



THE
ALIOMENTI
BOX SET BOOKS 1-3
SAGA

ALEX ALBRINCK

THE ALIOMENTI SAGA BOX SET

BOOKS 1-3

ALEX ALBRINCK

FABINARIUM PUBLICATIONS

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Just like reality.

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*Dedicated to my family
Who teach me every day about unconditional love*

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ALSO BY ALEX ALBRINCK

The Aliomenti Saga

A Question of Will

Preserving Hope

Ascent of the Aliomenti

Birth of the Alliance

Preserving Will

Stark Cataclysm

Convergence

Adam's Journey

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The Ravagers

The Ravagers Box Set: Episodes 1-3

Activate

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BOOK I

A QUESTION OF WILL

PROLOGUE

Will Stark ran toward his home as fast as he could, shattered at the likelihood that his wife and son would already be dead when he got there. And it would be his fault. He ran, not for enjoyment or accomplishment, but in a desperate attempt, no matter how futile, to prevent his wife and son from being brutally murdered.

You're already too late, a voice whispered in his head. *The killer had too much of a head start*. Visions of their lifeless faces floated before his eyes, causing him to slow momentarily. *No*, he thought. *I will not quit on them. Ever*. He pushed on, ignoring the bitter cold, the stitch growing in his side, and the screaming ankle that wanted rest and ice. He tried to distract himself by finding humor in the fact that he was running at full speed in suit, tie, and overcoat. His shoes were highly polished gems meant for business, not racing. It wasn't ideal.

None of this was ideal.

He had turned thirty-five years old today, an age at which running just over a mile should be simple. He'd focused on his business and his family, though, and his fitness levels had suffered as a result. The lack of exercise and the resulting bit of flab around his midsection weren't the only physical symptoms that might make one think him older. Wire-rimmed glasses that enhanced his green eyes perched dangerously on the bridge of his nose, the sweat of exertion and terror threatening to cause them to slip from his face and leave him blind in the pursuit of his target. The salty liquid slipped over his chapped lips and into his mouth, and he spat it to the ground as he ran. Noticeable patches of gray mixed in with his normally pitch-black hair. The stressful events of this day were unlikely to keep his hair from growing whiter.

The sharp pains wracking his body weren't entirely due to physical neglect.

He'd needed to break into his own highly secure gated community, climbing over a building and dropping to the ground. He'd twisted his ankle upon hitting the ground, but he'd pressed on. There would be time to deal with that type of pain later. He had to get to his house. The lives of Hope and Josh hung in the balance.

Desperate times made people do crazy things. There had been numerous attempts to abduct him off busy public streets in broad daylight. His car had been shot at on many occasions. People in the press seemed to forget that he was human and that he had no more interest in losing his freedom or his life than anyone else. The press enjoyed highlighting his "extravagant expenditures" on cars with armor-plating and bulletproof glass, fortress-style walls surrounding his community, and a security system that, even in *his* neighborhood, seemed more extensive than many military bases. They opined that such vast sums of money could have been better spent on other things, implying that the desire of the young multi-billionaire to protect his family from harm was driven by pure selfishness.

He wondered what such people would write about the next day, if his fears became reality.

He knew what *he'd* write. That he'd failed. He had vowed to keep his family safe no matter the expense. He'd consulted every security expert he could find, hired the best construction crew, paid for double and triple redundancies in every position and system charged with the security of those he loved most. It hadn't been enough. A killer had gotten inside his sanctuary and was traveling an unguarded driveway to his house. Will's wife and son were at risk due to his failure.

He ran faster than he'd ever run before, his feet in misery from the brick-like shoes covering them as he slammed them repeatedly to the ground. His ankle finally gave out, and he was forced to cover ground in a limping hop that tried desperately to resemble a sprint.

You should have let them meet you at the restaurant. They would not be home to be attacked. The inner voice gnawed away at his determination, seeking to replace it with guilt and self-loathing. It was succeeding. He refocused and refused to listen. There could be only one way to mitigate those feelings, and that required getting to his house. Quickly.

He rounded the final bend, his home visible in the fading sunlight. It was a large structure, though probably smaller than most might suspect from one so wealthy. The brick and stone exterior of the home continued his theme of

security, giving the sense of a castle inside the giant walls surrounding it. He looked inside, through the expansive bay window and into the living room. On most days, he'd see his son Josh standing there waiting for him, silent as always. On others, he'd see Hope, a chair pulled up by the window while she waited for him, reading.

Today, he saw something that made his stomach spasm.

A man stood in his house, his back to Will. He was dressed in black, his head clean-shaven, the skin marked by dozens of long scars. Will experienced a powerful sensation of hopelessness and dread, as if the mere presence of this man was sufficient to eliminate the will to live of anyone who came near him. On closer examination, he noticed something even more terrifying: a short sword held in the man's right hand, the steel glinting from the lights in the house, and blood dripping from the blade.

At the sight of the blood, Will passed through the denial stage of grief and went straight to anger. His pains were forgotten as a surge of adrenaline erased them all and his whole body cooperated in moving him toward the house. He would kill that man, the man who had ended the lives of his wife and son.

A bright light burst from the window, blinding him, slowing him down as he twisted away. He blinked his eyes rapidly, forcing them to refocus.

He heard and felt the explosion a few seconds later. The glass exploded from the front windows and lacerated his skin, the damage lessened by the thick overcoat he wore against the late winter chill. The force of the blast knocked him to the frozen earth, hurling him back several yards and knocking his glasses from his face. He felt the heat before he could turn around, felt his skin burning. He realized that his coat had caught fire and he pulled it off, hissing in pain as shards of glass were pulled from his skin in the process. He let the coat fall to the ground. His hands felt the frozen earth, seeking his glasses, needing to restore his sight. He found them, straightened the bent arms. He put them on and turned, still on his knees.

He could not see his house, even *with* his glasses on, even allowing for the small crack in the right lens. The walls of flame leaped out of the windows and doorways, somehow hot enough to ignite even the brick and stone of the exterior. The smell of fire and flame assaulted his nose, and the heat seemed to catch the hairs of his skin on fire.

He lowered his head to the ground, weeping. Then he screamed out the names of his dead wife and child in a tone of pure, agonized mourning.

THE FOUR OATHS OF THE ALIOMENTI

As a member of the Aliomenti, and in recognition of the special knowledge, technology, and power inherent in my position, I do hereby swear to abide by and uphold the following Oaths:

OATH NUMBER ONE: I vow to never knowingly share with any non-Aliomenti human the unique knowledge, technology, and power of the Aliomenti, directly or indirectly, nor shall I permit any non-Aliomenti human to acquire any of the same of his own accord. I understand and agree that the penalty for violation of Oath Number One is ten years imprisonment, stripped of all rights, privileges, and power for the duration.

OATH NUMBER TWO: I vow to never knowingly share with any non-Aliomenti human the existence of the Aliomenti, either directly or indirectly, nor shall I permit any non-Aliomenti human to acquire knowledge of the same of his own accord. I understand and agree that the penalty for violation of Oath Number Two is twenty years imprisonment, stripped of all rights, privileges, and power for the duration.

OATH NUMBER THREE: I vow to never enter into a committed relationship of any type, most notably marriage, with any non-Aliomenti human, and likewise vow to avoid such relationships within the Aliomenti community, lest termination of such relationship lead to distrust and disunity among our kind. I understand and agree that the penalty for violation of Oath Number Three is fifty years imprisonment, stripped of all rights, privileges, and power for the duration.

OATH NUMBER FOUR: Concerning the nature of the relationship and the potential for abnormally advanced abilities, I vow never to be the biological parent to any child, regardless of the Aliomenti status of the second parent,

regardless of the nature of the conception of the child. I understand and agree that the penalty for violation of Oath Number Four is death.

I hereby state my understanding that any humans involved in the breaking of the Four Oaths shall suffer death at the hand of an Aliomenti assassin.

I affirm my Oaths and vows, and do so of sound mind and body, without compulsion, of my own free will, as evidenced by my signature below in the presence of my Leader.

INFILTRATION

Two hours earlier

“I’ll never get tired of this view, Mark.” Deron McLean spoke to his colleague through the radio connecting the two guard stations for the exclusive De Gray Estates community. “When you’ve got a few billion dollars, you can build things like this.”

Mark Arnold laughed, amusing himself by tracing designs in the frost-covered, bulletproof windows. “No kidding. Wonder how *those* conversations went?”

“Well, probably something like, ‘Hi, I’m Will Stark. I’m buying your city and with it I am getting a tax and regulation free zone. Then, I am going to build a giant dome over it that glows at night, and it will have so many job opportunities during this awful economy that I can afford to pay people to move here to work, and businesses to move here and set up shop. Oh, yeah. Then, I’m going to build an old-fashioned castle wall and moat around 2,500 acres outside that dome and hire two dudes named Deron and Mark to keep the nasty stuff away from me.’”

Mark laughed again, with feeling. “Hey, if I had his money, I’d do the same thing. Well, I’d never think of doing *that*, but then again, I’m not Will Stark.”

“Nobody is, my friend. Nobody is. Half the time, I’m not even sure that *he* is Will Stark.”

“Seems too good to be true, doesn’t he?”

“Indeed he does.”

The banter stopped and the two men resumed the standard routine of their guard duties.

Three men appeared on the sidewalk outside the De Gray Estates. Had anyone been watching they would have sworn that the three men had materialized out of the twilight descending on the town.

They marched with purpose outside the massive walls that surrounded the neighborhood, footsteps partially muffled by the sounds of the water flowing in the moat. Small puffs of vapor emerged from their mouths, condensation forming in the crisp winter air. The only light came from the two buildings framing the massive concrete gate used to control access into the community. The walls could not be scaled; the gate could not be breached. The wealthy residents of the exclusive community slept securely and comfortably at night, knowing that no one got in without their permission.

Mark worked in what his security team referred to as the Guard Station, a ground-level building that enforced the various security processes allowing residents and non-residents to enter the enormous walls. Without Mark, the massive gate would remain above ground and prevent vehicles from entering the premises. Without Mark, those looking to enter the community on foot through a smaller double-door system known as a man-trap would be thwarted in their efforts, even if they were a known resident of the community. Mark's team maintained a list of non-residents expected to request access during a given time period, and tracked the comings and goings of residents. Mark knew that, at this time, only two residents were outside the premises—Myra VanderPoole and Will Stark. There were no expected visits from non-residents on the schedule this day.

He thus watched the three men with great interest.

Each man wore black, the expensive-looking shirts sporting a golden emblem with a circle and an upside-down letter V. One man wore a top hat and wire-rimmed glasses. A second wore what appeared to be a dark cape with a hood—was that a cloak? The third man wore no accessories, but his handsome face was marred by a thick scar running horizontally across his right cheek, just under his eye.

The purposeful look, devoid of any humor, gave Mark a very bad feeling. His pulse rate accelerated and he wiped a bead of sweat from his forehead.

The men moved past the Guard Station and then turned left, heading up the driveway, past the window with a sign reading "Guests Check In Here First," and proceeded to the outer door of the man-trap.

Mark tapped a button on his control panel. "Deron, are you seeing our uninvited guests?"

After a brief pause, Deron replied. "Got them. Is that guy wearing a top hat?"

“Yeah, and his friend’s got a cloak. They went straight to the door without stopping here first to check in.”

“I’ve got a bad feeling about these guys.”

“Yeah. Same here.”

“I’ll call our friends in the Dome.”

“Thanks.”

That was their procedure for dealing with unapproved guests. Mark, at ground level, would attempt to speak with anyone seeking unauthorized entry. Deron, his partner on this shift, worked in the Guard Tower and he’d notify the police stationed inside the massive Dome covering the nearby corporate city of Pleasanton, Ohio of the potential trespassers. Located on the opposite side of the driveway and concrete gate from the Guard Station, the Tower enabled a guard, located forty feet off the ground, to survey the surrounding territory and perform visual scans of the neighborhood. In the nearly impossible event that someone would breach the walls, the roles would be reversed. Deron would track the perpetrators, and Mark would notify the police.

They’d never had to execute that procedure. No one had ever bothered to try scaling these walls. Each year several people would try to break in by ramming the gate, which generally resulted in a totaled vehicle and, if the foolish driver was lucky, nothing more than whiplash for injuries.

These men clearly desired entry, and his gut told him it wasn’t a case of a resident forgetting to phone in the access authorization. The guidelines required him to proceed as if such a mistake had occurred until evidence proved otherwise. He left the speaker on, maintaining contact with Deron, and moved to the window the men had passed. Pressing a button, he activated a speaker on the exterior of the building. “Excuse me, gentlemen. Access to this community is available only to those authorized by current residents, and at present we have no standing authorizations for today. Please step away from the door and contact the resident you wish to visit to initiate your access request.”

The men ignored him. Not one of them even turned to acknowledge hearing his statement.

Mark sighed. The arrogant guests of one of the wealthy residents of this fortress, no doubt too deluded with self-importance to worry about such trivial matters. He knew the type. These men would expect him to eventually give in and allow them entry. Mark recalled an approved dinner guest of Myra VanderPoole several years prior. The man, who was severely obese, had entered the first door of the man-trap and could not close the door behind him. That left

the circuit open and the system was, in such a circumstance, coded to assume a second person was attempting entry at the same time. The man had demanded that they open the doors and threatened to sue if Mark did not come to manually open the inner door. Mark refused. Myra VanderPoole had come to the front gate herself and they had agreed to open the concrete gate so that the man could walk in. The man had complained loudly about the horrific treatment he'd received at Mark's hands. Myra had apparently set her guest straight on that matter, for he'd apologized for his behavior with great fervor upon his exit from the community.

Mark began to repeat his statement to the men, but paused. He'd heard something odd from the open communication link with Deron. It had sounded almost like a gasp, an inhalation of breath so sudden that it sounded like a noise of terror. He walked back to the control panel in order to listen more closely. "Deron? Everything all right up there?"

There was no reply. Mark was suddenly overwhelmed by a powerful sensation of pure evil, an effect so strong that he nearly lost his footing. "Deron —?"

A thunderous crash sounded from outside, resembling the noise of shattering glass. Mark whirled back toward the driveway and saw what looked like small pieces of ice falling from the sky. He'd just had time to register this oddity when a second, far louder crash sounded above and behind him. Mark whirled toward the center of the Station and looked up, just as a hole opened explosively in the ceiling and a large mass fell through. The mass landed in a heap on the floor.

Still feeling the overwhelming sensation of evil, Mark took one step toward the mass of debris and stopped, reeling in horror.

The mass that had crashed through the ceiling was Deron. His throat had been slashed with vicious power, the wound so gaping that he had already bled out. Deron's eyes were wide and lifeless, his mouth open as if to protest this cruelty. He lay on top of a pile of wood and shingles from the roof and ceiling he'd crashed through, pieces of timber impaling him, his arms and legs bent at impossible angles.

Mark was numb with shock. He turned back to his control panel, prepared to phone the police and ambulance, when the sensation of evil and foreboding ratcheted up to such a degree that his limbs refused to move. When he heard a third thumping noise behind him, it took every bit of remaining effort to merely turn around.

A man stood in the room, straddling Deron's body. He was dressed in black, with a logo on his shirt similar to that worn by the three men outside. He was of

an average height and build. The man's head was clean-shaven, with dozens of scars of various sizes marring his otherwise handsome face. His eyes, though, turned Mark's legs to jelly and the guard fell to the ground, suddenly unable to stand. They were completely blood red, both cornea and iris, and he found himself morbidly fascinated by them. The eyes were devoid of any type of human emotion, full only of malice. He held in his right hand a short sword, the blade dripping blood. This man exuded the aura of a cold-blooded killer, borne out by his execution of Deron.

He needed to get away. He needed to tell somebody, anybody, to help him avoid death at this man's hands. The killer walked toward Mark, a predator who had cornered its weakened prey, and the tip of the sword was suddenly at Mark's throat, the blood—Deron's blood—dripped into Mark's lap.

"Cooperation means Gena Adams lives." The voice was almost a whisper, the tone having the effect of fingernails scratching a chalkboard. Mark's insides chilled at the sound. This man knew about Gena. They were going to be married in a month, but Mark knew this man meant to kill him, too, just as he'd killed Deron, and then the wedding would never happen. He was a security guard in name only. As per current law in the country, he did not carry a gun. He doubted that it would matter against this man; his hands would fail to be steady enough to pull the trigger.

Mark vowed to spend the remaining moments of life ensuring that Gena would live. Over the past few weeks, he'd been starting to think he wasn't good enough for her because she was simply that sweet and generous a soul. She would hear nothing of such concerns, laughing them off as simple cold feet for a young man of twenty-three. It was a moot concern now.

Mark forced himself to look directly into the eyes of Death and nod once.

The killer backed away, giving Mark room to climb back to his feet. Mark never took his eyes from the man. If he was going to die, he wouldn't be a coward and look away.

The killer pointed at the three men standing at the outer door of the man-trap. "Let them in."

Full realization hit Mark. The four men had worked together; three had distracted the guards while the fourth eliminated the first and then subdued the second. How had he missed seeing this man? Had he been hiding in the Tower all this time? Guilt tore at him, then morphed into steely resolve. He was going to save as many people as possible this day.

He forced himself to look directly into those blood-red eyes and took a deep

breath. “No.”

The tip of the sword lashed across his face, and he felt the warm blood trickle down both cheeks out of the two lacerations now marking his skin. He had enough time to register this before he found himself on his back, the edge of the sword against his throat. The man had speed Mark could not hope to match.

“Wrong answer,” the killer hissed. He rose to his feet, the sword never breaking contact with Mark. At his full height, he used the sword to gesture toward the control panel where the man-trap authorization buttons were located. The killer had done his homework. The buttons were fingerprint-activated and sensed blood pressure and pulse rate. Only the on-duty guards could activate them. Each guard had his pulse rate and blood pressure measured upon starting his shift. If the measurements at the time they tried to open the man-trap were significantly higher or lower than the baseline, the interior door wouldn’t open. Mark had asked why it wouldn’t open if the numbers were lower than the baseline since that would likely represent someone calm and relaxed. “They could also be dead or dying,” the security expert had noted. With that memory, Mark was glad his fingers would be of no use to the killer unless they were still attached to him.

He climbed to his feet again, trying to calm himself from the violent attack. “The buttons won’t work if I’m highly stressed,” Mark told the killer. “Leave me alone so I can calm down.”

The killer walked to the opposite side of the room and turned his back to Mark. He was clearly unconcerned that Mark would try to flee. Both men knew Mark couldn’t outrun him.

Mark took several deep breaths and exhaled slowly. *I am not confined in a room with a superman ninja with a bloody sword. Deron is not lying dead ten feet away. I am going to see Gena again soon.*

He somehow calmed himself, and then pressed the man-trap button. The man with the scar on his right cheek entered the community after the inner door opened in front of him. Mark winced. He could relate to the scar.

The second man, the one wearing a top hat, entered the man-trap, the outer door locking behind him. Mark paused for a moment before he opened the inner door. “What are they going to do?” He glanced behind him at the killer who had not moved from his spot.

“One of the residents has something he should not possess. We will remedy the situation.”

A simple robbery? *That’s* what this was about? Surely there were better ways

to make money. Will Stark and his wife, for example, tended to be rather generous souls; they'd provided Mark and Gena gifts sufficient to cover the cost of their honeymoon. You could get money without resorting to robbery. Or murder.

Still, he needed to be sure. "So... you aren't going to hurt anyone else?"

There was a pause. "No."

Mark wondered if he'd asked the correct question. He elected not to press the matter against the skilled killer, convincing himself that he had the assurances he needed. He pushed the man-trap button again, allowing the second man inside. The third man, the man wearing the cloak, gave a bow with a bit of a flourish, and then entered the man-trap before being admitted into the neighborhood by Mark.

He glanced at the section of the control panel nearest the man-trap section. It contained a panic button, which would alert the police to a problem at De Gray Estates for which telephone communication was impossible. He could click on that button and perhaps the police would arrive quickly enough to apprehend these men. That meant Gena would no longer be at any risk. He shifted slightly to the left.

The killer seized him and threw him to the floor, the malevolent blood-red eyes alternately searing a hole through him and freezing every cell of his being. The man's sword pointed at him unerringly, the finger on his left hand waving as he tsked at Mark. He then waved at Mark with the sword, motioning him away from the man-trap and panic buttons and to the opposite side of the Station, facing the community rather than the street.

He watched the three men he'd just allowed into the community. Three men who were going to rob one of the residents of something these men believed they shouldn't possess. Men willing to kill to accomplish their goals. He glanced at Deron again, a graphic reminder of that fact. Deron would never again return home to his wife and young son. As he looked outside, he saw smoke. The half-dozen covered golf carts residents and guests could use to cover the distance from the front gate to their homes were all in flames. Anyone entering the community on foot would have a longer journey home than they'd expected.

The men reached a central cul-de-sac just inside the gated area where the residents ceased to be neighbors and traveled upon long, isolated driveways to their secluded homes as much as a mile away. The men veered sharply left indicating that they were off to rob the Starks.

Mark cringed inwardly. The Starks were the family in this neighborhood he

would least want to see harmed. The other four families residing here represented every negative stereotype of wealth imaginable: old, arrogant, condescending, cheap, and stingy. The Starks were the polar opposites. They were young, in their thirties at most, which made them young enough to be the children or grandchildren of the other residents. Both were active in the community, with far more trips outside the fortress due to community and charitable activities than commutes to Will's office building or personal outings. Most importantly, they were exceptionally generous with their wealth, always looking for excuses to give money away, funding new business ventures to such a degree that the domed city of Pleasanton had become an entrepreneurial haven. The children in the community played sports and engaged in various activities on fields, courts, and diamonds funded by the Starks, an endeavor likely driven by baseball-enthusiast Will. Rumor was that the Starks furnished uniforms, handled fees for umpires and officials, and generally made sure that a lack of funds was never a reason to deny a child the chance to participate in athletics.

Mark was cringing for another reason. Hope Stark was at home, and the three men were likely to encounter her as they searched for whatever item they wanted to take. Given what happened to Deron already, it was difficult to see Hope surviving their raid on her home.

He needed to do something to help Hope, without appearing to help her. "What do the Starks have that you don't want them to possess?"

The killer didn't respond.

"I've been to their house. I don't think they keep much money there, and they really don't keep many possessions in the house either, at least nothing of any value. Surely, men of your skills can find better places to rob? What do they have that you don't think they should have?"

The soulless red eyes turned to him. "Freedom. Life."

"What?" Mark spluttered. "I... I thought you said you weren't going to hurt anyone?"

"Those men will deprive Mr. Stark of freedom." He smiled, an expression that chilled the air in the room. "And I will deprive Mrs. Stark of life. She will not suffer."

"You... you can't do that!" Mark shouted, surprising himself. "I'll stop you!"

The killer snorted.

Mark charged him. He once again found himself on the ground facedown with his arms pinned behind his back. "Listen closely," the killer hissed. "I am tolerating your presence solely because you will yet be of service to me. Your

cooperation for the remainder of your useless life determines whether Gena Adams lives... or how slowly she dies.” He paused, the scars seeming to sear more deeply into his face. “I am not pleased at the moment.”

The killer walked to the control panel and placed his left hand on the panic button, his right hand still held the sword. He never took his eyes off Mark, but Mark watched the control panel, puzzled. A small burst of fire erupted from the man’s hand—no, that was impossible, wasn’t it?—and suddenly the circuitry for the panic button was in flames.

“Not pleased at all.” The threat was clear. This man could do more than hurt Gena with a sword; he could burn her until she was in excruciating pain.

Mark would do what he could to save Hope Stark’s life, but he was terrified of a man who could kill with such efficiency, attack with such swiftness... and who could somehow shoot flames from his hands at will. With his own death now imminent, though, his courage would be focused on preventing any harm to Gena... even if that meant sacrificing Hope Stark. Courage was in short supply at present. “What do I do now, then?” he asked, his voice timid.

“Wait.”

“Wait? For what?”

“A phone call.”

And he waited.

APPEASEMENT

The man wore a black shirt with a golden circle emblem, black pants, and matching black boots. On his belt was a sheath that held a short, sharp sword; a weapon the man had used to kill on many occasions. Killing was something that provided him great satisfaction, especially those kills affecting the group he referred to as humans. It was rumored that each of the scars marring his head signified a single authorized kill, and his bald head was littered with dozens of such markings. He had earned his title: Assassin. His blood-red eyes were a testament to his skill.

The Assassin crept along the inside of the massive concrete wall surrounding the community called De Gray Estates, moving slowly in the frigid air so as to avoid detection by the many cameras watching for intruders. As he neared each camera, he would hold out his hand, and a small flash of light would render the camera inoperable. He reached the base of the giant Guard Tower flanking one side of the wide driveway serving as the vehicular entry to the community. The driveway was blocked by a massive concrete gate that lowered into the ground only when a resident passed a retinal scan test, at which point the on-duty guard acknowledged their identity and opened the gate. Guards were able to allow entry via a double-door “man-trap” as well. Guests could enter using the same procedures, provided that a resident had previously authorized the visit.

Three other men walked toward the ground-level Guard Station on the other side of the driveway, traveling on the well-lit sidewalk. The man in the Station and the man in the Tower both watched these men, neither of them noticing the greater threat as he reached the base of the Tower. The Assassin scaled the outside of the Tower, gripping the mortar gaps with his fingertips as he moved upward. His black shirt rippled as a gust of cold wind blew into him, as if trying

to dislodge him. But he wouldn't be stopped by mere wind. Upon reaching the top of the Tower, the Assassin paused momentarily, and then an instant later he was inside. Below, the Station guard ordered the three men to comply with procedures for entering the community. His partner in the Tower turned away from the window to contact the police about the situation.

The guard saw the scar-faced Assassin and he sensed the aura of pure evil about the killer. It was then he noticed the blood-red eyes. He opened his mouth to scream, to yell out a warning to the man on the ground. The sword was faster, though. The Assassin removed it from the sheath and slashed out, his movements a blur, and the guard could not cry out a warning as the blade severed his windpipe and jugular vein at once. The guard clutched his throat, but it was a futile gesture. The hot blood gushed from the fatal wound, and the guard's eyes widened as he was unable to get air to his screaming lungs. He collapsed face-first to the ground, his body in shock and twitching as it desperately fought to live. It was a fight he would lose.

The Assassin seemed distressed. He moved to the dying man and, using his boot, rolled the guard over in order to see the man's face, watching his eyes as the light signaling life slowly faded away. It took only a few moments, and a hideous smile crossed the Assassin's scarred face. He was overjoyed, drunk on the thrill of the kill, and was eager for more. But he knew he must follow the plan, and must get his companions inside the walls so that they could set the trap for the man known as Will Stark. He must get down to the ground-level Guard Station, prevent the guard there from notifying the human authorities, and coerce him into letting his men inside. He could eliminate all human police that came at him, but the group's rules were clear: do not be seen and kill as few humans as possible. The first rule was inviolate; all other portions of the plan must be adapted to ensure there was no trace of their presence.

It would take too long to climb the stairs to the ground and doing so would give the guard the opportunity to hit his panic button and notify his police. The Assassin needed to get inside the building before the second guard recognized trouble. The man would eventually realize his partner wasn't responding over the microphone link established a few moments earlier between the two buildings. The Assassin's blood-red eyes fell upon the dead body and the large glass-sided wall nearest the Guard Station. A cruel smile invaded his scarred face, his evil eyes lighting up in anticipation.

He'd never launched a missile before.

He picked up the dead body at his feet, got a running start, and hurled the

body through the glass, shattering the window into thousands of pieces as bitterly cold air entered the tower. He watched as the body arched through the air, sailed over the driveway, and crashed through the Guard Station roof, falling into the single room below.

The Assassin's emotions were a rising thrill of anticipation as he contemplated the two remaining deaths he would initiate this day. He raced to the opening in the glass with a burst of adrenaline and leaped through, covering the distance across the driveway as he fell. He landed, catlike, on the roof where he could already sense the terror in the guard below. The man had seen his friend's corpse. The Assassin dropped through the opening...

Hope Stark woke, her breaths short, and she sat straight up in her bed. She'd only meant to take a short nap after a long day working with her son, enough to re-energize her for the evening, but a glance at the clock told her she'd overslept. Tonight, she and her son would join her husband, Will, for dinner at Will's favorite steakhouse. It was Will's thirty-fifth birthday.

Right now, though, she was having trouble getting the nightmare out of her mind. In that nightmare, four men dressed in black had worked together to kill one guard at the entrance to her gated community, and those men planned to use the second guard to gain entry and kill at least one other person. Was it her? Her son? Her husband, once he arrived home? She wouldn't have the dream if a member of her family wasn't the intended victim, would she? She tried to convince herself it was nothing more than a bad dream, but the images and sounds were incredibly vivid. Worse, she was still sensing the emotion of the killer, feeling his thrill in killing one man and the joyous anticipation he had at the prospect of causing more deaths. She shuddered.

Hope stretched, rose from the bed, and marched into her bathroom. She glanced at her reflection, deciding that she presently met the definition of frumpy: jeans, an over-sized sweatshirt, and her golden hair pulled back in a ponytail. She brushed her teeth, tasting the minty flavor of the toothpaste, and splashed cold water on her face, both in an effort to fully wake up from her nap and to shake the dream and ongoing sense of dread from her mind. Though a success in terms of waking her up, the cold water had no impact on her tense mood. Why would someone want to kill her, her husband, or her son?

She re-entered the bedroom and walked to a large wall painting. She pulled

on one side and the painting swung open on its hinge, revealing a hidden wall safe. Her hands were trembling; the sensation of dread and the feeling that she was somehow being watched was increasing. She finally got the combination entered correctly, opened the safe, and pulled out the gun. Guns were illegal in 2030 for anyone not granted a license as a militia member. Most states had passed laws stating that their official militias were exclusively formed of the members of local police departments and the National Guard. Somehow, Will had convinced someone that an exception should be made for him, and the gun and several clips of ammunition appeared in the safe one day. Hope knew that somewhere a family was living much more comfortably today than they might have otherwise courtesy of a large cash contribution from her husband. She didn't mind. They had more money than they could ever spend in many lifetimes, and the peace of mind that came from owning the weapon was worth any price.

Whatever that price was, however, it wasn't enough to eliminate the sense she now had that she was being watched, a sensation so powerful that she believed someone unwelcome was in the house. A chill fluttered down her spine.

She heard a thump from down the hall. Josh's room. She heard the dog, Smokey, growl and then bark. No. She would not let them hurt her son. Gun in hand, Hope sprinted for the boy's room. Drawing a deep breath, she flung the door open dreading what she'd find inside, expecting to find a scene of horror.

What she found was a miracle.

Josh, her six-year-old son, was not lying down on his bed with his dog Smokey at his side, mortally wounded by the hand of the unseen intruder. Rather, he was sitting on the side of his bed, a baseball in his hand. Smokey, his four-year-old black Labrador retriever stood several feet away, tail wagging furiously, eyes watching the baseball with great intensity. As Hope watched, the dog began to growl and then barked twice at Josh. The boy smiled and tossed the baseball over the dog's head. The ball thudded on the wall and bounced to the ground, Smokey following in hot pursuit. The dog finally retrieved the ball, tail high and wagging as she trotted back to Josh with the treasure in her mouth. The boy held out his hand, and Smokey deposited the slobbery baseball in Josh's hand.

"Josh?" Hope's voice was barely above a whisper.

The boy and his dog both turned, having just then realized she was there. "I couldn't sleep, Mommy," he said. Josh spoke in a slow, measured pace as if English were a second language he was learning and he had to first translate

from his native tongue.

Hope put the gun on a shelf near the door and raced to her son, smothering him in a fierce hug while smoothing down his sandy-blond hair. Smokey, irritated at the temporary loss of her playmate, barked and Josh dropped the ball on the ground, his throwing arm pinned to his side by his affectionate mother. “It’s a miracle,” Hope whispered, her eyes full of tears of joy. “A miracle.” For the four words Josh had said as his mother entered his room were the first words the six-year-old had ever spoken.

She finally broke the embrace, moving back enough to see her son as he was now. The boy looked back at her, making eye contact. His deep blue eyes sparkled with an internal light full of warmth and wisdom. Will had always said he could see that in the boy’s eyes, even while most of the light had been deadened over the previous six years. Hope could see it, too. She’d always known her little boy was special, even without the miracle she’d just witnessed.

“I need to call Daddy,” she said, wiping her tears on her sleeve. She ran down the hall to get her phone, dialing it as she ran back to Josh’s room where the boy had resumed the noisy game of fetch with Smokey, his face full of concentration and concern all at once. She was reminded that Josh’s words spoke of having trouble sleeping, something he’d never struggled with before. *He couldn’t have had the same nightmare I did, could he? Or sensed that I was fearful?*

“I just left the office and I’m on my way home,” Will said by way of greeting. She could hear the sound of the engine as he drove the car, which, quite sadly, featured armored exterior panels and bulletproof glass. *I guess we have to be afraid that those militia members will start shooting at us again,* she thought, a humorless smile on her face. “Did Josh say where he wanted to go to dinner?” The words, though spoken in a humorous cadence, carried with them the tone of a father saddened at the cruel hand life had dealt his beloved son.

“No, but if you ask him when you get home, you *will* get an answer.” She wondered if Will would catch her hidden meaning.

There was a pause. “Are you trying to tell me something?” Will asked, his voice trembling with emotion.

“Four words. Full sentence.” The tears were welling in her eyes once again, but the triumph in her voice was unmistakable.

She could hear Will breaking down as well. “My little boy is talking,” he whispered. Then, “My little boy is talking!” he shouted. “Whoa!” She heard the sound of tires squealing. “Sorry, lost control of the car for a second.” Now she

could hear the smile in his face. “Can you put him on the phone? By the way, what in the world is the sound in the background?”

Hope laughed. “After you almost crashed the car by merely being *told* he’s talking? I dare say you’ll end up crashing into a tree if I let you talk to him. The sound you hear? That’s your son playing fetch with Smokey, and they’re both having a grand time.”

“All right, all right, I can take a hint,” he said, trying to sound offended. “Guess I’ll need to risk a few speeding tickets to get home more quickly.”

“No, drive safely. We’re not going anywhere until you get here.”

“I love you, Hope,” he said, his voice serious. “It’s all the time you spent with him that’s enabled him to finally break free. You’re amazing.”

“I love you, too,” she replied. “And don’t shortchange yourself. We both know you’d have spent as much time with him as I did if you’d been able to. But it does take a bit of time and a singularly qualified individual to resurrect an economy of three hundred and fifty million people. Don’t forget that you’re setting a wonderful example for your son to follow. That’s just as critical as reading and math and history. Besides, without you, how would he know how to throw the baseball so that Smokey can’t catch it on the fly and break her teeth?”

He laughed. “And on that note, I must focus on my driving. See you in about a half hour.”

“See you then.”

They both hung up.

Hope watched the boy and his dog playing for a few more minutes, and then addressed her son. “Josh?”

He turned toward her. That was unusual. Typically, Josh showed no reaction to spoken words. He looked at her, expectation on his face. He still wouldn’t be accustomed to social customs, and would not necessarily recognize when he needed to respond to a spoken statement. That would come with time. “Do you know why you’re able to talk with me now?”

“The voice said it was time,” the boy replied.

That was... confusing. “What voice?”

“I do not know who. The voice said it was time for me to talk and be a little boy. And to protect you, Mommy.”

Now she was disturbed. “Did the voice say what you needed to protect me from?”

“The bad men.”

“What bad men?”

His face clouded with concern. “The men I saw in my sleep. They were hurting people. I woke up.”

Her hands went to her face. “I had a bad dream, too. Maybe the story I read before our nap was a bit too scary. For both of us.” She tried to smile.

He shook his head. “They are real, Mommy. I know that they want to hurt you.”

Now it was her turn to shake her head. “It was just a dream, sweetie. A very realistic dream, but just a dream.”

“Why would two people have the same dream if it was not real, Mommy?”

She had no answer for that. Still, she felt the need to comfort him, as much as herself. “Look, I’ll call the guards and they’ll tell us that everything is fine. Will that help?” Without waiting for a reply, she searched through her contact list and found the number to the Guard Station. A crisp voice answered after the first ring. “De Gray Estates Guard Station. My name is Mark. How may I assist you, Mrs. Stark?”

How does he know it’s me? Oh. Caller ID. She was too spooked to think clearly at the moment. “Hi, Mark. I just had a question for you.” She could hear the brisk wind howling through the phone, as though it was inside the guard station.

“Let me guess. You’re holding a small costume party and need to add three or four people to the access list?” He gave a short laugh.

She laughed, too. “Nothing quite so exciting, I’m afraid. It’s somewhat embarrassing, actually.”

“Mrs. Stark, even if it kills me, I will help ease your concern.” His voice had a forced cheerfulness to it.

Rather dramatic, wasn’t he? “I really don’t think it will come to that, Mark, but I... do appreciate the sentiment. My son and I both just woke up from realistic nightmares, and we both thought there had been a break-in to the neighborhood.” She felt silly even saying the words. But the confirmation that it was all just a bad dream would help calm both of them.

“I totally understand, Mrs. Stark. I’ve had bad dreams like that before, where in your dream someone wants to kill you, and when you wake up you feel like the killer is sitting right there in the room with you.”

Why was he talking like that? It was almost as if...

Oh, no.

She suddenly realized that the dream was real, and Mark was speaking under duress, bravely trying to give her information. There were three or four people

involved, in some type of costume, and one of them was in the room with Mark. Probably forcing Mark to make sure she had no idea what was happening.

She needed to help him.

“That’s *exactly* what this dream was like. Bad guys hurting people, then coming after me. I’m wondering if I should call the police and ask them to come and take a look around.”

A pause. “Oh, I don’t think that’s necessary, Mrs. Stark. We’d just be wasting their time.”

Hope cringed. She wondered about weapons. “I understand. It’s at times like this I really wish I had a gun. Even if a bunch of armed men charged into my house, I could shoot them.”

“Yep, you could cut them down, all right. That would be much more enjoyable than them cutting *you* down, of course.”

So it was too late to call the police now. They wouldn’t be able to get here in time to make a difference. Additionally, she knew that those coming for her would have some kind of knife for weapons, but probably no guns. “Thanks so much for talking to me, Mark. My husband should be home soon, and he can tell me how silly I’m being.”

“Not silly at all, Mrs. Stark. Take care of yourself.”

“Thanks, Mark. You do the same. Goodbye.” She hung up the phone, knowing somehow that it was a literal goodbye. Regardless of what happened to her today, she wouldn’t be talking to Mark again in this lifetime. But there was no time to mourn, not now.

She did a mental recap. There were three or four people coming her way armed with knives of some type, but no guns. They had killed or would kill both guards at the entrance. She could call the police, but they wouldn’t be here in time. She could call Will and warn him, but he couldn’t get here any faster, and she’d simply try to talk him out of coming. It wouldn’t work; he’d come no matter what. She could try to run, but the men who had entered the community earlier in the dream would undoubtedly be making sure she couldn’t run far, and having a six-year-old boy with her would slow her progress.

She was on her own. She needed to protect Josh at all costs and defend herself as best she could.

One woman. One six-year-old boy. A dog. One semi-automatic pistol. Against four psychotic professional killers armed with knives. Or swords, if her dream was as accurate as it now seemed.

It just didn’t seem fair.

Mark hung up the phone and wiped nervous sweat from his brow. “She’s convinced everything is fine.”

“I disagree.” The icy voice reminded Mark of the fear the man instilled in him, fear multiplied by the mangled body of his friend and coworker lying only a few feet away.

“What are you talking about? I told her she was imagining things, that calling the police wasn’t necessary...”

“You told her exactly the situation. She knows.”

Thank God. “You have no way of knowing that.”

“I know quite a lot. Mrs. Stark has a gun which she is retrieving now, and which she will attempt to fire at me. I thank you for uncovering that detail with your coded conversation.”

Mark’s head bowed. He’d tried. He prayed that somehow Hope Stark could survive these monsters, perhaps even kill them first in self-defense. The killers’ demise would certainly bode well for Gena. He had done the best he could for Mrs. Stark. He hoped he’d done all he could for his fiancée.

“I will not be the one to inflict Gena’s punishment for your lack of cooperation.”

Mark’s head snapped back up. Was he actually saying...?

“I will leave that detail to one of my colleagues. They are all far less skilled than I. She will suffer more for it. Your lack of cooperation has made her suffering a necessity.”

Sanity lost, Mark sprang to his feet to charge the man, but the killer moved his arm and Mark felt something sting him. He glanced down, his anger replaced once again by terror. Somehow, his skin was on fire, literal flames burning through him. He opened his mouth to scream, but the killer’s sword flashed. Mark fell to the ground and the race was on to see whether the gaping wound in his neck or the flames would kill him first.

The Assassin sheathed his weapon without cleaning it, and he walked with supreme calm through the guard door on the inside of the property. He then turned and began his march to the Stark’s home.

The death toll for the day was nearly complete. Two down. One to go.

It was time to visit Hope Stark.

DISCOVERY

Myra VanderPoole felt fatigued. She'd spent the entire day shopping in the cold weather, interrupted only by an early lunch and a light dinner. Years earlier, she'd spent time enjoying the night life as well, but that was before Jim had died twenty years ago. She still retained her old spending habits, though, enjoying the finer things in life with the money she'd received from the sale of the business she and Jim had built. Let the young Starks spread their wealth around like fools. She had earned hers, and she intended to spend every penny of it before she died, all on her own interests and pleasure.

The Starks, despite their propensity to lavish prosperity upon the unworthy, had proved useful. The plan they'd devised for this private gated community was brilliant. It provided isolation from the general public and total privacy from neighbors. They had an exterior security system for the community that was so advanced even an elderly woman like her could walk about in the evening without concern for her well-being. It was as it should be. The annual dues for the community were excessive, used to pay for upkeep of the fortress walls, security systems, and guards. Myra thought it was money well spent. After all, only the wealthiest members of society could dream of living here.

Myra felt vulnerable leaving these walls, even though her driver made sure she stayed out of undesirable neighborhoods. He drove her only to the nicest shopping locations and restaurants in and around Pleasanton. She avoided the Dome, convinced that the shimmering structure would collapse one day, and she had no interest in being inside when it did. Still, she'd grown accustomed to not worrying about anything while at home, and it was difficult to give up that sense of peace and venture out into society, exposed to the depravity of the mass of

humanity. Tonight, after the day of shopping and dining, the driver would ensure that she returned home to the security found only within those massive walls before he returned to his own home and family for the evening. He would get her inside where a half-dozen covered golf carts were available for usage by residents. She'd drive herself home tonight. Usually, she had one of the two guards on duty assist her; however, her shopping haul for the day was far smaller than usual.

Though it was barely early evening on the clock, the calendar dictated the early loss of daylight on this winter day. Frank, the driver, pulled up to the De Gray Estates and off to the right side of the entry driveway near the Guard Tower. He stepped out and opened her door. Myra exited with her usual grace, holding the lone bag of purchases in her hand.

Frank made as if to take her bag or arm to assist her across the driveway to the Guard Station for her brief security check-in. But she shooed him away. "Wait there, Frank, until the guard sees me inside."

Frank sighed. He wished the old woman would let him drop her off closer to the scanner, but she regularly insisted he keep the main driveway area clear in the event someone else wanted in or out. So Frank watched the old woman shuffle over to the outer man-trap door in the bitter cold and enter the enclosed space, crouching slightly for the retinal scanner. After the outer door closed behind her, the light turned green, indicating that there was a match, and Myra tried to open interior door. It didn't move. She shook the door, but no luck. "Confound it!" she snapped. "Guard, please open the door for me!" *Of course*, Frank thought. *The guard has to buzz them in after the retinal scan is a success.* However, there was a problem.

"Mrs. VanderPoole? I don't see a guard inside the Station. Perhaps he's escorting a resident home?"

"An extended visit to the lavatory is more likely the case," Myra VanderPoole snorted, her tone biting as usual. She frowned. "And it appears that someone has left ice chunks all over the driveway. It's a wonder I didn't fall and kill myself. The neighbors will hear of this. Confound it, where is that guard?"

The old woman shuffled out of the man-trap and back toward the Guard Station window, where residents and guests could see and speak to the on-duty guard. She peered in the window as she approached, and then frowned. "Is the man actually *sleeping* on the job?" she said, her tone sharp. Then she looked in the window more closely.

"*Blood!*" she screamed, moving as quickly as her old legs could carry her,

eyes wide with terror. “Oh, dear God, there’s so much blood, oh, dear God, Frank, call the police, there’s so much blood!” And she fainted, falling to the ground near the ice shards.

Frank, not sure what else to do, dug out his phone and called 911, telling them that Mrs. VanderPoole had suffered a fall on ice at the entrance to De Gray Estates and would need an ambulance. He let the dispatcher know that one of the guards normally on duty was not at his station. Frank hung up, called his wife to tell her he’d be late, and went to pick Mrs. VanderPoole up from the ground. He wondered where the ice had come from.

Despite the cold weather, they hadn’t had snow or ice on the ground in a month.

Michael Baker received the call from dispatch about one of the rich old residents of the De Gray Estates falling near the entrance. He’d been a police officer long enough to realize that this was more a case of babysitting and paperwork than anything else. Sure, the dispatcher had said that the fall was apparently caused by ice, but it seemed unlikely that the woman had much of a case for pressing charges, as she’d fallen on her own property. The dispatcher noted that the caller had mentioned not seeing a guard on duty at the time of the call, which was unusual. They kept two guards on duty at all times so that the gate was never without someone to attend it.

With a sigh, he pulled the car into the driveway of the De Gray Estates. He spotted Myra VanderPoole seated in the back seat of the rented limo with the door open, the driver waving a fan. The old woman’s face was pale, but there was no indication of any injury. He was expecting something that looked more like a concussion, or perhaps some cuts or bruises caused by the fall. Frowning, Baker walked to the limo.

The driver saw him and stood up, coming to meet Baker. “Thanks for coming, Officer. I’m not sure what caused it, but I do know she hit the ground pretty hard.”

Baker looked over and saw the shards of ice. “That’s where she slipped?”

The driver nodded. “She was waiting for a guard to let her in, but nobody did. She went to the window there at the Station, started screaming and, as much as an eighty-year-old woman can, *ran* toward me. That’s when she hit the ice and fell. I think she may have fainted first, though, from the screaming, so that

might have caused the fall as well.”

Baker nodded, tightened his coat to protect against the chill, and glanced at the Guard Station. “I still don’t see a guard there.”

Surprise covered Frank’s face. “That’s very strange. They’re incredibly insistent on having the ground level Station, at minimum, covered at all times. When Mrs. VanderPoole needs an escort to her house after I drop her off, the guard in the Tower is the one who leaves. I’ve seen cases where the Tower guard will cover the Station so that guard can take a short break. With all of this noise and commotion, how could neither of them be there?”

Baker nodded, puzzled as well. He glanced up at the Tower... and gasped. The glass side of the Tower displayed a massive hole, as if something had crashed into the structure. His eyes trailed back to the ice, realization dawning. “That’s not ice. That’s glass.” He pointed up at the Tower.

Frank saw it as well and raised a hand to his face. “Maybe something crashed into the Tower, and the guard down here went to investigate?”

“If something like that happened, though, the Station guard would have called us or the fire department first. They’re required to ensure two people are on duty, and on watch, at all times. In a situation like that, the guard down on the street would call us first and only then consider going to investigate. They’re not allowed to leave the Station unguarded, and only leave the Tower unguarded to cover the Station.”

As the two men spoke, a car pulled up into the driveway. Will Stark emerged, briefly silhouetted against the backdrop of the great glowing Dome he’d built, dressed in a dark gray suit and blue tie, and wearing an overcoat. His wire-rimmed glasses fogged briefly after leaving the warmth of his car for the chill of the wintry air. He frowned on seeing the police car lights flashing, and the limousine off to the side, clearly recognizing that something was amiss. He spotted his old friend Michael Baker and walked to the police officer.

“Hi, Michael,” Stark said, shaking the officer’s hand. He inclined his head toward Myra VanderPoole, still pale in the back seat of her car. “Is Myra all right?”

Typical, Baker thought. Will first asks if Myra’s OK. If the situation was reversed, Myra would demand that we get Will out of the way so she could get into the neighborhood. “Not sure, Will,” he admitted. “The call from dispatch stated that she’d fallen on a patch of ice, but there’s more to it than that.” He hesitated. “Something has gone very wrong here.”

Will, who had been scanning the entry while the conversation occurred,

recognized the situation immediately. “Where did the Station guard go? And what happened up *there*?” His gaze shifted up to the Guard Tower with the gaping hole in the side, then down to glass. “That’s not ice, is it?” His tone was ominous, and a frown formed.

Baker shook his head. “We’d just hit that point when you arrived. Like I said, this is starting to look like something more serious than an old woman slipping and falling.”

Will had turned his gaze back to the Guard Station, and his frown turned to a look of horror. “Michael,” he said, trying to keep his voice calm, “why is there a giant hole in the ceiling of the Station?”

Baker’s face sank as he saw the massive crater in the Guard Station roof. His eyes moved to the gaping hole in the Tower, the glass on the driveway, and back to the hole in the Station roof. *Dear God*, he thought, *please don’t let those be connected*. Steeling himself, Baker walked over to the Station window and peered inside.

Will heard Baker suck in his breath, and then the officer turned away from the window and retched. “Oh, dear God!” he screamed between heavens. He composed himself long enough to stumble to his cruiser, seize his radio, and call in. “Baker here. I’m at the entry to the De Gray Estates. Require backup, medical examiner, ambulance, and search unit relating to apparent double homicide, suspect is at large. Repeat: suspect or suspects at large.” Baker’s eyes seemed shattered, and his face made it clear that whatever he’d seen, he’d never be able to forget it.

Will saw and heard nothing else after hearing Baker’s words. There had been a double homicide and the suspect or suspects were at large. It was hard not to assume the killer or killers had gotten into the community with other potential targets in mind. Why else would they murder the guards? Realizing that Hope and Josh were in mortal danger, he called Hope’s phone, but she didn’t answer. He left her a message, telling her to let no one in the house, to watch for intruders, and to get the gun out of the safe. He pocketed the phone and had only one thought on his mind. He must get to his family and protect them from whatever person or persons might mean to do them harm.

He raced to the man-trap outer door, letting the scanner identify him, but only when the inner door wouldn’t open did he remember. No Station guard would be able to authorize his entrance. The system he’d designed to keep others out had failed to do so and was now preventing him from getting in so he could rush to his family’s aid. He moved to the concrete gate, which stood ten feet

high. He ran at it, trying to use his foot to spring up high enough to get a grip on the top of the barrier, so as to pull himself up. But he couldn't jump high enough.

"Michael!" he screamed, attracting the stunned police officer's attention. "Give me a boost!"

Baker seemed to regain his senses as Will's plan registered. "No way, Will. It's too dangerous. I am *not* going to help you run after those maniacs out of some noble idea of saving your family. Wait until backup gets here."

"Please," Will begged. "I *have* to go to them."

Baker shook his head. "I won't help you." A pause. "But I won't try to stop you. I know I'd be trying to do the same thing if my family was on the inside."

Will nodded and scanned the area, trying to find the weakness in the system he'd designed, a weakness that might be there now that there were no guards on duty to prevent his attempts at entry. Baker would not allow him to shatter the glass of the Guard Station and enter the community in that manner; the building was now a crime scene. Will glanced at the roof, an idea forming.

He couldn't go *through* the building. But he could certainly try to go *over* the building. The guards had defenses to prevent such attempts, but the guards wouldn't be stopping him today.

Will saw the opening he needed in the form of a downspout running from the roof. He seized the pipe and, with a surge of adrenaline, shimmied his way up the side of the building, relieved that the plastic was supporting his weight. He reached up and gripped the gutter, which was now two feet behind him, with one hand while keeping his legs and the other hand gripping the downspout for leverage. Once he had a secure one-handed grip, he let go with his legs and swung out, dangling, until he got his second hand fixed on the gutter. He built some momentum, swinging his body until he built enough speed, and then with a heave threw his legs up onto the roof, pushing with his hands to ensure he stayed there. He took a deep breath, calming himself after the exertion, and then turned himself around, facing the peak of the steep roof.

Leaning forward, Will moved to the top. He passed the gaping hole and steeled himself to not look into the room below. He'd seen Baker's reaction, and he couldn't afford that kind of reaction himself right now, not when he needed to focus on getting to his house. Will reached the top, and shifted around so he was backing down the roof toward the inside of the community. When he reached the edge, he gripped the gutter, gently lowered himself down as far he could, and then dropped the remaining five feet to the ground. He knew that he needed to roll into the drop to avoid injuring himself, but the impact still staggered him and

he twisted his right ankle. Ignoring the pain, he took a deep breath, stood, and moved toward the fleet of golf carts, aware that a golf cart would get him to his house more quickly than he could on foot, with or without his injured ankle.

But the golf carts were all in flames. The situation was becoming more ominous by the moment. He'd have to go as fast as he could on foot, with his injured ankle, while wearing the worst possible running shoes. Will ran down the central driveway until it forked five ways. He took the one to the far left and sprinted toward his house, which was a mile away.

He prayed he was in time to save his wife and son from the fate suffered by the two security guards.

ASSASSIN

Hope Stark sat in her living room, watching and waiting. Her breathing was rapid and shallow, reflecting the terror of anticipation she felt. Every noise made her jump, certain that at least one cold-blooded killer had entered her home.

It wasn't the ideal method of preparing for a potential invasion force, but it would have to do. It was the best approach available to her to meet her ultimate goal of keeping Josh safe. They could try to run or drive out of here, but they'd certainly be seen or heard by the killers. If they had already beaten Will's security system at the gate, they'd be ready for one woman trying to run or drive away from a house while towing a young child. She silently thanked the security guard for sharing information about the criminals. She feared the guard was dead, and hoped that if that was the case, his death had been quick and painless. She was going to do everything she could to make sure it had not been in vain, and that meant making sure that her son survived whatever was out there. The gun was in her nervous hand, loaded, safety off, a spare clip in her pocket.

Only time would tell if it would be enough.

The Assassin wove through the forest, clouds of vapor rising off his bald head, staying off the main driveway. Thanks to the fool human guard, the Stark woman would know he was coming, and would have a loaded gun waiting for him. His blood-red eyes blazed. He didn't like that. There was a chance she could get off a shot while he was still some distance away, and that meant she would have a

chance to hurt him. The Assassin didn't like fair fights. He needed to disarm her immediately. He would approach the house unseen, denying the human woman the opportunity to take a shot at him as he approached the house, traveling through the thick tree cover of the forest enclosed within the massive walls circling the community. He would enter the house through the rear door as the woman would no doubt be looking for him out the front. He had ways of defending himself and disarming her, but those methods worked best in close quarters.

He expected the Hunters would be lurking in these trees as well, and he soon spotted them. The men were, for reasons he'd never quite understood nor cared to consider, named after the characters in a human work of fiction known as *The Three Musketeers*. Supposedly the three characters worked together to defend their leader from attacks, which was reason enough for *their* Leader to appreciate the monikers one of their number had suggested. The Hunters enjoyed the names, and nobody seemed to remember what they'd been called before assuming the pseudonyms.

Athos had a handsome face with dark hair, dark eyes, and a scar across his right cheek—ironically, a gift from Will Stark—that only added to his physical appeal. Athos was the nominal leader of the trio, if only because he was the most sane and levelheaded. His gift for knowing when others were telling the truth—even when those questioned did not know *themselves* if they were telling the truth—was an incredibly useful tool for making decisions during the course of Hunts.

Aramis was the most peculiar in appearance. He'd seen a photograph of a human man wearing a top hat and monocle, and had become fascinated with the accessories, and now it was difficult to get the man to leave the hat off. Thankfully, he'd given up the monocle, at least during Hunts, after his fellow Hunters could no longer take him seriously. He'd compromised by wearing wire-rimmed glasses he didn't need. His wardrobe choices, combined with his white-blond hair, served to make the man look more like an aging professor than a young law enforcement officer. His demeanor, though, was more akin to a member of the Inquisition. Aramis knew every rule, law, and Oath of their organization, and the prescribed penalties for each, and he expected everyone else to know them and follow them with extreme strictness. Aramis tended to react with great emotion whenever someone slipped, as if he'd been personally violated in some fashion by their rule breaking, no matter how minor the infraction. The mere mention of Will Stark's name could lead the man to

convulsions—a fact that The Assassin enjoyed abusing on occasion.

The final member of the trio was the most bizarre in terms of behavior. Porthos wore his brown hair to his shoulders, often tying it back in a ponytail, and liked to wear a dark cloak with an oversized hood. The man believed that such garb gave him an air of ominous mystery when on Hunts. Porthos was the Hunter best at exploiting human culture and technology, a useful skill for gathering key pieces of data used on Hunts, but a habit which led to the display of many odd human mannerisms, including a lack of filters or decorum when speaking to other Aliomenti. Porthos could find anyone who emanated any of the Energy their group cultivated, tracking it like a bloodhound following a scent. His primary personality quirk—an ease of mingling with humans—led him to often question humans in order to narrow the search area for a suspect, or find some obscure detail that made the Hunts easier to conclude. It was Porthos who had tracked Will Stark to the outskirts of this domed city in southeastern Ohio, and it was Porthos who had unearthed the detail about Stark that necessitated the Assassin's services.

Porthos spotted the Assassin and made his way to the killer. “Nobody's left the house since we got here, so the human woman should still be in there and you can go blow her up or whatever it is you're planning to do. We'll take care of Stark when he arrives.” The man seemed unsure of himself about the last part.

The Assassin glared at him with his blood-red eyes, showing no sign that anything Porthos had said was of any interest. Porthos took the hint and moved away. The Assassin took the opportunity to approach Athos, who was the only one of the three with whom he ever willingly conversed. Athos was a man of few words, at least around the Assassin, and the Hunter reached into his backpack and pulled out a large can that resembled an aerosol spray. He presented the item to the Assassin and simply said, “Good luck.”

The Assassin took the can and did not respond. He didn't need luck.

Hope Stark needed luck.

Actually, it was *Will Stark* who needed luck. Hope would simply die, quickly and painlessly. The rules said that Hunters were to conclude a Hunt with the least possible injury to the fugitive. Given the history between this trio and their Hunted target, it didn't take a genius to figure out that even Aramis was going to make this day one of pure agony for Will Stark. They'd ask for forgiveness later, and they'd get their request. Everyone wanted Will Stark apprehended.

Well, not everyone, not those in the Alliance. They didn't count, though, being Oath-breakers themselves.

The Assassin moved silently out of the small forest and into the Starks' backyard, heading for the rear of the house. A small bit of Energy was sufficient to unlock the sliding glass door from the inside. He slid the door open, smiling in a manner that contorted his horribly scarred face in anticipation of the final kill of the day. He pulled the sword from the sheath on his belt in case the woman interrupted his preparations for the gift he was planning for Will Stark, and felt a slight sense of sadness.

It was a shame it all had to end so quickly. He was just getting warmed up.

Hope heard the back door open as the alarm chime sounded, and her head whirled in that direction. She held the gun in her right hand, and moved toward the kitchen in silence. The killer would need to move through the kitchen to reach her, and she had no interest in waiting around for him to come to her with that horrible, bloodied sword. She intended to fight him as best she could, rather than going quietly.

Hope heard the floor squeak and could verify where the killer was based on the noise. The noise was unnecessary, for the sensation of evil emanating from the man was so intense that she could orient on his location without using her senses of sight and hearing. Taking a deep breath, she leaped into the kitchen and started to pull the trigger.

An unseen force ripped the gun from her hands, leaving her defenseless. The gun moved straight into the outstretched hand of the man she'd seen in her earlier nightmare. In her dream, his appearance had been terrifying. In person, that same look was incapacitating. The soulless blood-red eyes looked at her, hungry to see the light of life in her eyes extinguished in death. His heavily scarred face showed the untold tale of horror the man had created with his life. The short sword held in his right hand was red with the dried blood of previous victims, most likely including Mark, the security guard.

The man glanced at the gun, and the clip of bullets dropped out of it, disarming the weapon. The killer threw the weapon to the ground. "You won't need that, Mrs. Stark." The man's voice was like ice, and Hope felt the temperature in the house drop as he spoke. The man glanced at the bullets lying on the ground, and Hope watched them shrivel into flattened pieces of metal. "You won't need those, either."

Hope found her voice, at least for the moment. "Who are you? Why are you

in my house? I'm calling the police."

"You'll do nothing of the sort." It wasn't a suggestion; it was a command.

She tried to reach the mobile phone clipped to her belt, but the force previously used to pull the gun from her hands now kept her hands up and away from the device. The phone rang, startling her, and she recognized the ring tone for Will. The killer smirked, and the phone dissolved into dust, destroyed by an invisible, crushing force. The force controlling her arms now pulled on her, forcing her into a chair at the kitchen table, where her arms were pinned to her side as she was restrained in the seat.

The man smiled, which had the effect of exaggerating the scars on his face. "That's better. I have a bit of preparatory work to do, Mrs. Stark. I'll then explain why I'm here, and then... why, then, you'll die." He said it without a hint of emotion, as if the concept of taking a human life had no emotional impact on him. Rather, if her dream had been accurate—and he was the living embodiment of the terror she had seen in her sleep—the man truly relished killing. And she was now unarmed, snared by some invisible force.

After sheathing his sword, the man pulled what looked like a large aerosol can from his pocket. He began to walk along the perimeter of the house, spraying a thin coating of the substance in the can on the exterior walls. Hope watched, confused, as the thin liquid expanded like foam, spreading to cover large portions of the wall surfaces, and an oily smell filled the air. He exited the kitchen area and moved into the dining room, which sat on one side of the front of the house. As he left the kitchen with a thump of heavy boots, Hope felt the invisible force restraining her release, allowing her to move again. She glanced at the gun on the floor with the useless bullets next to it. She still had an extra clip in her pocket, but clearly the man had expected the gun attack. He was likely prepared for the possibility that she'd reload and try to shoot him... and her previous attempt suggested such an effort would be futile.

Her eyes fell on the rack of baseball bats Will kept next to the door, which were used in the batting cage he'd installed in the backyard. If the gun wasn't an option, perhaps another form of attack was in order.

After slipping off her shoes to help muffle her steps, Hope stood, silent on her feet, reflecting on her knowledge of the spots in the house; those which would creak and those which would stay solid and quiet underfoot. She selected one of the wood bats and crept out of the kitchen in the opposite direction of the killer, still silent as a shadow. She stayed close to the inner wall of the room, out of sight, bat held at the ready. She could hear the killer moving out of the dining

room by the clump of his boots and the rustling of his clothes, and past the front door. He should be entering the room right about...

Now.

The man stepped into the room, his back to her, still spraying the foaming liquid on to the walls of her home. Subtlety no longer an option, Hope charged the man, swinging the bat with every bit of strength she could muster. The wooden bat shattered into splinters as it hit him full across the shoulders.

He paused briefly, grunted, and then continued his work, as if he'd merely been aware of a bead of sweat trickling down his back.

Hope's eyes widened and she dropped the bat handle to the floor. She backed away from him, back into the kitchen, where she seized a large knife from the butcher block and returned to the chair she'd been in moments before. Perhaps it was a futile effort at self-defense. She could run now, but the other men from her nightmare were likely out there, waiting for her. If they were here to execute her, she meant to make them work for it. She would do whatever was necessary to prevent them from discovering her child. Running would never do, but delaying the killer from completing his mission might. If she held off dying long enough, Will might arrive at the house with the police in tow. This plan had the added advantage of her staying alive.

She wondered if this killer would be able to seize their guns in the same manner he had seized hers.

The killer came into the kitchen, having finished painting the walls of her home in the foaming substance. He pocketed the can once more, and turned to face her. The look on his face said that her attack with the bat had not gone unnoticed, and would not go unpunished. She made herself glare back at him with as much malice as she could muster.

"Mrs. Stark, the rules say that I am to explain the nature of the crimes committed, and then quickly and painlessly end your worthless *human* life. However, I believe there are exceptions in the rules for termination candidates who strike an Assassin. I shall have to ask clarification on that point during our review of this mission."

In other words, Hope thought, he intends to make me suffer, regardless of the consequences he'll face.

The killer cleared his throat. "Will Stark has been charged with breaking innumerable Aliomenti laws and rules, though those are of no matter for us here today. Assassins are only summoned forth when rogue Aliomenti violate one or more of the Oaths all members must swear upon joining. The two minor Oaths

include willful communication of the existence of the Aliomenti, or the sharing of our advances with the human race, with marriage to a human considered to be an automatic admission of guilt to breaking those Oaths. For the guilty Aliomenti, the penalty is imprisonment. For the humans who knowingly or unknowingly aided and abetted the violation of these Oaths, the penalty is death.”

Hope blinked as she translated this into more practical terms. “What kind of nonsense is this? You’re saying my husband is part of some group that sentences his wife to death? That’s ridiculous. My husband loves me, and he’d never join a group like that or swear such a vow.”

The Assassin laughed at her. “Your husband is not what he seems, Mrs. Stark. Not only did he swear to those Oaths, it was he who actually *instituted* them and the requisite penalties.”

Hope shook her head. “No. That’s not possible. You’ve got the *wrong man*.”

“I assure you, I do not. Will Stark’s name and face are the most widely known in our entire organization, and he is the one man whose identity we could never confuse with another. His open use of his given name without disguise may suggest madness on his part, but it does not change who he is or what he has done. All criminals must meet their punishment in the end. Today is the day for Will Stark.” He paused. “And for you.”

“I’m telling you, you’ve got the *wrong man*. I’ve never heard of this alley-whatever group you’re talking about. Will’s not told me any type of secrets. Let me talk to him. You’ll see. You’ve got the *wrong man*.”

The Assassin laughed at her again, this time with a mocking cruelty in the tone. “Silly *human* girl. Do you think your words carry any weight with us? Save your breath. You have so few remaining.”

She considered her next move as he continued talking. “You see, your husband has been something of an embarrassment to our organization. One of our true leaders and innovators, leaving to be part of a rebellion that strives to *help* humans? This is not acceptable.”

Sounds like my kind of guy, Hope thought. *Anybody who aggravates this clown is a hero in my book*. Aloud, she snorted. “Now, see, *that* sounds like Will, always looking to help others improve their own lives. Where can I sign up for this rebellion you spoke of? I’d like to help him continue his noble work.”

The Assassin ignored her cheek. “He has many times escaped our attempts at capture, and our Hunters have become quite disturbed. When they learned about you, well... it was as if they had been given a wonderful gift.” His blood-red

eyes glinted with malice. “Bait.”

She stared at him. “What... what do you mean, bait?”

“We have heard plenty of stories through our information gathering of Will’s deep devotion to you. Even now, I am quite certain he is trying to work through the little obstacle I left at the entry to your neighborhood, as he has no doubt figured out that your life is in danger. And so I mean to show him a dramatic failure in this regard. Not only will you be dead, but your home will be in flames. In his emotional distress at losing you in this fire, he will be an easy target for our Hunters.” He leaned closer, smiling. “They have not forgotten how he has shamed them and our group. I dare say the capture will not go well for him.” At her look of horror, he laughed.

“And now, Mrs. Stark, we come to the manner of *your* death. Normally, I would simply run my sword through you, directly into your brain, and that would kill you instantly. No pain, for all that’s worth. Yet, you intended to shoot me with your little gun, and then you actually struck me with that piece of wood. That hurt my pride. Struck by a *human woman*? Such an embarrassment must be repaid. And so instead, I believe I will let you die slowly in my beautiful fire, maimed so that you cannot escape. I am uncertain as to whether I should silence you as well, but I daresay it will be far more interesting to have Will hear you screaming as you burn to death, knowing he cannot save you.” He moved toward her. “And now, we will see your legs and arms maimed.”

Hope pulled the knife from behind her back, blade gripped in her fingers, and hurled it at the Assassin. He was stunned, and though he could move quickly, he could not get entirely out of the way. The blade caught him in the left shoulder, and he roared in pain. If she’d felt his presence and evil before, it was nothing compared to the malice she felt now, crackling like electricity around her.

He switched his sword to his left hand, and used the right hand to yank the knife from his shoulder. He stared at his own blood, shocked, and then turned on her again, screaming in rage more than pain. “Now you will suffer beyond comprehension!” He raised both blades now, ready to charge her, to... do what, she had no idea.

She caught the blur of white hurtling through the air as the baseball smashed into the man’s face, shattering his nose, the already ugly face becoming even more so.

“You leave my Mommy alone, you bad man!” Josh shouted, shaking his fist at The Assassin, the picture of six-year-old fury.

The Assassin roared again and turned on the unknown assailant. *No*, thought Hope, *don't you dare hurt Josh*. She'd hidden the boy in his room, buried in his closet under clothes and stuffed animals, with the order to not make a sound or leave until he heard one of his parents calling for him. Clearly, the boy had heard the shouting and had come to protect his mother. *Just like the voice in his head told him to*. Though she admired his bravery and devotion to her, she wished he'd chosen to remain in place. Now she had to prevent The Assassin from killing her son; she'd failed to make sure the man never discovered Josh's existence. She waited for the expected attack on the child.

But The Assassin stared at the six-year-old boy, rooted to the spot and unmoving. The temperature in the house seemed to drop.

"Go away, bad man!" Josh shouted.

The Assassin finally seemed to shake out of his fog. "Stark has a son." It wasn't a question, yet the tone suggested he wanted it to be. "It's impossible. No Aliomenti can have children. Yet here he is. It's not possible."

Hope took advantage of the distraction and hurled herself into the man, knocking him to the ground. She heard him grunt again as his damaged shoulder slammed into the wood floor. Then he brushed her aside, sending her five feet through the air. She landed with a thud, temporarily disoriented. She was somehow by that same kitchen chair again, with The Assassin getting to his feet near the opening between the kitchen and living room. Josh, who had been in the hallway entering the kitchen, ran to her. "Mommy!" he shrieked, his face shrouded in concern as he hugged her.

A few hours ago, hearing her name and getting a hug from her son would have been the greatest gift she could receive. Now, she just wanted to get him away from here. But instead, the evil mind of The Assassin formulated a new plan. "I've thought of the *perfect* punishment for you, Mrs. Stark. You'll watch the boy die in front of your eyes before you burn to death." He laughed; a cruel and triumphant sound that reminded Hope of fingernails on a chalkboard.

The evil laughter turned to a scream of pain.

Smokey had emerged from hiding, and her jaws were clamped around the Assassin's leg. The dog snarled and pulled, as if she were trying to amputate the leg with her teeth. At a minimum, she was causing The Assassin a great deal of pain. The man roared and slammed a huge fist down on the dog's head. Smokey yelped, but didn't let go of his leg. The Assassin raised his sword and jabbed it into the dog's side. Smokey yelped again and fell to the ground, whimpering.

"Smokey!" Josh screamed, and Hope's heart broke at the anguish in her

son's voice. He tried to run to the dog, but Hope held him. The Assassin, noting the anguish as well, smiled at the boy and kicked the dog into the wall of the house. Smokey fell to the ground and lay completely still.

"You *monster!*" Hope screamed, while trying to restrain and comfort a sobbing Josh.

The boy broke free and sent a withering glance at the Assassin, who, to Hope's surprise, looked somewhat frightened. "I'll kill you for that," the little boy said, his tone the equal in malice to that of the Assassin. The voice was Josh's and yet not, as if from an unrepentant demon, and Hope was startled.

The Assassin took a step back, and then seemed to remember he was being threatened by an unarmed six-year-old boy. He laughed once, and then his face resumed its usual mask of venom. "Foolish boy," he hissed. "I'm tired of these games. This ends *now.*" He took a step toward Hope and Josh, the sword rising above his head, ready to finish them off.

They vanished from his sight.

He'd suffered insults to his pride as the two humans and the dog had fought him; while it was a rare human who could muster the courage to fight him at all, it wasn't without precedent, and some had even landed blows that scarred his face before he overwhelmed them. This had been something different. He hadn't known about the boy or the dog, and between the broken nose, the stab wound in his shoulder, and the torn flesh of his leg, he'd taken the worst beating of his career. But he'd gotten through it and fully disarmed them, ready for the kill of not one but two humans—an extra treat—and now he'd been denied that reward.

There could be only one explanation, only one man who could have moved the human woman and child to safety, only one man who could have denied him his kills.

"STARK!" he screamed, so loudly he was certain the world could hear him. His anger and rage boiled up in the form of the flames he could expel from his body, normally at will, but the tongues of fire were beyond his control at this point, so great was the rage that consumed him.

The flames touched the foaming substance he'd sprayed on the walls earlier, concentrated on the rear wall of the house in the kitchen where he was facing. The foam, a flame accelerant he'd developed over the years as a way to enhance his natural pyromancy abilities, was intended to be lit with a tiny spark, the way the Hunters had used it to burn the golf carts at the community entrance. Instead, the substance was ignited with the explosive equivalent of a small bomb. The foam exploded, blasting the rear wall of the house into the back yard. The

somewhat weaker flames moving toward the front of the house blew out the glass in the front windows; the shrapnel spraying Will Stark, who had just arrived at the front yard.

The remaining accelerant did what it was designed to do. Red-hot flames blasted into existence, engulfing the entire house in towering streams of fire nearly instantly. To an outside observer like Will Stark, it was as if the house had been erased and replaced by a giant bonfire.

The raging fires thirsted for oxygen, and while the Assassin's gift made him immune to the flames, he still needed to breathe. He gasped for air and tried to leave the house, but the loss of oxygen was so sudden and complete at his level that he only made it two steps before he lost consciousness. He fell to the ground, right next to the dog he'd kicked with extreme cruelty only a few moments earlier.

ABDUCTION

Will squinted at the wall of flame that was consuming his house, unable to fully open his eyes due to the intense brightness of the inferno. The sound of the crackling flames was loud enough to hurt his ears, and the smell of burning wood and paint filled the air. He could not fathom what force or power could engulf a five thousand square foot house in flames as though it was a scrap of paper thrown into a bonfire. What mattered most to him now was determining if either Hope or Josh had survived the initial explosion, and if they still lived amid the raging flames. The earlier news from Hope that Josh had finally started speaking now had a very practical benefit: his son had the ability to call out for help, assuming he still lived.

Will refused to think about any other possibility. He'd search for Hope and Josh until he found them, regardless of their condition or the pain and injury he might endure. He owed them that much for failing to protect them from the horror that stood before him.

He winced still at the pain from his twisted ankle and from removing the overcoat, which had not only pulled pieces of glass from his skin, but had also aggravated his burns, burns that were only getting worse as he continued to stand so close to the burning building. He'd probably be advised to get plastic surgery for the burns after this. He didn't care.

Will tried to look into the house where he'd seen the man with the bloodied sword, the man who'd tried and possibly succeeded in killing his wife and son. The flames were too intense, but he imagined the killer had probably been badly injured or killed in the explosion, and if not, the flames couldn't be doing him any good. It was difficult to feel any sympathy for that monster, though. Will darted to the right side of his house, looking for any semblance of an opening in

the flames or walls that would enable him to get inside. He saw nothing but towering sheets of fire. While he didn't particularly care if he suffered additional injuries, it wouldn't do Hope or Josh any good if he was so badly hurt when he got into the house that he couldn't help them get out. If they were already gone... he'd just stay in the house until he joined them.

For now, he'd search.

Will worked his way steadily around the side of the house, spotting nothing resembling an opening in the walls of flame, until he reached the back. It looked as if the explosion had been focused here, perhaps in the kitchen area, for it had taken a large section of the back of the house out. The flames were, if possible, even more intense near the gaping hole than around the front and sides of the house. Will suspected that it was because there was more oxygen here to feed the flames. He could feel the fire touching his scorched skin, and he inhaled a touch of smoke.

Gasping and choking, Will moved farther into the backyard, falling to his knees and coughing as he worked to expel the smoke from his lungs. He knew what he needed to do now. He would plunge into his burning home through the now non-existent rear walls to continue his search. Fate would decide whether he emerged.

His lungs finally seemed clear, and Will took deep breaths to flood his lungs with oxygen and in so doing keep his body from shutting down due to the extreme burns. He stood up, faced the house, and started walking, a look of grim determination on his face.

Two sets of hands grabbed him from behind and hurled him twenty feet through the cold winter air toward the forest surrounding his home. Will landed in a heap, his glasses flying off his face well past him, and the just-inhaled air was expelled forcefully from his lungs. He tried to get to his feet, but his attackers began kicking him and punching him, the force doubly painful due to his burned skin. Forced to focus on his own survival, Will tried to pull himself into a fetal position, but the attackers seized his arms and legs and held him face down. The heavy blows continued, fists and boots smashing into him, and he heard loud cracks as bones snapped in his lower leg and rib cage.

"Stand him up," a voice rasped. Will was hauled to his feet, his legs unable to bear his weight. He saw before him a man dressed in black with wavy black hair and a handsome face featuring green eyes that glowed with hatred. The man's face was marred by a single scar across his right cheek. The man produced a large knife, more like a small sword, which glinted in the fading

sunlight. “Let’s see how *you* like this, Stark,” the man snarled. Will felt the burnt skin of his face torn open as the attacker slashed him across both cheeks. One of his captors released him, and Will’s battered body slumped to the ground; the second man maintained contact as Will collapsed.

Cold water was splashed on his face. “No sleeping now, Stark,” the man with the scar announced. “You can’t answer for your crimes if you’re taking a nap.” He laughed. “Aramis, it’s your show.”

The man maintaining contact shifted around so that Will could see him. The man had blonde hair so light it looked almost white. He wore wire-rimmed glasses and a top hat. He looked like a dull literature professor, which suited Will fine as he desperately wanted to sleep. Forever.

The man maintained contact with Will as he spoke. “I, Aramis, along with Athos—” he nodded at the scar-faced man, “and Porthos—” he nodded at a third man, who wore a dark cloak, “hereafter referred to as the Hunters, do hereby charge you, Will Stark, with many crimes, including, but not limited to, the following. That you did knowingly, and with extreme prejudice, provide to humans technological advances developed by and intended to be limited to use by the Aliomenti, and that in so doing you violated Aliomenti Oath number one. That to further this illegal activity you recruited others to your cause, and formed an organization known as the Alliance. And that you did marry the human woman known as Hope Stark, in violation of Aliomenti Oath number three, which carries the automatic penalty of fifty years imprisonment for you and the termination of the human woman, in order to ensure the ongoing privacy and secrecy of the existence of the Aliomenti from humans. How do you plead to these charges, for which we have amassed unassailable proof of guilt?”

The blond man finished his recitation and looked at Will. In his dazed state, Will was only vaguely aware that he was expected to respond.

Will answered the only way he could. “What?”

He had to focus to avoid slurring his words as his brain was working overtime trying to deal with the massive injuries he’d suffered in the past fifteen minutes.

Aramis frowned. “That is not an acceptable answer. How do you plead to the charges?”

Will coughed, spitting out blood. “I don’t *understand* the charges.” His voice slurred.

The man in the cloak snickered. “I think you kicked him too hard, Athos. He can’t even answer a question now.”

“Shut it, Porthos,” Athos replied. “Acceptable answers to Aramis’ question are guilty or not guilty, Stark. Answer!”

“I plead...” Will paused, as he noticed the three men tensed at his words, as though expecting something disastrous to happen. But they continued looking at him, and Will completed his thoughts. “No understanding.”

Aramis groaned. “Surely, Stark, you are quite aware that you’ve done every single thing I charged you with, no? Why are you stalling? Answer for what you’ve done, like a man!”

Will’s voice continued to slur. “I don’t remember any of the things you’re talking about because I don’t understand most of the stuff you said.”

Aramis slapped Will’s face with his free hand, and the pain nearly caused Will to faint. “Wake up, Stark, and stop lying. You’ve never denied any of this before. Of course, usually you’ve managed to escape by now, too, but let’s not go there. Answer the questions!”

“I am proud to be married to Hope. I don’t know the group you spoke of, so I don’t know what rules or oaths you’re talking about. I haven’t started any type of groups like what you described.” Will wasn’t sure how he managed to speak so many words at once in his current condition.

Porthos groaned. “Athos, just Read him and get this over with. Screw the stupid rules that seem only to exist to keep us from capturing him. We all know he’s guilty anyway.”

Athos grabbed him, and Will thought he’d once again be throttled. But the man simply put his palm on Will’s forehead, closed his eyes, and concentrated. When he opened his eyes, Athos looked concerned. “He’s not lying. He truly has no memory of anything.”

Aramis turned on Porthos. “You *idiot!* Did you actually track the *wrong man?*”

Porthos shoved Aramis, dislodging the top hat, which Aramis stooped to retrieve with both hands. Athos and Porthos looked concerned until Aramis donned the hat and resumed his hold on Will.

Porthos glared at Aramis. “I tracked nothing wrong. The Energy reading was off the charts. There’s only one registered fugitive with a reading like that, and that’s Will Stark. The Energy scent was his. *Look at him!* How can you consider the idea that that man is *not* Will Stark?”

Athos spoke, his voice quiet and uncertain. “He has no memory in his mind of his past with the Aliomenti. That’s not to say that the memories have not, somehow, been erased. He does seem... taller, though.”

“Impossible. Nobody has that type of technology.” Porthos was adamant, but his face showed doubt.

“There’s no way we can know that for certain,” Aramis said. “We do not have information on what the Alliance does when it’s not fleeing from us. It’s not impossible to believe that they’ve developed just such a technology. We have no one inside the Alliance to report on such matters.” His eyes narrowed. “Or *do* we?”

I wish I could move right now, Will thought. I could get away and find Hope and Josh and escape while they bicker.

Athos held up his hand, seeming to recognize this as well. “Gentlemen, this is not something we can settle here today. It is, indeed, our assessment that this man is Will Stark in the flesh, if not quite the mind, and that for his past crimes he is, at the minimum, subject to arrest. Are we in agreement?”

“Thoroughly,” Porthos said. Aramis nodded.

“Then I would propose we detain the suspect and return him to Headquarters where he can be properly questioned to determine the extent of this apparent memory loss, and recommendation of final punishment,” Athos stated. Then, in a lower voice: “Though I’ve never been unable to unravel even a cellular level indication of memory before. This is truly bizarre.”

Aramis nodded. “I’m in agreement that we are within the rules to detain him. At this point, we’ve said enough that he’s a danger to our anonymity even if by chance this is not *our* Will Stark.”

Porthos snorted. “You basically just said that we broke Oath Number 1. Shall we have someone hunt *us* down and bring *us* in for questioning?”

Aramis’ face reddened. “The Oath specifically states that you must *knowingly* expose the Aliomenti. We had, and have, reasonable suspicion that this man is our main fugitive from justice. Will Stark. He knows more about the Aliomenti than anyone, no? It’s impossible that we could expose our existence to *him*. He was Aliomenti before any of us!”

Porthos patted Aramis on the arm. “Ease up. I agree with you. But this is very strange. Very strange indeed. It’s almost as if…” He paused, looking thoughtful.

“Out with it, man,” Athos snapped. “What are you suggesting?”

“I’m wondering if this could be a trap set by the Alliance,” Porthos said, frowning. “They know we’re desperate to capture Will Stark. They erase or hide his memories and plant him here. Or they just find someone with a similar likeness. Then they sneak into this backyard and shoot off Energy like fireworks.

We show up, and while we're sitting here trying to figure out why Will Stark seems so, well, so *human*..."

"...the Alliance swoops in and captures us," Athos said. He glanced around. "I don't think that's true, but... any Energy readings now?"

Porthos closed his eyes, deep in concentration. When he opened them, he frowned. "You mean, outside of the three of us? There is one person." He turned toward the woods. "You can come out now, sir."

The Leader of the Aliomenti, a short man with thinning blond hair brushed straight back, emerged from the woods and walked toward the three Hunters and Will Stark. The man glanced at the burning house behind them with an amused air of satisfaction. Will noted an odd symbol of gold stitched on the lapel of his expensive suit. The symbol seemed to show a dashed circle inside a solid one, with an upside-down V overshadowing both. There were other symbols, but Will's eyes weren't functioning well enough, between the beating and his lost glasses, to make them out.

"What, precisely, is the delay here?" he demanded. "Why are we not leaving with Stark immediately? Eventually, the human police and fire professionals will get through The Assassin's mess out there and come this way. We cannot risk exposure." He glared at the Hunters. "Well?"

"Sir, we have reason to believe that this may not be the true Will Stark," Athos admitted. "Porthos detected strong Energy here consistent with our favorite fugitive, but he has no memory of anything related to the Aliomenti... and no discernible Energy readings at this range either. Aramis' Damper shouldn't completely eradicate any semblance of Energy from Will Stark, but it has." He took a deep breath. "I'm concerned that this man may be part of a trap set by the Alliance."

The Leader frowned and turned to the man wearing the cloak. "I thought you could distinguish between Energy given off by different people, and thereby know who you were Tracking? Why did you not sense something different here?"

Porthos shrugged. "There are remnants of Stark's Energy here, and quite a bit of it. Perhaps he simply emptied himself of it, leaving himself without Energy or memories. But there is no Energy coming from him now, and I don't know for sure that that's not because of what he demonstrated in our last encounter." He glanced at Aramis and Athos. "He could hide his Energy then, and he could be doing the same thing here. I fully believe this is our man. Whether he's faking humanness, or had his memory erased, or is employing some other deception, I

can't say. But the readings I picked up from far away? Nobody else can crank out that much. This is our guy." He hesitated. "It *has* to be." His face betrayed his doubt, though.

Will's scorched face seared with anger at this. Now, after they'd murdered his family and beaten him and burned down his house... now they think they might have the wrong person? "You *murderers*," he snarled, as best he could in his battered condition. "You killed them and beat me up because you thought I was somebody *else*?"

"Shut up, Stark," Athos said, kicking him in the ribs. He didn't put as much into it as before, but Will's body had suffered so much abuse that it was agony. "Nobody's going to lose sleep over a handful of human deaths."

"If you were concerned, you shouldn't have broken the rules and Oaths," Aramis said, smug, as if this resolved all concerns. "You have only yourself to blame."

"I have *you* to blame!" Will said, raising his voice as much as he could. "You *think* I'm somebody that your group says broke some rules, and for that you beat me up, kill two good men, and murder my wife and son?"

"Look, I don't..." Athos froze. "*What did you just say?*"

"You killed those guards and my wife and son over a case of mistaken identity, and you think that's *nothing*? What kind of monsters *are* you people?" His voice was breaking as he realized he was recognizing the obvious, that Hope and Josh were dead, and that he would die as well. He accepted his fate, and felt a strange sensation moving over his body, a sensation that was oddly ticklish. He wondered if that meant his body was giving up.

"*Oath-breaker!*" Aramis screamed, his face turning purple. "*How could you?*" The others' faces had paled, though none had fallen to the ground in convulsions as had the odd man in the top hat who was writhing on the ground several feet away from Will.

Athos looked at the Leader, and pulled a long knife from a sheath on his belt. "Sir, you have heard the confession. Stark has somehow reversed the procedure and managed to father a child. Even Porthos knows the prescribed punishment for that Oath violation."

Porthos didn't even respond to the verbal jab. He simply nodded, and drew his own knife.

The Leader nodded as well. "I had always hoped to reclaim you to our cause, Will Stark." His voice was solemn. "You were the epitome of what our kind could be. But your misguided ideals have been your downfall. And now this.

Fathering a child? Violation of the Fourth Oath? You know the penalty for that.”

He glanced at Athos and Porthos, who stood ready with their knives, and nodded, turning back to face Will. He looked Stark squarely in the eye. “I, Leader of the Aliomenti, hereby sentence Will Stark to death for violating the Fourth Oath, the Oath forbidding having children. The child we can assume destroyed by our Assassin and his fire, which is the lawful punishment for the offspring.”

The Leader breathed a deep sigh, and glanced at the Hunters. “Kill him.”

Athos and Porthos, on opposite sides of Will’s prone, battered body, plunged their knives straight down at Will’s chest, aiming directly for his heart.

The knives clanged off an invisible barrier, sliding off Will’s body, leaving him winded but otherwise free of further injury.

Both Hunters stood up instantly, looking around with suspicion.

“The Damper is off!” Porthos shouted, looking at Aramis’ figure rocking on the ground.

“It’s a trap!” Athos screamed. “Aramis, on your feet!”

The man did not stand; rather, he rolled back to Stark’s still-prone figure, drew his knife and pounded it repeatedly at Will, shrieking, “Die, cretin!” His stabs were no more successful than the others, sliding off the invisible shield protecting Will.

“Where *are* they?” The Leader shouted. “Porthos, where are they?”

“I’m not detecting *anything*, sir! There’s no indication that there’s anybody using Energy nearby!”

Will felt the tickling sensations on his body suddenly solidify and grip him in a tight cocoon, and then the cocoon pulled him feet-first into the frozen ground below. His last vision before the dirt filled in overhead was the look of absolute shock on the faces of the four men left above.

RESCUE

The silver-colored vehicle shimmered in the faint light of the Stark family's basement. The craft looked similar to a small car without wheels, suggesting a different means of movement. The top dissolved, revealing occupants inside filling three of the four seats. All three moved from the vehicle without speaking, their faces showing determination and focus.

A young woman with shocking red hair and violet eyes, wearing a one piece body suit of deep green, walked several steps toward the back of the house where Will Stark was being kicked and battered by three assailants. She stared at the finished wall, and a giant hole suddenly appeared, as if an invisible drill was being operated. Dirt, roots, and bits of rock flowed into the basement, covering the carpet with debris, the thunderous noise exaggerated in the otherwise silent space.

A man with short brown hair and brown eyes, wearing a similar bodysuit of pale green, examined the exterior of the craft, looking for any sign of damage. Satisfied that the craft was sound, he attached a small device to the ceiling above him. The device looked somewhat like a mobile phone. Once the device was planted, he climbed back into the vehicle and began adjusting a series of dials.

The third man wore wraparound, mirrored sunglasses and sported jet-black hair, matching the color of his bodysuit. He grabbed a small backpack and sprinted for the stairs leading to the upper levels of the house, donning a device over his mouth and nose as he moved.

The man looked around for several items as he reached the first floor, breathing clean air purified by the device worn on his face. He retrieved the gun that the Assassin had taken from Hope Stark, as well as a clip of ammunition the woman had dropped during the altercation. He grabbed a spare set of eyeglasses

worn by Will Stark. He also spotted the baseball Josh Stark had thrown at the Assassin. He hesitated, then added the baseball to the collection of items in the backpack and zipped the bag closed.

He walked to the unconscious form of the Assassin, and a look of pure rage contorted the visible parts of his face. He kicked the man's side, snarling "*That's* for my wife." He stomped on the man's chest, and the sound of ribs breaking could be heard over the crackling flames. "*That's* for my daughter." He spied the black Labrador laying only a few paces away, and kicked the killer in the face, watching his nose shatter in a spray of blood. "And *that's* for the dog." After donning the backpack, the man with the sunglasses knelt down, picked the Assassin up, and threw him over his shoulder.

As he stood, the man noticed that the dog was still breathing. A smile curled his lips. The animal seemed to sense the attention, and her tail twitched briefly.

He sprinted down the steps to the shimmering vehicle in the basement, and kicked the rear of the vehicle. A panel opened, revealing a large storage compartment. He threw The Assassin's unconscious form into the trunk, making no effort to prevent the man's head from slamming against the sides of the vehicle, and kicked him roughly into the compartment until The Assassin fit into the confined space. The trunk lid slid closed silently. He tossed the backpack in the front seat and turned around, racing back toward the steps.

The brown haired man noticed the movement. "Fil, where are you going? We need to be leaving, not sightseeing. It's too dangerous up there!"

"One more trip, Adam. Can't leave any evidence behind."

"Why didn't you get it all on the first trip?"

"I had two hundred pounds of Assassin on my back. And this is a special bit of evidence."

He ran up the steps back to the first floor, the oxygen mask back over his mouth and nose, but not before he heard the woman shout out. "Adam! He needs a shield, *right now!*"

"On it, Angel!" Adam replied.

Fil reached the first floor and sprinted to the gravely wounded dog, grateful to see that she was still breathing after his brief excursion to the basement. He gently picked her up in both arms, careful to avoid any excess pressure on the badly wounded and burned animal, and walked slowly down the steps, careful to avoid making any sudden movements that might disturb her. The dog's muzzle twitched, and a scratchy tongue reached out to the man's face in a silent, wet expression of canine thanks.

The dirt continued pouring into the basement from the hole Angel had created as Fil returned to the lower level. A moment later, the immobile form of Will Stark emerged through the hole in the basement wall of his home, floating through the air toward the vehicle. The woman named Angel moved her hand, and suddenly the dirt began moving *into* the hole in the wall, filling it back up.

Fil sat down on the front seat, still holding the wounded dog as Will was gently deposited in the back seat. He turned to face Angel who sat in the back, her arms protectively shielding the battered man. A tear streamed down her face. "I wish we'd protected him sooner," she said, her voice choked with emotion.

"If we'd protected him sooner, the Hunters would have been alerted to our presence," Fil replied. "It was his unfortunate role to play in his own rescue."

Will, barely conscious, saw the dog lying on the lap of a young man wearing what looked like sunglasses. "Smokey," he whispered, barely retaining consciousness. "You saved Smokey. Thank you."

The dark-haired man merely nodded at him.

"My wife, my son... did you save them, too?"

The young man shook his head. "They were already gone."

Will wept, his burned face remaining dry. His body had lost all of its moisture, and he could no longer produce tears.

The dark-haired man turned toward the young woman. "Angel, he needs deep sleep, but he needs to remember this when he wakes up."

She nodded. "Got it, Fil." She reached into a bag near her feet, studied the contents, and removed a small vial of fluid. She looked at Will. "This will help you sleep, but you'll need to swallow it for it to work." Will nodded, opening his mouth, happy to be relieved of the pain for even a short time. He swallowed the fluid poured into his mouth, grateful for the promised sleep.

He would have swallowed it faster if she'd told him it was poison.

Fil, meanwhile, looked at the man next to him. "We need to leave *now*, Adam. They'll figure out where we are soon enough."

Adam nodded, and as Will's eyesight faded into a deep sleep, a cover formed over the top of the vehicle, blocking out everything outside. The last thing he remembered seeing was the woman's right hand raised to indicate something to the men. He was vaguely aware of a golden tattoo on her palm, a tattoo with three intertwined dashed circles.

The incendiary device Adam had planted outside on the ceiling was started using a remote inside the vehicle. The readout showed five minutes, and started counting down.

Porthos looked around, trying to make sense of Stark vanishing. “It’s the Alliance. It has to be them. Why can’t I sense where they are? That... that... that vacuuming Stark into the ground trick, that was *not* minor Energy usage.” He was frustrated, effectively rendered blind to a target he knew was out there.

“I don’t know how they did that, but the fact that they pulled him into the ground suggests he must be nearby,” Athos said, glancing around. “Perhaps they’re in a secret chamber nearby? Or another house in the area?”

The Leader turned and looked at the burning building. “Or perhaps it was a means of getting him back into his *own* house?”

Athos started sprinting toward the building, followed closely by Porthos. “The basement!” Porthos said, catching on. “They’re pulling him into the basement!” Aramis ran as well, and the Hunters vanished into the flames and smoke of what remained of the Starks’ house.

The Leader walked closer to the house, but did not go in. He would leave the heat, smoke, and discomfort to his Hunters. He saw a scrap of paper on the ground, picked it up, and gasped in shock. He hid the paper in a pocket, fighting to control his emotions. The revelation from the paper, and its implications, would need to wait until later for processing.

Athos entered the burning house first, stunned at the intense heat and low oxygen levels he encountered. The basement suggestion from Porthos was sound; it would put Stark in the structure nearest to his departure point, and in the spot best protected from the flames. Upon spotting the steps, he sprinted to them and raced to the bottom with a coughing Porthos close behind.

Athos looked around for some sign of Stark or members of the Alliance, suddenly aware that he’d be quite vulnerable to an attack right now. He didn’t see Stark, but he did see something highly unusual: a huge hole in the wall nearest to where they’d been standing outside. The hole in the wall was strange enough, but it would explain the dirt on the ground nearby. It didn’t explain why, or how, the dirt was flowing *back into* the hole with a thunderous roar. Athos stared. How was that *possible*?

Porthos reached him, his jaw agape at the sight of the moving dirt. “If we’re right, Stark came in through that hole. The question is, now that they’re filling it back up... where is Stark?”

Aramis reached them, likewise puzzled by the sight of the refilling hole. “No ambush by the Alliance down here then?”

Athos shook his head, pounding his fist into an open palm. “No. They’re gone, if they were ever here. Stark has escaped again. We need to get to the Leader and leave before the human police and firefighters spot us here. We’re in danger of exposure here.”

The men paused for a moment, trying to determine if there was anything else to be done here. Then Athos noticed a strange noise. “What’s that sound?”

The Hunters whirled around, searching for the faint beeping sound. Porthos found it. “It looks like a clock.”

“What’s a clock doing on the ceiling?” Aramis asked. “And why is it counting down from ten seconds?”

Athos sucked in a breath of air. “That’s not a clock. That’s a bomb!”

The three men teleported the short distance to the back yard, no longer concerned that the Energy usage would alert the Alliance to their presence.

The incendiary bomb detonated, exacerbating and reactivating The Assassin’s accelerant. The remaining flames burned with renewed and unnatural vigor, and only moments later the spot in the basement where the Hunters had stood was covered in ash and dust, the only remains left of the entire Stark home.

Michael Baker had heard the explosion and had seen the flames. He shook his head, pulling his coat tighter against the chill, an irony not lost on him. Will Stark had been a fool to run to his house after that killer. Now he was probably dead—given the timing of his entry into the neighborhood and the explosion—along with his wife and son. He couldn’t imagine any of them had survived.

When the fire trucks arrived, everything was chaos at the entry to the De Gray Estates. Crime scene investigators had photographed the Guard Tower and Guard Station from every angle, the shards of glass on the entry driveway, and the two dead bodies. They were diligently looking for any type of clue as to the identity of the killer: a fingerprint, a lock of hair, a strand of clothing. They’d finally released the bodies of the two guards to the coroner. When the fire trucks arrived they’d needed to wait to sweep the glass, and then realized that they needed a guard to open the gate due to the biometric security features. They waited nearly twenty minutes until the man arrived, pale and understandably jittery at the scene of chaos and word of his colleagues’ deaths.

The off-duty guard had seen the flames in the distance as well, and shook his

head. “We lost good people today, didn’t we?”

Baker could only nod.

He rode behind the fire equipment in his cruiser, in no hurry to arrive at the home of a man he considered to be a good friend. Will and Hope were friends to many and friendly to everyone, their generosity and kindness legendary in the domed city and surrounding communities. He didn’t want to rush to the house as he knew there was nothing he could do to help them now. He had no great desire to locate their bodies... and he most certainly did not want to find the body of their six-year-old son, a boy the same age as his own son. The confirmation of their deaths would have a devastating effect not just on this isolated community or the domed city nearby, but the entire country as well. Will Stark was the symbol of the slowly emerging economic recovery. His death was not an omen they needed.

He rounded the final bend and pulled up at what remained of the Stark home. It was a scene of complete destruction. Nothing remained standing or intact except for the concrete foundation walls and floor. Every wall, every piece of furniture, every personal belonging—and likely, every person—had been reduced to dust and ash. The only good news was that the fire had been confined to the house, and therefore they’d avoided the chaos of a forest fire inside the massive walls of the community.

Baker shook his head, still too much in shock after the events of this day. Investigative teams would secure the area, but it was too dark to see anything, even if they could bring in portable lights. Clearly, there was nothing left to see. They’d all be back out here tomorrow morning, and he’d be here with them, trying to figure out what had happened.

He walked to the fire chief who was staring at the destruction in disbelief. “Any chance of survivors?” He knew it was a ridiculous question, but felt he needed to ask.

The chief shook his head. “None, Michael. Not unless they got out before the fire started. We’ll be lucky to recover any remains, let alone find survivors. If the explosion and flames happened as you described them... anybody inside would have been dead almost instantly, either from the blast or the heat. Given the destruction I’m seeing, this is clearly arson, and the arsonist used some type of chemical that made those flames spread rapidly, and at an incredibly high temperature. I’m guessing the explosion meant that it happened faster than he expected.”

“Meaning...?”

“Meaning that our arsonist probably turned to ashes in there as well.”

Baker nodded, and his expression was grim. That meant they’d never get the true answers as to why all of this had happened, why at least six people had died in this neighborhood today, counting the two security guards at the entry to the community, and the killer arsonist.

He shook his head at the tragedy of it all. “Call me if they find anything tonight,” he told the chief and the lead crime scene investigator without really meaning it.

He climbed into his cruiser and headed back to the station, wishing he could go home to his wife and son instead and hug them just a little tighter than usual.

DEBRIEF

The Aliomenti Hunters and Leader watched the police cruiser leave the human community where Will Stark's home had once been. They were safely hidden in the trees opposite the entrance to that community, having exited without being seen by any humans, emergency personnel or otherwise. Like other advanced Aliomenti, they possessed many incredible skills, including teleportation. Those skills enhanced their ability to exist in the human world without being discovered.

Athos wondered, in hindsight, if they should have used teleportation to enter the neighborhood. Having The Assassin kill the guards as planned did have a number of benefits, the most important being that they'd used no Energy getting inside, and that meant Will Stark would have no idea where they were or if they were even involved. Since neither guard had been able to alert anyone to their presence, they'd significantly reduced the chance that anyone would see them. The fact that Stark's own security prevented the human authorities from entering the community to come to his aid—and potentially seeing *them*—was deliciously ironic. Stark had seemed truly stunned by the fire. Somehow, though, he'd contacted his Alliance friends and gotten his memory erased, and everybody had gotten away. Again.

He sighed, considering the nature of the plan as the Hunters and Leader walked back to the hotel suite they shared. It had seemed like a good idea at the time, as flawless as a plan could be against a powerful, resourceful criminal like Will Stark. But the Leader would undoubtedly blame him for the failure, citing poor planning, or poor execution of the plan. Stark wasn't in custody, and thus the Hunt had failed.

The four men arrived at the outskirts of the hotel on foot, staying in the

shadows, and then teleported into the suite. They wouldn't travel far with teleportation. Teleportation was an Energy-intensive skill with demands increasing exponentially as the travel distance grew. That was, in fact, another of the reasons he elected not to use teleportation to get into the neighborhood. The Hunters needed to be fully charged to deal with Stark. He hadn't wanted to use it to get back *out* of the neighborhood, either. They had a small transport craft, capable of near-invisibility, waiting outside the fortress. Once they'd subdued Stark, Athos had planned to summon the robotic craft to fly them all out, and they would board a private airplane back to Headquarters. The eventual use of teleportation was forced by circumstance; the sirens of the fire engines and police cars were getting too close, and they couldn't risk being spotted.

Athos spoke immediately. "Sir, I just want to say—"

"Silence," the Leader said, his face drawn as he grabbed a drink from the in-room refrigerator. "I was *there*, Athos. The plan was sound. It was executed correctly. The Alliance clearly has some power unknown to us, and that is what they used to remove him from our clutches." He took a sip of the drink.

Athos was relieved. "Sir, I... thank you."

The Leader didn't look at him. "If you had told me the tale and I'd *not* been there, I'd likely have had you imprisoned for lying. But I saw it with my own eyes. We must deal with the reality of what this encounter with Stark means for our future."

The Hunters were tense, concerned about where the Leader might go with this. The temperature in the room seemed to drop.

"My first question is this: where is The Assassin?"

Porthos blinked. "He hasn't contacted you?"

"Clearly not, since I asked," the Leader replied, his tone one of scathing exasperation. "I am wondering if any of you saw him in Stark's house when you entered."

Athos opened his mouth to speak, and then closed it. He hadn't thought to look. "I saw no one in the house. That's concerning. We should have seen the bodies of the woman... and the alleged child. The fire was more intense on the exterior walls than on the inside; it was difficult to breathe, but it wasn't so hot that the bodies of the two humans would be burned to ashes."

"How much of the house did you search?"

"We were focused on looking for Stark on the way in, sir, and we teleported out before the fire bomb went off. We saw a large portion of the first floor and the entire lower level. There was no sign of anyone in the portions of the home

we viewed.”

“I was a bit slower to the lower level, where we’d surmised Stark had been taken,” Aramis added. “As Athos said, there was no sign of any human or Aliomenti in the house. So the only possibility is that they were upstairs...”

“...or that The Assassin failed to kill them,” the Leader finished. At the looks of incredulity on the faces of the Hunters, he continued. “I think we have to consider the possibility that an Alliance that could save Stark, in the manner we saw, would certainly be capable of saving his wife and child as well. If that is the case, the Assassin fled, or he was captured as well. This is a disturbing development.”

Athos frowned. “They couldn’t have gotten to the house that quickly. And the hole that Stark used to enter the house—”

“And there’s the rub, Athos,” the Leader said. “We don’t *know* if Stark ever entered that house after leaving our sight. We *assumed* it. Porthos,” he turned to the man with the cloak, “did you detect any Energy readings inside?”

Porthos frowned. “No, I didn’t. Well, let me correct that. I detected very *faint* traces of Energy, but they were fading, as if...”

“It was as if whoever left those traces had disappeared, wasn’t it?”

Porthos shook his head. “Not possible. If they’d teleported away, even just a few hundred yards, the residual Energy left behind would have hit me harder than those flames. It was as if there were a few distinct Energy users, but they either left a long time ago, or they leaked so little Energy that they never *did* anything. They would have been neophytes, just learning to sense Energy, given the intensity I detected.”

“I agree with your assessment, Porthos. It’s another piece of evidence of what I believe happened.” He paused, considering, and took another sip of his drink. “Let’s move back in time a bit. Stark is distraught at the sight of his house ablaze, and is easily subdued, just as planned. Aramis Dampers him, and the three of you vent some frustrations on him.” He scowled, and the Hunters quailed at the look, but the Leader merely continued. “Stark pleads ignorance, and drops the bombshell about having a child. Athos detects he is telling the truth. Porthos detects no Energy.”

Porthos nodded. “He was dry as the desert.” The stale air in the hotel room had a similar feel.

“Yet, only moments later, he is rescued in what can only be considered a miraculous fashion. I’ve seen no telekinetic power able to pull a man into the ground without crushing him... or suffocating him. Why did none of us detect

any Energy during the time when our blades couldn't puncture the man and when he vanished into the ground? Surely such a feat would require an enormous amount of Energy. But none was detected."

Aramis nodded. "There's no Energy in the basement of the house, which is where Stark was most likely taken. But we saw no one in the house, and detected no Energy. This is very wrong indeed."

"On the contrary, it all points to two assumptions we're making, and one of those assumptions is clearly wrong. The first is that Stark's rescue, and the lack of any bodies in the house—living or dead—means that the Alliance is involved. I don't think we can disprove that this is the case; indeed, I rather think it *must* be the Alliance."

The Hunters nodded.

"But the second assumption is that the rescue could have happened solely through a massive expenditure of Energy. What if the Alliance had no need to use Energy to execute this rescue, and as such we only detected very trace amounts of Energy leakage, rather than the massive spike we thought we should see?"

The Hunters considered this. "So, you're suggesting that the Alliance has developed technology that can do this?" Athos asked.

"Precisely. It fits, doesn't it? And because we had no awareness of this technological advance, we were chasing Energy bursts that didn't exist, and it gave them time to escape while we did so."

Porthos looked puzzled. "The concept seems to work, but I'm at a loss to explain what type of technology could do everything we've seen today. Is it instead possible that they've developed something that can mask Energy so it can't be detected?"

The Leader considered it, and nodded slowly. "Perhaps. In either case, the Alliance has clearly developed *something* advanced, and it is this *something* which enabled Stark's escape."

Aramis spoke up. "Stark also manipulated us rather badly. And by us, I mean *me*. When he made his... confession, I dropped my connection with him, and as such my Damper was released. Stark may have regained sufficient Energy to do what we saw without help."

The Leader frowned. "Explain, please."

"Consider this. I have the Damper on. We have him trapped and our focus is on finally subduing him and taking him back home. Then he drops his bombshell. I drop the Damper, Athos and Porthos lose their cool, and Stark

quietly uses his Energy reserves to construct a shield against our blades and then pulls himself away.”

Athos shook his head. “Couple of issues there. First, you had the Damper on when I Read him. He couldn’t have used Energy to block my Reading on him. He had no memory *anywhere* in him about his past dealings with us. Secondly, if your Energy is back, and you’re Will Stark, why bother with deflecting knives and burrowing into the ground? Wouldn’t he just teleport far away?”

“The man *had* been beaten pretty badly. His Energy reserves were undoubtedly being tapped for healing. He couldn’t spare the Energy for something like a teleport at that point.”

“And if he’d used Energy for healing, or his burrowing trick, I would have known immediately,” Porthos snapped. “Nice try, Aramis. Your theory only works if Athos and I are both simultaneously unable to do our jobs while you’re crying on the ground like a baby. Good cover.”

“Shut up, Porthos!” Aramis snapped, turning red.

“Make me, tough guy.”

“Ahem,” the Leader said, and the two Hunters were immediately silent, though they did stare daggers at each other.

“We need to consider Stark’s claim of fathering a child,” the Leader said. “At the moment, we have no evidence to prove or disprove the claim. There were no bodies seen in the house, and we’ll need to monitor the local news reports for the next few days to see if any bodies are located, or if they reference a child as missing or deceased. The humans will know the truth of his claim. We may hear reports of five or more bodies found in the house by the human authorities.”

“Five?” Porthos asked, arching an eyebrow.

“Stark. His wife. The alleged child. The Assassin. One or more Alliance members helping Stark.” The Leader raised a finger as he listed each individual. “We could hear of five or more, or we could hear of four presumed deaths if the human authorities conclude that the Starks and their killer all perished in the fire and burned beyond recognition.”

He paused. “But I doubt that any bodies will be found, regardless of the state of destruction of the house. You see, the Assassin cannot be harmed by fire. If they find *no* bodies, it means the Assassin wasn’t in the house when you left right before that bomb went off. They’d find everything else in ashes, save for one man’s body, dead or unconscious, and unmarked by fire. If we hear reports of something like that, my opinion will change, but until then, my conclusion is simply this: the Alliance has everyone that was in that house, living or dead.

Stark was pulled from our grasp, the Assassin hasn't contacted us, and you didn't see his body in the house. He wouldn't hide from us, even if he thought he'd failed. No, the only explanation is that the Alliance has him. And they have Stark. More than likely, they have Stark's family as well, living or dead." He shook his head. "I've no ideas yet of what technology or Energy skill the Alliance used to make *Stark* seem so human, but it's clear that everyone's abilities here are still working correctly."

He pounded his fist into the table. "I don't like this at all. It makes me feel so... *human*."

The Hunters shuddered.

"Sir?" Athos said. "With this new technology... what do we do now?"

"Continue to seek them out. You will need to travel more, move around frequently, and try to catch them unawares. There is no need for subtlety of action now. The order to avoid harm to fugitives is revoked; subdue first, harm to render unconscious as needed. We need *our* people to see *these* people return and admit to their wrongdoing; however it is that we get them back. We cannot sit back again and wait for them to make a mistake, or for our previous detection systems to work. We must seek them out, and stop them immediately. Their technological gains are troubling."

He glanced at the men whose faces were full of determination mixed with concern. "Go."

They vanished from his sight.

The Leader grabbed a stronger drink from the refrigerator, pulled out the scrap of paper he'd retrieved outside the Stark house, and sat at the desk in the hotel suite. He glanced at the photo of Hope Stark in her wedding dress, her blue eyes radiant. Hope's joyful expression did not carry over to the Leader. The man looked sad, as if he might shed a tear. But then he slammed the photo down on the desk.

He'd verify later the news the photo seemed to convey, but the evidence seemed clear.

"You *lied* to me, Will Stark. *No one* gets away with lying to me."

CLEANUP

It had been a long day, and Gena Adams was exhausted.

Despite that, she was happy to have a job in this economy. It gave her the opportunity to earn her own way, no matter how meager those earnings might be. Still, working twelve-hour shifts at The Diner had a negative impact on her feet and legs; she felt like an old woman instead of a twenty year old engaged to be married.

Gena limped into her apartment building on the outskirts of Pleasanton, outside the Dome, having walked the final mile here after the bus dropped her off. The bitter cold had kept her alert and awake. She was grateful that the bus ran as late as it did, and more so that the owner of The Diner always ensured that she caught the final bus, even if they were still in the midst of their final closing rounds. It was another reason she was happy to have that job; her boss took a personal interest in her, though thankfully not *too* personal. Mark wouldn't like that one bit. She smiled. Mark was possessive and protective of her in that way, and it was one of the many reasons she loved the man.

The apartment wasn't much, but they needed to save money for their wedding, and an eventual down payment on a house. They were willing to live more simply now so they could reach those goals in the future. They had only one older car as well; Mark's job as a security guard required it as the bus lines didn't go near the private community where he worked. She supposed the rich people who lived there didn't want to see the poor folk go by on public transportation.

She walked to the second floor landing of the building and unlocked the door to their apartment, pleased to feel the heat warming her after the walk outside. She was surprised to find that the lights were out, as Mark usually arrived home

before she did. Only then did Gena realize that she hadn't seen his car in the parking lot. Perhaps he'd gotten stuck at work; he occasionally got some overtime when his shift replacement was running late, and she figured that was the situation here as well.

She dropped her apartment key on the kitchen counter, flipped on the old television set, switched to the twenty-four hour news channel for background noise, and looked for something to eat. Most people found it odd that she worked at a restaurant and came home to eat, but after being around that particular cuisine for such a long period of time, Gena needed the variety.

“Our top story tonight: America’s billionaire philanthropist, along with his wife and son, die in a massive fire at their home in southeastern Ohio. More details just ahead.”

Gena froze. There was only one man who would be described that way, and that was Will Stark. Mark worked as a security guard in the neighborhood where the wealthy man lived with his family. Gena wasn't partial to rich people in general, but the Starks had been exceptionally kind and generous toward Mark, and she found herself tearing up a bit at the news of their deaths. *That must be why he's late*, she thought. *They're probably doing interviews of everyone in the area to try to figure out what happened.* She checked her phone, but didn't see any texts. That was odd; usually if Mark knew he was running late he'd let her know.

“Authorities say that the home, located in an exclusive gated community outside the domed city of Pleasanton, Ohio, burned rapidly and trapped the occupants inside. Also killed in the fire was the suspected arsonist. Police aren't sure if arson was the primary motivation in the attack, or if the arsonist used the fire as a means of enforcing other demands including, potentially, demands for a portion of the Stark family's massive wealth.

“Regardless of the motive, the nation has been deprived of one its few true bright lights in recent years. Stark famously started his medical data mining company as a means of showing insurance companies where fraud and double billing were occurring, and provided true actual costs for medical services, devices, medications, and other supplies. After the insurance industry began using the data to reduce payments to medical practitioners, Stark made the data available to everyone, and the forced transparency of actual costs dramatically cut the price of medical care in the country, making Stark a wealthy man in the process. He later invested in other businesses, including the building materials company that popularized creating panels of all sizes, shapes, and colors with

nano-materials, building components which are smaller than human cells.

“After several attempts on his life and aborted kidnapping attempts in his home town of Chicago, Stark relocated himself and his business headquarters to the small southeastern Ohio town of Pleasanton. Finding the city nearly deserted and bankrupt, Stark bought the town, razed and rebuilt its aging infrastructure with new technology, and enclosed the entire city in a dome created from nanotech components. The explosion of innovation, growth, and entrepreneurship in the once-bankrupt town has energized the entire nation.

“A well-known philanthropist, Stark is famous for giving away hundreds of millions of dollars in and around his local community, and he and his wife, Hope, have traveled the world seeking to aid and inspire others to success and prosperity.

“Will Stark was thirty-five years old. His wife, Hope, was twenty-eight. Their young son, who suffered from various developmental disabilities, was only six. Our thoughts and prayers go out to his grieving friends and community.”

Gena allowed the tears to flow during the on-air eulogy. Stock video showed the massive walls encircling the community of mansions, and the buildings housing the two on-duty guards looked small in comparison. Live video, taken as darkness had fallen, showed still-glowing embers where the home of Will and Hope Stark once stood. Gena wondered how the arsonist could have gotten inside.

Unless... no, it couldn't be. She felt a deep chill down her spine at the thought.

The phone rang, startling her. The ringing seemed far louder than normal.

Gena picked up the phone, her hand trembling. “Hello?”

“Is this Gena Adams?”

“Yes, it is. May I ask who is calling?”

“Ms. Adams, my name is Michael Baker, and I am with the Pleasanton police department.”

No, no, no! Please, no! “Is something wrong, Officer Baker?” Gena tried to keep her voice steady through some misguided notion that if she pretended nothing was wrong, then nothing *would* be wrong.

“Ms. Adams, have you, by chance, heard the news about the fire earlier today that took the lives of the Stark family?”

“I just got home from work and saw it on the news. It's awful, isn't it?”

“Unfortunately, Ms. Adams, they weren't the only ones who perished today. I'm very sorry.”

No, no, no! “I... I don’t understand. What are you saying?” *Say that it’s a joke, a sick, twisted joke. I won’t even be mad. I promise.*

“I’m very sorry, Ms. Adams. The perpetrator killed both security guards on duty at the time in order to gain entry. One of them was Mark Arnold. I’m... very sorry for your loss, Ms. Adams.”

Gena choked back a sob. “No. No, no, no. It *can’t* be him. We’re getting married next month. He can’t be gone! You’ve got the *wrong man!* I’ll come down to the police station or the morgue or wherever and *tell you* you’ve got the wrong man! It’s somebody else!” She was sobbing now, shouting in an attempt to hide the tears and shock and horror at the news she’d received.

The police officer let her finish her rant, and then spoke in a calm, quiet voice. “I wish that was the case, Ms. Adams, but it is not. I’d strongly advise you not to come identify him; remember him as he was. There are others who can handle the official identification.” He paused. “Goodbye, Ms. Adams. I truly am sorry for your loss.” He hung up, leaving Gena with her tears and an overwhelming sense of loneliness.

Mark was gone. She’d known it the moment the news story had ended. There was no way into that fortress of a community except through the gate, and that’s what Mark guarded. He took his job seriously, and while he didn’t care much for the other residents of the fortress community, she knew that Mark adored the Starks. He would do anything to protect them if they were in danger, even take a bullet if he thought it would protect them. In her grief, she experienced a brief sensation of pride at his bravery and heroism.

What possible motive could there be for killing Mark and then going after the Starks? The police had no leads in the matter, according to the story on the news. She figured it had to be money. Why else would they go into that community? Over the past fifteen years, with the Second Great Depression in full force, the inevitable envy and anger toward those not suffering through the miserable job markets had its most common expression in the form of armed kidnappings of members of wealthy families. It seemed, from her perspective, about half of the kidnappings ended with the death of the victim, and the other half with the ransom being paid. From that perspective, she completely understood why Will Stark had built the massive walled community and developed such strict security. He didn’t want anyone coming after his family.

Unfortunately, though, the walls had failed to protect them. Somebody had been willing to *kill* to get inside that fortress. But why? Surely it would be easier to get at the family *outside* the community, without the walls, gates, retinal

scanners, and guards in the way. She didn't know if the Starks traveled with any type of bodyguards, but it still seemed to her that it would be easier to attempt a kidnapping-for-ransom in a location that didn't require entering a military-grade security system. Yet this criminal hadn't done anything of the sort. Perhaps the Starks had something on hand that the arsonist wanted, something valuable enough to risk the security gauntlet.

Oh, no.

The man had come into The Diner just a few days ago, ruggedly handsome, with his long brown hair pulled back. He'd been wearing a cloak like she'd commonly seen in old science fiction or fantasy movies, complete with an oversized hood. The mystery of the man started with his name, a nickname which he said he'd been given by his boss. It was the name of a character from a well-known piece of literature. Something with a P. Pinocchio? No, that wasn't it. Poseidon? No. Gena snapped her fingers. Porthos. That had been the man's name.

They'd chatted, and he'd told a story of a powerful amulet likely to explode with disastrous consequences in only a few days. It had been buried decades ago, and his team of explorers had positively identified the underground location as being just inside the walls of the Estates. His search was for a TV show, he told her; they were filming a pilot for a new series about professional treasure hunters, and she'd be on TV telling them about the current community situated on the ground covering this dangerous amulet. They'd talked about the need to dig this trinket up to prevent a disaster, though Gena didn't think the man truly believed that part of his research. He just wanted to dig the gem up because it would do wonders for the ratings of his fledgling program.

The conversation had shifted to the residents of the community, and naturally to the Starks. He'd seemed surprised to hear that there was a Mrs. Stark, actually. As he'd departed, he'd thanked her for her help and let her know he'd be talking to the Starks in a couple of days.

They had spoken two days ago. Which meant his "conversation" would have been... today.

"He made it all up," she whispered. "The treasure... they were just after Stark the whole time. They just wanted to get to him."

"Very good, Gena."

The hand was over her mouth before she could scream. It was him, the man in the cloak. She hadn't heard him come in the door, hadn't heard him at all until he'd spoken, as if he'd just appeared out of the air right behind her.

“You may not know or believe this, Gena, but the man you and other humans revere, the man called Will Stark? He’s broken his word, violated oaths he has sworn, and put the lives of many immensely powerful people at risk. And for what? So he can teach a little kid how to hit a baseball? You see, Gena, Stark had to be eliminated before he became even more bold and brazen. He might reveal just how *talented* we actually are. And we can’t have *that*.”

The man she knew as Porthos was suddenly in front of her. Her hand went to her mouth in horror. He hadn’t actually moved. He’d simply vanished behind her and reappeared in front of her.

“You killed Mark,” she whispered. “You killed Mrs. Stark. You killed their little boy. Whatever you’re doing or whoever you’re protecting, is it truly worth it?”

“I personally killed none of them. The man responsible is missing in the chaos at the Stark house. I understand that he threatened to kill *you* if Mark didn’t cooperate. Mark tried to fight him to protect you and the others, foolish though that was. So there *are* things worth fighting for, and things worth dying for, aren’t there?”

Gena’s eyes filled with tears. Mark had died fighting a killer, fighting to protect her and others. That was the man she loved.

Porthos looked right at her. “And just as there are things worth dying for, there are things worth killing for.”

The blade was in his hand and slashing at her before she could scream, and he was gone before she hit the floor, never to rise again.

SURVIVOR

The pain was intense, but tolerable, more of a dull headache than a raging migraine. He knew now that he would live and survive the injuries suffered from the events of last night. Had it been last night? He had no way of knowing how much time had passed since his world had faded into darkness, since he'd watched his house burn with his wife and son inside. His son had finally spoken his first words after six years in complete silence, and he'd never hear the boy speak, never know the joy of his laughter.

He remembered the conversation of the men who had attacked him and prevented him from entering the burning house. His ironic laugh was internal. By hurling him away from the house and beating him, they'd probably saved his life from his foolish bravado and thoughts of rescuing the two most important people in his world.

More interesting about the conversation was the doubt expressed at the end. They'd called him by name, told him that this death and suffering were his fault. He'd protested his innocence, and they'd laughed at him, fully convinced of Will's guilt at whatever imagined crimes they'd charged him with. Then the doubts began. One of the men stated emphatically that Will had no memories of the crimes he'd been accused of, and his tone expressed uncertainty about their actions. What had changed his mind? A second man, who hadn't let go of Will until his convulsions over news of Josh's existence, stated that Will had no "Energy," a term used with special reverence. The third man, the one wearing the cloak, had agreed. This lack of energy or Energy added further doubts over his identity, and thus his guilt.

Was it possible? Were the deaths of his wife and son, the destruction of his home, the murders of two guards, and his own savage beating the result of a

mistake? Was there truly another man out there with his name and likeness who had survived this encounter as Will and his family suffered?

The physical pain had lessened but, if anything, the emotional trauma had gotten worse.

The faces of Hope and Josh flashed before his eyes. The shining blue eyes of Hope, with a similar, though faded, glow appearing in her son's icy-blue eyes. What had Josh's eyes looked like when he'd finally spoken? Had they started to twinkle as Hope's often did? He'd never know, now. Any chance of saving them from the fire had vanished. He cursed himself for accepting the sleeping potion from the young woman rather than insisting on being allowed to search his home, all the while recognizing that the effort, while noble, would have been futile.

He tried to convince himself that it had just been an awful nightmare, that the physical ache in his body was the result of an overzealous workout. He'd run a mile in unforgiving dress shoes, after all, in the chilly winter air. That might explain it. Yet, that run had preceded the awful events that followed, and so if one had happened, so had the other.

He imagined playing baseball with his son, and tried to picture the smile spreading on his face as he hit a baseball for the first time, the crack of the bat lighting a joyful fire in the boy. He felt a sense of pride as he imagined the two of them playing catch in the back yard, just like millions of other fathers and sons. His dream was somewhat hollow, though. Josh should be laughing, talking to him in this dream. Yet he had no idea what his six-year-old son's voice sounded like. He'd never heard Josh laugh. The boy had never seemed to experience enough joy to laugh, nor enough pain to cry.

In the end, there was only one reality, one he'd carry for the rest of his life. He'd failed them. It was his responsibility to protect them from harm. And they were dead because of his failure, dead because of three crazed lunatics who'd beaten and detained him in his back yard, dead at the hands of another man who'd been dispatched to murder them and burn down their house. He could still see the bald man's head, the sword dripping with blood, presumably staring at the people whose lives he'd just ended. He wondered at the purpose of the explosion and fire. Perhaps, in their twisted minds, they'd meant to send Will a message. After all, they seemed content to simply beat him before learning about Josh. Perhaps the fire was intended to be a message to stay away from them and their stupid rules.

Will bristled inside at the thought. That was their mistake. Will Stark was not

a quitter. He'd regroup emotionally and physically and then he'd fight with everything he had, just as he had always done. He'd spent much of his life building his dream, finding his true love to share it with, and then they'd started a family to expand on the love they felt for each other. That part of him was gone. He'd never remarry, that much he knew, no matter how long he lived. Hope was the only one for him, and he'd never find anyone else like her, not if he looked for a thousand years. He'd failed Josh, too, and therefore he'd never let himself have another child. That was his penance for his failure, to live the rest of his days alone, focused on a singular purpose.

That purpose was simple. He would find the men responsible for these crimes and ensure that they'd never hurt anyone again as they'd hurt him. No more innocents would die at their hands. They said they were part of some strange group, with a name he couldn't quite recall, and an odd symbol including a couple of circles. That was their mistake. He didn't need much information to get started, and he'd not rest until he'd destroyed them.

Resolved to the new purpose for his life, Will opened his eyes.

He was lying on a table in the middle of a room. The walls, floor, and ceiling were all the exact same shade of white. With no furniture other than his makeshift bed, and nothing on the walls, it was difficult to determine the actual size of the room. It didn't help that he'd never gotten his glasses back after the men had thrown him across his yard.

He blinked, trying to focus his eyes, but it didn't change what he could see, fuzzy though his vision might be. There was nothing on the walls. There was nothing *in* the walls either. There were no windows or doors. It was as if he'd been built into a box as he slept. Had he been rescued from harm from one group, only to be a prisoner to another? There was no indication that he was in danger just sitting here; the air was pure. Air? If there were no openings in the walls—no windows, no doors, no vents—how was he getting air to breathe?

The red-haired woman, whom he remembered was named Angel, walked through the walls as if stepping through a waterfall. No opening formed in front of her, and none was left behind her. She simply moved through the wall as if it was a mere illusion. Will relaxed just a bit. At least he knew he could get out of this building.

Wait. Did she just walk through the wall? It must be because I don't have my glasses anymore. There's really a door there that I just can't see.

Angel walked to him, a smile forming on her face. In spite of the events since his arrival at the gates of the Estates yesterday, despite being trapped in a

room with no visible exits, despite watching a woman simply walk through a wall... somehow, Will felt completely calm in her presence, all sense of fear melting away. The loss of his fear, though, returned his attention to the physical pain in his body.

Angel sat on the edge of the table next to him. “Mr. Stark, I’m glad to see that you’re awake. We gave you some fluids designed to help you achieve a deep sleep, and that’s what you’re waking up from now. The sleep enabled your body to do some healing, which is why the pain should be somewhat reduced from where it was when... well, when we picked you up.” She rested a hand on his arm. “I do apologize, though. We could have given you something a bit more potent, and healed you of your injuries, but doing so might have led you to believe that what you experienced at your home was just a very bad dream. It was necessary to leave some of the pain in place so that you could not deny the experience.” She handed him a pair of glasses. “These might help you.”

Will accepted the pair of glasses, and breathed a sigh of relief as the world snapped back into focus. He winced at the effort. “Thank you. Are you a doctor? Is this a hospital room? And how is it that you just walked through that wall?”

She looked puzzled, and then nodded. “Of course, the walls... that *would* be something different for you. Let me answer your first two questions. I’m not a doctor, and this is not a hospital. But this *is* where you will recover from the wounds you suffered at the hands of the three Hunters. Not many human men—”

“Wait,” he interrupted. “What are Hunters? And why did you refer to me as a *human* man? Isn’t that redundant? Those men, the ones who did this to me, they kept referring to my wife as human, but acted like I wasn’t. They said it like I knew what they meant.” He took a deep breath. “I have no idea what they meant, or why they did what they did.” He looked at her, and could read the sympathy on her face.

“I know you don’t,” she said. “I’ll just say that they believed what they said to be true, and with that being the case, they acted according to the rules and laws of their organization.” She frowned. “They acted on them despite the fact that those rules are wrong.”

He frowned, and wished he hadn’t. His face was still sore. “What about my other questions? The wall, the Hunters, the human this and that...”

She smiled. “Mr. Stark, you have found yourself at the crossroads of a great battle you had never been aware of until you arrived home and discovered that your family was in danger. There is much you need to learn, and you will have all the time you require in order to do so. But first, you must regain your health.”

He shook his head, ignoring the pain. “I can’t. I need to go after those men. I cannot sit back and let them walk free after what they’ve done. If you can help me to heal, I would certainly appreciate your assistance, and I can pay you. I need to get out of here. I need to go after those men. I can’t let them... I can’t let them do to someone else what they’ve done to my family.”

The man with the wraparound, mirrored sunglasses entered the room as Will finished speaking. Angel continued as if unaware he’d joined them. “Mr. Stark, I appreciate your passion and love for your family, but if you walk out of this room and try to go after those men, you will be captured and jailed and likely killed by them before the day is out. You must regain your health, and you must learn why it is that they came for you and your family. Do not throw your life away in a rash attempt at bravado.”

Though he hated to admit it, he knew she was right. He needed to heal up. But that didn’t mean it needed to be here. “I appreciate your advice, and I agree that I need to recover. I’d prefer to do that with my own doctor, where I can start my own hunt for these men. I’m happy to pay whatever you ask for the care you’ve provided and the rescue... wait, how did you get me away from them?”

The man, called Fil as Will remembered, spoke up. “Mr. Stark, I will be blunt. The world believes you to be dead, killed in the fire that took the lives of your wife and child. If you suddenly reappear, the world that believes you are a great hero will suddenly become suspicious, that perhaps you survived because you orchestrated the entire event. You would also advertise...”

“Now, wait just one moment!” Will snapped. “How *dare* you suggest I had anything to do with what happened! I’d give my life right this second to give either of them a chance to live, and...”

Fil raised his hand, and Will noticed a strange, golden symbol tattooed on his palm. “Mr. Stark, I’m aware of your true and noble sentiments in that regard. The reality, though, is that the public is easily swayed, and loves to see a shining star fall. People cheered you as you rose to great heights, but they will cheer louder as you fall. You are best served remaining with us, and getting your revenge from the shadows. The attacks those men perpetrated were so successful because of the element of surprise. What bigger surprise can there be than an attack from one believed dead?”

Will opened his mouth to protest, then realized the man was correct. “Then I am dead, and I have no means of repaying you. I will work—”

“Mr. Stark, we have no need of money,” Fil replied. “As for working, you are in no condition to do so. Your job at present is to heal, and to listen, and to

learn. I ask only that you keep an open mind. What you hear will seem impossible, and you may think us liars in telling you what we do.”

“I’ve just watched two people walk through walls,” Will replied. “Unless my battered memory is wrong, three men tried to stab me and failed. I was pulled into and through the ground in my back yard. I don’t believe any of that is possible. Yet, I saw and experienced all of those things. I don’t have much choice *but* to have an open mind.”

Angel smiled. “A very practical philosophy, Mr. Stark.”

“Please, call me Will.”

“I feel more comfortable calling you Mr. Stark. Is that acceptable?”

Will shrugged. “Suit yourself.”

The woman continued. “I also ask you for your patience as we move forward. You may want answers to questions, and find that we will not provide them immediately. This is not because we wish to keep you ignorant of the answers, but because some questions need more context before you will be able to understand the answers. Deal?”

Will considered, found the statement reasonable, especially in his current circumstances, and nodded. “Deal.”

“Mr. Stark, what we tell you will be told to you in confidence. In time, once you understand everything, you will have the opportunity to use those lessons to help others. Many, *many* others. But we must have your assurance, your oath, that you will not share what you do not fully understand, but not hoard forever for yourself what you *do* understand and believe could benefit others. Do I have your word?”

“I’m not sure I understand what you mean. I’d rather not involve myself in an oath... wait a minute.” He frowned. “The men who attacked me, the Hunters, they said I’d broken an Oath or Oaths. What was that about? Is that what I’m doing now? Making an Oath that will make people kill me, or people that I care about?”

“The Oaths they spoke of fall into the ‘be patient now’ category,” Angel replied. “We will explain them in due course, and how they came to be, but there are other lessons and goals to reach first. The Oath I am asking you to make is different. Think of it as the core Oath, if you will. Here’s a simple analogy to explain what this core Oath means. Suppose that you were the first person to discover fire. Perhaps you were walking around after a thunderstorm one day, and you found a burning branch. If you were to pick up that branch and run into your village, and then into someone’s home made of dried sticks, would that be

helpful to them?”

Will frowned. “I suppose yes, it could be, but they’d be at risk, too.”

“Why?”

“Because that burning branch might set their house on fire.” He winced, as the memory of his own house on fire, and what it meant, was still fresh in his mind.

“Exactly. Though you may have the best of intentions, it would eventually cause them great harm. Yet after some period of time when you truly understood fire—how to create it as needed, how to control where it burned, and so on—denying that knowledge to those in your village and hoarding it for yourself would be a selfish thing to do. I wouldn’t do that, and I doubt you’d do that, either. Rather, you’d share it so others could safely stay warm, and cook food, and protect themselves from the wild.”

Will waited for more, but Angel remained silent, simply watching him. “That’s it? Teach people about fire, once I understand it well enough? Don’t keep it to myself?”

“That’s it.”

“That’s the Oath I was attacked over?”

“There are four Oaths that those who attacked you are concerned with. This is not one of those four, and in fact I doubt those who attacked you even know about this one. This is the Oath at the heart of *our* group; it sums up our philosophy and the distinctions between our group and theirs.”

Angel paused, noted Will’s look of understanding, and resumed. “To continue the analogy used before, we are a small portion of the population of the world, and our group is the only one who has figured out how to manipulate... flames. The philosophical question for you, Mr. Stark, is this: do you wish to be the part of the group that wants to keep that knowledge here? Or do you wish to be the part of the group that gradually educates the rest of the world about fire and its safe usage?”

He understood their request now, and nodded, smiling. “Call me Prometheus. Fire for everyone. I’ll abide by that Oath.”

“You swear it?”

“I do.”

Fil nodded at Angel, and then turned and left the room, vanishing through the wall.

“Seriously, how are you doing that?” Will asked, his curiosity piqued despite his pain. “Is the wall an illusion?”

Angel laughed. “No, it’s not an illusion. It will be explained to you. But right now...”

“Right, right, focus on getting healthy, I know.” He sighed. “I just wish I could set it all right. Make it so that none of it ever happened.”

“We *can’t* change the past, Mr. Stark,” Angel said. She rested a comforting hand on his shoulder. “What has happened, has happened. If your roles had reversed, and it was Mrs. Stark here with me right now instead, what would you want to tell her? What would you want *her* to do?”

“I’d want her to be happy,” Will said without hesitation. “No more and no less. In whatever form that would take.”

“Your wife loved you as you love her,” Angel said, her voice quiet. “Perhaps she would want the same for you.”

He considered that, and nodded. “I know,” he said, with a deep sigh. “When I woke up, outside the pain and the sadness, the most overwhelming emotion was rage. I wanted to do nothing but track those men down and kill them, make them suffer. But I realize that’s not going to make me happy, or bring my family back. There’s a larger picture, though, and that’s to make sure that others don’t suffer the same fate that Hope and Josh suffered, and that other survivors don’t have the type of emotional pain that I have. What I need to do is focus myself on anything that will stop those men from acting again. If that’s through working with you and the others here, then that’s what I need to do.”

Angel smiled. “Well said, Prometheus. As I said earlier, we could have given you something to heal all of your physical wounds, but wanted to be sure at first that you didn’t live in denial of what happened to you. You’ve passed that hurdle, and now we’ll give you the true healing you need.”

She pulled a vial out of her pocket and handed it to Will.

He accepted it, but couldn’t keep a smirk off his face. “This vial is going to heal me of all of my injuries? I’m pretty sure I’ve got a broken leg and two broken ribs—”

“Three, actually.” Angel held up three fingers to accentuate the point.

“Three broken ribs. Lots of bruises. Burns of all degrees. And that *vial* is going to fix me?”

“And everything else you haven’t mentioned. Remember, you promised to have an open mind.” She chuckled. “I can walk through a wall. Why is it difficult to believe I can fix broken bones and bruises with a vial of liquid?”

Will snorted, wincing at the sharp pain it produced in his broken ribs. “I can *pretend* the wall is a holographic illusion, rather than solid, while I’m lying on

this table. My broken leg is much more tangible.” He sighed, and glanced at the vial. “But I did promise that I would keep an open mind. And I keep my promises.”

Angel nodded. “You need to drink all of it. It will make you sleep until you’re fully healed.”

Still skeptical, Will drank the contents, and handed the vial back to Angel. “Tastes like mint.”

“Peppermint, actually.”

A wave of fatigue hit him, and he began to drift. “Already getting sleepy,” he said, yawning. “See you in the morning.”

“Sleep well, Mr. Stark.” She walked through the wall as Will faded into a deep sleep.

Fil was waiting for her. “How are you holding up?”

“He’s... not what I had expected, but I think I’m more heavily biased by the *myth* of the man than you are.”

“That’s *not* what I meant.”

“I *know* what you meant. Can I just say that I’m in shock, and leave it at that? I hadn’t expected the injuries to be so... extensive. He barely survived.”

Fil’s mouth twitched. “You’re still avoiding the real question.”

Angel sighed. “Short answer: I don’t know. I’ll tell you when I figure it out.” She fixed him with a stare. “How are *you* holding up?”

“I’ll live.”

She snorted. “I see non-answers run in the family.”

He shrugged. “My memories are a bit more vivid than yours.”

“And that means...”

“Like I said, I’ll live.”

She shrugged. “I guess we’ll discuss the impact of having him here on each of us when we actually figure *out* the impact.” Angel looked down at her feet.

Fil nodded. “Moving on... impressions of the man?”

“He’s passionate. He wants to go after the Hunters; that’s genuine. He’s managed to regain control of his emotions despite the attack, but he still wants them stopped. Permanently.” She looked up at Fil. “Of course, he has no idea what he’s truly up against, and he may change his mind. At this point, I see no reason to alter our plan.”

Fli considered her words, and then nodded. “Agreed. I have no doubt he’ll be the most demanding Energy student we’ve ever had, because he’s so incredibly motivated. And he’s highly calibrated for Energy work. He’ll want to train twenty-four hours a day, motivated by his sense of vengeance and his genuine talent. Adam is going to *hate* him.”

Angel chuckled. “He can’t get started until he’s done with the Purge.” She winced. “He’s going to want to kill *us* after the Purge rather than the Hunters.”

Fil’s face was grim. “He probably will. But he can’t kill anyone until he survives the Purge. And that’s not a guarantee in his situation.” Fil shook his head. “If he knew what was coming, he might try to kill us *now*.”

Fil looked at the ground. “And I wouldn’t blame him for trying.”

TRAPPED

He woke in complete darkness with a start, and sat up quickly. The forceful contact of his head with a solid surface, and his inability to easily move his hand to his forehead, told the Assassin he was inside a coffin.

While he didn't believe he was dead, inside a wooden box and buried underground, it was difficult to prove that wasn't the case. There was very minimal lighting within his confined space, and the air was stale, as if there was little circulation around him. He was lying on his back, and his head and feet were both touching the sides of whatever cell held him.

How had he gotten himself into this predicament?

The Assassin recapped his most recent memories. He'd received a call from the Leader, which was always a good thing. Those calls meant he'd get to do his *own* form of Hunting, where he would rid the world of human scum. It was never a large group of victims, however, just one or two at a time. The Assassin had never understood why the Aliomenti leadership would not let him go on mass cleansing missions rather than just tag along on a small number of Hunts.

The Leadership team was terrified of being discovered by the humans. The ten thousand Aliomenti were outnumbered by eight billion humans, and though any skilled Aliomenti could easily hold their own against a large number of humans, the Leadership remained concerned that discovery would lead to their gradual and eventual elimination.

He thought the humans were worthless, and the Leadership thought they were a grave threat to their existence. He was able and willing to eliminate the threat. He'd proposed campaigns of annihilation in certain key areas of the human world, which he assured his Leadership would result in the humans

exterminating themselves. It had happened in their history before, though they'd managed to avoid mass extinction. With his plan, they'd finally be rid of the human threat and could rebuild the world as they saw fit, no longer hiding in plain sight, free to be themselves at all times.

His suggestions had always been rejected. He would wait, patiently, for the Leadership team to make the right decision.

In the meantime, he availed himself of the opulent lifestyle the Aliomenti enjoyed. Immense wealth. Resort communities humans were unable to visit. Amazing abilities he once would have considered impossible. He wondered how traitors like Will Stark could walk away from all of it, renounce what he was and that he'd sworn an Oath to uphold, and openly flout Aliomenti tradition. How could they leave a beautiful existence for the stupid, untalented human scum who would never even know of, or thank him for, his efforts? He hated Stark for being a traitor, and even more for being an idiot.

Thoughts of Stark brought back memories of the moments before he'd lost consciousness, before he'd woken up here inside some enclosure. The Leader had called and told him that the Hunters had found Will Stark. That in itself was unusual. Stark knew how the Hunters searched for him, and was skilled at eluding detection and capture. Rumors of their last encounter suggested that the Hunters believed Stark might never be found again. Those rumors were apparently untrue.

The great joy of the call was the report that Stark had been shown to have violated Oath Number Three. Stark, married to a human woman? The Assassin's hate morphed into something worse: pity. The man had clearly lost his sanity. He wouldn't have believed it, but the Hunters didn't make mistakes, and if they'd reported this fact, then he knew it to be true. Nor did he care if it was true or not. Accusations of marriage to a human meant the Assassin got to work, because the humans married to an Aliomenti were always sentenced to death. They assumed any human married to an Aliomenti would know, or come to know, of the existence of the Aliomenti, and thus their secrecy was at risk.

Risks were eliminated.

He remembered creating the plan of attack with the Hunters. Stark's house, where he lived with his wife, was heavily guarded. The Hunters' job was to grab Stark, which was not an easy task. They could teleport into Stark's house, grab him, and leave the wife to the Assassin, but their fear of Stark was real. They fully expected the man to defeat them and escape. They needed to destroy him mentally first. When they'd learned the traitor was also a married Oath-breaker,

they not only found a reason to bring in the Assassin, they'd found the bait they needed to distract Stark and mentally unbalance the man. The Assassin would kill his wife in spectacular fashion. If Stark loved her, as husbands were supposed to love wives, he'd be so distraught he wouldn't be able to fight back. And then the Hunters could bring him back to Headquarters to face the punishment the traitor so richly deserved.

He'd been delighted when the plans adjusted to allow him to kill two more humans. The Hunters said it was necessary to prevent the human authorities from entering the well-guarded community too quickly, and the Leader had approved. The Assassin didn't care about the reasons. He just needed targets.

Everything had gone well. He'd killed the two guards in a most artistic fashion, enabling the Hunters to enter the guarded community and wait for Stark to arrive. He'd gotten to the house without issue and entered with no problems. The woman was there, looking just like she'd looked in the picture.

The Assassin frowned. He knew he hadn't killed her, that he'd failed in his mission. He searched his memory, trying to remember why. What had gone wrong?

He gasped as the memory came. The boy. Her son. *Will Stark's* son.

He shivered at the realization. Stark had somehow overcome the sterilization procedures. Given the Oath against having children, most Aliomenti had opted in when the procedures were developed, and eventually it had become expected of all members of the organization. Stark had gone through it as well. Somehow, though, he'd overcome it. For there was no doubt the young boy was his son: same hair texture and hairline despite the different color, same face, eyes burning with a fiery intensity... and Energy that had been startling. He remembered now. The baseball the child had thrown at him had hurt, to be sure. But it was that resemblance to Will, and that Energy—a brief flash of it so pure and intense, beyond what he'd ever sensed from anyone—that had frightened him. His astonishment, and the boy's burst of Energy, had both vanished when the mother, in a fit of insanity, had decided to tackle him. He seethed—a *human woman* tackled *him*, the Aliomenti Assassin. The boy's fury had turned to concern for his mother's well being, and the Energy had vanished. The dog had attacked him, and he'd dealt with the stupid beast, and that had reminded him that he had at least one human yet to kill. The boy seemed uncertain as to what to do next, and the human woman had tried to put herself between him and the boy. He had them beaten now, could feel the fear of both of them, as his Energy worked its emotional magic and inflicted them with terror.

Then the two of them had vanished from his sight.

It was impossible. The boy was too undisciplined to manage it. The woman, of course, couldn't dream of performing it. Someone had teleported them away from him, denying him his assigned third kill, and the unexpected bonus of a fourth. It had to be Stark. No one else had that kind of Energy power. He'd lost control of his emotions, and his fire had burst forth in explosive fashion. The fire must have absorbed the oxygen in the house, creating an air vacuum of sufficient size and duration to render him unconscious.

Still in his dark prison, the Assassin assessed his likely situation. If Stark had rescued the boy and his mother, he'd likely defeated the Hunters yet again. Stark and the Alliance had captured the Assassin, taking him prisoner. That's where he must be now, at the Alliance base of operations. He smiled. He could eliminate as many in the Alliance as he desired now. It would be self-defense for a captured prisoner.

He frowned as another memory stirred. He must have stayed partially conscious for a time after the explosion of fire, for he remembered lying on the floor of the house, feeling the flames warming him in a gentle caress. Then there was a voice, one he'd never heard before.

This is for my wife. The Assassin winced, remembering the blow that followed those words. Was this an Aliomenti who'd broken the third Oath, like Stark? Perhaps a fresh recruit drafted directly into the Alliance? Reportedly, they didn't follow or take Oaths in the Alliance at all. He snorted. Ignorance of the law was no excuse. This man's wife had paid the appropriate price.

This is for my daughter. That made no sense. Had a member of the Alliance fathered a child? He chilled at the thought. If the Alliance were so devoid of tradition, they'd think nothing of flouting the fourth Oath, avoiding the sterilization processes. The Alliance could be breeding children born with high Energy. Like Stark's son. The Assassin felt a chill. He wondered if the Leadership had considered that possibility. If not, they needed to know. Those children were a far greater threat than the traitors or the new direct recruits to the Alliance.

And that's for the dog. Instinctively, the Assassin moved his arm to block his face from the blow that had already struck him, though he felt no pain on his face at the moment. The man must have seen the dead dog near him, and drawing on his weak human roots felt sympathy for the animal. The Assassin's arm brushed the side and top of his dark cell, leading him to realize that it wasn't much larger than a coffin. When he touched the sides of this cell, he remembered

being thrown into this prison by the man who had struck him, and remembered hearing muffled voices from outside that suggested that a woman and another man were part of the crew. It was convenient that his current cell was the size of a coffin. The man who had dared strike him would need one in short order. He was sure that he could find similar accommodations for the man's cohorts.

First, though, he needed to escape from this prison.

The minimal light in the space seemed to come from his right, and he twisted his head in that direction. There was a small seam and a faint glow. He had only faint memories of being thrown in here, but they ended with a door shutting on him. If he hadn't been moved, the light must be coming from the side that opened to the outside world. He decided he'd emerge in his own fashion.

He and the three Hunters had each developed a unique skill that enabled them to perform their duties with exceptional efficiency. Porthos had an incredible sensitivity to Energy, able to sense even trace amounts over great distances. His skill was such that he could identify the person who had produced the Energy he sensed, and follow it to the original source. He served as the Tracker for the Hunters. Athos could touch anyone and know if they were telling the truth, and his skill was such that no matter how deep within them the truth might be buried, Athos could sense it. Aramis possessed the Damper, the ability to suppress Energy in other Aliomenti. For most, Aramis' skill was sufficient to prevent one from using Energy at all. He rendered other Aliomenti merely human. Porthos would track the fugitive, the suspect would be questioned, Athos would determine the veracity of the claims the fugitive made, and they'd return the criminal to Headquarters.

As an Assassin, he had no use for skills of such subtlety. The Assassin could generate fire from within, and the ability to shoot flames from his body added to his terrifying visage. He'd learned that he was immune to burns, though not oxygen deprivation, as his experience in the Stark home had shown.

He would use those fiery skills to escape his prison. He shifted onto his right side, facing the seam, and touched his left hand to the crack. Then he shot forth a small amount of flame.

The material did not catch fire or burn. Frowning, the Assassin concentrated, and the flame from his hand burned with greater heat. The material still did not burn. He failed to detect a scent of burning material of any kind. He extinguished the flame, conceding that this approach would not work, but in the process confirming something he'd suspected.

He was definitely a prisoner of the Alliance. No human could build

something able to resist his flame.

He shifted his left leg back, over his right, bent the leg, and then used his knee as a battering ram, slamming it into the wall he'd just tried to burn. To his mild surprise, the entire side popped open immediately. He blinked rapidly, allowing his eyes to adjust, and then rolled through the opening.

He dropped three feet and landed on a clean white floor. The Assassin grunted in pain, his ribs still tender from the attack he'd suffered earlier. He rose to his hands and knees, getting his breathing under control, and then stood, taking in his surroundings.

He was in a small room. The floor, ceiling, and walls were completely white, and there were no windows or doors, and no visible sources of lighting or ventilation. Yet he was breathing pure air and there was plenty of natural light filling the room. He was standing next to a strange vehicle, which looked something like a human automobile without tires. It was a shiny, silvery color, and did not have a top covering the seats in the passenger compartment. He'd clearly been in the rear compartment, and that annoyed him. They had thrown him in a *trunk*?

Yes, those people would suffer greatly.

"I see that you're awake."

The Assassin whirled around. A man stood there. The Assassin hadn't seen him during his scan of the room, and assumed that the man had been hiding behind the front of the vehicle, out of his line of sight. The man looked to be older, with graying, thinning hair, and wore a one-piece orange bodysuit.

The Assassin scowled at him, and amped up the Energy he projected at his victims, Energy designed to make the person feel frightened.

"I'm known as the Mechanic," the man said, seemingly oblivious to the burst of fear Energy sent his way. Stupid human. "I fix things around here. I'd appreciate it in the future if you would avoid trying to damage my handiwork." He nodded at the vehicle.

"What are you talking about?" The Assassin said, scowling with as much ferocity as he could muster. He was unaccustomed to people who didn't cower from him in fear.

"It won't burn," the Mechanic explained. "I noticed the smell of smoke when you emerged with such grace." The Mechanic paused. "Who are you?"

"I'm known as the Assassin." He smirked. "I kill people who annoy me."

The Mechanic shrugged. "OK, I'll keep that in mind." He squinted at the Assassin. "What happened to your face?"

“The scars come from those who tried to escape me. They scratched my face. I ended their lives. I consider them badges of honor.”

“Not that. Your nose. What happened to your nose?”

“Someone kicked me in the face while I was unconscious, apparently concerned I had killed a dog. The fool will suffer greatly, all for the love of a furry bag of fleas.”

The Mechanic laughed. “I imagine the one upset about the dog was Fil. The man seems to have a soft spot for the creatures. I’ve told him it’s going to get him killed one day, and it looks like you’re interested in proving me correct.” He shrugged. “He never listens to me.” He fixed the Assassin with a pointed look. “Would you like me to bring Fil here to you?”

Was he serious? “I’d *love* to meet this Fil of yours.”

The man seemed to wince momentarily. “Then I’ll go get him. Before I leave, however, let me offer you a bit of advice. The terrifying killer routine won’t work around here. Save yourself the effort of trying.”

“And where would we be?”

The Mechanic smiled. “You know exactly where you are.”

He walked toward one of the solid walls and went directly through it. The Assassin gaped at the spot in the wall where the man had exited the room. There was no doorway, no opening in sight. Was it that easy? He walked to the spot in the wall and attempted to pass through. His face collided with the very solid surface the other man had just melted through. No, the wall was definitely a wall.

The Assassin roared, more out of frustration than pain, and tried hurtling his way through, ramming his shoulder into the wall. He tried other sections of the wall. He tried to burn the wall. He set his fire to every surface. Nothing worked. Fifteen minutes later, he sat down, exhausted and sweating, recalled his fire, and simply waited.

He was trapped.

ELITES

The absence of pain was so startling it nearly caused Will to faint.

It wasn't the dead feeling caused by anesthesia, either. The pain simply didn't exist, and there was nothing to mask. He felt no pain near his broken leg, or his broken ribs. There was no pain on the vast portion of his body riddled with cuts and bruises, no general sensation of heat from his burning skin.

Will sat up, clenching his teeth at the expected pain. None came. His movement was smooth, without even any muscle stiffness. He touched his face, and then looked at his hands. The burns were gone, replaced by clean, unblemished skin. He tapped his rib cage, wincing on reflex, but found nothing there causing pain, either.

He took a deep breath. The big test was the leg. He slid off the table, as if he were sliding into a cold swimming pool, until his bare feet touched the white floor of the room. With extreme caution, Will let his full weight come down on the leg. Nothing. He hopped up and down, and then took a few steps.

Nothing. Every injury was completely healed. No scars, no blisters, no pain. He couldn't remember ever feeling better than he felt right now.

Will sat back down on the small table he'd been using for a bed and lowered his head, feeling guilty. He was alive, his injuries completely healed, and feeling better than he'd ever felt before. Meanwhile, his wife and son were being buried, mourners there to pay their last respects to the two people who'd been his whole world. They would mourn his loss, too, and Will wanted to go to the grave site and tell everyone there to waste no tears crying for him. He was alive and his wife and son were dead, through his failure. He'd vowed to Hope on their wedding day to always protect her, and vowed the same to his newborn son.

He'd failed, and now a box with his name would be in the ground, empty like his heart, lower than dirt like the man he was.

He was still brooding when Angel entered the room, so mellowed at the thought of his family that he barely noticed her miraculous entry through the wall of the room. Whether it was his mental funk or the human mind's rapid adaptability, he simply accepted the oddity and treated it as his new reality. Angel had the effect of brightening his mood, however, and his mild depression ceased as she walked toward him, smiling. Perhaps one day she'd tell him how she accomplished that feat.

"You're sitting up!" she exclaimed. "I take it you've found your injuries are adequately healed?" She arched an eyebrow, combining that with a knowing smile.

He grinned sheepishly, finding it difficult to remain remorseful against her irrepressible cheer. "Consider this doubting Thomas an official convert. I'll try to be somewhat less skeptical in the future."

"I'm glad to hear that, because everything you learn from this point forward will test your skepticism like never before." She pulled two chairs from around the other side of the table-like bed. They were a deep burgundy red, and appeared solid, with no cushioning visible. How had he missed them as he was standing up and walking around? The color alone should be noticeable in this all-white room. He moved to one of the chairs and sat down, and Angel took the other.

He looked at her a bit more closely. Her hair was shoulder-length, a vibrant red that was shocking. Her face was round and cherubic, highlighted by friendly violet eyes that seemed to possess an eternal twinkle. Her skin was smooth and unlined. She was tall, nearly matching Will's own six-foot stature. She wore a deep green body suit that reminded him vaguely of those worn by ship crews on TV shows he'd watched as a child, shows about future missions into space. He glanced down at himself, and noticed that his attire was similar in style, though it was a bright white instead of the deep green Angel wore.

"Are you a witch?" he asked.

She blinked, startled. "What?"

"Are. You. A. Witch?"

She frowned. "What on earth would make you think that I'm a witch?" She burst out laughing. "Sorry for that, but your question is very amusing to me. Why do you ask if I'm a witch?"

His face reddened. "I'm not trying to offend you, trust me. All of you have

done more for me than I deserve, or can ever repay. But it's not just you, it's Fil and... I don't think I caught the other man's name..."

"Adam."

"Right, Adam, too. All three of you. Everything I've seen and experienced, everything since right before I was about to be killed by those men... it's beyond my understanding how it all happened. I know I promised to keep an open mind, but I keep thinking about it, and I can't explain *any* of it. The only explanation I can come up with is magic, and I don't *believe* in magic."

Angel grinned. "I thought you were going to keep an open mind? What if I *am* a witch?"

He smiled, unable to resist. "Are you a good witch, or a bad witch?"

Angel chuckled. "Neither, actually. I'm so used to everything here that it's difficult for me to see it from another perspective. I imagine many things that happened did seem quite magical to you. The vial of liquid that cured all of your injuries didn't help matters, did it?"

Will smiled. "It would have been worse if steam was coming off of it, or I'd seen you stirring it up in a cauldron."

She laughed. "Good point. But no, to answer your question, none of what you've seen is magic. There are a couple of things our group has learned to do that *are* highly advanced. Our friends in the other group think it makes them a new species of superhuman. In fact... did they use the word *human* as a sort of put-down?"

He frowned. "I think so."

Angel nodded. "To them, that's exactly what it is. We are super humans, the Aliomenti and Alliance, and everyone else is just a mere human. We're better, they're lesser life forms. If you call a Hunter a human, he's likely to forget his vow not to kill you, because they perceive it as so great an insult." She paused. "They didn't think *you* were human though, did they? But they thought your wife was."

He nodded. "They were really shocked about my having a son, too. Why is that?"

She paused before answering. "The Aliomenti swear four Oaths before being admitted into the group, before they are permitted to receive the knowledge we're going to share with you. I'll tell you about all of them later, but the fourth Oath says that you will not have any children, and it's expected that new members will undergo treatments guaranteed to make sure the Oath *can't* be violated." She sighed. "The real reason most of them undergo that treatment is

because the penalty for violating the fourth Oath is... well, that's why they stopped trying to capture you alive and openly tried to kill you."

Will felt his jaw drop, and he stared at her in silence. "They *kill* you if you have a child?"

She nodded, somber. "There's a story behind it, and as you learn more you'll get an understanding of why the Oath was implemented, but... I agree, it's a stupid rule."

"My wife, my son... they were killed because of that Oath as well, weren't they?"

Angel's face turned grim. "You're getting me off topic, but yes, they were targeted because you were considered to be in violation of one of the Oaths. You violated the Oath against having children, and so you and your son had to die. You violated the Oath against marrying a human woman, and so *she* had to die. Had they not learned about your son, they would merely have arrested and detained you for many decades."

Will slammed a fist into his chair. "This is *stupid!* Four people are dead, and I was beaten and nearly killed, by a group who makes people swear an Oath not to get married and have children?"

Angel grasped his hand, and her touch produced an instant calm. "Mr. Stark, I agree with you. The Oaths have been horribly modified, far beyond their original intent, and those Elites who enforce them today do so out of a desire to retain and enhance their own power in the world. That's why *our* group, the Alliance, was formed."

Will stared at her intently. "You seek to destroy these people?"

"We seek to *change* them, and defend those they would harm. We do not seek to destroy. The vast majority of those who are part of the Aliomenti do not care for the penalties or participate in their enforcement. They *are* content with their own lives of luxury and privilege, and do not wish to see that change, and so they say nothing. They are cowards, not evil people. We actively recruit them to our organization, and we have made a great deal of progress, but we are still greatly outnumbered. The Hunters are extremely proficient at finding those we have converted to our way of thinking, and then returning them to the Aliomenti against their will."

"How many have they caught?" Will asked.

She sighed. "Our numbers are only as high as they are because we directly recruit humans to our side, and the Hunters don't know who they are. As for Aliomenti who've switched to our side... well, they've eventually gotten every

single one they've gone after. Except one."

Will looked at the floor. Him. They'd gotten everyone they'd ever gone after except for him. Or, more to the point, the man they *thought* they were attacking that night, a man with the same name.

He looked back at Angel. "Teach me. Show me how to fight those people, to stop them."

Angel nodded. "Let me give you some basics. Our core organization began over a thousand years ago, started by a land baron who wanted to figure out why the serfs working his land were so often sick and died so young. He recruited a group of younger people from his land, and charged them with figuring this out. They went one step further and figured out how to become quite healthy, avoiding most sicknesses, and generally being better able to live a longer, happier life, to grow as a person. They merged together a few Latin words that loosely translate as *personal growth* and coined the phrase Aliomenti."

Will rolled his eyes. "And they're still around a thousand years later. I think I've seen this story on late night infomercials."

Angel smiled. "This isn't quite the same thing. The land baron thanked them and tried to send them back to their farms, but they revolted, ran away, and made camp in the untamed wilderness of England. Over time, they developed many unique abilities, based around the ability to create and manipulate what we call Energy. Those abilities helped them to become very rich and very powerful, and that wealth and power has grown to this very day."

"Sounds intriguing. Where do we get to the part about killing children?"

Angel frowned. "Let's just say there were events in their history which caused huge devastation to the group. And yes, some of those events revolved around marriage and children, and the trauma resulting from those events nearly destroyed the entire group and all of the members. They overreacted by banning everyone from engaging in the activities they thought were the root cause; through the Oaths."

Will scowled. "Still, killing children? Banning people in love from getting married? Wouldn't they have learned their lesson over time and figured out something new?"

Angel sighed. "Memories last a long time in this group."

Will just shook his head. He couldn't conceive of anything happening that could possibly justify such a permanent response.

"Over time, members of the group began to rebel against the harsher aspects of the Oaths. They left the Aliomenti, which over the years came to own a

massive series of hidden estates in some of the most beautiful lands on Earth, and they instead lived in small groups of isolated cells, bound together by a common mission. We would live in and around human communities, using our skills to influence them subtly. The idea was to help them develop the skills and technologies we had already developed, at a pace that was reasonable and safe, while avoiding the attention of the core group of Aliomenti. These people referred to themselves as the Alliance, and current members include the three people who brought you here. It's tricky work, and we must be careful about revealing too much, too quickly. If we showed them everything we're capable of immediately, they'd burn us at the stake if they could catch us."

Will laughed. "I thought you said you weren't a witch? What could you possibly show them that would cause that reaction?"

Angel smiled at him. "You're right. I'm *not* a witch."

She vanished.

What the... Where in the world did she go?

"I'm right behind you."

He spun. *But she was...*

"...right in front of you and then I vanished. Yes. Most members of the Aliomenti and the Alliance eventually develop enough Energy to perform teleportation. A smaller percentage can travel for very long distances in that manner."

Will's face was frozen in shock. *She lied to me. She's a witch. I'm getting turned into a toad for sure.*

"Heavens no, you'd look dreadful as a toad," Angel exclaimed, a soothing smile on her face. "And I couldn't do that anyway. As I said, I'm not a witch, and none of this is magic. But do you understand now why we're rather cautious about such displays of Energy manipulation around those who aren't aware of our existence?"

Will couldn't think. She could read his mind. He was completely terrified of her.

"I'll take that as a yes. You don't have to be terrified of *me*, though. The men you want to fight? They can do this, too, Mr. Stark. You'll learn to do the same in time. But you must trust us, as difficult as it can be in the face of the unknown. Now, are you still mostly concerned about my walking through the wall?"

Suddenly, he could do nothing but laugh. He fell out of the chair and onto the clear floor, rolling around, laughing with such intensity that tears formed in his

eyes. The absurdity of everything that was happening to him had finally burst forth. He finally finished a few moments later, but remained on the floor, unwilling—or possibly unable, he wasn't sure which—to bother to climb back into the chair.

“Mr. Stark, as I've noted, we use something called Energy. It is a force, something like fire, something like electricity, generated by the human body, within every human cell. The Aliomenti learn to sense and grow and control this Energy, sometimes to a phenomenal degree. It is what enables me to do things like read your thoughts and emotions, and even influence them. Do you notice that you're calm around me? I send Energy to you with calming thoughts, and you feel that. My mind is able to hear thoughts and sense emotions from others. I've developed quite a bit of Energy capacity and creation capability over time, and that's why I can teleport. And there's another thing I can do.”

Will felt pleasant warmth surrounding him as he lay on the floor, listening to her speak. She was telling him it was science, the basic electrical signals the body used to fire synapses in its cells, but to a massively larger degree, enabling powers he'd only suspect to see in one who practiced magic. But magic didn't exist. And this warmth... it was solidifying around him, surrounding him like a warm glove, and he was gently raised off the floor, rotated slowly in the air, and deposited back into his chair. The warmth left him.

“I can do that as well. And we can teach you to do the same, Mr. Stark. The Hunters can do these things. There are many other Aliomenti who would like to see our group eliminated, and those men and women can do these things as well. Will you allow us to help you achieve your potential?”

Will took several deep breaths. He'd promised to keep an open mind, and he'd clearly need one to deal with this new reality. He needed to learn these skills if he was going to face the men known as the Hunters, and fight the man who'd killed Hope and Josh. He needed these skills to compete against those who would seek to harm others in a similar fashion. It was his duty. And he had to admit it was tempting outside of the sense of duty as well. What would it be like to do what Angel had just done?

He looked to Angel. “Will I feel that warmth again if I follow your training and teaching?”

Angel looked surprised. “You *felt* that?”

“When you moved me? Yes. It felt like a warm glove surrounded me and picked me up. Was that... was that your Energy that moved me?”

She nodded. “It was, but I'm surprised. Usually humans can't sense the

Energy at all. You have a tremendous sensitivity.”

Will scowled. “I thought *human* was a bad word around here. And what does it mean, I have a tremendous sensitivity?”

Angel smiled. “Relax, Mr. Stark. In the Alliance, *human* simply means one untrained in our practices, one who cannot yet sense or use Energy. Think of it as a synonym for an apprentice. The sensitivity I refer to means that you’ll progress at a much faster rate in developing Energy skills than most.”

Will considered that. “So I’ll learn to sense and manipulate that warmth. That’s it?”

She nodded.

“*That’s* the big secret the Aliomenti want to hide? *That’s* why my wife and son were murdered?” He managed to keep his tone conversational. Angel had done nothing to them, after all.

She understood his concern, though. After all, she could read his thoughts and emotions. “Electricity might make for a better analogy than fire to explain why the Aliomenti think as they do. Many years ago, few people were aware of electricity, and none of them understood the potential electricity brings. Most people, if they’d even heard of it, might see electricity as nothing more than the output of a strange experiment performed by Benjamin Franklin. He invented lightning rods, but the building block of electricity wasn’t of any use. Nobody knew what to do with it at that point.”

Will shrugged.

“But think about electricity two centuries later. Electricity is used to power lights and air conditioners and furnaces. It enables the use of refrigerators and microwave ovens. Without electricity, we would not have seen the advances that led to radio, television, computers, or the Internet. If you went back to Franklin’s era with that advanced knowledge and could implement those advanced technologies with electricity, you’d be rather wealthy and powerful in a short period of time. Energy is like that. It’s limited by how much you can generate and your own creativity, much as electricity seems to be. Would people kill to have and retain exclusivity about such a technology decades or centuries before others? You know the answer to that, Mr. Stark.”

He nodded. As much as he’d like to deny it, the type of power a person like that would have, understanding how to *use* electricity centuries before others... there was no question in his mind that many men and women would indeed kill to retain that exclusive knowledge.

“That is our predicament, Mr. Stark. We’re too far advanced to drop

everything we know and can do on the world at once. We agree with our Aliomenti brethren on that point, but not on the need for permanent punishment for so-called violations. We believe in sharing that knowledge, tempered with patience. That's what our symbol represents." She held up her right hand, palm facing him.

The symbol was tattooed on her palm with gold ink. Three dashed circles merging in the center around what looked like a letter A. Each circle contained an object: a scroll, a tongue of fire, and a bird.

"Our group—the letter A—is at our core, and enables us to make our advances. But our circles are *open*. We want our knowledge—the scroll—and our technical and Energy advances—the fire—to go out to the whole world. We also seek peace and prosperity and work to achieve that as well, hence the dove. They are tattooed onto our palms, always with us yet out of sight, and our unity is shown when we shake hands and our symbols come together. New recruits must wait a year before they receive the tattoo on their palms. We use it as a precaution, to make sure loyalty is proven before too much is revealed. We don't like doing it, but unfortunately, we can't take the risk at this point of doing otherwise."

Will nodded. "I saw something similar on the man at my house. I don't think he was one of the Hunters, though. I thought maybe he was their boss."

Angel looked interested. "The Leader was there?" She nodded. "That makes sense. He'd want to be present for the long overdue capture of Will Stark, master criminal and fugitive from justice." Will opened his mouth to protest, and then realized she was teasing him. He turned crimson.

Angel laughed. "Yes, Mr. Stark, the Aliomenti have a symbol as well. They also have a scroll and a tongue of fire, but where we have a dove of peace, the Aliomenti have a sword, representative of power and control. The symbols are within a dashed circle, indicating that sharing is encouraged, but only within the group. The outside world is off limits. That's why there's a solid outer circle surrounding it. And the giant A... well, that's their way of reminding themselves of the importance of the Aliomenti organization, the central part of their life. They are the Elites of this world, and they are focused on making sure it stays that way. The four items in their symbol—the scroll, the fire, the sword, and the letter A—also symbolize the four Oaths. They wear their symbols on clothing except when they go into human communities; they don't like to draw attention to themselves if they can avoid it. If you are human and see the Aliomenti symbol, there's a good chance it's the last thing you'll ever see."

Will glanced at the symbol on her palm again. “I prefer *your* symbol. How do I get started so I can begin fighting the Aliomenti?”

Angel sighed. “Mr. Stark, we don’t *fight* the Aliomenti in the traditional sense of the word. We are not an army, and they have the same skills we have. They also outnumber us by a substantial amount, and thus any Alliance offensive would probably end with all of us being eliminated. The Aliomenti are like estranged family members to us. We prefer reunion and reconciliation, not war. The dove is part of our symbol for a reason. Most of our efforts involve recruiting from their numbers in secret, winning over the silent majority. We know that men like the Hunters are beyond reach and reason, but many others need only see that there’s a different way.”

“I can respect that,” Will said, sighing with grudging acceptance. “I can’t say with certainty that I’ll act with restraint if the opportunity arises, but I will do my best to follow your guidelines and earn the right to wear your symbol. Now, how do I begin?”

“You’ll need Energy training, where you’ll learn how to sense, manipulate, and grow Energy, and how to use it to perform various tasks. For any of that to work, however... you’ll have to undergo the Purge first.”

“That sounds... ominous.” Will winced. He felt a flicker of fear reach him; was Angel transmitting her own concerns about this Purge as she’d previously transmitted sensations of calm?

She sighed. “It is, unfortunately. Right now, a great deal of what’s inside you is preventing you from sensing and using your Energy. It’s there; I can feel it, though you can’t. The Purge will change that. But it *won’t* be a pleasant experience.”

Will cringed. “How... how bad can it be?”

A look of sadness took over her face. “Let’s just say that you might consider your injuries and pain levels from the night of the fire to be minor in comparison.”

Ominous, indeed. He fixed her with a pointed stare. “Could it be... fatal?”

She shook her head. “I honestly don’t know. I don’t think so, but I don’t know.”

Will considered his options, and then nodded his acceptance. “It sounds like this Purge is what I need to do, though. I’m ready when you are.”

Angel looked at him with deep sympathy, but her eyes told him she admired his courage. “Fil and Adam can prepare the Purge. I’d advise you to rest up until then. You’ll need it.” She patted him on the arm. “Good luck, Mr. Stark.” And

she walked through the wall and out of the room.

Will climbed out of the red chair and moved back to his bed, left with that sobering message.

He'd been burned, cut, kicked, punched, beaten, suffered broken bones, and had likely been within a few moments of being killed.

And he'd just willingly agreed to undergo something that was supposed to be worse.

PURGE

The table beneath him was surprisingly comfortable, and Will slept soundly. The room temperature was such that there was no need for a blanket; the table surface gave as if it was a mattress, and he had no need for a pillow. His eyes opened slowly as the noise entered the room.

Angel and Fil entered the room, materializing through the door, in the midst of an intense discussion held in whispered tones. Will only heard every few words.

“—brought him here, what were you thinking—”

“—plan, the... change him—”

“—if he’s wrong?”

Then they seemed aware that they had an audience and ceased whispering. Angel had the decency to look guilty. Fil looked at Will as though offended the man had dared to be right where they’d left him.

Will arched an eyebrow. “Was that anything I should know about?”

“No,” Fil said.

“That’s it? Just, no?”

“Just, no.” Will could feel the man’s intense gaze even through the mirrored glass covering his eyes.

Will returned the glare through his own uncovered eyes. “You know, you’re reportedly going to give me something that will make me feel awful. I’m told I’ll feel worse than I did shortly after receiving second-degree burns, getting shards of glass blasted into my body, being thrown through the air, and having three men kick me with so much force that bones broke. I’m putting a lot of trust in you, Fil. I’m going to be part of this Alliance of yours. Keeping secrets from me isn’t exactly going to help our relationship.”

“We have no relationship,” Fil said, his voice cold. “We’re doing each other favors. My life and my business are none of yours.”

Will glanced at Angel, pleading for her to provide some level of sanity. She shrugged. “It was a private conversation and it has nothing to do with you. If there’s something you need to know, you’ll know.”

He sighed, but relaxed as the young woman approached. He knew she was sending calming Energy his way, and wondered if the technique worked on everyone. He glanced back at Fil, and the man’s face was still cold.

Apparently not.

Will shrugged. “OK. Then, can you at least give me an explanation of this Purge?”

Fil pulled a bottle out of his pocket. It was larger than the mere vials that Angel usually provided him. “This is the Purge.” He handed the bottle to Will.

It was a dark, reddish color, and looked a lot like...

“Is that *blood*?” Will gasped. “You told me you aren’t witches, but I guess I need to ask if you’re some other type of supernatural creature. I have no interest in becoming a vampire.”

Fil scowled and opened his mouth to hurl an insult Will’s way. Angel placed a hand on the man’s shoulder, and he closed his mouth, still seeming to look daggers at Will through the ever-present mirrored sunglasses. “Mr. Stark, it’s not blood. That’s just the color that the various components create when mixed together. We are very much human, just operating with a higher degree of our potential compared to most of our fellow humans. None of us drink blood.” She glanced at Fil, who still looked annoyed at the suggestion, and gave him a friendly elbow. “Well, Fil *thinks* about it sometimes.”

Fil smirked, and Will sighed. “It does look like blood, but I appear to have no choice. What does it do, exactly?”

Fil answered. “It’s a mixture of selected food substances chosen for their individual and collaborative impacts, as well as special additives of our creation, designed to extract and expel harmful substances from the body and enable true health and Energy development.”

Will blinked. “What?”

Fil scowled. “What do you mean, *what*? I just answered your question. Weren’t you listening?”

“I don’t want a scientific explanation,” Will replied, nettled. “Just the facts. In plain English. With specifics on what it’s going to do to me. I’d like to mentally prepare myself for the tortuous pain I’m supposed to endure from

swallowing the... blood stuff.”

Fil’s face curled into a snarl. Angel spoke up, easing the tension developing. “What we’ve found, over time, is that humans develop large quantities of what could best be called contaminants in their bodies. These contaminants have two primary effects, though sometimes they’re subtle. First, they prevent your body from operating at optimum efficiency. For example, you might eat something that lessens your ability to fully digest the food you eat, or slow your recovery from an injury. Over time, these... contaminants build up, and as a result, your body operates at less than peak efficiency, sometimes *dramatically* less. You’ll see various aging markers appear as time passes. That might include lower muscle tone, aching joints, and so on.”

Will glanced down at himself through his glasses and patted his stomach. “I think I can relate to that point.”

It was quite clear that Angel and Fil did *not* relate. Both were extremely lean with excellent muscle tone. Will thought they both looked like the gymnasts he’d watched during the Olympic games when he was younger, before the worldwide economic depression caused the event to be canceled in 2020.

Angel nodded. “The second thing the contaminants do is mask the Energy that your body naturally produces. Everyone produces some, but few can actually sense it, and if you can’t sense it, you can’t manipulate it to perform various tasks, like those I demonstrated to you before. Once those contaminants are gone, you’ll feel better than you’ve ever felt before. You’ll sense the Energy. Your body, freed of those contaminants, will be able to produce more Energy on its own, and you’ll be able to attract more from nature.

“Contaminants are impossible to avoid, so most of us will do a Purge several times per year, and it’s unpleasant for us, like having a really bad cold. But for you, having lived thirty-five years without a Purge... I can’t imagine it will be a pleasant experience.”

Will put on a brave face. “I’ve had colds before, Angel. I can deal with that.”

Fil shook his head. “The various agents in the formula will seek out and bind to the contaminants wherever they are. In muscle, in bone, in organs, in your brain, in tissues and ligaments. They will then seek an exit from the body, taking the contaminants with them. When there’s not much contamination to remove, it’s sweating and a runny nose. You, on the other hand, may literally bleed from your eyes. We simply don’t know; we’ve not had anyone Purge before with such a buildup.”

Will winced, and the comfortable air suddenly seemed warm and dry. “Your

bedside manner needs work, but I appreciate the warning. Still, if that's what I need to do to prevent others from going through what my family and I went through, it's a price I'm willing to pay."

Fil glanced at the bottle. "Angel will stay and be prepared to take action if needed. When the effects of the Purge hit, please try not to kill her."

"Wait," Will said. "If I'm going to be dangerous, why are *you* leaving?"

Fil remained calm in the face of the unspoken accusation of cowardice. "You're far more likely to try to kill me. I'd exaggerate your desire for violence."

Good point.

Will watched as the man walked through the wall of the room. He wondered when he'd leave this place. He hadn't yet tried to leave the room, but wondered if he needed this Energy to get through the wall.

"Can I ask you something?" Angel asked, and Will nodded.

"What were they like?"

"Who?"

"Your family. Your wife and your son."

Will sighed, and his eyes glazed over as he reminisced. "They were my whole world. A lot of people thought my world was business, or making money, but those were just things that I did. My life was pretty lousy until I was about twenty years old because my family was dead and I was completely broke. It wasn't a fun life. I had an older brother, but he died when I was only about four or five years old, and his death destroyed my parents. They were of the type who thought the oldest child was always the best, but they tolerated me while he was around. After that? Let's just say I didn't get many examples of love from them. When they died, I didn't even care; and I doubt that fact would have bothered them because they didn't think I was worthy of having an opinion on anything."

"That's awful. You're not exaggerating just a bit though, are you?"

Will's eyes regained focus as he looked at her. "They said those exact words to my face on more than one occasion."

Angel's hand went to her mouth.

Will looked away as he continued. "They never had money. We were living in an economic depression, so that wasn't unusual. With that upbringing, I promised myself that I was going to fall in love, and live my life for that love. I promised myself I'd be rich, too, but it was more important to be accepted and loved just for being me. Hope gave me that. She was the first person ever who simply accepted me for who I am, and loved me for it unconditionally. If I hadn't

met her, I don't know where I'd be. I guess I'd still be pretty rich, but there'd be no guidance on what to do with all the money I had. I never had that issue with Hope. She accepted me and let me be who I needed to be, and gave me a moral center and heart. And she made me laugh. We laughed all the time. It was such a happy home."

Angel wiped a tear away from her eye. "She sounds wonderful." Will could only nod. "What about your son?"

Will's eyes misted slightly. "We wanted so desperately to have children, but we couldn't, and I found out that the fault was mine. I visited doctors in secret, and nothing helped. I finally found a private researcher who had some different ideas, and not long after I went to him Hope was expecting. Josh's birth was the happiest moment of our lives, and we were very happy people, the total opposite of what I grew up with."

Will smiled with pride. "He had the most incredible eyes. They were this amazing blue color, like ice reflecting a clear sky, and they had an amazing intensity to them. I'd watch him for hours. I'd look into that little boy's eyes and feel like I was looking at a truly amazing soul, one with wisdom and intelligence and knowledge. Somehow, though, he was never able to talk. Our doctors gave up trying to figure out why, because there was nothing physically wrong with him. Hope and I spent a lot of time with him every day, especially Hope, and we read him stories and tried to teach him things. We joked that if he ever started talking he'd be the best educated child in history. I'd also teach him how to throw different pitches and hit, because I loved baseball and wanted to share that with him. I have no idea if he knew what I was doing or if he'd like baseball if he could play.

"He never spoke or laughed or cried. Never made a sound. I always wondered why, if maybe it was something I'd done by accident, or if there was something I *hadn't* done. I wondered if I'd failed him somehow, failed some parenting test and because of that, he couldn't speak. That's one of the things those attacks took from me. I never heard my son's voice in any form. I wish I could have heard him laugh just once. You know, Hope called me while I was heading home that day, and told me he'd started talking, and I was so emotional about it that she wouldn't put him on the phone because she feared I'd lose control and crash the car. Maybe I should have insisted and talked to my son even that one time, telling him I loved him and was proud of him."

Angel's face was damp with tears. "That was beautiful. I think they both knew how you felt about them. Including your son."

Will smiled sadly, and nodded. “I hope so. Do you understand now why I need to do this? I don’t care if it’s painful. It’s a way to honor their memory by making sure those monsters never hurt anyone else. They denied me my chance to connect with my own child, and I can’t let that happen again.” He glanced at the bottle. “I guess it’s time for me to drink this.”

He took the top off the bottle and started drinking. The liquid was smooth and cool, and tasted minty, not at all what he imagined blood would taste like. He drank the entire bottle, and set it down.

He waited.

Nothing happened.

After a few minutes, he glanced at Angel. “Will I *know* when it starts working?”

Angel nodded, tears forming. “You will. And you’ll start to feel it very soon.”

Will nodded. Then it started.

A sensation of heat—not soothing heat, but scorching heat, hot enough to boil water—started in his core and arced out to his extremities, followed by what felt like a razor carving his insides up. He tried to scream in pain, but couldn’t gather the requisite air, his body seeming to shut down in pure shock. The razor sensation seemed to be literally scraping against every internal inch of his body, caring not what it cut or shredded. His limbs moved crazily, seeking something to strike as if it would calm the pain, and he understood Fil’s request to try not to kill Angel.

There was a brief respite, and he was able to breathe for a moment. He noticed the moisture on his skin as he sweated with the strain of the experience, and felt the moisture around his eyes. And he noticed that Fil had returned, laying a comforting hand on Angel’s shoulder, a hand she grasped and held with great firmness. Apparently, he wasn’t always cold and heartless after all.

Then the next wave hit.

The materials in the Purge formula found every possible exit from the inside of his body. The sweating was of incredible ferocity, what seemed like gallons of moisture pouring from his pores. He just had time to smell the foul aromas before material poured from his nose, ending his sense of smell. Fluid seeped out his ears. He retched, if it could be called that. There were no heaves, just a mass exodus of putrescence exiting his mouth. His mind reeled, unable to comprehend what was happening, shrieking for oxygen, unaware that his excretory organs were participating in the expulsion efforts. His limbs lost all control as muscles

and tendons spasmed, and he slumped to the ground as if made of jelly, his limbs contorting out of his control.

He had no idea how long the torture lasted, only that he was suddenly breathing pure, sweet air again, gasping in huge gulps to feed his screaming cells with their fuel. He could not open his eyes, out of pure exhaustion, but his ears worked well enough to hear Angel crying, the sobs seeming to come from miles away.

He sensed footsteps. “We’ll need to clean him,” he heard Fil say, his voice tight.

“He can’t walk,” Angel said, choking the words out between sobs as she sought to calm herself.

“I know,” Fil replied. He bent down and picked Will up with ease, and started walking.

“He looks *awful*,” Angel whispered. “He *smells* awful.”

“I know,” Fil said again, his voice strained, yet patient.

“Will he ever forgive us? I didn’t know it would be that bad. I tried to warn him, but I still had no idea it would be that bad.”

“I didn’t either.”

Will managed to crack his eyes open for just a moment, before the bright sunlight of the outdoors blinded him. His body thoroughly exhausted from the horrific intensity of the Purge, he finally crashed into unconsciousness.

But not before he’d noticed the single tear sliding down Fil’s cheek.

The fire still burned in Will as he woke up, but he found it to be a pleasant sensation. It was akin to a warm washcloth on his face, rather than the burning embers he’d been subjected to, internally and externally, in the past several days.

He wondered how long he’d actually been here in this building. He’d been asleep a lot, and given the traumas or medications he’d been subjected to prior to each round of sleep, he imagined he could easily have slept twelve hours or longer each session. He’d also been inside the entire time, which meant he had no ability to observe the daylight or the nighttime. He vaguely remembered being carried outside after the Purge had completed, carried somewhere by Fil with Angel following, apparently to clean him from the mess of everything that had come out of him. When it had all ended, he’d caught a brief whiff of the stench and gagged, but there was nothing left in him to vomit up.

His strangest memory was the sight of the tear on Fil's cheek. Did the man actually have compassion for his suffering? Overall, he seemed cold and distant, and while Will wasn't specifically seeking friendship, he sensed a deep resentment from Fil, a discomfort with Will's presence in their community. Perhaps he believed Will to be a threat in some fashion.

Regardless of Fil's opinion of him, Will had work to do, and right now that meant recovering from the trauma of the Purge. He took a quick mental assessment and realized that he definitely felt better. *Much* better. He felt lighter. His muscles had no knots of tension and moved with greater smoothness. He thought he was seeing with a lot more clarity as well. He moved his hands to adjust his glasses, only to note that they weren't there. He blinked with surprise, but reminded himself that one of Angel's magic potions had healed broken bones; there was no reason at this point not to believe in Fil's ability to create something that could perfect his eyesight. His vision was now strong enough that he realized, with shock, his all-white bodysuit actually had streaks of pink in it. He figured that must be Fil having fun with him.

The warmth he'd noticed inside was still there; what was odd was that it seemed to move and be more intense wherever his concentration focused. When he thought of his eyes, the warmth seemed strongest there. He concentrated on his feet, and his toes tingled. He looked at his hands, and felt them warming, almost seeing something sparking off of them. He cupped his hands together, and felt the warmth grow until he seemed to be holding a ball of fire. Smiling, he went into his pitching windup, turned, and threw the ball of fire at the chair that was standing in for the catcher in his little daydream.

The chair flew backward and slammed against the white wall.

What the...?

"I see you've already started experimenting with Energy," a new voice said. "That's excellent. You'll be a fine pupil."

Will turned and saw Adam, the brown-haired man from the escape vehicle. Adam wore a pale green bodysuit. The man was grinning at him.

"That's the Energy? That warmth?"

"Indeed it is. Most of my pupils take quite some time to notice the Energy at all, dismissing it as a post-Purge fever or some other form of fantasy. Most of them also possess very little Energy at that point, so it's not difficult to understand why they can't sense it or manipulate it. You already possess a decent quantity, which suggests that you're predisposed to this type of skill, even with absolutely no training." He chuckled in a manner suggesting he found that

statement ironic.

“What’s so funny?” Will asked. Normally, he’d snap such a response out, but he felt so healthy it was difficult to express anger.

“Those Hunters were looking for a man named Will Stark, the man who possessed the greatest ability to produce, acquire, and manipulate Energy of any Aliomenti in history. New as you are to Energy work, I dare say that at some point, the Aliomenti will wish they’d kept you captive when they found you. It looks like they may have found the right man after all. And they helped deliver him straight into the hands of their enemies.” Adam smiled.

Will smiled, too.

Revenge could be sweet.

DUEL

The Assassin sat on the floor in the room with his back against the solid wall, waiting for someone to come for him. He was trapped here in this room of uniform color with no windows or doors, and he was enraged, so much so that he was prepared to litter the room with bodies.

Everything about this place was strange. Since he'd awakened from his capture and crawled from the trunk of the vehicle, he'd detected no Energy. He was accustomed to being bombarded with Energy in the Aliomenti communities he frequented, most notably the Aliomenti regions of Headquarters. Here, there was nothing. His experiences and inability to escape led him to conclude that he was in the hands of the Alliance, but if that was the case, he should sense at least *some* Energy. Was the Alliance now devoid of Energy? And if so, how were they restraining him?

He stood and faced the surface behind him. There was something very strange about these walls. He had seen the man who had called himself the Mechanic walk straight through the wall, yet there was no sign of an opening. He leaned close, his eye nearly touching the surface, trying to identify the materials used in its construction. He noted two details of interest. The surface of the wall gave off a soft glow, and he felt a gentle breeze coming from the wall, noticeable only when he was this close to the surface.

The Assassin moved back from the wall and began pacing. The wall was built of some type of permeable material. It kept him in, yet somehow allowed in exterior light and air. He detected no sounds from the outside, and had felt no moisture from outside precipitation. Was this room a standalone building? Did it have one or more walls—or the ceiling—facing the elements? Or was it part of a larger structure, perhaps a fully isolated room? That would explain some of his

puzzling observations. They could control the amount of light, air, moisture, and noise available from the outside, and allow only what was desired through the permeable walls. Such permeability apparently allowed an Alliance member through, but kept *him* from leaving. He allowed himself a brief, grudging moment of respect for the Alliance; they'd performed an exceptionally useful bit of Energy work here, one that somehow emitted no Energy in its operation.

The brief sense of commendation ended. He needed to leave this building. Though he was in no danger of suffocation or otherwise succumbing to the elements, he was still trapped in here by supernatural means. He would leave, exact his revenge, and return to Headquarters where he belonged.

The Assassin slapped himself on the head. He was thinking like a stupid human, who would need to walk through a door or crawl through a window to leave a room. He could teleport, albeit only a few feet at a time. But that should be enough.

He marched back to the wall until he stood only a few feet away. Then he paused, frowning. One typically needed to have a firm picture of the target location in mind to teleport successfully, and unfortunately he had no idea what the outside of this building looked like. He had no idea of landmarks, or even the exterior shape, size, and coloring of the building housing him. So how should he do this? A thought struck him. Could he just think "go forward five feet" and have it work? He'd need to test the approach.

He moved back several paces, and then spun around in circles until he had no idea which way he was facing. Once the disorientation was complete, he dropped his short sword straight down as a marker of his starting spot. He concentrated on simply moving himself forward two feet, without opening his eyes, and felt the familiar sense of displacement indicating he had actually moved. He opened his eyes and turned around, and the blade was two feet behind him.

He smiled, his scarred face looking even more disfigured with the effort. Perfect. It worked. Not something he'd typically need to use, but in a situation like this, it was a critical nuance to his skill. And it would be the downfall of the Alliance, especially the man named Fil.

After retrieving and sheathing his weapon, The Assassin marched back to the wall, stood two feet away, and closed his eyes. He performed the same exercise, projecting himself forward four feet this time. After all, he had no way to know the thickness of the mysterious walls.

He felt the familiar sensation of displacement indicating teleportation, but his

body was jarred immediately after. When he opened his eyes, he found himself pressed flat against the permeable, but solid-to-him, wall.

Frowning, he moved back just a few inches, so that he was nearly touching the wall surface, and repeated the process. Once again, his teleportation effort only succeeded in smashing his face against the very solid surface of the wall. He grabbed his sword and stabbed at the wall in frustration, but the weapon merely bounced off the surface, without leaving even a small mark.

“You need to develop better learning comprehension.”

The Assassin whirled toward the voice, short sword readied, assuming a defensive stance.

A young man sat in a chair he hadn't previously noticed, lounging casually. He had short, jet-black hair, and wore wraparound, mirrored sunglasses, a human fashion item that aggravated the Assassin greatly.

“Who are you?” the Assassin snarled. He relaxed his stance slightly.

“I was told you were looking for me.”

The Assassin scowled. “You're the one who threw me in... in there.” He gestured toward the vehicle sitting in the center of the room.

“Guilty.”

The Assassin stared at the man. He exuded no Energy, yet showed absolutely no fear in the face of a scar-faced man wielding a sword. “Do you know who I am?”

“Yes. You're the Leader's lapdog, sent to perform the noble, brave work of killing unarmed human women and children. A true model of bravery for all to emulate.” The man clapped in a slow, mocking fashion.

The Assassin glared at the man. “Humans aren't worth the space they take up. I'm doing us—and them—a service by ending their miserable existence. The only shame is that I'm not allowed to be more thorough.” He moved toward the man, slowly, his blood-red eyes never leaving the face of this man who seemed unafraid of him.

“You judge an entire species based upon the acts of a tiny few acting irrationally. Tell me, did you ever bother to follow up on that mob? Learn about the fact that every single one of them was ashamed of their actions, and sought you out to seek forgiveness? Or did you cede all control of your emotions to your hatred and anger, lumping the innocent with the guilty, forgetting that you are committing the very crime you suffered?”

The Assassin stiffened. How could he possibly know? “You have no idea what you're talking about.”

“No?” The man gave a grim smile. “An Assassin, very much like you, decided that two people very dear to me needed to die, because one of them could do things she shouldn’t be able to do. The two people killed were my wife and my young daughter, people I loved and had vowed to protect. Does *that* sound familiar?”

The Assassin’s breathing caught in his chest.

“The Hunters told me what would happen. But they didn’t tell me *where*. They just gave me a link to a two way video feed so I could watch them be slaughtered, and they could see me helpless to defend them. I did watch. I would not abandon them. I met their gaze, told them I loved them, and that I’d avenge them.”

The man rose to his feet, nearly a head taller than the Assassin. “I should hate all Assassins, shouldn’t I? I should kill you on the spot, right here, right now, simply because of what you are. Yet, when given the chance, I kicked you a few times, and then I gave you medicine that healed your wounds. Why? Because I won’t give in to the animal nature like you have. I won’t become what I detest. I won’t kill someone who cannot defend themselves against my actions.”

The Assassin laughed. “Lovely speech. A morality plea? How comic. And such arrogance, too. You think me defenseless? You think you would be able to kill *me*? *No one* kills *me*. Least of all a coward too weak to avenge those he claims to have loved. I avenge those I’ve lost with each bit of blood I spill. You spit on the existence of your loved ones with each life, like mine, that you spare.” The Assassin stepped forward, blood-red eyes glinting, the malice so intense that the temperature in the room seemed to rise.

The man in the sunglasses stood still. The Assassin was nearly upon him, and laughed again. “Foolish human. You should have killed me when you had the chance.” He raised his sword.

The man finally reacted... by smiling back at him. “Oh, I’m not foolish.”

The Assassin felt an invisible glove surround him, pinning him still, and there was a look of shock upon his ugly, scarred face. He still sensed no Energy from the man.

“I am, though, quite human, just as you are at your core. You deny it as something shameful, but without that starting point, you have no way of measuring how much you’ve developed yourself. Or, in your case, how far you’ve fallen.”

The Assassin’s scowl deepened.

“I refuse to deny what I am. The humanity in me prevents me from killing you now, even though I could do so with ease.” The Assassin felt the glove start to tighten, ever so slowly, until he couldn’t breathe. Then the glove released, just enough to enable him to breathe again. “But I won’t kill you. I will not, however, deny others their opportunity to act on their own nature. You see, Assassin, when I rescued you from that burning house, I brought someone else with me as well. I healed her of her wounds as well. She’d like the chance to reveal her own inner animal to you.”

The Assassin blinked. Was this man talking about the human woman married to Will Stark? Was this young man, not Will Stark, the one to make the woman and child vanish? How could he do that, with no detectable Energy?

“But before I let the two of you get reacquainted, I feel you must do so on an even footing.” The man smiled, a look of such confidence that the Assassin felt a flicker of fear. “She comes to you unarmed. You will therefore meet her unarmed.”

The sword was torn from his grasp, before he even knew it was missing, and he watched as it moved through the wall and outside the room, safely beyond his reach. The Assassin gritted his teeth in anger and frustration.

“She also comes to you as one without Energy skills, and you will therefore meet her in a similar state.” The Assassin felt something surround his Energy stores, shutting off all access to them, and he felt helpless and human as he experienced the same sensation those meeting Aramis’ Damper felt. He fell to the floor, stunned, as the invisible, restraining glove released him, but quickly scrambled to his feet. Instinct screamed at him to charge the man, but he controlled himself.

“Now that the two of you are on a more even footing, Assassin, I’d like to present an old friend.” The man licked his lips, and then whistled.

A dog, a black Labrador retriever, trotted in through the wall, attracted by the sound of the whistle. The dog was cheerful, tail high, panting in the manner of her kind. She trotted to the man with the sunglasses, who patted the dog on the head. “Assassin, meet Smokey. Smokey, meet the Assassin.”

The dog paused, sniffed the air, and turned to face the Assassin. The dog’s hackles rose, and a deep, rumbling growl sounded. The hairs on the back of the Assassin’s neck stood on end, and chill worked its way down his spine. He knew true fear, his first experience of the emotion—on the receiving end—in a very long time.

Seeing the change in the Assassin’s manner, the man in the sunglasses

smiled. “Smokey remembers what happened the last time you met, Assassin. She knows that you attacked two humans she cared for. She remembers that you hurt *her* as well.” His smile was without humor. “I believe she’d like to discuss her grievances with you, in her own fashion.”

He patted the dog on the head. “Sic ’em, girl.”

Growling, the dog charged the Assassin.

The Assassin threw an arm up to defend himself and fell in the process. The dog seized the limb in her jaws and bit down with every bit of savagery she could muster, tearing skin and muscle. The Assassin screamed as the sharp pain overwhelmed him. He tried to position himself to kick her, but with four legs planted firmly on the ground, she easily maneuvered around the attempted blows. Survival instinct kicked in for him, and he moved his torso closer to her, rolling off his backside on to his knees, with the dog hanging on to his shredded arm. The Assassin raised his elbow and slammed it into the dog’s head, but Smokey didn’t react. He tried again, and this time she saw the blow coming. She released her jaws and sprang away. The Assassin howled anew as he struck his own mangled limb. The nerve endings and muscles were torn and blood flowed freely. The arm was effectively dead.

While the Assassin stared at his injury, the dog pounced again, paws hitting him firmly in the chest, knocking him onto his back. The force of it slammed his head onto the ground, and he saw stars. He threw his injured arm in front of his face while swinging his good arm in an arc. The good arm made contact, and Smokey was knocked away from him, hitting the ground on her side. Smokey rolled twice, scrambled up on all four paws, and charged the man again. The Assassin had been trying to get to his feet, his good arm under him as he tried to press himself up to his knees, and the weight of the dog landing on his back unbalanced him. He landed face-first on the floor in a pool of his own warm, sticky blood, smelling the saltiness of it, and felt the dog’s teeth sink into the skin of his neck, snarling with rage and blood lust.

The Assassin realized then that he was going to die.

“To me, Smokey.” The man’s voice carried to the Assassin’s ears, faintly. But he felt the dog’s teeth release him, was aware that the animal had left him, and was suddenly quite grateful to be alive. He spent several minutes face down on the ground, breathing rapidly at first, then more deeply until his heart rate stabilized. He was still weak due to the blood loss from his arm, but he was alive and would survive. With agonizing effort, he used his functioning arm to push himself up onto his knees, resting back on his haunches. His face and clothes

were covered with blood... and this time, the blood was his own.

The man with the sunglasses sat in the same chair, watching him with detached interest. At his side sat the dog, Smokey, the latter sporting a look of extreme contentment as the man scratched her behind the ears. There was no sign in the dog's current demeanor of the vicious beast that had attacked and nearly killed him, save for the small amount of his blood on her snout.

"You see," the man said, "we all have moments where we lose control, when our inner animal comes out in violent fashion, including those who are actually animals." He nodded at the dog. "Yet what you see here is Smokey in her normal state. She is a pleasant, friendly companion, happy with the simplest gestures. When she felt threatened, however, she reacted with violence. If she'd taken the time to assess the situation she would have realized that you are no threat to either of us, and that the attack was unnecessary."

He patted the dog, and Smokey trotted back toward the Assassin. The man lurched backward away from the animal, terrified that she would attack again. He crashed into the wall, that wall that let everyone and everything in and out but him, and he was trapped. His legs kept moving, trying to push his body through the wall, desperate to get away from the vicious beast before she finished him off. He threw his good arm up in front of his face. Smokey moved closer, cautious, and sniffed. He could feel her hot breath on his face; see his own blood still on her snout.

His terror complete, the Assassin's will broke. She was too close, he was too frail, and he had none of his usual tools available to defend himself. He let his legs go limp, and dropped his arm from its defensive position. The dog had defeated him, and she would kill him.

Smokey watched him, panting. Then she moved up next to him and licked his face. She sat down on her haunches next to him, tail wagging.

The Assassin was stunned. Wasn't this animal the same one that had attacked him without remorse only a few moments earlier? What was this behavior?

"She likes to be scratched behind the ears," the man with the sunglasses offered.

"You have *got* to be kidding me," the Assassin muttered. But the dog hadn't attacked him again. Yet. And so, with a great deal of anxiety, he reached his good hand over, resting it on the dog's fur, and started to scratch. The dog's eyes closed, and she seemed to be very content.

"I think she likes you." The man with the sunglasses was enjoying the moment.

“She has no need or reason to like me,” the Assassin said, his voice still weak from the physical and emotional beating. “I fully expect her to finish me off at any second.”

“She reacts as instinct demands, to defend herself and those she cares for,” the man replied. “If you are no threat, then she’s quite happy to be friends. If you move to attack her, however, or threaten me... well, you know what she can do when provoked.”

The man with the sunglasses stood. “Come, Smokey,” he called, and the dog trotted away from the Assassin, back to his side. The man glanced at the Assassin. “I will send someone in to provide medication that will heal those wounds and help you sleep, at which point we will discuss your future.”

“You can’t trust me,” the Assassin replied. “I’ll kill every single one of you when I get the chance. You should execute me now, not restore my health.”

“A man who pats the head of a dog that just mauled him is one who can learn to trust and be trusted. I dare say you are more capable of change than you realize.” Fil and the dog left the room, melting through the walls, and the Mechanic reappeared. He pulled out a potion and gave it to the Assassin.

“What’s this?” the injured man asked. The man’s orange body suit seemed unnaturally bright, and he squinted his eyes.

“It’s the medication Fil mentioned,” the Mechanic replied. “It will help you sleep and heal the wounds you suffered in your little duel.”

The Assassin smirked, the action sending a shooting pain through him. “More like it will kill me,” he muttered.

The Mechanic shrugged. “We’ve had every opportunity to kill you. I could do that right now.”

The Assassin wanted to argue, but the experience he’d just had enforced the truth of the statement. “I know.”

He opened the bottle and drank the contents, finding the fluid sweet and smooth. He started to feel the effects of the potion almost immediately, and as his eyes started to flutter shut and the adrenaline of the fight wore off, he finally felt the pain of his injuries.

He was vaguely aware of the Mechanic carrying him to a bed that hadn’t been in the room moments ago. Perhaps the chair the man with the glasses had used could be changed into one? The Mechanic placed something on the bed next to the Assassin. “I have a feeling you’ll need this again, Assassin. Use it with greater wisdom in the future.” He turned and left.

The Assassin’s good arm moved to the object, his hand grazing the surface,

and he felt the familiar texture of his sword just as sleep claimed him.

ENERGY

Will settled into a routine that became his new normal, reflective of the incredible ability of human beings to adapt to new circumstances.

A few weeks earlier, his life had revolved around his wife and son, his philanthropic work, and his businesses, in that order. Today, he could no longer spend time on any of them, outside the happy memories he had to dig to find. More frequent were the flashbacks of the last minutes before his rescue. Michael Baker's look of horror at seeing the two dead guards. The killer standing in his house, the blood dripping from the sword the man carried. The explosion and fire that annihilated his family and destroyed his house. The maniacal frenzy of anger and rage on the faces of the three Hunters as they kicked and beat him, as Athos slit his cheeks to match the scar on the Hunter's face, of Aramis' look of righteous fury as the man tried to stab him to death along with his fellow Hunters.

Now he'd wake each day in that empty white room, roll to his side, and not see Hope's sleeping form beside him. There was no daily walk down the hall to see Josh and his faithful companion, Smokey, ever hopeful that that day would be the one the boy would finally speak. That day would never come now, and he'd go to his grave having never heard his son's voice or laughter.

All of those flashbacks of his past life were pushed deep into his mind for later, a brief moment when their recollection would serve as a form of penance and self-condemnation. At the moment, he was focused, at Adam's direction, on making sure that he remained floating three feet off the ground, levitating himself with his own Energy, enjoying the sensation of the buzzing warmth keeping him aloft. The marvel of human adaptability was that this seeming

wizardry was as normal to him now as driving a car had been only a few weeks earlier.

Progress had been steady. Adam worked with him for a few hours at a time, teaching him how to sense and grow his Energy levels. Will, with nothing else to do, spent every waking moment before and after his sessions figuring things out for himself.

He had also finally left the room he'd been living in, walking through the walls like the others did. Adam noted he was not a prisoner and never had been, and the other buildings in the community were built with a similar technology; he was free to attempt to enter any he liked. The buildings were intelligent; if he wasn't permitted in a building, he wouldn't be able to enter.

Will tried to think of the various Energy skills he'd seen demonstrated or heard mentioned. He mastered empathy fairly quickly, able to read emotions with startling accuracy. He mastered telepathy shortly after. His educational sessions with Adam included discussions of the ethics around the use of his skills; performing deep empathic or telepathic work without permission was considered rude. He recalled the feeling of invasion when Angel had demonstrated the skills several weeks earlier, and understood that logic quickly and easily. He learned that you could project Energy with a specific emotional charge and effect that change in your target. Angel's calming influence on him was his most obvious example of this. He kept those skills in check, though he knew he'd use them if needed, if he ever came up against the Elites of the Aliomenti—the man called the Leader, his council, the Hunters, and the Assassin. Those were the men and women whose drive to global Aliomenti dominance had led to the overzealous enforcement of Oaths, and apparently included authorization for the murders of those like Hope and Josh who simply were in the way. There'd be no restraint around those people.

He had built sufficient Energy to begin to practice the skill of telekinesis. That was the ability to project and control his Energy outside his body, often used to move objects that could not be reached with the hands. He found that Energy was immune to weight, and that it was more difficult to lift something with a large surface area than a large weight. During his self-study he'd applied the approach to his own body, and managed a crude form of flying that took so much mental control that it exhausted him. When he mentioned this to Adam, the man noted that there were better ways to fly; they'd practice those at a later date. For now, Will simply accepted the fact that he could prevent himself from falling to his death, but he wouldn't be emulating an airplane any time soon.

Adam told him that many of the Aliomenti perfected a special skill, typically tied to their personality. Angel had very strong empathy skills, for example, which Will had already deduced. Each of the Hunters for the Aliomenti had a skill which, when combined, made them incredibly effective at capturing a target from the Alliance. Porthos had extreme sensitivity to Energy, able to locate even tiny bursts from great distances. He could even sense who had generated the Energy he detected. His Tracking skills enabled the Hunters to find their targets rapidly. Aramis had developed an incredible Dampening ability, able to wrap insulation around a person's Energy and stifle it, in some cases eliminating their access to it entirely. Athos combined telepathic and empathic skills to be a human truth detector, so powerful that even when those queried didn't know the true answer to questions, Athos did.

Will tried his hand at each of the abilities, and found that he could "hear" Energy if he focused. Each member of the Alliance produced a different tone, and Will made mental notes matching tones to people. He used the technique to track Adam once in an effort to practice the skill. It took an incredible effort, though, and he filed the capability away to revisit; perhaps he needed more Energy before the skill became practical. Likewise, he was able to dampen Adam's Energy a bit, but it was a skill that didn't come to him easily. He wasn't sure how to test Athos' skill, however, and let it go.

He made himself walk around the camp each day, taking breaks from his self-imposed, rigorous Energy training. The camp was comprised of small buildings, all of a similar size, shape, and color to the one he had been using. He didn't see many people, which was at times reassuring—the Alliance probably preferred to keep their numbers spread out—and at other times concerning. Were they widely dispersed, or were the numbers of the Alliance that small? Nobody would give him answers.

He enjoyed sitting at the outskirts of the camp, his back against one of the massive trees circling his new home, trees reminiscent of the community at De Gray Estates. The weather was tropical and pleasant: bright sunshine warming him, fresh air energizing him physically, and a sense of serenity his former high-paced lifestyle had never afforded him.

If only he could have brought Hope and Josh here...

Will had asked where in the world they were, and was told that it wasn't important for him to know. He was treated well, was given nourishing and delicious food, had been healed of wounds that should have killed him, and was able to do things he'd never thought possible. Yet, he often felt like a prisoner,

one not trusted to keep the secrets of the Alliance, doing his penance to earn the right to wear the golden tattoo on his palm—and know just where in the world he actually lived.

He stood and made his way into the forest. He had a few secrets of his own.

Will had found the tree during his first solo journey outside the building nearly a week ago. Walking among the majestic trees in the forest and feeling a tremendous sense of peace, he'd seen the small tree nestled among the giants. The leaves were a paler green than those of its neighbors. Will sat down and watched the tree, entranced at the sight. And then he'd seen it, a slight twitch in the tree, and one of the limbs moved, ever so slightly, so that it caught one of the few rays of sun that managed to sneak through the canopy above. The tree was fighting for every nutrient it needed to survive, including sunlight.

Will was inspired, for it couldn't be easy for a tree to move, and he wanted to help. This tree was every young entrepreneur he'd ever helped, trying to make it in a difficult world, fighting for every bit that they could get to press on toward their goals, seeking to make themselves better, not to drag others down. Will had no money to give in this case, and money would do the tree no good. But he had Energy now, and he wondered if that would help the tree.

He stood and walked to the tree, moving to avoid interrupting that cherished bit of sunlight. Touching a branch of the tree, he put Energy forth into the limb, hoping that it would help the tree find and process the nutrients it needed to grow. Instead, the tree seemed to straighten under his touch, growing taller. The color of the leaves deepened, and more buds began to sprout. It was exhilarating for Will to see the tree succeed. He put both hands to the trunk, feeling the warm, rough bark, as a means of more rapidly passing the Energy into the tree, wondering if it might further enhance the tree's growth.

The tree's rate of growth did accelerate, but what Will didn't expect was the feedback effect he got. Will felt Energy coming back to him, somehow purer and richer and in greater quantity than what had been in his body previously. In some strange form of symbiosis, Will was getting stronger as he helped the tree grow stronger.

His encounter with the tree was like a timeless meditation, and it was only with great reluctance that he allowed the connection to end. He'd passed Adam on his way back into the camp, and the man shot him a strange look but said nothing. Will glanced down and was surprised to see that his white bodysuit seemed more pink than white. That must have been what caused Adam's reaction. Will wondered how the clothing had managed to change color; he

didn't remember it being so pink when he'd donned it earlier that day. He'd pushed the thought aside, focusing on visiting the tree again each day as time permitted.

When he visited the tree this day he was amazed. His visits had occurred for just over a week, and during that time the tree had shown remarkable growth. Today, his tree—*his tree*—had reached a height sufficient to push its tallest branches up above the canopy into the direct sunlight. It was a moment of extreme pride for Will, as if his own child had achieved some remarkable accomplishment. His face fell at the thought of Josh. His own son never had the chance to reach for the sunlight. Will added yet more pressure to himself to learn and get stronger; no other children's lives should be cut short for lack of defense against the evil elements of the Aliomenti.

The feedback effect had grown each day, as both man and tree had strengthened and increased the amount of Energy they could share and provide to each other. Will had seen the obvious effects in his work with Adam; he didn't need telepathy or empathy to know that he was progressing at a rate that astounded and even frightened his trainer.

Will put his hands to the rough bark of the tree trunk. The tree was now strong and sturdy, and though he once could wrap his hands around the trunk, he now struggled to wrap both arms around the same section. The Energy flow today was incredible; Will wondered if the tree's ability to directly tap the sunlight overhead had something to do with it. He found his senses strangely magnified, his awareness of his surroundings intensified. And he noticed something else when he closed his eyes to better enjoy the sensation.

He could see Adam and Fil talking, both men animated in their gestures, and with looks of concern crossing their faces. He became aware that he could hear them as well, faintly at first, but as he focused, their voices became clear.

Fil: "...shielding, his Energy levels are getting far too strong to be missed."

Adam: "I know. The growth is beyond explanation. He's already hinted at red. In less than four weeks. He's going to be teleporting soon, whether he intends to or not. I need to make him aware of it before he finds himself three miles away with no idea how he got there, or worse, drops unannounced into an Aliomenti community."

Fil: "No. Shielding first. We cannot allow him to be a danger to this community, Adam. Our numbers here are low enough as it is without inviting an attack. His Energy level is going to attract Porthos' attention soon."

Adam: "I'll work on both in the next session. We meet up again tomorrow."

Fil: *“If you wait that long, you’ll likely be meeting the Hunters, not Stark. You need to find him now. He should be rather easy to locate.”*

Will pulled his hands from the tree, and the eavesdropping session ended. He made them worried, fearful that his rapid Energy growth would attract the Hunters to their camp. At the moment, he was more concerned about anyone finding him near this tree. He sprinted through the forest toward camp, focusing on tracking Adam as he ran. As he edged past the tree line into the clearing, he slowed to a walk, normalized his breathing, and sat down at the edge of the forest, his back against a tree as usual. He knew Adam was looking for him, and would follow his Energy trail. It was best to stop him here, before he moved deeper into the forest.

He closed his eyes, tracking Adam’s Energy sound. It seemed to move in a straight path, and then suddenly shifted. Will opened his eyes, frowning and turned in the direction of the sound. It was almost as if Adam had...

He stood up and walked back toward his tree. The men had talked about teleportation. Will knew what that was, vanishing from one location and appearing in another, instantly. Angel had demonstrated the ability to him in his first days here, and Adam had made allusions to the skill, saying it took enormous amounts of Energy to be able to move even a few yards. If Will’s judgment was correct, Adam had just teleported several hundred yards, which meant that the man was exceptionally powerful, more than Will had originally thought. It wasn’t the skill that concerned Will, however. It was the destination.

As he expected, Adam was there in the clearing, staring at the tree. *His* tree. The man’s face was a mask, as if he were deep in thought. Will couldn’t imagine what he was doing, but he wanted to get Adam away from here.

“There you are!” Will said. His words startled Adam who spun, his face bearing a look of genuine surprise. “I had a question for you, but couldn’t find you.”

“It appears that’s no longer the case,” Adam replied, a thin smile on his face. “Practicing your tracking skills on me? I thought you’d given up on developing that particular skill.”

“It appears that’s no longer the case,” Will said, smiling, expecting a like response from Adam. Instead, the man turned back toward the tree with a deep sigh.

Will leaned toward him. “Something bothering you, Adam?”

Adam frowned. “There’s something very strange about this tree. It seems to have an Energy vibration very much like yours. I tracked you here because of the

strength of the Energy in this area. I found the Energy I tracked in the tree and its surroundings, but I found no sign of you.” He turned to face Will. “Most unusual.”

“Trees can have Energy, too?” Will asked, surprised. His natural curiosity had the added advantage of deflecting the topic away from the tree’s Energy signature.

Adam nodded. “All living things have Energy, though most have only minute traces. Humans have the most, but even there, the vast majority suppresses what little Energy they possess. This tree has Energy levels I’d expect from a reasonably adept human trained in the Aliomenti sciences, perhaps even a pink. I’ve not sensed such strong readings in a non-human organism before. That’s what baffles me; how did this tree develop such strong Energy levels?”

“A pink?” Will asked. “What does that mean?”

“Ah, yes, we haven’t discussed that yet,” Adam said, chuckling. “The clothing we wear in this camp changes color based upon our Energy levels. The colors roughly correspond to the wavelength of the visible light spectrum. The longer the wavelength, the darker the color, the greater the Energy levels. Each color progression represents an order of magnitude increase in accumulated Energy levels. White, pink, and red are the first few levels. Most people peak in the yellow range, though quite a few never make it that far.”

Will glanced down at his clothing. It was definitely pink, and the color seemed to have deepened even in the past few moments, more a pale red color. “What does my coloring mean?”

“It means you’ve accomplished a great deal, and if you keep progressing at this pace you’ll hit orange and be able to practice teleportation.”

Will thought about Fil’s jet-black clothing. “Fil’s clothing... what does his coloring mean?”

Adam considered. “It means that Fil’s a very special case. A very *advanced* case.”

A *mental case*, Will thought. “Listen, I wanted to talk more about teleportation, maybe practice it...”

“Not yet, Will,” Adam interrupted. “We need to work on another skill. Your Energy development is progressing at a very rapid pace, and as your Energy levels increase you’ll be more easily detected by someone like the Hunter Porthos. We’ve developed a skill called Shielding, which is something unknown outside the Alliance. It basically lets you hide your Energy and makes it difficult or impossible to detect.”

Then what I saw was real, Will thought. *I'm becoming a risk*. "I don't want to put anyone at risk. I *can't* put anybody at risk. When can we start?"

"Let's start now," Adam replied.

Adam taught him that those with large stores of Energy naturally leaked a small portion of that Energy out into their surroundings, even when not doing Energy work. It was equivalent to the leaking of heat from the body, or electricity from conducting wires. Unfortunately, if the individual was powerful enough, even minor leaks amounted to large amounts of Energy, and could be sensed by others. This was not something that the majority of Aliomenti concerned themselves with, for they were not Hunted. For the Alliance, Shielding was essential to survival. All of them had learned to Shield to avoid detection from a distance.

Will practiced the technique, which amounted to building a mental barrier of insulation around the Energy, forcing it to remain inside him. The trick, as Adam noted repeatedly, was awareness; he would only Shield when he made the conscious effort. Over time, it would become a skill like driving, able to be done with less conscious effort, but in these early days he needed to be quite diligent. They were essentially copying Aramis' Damper skill, but voluntarily using it on themselves.

They were just finishing up and starting back to the camp when they heard loud, rumbling noises overhead. Adam's face tightened.

"Is that... thunder?" Will asked.

"No," Adam replied. "That's the sound of Aliomenti aircraft. It's the Hunters. They've found us."

Will's face fell. "No. They've found *me*."

MACHINES

Adam led the way back to camp, and the two men burst through a haze inside the tree line that Will hadn't noticed before. Nearly all of the buildings in the clearing had vanished, leaving not even a trace of a foundation or imprints in the grass. Adam headed for one of the three that remained, the building Will used for lodging. Will noticed a haze overhead, as if a cloud had formed over their clearing, level with the tree canopy above.

Fil and Angel burst from another of the remaining buildings. Angel's face was fearful, but Fil's face showed nothing but mangled fury. "You!" he screamed, sprinting at Will. "This is entirely *your* fault!"

Fil's attack put Will on the ground, on his back, and Fil's fists rained down on him faster than Will believed possible. He was able only to put his arms up in token defense, and felt his skin bruising, his arms becoming numb. Angel looked like she wanted to say something, but stayed silent, instead opting to join Adam in watching the skies nearby as the Aliomenti flying craft soared after fleeing members of the Alliance.

The attack by Fil finally stopped, and Will lowered his arms. Fil's face was one of pure fury, obvious despite the sunglasses that masked his eyes. Will didn't need his new empathy skill to know what fueled it. Will's growing Energy, and the leakages he'd never Shielded until moments before, had drawn the attention of the Hunters and brought them here.

Will hadn't fought back because he believed he deserved each and every blow.

Adam pulled Fil off of Will. "We need to get moving. You need to deal with this later."

Will glanced up. Aircraft the size of motorcycles were visible over the

nearby forest, the spot Adam and Will had just vacated. Had they zeroed in on the tree? A burst of flame erupted from one of the aircraft, igniting the trees in the distance. Will felt a chill and a burst of anger. They'd fired at *his* tree. Will started toward the trees, his fists clenched.

Adam grabbed him. "No, Will. There are too many of them. There were at least a hundred aircraft initially, and most of them are chasing those who have already fled. We need to leave." Adam pulled him along until Will moved of his own volition. Will watched Fil and Angel vanish inside one of the remaining buildings, just as he and Adam entered Will's room. "Stand still," Adam ordered. Will, not sure what to expect, did as he was told, standing still directly behind Adam.

The bed and chairs in the room melted into the floor, and the walls, floor, and ceiling collapsed inward toward the two men. Will felt a moment of panic. Was he being executed for leading the Hunters to camp? Adam looked calm, watching as the modest-sized room reformed around them and shaped into what looked like a sleek, flying bobsled with a clear top.

"Sit," Adam said, and Will sat without thinking, surprised—though he wasn't sure why—to find a seat had formed under him. The chair molded itself to him, firm yet comfortable, and restraining bands serving as a seat belt held him in place. The air inside the newly formed cabin cooled. Will looked out of the clear, seamless top, and saw another vehicle where Fil and Angel's building had stood.

Shape-shifting buildings? He wondered what type of Energy enabled that. The third building remained in place and unaltered.

Things had definitely changed over the past month or so. Now, a building that stayed in one place and maintained its shape was the oddity.

The building—now a vehicle—lifted silently off the ground and followed Fil and Angel's vehicle into the forest, away from his tree. Will glanced behind them, back toward what was left of their camp. "What's that last building?"

"That's where the Mechanic works. He's usually the last one to leave." Adam paused a moment. "I didn't think that would be your first question, though."

Adam steered the craft expertly through the trees. Will turned around, and noticed that there were no controls. He would have been surprised if there were.

Will considered the comment. "What was I supposed to ask?"

Adam risked a quick glance back at him before returning his focus to the flying vehicle in front of him. "I thought you might ask why Angel and I stood

back while Fil... well, while Fil vented some frustration. Given that you didn't try to fight back, though, I imagine you figured that one out on your own."

Will nodded, though Adam wasn't looking at him. "He's mad at me for drawing the Hunters here. I don't fault him for that."

"You should be faulting *me*, though. As your trainer I should have recognized that your Energy levels were going to make this inevitable and taught you how to Shield sooner. I really should have told you to stay in camp. We have a technology that Shields all of us while we're in the clearing, so if I'd told you then you could have stayed where it was safe and nothing would have happened. Fil really should have come after me, but he chose you instead."

"Lucky me," Will muttered. "Why?"

"We go back a long way together. I helped him during a rather difficult time of his life, and so I think he feels an obligation to give me a break when I don't deserve it. In this case, he was simply too angry to let it go, and you were the *second* best target available." He shook his head. "I thank you for your patience with him there, and with me now."

"You knew I wouldn't ask that question, then," Will said. "Then what question was I *supposed* to ask?"

"It's the question on your mind right now. Ask."

Will shrugged. "How is it that my room is now a flying bobsled?"

Adam laughed. "I hadn't expected *quite* that wording." He paused briefly before continuing. "This is your introduction to our most prized technology, the one that the Aliomenti Elites don't have. They can match us for Energy easily—well, except for Angel and Fil—but this... *this* technology gives us the edge we need to survive." He made a sharp left turn to avoid a tight cluster of trees, and then straightened back out to track behind Fil and Angel. "What you're seeing is our version of nanomachines."

Will was stunned. The stuff he'd used to build the Dome over Pleasanton was now a material that could shape-shift from a stationary building to a flying vehicle? "I own a company that makes nanos, and we're not building any that can... do all of this. And we're the only ones, too. Other than my company, everyone's pretty much abandoned the technology."

Adam sighed. "For decades, nanotechnology was hailed in human circles as the next great leap in technology. Microscopic machines were going to heal our wounds, cure us of diseases, and make materials stronger and lighter than anything seen before. And then the advancement stopped. Why?"

Will shrugged. "A lot of research of all kinds stopped during the depression.

Nanotechnology is expensive to research. It was a pretty easy thing to cut. That's why I had the only company left. Nobody else wanted to throw the necessary capital at it." He paused as he remembered something else. "I do remember hearing of some failed trials for medical applications, though."

Adam nodded. "Exactly. The Elites got wind of those medical applications. Humans becoming healthier and stronger... that's counter to everything they stand for. That application of the technology would be a threat to the Elites' power. And so, they used their wealth and influence to sabotage research, and encouraged businesses to pull investments. That included those medical trials, by the way. The Elites sabotaged the samples so that patients *died* rather than getting healthier. They weren't worried about a mere construction company like yours, so you were left alone. With their mission accomplished, the Elites forgot about the technology, because after all, no human idea could have enough merit to warrant further research by the Aliomenti." Adam laughed. "The Alliance have long thought otherwise. We picked up the scraps, bought the research and prototypes, and even brought in the top researchers, who were now without jobs. Those men and women became full members of the Alliance and focused on the research they had thought lost to them forever, working to take their own ideas and meld them with the advances we'd made separately to take the devices to new levels of functionality. That's how we got the Mechanic. He was the best, and his theories were among those supposedly disproved by the sabotage. He, along with a few brilliant youngsters, made nanomachines far beyond any they thought possible before, making huge amounts of progress in only a few years."

Will smiled. Served the Elites right. "So this flying ship is made of a few thousand tiny machines, then?"

"A few *trillion*, actually, maybe more." He chuckled. "When you're dealing with machines smaller than human cells, the numbers get very huge very quickly. A thousand nanos? That's a number you'd see for work inside the body. For anything tangible, like this ship? You'd need far more."

"Inside the body... there are nanos that are part of the Purge, aren't there?" Will asked. Fil had mentioned "special additives of our creation" as being part of the formula.

"Correct," Adam said, as he swerved to avoid another tree. Just how large was this forest? They'd been traveling at a high rate of speed for quite a while. "There are foods and other natural substances which will accomplish the same thing with less trauma, but at a much slower pace. That's how our earliest members achieved what they did. With nanos, however, we could rapidly

accelerate the timetable of advancement. That's why all of us go through the Purge a few times a year, and why we had you go through it right away. We couldn't afford to have you wait a few decades to clear your system and start sensing Energy."

Will shook his head. "No, definitely not. It was horribly unpleasant, but now that it's over with I'm glad you went that route with me. So what else can these machines do?"

"We've built varieties we can use to protect our camp. There are nanos set up overhead that reflect the image of trees so no clearing can be seen. We also have nanos that block Energy; we keep a thin layer of those around the perimeter of camp. If the Hunters are spotted, we put a lot more of those up." Adam smiled. "And we have a few folks doing research on how they can affect the human brain."

"I will *not* get in there." The Assassin glared at the Mechanic, arms folded across his chest in a show of defiance. Everything in him screamed at the Assassin to draw his sword and execute the man. But he knew he'd be stopped.

"We've discussed this." The Mechanic's bored calm added to the Assassin's fury. "The Hunters have arrived. If they find you here, they will assume you've gone rogue. If they see you fleeing with me, they will assume you've gone rogue. If they see you here and you then go back to Headquarters, they will take you for a traitor. You must flee with me, and you must not be seen."

"Then leave me here."

The Mechanic laughed. "Not an option. You've been gone a long time, Assassin. You'll be seen in the empty enemy camp. You never told them about any intentions to spy. You never returned after your little outing chasing down Will Stark's wife and child. No, if they find you right now, you'll be taken for a traitor and executed." The Mechanic smirked.

The Assassin's red eyes blazed again, defiant. "You will *not* put me back in there."

"I'm giving you the chance to climb in on your own. You have five seconds."

"I really will kill you..."

"One..."

"...as soon as I get out..."

"...two..."

“...of this. The...”

“...three...”

“...indignity has been...”

“...four...”

“...uncalled for, and...”

The invisible glove snapped around the Assassin. He was hurled into the trunk of the vehicle, and the lid snapped shut behind him. He screamed and shouted the vilest curses he could dredge up at the Mechanic, though he doubted the man could hear a word he said. The Mechanic climbed into the front of the vehicle as the building evaporated around him, and he smelled and spotted the tree fire and heard the Aliomenti aircraft nearby. He glanced over at Smokey and whistled. The dog trotted over and jumped into the vehicle with him.

“Too late to run now, girl,” he said, giving the dog a friendly pat on the head. “We’ll need to wait it out here.”

The vehicle shimmered... then vanished.

The Aliomenti aircraft flew overhead and saw nothing but an empty clearing.

“So that’s why they couldn’t stab me? That’s how you pulled me through the ground into the house?” Will was stunned at the creative use of the nanomachines.

“Yes,” Adam said, still trailing Fil and Angel as the flying craft maneuvered through a seemingly endless forest. “Angel dug a tunnel with nanos to make the passage a bit smoother for you, but we ran out of time when you mentioned your son. I got the nano shield around you just in time. We could have used Energy and teleported you, but that would have told them where we were and we might not have escaped. That’s the nice part about nanos—we can do many things with them that we could also do with Energy, but the Aliomenti can’t detect them.”

“I still don’t understand how they work. Not at this level of sophistication, at least.”

Adam thought for a moment. “Each of the machines has several components—a generator, a small camera and microphone, a small panel capable of showing color, some computation circuits, communication circuits, anti-gravity magnets —”

“Whoa. What? Anti-gravity magnets?”

“We don’t have much to do here outside of performing research,” Adam

admitted. “We’ve had the individual components for a while. We just miniaturized them and taught them how to communicate and problem solve together. Form a wall. Form a room.”

“Or form a flying car?”

“Of course. Might as well take advantage of the anti-gravity capability, right?”

“Of course,” Will said, wondering if Adam noted his sarcasm. The machines sounded more like magic than all of the Energy abilities he’d seen.

“Everyone in the Alliance has a sizable number of nanos inside us. Some fight illness as a supplement to our immune system. Some repair wounds. And some interpret our thoughts and commands and communicate those to our personal swarm of nanos.”

“Wait, so you just think something and the machines do... whatever it is you ask them to do?”

Adam nodded. “If they can figure out how to do what we ask, they do. There are some limitations coded in, though. They aren’t supposed to be used to kill anyone, but they don’t always figure out that a request will cause a death.”

Will shook his head. “This sounds impossible. Yet I have no reason to doubt it. A few weeks ago, I’d have considered a flying car to be impossible, and yet here I am, chased by people who want to kill me because I have enough Energy to destroy a small apartment building.”

Adam laughed. “You’ve adapted very well, Will. We’ll need to get you some nanos for personal use. You have the various health-related nanos in you already...”

“What?” Will was stunned. There were tiny machines inside him?

Adam nodded. “Of course. They’re the ones that patched you up from your last encounter with the Hunters. You didn’t think we took them back, did you?”

“Well, I hadn’t thought much about it at the time since I’m just now learning about these machines, but...”

“No, they’re still inside you, making sure everything is in optimal working condition. They’ll patch up the bruises you got from Fil pretty soon, if they haven’t already. We’ll need to get the communication nanos inside you, and then gift you a few to get started. I’ll ask the Mechanic to build you a batch of a few trillion when we stop running.”

“So how often does this happen?” Will waved around. “How often do you have to pack up and move?”

“It’s probably been about twenty years since the last one, I’d wager. We’ve

gotten pretty good at evading their traps since we know what to look for. They don't innovate much anymore, which helps. We build out of the nanos exclusively. We also don't keep a lot of personal possessions. It's easy to move when your home becomes your transport vehicle."

"I can see why Fil is so upset about this, then," Will said, turning to look out the side of the craft. The small branches and leaves scraped against the body of the vessel, but Adam managed to avoid major collisions. "He must've been extremely young when you last moved. He's known mostly a stable home location most of his life, so this forced move must be traumatic."

Adam chuckled. "Fil's life has been anything *but* stable. And he's old enough to remember the last move."

"When do we stop flying?"

They'd been weaving through forests now for about thirty minutes. Will could hear no sound of the Hunters chasing them in their flying cars, but he had to consider the possibility that the pursuit teams could travel in silence as well.

"Angel scouted out the next location a few years back; we change our target location about every three years to ensure there aren't any Aliomenti in the area. Our target location is about a hundred miles from the last location. We should be there in another half hour. We like to move far enough that they can't find us again by simply flying circles around our last base, but at the same time, we don't want to move *too* far."

Will glanced around. "Where *are* we, anyway? I've not seen any cities, or rivers, or anything else that gives me an idea where on the globe I am."

Adam turned a bit, partially glancing at Will over his shoulder. "Is it really important to know?"

Will frowned. "Why is it such a difficult question to answer?"

Adam grimaced. "I knew this would come up eventually. You see, there's something you need to understand. It's—"

The craft lurched, thrown violently to the side. As it stabilized, Will saw the vessel carrying Fil and Angel smash into one of the giant trees, then plummet to the ground. Adam righted their craft, and then leveled up and over the tree canopy, banking sharply to the right, away from Angel and Fil. "So much for hiding in the trees," he said. "We need to draw their attention away from Fil and Angel."

Will glanced out the side of the craft. He counted six different vehicles chasing them, and spotted the three Hunters piloting half of the squadron. They were dismally outnumbered.

“Angel’s hurt,” Adam said, his voice grim. “Fil said she’s in bad shape. He’ll do what he can, but...”

A lump formed in Will’s throat. Angel had been his guide and first mentor in this new world, and had always treated him with kindness. If something happened to her because of his mistakes...

He grasped Adam’s shoulder. “We need to go to her, then, and help!”

“And do what, exactly?” Adam asked. “Fil’s there with her, and that’s the best we could hope for. It will do her no good if we get shot down as well.”

Will shifted backward to watch the Aliomenti aircraft. “What are they made of?”

“What?”

“What are their aircraft made of? Ours are made of the nanos... what about theirs?”

“Not sure,” Adam admitted. “I suspect they’re made of some type of metal or plastic. Glass for the windows. Electricity and wires for their various control systems. I’m not sure what their fuel source is. Why?”

An idea formed in his head. “We need to draw them away from Angel. I have an idea.”

Adam shrugged. “I thought that’s what I was already doing.”

“You are, I know. Can you go faster, though? And a bit lower? Just skim the tops of the trees.”

Adam nodded, not questioning his pupil’s plan, and the craft shot forward and banked down. “What are you doing?”

Will grinned. “Slowing them down very quickly.”

He turned around and faced the rear of the vehicle, spotting all six of the Aliomenti craft following. *They’ve assumed the other craft is destroyed and the occupants gone*, he thought, and then grimaced. *I hope they’re wrong on that point.*

Will channeled Energy into his hands, forming it into a sphere roughly the size of a bowling ball. He maneuvered it out of the craft, suspending it in the air, adding more and more Energy until it was the size of a small house. He then froze it in one place, between them and the Aliomenti aircraft chasing them.

The lead vehicle hit the Energy field and lost control, spinning wildly down into the trees. Two others crashed immediately after, following so closely that they could not react, and followed the rapid descent of the first craft. The Hunters veered wildly around the invisible barrier, but did not stop to check on their companions.

Nice guys, Will thought. Real team players. He turned to face Adam. “I’d say that Energy and their aircraft don’t mix very well.”

Adam snickered. “Old-fashioned punks getting what they deserve, if you ask me. Are the Hunters still in pursuit?”

“Unfortunately. I’m thinking we need to take the attack to them.”

Adam nodded, swung the craft around until he was facing the Hunters, and then accelerated at them. Will shot bursts of Energy at the three aircraft, connecting with the vehicles carrying Porthos and Athos. Both men gave looks of surprise as their aircraft plummeted down into the tree line. Aramis stared at Will as the Hunter flew by, on his face a look of shock and fury. Will smiled, and flashed a taunting wave his way. Aramis considered continuing the fight alone, but decided better of it, and flew his craft down to check on his colleagues.

“That should keep them busy for a while,” Adam remarked. “By the way, you’re leaking Energy. Get your Shield up.”

Will’s hand shot to his mouth. “How long has my Shield been down?”

“I just noticed it in all the commotion, but... I suppose it’s possible that your Shield has been down since we left camp.”

“No,” Will whispered. He’d led the Hunters to them originally. Had he set a trail for them to chase after them as well? He set up his Shield, and Adam confirmed that the Energy leak was stopped. Adam took a circuitous route back to the downed aircraft belonging to Fil and Angel, making sure that there was no actual Energy trail or direct path for the Hunters to pick up again.

Fil held Angel in his arms, tears streaming down his face from behind his sunglasses. Angel looked horribly pale, her deep green bodysuit stained red. Will and Adam sprang from their aircraft and raced to them.

Fil looked up at them. “She’s lost blood. I used machines to stitch her wounds and internal damage, but I can’t replace blood.”

“I have type O-negative blood,” Will said. “That’s the universal donor type.” He pushed up his sleeve, and looked at Adam, somehow sensing the man could actually do something as obscure as a blood transfusion in the middle of a jungle. “Take as much as you need for her. This is all my fault, anyway. Take it all if you need to, but save her.” Will felt a chill unrelated to the cool breeze blowing through the forest, and he shivered as the lump formed in his throat.

Adam nodded. He fashioned the necessary needles and tubes from nanos and fashioned a crude blood transfer link between Will and Angel. Will watched the young woman’s face, desperate to see her pale features gain more color. Gradually, they did, and Angel began to breathe more easily. Will felt better,

despite his own blood loss. Adam stopped the transfusion and began bandaging the wounds.

Will insisted that Adam take more blood if it was needed, as much as necessary, but Adam shook his head. “She has enough now, Will. You’ve saved her.”

“I owed her that much. She’s the closest thing to family I have any more. I won’t let someone else suffer for my mistakes again.”

He felt suddenly weak from the blood loss, and started to drift to sleep, but he caught the emotion from Fil without needing to focus on it. The emotion was powerful. And unlike previous emotional bombs directed at him by the man in the sunglasses, this emotion wasn’t one of fury, or rage, or anger, or even sadness.

It was admiration.

REPROGRAMMING

As his craft circled the clearing for the new camp, the Mechanic scanned the community and noted the familiar patterns. Many of the buildings had reformed in their usual layout, and people began to explore the environment around the clearing to locate sources of water and the foodstuffs they consumed. This was what the Alliance referred to as unpacking. Others merely enjoyed the slightly more fragrant scent of the air, the mild reduction in temperature, or the warm sunshine peeking through the tree canopy. The defenses against Aliomenti observation and detection were raised, a shimmering haze reflecting the mid-afternoon sunlight. A quick look around the camp below revealed no major injuries. The healing nanos in each member of the Alliance could be seen working, knitting the various scrapes and scratches closed.

As he descended, the Mechanic had a vision of something happening several miles away. It involved a small cluster of people, including Fil and Angel. Fil held Angel, who looked extremely pale and bloodied, while Adam and a third man stood nearby. He frowned, as he was uncertain who this other man was. He watched as Adam ran a tube between the stranger and Angel, and watched as the clear tube turned a deep red. The Mechanic nodded. Angel had received a blood transfusion from the stranger. All would be well.

The craft landed, and the nanos surrounding the vehicle separated and formed into a building around him. The vehicle he flew was unique, as it was one of the few structures in the entire Alliance camp that wasn't constructed of nanos; rather, this craft was formed entirely of "normal" materials. It needed to be, for it was a craft unique in the entire Aliomenti universe, and only a very few people knew its true purpose. The Mechanic needed to work on a few

modifications he had planned over the next week or two, and was pleased to see that the craft had come through the escape and relocation without suffering any damage.

The Mechanic opened the hatch and allowed the dog called Smokey to run loose. They left a patch of grass open through the floor of the building, a feat made simpler by the fact that the entire structure was built of intelligent machines. He also adjusted the building to allow in more sunlight, and Smokey indulged herself, sleeping on the grass as the rays warmed her dark fur. Pets weren't officially disallowed in the community, but were avoided as a common practice, so the Mechanic made do for Smokey as best he could under the circumstances.

His other houseguest would not be quite so pleasant. He would need to prepare the appropriate materials before releasing the man from the trunk.

In the rear seat of the craft were two cylinders, each about two feet tall and roughly a foot in diameter. These machines, like the vehicle they were in, were not composed of nanos, and as such were irreplaceable. He moved to the first of the machines, which was used to generate new nanos, and his hand grazed the smooth metal surface. He adjusted the settings to create a small, highly specialized batch of fifty million of the tiny devices. This batch of machines was unique, as he'd need to override a key portion of the standard code operating all of the other nanos, in order for them to perform the task he required.

Most of the nanos he generated with the device were general-purpose machines used to perform various tasks by Alliance members who owned them—such as shaping the buildings they lived in and the clothing they wore—and used the standard operating system coding image. That image could be modified to provide machines with more specialized, internal functions. There were images to create Purge nanos, immune system supplements, those for injury repair, sleep enhancers, and more. To date, the most challenging code image he'd built had been for the internal nanos that served as the communication channel between the brain and the general-purpose nanos. One challenge: ensuring that no one could use or control nanos not owned by them. Alliance members could “gift” each other nanos if it was necessary, but most simply came to him to produce more if there was a true need. The gifting process worked well for temporary projects, and since the Alliance worked to avoid waste, he usually only made a standard batch for new members and regular batches for the Purge.

This set would be the most unique of the unique, building on the internal communication nanos code set. He only expected to create one batch of this

type. Ever.

It had taken time to get the code change just right, and he'd been working on it almost without interruption since the Assassin had been captured. He hadn't gotten a lot of support for his idea since it was so unique and high risk, but he intended to press on and go through with it, knowing that it was a critical piece of the future. He used his general-purpose nanos to form a small drinking glass to hold the custom nanos created just for the Assassin.

It was time to get the test subject.

The Mechanic marched to the rear of the vehicle and kicked the panel, which opened to reveal the Assassin, a highly trained and now highly irritated killing machine, who had seen better days. The Mechanic winced at the smell of the vomit inside the compartment; apparently, all of the changes of direction during the flight hadn't been pleasant for his guest.

The Assassin groaned and rolled out of the trunk, so disoriented that he forgot that it was several feet off the ground. Perhaps, given his nausea, he didn't care. The Assassin hit the white surface with a resounding thud, and groaned again. The Mechanic chuckled. If he hadn't known better, he would have interpreted the man's actions as those of a drunk.

On hearing the chuckle, the Assassin snapped off an intense stream of profanity.

"Your language suggests to me that you may not like my accommodations," the Mechanic stated, unable to resist adding an air of emotional trauma to his tone.

"The current accommodations are reasonably spacious, if a bit restrictive," the Assassin replied, his voice strengthening as his equilibrium returned. "The accommodations just now ended, though, resembled a coffin."

"I bow to your expertise on that front," the Mechanic said, bowing, a smirk upon his face.

"What do you want from me?" the Assassin snapped, his frustration boiling over. "Why do you injure me and then heal me? If you want me dead, why not execute me and be done with it? Surely you realize that the instant I'm free of these restraints, free of this room, I'll seek all of you out and kill you, right? What do you want from me? Why do you keep me alive, knowing that doing so means risking *your* lives?"

"I want you to be my spy at Aliomenti Headquarters," the Mechanic said, his voice quiet.

The Assassin gaped at him for a moment, and then enjoyed a loud laugh at

the Mechanic's expense. "You can't seriously believe I'd do that, do you? Or are you that big a fool? I admit that is a possibility since you were the one foolish enough to leave me with my weapon. I promise that should your concentration wane for even a moment, long enough to crack that Energy shield you use on me, I will put you to the sword, you and that dog. Yes, Mechanic, you may come back here one day and find your smelly canine butchered in your home. I won't soon forget, and will never forgive, the shoddy treatment I've been given here."

"Your complaints evoke little sympathy in me, as you've just expressed an earnest desire to kill me." The Mechanic's stare was piercing, and the Assassin felt an involuntary chill. "You may recall that you were seized and brought here following your attempt on the lives of the family of one of our Alliance members here. You won't win sympathy from anyone."

The Assassin stared at him. "Stark is *here*? But the Hunters were after him."

"They, like you, failed in their mission. Will Stark was our extraction target that night, and we were successful. *You* were a nice bonus."

The Assassin glared at him. "How do you know I failed to kill them?"

"You talk in your sleep. It's a habit you should work on."

"What happened to them?"

"What?"

"What. Happened. To. Them." He paused, and upon receiving no answer, continued. "The woman. The boy. How did they escape?"

"How would you expect me to know that? I wasn't part of the rescue team. I choose to believe that the woman and the boy—and our friend Smokey here—beat up the famed Assassin, and fled the house he'd set on fire, laughing all the way."

The Assassin snorted. "Hardly. Some powerful Aliomenti teleported them. I assumed Stark did it before the Hunters trapped him. If Stark is here, I'm even more convinced that's the case."

The Mechanic shrugged. "You have your story, I have mine."

The Assassin rolled his eyes and palmed his sword. "I repeat myself: what do you want from me?"

"I have already answered that question. You are to become my spy—my eyes, my ears, my hands—inside the Aliomenti Headquarters. You will provide me with the information I need, and as I direct you, you will act. You will betray nothing you may have learned here to those at the Headquarters."

"On the contrary. I know that Will Stark is here. That's useful information for the Leader, sufficient to earn a pardon for my failures that night."

The Mechanic snorted. “The Leader already knows, fool. Why do you suppose we were attacked?”

“It’s a moot point regardless. I will not do as you wish. You have no way to compel me to act.”

“I rather disagree,” the Mechanic replied. He directed his general nanos to form an exoskeleton around the Assassin, rendering the man immobile. The hatred in the Assassin’s gaze was haunting. Even though the Mechanic knew he could not be harmed, the malevolence in those blood-red eyes startled him. He did not doubt that, at this very moment, the Assassin would strike him dead if the opportunity presented itself.

The Mechanic picked up the concoction of specialty nanos and moved to the Assassin. “Bottoms up!” he said, giving the Assassin an evil look that mirrored the one the captive had leveled at him a moment earlier. He directed the exoskeleton to open the man’s mouth and hold his tongue down, which would force the man to swallow. The Mechanic poured the solution down the man’s throat, watching the Assassin’s glare change from one of hatred to one of fear. He’d already seen what these potions could do in terms of healing injuries, and no doubt understood that the Alliance could create something far more frightening if they chose. Once the fluid reached the man’s throat, the Mechanic forced his mouth closed to ensure that the man swallowed the fluid, preventing him from coughing it back up.

It was a cosmetic gesture to ensure that the Assassin believed it was a liquid formula. In reality, the machines had made their way to his brain upon entering his mouth, and he needn’t have waited that long. The customized nanos could have entered the Assassin’s body without any liquid at all. He released the Assassin’s mouth, and said mouth began spouting profanities at him once more.

The Mechanic closed his eyes, and waited for the feedback signal. The Assassin’s flow of verbal abuse continued unabated, which was to be expected. After a few moments, however, the Mechanic could see something via the nanos he’d inserted into the Assassin’s brain: himself. The communications nanos were embedded and in place.

The machines were in. That was the easy part. The behavioral modification test would be somewhat more unnerving. The Mechanic released the exoskeleton from the Assassin and reformed it around himself as a protective measure. He then walked over to the Assassin who was just beginning to stretch his muscles after the latest confinement. The Assassin looked at him, puzzled, as the Mechanic punched the killer in the face.

The Assassin roared in pain. "I'll kill you!" he screamed. He drew his sword, but did not strike. The man stared at his arm as if it were no longer part of him. His arm was strong, and he'd swung that sword thousands of times before. Yet he could not move his arm to strike the Mechanic. He turned to face the Mechanic. "What did you do to me?" he whispered, his eyes fearful.

"I told you: you are to be my spy inside Aliomenti Headquarters. I've simply made sure that you'll behave and perform well in the role. It would hardly do for you to kill me now, would it?" He chuckled, primarily because he knew the Assassin hated the sound being directed at him.

The Assassin's face was a mask of confusion. "What was the punch about?"

"There were two reasons. First, it was the best way to ensure you'd instinctively want to attack me, and I needed that to make sure that your reprogramming is working correctly."

"And the second?"

"You've ruined the lives of a lot of people dear to me. Consider it a small payback for what you've done to me and my extended family."

The Assassin sneered. "You're *pathetic*. Your emotional attachments will get you killed, and your effort to ensure it won't be me who does it, simply means someone else will do the job. Truly, now, are these long lost dead people really worth losing your life over?"

"They're my reason for living, and if it takes my life to save theirs, I will gladly pay that price. That said I'd just as soon *not* pay that price if I can avoid it. Therefore, now I can use *you*."

The Assassin looked moderately confused. "And what is the plan on that front?"

"You will return to Aliomenti headquarters. I will teleport with you to get you close enough to be detected and walk; at present it is quite a significant distance. They believe you died in the fire you set the night you and the Hunters attempted your various assaults on the Stark family. You will tell them the truth, to a degree; that you were so excited at the prospect of the deaths of the Stark woman and the boy that your pyrokinesis erupted, igniting an explosion that knocked you unconscious and, you suspect, also killed the family of Will Stark. You were kidnapped by the Alliance, which fed you various drugs to keep you in a state of deep sleep."

"And why would they believe that?" the Assassin asked.

"They know that there was an explosion because the Hunters were camped out in the Starks' back yard when it happened. They have not seen you since."

They most likely assume you dead, and reasonably so. To a degree, we have given you drugs, but the intent has been to heal the injuries you sustained in the fire and your encounter with the Starks. Your story is consistent with both what they know, and what you experienced, and as such they'll detect no lies from you."

"If I was drugged, how did I escape?"

"You had enough lucid time to understand that you were being given the drugs. You figured out how to stop swallowing the drugs and as such your alertness returned. There came a day when you were out of your cell, and the bindings securing you to your table were removed for a change of clothes and washing. You feigned still being addled until that point of freedom, and then rose to the occasion, killing several of the Alliance with their medical knives and instruments.

"In the chaos that followed, you found your sword and escaped the camp, gradually working your way back to Headquarters. You note that the camp is fairly small and basic and easy to move, and so given the time it took you to escape and arrive at Headquarters, it is probable that the Alliance moved again following your escape, figuring out that your next step would be to report to the Leader all that you learned."

"And what have I learned, *Master*?" The last word was said with a sneer. The Mechanic smiled. The Assassin couldn't fight him, or what he said, but it certainly hadn't altered his charming personality.

"You have learned that Will Stark has been in this camp." He smiled.

The Assassin glared at him. "They already know, as you've pointed out. Why else would they send so many aircraft? I need something showing that my time spent here was not wasted." He frowned. "Drugged or not."

"Will Stark is still working his way through the ailments that plagued him during their Hunt for him at his home. His Energy is quite low and he has forgotten how to do much of what he once did. He is better than he was at the house; however, he is unlikely to be able to withstand a well-planned and executed Hunt at this time. This is the time to strike to get Stark if that is still something they wish to accomplish."

The Assassin frowned, and the scars marking his face seemed to crack open from the effort. "Will Stark is a traitor to his Aliomenti Oaths. He must be captured and tried for these crimes. Nothing has changed."

The Mechanic smiled. "I dare say much has changed at Aliomenti Headquarters since you left to execute Will Stark's family. That is what you're

going to find out for me. What are the priorities with the Leadership, with the membership as a whole? Who are they tracking for possible Hunts, and why? Once I have that type of information—which *you* will gather for me—then I will determine how you will act.”

“Act?” Concern showed in the Assassin’s blood-red eyes.

“Yes.” The Mechanic showed little sympathy for the Assassin’s concern. “I am giving you this order today: you are never to kill another human. Nor may you kill an Alliance member. You may be asked to kill a member of the Leadership, by me, but I am issuing no such order at this time. You may not directly refuse an order by the Leadership to violate any of these rules, but you must use your cunning to fail to successfully complete these orders in manners that seem plausible. You are not to mention or even give hints that you are operating under my instruction and control, or the control or instruction of anyone else.” He looked the Assassin straight in the eye. “Is that clear?”

The Assassin winced. Every fiber of his being rebelled against the order, for he lived to kill, humans in particular, and yet whatever magic this man had performed was overwhelming that desire. He had no doubt that he would perform as ordered because he was incapable of choosing to do otherwise. “Clear.”

The Mechanic smiled and slapped the Assassin on the back. “Wonderful! We’ll need to arrange for your escape, gather some supplies, and provide you a map to help you return.”

He paused. “Ah, yes. There’s one *more* very important detail you need to be aware of.”

The Assassin’s eyes widened as the Mechanic related the story. It was impossible. It had to be. But he had no choice but to believe.

He’d been given his orders.

SACRIFICE

Devastated at the near calamity resulting from the Aliomenti attack, Will stopped training with Adam.

He was convinced that he'd progressed too quickly, and that as a result, he'd not taken the time to assimilate his new abilities; his singular focus on advancement meant that he'd not learned to focus on the basics, like Shielding at critical times. As a result, Angel had nearly died. He needed to slow down, truly understand what he was doing, what he could do, and what he needed to focus on. And he needed to stop making stupid mistakes before somebody actually *did* get killed.

Angel made a full recovery over the next day or so, and thanked Will for the blood he'd donated. She said she felt better than ever because of the gift, though Will suspected that the fresh, clean air of this brisk morning had far more to do with her recovery.

Angel sighed, sensing within him the profound guilt for her injury. "Stop blaming yourself. All of us noticed the leak days before the attack, and nobody said a word. There's no way you could have known what was happening, let alone how to stop the leaks."

"But I *did*," Will protested. "Adam showed me how to Shield that day. I stopped Shielding once the lesson ended, and I didn't start again even when the Aliomenti showed up and chased us. I was taught what I needed to know, and didn't do what needed to be done. I hope one day you'll forgive me."

"There's nothing to forgive, but if it makes you feel better, I will say the words. *I forgive you.*" Angel rolled her eyes. "Think about the timing. They'd found us long before that lesson occurred. They needed time to travel here, hours or days. The lesson occurred far too late to matter. Stop blaming yourself, and

stop worrying about it.”

Will opened his mouth to protest, but Angel held up a hand. “No more. Get back to work.” She winked at him and walked away.

Will sighed. Women were confusing. He wondered if she’d been difficult as a teenager.

Adam worked with Will to install the communication nanos, and gifted Will a few hundred billion general-purpose nanos to work with. He managed to get his machines to form body armor around him after some practice, but the new toy wasn’t nearly as exciting as it would have been a few weeks earlier, before he’d nearly destroyed them all at the old camp site.

Their new camp looked similar to the old; the structures used for dwellings built of nanos, the large wooded enclosure, the clearing used as a common area for communication. Unseen were specialty nanos serving to camouflage the camp from overhead observation, and others that trapped Energy within the campsite, preventing detection by the Hunter Porthos. Oblivious to the security mechanisms, Will moved to the edge of the clearing and sat up against a tree, watching and listening to the interactions of those in the camp, wondering what these people did with all of their time. He got the impression that the 16-20 hours per day he’d spent practicing Energy work wasn’t the norm, and that most of them spent no more than an hour on Energy work each day. He learned that the nanos were used to perform manual labor: gathering food, processing waste, and generating electricity. Adam had, in his typically vague fashion, indicated that most of their time was spent on self-directed research... whatever *that* meant. Will asked what research Adam was doing, and Adam stated that *Will* was his project at the moment.

Still unsettled by the attack of the previous day, Will stood and headed into the forest, thinking about the impact of the Energy work he’d done with the tree, ignoring the sounds of twigs snapping beneath his feet. Clearly, both he and the tree had benefited from the symbiotic relationship. The tree had grown dramatically during the time he’d worked with it, growing from being one of the smaller and weaker trees in its grove, with paper-thin bark soft to the touch, to one fighting for dominance with other trees that had been much longer established, its rough bark riddled with thick, deep ridges suggestive of a tree far older than its actual years. Likewise, Will had gone from a relative weakling in terms of Energy capacity to one fairly strong in the community; the glances he received as he walked through the common areas in his bodysuit with the yellowish-orange tint said that others recognized this. Thankfully, no one seemed

to feel threatened by his accelerated achievements, at least not until the hundred or more Aliomenti fighter craft, including the three piloted by the Hunters, showed up and started shooting. Rather, they seemed pleased and encouraged by his growth, proud of him for the effort he'd put forth and the results he'd gotten. It didn't take much in a small community of telepaths for word of his relentless pursuit of Energy growth to reach the entire population.

Will found a small tree amid the giants in this forest grove as well. He sat down on the soft earth and watched the tree, the leaves rustling in the light breeze that grazed his skin, the branches swaying like the hairs dancing on his head. The canopy wasn't as developed here; this tree managed to receive significantly more sunshine than did his tree back at the previous camp. He smiled at the possessive thought. The tree belonged to no one; it merely did what it was born to do, grow to its greatest possible height, competing against other entities for sunlight and air and nutrients in the soil. To fail was to perish; to succeed was to live. The tree did not care what other trees did; it simply made whatever effort necessary to get sufficient resources to grow. Will smiled. Sometimes, though, an extra helping hand could make all the difference.

He wondered about the tree. Had it continued to grow, stretching high above the others to reach greater quantities of sunlight and air? Or had it stagnated without his efforts? Or worse, had the attack by the Hunters damaged it, perhaps beyond repair? He wished he were there. Will pictured the tree, seeing himself standing near it, hands on the rough bark of the tree's trunk. In his reverie, his focus lapsed and he felt a surge of Energy. There was a sense of physical nothingness, a flash... and then he was *there*, with his hands on the burned-out trunk of the tree he'd nurtured and been nurtured by, a simple link and a reminder of the basics of life. He felt the warm rush of Energy from the tree, though weaker than he'd remembered due to the attacks. He instinctively fed his own Energy back, feeling the synergy and symbiosis as each living thing reprocessed the gifted Energy and fed it back to the other, better and more powerful than before. The tree was healing, and Will's Energy was growing. It was like old times, before the Hunters found them, before...

Will backed away again, moving a dozen yards away from his tree, eyes wide in horror at the realization of what he'd been doing. The surge in Energy was noticeable, even for him, new to the experience. It was like a powerful, sweet smell, overwhelming all else. He was worried now, startling as his shoe snapped a twig in his retreat. Had he triggered the Hunters' warning signals again with that burst? It was with some relief that he realized that the camp was

some distance away; if they came here now, they'd find no one to capture or kill besides Will. Still, he slapped on his Shield, hoping it wasn't too late. Again.

He heard a soft popping noise. A man had materialized where Will had stood only a moment earlier. The man had long, brown hair and wore a dark cloak that swayed in the gentle breeze. It was Porthos, the Tracker Hunter, and the man had found him, yet again. Porthos turned around, searching, and finally faced Will.

A sneer curled on Porthos' face. "Well, Stark, you managed to escape and hide for some time. But you're getting a bit sloppy in your old age. You let us find you twice now in, what, a week? A rather poor showing. What's the matter, lonely from hanging out with all of those losers who call themselves the Alliance? At least your Energy levels are back to more Stark-like levels." He chuckled at his own joke.

Will folded his arms. "Why are you here?" He tried to sound confident, like he suspected he should sound facing this man, but he feared the tremor in his voice would betray his sense of foreboding.

Porthos blinked. "Is that a trick question?" He snorted. "I'm here to capture you, you fool, or slow you down until my friends arrive. Don't worry, they'll be here soon enough. I'm sure Aramis would love to see you again, Stark. He's probably invented a few more crimes to charge you with by now." He took a step toward Will. "You know... you *could* just come quietly and save your old friends the trouble of subduing you."

Will frowned. "My old friends? I think not. My friends are the members of the Alliance. Not Athos. Not Aramis. And certainly not you."

Porthos put a hand over his heart in mock pain, covering up the golden Aliomenti symbol. "I am shattered at your harsh words, Stark." The Hunter's face changed, the sneer replaced with a look of curiosity. "I don't understand you. You lure us to your home. You escape. You hide for a very long time. You taunt us with an Energy burst, and then escape after we locate you. Now you're luring us to your side yet *again*. Tell me, what's the purpose of this game of cat and mouse? Has your life lost its meaning? Have you become bored enough to risk us killing you? Or is there truly some Will Stark master plan you're building toward?" Will could sense the concern in the man's voice; he truly believed Will was the architect of some devious plan to destroy the Hunters.

Will snorted. "Life is never dull, Porthos, when it's lived with true purpose. I prefer to live under my own terms, without the threat of someone taking my freedom away. I can never rest while you operate under your rules, because that threat, that potential loss of freedom for me or others, remains while you do so."

Porthos rolled his eyes, taking a slow step forward. “As you said, Stark, life is never dull. Perhaps it is the threat of loss of *any* type that motivates you. Tell me, how motivated were you after we destroyed your home? And everything inside?” The man’s eyes glinted, and a sinister grin covered his face.

Will took two steps toward Porthos, and then stopped. He took a deep breath, refusing to take the bait. “My motivations are of my own choosing, not driven by someone else’s actions. But I’ll never forget that moment, or forgive you for your part in it.”

Porthos chuckled. “Again, my feelings are truly crushed.” He paused, and then smiled a triumphant smile. “Ah, I see the rest of the guests have arrived for our little party.”

He glanced behind Will who suddenly felt the presence of another man. Aramis. The shadow with the top hat gave away the identity, and before Will could react, Aramis grabbed him by the arm. He felt as if the wind had been knocked out of him, as if someone had started crushing his lungs and prevented him from breathing. It was Aramis’ unique gift, known as the Damper, and it was erasing his Energy. Will knew he needed to free himself and escape, or he’d lose his strength—and his freedom—in mere moments.

He rammed his elbow into the Hunter’s stomach, and Aramis let go, gasping, trying to refill his suddenly empty lungs.

Will darted away trying to distance himself from both Hunters, but then sensed a third man behind him. Athos reached around him and put Will into a bear hug, and Aramis and Porthos both advanced, with the former ready to slap on the Damper, and the latter prepared to help escort Will back to the Aliomenti prison. Will stomped down on Athos’ foot and slammed his head back into Athos’ face, snapping a bone in the Hunter’s foot and breaking the man’s nose. Athos let go, screaming, his hands flying to his face and the gushing blood. Will dipped under Porthos’ arms and darted from the tree. He’d wanted so desperately to get to the tree; now, he wanted to get back to the camp, safely, without the Hunters. He remembered the new tree he’d been looking at earlier, and...

Will reached his tree, which was still healing from the blasts of the Aliomenti fighting craft, and he felt a huge surge of Energy into him. The Energy pulsed, and Will felt a sense of displacement, just as he’d felt earlier. He was back at the tree outside the new camp in an instant, sensing the different air temperature as proof he’d traveled an unknown number of miles. He immediately Shielded his Energy and sprinted back to the clearing, bursting through the faint haze of Energy-shielding nanos surrounding the Alliance camp. He found Fil and Adam

having a tense, hushed conversation, but both of their faces relaxed upon seeing Will.

“Where have you been?” Adam asked. “I was going to restart your lessons because Angel said you were probably ready, but I couldn’t sense your Energy at all. I’m sure that your Shielding skills have improved, but I should be able to find you in camp at this short distance regardless.” He chuckled in appreciation of his pupil’s skills.

Will waved his hand, asking for silence. “I teleported. Back to the old camp. Listen, though—”

“You did *what*?” Fil asked, his voice venomous. Will wondered if the man’s eyes were the same blood-red as the Assassin’s behind those reflective sunglasses. “Who taught you how to teleport? And how did you travel so far in your first effort?”

“Nobody taught me, it just happened, and I don’t know how,” Will said in a rush, ignoring the sense of anger emanating from Fil. “There was a spot in the forest where I liked to go, and I pictured it and thought about how nice it would be to be there again, and there I was.”

Adam’s eyes arched, impressed at the feat, but Fil was shaking his head. “You’re out of control. You must learn to discipline your use of Energy.”

“Right, I know, but understand this.” Will glanced at the soft, lush grass beneath his feet. “I think... I think I surged some Energy while I was there, because... well...”

“Because one of the Hunters showed up?” Adam asked. Will nodded in reply, and Adam nodded slowly in return. “I noticed the intensity of the Energy there—by a tree in the forest outside camp—right before the Aliomenti discovered our previous campsite. We’ll get back to that point, but right now, it’s more urgent that we understand what happened with the Hunters. Tell us.”

“Porthos showed up first.” Based on the facial reactions, this was no surprise to the two men listening. “He taunted me about losing my touch and him finding me so quickly again. Aramis showed up and put his hands on me, and I felt my Energy waning rapidly, but I elbowed him hard in the stomach and got away. Then Athos showed up and tried to restrain me so Aramis could get me again, but I head-butted him, broke loose, wished I was back, and here I stand. My Shield went up the instant I arrived.”

“You *idiot*!” Fil seethed. His face turned beet-red, and Will was certain the temperature in the clearing had risen. “If you only Shielded when you arrived here, they may be able to track you here because your Energy signal was so

strong. We're going to need to move camp *again!* And so help me, if anyone suffers an injury due to your carelessness, I will knock you out cold and deliver you to the Hunters *myself!*"

Adam glared at Fil, and Will was taken aback. "I... I don't know what to say. I'm sorry. I'm trying to learn everything, but... maybe it's all happening too fast." It felt like an admission of failure, of a return to the days before his meteoric rise in business, when the world saw him as a nothing.

"No excuses," Fil snapped. "You've been putting us in jeopardy since you got here, not to mention the severe risk we took in rescuing you to begin with. I..."

"Why rescue me, then?" Will asked, fuming. "I've always wondered that. The Hunters thought I was somebody I wasn't; maybe I'm better able to pull off the act of being that man now with the Energy training I've had. But they seem to think I'm some super criminal, breaking all of their rules. I'm *not that guy*. I'm *nobody*. Why rescue me?"

Fil's teeth clenched. "Everybody makes mistakes." He turned and left.

Adam watched him leave. "You must understand something, Will. In our world, Will Stark is basically a god. He was exceptionally powerful, drove many of our innovations, and in many ways formed us into what we are today, Aliomenti and Alliance alike. Others abused his ideas. The concept of not marrying wasn't something instituted as an excuse to murder innocent humans in the early days, for example. It was meant to ensure that such an important commitment wasn't made without ensuring that each spouse was capable of handling the truth of what we are, of integrating into our society from the outside without exposing our existence, and possibly endangering our lives." He sighed. "Think of the men and women you consider heroes, Will. If you thought they were in danger... wouldn't you go rescue them if you had the means to do so?"

The implication seemed clear. *They'd* been fooled as well, thought he was the legend with the same face and name. And Fil's anger at being duped was coming out as overt hostility to the impostor. Yet with Fil, it seemed like a deeper level of dislike.

Will let out a deep breath. "I wish I knew what that guy has against me."

Adam cocked his head. "Who? Fil?"

Will nodded. "Yes. You seem friendly enough. Angel treats me far better than I deserve. Fil seems to feel a genuine hatred for me. Is it because I'm not this superhero legend, and he's blaming me for only being who I truly am? Or is there something else?"

Adam shook his head. “He doesn’t hate you, Will. Your presence, though, reminds him of several of the most painful experiences in his life, and he’ll need to be the one to share the story behind that pain with you when he’s ready. Then you’ll understand why he reacts as he does. I will tell you this, though. Fil, like you, lost a wife and young child—a daughter—to an Aliomenti Assassin. He had to watch them die, Will. Your experience... well, it hit a bit too close to home, and triggered memories he’s tried to bury.”

Will lowered his head, stunned. “I... I had no idea. I wish I could apologize somehow. But it does prove one thing, though.” He looked back at Adam, green eyes blazing. “Those men are pure evil.”

Adam raised a hand. “You didn’t know about Fil’s experience, and I request that you seem astonished anew when and if Fil decides to let you know about that painful part of his life. I doubt he ever will. As you might imagine, he doesn’t like to think about it.”

Will glanced up. “When that attack happened... did the attackers damage his eyes?”

Adam frowned. “His eyes? No, I don’t think they did. Why do you ask?”

“I was wondering why he always wears those sunglasses.”

Adam smiled. “That’s another story he’ll tell you when he’s ready. But it’s something that only he can choose to share.” He turned to leave. “I was thinking of doing a lesson, but it was to be about teleportation and it would appear you’ve got the basics down. Perhaps we can pick up in the morning?”

Will nodded. Adam walked away, leaving Will alone and confused. The breeze felt cold, like a knife cutting into him, though moments earlier it had seemed warm and refreshing. Perhaps it was a tangible sensation of the guilt tearing at him.

Will moved away from the buildings and headed into the woods, barely noticing the hazy mist of Energy-shielding nanos as he walked through them. His foolishness and lack of concentration had nearly gotten Angel killed and uprooted the community once, and might well do so again. His presence caused Fil great pain. Adam was uncomfortable working with him, a fact Will had pieced together with his telepathic and empathic skills during several of their lessons. Adam simply was not certain how to deal with someone like Will, who tried to cram years of training and growth into days or hours, and who spontaneously started practicing new and different skills without guidance or consultation.

Adam’s fears were well grounded. Will might bring the Hunters down on

them again. He couldn't let that happen and risk the possibility that this time someone like Angel would be hurt—and not survive the injuries.

He'd fought the Hunters to regain his freedom, but he wouldn't keep it if it meant others would lose their liberty or lives. The Alliance members—Angel, Adam, and even Fil, surly though the man could be—were his family now. He'd lost one family through his own failure, and he wasn't about to have another be lost for the same reason.

Will made it back to his spot in the woods, and once again pictured his tree with its burned-out limbs, struggling to work its way back to health. He pictured himself being by his tree, and unlocked his Shield enough to power the teleportation effort. He was not surprised this time to find himself back outside their old camp. Nor was he much surprised to see Porthos still there, trying to piece together the Energy patterns that would tell him where Will had gone after teleporting away.

Will cleared his throat, shattering the silence. “Miss me?”

Porthos whirled, startled, but quickly regained his composure. “No, you aren't someone I'd ever actually *miss*. After I capture you, you'll stay in our prison for a very long time, and I won't miss you then, either. I don't really like you running off like that, however, because it makes it so difficult to track you effectively when you keep moving so quickly.”

Will nodded. “I agree. I'm giving myself up.”

Porthos' eyes widened and he stared at Will. “Stark, you can't possibly expect me to believe you.”

Will walked toward him. “Here I am. Take me to your Leader. Bring Aramis to subdue me if you want. I'm not going anywhere and I won't resist.”

Porthos felt an incredible sense of elation, and a smile formed on his face.

After all of the years, all of the Hunts, all of the failures... he would finally see Will Stark brought to justice.

HEADQUARTERS

Adam stretched as he woke after a restful night's sleep. The argument between Will and Fil yesterday was still on his mind, and he sensed that it had broken Will's spirit a bit, more than anything had since his arrival in camp following his rescue from the Hunters. The two men had argued before, but Will had been more assertive, more combative in the previous encounters. The man was now so concerned that he was a threat to the safety of the others in the Alliance camp that he had no desire to further develop his Energy abilities. That was a problem. As a member of the Alliance, he needed to have those abilities well developed should he ever encounter the Hunters or other Aliomenti who might find him and try to subdue him. Will had escaped yesterday, probably because the Hunters were so surprised to see him. There was no guarantee he'd be so lucky again.

Will had been eager the day before to practice teleportation, and Adam had been impressed that Will had so quickly developed the Energy stores needed for that skill. He knew many long-term Aliomenti who could barely teleport a few hundred yards, and Will had managed a greater distance in just over a month.

He frowned. He needed to figure out how, exactly, Will was building his Energy so quickly. It was simply unnatural.

The Aliomenti and Alliance knew that there was a genetic marker that could predict how quickly someone would develop. In the early days, before they had the ability to supplement their development with nanos—most notably through the Purge—their group had politely expelled slower-developing members. Today, the Alliance could focus on recruiting people of high character and motivation first, and supplement their genetic potential.

In this case, perhaps they had supplemented somebody who already had a

powerful genetic potential and capability; after all, they didn't scan for that anymore. Was that the explanation for Will's rapid growth? Adam rather doubted it. Still, whatever it was, it had shocked all of them. He knew Will blamed himself for the Hunter's attack on the camp, but the rest of the Alliance, men and women with far more experience in such matters, had been too slow to react to his rapid development. They needed to be more cautious and patient with his training, and make him more aware of the implications of his progress. Lesson learned.

Speaking of lessons, he needed to find Will.

He mulled over how best to handle the teleportation lesson. Most Energy users understood the process and could repeat it without fail after their first successful attempt. The primary learning opportunity was the process to assess how far you could safely travel. The challenge was preventing the kind of unintended "hop" Will Stark had experienced the day before, brought on by lack of focus and control over the Energy required to move. Keeping Energy tightly bound, as would happen when he was consistently Shielding, would prevent those unintended hops. But emotional situations would crack that focus, release the Energy, and put the person at risk of a hop like Will's. They'd need to review those concepts, and develop approaches Will could use to keep his focus even in times of stress.

Adam dissolved the nano-based blankets he'd used for warmth while sleeping and walked from his sleeping quarters to a common bathing area. His clothing dissolved around him, and he allowed the stream of warm water to cleanse him. A burst of Energy dried his skin and hair, and he reformed his nano-based clothing around his body. He'd need to teach Will the technique; at present, Will still treated his clothing as if it was made of human-constructed fabrics.

He walked toward Will's sleeping quarters, enjoying the sensation of warmth from the early morning sun. Adam decided that he should gift Will the nanos comprising what had become Will's home, and request a new batch from the Mechanic for himself as a replacement. Will had a small number of nanos already, but was ready for a standard allocation. That would be another lesson for another day, however, and he elected not to make the gift until they'd done more work with the smaller batch of machines.

Adam frowned as he neared the nano-based building. Will should be inside, but he detected no Energy there. Even if Will was Shielding, he should be able to sense the presence of at least *some* Energy in the room. Adam smiled. Perhaps

their prodigy had taken Shielding to a new level as well, able to completely mask his presence even at close range. He should raise the idea to the Alliance of letting the Aliomenti know about their Shielding skills. The thought of those tyrants thinking they could walk right past someone from the Alliance without knowing it was priceless.

Adam walked into the building. There was no sign of Will.

He frowned, puzzled. Perhaps Will had gone for a walk in the woods. The man seemed to enjoy the tranquility to be found among the dense forests surrounding their clearings. Adam remembered that Will had lived in a wooded community before the Hunters had found him, and that his home had been surrounded by large, old trees. It made sense that he'd experience a sense of belonging in the forest.

Adam walked into the woods, circling farther and farther from camp. He detected some of Will's Energy, fairly strong, but while he found a clearing with a few smaller trees, he found no sign of Will Stark.

Very curious. And concerning. Adam felt his pulse rate begin to rise.

Adam walked back to the camp and approached the building Fil and Angel shared. He walked in; the interior of their building was a bit more elaborate than most and featured two private rooms along with a public area anyone could enter. He found Fil there, deep in thought.

"Have you seen Will?" Adam asked.

Fil laughed. "Do you think Will Stark would willingly associate with me at this point? No, I haven't seen him since last night, when he returned from his latest encounter with the Hunters and put everyone in camp at risk. His lack of focus is disturbing."

Adam rolled his eyes. "Duly noted. We'll make sure in the future that we handle Shielding a month into training, though few need such skills until they've been at it for five years... if they're lucky."

"Save the sarcasm, Adam. *Your* sister wasn't the one hurt in a crash after the Aliomenti attack."

Adam waved off Fil's concern. "Speaking of your sister, has *she* seen Will?"

"I haven't," Angel answered, emerging from her room. "I thought he'd be having a lesson with you."

"That was the plan, but I can't find him. I checked his building, and looked for him in the forest. There's a spot with a bit of an Energy buildup—not enough to attract any attention." Adam added the last bit quickly when Fil looked ready to explode again. "But that's the only sign of him I could find. Do either of you

have any sense of where he might be?”

Both Fil and Angel closed their eyes in concentration. Adam watched Fil. Though the man hid it well, his Energy levels were exceptionally high, and he was more likely to find something than anyone else. Angel's Energy levels were extraordinary as well, though nowhere near the levels of Fil. She was more empathic than her older brother, and more likely to sense what Will was thinking even without actually invading his thoughts. They were an effective combination.

Angel opened her eyes. “I'm not getting anything besides that faint Energy marker in the woods outside the camp that you found.” Adam nodded. “My concern, though, is the mental state he was in after yesterday's events. He seemed very depressed, and his conversations with me... I got the sense that he feared he was a danger to us and he didn't like that.” She glanced at Fil, and took a deep breath. “That, combined with the fact that we can't find him, leads me to believe he may have run off on his own. I think he left the camp so he wouldn't put any of us at risk anymore.”

Adam's eyes widened. “I hope you're wrong about that.”

Angle nodded. “So do I. But his pain and his fear were genuine. I heard him blaming himself for the situation at his house while he was sleeping in those first few days. Kept saying it was his fault, that he'd let them be killed... his greatest fear is doing that again. If I'm wrong, we need to impress upon him that we'll work with him, but we don't want him running off.” She looked straight at Fil, but her brother was still in deep concentration.

A few moments later, Fil opened his eyes and cursed.

“That *idiot!*” he seethed. He turned to Angel. “We're too late to work on that idea, because he's run off, all right.” He looked at Adam. “He teleported from that spot in the woods near here. That was the Energy burst you detected. He showed up back in the woods by our previous camp, again, where he'd met the Hunters before. Unfortunately, one of them was there.”

“Porthos,” Adam said. It wasn't a question.

“I get no Energy sense of either of them there now. Porthos is powerful enough that I could pick him up in that location from here if I concentrate, and he's never learned to Shield, or bothered if he knows how. But he's gone. And so is Will.”

Angel's eyes widened. “What are you saying?”

“I'm saying that we can go check that spot, but all signs point to that stubborn idiot either being captured, or turning himself in to the Hunters.”

The trio exchanged glances.
Will had been taken to Aliomenti Headquarters.
And then, in unison, they smiled.

This time, nobody beat him up or tried to kill him. At least, not yet.

An aircraft driven by Athos arrived in the clearing. The lead Hunter stared at Will Stark, his face a mix of emotions. It was one part triumphant, one part fear of sudden and tremendous disappointment.

Will, true to his word, had not put up any type of fight at all. He sat in the craft, which was clearly not as well built as the Alliance nano-based vehicles, nor as gentle on takeoff and landing. Will looked out the window as the craft rose into the air. He saw massive forests behind him, and eventually a huge body of water appeared on the horizon before them. Will realized he still had no idea where on the planet he'd been living for the past two months. Right now, he didn't much care.

The craft flew out over the body of water, and soon there was nothing to see but gentle rolling waves. Athos and Porthos both tried questioning him, but Will ignored them, focusing on nothing but the motion of the water below. Eventually, the Hunters gave up and left him alone, murmuring quietly among themselves. The excitement carried on their waves of leaked Energy was so powerful that Will doubted he'd need his own new empathic skills to sense their delight.

After they'd traveled over water for several hours, Will finally saw land. It was a large island, with beautiful beaches around the perimeter. The buildings were glass and metal, and looked remarkably new and clean, as did the streets forming a patchwork that he saw as they moved inland from the beaches.

The craft flew over those beaches and buildings and roads; Will noticed, in an offhand manner, that despite it being midday with clear skies, there were very few people out on the beaches or the streets of the island. Odd.

The craft was heading for the middle of the island, and Will noticed a much taller building, one with a black marble exterior, polished and gleaming in the sunlight. But it was the name emblazoned across the top that got his attention more than all else.

ALIOMENTI.

This must be the Headquarters of the organization, though it certainly piqued

Will's interest. For an organization willing to kill to protect its anonymity, a large modern building with the group's name prominently displayed seemed remarkably out of character. The giant, golden Aliomenti symbols flanking the name on the building also seemed amiss.

Athos landed the craft on a landing strip near the building, and Will swayed in his seat as the wheels bounced on the pavement. The lead Hunter taxied the vehicle into an open hangar at the base of the Headquarters building. The structure was massive, easily thirty stories tall, and with a footprint that would cover several standard-sized city blocks.

The Aliomenti here were definitely not keeping a low profile. So why did they want to abduct him for supposedly talking? Why were the Aliomenti so intent on killing his wife and son just because they *might* know about the group's existence if they were willing to broadcast the name and symbols in such an obvious fashion?

Will shifted focus again. He'd come here to eliminate the risk he posed to his new family. Now he was ready to fight again to avenge the deceased one. Apparently, the Aliomenti had made up a different set of rules for him, for this other Will Stark, and now his family was dead, and his new family—Angel, Adam, and even Fil—were at risk as well. He couldn't stand the hypocrisy.

He kept his face stony, however, and ensured his Energy Shield was up. No sense letting on what he was up to until the time was right. He hadn't come here planning to fight, and had no idea how he might escape this island metropolis if he managed to escape. Right now, he had to improvise every step of the way.

He followed Athos through the hangar and into the main portion of the building, which was every bit as opulent as the outside. Porthos followed behind, and Will could feel the man's smirk burning a hole in his back. White marble floors, columns, and gold trim were to be found almost everywhere.

Will noticed three other strange details.

First, there were dozens of screens of information flush with all of those marble walls, all displaying financial information. Prices of commodities. Exchange rates for currencies. Active stock market data. The numbers looked wildly different than Will remembered, but then, the world was still in a delicate state economically, and he'd not seen such data for nearly two months. A lot could change in those circumstances. Still... he winced at the implications some of the numbers suggested.

Second, he felt his Energy being squeezed within him as he walked, as if Aramis' Damper was settling on him. Yet Aramis was nowhere to be seen. He

still had some Energy left, but not enough to teleport. It was uncomfortable, but not as debilitating as the Hunter's touch.

The final strange detail: other than Will and the two Hunters, every other person he encountered in the building was human. Will retained his enhanced senses, and enough of his Energy, to realize that none of these people would know what Energy was if he asked them.

The Aliomenti were broadcasting their name and interacting with humans. Inwardly, Will seethed once more at their hypocrisy.

Athos and Porthos were clearly well known among the humans. Everyone smiled and bowed slightly as the two men passed, and Will could sense their obvious fear of the Hunters. Will figured that the two of them probably loved generating that fear. Will himself received curious looks as they worked through the lobby to an elevator bank, and thought he saw one woman whisper "must be a new client" to her friend. He found that conclusion amusing.

They reached a bank of elevators, but moved to a separate elevator clearly set off from the others. Athos held up a card, but Will detected the short trickle of Energy that went into the security device. The Energy-based locks guaranteed that none of the many humans working in the building could ever enter this particular elevator car, even if they should come into possession of one of the cards.

As the doors closed with a firm thud, Athos fixed Will with a stare. "Why'd you do it?"

Will returned the stare. "Do what?"

"You put up a fight less than a week ago, as you've always done in the past. Now, you let us take you away without so much as a contrary word. That's not like you at all, which makes me think you're up to something."

"I don't want to put my friends at risk anymore." Sometimes the truth was the best answer. Will reserved, in his mind, the right to change his answer in the future.

Athos laughed. "Why is that a concern after so long? It's not as if those risks didn't exist before."

Will shrugged. "Perhaps I'm just getting old and tired."

Porthos snorted. "Now *that* I'll give you."

If they were being conversational, Will decided to try to get some answers. He gestured in a circular motion. "What is this place? Humans everywhere? As I recall, at one of our more recent get-togethers, you were quite upset to find that I'd been involved with a human woman. Why are there so many humans here?"

Athos stared at him. “Have you lost your mind? Or just your memories?”

Will shrugged. “At least one of those. I’ll let you decide which.”

“This is our business front, which we use to develop significant wealth in human currency so that we can live in luxury when we must interact with their world. We’ve essentially set up the world’s largest bank with a very select clientele. All Aliomenti, of course.” He smiled. “Given our abilities, the holdings are rather extensive. We own the whole island, and it’s primarily populated by the humans who live here and work the hotels, casino, shops, restaurants, and beaches. Officially, the island is a nation unto itself, and as such we can limit travel here from the human world. Only the human workers and Aliomenti coming in for visits are allowed on the island. So it serves as our financial stronghold and our primary playground in this world. The humans who work here in the bank handle the chore of investing our surplus cash, exchanging currencies, and so on.”

“And the name?”

“It’s our business name. It just so happens that it’s more than that. We can talk Aliomenti banking business in public all we want, and we do. In the event the term is used with its *other* meaning and overheard, everyone assumes we’re talking about the bank.”

A thousand-year-old secret society of incredibly gifted, telepathic people who lived in perfect health would certainly seem capable of developing an immense presence in any global industry over time. The financial statements of this company—if they had to issue any—would be incredible.

“Where are we going now?” Will asked, as the elevator doors opened in a silent whisper, ushering fresh air into the car. He saw Aramis standing there, the man’s face greedy with expectation. The Hunter seized Will’s arm, and the Damper began working. Will felt his legs buckle, but with concentration he was able to keep his physical health unaltered by Aramis’ succubus-like touch.

“We’re going to meet with the Leader,” Porthos replied. “He has questions for you, and he’d like to get answers to them before you’re gone.”

“Gone?” Will asked, a sense of foreboding in his tone.

Aramis chuckled. “Mr. Stark, despite your long absence, you remain an Oath breaker and your sentence has been pronounced. The fact that you turned yourself in and appear to be devoid of much of your memory and Energy is irrelevant.” He rubbed his hands together.

“You see, you will, with our prodding, provide the Leader with answers to his questions. When that is done, I will have the honor of taking you to our

Assassin. And then, Will Stark, you will die.”

TURNCOAT

The penthouse level of the building was the most extreme example of pure extravagance that Will had ever seen. It was a single open space, save for the elevator shaft in the center. The entire floor was built of pure marble, polished so brightly that Will had to squint to allow his eyes to adjust. Floor-to-ceiling columns of silver populated the level; Will had the sense the columns weren't just plated with silver on the outside, but were shaped entirely of the metal.

Those solid floor-to-ceiling columns changed to gold as they approached the Leader himself. The man had styled this section of the floor as if he was a monarch holding court. In addition to the golden columns leading his way, thick rugs and carpets lined the floor, and gemstones of all shapes, sizes, and colors ringed the carpets, forming an aisle leading to the Leader's chair. The chair itself was fashioned of solid gold, and the exterior was lined with sparkling diamonds. The seat was inlaid with a red velvet cushion.

The Leader stood from his chair as Will and the Hunters approached. He looked to be in his mid-forties, with slightly thinning blond hair brushed straight back. His smirk was suggestive of a child who had just gotten away with swiping a cookie without getting caught, and the smirk reached his eyes.

"Mr. Stark, it's so good to see you again!" The man's voice was oily, and Will felt a sudden need to bathe thoroughly. "It has certainly been a long time."

Will said nothing.

"Come now, my old friend, you mustn't be upset about the circumstances. All of our rules and laws and Oaths were created for the protection of our community and our ideas. What is the term you used in the human business world you so excelled at all those years ago? Intellectual property? Thieves who

steal intellectual property, I believe, are committing the crime of industrial espionage. It saddens me, Will, to know that you elected to become the greatest purveyor of industrial espionage in our history. And you've managed to break all four Oaths in rather spectacular fashion, even those you should not be able to break. Impressive as your feats may be, even you are not above the punishment our laws dictate."

Will blinked. Something he'd said was out of place. "What do you mean, 'all those years ago'? My businesses, and their intellectual property, still exist."

The Leader laughed. "Come now, Mr. Stark. You mustn't be so attached to your little enterprises, and you certainly mustn't fool yourself about them still existing. You are well aware that they ceased to exist mere decades after your alleged death, torn to shreds by the hands of all of those humans you loved to support, each trying to extract what they could for their own ends. And in the end, they destroyed the engine that you built for them, as stupid humans always do."

Will shook his head. "But my business can't have been gone *decades* after my alleged death. I haven't even been gone that long."

The Hunters looked at each other and burst out laughing. The Leader joined in as well, the intensity growing as the look on Will's face grew more and more confused. Athos, still laughing, stepped forward and rested a hand on Will's shoulder, pausing in his chuckling long enough to concentrate. He frowned. "This is fascinating," he commented. "To the best of his knowledge we are, oh, two *months* beyond that little event where the Assassin burned his house down. I see your so-called friends have kept you in the dark, Stark, and likely in some type of hibernation or stasis, for quite some time."

Will threw up his hands, exasperated. "What are you *talking* about?"

The Leader glanced at Athos and nodded, then turned back to Will with a smirk. "What year is it, Will Stark?"

"2030, of course."

The Leader shook his head. "Hibernation indeed! No, Will. It appears your so-called friends, the people you sacrificed yourself to protect, have been less than forthcoming about your own current reality. You see, Will, you've apparently been asleep for nearly two *centuries*. It's currently the year 2219, *not* 2030."

Will staggered backward as if punched, and felt the air leave him, far more damaged than he'd ever been under Aramis' Damper. It was impossible. Completely impossible. He'd only counted two months or so since the Hunters

had assaulted him in his own back yard. This man was claiming that the past two months he'd lived had in fact taken place over 189 *years*, twice the length of the average human lifetime. Had the drugs he'd received put him to sleep for *decades* at a time?

But there was a flaw in the claim.

“That’s not possible. None of you have aged. None of the people who rescued me have aged. If it’s really been 189 years since you murdered my family and destroyed my house, all of you should be dead. Or look *really* old.”

The Leader and the Hunters burst out laughing again. At *him*. At his ignorance of some key detail. Will seethed quietly.

“You really don’t remember *anything*, do you?” The Leader’s eyes shone with mocking triumph. “When you went through everything all of those years ago, all of those exercises, all of the foods and medicines, you helped your body remember how to stop aging. Your cells don’t die off; they reproduce completely and cleanly every single time. Therefore, you don’t *age*. You learn more, retain more, understand more. You build substantial wealth and power. Do you remember *any* of this?”

Will sucked in his breath. They’d learned to become immortal?

And it all clicked into place. Immortality. That was their true discovery: the fountain of youth. That was something they were willing to protect at all costs, something they were willing to kill over. It wasn’t the ability to sense and control Energy that gave them their greatest power; no, it was the reality that, after the humans working in the building below were gone, they’d live on in eternal youth and health, growing their wealth, expanding their control over the world. Over the course of a century, two centuries... the amount of wealth a person could amass was mind-boggling.

What if they lived even longer than that?

In fact... the man they thought he was, that man must have been centuries old as well in order for him to have acquired as much power as they all claimed. No wonder the Hunters seemed so familiar with him, seemed to take capturing him so personally. In their memories, they might have been after Will Stark for centuries, and even if they’d gone twenty or thirty years between attempts, they still could have made those failed attempts at capture dozens of times. He could understand why they’d been so violent. He imagined that failing at something for centuries might be incredibly frustrating for people accustomed to getting everything they wanted with ease.

These revelations—the immortality secret, the amount of time that had

passed since the murder of his family changed his perspective quite a bit. He wanted to know why, if he was supposed to be so critical to the Alliance, that Adam and Fil—and yes, even Angel—had elected to put him into hibernation rather than rehabilitate him or help him recover his memories. He had no doubt they could do either, having experienced their potions and nano-based “medicines.”

But what if they’d put him into a deep sleep because they needed that time to develop those cures? That theory was far more comforting. Fil, in all his cantankerous moods, was recalling the literal centuries of work to restore Will to what he once was, and was understandably furious when the man he’d restored was putting his family and community at risk. He’d wanted Will to remember who he truly was and return to his place as a leader of the Alliance.

The problem with this scenario is that it meant that his entire life had been a lie.

Somehow, his memories of his long life had been erased, replaced with those of another, and while he had retained his name, he had no recollection of the skills and knowledge he’d gained over his previous decades, or even centuries, of life. He’d lost his Energy stores and skills. It certainly explained why, after he woke up, he’d regained the skills so quickly. His body probably remembered everything; it was his mind that needed to catch up.

The Leader had stated this to further demoralize him, to break down his mental defenses and gather information about the Alliance. He needed to survive, to get back there himself. To thank them for what they’d done in rebuilding him, but also to question them in depth about why he’d been altered in the first place, why they’d never told him the truth. He *knew* it was the truth; the ramifications of what he’d seen with the Purge and the nanos and everything else meant that these two factions could live forever. He needed to reclaim his place with the Alliance, now that he had a truer sense of what that was, and not give himself up to this loathsome bunch.

He needed to escape, to get out of this room. This Leader wanted to interview him; Will had no interest in cooperating. A man with the ego on display here—solid gold and silver columns, expensive tapestries and rugs, piles of gemstones—would not react well to insults.

Inwardly, Will smiled. He could do insults.

He looked at the Leader. “As a matter of fact, I do seem to remember a few things. For example, I remember that you always did have a terrible inferiority complex, always needing to compensate with external possessions to make

everyone forget just how weak you truly are.” Will glanced around the room at the jewels, and rugs, and precious metals on display, then turned his gaze fully back on the Leader. “I see that particular problem has gotten worse. Or is there a *new* problem that’s come up in the past few decades that’s driving this?” Will arched a suggestive eyebrow.

The temperature in the room seemed to skyrocket. The fake smile on the Leader’s face vanished, replaced by a dark look of loathing. Aramis looked scandalized, an expression he seemed to have mastered. Athos clapped his hand to his mouth, whether to cover a gasp of shock or a laugh, Will did not know. Porthos had no such insecurities. He snickered openly, and then snapped his mouth shut and stayed silent when the Leader glared at him.

“I see you’ve remembered your lack of tact and decorum, Stark,” the Leader hissed. “You never did appreciate all the benefits our group had to offer, never did play by the rules, and you certainly never treated your betters with appropriate respect. Perhaps I was wrong to hold this sentimental little meeting to enjoy a laugh about the good old days.” He looked at Aramis. “I have no use for this man anymore, seeing as how my own spy has taken the time to update me fully on the situation with the Alliance.” Seeing Will’s look of horror, he laughed. “Oh, did I forget to mention that? You see, on the night you vanished from the annals of history, someone else vanished as well. Someone else your Alliance friends drugged into hibernation for two centuries. Thankfully, he escaped the clutches of the evil that is the Alliance not long after your little arranged meeting with Porthos. In the process of escaping, he apparently took one or two lives, for he *is* an Assassin. *The* Assassin, in fact. He, too, was surprised to learn how long he’d been away. We had to appoint another Assassin in the interim, so now I have *two* of them to keep busy. You see, your Alliance abducted and drugged the man I sent to kill your wife and child. Now he has returned to me, and this very day he will end your life. Isn’t that simply *perfect*? Oh, and Will?” His smile turned to an evil glare. “They drugged one of their greatest enemies, the Assassin, just like they drugged you. What does betrayal to that degree feel like?” The Hunters all laughed as the Leader looked at him, triumphant.

Will fumed. He added another short-term goal. He’d take the time to avenge Hope and Josh before escaping. He’d simply have to wait a while longer. And after 189 years, a few more minutes or hours were no big deal.

Aramis came forward and seized Will by the arm, and he could feel the Hunter’s Damper ability working. The dampening effect in this building negated

the impact Aramis had since there was little Energy left to suppress. But Will played the part, acting a bit more unsteady on his feet and lightheaded, and allowed Aramis to lead him away from the throne of the Leader and back to the elevator.

Once inside, Aramis spoke. “You really lost your memory? Wow. It must be horrible to be executed for crimes you don’t even remember committing.” The Hunter snickered.

Will looked at the man with deepest sympathy. “You told me that my death sentence was for being the father of my son, Aramis. I very much remember him. I remember his mother as well. And I remember every single moment I spent with both of them. They were the two most amazing people I’ve ever met. If my relationship with them is considered a crime by this group, then I am proudly guilty as charged.”

Aramis snorted. “Humans are unstable, though. Given enough time, both of them would have lost interest in you, or betrayed you in some fashion. Sounds like they would have been perfect fits with your Alliance, wouldn’t they?”

Will nodded. “I would be proud if they had joined a group dedicated to destroying this one, Aramis. And I’ll tell you this as well. If living forever makes you such a cynic, I’m rather pleased that you’re taking me somewhere to die. I’d hate to be a miserable old coot like you, bored out my mind, with no one to love or to love me.”

Aramis was silent after that, lost in his own memories and thoughts.

The elevator did not stop in the lobby, but continued to a floor labeled Lower Level 7. “The part of the building that’s visible from the surface is where the humans do their work on behalf of our banking interests. Other than the penthouse suite the Leader commands, we work underground, out of sight of the humans. We’re discouraged from using Energy in the main building; it has decent dampening capabilities in the walls, not to stop anything, but to remind us where we are. There are no such restrictions on the Lower Levels. Usually we just teleport down here, but I figure using the human-invented elevator to escort their champion to his final end is more fitting.” He smirked in triumph.

A bell dinged and the doors opened with a whisper. “Seventh level of hell, right this way,” Will muttered.

They headed down a long hallway, and stopped in front of a door on the left. A simple plaque hung on the wall near the door, reading: “The Assassin.” Will noted to himself that this was the first time in two months he’d actually entered a room via a door. Or perhaps it was the first time in two centuries.

Aramis knocked on the door with his free hand. “Enter,” an icy voice said from inside. Will felt a chill inside him. This was the voice of the man who had killed his wife, and who had silenced the voice of Josh before Will had ever heard his son speak. Yet even without knowing that, he could detect a sense of pure evil in the man.

Aramis opened the creaking door and they walked in, their feet sinking into the thick carpeting on the floor. The room felt unnaturally cold, like a giant tomb for those still alive. A man sat in a simple chair, dressed entirely in black, sharpening the blade of a familiar-looking short sword. The edge was razor-thin and glinted in the scant light of the room. So this is how they planned to kill him, then? With a giant knife? Will had been hoping for something less painful. Then again, he was hoping not to die at all, so the chosen method of execution was moot.

“Today, I finish what was started so long ago, Will Stark,” the man said, his voice a whisper. He glanced at the blade, checking the sharpness on the tip of his finger. Will could see the blood drip down onto the floor, despite the very light pressure the killer had used. Will focused on the blade, directing half of his small batch of nanos to cover its surface, and he made ready to direct the machines to alter the attempt at mortally wounding him. He directed the other half onto his skin to act as a shield; he’d need to both alter the trajectory of the blade, and bounce it off of his skin, to avoid serious injury. Adam had told him that this was the approach he’d used to save Will from the sword attacks in his back yard that night so long ago, though Adam undoubtedly had more nanos to work with. It would need to be enough.

The Assassin stood up, facing Will. The man’s head was shaved clean, marred by dozens of deep gashes that had scarred over. His eyes—irises and pupils alike—were a deep blood-red. The image, the voice, the aura of pure evil—Will knew this man was a gifted killer.

Aramis remained behind his prisoner, with his right hand firmly planted on Will’s left shoulder. The Assassin glared at the Hunter. “Aramis, leave us. I don’t want to hear any complaints about blood on your outfit.”

Aramis shook his head. “If I let go of Stark, he’ll teleport out of here. The dampers don’t work down here like they do above ground. So, I’ll stay put. Just try to be careful. Oh, and one more thing?”

The blood-red eyes remained unblinking.

Aramis shifted uncomfortably under the killer’s gaze. “Right. Like you said, at least *try* to keep the blood away from me. Carry on, then.” Aramis moved so

that he wasn't directly behind Will, forming a 45 degree angle with the intended victim, believing it would put him farther away from Will's splattered blood.

The Assassin tossed the sword handle back and forth in his hands, as if deciding which should have the honor. He settled on his right, and advanced to within two feet of Will.

Everything after that was a blur.

The Assassin pulled his blade back and jabbed it forward with tremendous force and speed, landing his left hand on Will's right shoulder for support, aiming directly at Will's midsection.

Will moved his nano-shield down to the targeted area of his body and condensed the shield, forming an impenetrable barrier. At the same time, he had the nanos on the blade force the trajectory away from his body, to his left and the Assassin's right.

The blade slid to Will's left, striking the nano-shield on Will's oblique muscle area, and bounced off to the Assassin's right.

Sensing that he was safe on this pass, Will pulled the nanos off the sword and onto his back to prevent the Assassin from trying to stab or slash him as he pulled the blade back for another attempt.

The combination of the redirection and the bounce off the shield turned the blade, still at full speed, at a 45-degree angle to Will's body, directly at the Hunter.

The blade had barely slowed down when it entered Aramis' body with a sickening sound, and did not stop until the tip exited through the man's back and clothing.

All three men were in shock. Aramis looked down at the growing red stain on his clothing, and realized it was a fatal wound. His legs collapsed and he fell to his knees.

Aramis looked up at the Assassin. "I told you not to get any blood on me."

He fell forward into the Assassin's legs, before the man could release the hilt. The Assassin tried to pull the blade out of the dying man's body, all the while keeping his eyes on Will.

With the Damper of Aramis released, Will suddenly had full use of his Energy. He could teleport out now, but there was work to be done, and deaths to avenge. He hurled himself at the Assassin, knocking the man to the floor, separating the killer from his sword. Aramis' body crumbled to the ground.

Stark, listen to me. Will blinked, continuing to wrestle the Assassin, trying to get his hands on the man's throat, wondering why the killer's voice was now

inside his head. *I'm on your side now, Stark. Listen carefully inside your head, but keep fighting. They're watching us.*

In response, Will threw a forearm at the Assassin's head.

That hurt. They're watching us, Stark, so we must make this convincing.

The Assassin suddenly shifted his weight, and Will found himself on his back, staring up into a face lined with deep lacerations hardened into scars.

Why should I believe you? Will projected.

The Assassin punched Will in the head, and Will felt a bit woozy. *One of the Alliance people gave me a potion. Makes me have to do what he wants. He wanted me to get you out of here, but in a way that lets me keep working here, spying on the Elites.*

The Assassin threw another punch, and Will shifted away at the last instant, causing the Assassin to curse out loud as his fist hit the hard floor.

I'm listening. Will tried to roll into the Assassin and take advantage of the man being off balance, but the man shifted his own weight, and Will was driven back into the floor.

Here's an area outside our building you can teleport to in a few moments. Will saw an image of a small copse of trees near the Aliomenti building and saw where the sidewalk was. *I need you to block this punch.* The Assassin threw a punch at Will, who blocked it with his arm. *Now throw me, and the gun will fall out.*

Gun? Will whipped his body, and the Assassin flew off him, landing hard several feet away. In the process, a small gun fell out of a holster hidden on the man's belt, landing between Will and the Assassin. Will didn't need to be told the next step. He snatched the gun before the Assassin could recover and sprang to his feet, aiming the gun at the Assassin while flipping the safety off, his look of fury not faked.

You killed my family. I think you expect me to be merciful here. Merciful would be shooting you in the head and killing you with no pain. Will aimed the gun at the man's head.

The Assassin rose slowly to his feet, the unblinking red eyes never leaving the gun in Will's hands. *No! You must say that out loud, but shoot me in the shoulder, the leg... somewhere it won't be fatal. Tell me it's a crueler fate to suffer.* Will realized that he was correct on that point. Living with your failures was punishment; death was mercy.

"You expect mercy from me, don't you?" Will asked. "You think I'm going to shoot you in the head so that you die quickly, don't you? That I'll kill you to

avenge my family.” Will aimed lower, at the man’s groin, and the Assassin winced. “I think I’d rather you suffer, though.” Will shifted to point at the man’s leg.

The Assassin laughed out loud. “You fool! What makes you think the gun is actually loaded?” *It’s loaded. Shoot me. Gloat.*

Will pulled the trigger, and the Assassin screamed in pain as muscle was shredded and bone was shattered, blood spouting from the wound just above the knee. The killer fell to the floor, blood staining the thick carpet. *Good shot, oh that HURTS! You may shoot me again if you see fit, but know this, Will Stark. Oh, that HURTS! Know this... I failed to complete my mission that night. Go! Now! They’ll be coming for you!*

Will froze temporarily at the words, and then recovered. “I’d say it’s loaded. I’ll check again, just to be sure.” He pointed the gun at the other leg and shot him again. The screaming began anew, even more agonizing. “Suffer long,” Will said, glaring at the man. After recalling all of his nanos, he pictured the area outside, and teleported out of the building.

Good job, Will Stark. Will could hear the agony in the man’s thoughts. *Tell my boss I did well.*

“But I don’t know who that *is*,” Will said, to no one in particular. He flipped the safety on, stowed the gun away, and took in his surroundings.

He was outside the massive building, surrounded by trees and salty air and gentle breezes tinged with Energy. There was no sign of any life, human or Aliomenti, on the nearby sidewalk. Will moved to it and began walking, at a casual pace, away from the building. He needed to get off this island, and get back to his new family in the Alliance. To Angel, to Adam, and yes, even to Fil, who was likely rejoicing that Will was gone for good.

It was too far to teleport, though. He knew that much. He needed some other means to travel back home.

He saw the bush ahead of him rustle, and a figure emerged, wearing a dark cloak, with a thick hood covering the head. Will couldn’t tell if the person was a man or a woman. He saw a hand emerge from the sleeve, wearing a thick glove, and motion for Will to follow. Will hesitated for an instant before doing so. Thus far, his instinct on whom to trust had been quite good—at least for staying alive, though not for learning the truth—and he sensed this person was there to help. This cloak was definitely *not* being worn by Porthos.

The figure in the cloak led him down the sidewalk, back into the trees, and on a circuitous route through the small park. He emerged on the runway where

the small aircraft carrying him and the Hunters had landed. The cloaked figure glanced about, and then darted into the hangar. Will followed. There, he found the same craft Athos and Porthos had used to bring him here. The figure pointed to what appeared to be a navigation system, showing the path they'd traveled to get here.

Will finally knew where he was. He'd been living on the northeastern edge of South America, and the island he was on was... inside the Bermuda Triangle.

Creepy.

The guide silently motioned Will into the aircraft. "You're saying that I should fly this back where I came from?" Will asked.

A nod.

"Will I be able to fly it? I've never flown anything before."

Another nod, but no words.

"OK. Thank you." Will tried to duck down to get a glance under the hood, but his guide turned quickly and walked back out of the hangar. Will shrugged and climbed in.

As he sat, the top closed automatically. "*Select destination,*" said a soothing female voice. Will shrugged, and tried zeroing in on his old camp location on the screen. Once he found it, he tapped. "*Destination selected,*" the voice confirmed. With no further direction from Will, the craft backed out of the hangar, turned, and raced down the runway, gradually lifting into the air. Autopilot. Of course.

Will settled in for the journey, soon drifting off to sleep.

In the trees along the runway he'd just left, the hooded guide watched the vehicle soar from sight. The hood came down, and the woman underneath gave a gentle wave into the distance.

"Good luck, Will," she whispered.

REUNION

Will woke, feeling as if he'd had a full night's sleep, blinking as the bright sunshine assaulted his eyes. He had answers to many of the mysteries of his past two months, and the basis for better questions. Like, who had wiped his memory two centuries earlier, and why? Like, how had they kept him in suspended animation all that time, and why?

The craft had landed in the same clearing where the Hunters had found him earlier, showing that the autopilot feature in the vehicle was quite well developed. He stood to look for a mechanism to unlock the hatch. The top sensed his movement and opened on its own. Will scrambled over the side and dropped to the soft carpet of grass beside the craft, inhaling the sweet, fresh air of freedom.

He glanced around, and noticed that he was back in the thick forests that were so familiar to him now. It seemed that the trees remembered him as well. He could feel their Energy moving to him, and he responded in kind, feeling the now familiar intensification of the Energy flowing back to him. Perhaps trees had developed this capability in the past two centuries. Then again, he wouldn't have known two centuries ago for purposes of comparison. He noted his clothing was yellowish-orange, and wondered if he'd start mutating at some point in the color progression. Maybe that explained Fil's surly attitude.

Will thought through his actions carefully; acting impulsively in the past had caused problems. Will's part in the stabbing of Aramis, and then his shooting of the Assassin, would be analyzed and discussed by the Aliomenti Elites. He expected that they'd provide whatever form of medical care existed in this future time to stabilize the injured men. He wasn't sure if Aramis could be saved, though he couldn't get himself to be upset about that. The man had been quite

pleased to take Will somewhere to die, and tried to directly kill him in the distant past. Will had defended himself without meaning for Aramis to be hurt. He didn't feel the same way about the Assassin, though he doubted that the gunshot wounds would be fatal. He hadn't made the shots with the intent of killing the man. If someone had told him he'd be more upset about the impending death of a man who'd tried to capture him, rather than one who had tried to kill Hope and Josh, he would have questioned their sanity.

Had the Assassin been telling the truth? Was he truly now a spy on behalf of the Alliance? And who was the master he'd spoken of? That would be another detail he'd need to learn. He ruled Angel out immediately. He'd been with Adam quite a bit, and the man seemed too stable to try something so rash and bold as to turn an Aliomenti Assassin to their cause. Fil seemed the type, or at least the most likely of the three he'd met. Of course, there were dozens of others in the camp, and every possibility that one of those men or women was responsible. Will simply didn't know any of them well enough to make an assessment.

He needed to get back to them, his closest friends and confidants in the Alliance camp, if for no other reason than to warn them. But the last thing he wanted to do was to bring a wrathful team of Elites on them. If he was one of the Elites, he'd expect Will to go right back to the Alliance, then he'd follow Will Stark there with a truly massive attack force. Will had hurt two of their number badly, and now he needed to protect his closest friends in this future time, even if they'd been incredibly deceptive. Revenge was a powerful motivator, as Will well knew, and he couldn't believe that his attack and escape would be forgotten. Focusing on all of this helped keep his mind off the *other* revelation from the Assassin; he needed to compartmentalize and deal with *that* information later.

He decided that he would not return to camp. He figured he was quite safe here, actually. The Elites would not be likely to come here only get him. His best move all around was to stay here. Or move away from here, but to a site away from the camp. Perhaps he could mislead the Aliomenti into chasing him all over the planet. That would protect his core group, but what if he unintentionally led the Aliomenti to a *different* Alliance camp? He had no idea where those camps were located, or how many there were... or if the one he'd lived in was the only one left.

He needed to communicate with Angel, and Adam, and Fil. But how?

Then he realized that he had a rather untapped ability, the first he'd mastered here in this future world of people with nanos, personal flying craft, and incredible mental Energy abilities. Telepathy. And the person who'd taught him

was Angel, the one he trusted above all others. It was a very low Energy ability, which meant that even Porthos shouldn't be able to track it. And it was a risk that Will needed to take.

He directed his Energy in the direction of the camp, at a very low level, and thought of Angel. He hoped Angel would sense the Energy and contact him.

He didn't have to wait long. *Mr. Stark? Is that you?* Angel's voice projected into his mind.

Yes. I escaped from the Headquarters. A few of them got hurt in the process, including one of the Hunters, and he's hurt very badly. I have a feeling they aren't going to like that. I'm not risking coming back to camp and bringing all of them after you.

There was a pause. *Where are you?*

I'm back in the forest near our old camp, right where they took me. I—

Angel, Adam, and Fil appeared in the clearing. "Drop your Shield," Fil said. "You need to flood this place with Energy."

"What?" It was the last thing Will ever expected to hear from Fil.

"Do it," Adam said. Will did, and Adam explained the logic as the Energy flowed from his pupil. "We're pretty well Shielded, outside the Energy remnants left from teleporting here. If you're right, they already know *you're* here. Our best bet is for you to kick off lots of Energy, which should mask ours, and make them think any surges they've detected are just you."

That made sense. Will spread his Energy around, especially into the trees, and felt the strengthening of the return Energy. The trio watched him with great interest. "How are you getting *stronger* while you're doing that?" Adam asked.

"What do you mean?"

"I'm seeing the Energy all around us, so clearly you're sending quite a bit out. Yet your Energy levels are rising *faster* than you're expending it. They should be *dipping*, at least for a short while, until your body can regenerate its stores." Adam seemed genuinely baffled at the phenomenon.

Will shrugged. "I don't know how to explain it, either." He told the story of seeing the young tree here, and feeling compelled to send it Energy, and that somehow this helped the tree grow rapidly and resulted in more Energy coming back to Will than he was sending. "I guess it's like it is in nature. We breathe out carbon dioxide used by plants, and they send back oxygen we breathe in. I don't know why it results in more Energy being returned to me than I've sent out, though."

Fil nodded. "As interesting as that is, we do need to focus on the problem at

hand. Angel said that you escaped Headquarters in a manner likely to draw a violent response. True?"

Will nodded as well. "Correct. Aramis took me to the Assassin, but I was able to use my nanos to deflect the blow and Aramis was stabbed instead. I fought with the Assassin, and in the skirmish his gun fell free. I retrieved it, shot him, and teleported out." Will frowned. "But I think I had help."

"What do you mean?" Angel asked.

"The Assassin was talking to me in my head. Telling me what to do, how to beat him as we were fighting after Aramis was stabbed. Told me to throw him and the gun would fall; I didn't even know he carried a gun. Told me to shoot him non-fatally and make it seem like I was interested in him suffering more than killing him. He gave me an image of a place to teleport to in order to get out of the building." Will looked at the men and woman standing with him. "He said to tell his master that he did as ordered. Any of you know what that means?"

"I have a hunch," Fil said. "One of our members has a knack for creating specialized nanos. It sounds like something he would try."

"But how did he get them into the Assassin?" Will asked. "When would they have met?"

"We picked up more than just you at the house that night," Angel said. "The Assassin, the man sent to murder your wife and son... we captured him and brought him back to hold as a captive."

"It was a risky plan," Fil said. "Like you, he brought inherent trouble, perhaps even more. You would only cause harm through inaction but without intent; the Assassin would willingly inflict great harm. If the devices meant to contain him didn't hold, or the reprogramming didn't work... it could have been a problem for all of us."

"But it appears that it *did* work," Adam noted. "We may be down to only two Hunters, and the Assassin will be unable to go on any official missions for a time if you shot him."

Will pulled out the gun. "This looks familiar. Something else you pulled out of my house?"

Fil simply nodded.

"Anything else about that night you want to tell me?" Will asked, fixing a pointed stare at the trio.

Angel fidgeted. "Your dog survived. She's back in camp right now."

Will blinked, and a foggy memory of seeing the injured animal on Fil's lap in the escape vehicle appeared in his mind. "Why didn't you let me see her? What

would be the harm in letting me see Smokey?”

“You would have wondered why we were able to save Smokey, and not... others.” Angel replied, discomfort all over her face.

“It’s a fair question, though,” Will noted. “You rescued me from a beating, found my dog and the man sent to kill my family. Why could you not save my wife and son?”

“They were already gone when I got there,” Fil said. “I could retrieve the Assassin and the dog. But not them.”

Will stared at the man. “With the technology I’ve seen here since I arrived, I dare say you could have saved them. Why not try?” The Energy coming from Will now was powerful enough that the air was sizzling, and it was doubtful to all present that the intensity was due solely to the interaction with the trees.

“They were *gone*.” Fil fixed him with what was likely a deadly stare through those sunglasses, as if offended at being challenged. “As in, they were not there. I could not find them. Therefore, I could not rescue them.”

“I thought you said that they were dead?” Will snarled, advancing on Fil.

“No. I’ve said they were *gone* every time you’ve asked. I cannot make you comprehend what the word means.”

“You used a word commonly meant to indicate death, especially in the context of a raging house fire and an Assassin sent after those people. Any sane, decent person would know that and avoid using the expression.” Will jabbed a finger at Fil. “Unless you *wanted* me to think them dead.”

Fil shoved Will with both hands. “Take that back! There’s no reason whatsoever I’d want to deceive you!”

Angel jumped between them. “Both of you need to stop it! Right now!” The two men continued to glare at each other, but backed away. “Fil wasn’t clear, but there’s no reason to think he’d want to deceive you. I would know if he’d tried.”

“Shut up, sis,” Fil muttered.

Will’s eyes widened. “She’s your *sister*?” he asked Fil. Of all the shocking things he’d learned recently...

Fil nodded, and Angel elbowed Fil gently. “Yes, Fil’s my overprotective big brother. Always playing the alpha male lest anyone try anything to hurt me.” Will was stunned to see a slight smile form on Fil’s face.

Will shook his head. “You people are full of surprises,” he said. He glanced at Adam. “What about you? You their cousin or something?”

Adam chuckled. “Thanks for not asking if I’m their uncle.” He ran a hand through his thinning hair. All four laughed.

“So, about that night you pulled me and others away from my burning house,” Will said. “Anybody care to tell me exactly *when* that was? Relative to, say, today?” He arched an eyebrow.

Three heads dropped. “Oh.” Angel said. “That.”

“Yes. That.” Will glanced among the faces. “Why on earth would you find me and drug me into a sleep for almost two centuries?”

Adam frowned. “But you weren’t drugged. Who told you that? The Leader or one of the Hunters?”

Will nodded. “They figured out pretty quickly that I think it’s about two months after the events at my house. They corrected that... minor oversight. I’m sure it just slipped your minds to mention it. Needless to say, not having anyone tell me that rather critical piece of information tends to make me less than trusting about anything any of you say from this point forward.” He fixed a glare at Fil. “And question the motivation for what I *am* told.”

“They were half right,” Adam said. “Yes, it’s far into the future. But we didn’t drug you into some kind of suspended animation all this time.” He glanced at Fil, then at Angel, and both of them nodded at him. “When we rescued you from the yard and the house that night, the craft that we used... it was a time machine.”

Will blinked, and the slight gust of wind that grazed him in that moment was nearly enough to knock him to the ground. Then he laughed. “Right. I know, at this point I’m supposed to believe anything. But a *time machine*? No. That part I cannot believe. I will not believe.”

Angel walked to Will, and put a hand on his arm, and he could feel the calming Energy she was sending his way. “It’s a lot to take, I’m sure. But you *know* we’re telling the truth.”

“I don’t know *anything!*” Will screamed. “Do you understand just how much every part of my life has been completely turned upside-down? I’d like to think I’ve handled everything really well, truly I do. But right now, I don’t even know *who I am!* Am I some amazing Energy-wielding warrior traitor who had his memory wiped clean and became a business tycoon only to sleep for two centuries and wake up not remembering anything? Or was I truly born in the year 1995 and brought forward in time after my family was killed by some crazed murderer? Something else entirely? Oh wait, the killer said he failed in his mission to kill my family, which means that they were still alive at some point, and nobody saw them. Then this same man, the man who wanted to kill my wife, and then my son when he learned of Josh’s existence, this trained

Assassin suddenly helps me escape from captivity, because somebody put some tiny robots in his brain. And on top of it all I seem to attract trouble wherever I go. I'd like to go home, back to being that businessman, and just go out to that nice birthday dinner with my family. And I'd like to see my son. Do you know he never talked? I never heard his voice. All I want is to go home and hear his voice, and tell him I love him. Is that too much to ask?"

Will felt his knees sag, and he let himself fall to the ground. "I just want to go home, to my family," he whispered. "I don't want to do this anymore."

Angel went to him, tears in her eyes as she knelt down and put a comforting arm around him. Fil's face was its usual mask, yet there were tremors there of some unspeakable emotion. Adam looked at the siblings, and then at Will. He knelt down in front of the man.

"Will," he said, "I think we can make that happen."

QUESTION

They gave Will time to regain control following his emotional outburst, and then the group made its next moves.

Will put a very tight Shield up, hiding his Energy so well that none of the trio could sense anything, even standing next to him. Each of the trio did a thorough search of Will and his clothing, to ensure that the Elites had not placed any type of tracking device on their former captive, and found nothing. Fil generated a flying craft of nanos, and the four climbed in. No one spoke as Fil carefully piloted the craft through the trees. He avoided breaking through the top canopy so that the Elites couldn't search for them with satellites. Nobody wanted to speak and break concentration on the Shield Will had established.

They landed at camp an hour later. Will climbed out of the craft, still rather numb from the revelations of the past twenty-four hours. He staggered to the edge of the camp and sat with his back against one of the large trees encircling the clearing, pulling his knees to his chest and wrapping his arms around them. His mind was in shambles as he tried to make sense of everything. The emotion he'd kept bottled up for two months, as he absorbed and accepted with calm the massive paradigm shifts he'd undergone, had finally burst forth and taken its toll. He felt nothing, immune to the small stones and moist earth beneath him, to the sunlight that warmed him, to the breeze that grazed his cheek.

Fil walked over to him a short while later, the sunlight reflecting off his ever-present mirrored sunglasses, his face softer than Will had ever seen it. He gave a faint smile when Will glanced up at him. "I thought you might want to visit with someone." Fil turned and whistled, and Will saw a black Labrador Retriever come trotting out from behind one of the buildings.

Will stared at the dog, and the dog stared back, frozen.

“Smokey?” Will whispered. The dog’s tail began to twitch, shuddering with the effort, as if overcome by a powerful emotion she couldn’t otherwise express. “C’mere, girl!” Will said, louder, and patted the ground next to him, stretching his legs out. The dog started to him, slowly at first, then at a full sprint, eventually slowing down only because her tail was wagging with such force that she couldn’t walk straight. She darted to Will with joy that only a dog can express, licking his face as he wrapped his arms around her neck, hugging the only family member he still had with him, his face moist for reasons other than the dog’s wet kisses. Smokey curled up next to him, then crawled into his lap, and Will laughed as he watched the dog try to fit her too-large frame onto his too-small lap. She settled for nestling next to him, her chin rested on his leg, her tail still twitching with joy. Will was content to scratch the dog’s head, and remember the times he’d seen her nestled up against Josh in the same manner.

Will realized Fil was still standing a few paces away, watching the interaction between Will and Smokey. While the shade of the trees in the area made it difficult to tell, it looked as though Fil’s cheek was a bit moist. “Thank you,” Will said, his voice quiet. “I needed that.”

Fil nodded. “You weren’t the only one.” He turned and walked away, giving man and dog time alone.

I must be losing my mind. A trained assassin helps me escape death, I’m two centuries into my own future, I’ve been reunited with my dog, and by a man who’s acted as if he’d rather have that Assassin here over me. He chuckled. It was odd how Fil’s act of kindness seemed stranger than teleporting himself dozens of miles away.

The trio headed his way, each bearing a purposeful look.

Will glanced down at the dog. He was tempted to sic her on them to avoid whatever new fate they had devised for him, but decided he liked her right where she was. He leaned down to hug the dog once more, before looking up as the group arrived.

“Don’t get up,” Adam said, smiling faintly. He sat on the grass near Will, and the siblings joined him.

“Have you... come to terms with the idea of time travel yet?” Angel asked, her face full of concern.

Will exhaled deeply. “Right now, I find it hard to accept anything,” he replied. “And yet, so far, nothing else that seemed impossible has turned out to be impossible. I’m willing to entertain the idea that it’s true, with a heavy dose of skepticism.”

Fil nodded. “That’s a very reasoned approach.” He glanced at Adam and Angel, and then back to Will. “We have a proposal for you, however, and for you to accept that proposal you must accept the premise that the time machine we’ve mentioned does, in fact, work.”

Will shrugged tentative acceptance. “Continue.”

“From what we know first-hand, combined with what we’ve been able to ascertain from your recounting of your time at Headquarters, it would appear that your wife and son exited the house before the Assassin was able to kill them.” Fil said this without emotion, but Will shuddered at the word *kill*. “I did not see them in the house, so clearly their escape was accomplished before my arrival. It’s also likely that it happened before the house caught fire, for the Assassin himself was knocked unconscious from the oxygen loss caused by the flames. The Assassin has developed the skills of pyrogenesis and pyrokinesis, which means he can translate his Energy—which is not terribly strong, by the way—into fire, and that he can control or move fire. He seems to be immune to flames as well, which means you could throw him into a bonfire and he wouldn’t suffer any burns. Point being, if he’s unconscious from the fire, the other two should be as well. Unless they escaped before that fire started.”

Will nodded. “That makes sense. He told me that *he* had failed. If they weren’t there, I’m fairly certain he would have considered it a failure of others who had told them where they should be. So it seems that he at least *saw* them.” Will thought of the Assassin’s blade, dripping blood, and the dog’s unconscious form on Fil’s lap as he’d been removed from the house two centuries ago. If what they were saying was true... it wasn’t Hope or Josh’s blood on that blade. He glanced down at the dog nestled up to him, realization dawning, and he gave the dog another friendly squeeze.

“Right,” Fil agreed. “The Assassin sees them, they escape, the fire starts, you’re injured, the Hunters get you. Somewhere in there we show up, get you, Smokey, and the Assassin, and leave. The Hunters leave. There’s no sign of Hope and Josh Stark. But this makes no sense. If you’re dealing with a human woman and a small child, and they are caught in their house by a trained Assassin who has Energy abilities, how could they escape? He had a sword, and he’d already used it to kill two trained security professionals only moments earlier. He’s stronger and faster than they are. They might have been armed, but the Assassin could easily have gotten the gun from them, and in addition, the Assassin did not have any gunshot wounds when we returned. Yet they weren’t there. I ask again: how could this be?” Fil’s right eyebrow appeared at the top of

his sunglasses, which seemed to mean that he was arching the brow. Will found this oddly amusing.

Yet the question itself was not. How indeed? He'd not been at this long, but he knew that no untrained person—or human, as the term was used in present company—could possibly escape him now. He could run faster than the greatest human athlete. He could teleport, or use telekinesis to grab them.

And then he had the answer. “Somebody helped them. Somebody Energy-trained.”

Fil nodded. “Exactly. So the new question is: who did that? And more importantly: why?”

Will looked back at him. “On that note: why rescue *me*?”

Adam spoke up. “You must understand the importance of the Will Stark that the Hunters know and remember. He was the most powerful and influential member of the Aliomenti for many years, and directed many of its innovations and much of its progress. Yet he reached a point of fundamental disagreement over the swearing of the Oaths, and more critically, with the penalties imposed for breaking them. And so he left, letting others know they were welcome to join him as part of an alliance of like-minded men and women who believed it their role to *help* humanity rather than thwart its efforts to improve and progress. People left the various Aliomenti communities around the world and rallied to Stark, and started integrating into human society, using their abilities to nudge the most receptive minds in the direction of progress. A few married humans, but none of those had children. With the numbers of the Alliance growing and Will Stark's defection still stinging him, the Leader had to make a decision. He found three uniquely skilled Aliomenti and called them Hunters, and sent them to hunt down these so-called rogues and bring them back. His scientists were fascinated by Aramis' Damper ability, and figured out how to repeat it in small jail cells. The Hunters' skills improved, and it reached the point that they *never* failed to get their man, and quickly. But they couldn't catch Will Stark, no matter how many times they found him. To be blunt, Will Stark is our hero, our legend. We didn't have any reason to believe you weren't the same man, any more than the Hunters of the time did. And none of us here regrets getting you away from them.

“Our records show that there is no mention of Will Stark following the fire at your house. You didn't suddenly appear a few days later. We knew the Aliomenti hadn't gotten you, because that news would be broadcast. Nobody in the Alliance heard from you either. As we finished the research on the time machine

and wondered what our first test would be, we made the rather startling conclusion that you'd disappeared forever during the fire because we'd gone back in time and retrieved you. To us, we were saving our greatest hero from the death the Hunters so desperately wanted to inflict upon you. We needed to ensure that the fire was seen as having burned everyone in the house, and all evidence of the actions that happened there, from existence. That meant we needed to bring back everyone and everything that would have been found, including the gun."

"But what if Hope and Josh *had* been there?"

"Then Fil would have gotten them as well, of course. But they weren't."

"Because somebody else had already helped them?"

Adam paused. "Somebody got them out of harm's way. We aren't *exactly* sure of whom. We just know that they were never spotted again after that fire."

Will's blood chilled. "Who could it have been, though?"

"We don't *know*," Adam replied. "But... we have an *idea*."

"Who?"

"You."

Will blinked, and it took a moment before he could respond. "What are you talking about? I was getting beat up in the back yard, remember?"

"No, not *then*-Will. *Now*-Will."

Will realized he'd stopped patting Smokey, for the dog nudged him, and he resumed scratching behind her ears, trying to process this concept. "So, you're saying... I go back in time... and rescue Josh and Hope?"

Adam nodded.

Will slid out from under Smokey's chin and rose to his feet. "When do I leave?"

Fil's jaw tightened. "You may wish to think this over and consider the ramifications."

"What ramifications?" Will demanded. "I have the chance to save my wife and son from certain death at the hands of a horrific assassin. There are no *ramifications* to consider."

"You could die in the process."

Will waved him off. "It's a price I'm willing to pay."

Adam raised a hand. "Let's consider this in more depth, Will. I think we're all fully aware that you're willing to pay whatever price necessary to save your family, but there are historical facts to consider. It's not just that Hope and Josh don't appear after that night. You don't either."

“Which means I die while saving them, or I succeed and bring them back here.”

“Which means you might die in a *failed* rescue attempt, or not make it there to begin with. This time machine is not a heavily tested device. Its first and only round trip was that very evening. We have no way of knowing if you’d make it *there*, let alone make it *back*.”

Will swallowed hard. That meant that the three of them had risked their own lives coming after him, or at least after the man they thought he was. Adam was pointing out that he might die during the journey, or simply not make it there at all. He’d be lost, and for nothing. That was far less appealing. He took a deep breath. “I understand that. It doesn’t change my mind, though. The opportunity is there. I have to take advantage of it, despite the possibilities of negative outcomes.”

“There is another point to consider. Our present means that the past has already happened as it is supposed to happen. That is, the Assassin fails and Fil finds no trace of Hope and Josh. He does find the Assassin alive. That means that no one—including you—killed the Assassin before he could attack Hope and Josh. The Hunters survived to this day. That means no one went after them. The Hunters successfully attacked and assaulted you. That means no one interfered. That means, Will, that if the trip is successful in getting you back there, you mustn’t interfere with *any* of that. Do you have the ability to refrain from blasting Aramis or Athos or Porthos? Or teleporting to get your gun and shooting the Assassin on the spot? Will it be enough to get there, let the Assassin see them, and then rescue them to bring them back to this time, to safety?”

Will hadn’t considered that possibility. He wouldn’t mind a shot at Athos and Porthos. Aramis might be dead by now, and the Assassin had helped him escape Headquarters, so there was less animosity there. But he understood: he couldn’t alter history by ending the life of someone he knew survived to this day. “No blasting of the bad guys. Understood. Are we ready yet?”

“No,” Adam said. “There is one *more* scenario to consider. You make it back to 2030 safely. You rescue Hope and Josh from the house, getting them away from the Assassin. But the time machine fails to make the return journey. You cannot return here. History says that Will, Hope, and Josh Stark do not exist after that fire. How will you make that stay true if you cannot leave that time?”

Will considered. “We’ll go into hiding, we’ll change our names and our appearance, we’ll...”

“You, personally, would have a massive Energy target on your head courtesy

of the Hunters, and your skills aren't strong enough yet to continually escape their clutches or hide from them. They wouldn't know that Hope and Josh survived, and as such would have no reason to look for them, with or without new names or faces. After all, the Assassin wouldn't fail to kill a couple of *humans*, right? You, on the other hand, they *do* know about. They would know that you survived. They likely suspect that the Alliance, as it existed at the time, was responsible. They will throw everything they have into finding you. And if they find you..."

"...they find Hope and Josh," Will whispered, feeling a chill down his spine. "I can't let that happen. I can't save them and then lose them again."

"If they had captured you, we would have some record of it; the Elites would trumpet the news everywhere. If you escaped them as you did here, they would chase you with ever-greater intensity." Adam paused. "And eventually, they'd figure out who you were protecting."

Will was shaking his head. "No, I won't let that happen."

"But there's only one way for it *not* to happen in this scenario, where the time machines fails for the return journey." Adam took a deep breath. "It means that you must actually die in that fire."

Will stared at him, jaw agape. Fil's face twitched, which for him was quite expressive. Angel gasped in horror, and burst into tears.

Will felt like crying as well. Though it seemed unlikely to matter—the ship had worked for one round-trip, and if he made it to the past there was no reason to think it wouldn't work to return him—he had to consider the possibility. Adam's message was clear: he could not live in that time frame after freeing Hope and Josh. They could mask their identities and forge new lives there, but Will could not. He must return after their rescue to 2219, or perish in 2030.

"If that was the case," Will said, his voice trembling, "it would mean I would get to hold my family one last time, to hear my son speak, to tell them how much I love them, and that I would need to leave them to keep the evil people away from them, from trying to hurt them again."

He paused, unable to continue.

"You see the concern, then," Adam said. "That is why I must raise this scenario. The question for you, Will, is this: are you willing not just to *sacrifice* your own life, but to *take* your own life, if the situation you find calls for it, in order to protect your family and leave history unaltered?"

Will took a deep breath. "Yes. I am."

Adam nodded. Fil drew in a sharp breath, turned, and walked away, followed

closely by Angel who was crying with even greater intensity.

Will watched after them. “Do they always get so emotional?”

Adam watched them as well. “Few people ever see such a pure example of altruism or heroism, and certainly not to that degree you’ve just shown.” He glanced at Will. “I don’t think they expected to be among the few who do. They went back in time to find their hero, and watched you become the man they sought. Today, you truly are the Will Stark of legend.”

DEPARTURE

The preparation for the departure in the time machine was quite extensive. Will had assumed that he'd simply jump in, go back in time, rescue his family from The Assassin, and come back to this point. Thankfully, Fil, Angel, and Adam had completed a similar journey recently, and were able to walk him through the level of planning required for such an "easy" trip. He came to the conclusion that time travel was far too complicated to handle on a regular basis, and was happy he'd only have to go through it once.

It was assumed that the Hunters had been lying in wait for him for quite some time. Given the sequence of events, they likely had camped out in the forest behind the house before the Assassin entered. They were expecting the historical Will Stark, and knew that teleporting in would alert Stark and allow him to defend himself. Everything that happened that night had likely been scripted to ensure that Will Stark, member of the Aliomenti and founder of the Alliance, would arrive at his home in shock, lose his concentration, and fall into a state of despair sufficient for the Hunters to subdue him.

Therefore, Will could not arrive in the time machine and walk into his house. The Hunters would see him there—twice—and that would cause quite a bit of confusion. They'd attack the "current" Will and the original Will, still in 2030, would not be attacked and rescued by the Alliance trio. He needed to land somewhere away from them, out of sight of the community's security cameras, but close enough that he could see when the Assassin entered the house. More than likely, that meant he'd need to land the craft in the forest outside his nearest neighbor's house early that day, teleport into his house, wait in seclusion until the Assassin began his attack, and then rescue Hope and Josh.

Adam had spoken with the Mechanic, whom Will had heard mentioned

before. The Mechanic, as it turned out, had been the one controlling the Assassin since the killer had arrived in the future. The Mechanic noted that under his questioning, the Assassin stated that he had been unaware that Josh and Smokey existed. The boy had attacked him to stop the Assassin from killing Hope, Hope had attacked the man to prevent him from hurting Josh, and Smokey had bitten the man with great fervor after the Assassin had thwarted his human combatants. After the Assassin had managed to stop the attacks by the dog and humans, the mother and child had vanished from his sight. That, Adam told him, suggested remote teleportation, an incredibly advanced Energy skill. It meant he'd need to surround both of them with Energy and then picture them moving to the forest where the time machine would be waiting. That effort would drain most Aliomenti of Energy completely.

He needed to stay out of the basement of the house, as that was where the trio had arrived for their rescue mission. It sounded as if Hope had initially hidden Josh and Smokey upstairs, probably in the boy's room. Hope napped most afternoons and spent the rest of her time in Josh's room or on the first floor. Will would need to teleport into his office, which would enable him to observe the Assassin enter the house. Once he determined that the Assassin had thwarted the attacks of Hope, Josh, and Smokey, he would need to teleport all of them to the time machine. He'd need to convince them to get into the craft to escape very quickly, because the Energy depletion would likely exhaust him to the point of needing sleep. Fil suggested that his tree recharger technique might help, which Adam and Angel both agreed was a good idea. The plan, if executed correctly, would not alter the recorded events of history, nor the memories of the Hunters, the trio, the Assassin, or Will himself.

He was provided with a full allotment of general-purpose nanos in the event that something went wrong and he'd need to shield the three of them after depleting his Energy with the teleportation effort. Though they'd not gotten any indication of the Hunters' experience of the events of that night, it was likely that Will's disappearance would have all three Hunters on high alert for an Alliance presence. Porthos might well detect the remote teleportation Energy surge coming from nearby and move to investigate. Will needed to move his passengers into the time travel craft quickly. Will suggested that he teleport them directly into the machine, a suggestion the trio found agreeable.

The time machine itself was simple to operate. It had the targeted date, time, and position coordinates locked in so that he'd arrive at the designated area of his own community with time to execute the overall rescue plan. They'd coded

the machine so that it would return to the year 2219 roughly five minutes after the departure. The Mechanic set the machine up to use a single button to activate each phase of the journey. The Depart button would seal the vehicle for the trip, warm up the time travel circuits, and then depart for the past. He'd have about thirty to sixty seconds between hitting the button and the machine jumping to the new time. The Return button would work in the same fashion, so he'd need to be prepared to defend the craft from the inside if the Hunters found him before the craft departed.

Adam took Will aside and asked if he had the gun. Will nodded. He knew the circumstance under which he'd need to use the weapon. He preferred to think of the weapon as nothing more than a precaution, not a predestined tool for suicide.

And finally, it was time to go.

Will climbed into the vehicle, feeling a chill that had nothing to do with the weather. He was about to become a time traveler. If all went well, he'd be sitting in this exact spot in less than ten clock minutes, springing the hatch and watching his son jump out to reunite with his dog. Smokey had shown tremendous emotion at seeing Will after so many weeks. He couldn't imagine how the dog would react upon seeing her greatest friend.

Adam walked up to him. "Will, I just wanted to wish you luck on this journey." He held out his hand, and Will shook it. "I want this mission to succeed, and wish I could go with you. But unfortunately... well, you know." Will nodded. They'd discussed the possibility of having someone go with Will, but realized that two people would be far more likely to draw the attention of the Hunters. He certainly couldn't take more than one of them, anyway, as the craft only held four people. After additional protests, Will had stated that the risk was his alone to take, and that had ended the discussion.

Adam released the handshake. "I greatly admire you, Will. I always have. Few men have the courage to face the unknown, and immense danger, with no thought to their own safety. Your family... they have to be the most fortunate people who ever lived. I hope I'll get to be counted among their number in the future." He smiled, and stepped away.

Angel came next. She looked at Will, and the tears started. "I'm sorry, I shouldn't be crying. This is a simple thing to do, right? We did the same thing not that long ago. The machine worked, and we got our man here safely. It will work out the same for you as well." She wiped her face dry with a sleeve, and then leaned over and hugged him tightly.

Will was truly touched at the affection the young woman had shown him

during the time he'd known her. "You're a wonderful young woman, Angel," he said, returning her embrace. "I'm glad you've become part of my life. You've been the family I thought lost all this time, and I can't thank you enough for that." He smiled. "I'm looking forward to introducing you to my wife and son shortly." Angel smiled at him. "Oh, and Angel? Tell your brother to relax a little bit." He smiled, and Angel laughed, stepping aside.

Fil stepped forward. As always, his face was a mask, his eyes hidden behind those mirrored sunglasses. The man opened his mouth to say something, thought better of it, and closed it again. He simply held out his hand, and Will clasped it.

"So... looks like you'll get your wish for a while." Will looked directly at those hidden eyes, his expression neutral.

Fil frowned. "What wish is that?"

"You've considered me to be a great risk to this community since you brought me here. I've not helped to change that thinking, I'm sure. Now I'm heading into the past, and there's a chance that I won't ever return." Will tapped the gun. "So you'll have your safety, and I may be dead and gone."

Fil's face reddened. "I have *never* wished for your death," he snarled. "You've been a risk to our community, to be sure, but if we'd thought the risk not worth it, we never would have used an untested time machine to go back in time to save you, would we? No, we would have left well enough alone, and left you to the Hunters. They would have finished you off. You're completely wrong about me."

"Am I?" Will asked. "Then why is it that other people have tried to teach me and train me so that I can learn how not to *be* such a risk? Why do *they* try to make me feel at home? Why is it that you, and *only* you, seem to only find my faults and see only the risk? I never asked for *any* of this, Fil. All I ever wanted to do was go home to my family. This has *become* my home, and the people here my family. You're the only one who has consistently pushed me away. And before I go risking my life on multiple levels to save the people in the world who mean the most to me, I'd really like to know what it is I've done to you that makes me deserve such treatment."

Fil's face tightened and his teeth were clenched, as if responding was the greatest effort of his life. "It's different with me," he said, his voice quiet. "My view of Will Stark was not the same as the rest of the people you've met here. The rest of them, they know the legend, the greatest practitioner of the Energy arts, defender of humanity, the man who fights the Elites for true freedom for our people. But for me? Will Stark was the most selfish man who ever lived."

Will's face fell. "What? Why?"

Fil ignored him. "When we had to risk our lives with the time machine to rescue you, it was a kick to the gut. Why was I risking my life to save this man, this selfish man so heavily glorified by others? It was wrong. And it seemed I was proven right. You figured out how to grow your Energy faster than anyone has ever done. Yet you never told any of us how. You were careless and caught the attention of the Hunters, and my sister was injured because of it. Yet Adam says that we're supposed to blame *ourselves* for failing to train you adequately. To me, the extra training wasn't what was relevant. For you, selfish man that you are, no amount of training would make you apply what you'd learned, because you wouldn't think to do something for the benefit of others."

Will started to protest, but Fil held up a hand. "Why did I think that? Because I knew that, if our mission to rescue you was successful, a good man would want to go back in time and rescue his family. Not just rescue them, but *be* with them. With his wife, a wonderful woman who deserved the best husband the history of the planet could offer. He should have been there spending time with his son, as it always seemed he wanted to do, to help that little boy discover himself and grow into a man. Yet you didn't do that, did you? The technology was there, and you didn't do a *thing* with it. The only explanation I had was that you were selfish, that you didn't want to waste your new abilities for those people, and especially not for that little boy, the one who never spoke, the one who wanted to be able to tell his father that he was his hero and that he loved him. But you weren't there."

Will stared at the man, his mouth agape in shock. "I don't need to listen to this!" he shouted. "Here I am, ready to risk my life to go do *exactly that!* Why on earth would you prejudge me like that?" He shook his head. "I'm going to go take care of the people who need me most." He punched the Depart button, and the top closed. He could hear a strange noise; the time travel circuits were activating.

"What I've been trying to explain to you is what I have always thought of you in the past, and why." Fil spoke to him telepathically, and Will busied himself looking at the simple controls. *"What I've learned, though, is that you truly are the hero I always believed you were when I was young. You've proved beyond any possible doubt your selflessness, your courage, and your generosity. What I need you to understand, now, as you go back in time, is that the person who needs rescuing is your wife. Your son made it through just fine. With any luck, one day I'll become the man you are."*

Will looked up sharply at Fil. The man reached for those ever-present sunglasses and pulled them off, revealing a pair of shockingly blue eyes, eyes that revealed an incredible depth of intelligence and wisdom beyond their apparent years. Eyes that literally sparkled with Energy. Eyes that looked at him with admiration.

Eyes that belonged to his son.

“Josh?” he whispered, and for the first time, the man he knew as Fil smiled, a huge, joyful smile, the smile of a man who has finally figured out who he is, and that his beliefs as a boy of a heroic father were fully justified. It was a smile that reached his eyes, the eyes he’d waited so long to see just like this.

“Take care of Mom, Dad. She’s the one who needs you.”

Dad. It was true, then. But that also meant...

He looked at Angel, and she too was smiling at him, tears of joy pouring from her shining, violet eyes, moistening her cheeks. “Love you, Daddy,” she mouthed, and blew him a kiss.

The top of the time machine snapped opaque, blocking his children from view, and then he no longer felt their presence, losing them again in time just as he’d finally found them.

RETRACE

2030 A.D.

The Leader drummed his fingers on the surface of the large, polished table in an opulent conference room at Aliomenti Headquarters, joined there by the three Hunters. It was the first meeting at this location since they'd failed to capture the outlaw Will Stark at his home. The news continued to be disturbing. Will Stark was clearly taking steps to hide the few traces to him they'd found, those few clues that had given them their best chance at capturing the loathsome fool in centuries.

Porthos had spent nearly every waking hour in deep concentration, trying to detect even the slightest hint of the fugitive's Energy scent, but there were no scents of the unique Energy signals that identified their most wanted man to their most gifted Tracker. That wasn't unusual; Stark had proven extremely adept at hiding himself and his Energy signals over the years. But Porthos had also reported difficulty in locating signals for *any* Energy users that were in poor standing with the Aliomenti. It was as if the entirety of the Alliance had vanished. They couldn't simply hope that the scourge was wiped out, however; they needed proof that the criminals had been destroyed. An Alliance that managed to hide its existence was dangerous, because it had the chance to grow and recruit new members without detection, without the Aliomenti passing judgment and thinning their ranks.

News from the human world was likewise disturbing. Large portions of the fortune Stark had earned had vanished, despite supposed precautions meant to preserve the assets for decades. The two men charged with disbursing his estate as Stark wished had accused their national government of stealing the money,

and had evidence backing their claim. Porthos found the story entertaining. Then again, he'd been the one who had so enjoyed a book by a human that he'd insisted the Hunters adopt the names of the characters. Athos believed that Stark had taken his money with him—since he wasn't actually dead—and had not bothered to tell anyone. With the sums of money in question, Stark and the Alliance could accelerate their direct recruitment of humans—activity the Aliomenti had never been able to track. On the positive side, Aramis noted, it meant they weren't poaching anyone from the core group of Aliomenti, or worse, those working at Headquarters with the Leadership team.

Outside his usual fatigue concerning the never-ending negative news about Will Stark, the Leader remained troubled by two facts gleaned in the aftermath of the failed Hunt just ended. He'd hinted at both points in the meeting held immediately after Stark's escape.

The Assassin was still missing. He had not returned to Headquarters, nor had he contacted them. The human and Aliomenti investigative teams sent to the scene of the fire failed to locate a male victim matching his description. That meant, as they'd speculated, that the Alliance had gotten him, and it wasn't a case of him trying to continue his mission until he was finished.

The Leader looked at the assembled Hunters. "Gentlemen, with the Assassin's capture, we must fill the role of official Assassin for the Leadership team. Thankfully, we were able to locate another bloodthirsty human-hater within our organization. While he's not quite as skilled or creative as the Assassin we have recently lost, he will more than make up for the deficiency with sheer cruelty and hatred." Porthos clapped quietly, stopping only after a glare from Athos.

The Leader resumed. "The Assassin was no lover of humans, as you well know. Yet he recognized that, despite his most fervent wish, he could not eliminate them with impunity. We strive for secrecy above all else, and massive numbers of deaths would lead to investigations we simply cannot risk. My greatest fear with our new Assassin is that he will lose control and carry out the type of rampage that could lead to questions that would be... uncomfortable. However, he is the best candidate we have." He nodded to the door. "Come in, Abaddon."

The man entered. Like the Assassin, Abaddon was dressed in black. He had multiple tattoos left exposed by his clothing, each of which depicted gratuitous killing and torture. The Hunters each winced at the twisted nature of the images.

It was his eyes that would give potential victims the greatest degree of

concern, however. They were a deep brown, almost black, but there were streaks of different shades of red in each eye, as if the bloodshed he sought had reached the very windows of his soul. The eyes told of a man who was pure evil, comprised of chaos and a complete lack of self-control. The random nature of the streaks made the man look cross-eyed, as if to give an idea of the instability at his core.

“Abaddon, please meet my Hunters, the men charged with finding and bringing to justice within these walls those who would violate our laws and Oaths. In circumstances where they find compelling evidence of interaction with humans, to the degree that the human or humans may be reasonably assumed to know of our existence or our advances, they will inform me. And in those cases, and *only* those cases, you will be authorized to fulfill your blood lust, limited *just* to the offending humans. This role does not provide you sanction or backing to execute humans for any other reason, and if you are found to be doing so, you, too, will be considered in violation of your Oath to not enable humans to learn of our existence. In front of the Hunters as witnesses, do you solemnly swear to carry out this role and abide by its rules and limitations?”

Abaddon’s lip curled up, and it was apparent that his twisted mind was already trying to find loopholes. He nodded, a sharp, crisp movement that was barely noticeable.

“Abaddon,” The Leader said, sighing loudly, “we must *hear* you state your agreement. A nod is not sufficient.”

“Agreed,” Abaddon said. His voice was reminiscent of nails scraping a chalkboard, and the Hunters glanced at each other, each to confirm he was not the only one frightened of this man.

“Then you are hereby and officially the new Assassin for the Aliomenti Leadership. You will report to me. I expect that I will not hear accounts of any unauthorized activities. Am I perfectly clear?”

Abaddon’s glare put a chill in the room. “Crystal.”

“Phenomenal. Now leave us.”

Abaddon left, and as the door closed, the Hunters breathed deeply, as if the man’s departure had restored air to the conference room. Porthos turned to the Leader. “While I’m not in the habit of questioning the mental stability of one of my Aliomenti brethren... that guy is a terrifying and insane monster. I’m quite fearful he is going to do something... imprudent.”

The Leader shot a lethal glance his way, and Porthos lowered his head.

“I do not appreciate the skepticism, Porthos. I am well aware of Abaddon’s

instability. Sadly, most of my other candidates are far too soft. I am concerned that should the need arise, they would hesitate to execute humans, and would perhaps not even make the effort. Therefore, I had to appoint one perhaps *too* cruel, lest the role lose its deterrence effect.”

Aramis nodded while Athos stroked his chin. “We need that. If word gets out that Stark was married and fathered a child without being captured or executed... well, I fear that the wrong message may be sent to those who are... less than fervent. The understanding that someone like Abaddon is hiding in the shadows to enforce Oaths... well, I for one would think twice.” At the Leader’s narrowed glance, Athos amended his statement. “Figuratively speaking, of course.”

The Leader gave Athos an appraising glance, and when the leader of the Hunters lowered his head, turned to look at Aramis and Porthos. “We must once more address the Stark problem. I have reason to believe that any child born to one Aliomenti-trained parent will be born with abnormally strong Energy stores and Energy control, and likely would be able to perform our most challenging tasks with ease, and perhaps perform others we can’t even fathom. Thus, Stark’s child is an inherent danger to us. He may spontaneously and publicly do things humans—or Aliomenti—should not be able to do. That will raise questions. However, it is worse than that.” He paused. “I have reason to suspect that Stark’s wife is no mere human. Instead, she is an ancient Aliomenti woman long thought dead.” He glanced at the Hunters who looked startled at this revelation. “The Energy ability enhancement mentioned with *one* parent is likely enhanced by orders of magnitude with *two* such parents. This child is not just a risk to expose us; he may be able to destroy us. *Alone*. We *must* locate him before his skills are beyond our control. If necessary, we may bring Abaddon into play.”

He glanced at the man wearing the cloak. “Porthos, you must begin traveling again.” Porthos sat up straighter, a gleam in his eye. “Interact with and travel around in the human communities as you have in the past. We must find the Starks. If you find the boy, the parents are sure to make an appearance, but be warned, the boy will be very powerful. Should he be frightened, he may unleash enough Energy to kill you and destroy a human city block. Do not treat him lightly because he is a boy; he will be just as difficult to capture as his father, if not more so. Focus on him.”

He turned to Athos and Aramis. “The two of you will travel as well, but stay separated from Porthos. They will be able to sense three of you coming far more readily than one or two. In fact, I recommend that the three of you stay separated

from each other to the greatest degree possible.” He paused, gathering his thoughts. “It seems impossible that anything other than technology or newly-discovered Energy skills by the Alliance was responsible for the escape of Will Stark. Thus, he may be with them on at least a periodic basis. The two of you are to spend your time solely focused on finding the hidden Alliance base of operations. We seem unlikely to find them with traditional methods of Energy tracing; thus, use alternate means.”

Athos nodded, and Aramis raised his hand. “Sir, what do you mean by ‘alternate’?”

“Given the Alliance’s love of humans and their progress, we must look there. They wish to edge humans forward in terms of technological development, and as such I suggest that you look for reports of unique advances and search for Alliance influence there.”

Aramis nodded. “Understood, sir. I’ll begin immediately.”

The other Hunters affirmed this statement, and left the conference room. The room descended into silence as the doors shut, cutting off the sound of the Hunters’ footsteps, closing as Porthos claimed tropical regions for his own tracking efforts. “Even the human world should be spared the sight of Aramis in a Speedo.”

Alone in the silent room, the Leader reached into his pocket and pulled out the photo he’d picked up at Will Stark’s home during the time when the Hunters had gone to check for Stark inside the burning house. He looked at the picture there, the picture of a woman known as Hope Stark.

The eyes told him that she had once been known by another name in the far distant past. And that was the second thing that had him so distressed after the events at Stark’s home.

That woman had died young, or so he’d long believed, the victim of horrific abuse that others had performed and that he had allowed—and even encouraged. Her death had shattered him, and the guilt at failing to stand up for the young woman was a feeling he’d never forgotten.

He had failed as her father.

Now, though? This woman was alive and vibrant. She looked older than he remembered; she’d been only a teenager when she died, and Hope Stark was in her late twenties. But there was no denying it was the same woman.

That meant that the man who had pronounced her dead so long ago had lied to him.

It was yet another reason to hate Will Stark.

He wouldn't believe it until there was strong evidence to support it, stronger than a mere photograph. He must go to the source and verify. The Leader rose from his chair, his heavy shoes echoing down the hallway to the elevator. He rode down to the ground level where the flying crafts were kept. The guard on duty saw that it was him and waved to him to take his choice of vehicle. The craft was a long-range variety and completely fueled. He'd need the entire capacity of the tanks to make it to his destination and back. He was powerful, to be sure, but he had never taken to teleportation, living in fear that he'd somehow miss his target and stay in the realm between locations forever. So he instead used the crude, almost human-like private personal aircraft on his journey.

He kept his mind blank during the hours-long trip; such mental quietude was beneficial, and the craft would handle navigational matters better without his interference. He eventually descended into a thick forest, well away from the large cities dotting England, and the craft came to rest in a small clearing.

The Leader emerged from the vehicle and, as the cool breeze brushed against him and the twigs snapped beneath his feet, the memories flooded over him. He remembered the somber procession as he and the others had come to bury his daughter, soft cries of grief audible around him, seeming to sound from the trees even now. Ironically, if they had held a trial for her murder there, everyone present at the grave weeping her demise would have been found guilty, save for one. The box had been lowered and covered with dirt, and a small wooden cross served as the only marker and reminder that she'd ever existed.

The Leader opened the rear compartment of the craft where various tools were stored and located a sturdy shovel. He could generate sufficient Energy to simply blast the dirt away, but he felt it appropriate to handle the excavation with a simple tool, a testament to where they'd been when the fledgling Aliomenti group had formed, and where they'd been when she'd been buried. And so he spent the better part of an hour, pushing the blade through the coarse soil, his arms and back aching from the unfamiliar form of exercise, sweat dripping from his face and neck.

At last, the shovel struck something solid. It was the simple pine box, still there after so many years. He moved with great purpose and precision, clearing the dirt completely off the box, then used Energy to raise the coffin from the hole in the ground to rest on the grass near his craft.

He raised the lid.

He knew there would be nothing inside, but the shock of seeing the empty coffin was still powerful. There was no sign that any person, alive or dead, had

ever spent time in this box stored in the ground.

He spotted the velvet pouch, however, and lifted it. The original items were gone, but something else was inside. He removed a short handwritten note.

If you are reading this note, you have finally come to the conclusion that Elizabeth did not die of the trauma she received at the hands of those she considered her extended family.

Know this: I will never allow you to hurt her again, no matter how long either of us walks this earth. If I so much as sense that you are looking for her, your walk will come to a swift and certain end.

Men such as you should never be permitted the title of father. May your guilt and suffering be eternal.

WS

The Leader crumpled the note, a surge of Energy and anger turning the ancient paper to dust. His eyes flashed.

Will Stark had issued him a warning and a declaration of war from the distant past.

He would get his wish. The Hunters would no longer be out to simply capture Will Stark for a formal sentence of death. They would be under orders to kill the man on sight.

2219 A.D.

The Leader sat in his office at Aliomenti Headquarters, remembering his discovery about Hope Stark, reminded of his journey to her grave site in the aftermath of the failed attempt to capture Will Stark at his home. They'd never located any sign of Will Stark after that day, and had not seen him again until he suddenly reappeared in what must have been the Alliance camp, surging massive amounts of Energy. He smiled at the memory of the stunned look on Porthos' face when the man had rushed in to report that he'd just detected Will Stark's Energy for the first time in nearly two centuries, despite the searches his best Hunters had carried on during the interim.

They'd bungled the operation, however. So fearful that the man would harm them, they'd tried to subdue him first, rather than simply kill him as they'd been ordered, and they'd failed. Stark had escaped them yet again. Then he'd given

himself up, and Porthos, displaying what later turned out to be foolish thinking, had thought to bring the man in to see him before the execution. Porthos knew the Leader had many questions for Will Stark... and Athos had no idea that the Leader had a daughter long thought dead. The Leader had certainly wanted to know why Will had lied about the girl's death, and how it was that the two of them were posing as a married couple in the human world so many years later. But it became quite clear, only a few moments into the questioning, that the man would answer nothing, and so they'd gone ahead with the execution order.

He should have gone with Aramis to Will's execution, not because the man needed help, or even in hindsight so that he could have stopped Will from overpowering the Assassin and escaping. No, he should have gone because he'd personally vowed to see Will Stark dead, and he should have been there to witness the event.

Nothing could be done about it now, though. You couldn't change the past.

He was tired, though. He was tired of the waiting, tired of the failure and the excuses, tired of being outsmarted and outfought. This battle with the Alliance, with Will Stark, was distracting them from their mission. Humans thrived like never before, a mere century or so after the Cataclysm, and their numbers were growing. Commerce was growing. Prosperity and advancement were accelerating at a rate never before seen in human society.

That could not continue. Not if the Aliomenti were going to continue to be the dominant force on the planet as they had been for over a thousand years.

They'd done everything they could to keep humans docile and subservient, all in a subtle fashion. The Alliance opposed them. He remembered a human discovery or two that were supposed to lead humans to infinite life spans a few centuries ago. They'd threatened the companies working on those technologies with loss of funding, threatened the researchers making breakthroughs. They'd even managed to sabotage one experiment in which they ensured that every person in the group receiving the treatments had died within six months. That so scared people that they gave up the research on their own; nobody wanted to die *sooner*, after all. Those days were gone. They'd wasted time on Stark and his family that would have been better spent keeping their boot on the neck of humanity. It was time to reassert Aliomenti supremacy, and that meant there would be no more subtle, hidden tactics.

The Leader sent a communication out to every one of the Aliomenti throughout the world. They were *all* Hunters now. They were *all* Assassins. They were to find anyone who was part of the Alliance. They could be brought

to Headquarters for re-education if the capturing parties thought it possible; if not, they were to be executed. On the spot. Without questioning.

He added an addendum, however. If anyone found a woman who looked like Hope Stark, famous for marrying the notorious outlaw years ago, she was to be brought to Headquarters unharmed, without exception.

He would protect Hope Stark. It was what any father would do.

FOUND

2030 A.D.

The investigations into the fire at the home of Will and Hope Stark had finally ended.

The fire itself had burned with such intensity that everything within the walls of the house had been turned to ash. The exterior walls had likewise been completely consumed by the inferno, and the only things remaining were the bricks forming the chimney and the concrete foundation walls and floor of the basement. The pile of ashen debris in the lower level was extensive, and it was impossible for the investigation team to determine if anyone once living was buried there in cremated form. News sites noted that, given the nature of the destruction, it was almost as if a small-scale, space-confined nuclear weapon had been detonated within the walls of the Starks' home, as only a device such as that could generate the heat required to create the destruction they'd observed.

After over a month of waiting, none of the Starks had come forward. A reluctant coroner had no choice but to officially rule all three members of the family dead, despite the lack of bodies to prove it. After all, he reasoned, even if the family had taken an impromptu vacation, they'd likely hear about what happened and speak up after so much time had passed if they were alive and able to do so. Police likewise reported that they'd found no evidence suggesting that the arsonist had escaped the raging fire he'd started. With no living victims to press charges, and no criminal to charge with a crime, the case was closed.

Tabloids enjoyed teasing readers with conspiracy theories about the nature of, and the purpose of, the holes in the basement and back yard. Had the Starks expected an attack and started building an escape tunnel? Had the arsonist

tunneled his way in? Were they building a secret vault under their back yard, with entrances from the surface and the basement?

Eventually, the conspiracy chatter was replaced with a more serious question. Will Stark, with both his own phenomenal success and investments in many fledgling businesses, was both the face and the engine of the country's nascent recovery from economic turmoil. What did it say for that recovery when someone was clearly willing to murder the man? And who would take his place?

While such questions continued to be discussed in public, the nation's watchful eye turned away from the burned-out shell of the Stark's home. News channels no longer demanded access to film the scene for the alternating depressing and scandalous related stories of the day. The site became a less dramatic visual as cleanup crews removed the ash and rubble, leaving nothing but the smooth concrete poured to form the foundation floors and walls. Quiet and silence returned to the site the Starks had once called home.

Darkness fell on a moonless night, with a brisk wind that rustled the leaves of the trees still standing unharmed around the remains of the home.

As the clock passed midnight, there was movement at the house.

A fine line formed in the concrete floor, working its way around, until it formed a square measuring eight feet per side. The square began to rise slowly into the air, a solid slab of concrete a foot thick, and a faint rumble sounded as the square moved. The square cleared the floor and a gap opened up revealing that the slab was supported by four large steel columns, and the rumbling sound increased in volume. After several minutes, the original slab was over seven feet above the floor of the basement and another slab appeared, the entire structure rising out of the ground like the elevator car it was.

Hope Stark, hair rustling in the cool breeze, stood in the elevator car, holding the hand of her son, Josh.

Mother and son took deep breaths, the first outside air that the two of them had breathed in nearly two months. The underground bunker Hope had built was designed to withstand another economic calamity in which food, water, or air quality might be compromised, or in which their personal safety was threatened. Nobody else knew it existed, and nobody else knew how to get in.

Not even Will.

Hope had found a use for her long-dormant Aliomenti abilities when the house had first been built. She had remotely teleported small amounts of dirt from under the house, and scattered it around the property, until she'd cleared out sufficient space for the bunker. Using scuba gear for breathing, and a

flashlight to enable her to see, she was able to teleport herself into the underground bunker and gradually reinforce the walls, create the hydraulics for the elevator car, build connections into underground electric, water, and sewage lines separate from those going to her house, and added an air filtration system. She gradually stocked food supplies, water, and materials for entertainment in the bunker. She completed the underground hideout, which would enable them to live in moderate comfort for several months without needing to leave, over the course of several years of work.

Hope was troubled, though. She was the only person who knew that the bunker existed. Yet someone *else* had moved her and Josh from the kitchen just as the Assassin was preparing to strike the deathblows. It was unnerving. Somebody out there knew her true identity, *and* had the ability and desire to save her—and more importantly, Josh. What disturbed her is that she'd been prepared to move them herself. Something had stopped her, though. Something she couldn't recall just now. Whatever it was, she'd not done what needed to be done.

Someone had bailed her out.

Hope had technology that kept Energy inside the bunker. She could relax and be at ease, and it enabled Josh to learn of the gifts he'd been born with, without having to worry about being detected. She glanced at her son. Josh had grown tremendously in all facets of his life during their self-imposed exile. She found that he'd absorbed most of what she'd taught him over the past six years, and the few things that were fuzzy were quickly clarified. She taught him about Energy and about how to Shield that Energy to make sure that nobody unfriendly could find him once they left the safety of the bunker. She explained her own life story, how she came to meet Will, and the reason that Will must now stay far away from them.

The little boy had nodded during her explanation of this last part without really meaning it, for he wanted his father there with him. She knew what he was thinking, even without using telepathy or empathy. Josh was hurt that Will was staying away. Though she explained that his father's only goal was to keep the boy safe, Josh believed the truth was something else entirely, that Will had *chosen* to stay away to avoid dealing with him anymore, dealing with his issues. Her efforts to convince him otherwise had proved futile for now. She hoped things would improve soon. She didn't want Josh to poison his sibling's understanding of Will. Her hand instinctively went to her belly, and she felt the movement. She knew the baby was a girl, her little angel, a future reminder of

Will as he moved around and drew the Aliomenti away.

Josh also missed his dog, Smokey; she was the closest thing to a friend he'd ever had. Hope feared that the dog had died in the fire, but elected not to say that to the boy. Josh had enough issues to deal with already.

Hope knelt on the concrete and looked Josh in the eye. "It's a very dangerous time for us, Josh," she said. "We must pretend we are different people. And we must avoid seeming different, and that means we have to avoid using our Energy unless absolutely necessary, and even then we need to use the least amount possible. You are very, very powerful, and the people who did all of this would sense your Energy and find us both. Do you understand?"

The little boy nodded, the wind tousling his sandy blond hair. He was trying to look brave, but his ice blue eyes showed genuine fear.

"We'll need to use different names." She thought for a moment, and then nodded. "*Stark* can be rearranged to spell *Trask*, so that will be our new last name. You... you should use your middle name. So you can go by Phillip or Phil."

"That's spelled F-I-L, right Mommy?" Josh asked.

Hope nodded absentmindedly, and didn't correct him. "That's very good. I will be...Phoebe. The first four letters can be rearranged to spell *Hope*." She patted him on the head. "Nice to meet you, Fil Trask."

The little boy grinned at the new game. "Nice to meet you too, Mommy Trask."

"Those are fine choices for names," a man's voice said, and Hope froze. "You'll also need a new place to live, and some money for your journey." He walked out of the trees toward them. Hope pushed Josh behind her, but he poked his head out to watch.

"Your secret is safe with me... Phoebe." He smiled. "I'm one of you, and I'm on your side." The man held his left hand palm-side up, and light erupted from his palm, partially illuminating his face and his short brown hair.

Hope was able to recognize the man, and sense that he was trustworthy. She struggled to recall his name, but a haze began to lift from her memory of the plan they'd followed that fateful day. This man was a friend. "It looks like we carried everything out successfully, then. The Assassin got in. The fire started. We got away." She shook her head, shuddering at the memory of the Assassin. "It took a great deal of effort to play my part and not blast that man into oblivion. He's simply too terrible to be allowed to walk free. It was difficult enough working to suppress Josh's Energy all of those years, even more so when

I realized that one of the side effects turned out to be his permanent silence.” She finally remembered his name. “It was a terrible burden to carry, Adam.”

Adam looked at her with sympathy. “I don’t envy you that part of these past seven years at all, Phoebe. I assume *he* knows what happened on that front?” He glanced at the boy, and the mother nodded. “He may have issues with it later, but very young children are extremely adaptable and resilient. As to the Assassin... he’s terrible, all right, and certainly deserves to die. But we must be careful what we ask for. Sometimes, we get just that. And it’s worse than what we already know.” He smiled at Phoebe. “You did well. I know Will is quite proud of you, wherever he might be at the moment. He’ll always be keeping an eye out for both of you in his own fashion. Never forget that.” He looked at Fil. “Your father loves you, young Fil. More than you’ll ever know. Don’t confuse his lack of presence with a lack of love.” The little boy stared at the man, and then looked away. It would take time for him to truly understand.

Adam turned back to Phoebe. “Will asked me to make sure that both of you were taken care of after all of this happened.” He glanced at the skeletal foundation walls around him, and shook his head. “How are the two of you doing?”

“Mommy’s been puking!” Josh sang, and even mimicked the act and sounds in case there was some confusion about the meaning of the term.

Adam looked at her with deep concern. “Are you ill?”

She shook her head, a hand resting on her belly. “Just a bit of morning sickness.”

He nodded, a look of comprehension or memory on his face. “My congratulations. My charge to protect extends to your newborn as well.” He cocked his head, and then smiled. “Your child loves the stories you tell of your husband. Do you want to know if Fil is getting a brother or sister?”

Hope shook her head. “I already know. Right now, I just need to get us out of here.”

Adam nodded, and removed a thick folder from his coat. “I have a credit card, checkbook, and debit card for you, along with other key documents. There’s a house rented in your new name in the neighborhood I’ve scouted out for you. The checking account is nicely funded, and the rest of your money—*all* of it—is accessible when you need it. We’d rather not open a new checking account with several billion dollars, for obvious reasons.” He smiled. “You need not get a job because of financial concerns, Mrs. Trask.”

He walked closer, and handed her the materials. Her name—her *new* name—

was on the checks and debit card, with an address in a small town in Oregon. The forms included birth certificates for both of them as well. “You’ll be able to start fresh there, with your new names, but we need to work on your appearances. You in particular, Phoebe, will be easily recognized. A newly-widowed mother arriving in a community with a sizable amount of money, bearing a striking resemblance to a very famous dead woman, is going to raise a lot of eyebrows.”

Phoebe smirked. “You worked out the names ahead of time and pushed them to me, didn’t you?”

Adam’s feigned look of innocence was the only answer she got.

Hope shrugged. “In terms of altering appearance... well, I haven’t tried that in a while, but I think I remember the process. I’ll need to teach Fil, however. I think we should both go with dark hair, since we’re better known for our lighter hair color. Especially me.”

“Agreed,” Adam replied, nodding. “Both of you have rather round faces, so I’d recommend a narrower facial structure as well.”

Hope nodded. “I can work on my changes. Would you be able to walk Jo—er, Fil, through the process?”

Adam smiled. “I’d be delighted.” He glanced at the boy. “Fil, has your mom been teaching you how to use your Energy?”

The boy took a moment to realize that *he* was Fil. “Yes. I can move things around without touching them now!” He grinned.

“You’ll be able to do much more than that when necessary. For now, though, that will suffice. You need to concentrate your Energy on your hair, and see the Energy changing the color to black.”

Mother and child did as he suggested, and Adam watched as the hair on their heads gradually darkened until it was pitch black. Adam applauded lightly. Phoebe and Fil looked at each other, and both gasped at their new hair color and the remarkable difference it made in their appearance.

“You’ll need to use the same approach to narrow your face, Fil. Please realize that this ability is more cosmetic than structural. You can narrow your face a bit, but you can’t make yourself a foot taller. Just be careful that you don’t narrow your faces too dramatically.” Mother and son repeated the process, and when they were finished they were nearly unrecognizable as the “dead” Hope and Josh Stark. The widow Phoebe Trask and her son, Fil, had been born.

Adam took the driver’s license back from Phoebe, and held it up so that it faced the dark-haired, narrow-faced woman. The empty section for her picture

gradually filled in with her new face, one that would take time to get used to seeing.

“I will take the two of you to the outskirts of your new town, to a hotel there with a reservation in your name, Phoebe. There will be a package there waiting for you, which will have some cash in it, and the keys to a minivan with your remaining possessions. Your story is, in essence, a true one. Your husband perished in a fire that destroyed your home and possessions, leaving you a widow at a young age, with a young son and another child on the way. You have a modest amount of money from a life insurance policy, and wanted to move away to start fresh and erase the sights that would remind you of your loss. You’ve come into some possessions from donations, which will be in the truck, but you will need to do some shopping.” He glanced at Fil. “You will need to go to school, and you will make friends there and learn in a classroom. School and learning will be very easy for you, Fil, because your mom and dad have taught you so much. But it is very important that you avoid using your Energy except when it’s exceptionally important. Do you understand?”

“Yes.” Fil said. His mother told him this on a regular basis. Time would tell how well a six-year-old boy truly understood such words.

“Remember, if you use a lot of Energy—either of you—the people who did this to your house will find out, and they will come after you. They are not happy that they failed. And Phoebe... I think you are wise to assume that they’ll figure out who you *truly* are as well, if they haven’t already.” The woman merely nodded.

He looked at the two of them. “Since I’ve been asked to keep an eye on you, I’m going to move into your house. I will alter my appearance so as to look much older, and become your father-in-law, Phoebe. Adam Trask, at your service.” He bowed low, and despite the seriousness of the situation, Hope found herself laughing. “I’ll be a quiet old curmudgeon in public, but I can watch Fil when you need to go out alone, and can help with his training. And I might even be able to help correct his homework.”

“What’s homework?” Fil asked. Adam laughed.

Phoebe looked at Adam, her newly-narrowed face displaying a look of curiosity as memories suppressed reentered her consciousness. “You sound very familiar, Adam. I feel like we met even before we started planning everything that needed to happen on that night. Can you help me remember where we first met?”

Adam smiled. “The key question is not *where* we met, Phoebe. The key

question is *when*.”

WAITING

2219 A.D.

Joshua Phillip Stark sat at the edge of the Alliance camp, his back against one of the giant trees forming the perimeter. He watched the faint Energy dance between the trees, a sight only he could see. Energy had been injected into him with such force from his very birth that he saw it everywhere. He looked to the spot where the time machine had sat before its departure, and saw the unique sparks indicative of Will Stark. With a sigh, Fil pulled his knees close and wrapped his arms around them.

It was something he'd seen his father do on a regular basis.

It had been an incredibly challenging two months, starting when they'd made the decision to rescue Will Stark from the pages of history, a history that said the man had vanished and was presumed dead following an explosion and inferno that consumed his home and everyone in it.

Their conversation had been much like the staged conversation held to convince Will that he was the one who had rescued Josh and Hope from the house. Everything had been staged to get the man into the time machine, because they had all known he wasn't going back to the house. History said Will Stark would emerge from the time machine much sooner than that. They weren't sure that even Will would choose to follow the path set before him. If Will had known that his son was already here, he might never choose to leave. And if he'd learned that the morning of the fire Hope Stark had discovered she was pregnant, and that the daughter he'd never known existed was in this camp... would he ever, willingly, go?

They couldn't take that chance. Will's journey to the past was the key to

everything. They'd needed to teach him, to prepare him, to drive him to the point where he chose to enter the time machine of his own free will. They'd convinced themselves that keeping hidden those details that might keep Will in this time was necessary.

As for him, Fil's story had been completely true. He *had* viewed his father as a selfish man, perhaps embarrassed by his son's disability, a man who had no doubt decided that he'd simply give up on the boy and walk away. It didn't mesh with his memory of the man those first six years of his life, but when Hope had said his father needed to go and stay far away from them for their own protection... his young mind couldn't fathom that. He especially hadn't been able to fathom that the choice to stay away would be far more painful for Will than for his son.

He'd been somewhat more accepting of that reality when he'd become a father himself. The thought of being separated from his little girl was devastating, and yet if it had been necessary for her survival he would have done so. The Hunters and Abaddon had made sure that such choices were no longer his to make. He wished once more for the opportunity to punish Abaddon, but a few kicks at his predecessor, the Assassin, would have to do.

Over the decades that followed, he'd had plenty of time to forgive his father and himself for their self-imposed views of failure. Seeing the man again, just as he remembered him from nearly two centuries earlier, had brought back his old emotions and memories. He'd needed to keep Will from getting close; the man would recognize his own son for certain if given the chance. He'd grown to be a man, and his sandy blond hair was now the jet-black color of Will's own, so he was somewhat camouflaged. His eyes, though, hadn't changed, and he knew his father would recognize them in an instant. Fil had fashioned the sunglasses to ensure that his father would never see the eyes that would expose the truth of his identity, and thus make Will's choice to go back in time—*far* back in time—even more difficult. Why leave to save what was already there in front of you?

And so he'd gone along with the subterfuge, treating his own father as an unwelcome stranger, planting the idea in his mind repeatedly that Will would destroy his new family, for he knew Will Stark would do anything to avoid being a risk to anyone he even remotely cared for. In reality, all he truly wanted was to spend time with the man, before his father and his hero began his incredible journey. For he knew he might never see the man again. But he did the job he needed to do, just as Adam had done when he'd "stolen" the money from the Trust his parents had set up to give away their vast fortune after their deaths. It

had been a nasty process, one that bothered Adam immensely, and a process that would have left two innocent human men viewed by history as the greatest, most bungling thieves in history. Driven by duty though he was, Adam wouldn't let the innocent be victims, and had arranged affairs so that others—guilty of other crimes, but guilty nonetheless—took the blame for Adam's own heist.

Fil didn't have the ability to shift the blame for his behavior onto others. He could only hope that, in time, Will would come to understand why he'd done what he'd done, and would applaud his son's dedication to duty, no matter how painful that duty had been. For both of them.

Fil glanced at the backpack sitting on the ground next to him, the same bag he'd used to retrieve items from his childhood home on the trip back in time to rescue his father from death at the hands of the Hunters. He chuckled, noting the irony that Fil, the son, had rescued his father from punishment for the crime of enabling Fil to exist.

Inside the bag, he found a baseball. It was the ball he'd used to play catch with Smokey that morning all of those years ago, when his Energy stores had grown so immense that his mother had no longer been able to Shield them—or him. She was already too weakened from her early term pregnancy with Angel, who brought another set of Energy abilities for Hope to deal with.

Angel. The thought of his wonderful little sister brought a smile to his face. Her joy at seeing their father had been quite touching, and made it so much more difficult for him to maintain the charade of his negative attitude. Angel had never met her father before, had never even seen him. She was so fearful of slipping up, of calling him Dad, that she'd insisted on the formal "Mr. Stark" for address, rather than "Will." She'd changed her natural platinum-blond hair to red trying and succeeding in preventing Will from seeing in her his wife's near-twin. Angel had learned of their father solely through the stories that their mother, along with Adam and others within the Alliance, shared, and though at times Fil thought they were embellishing a bit, he now wondered if perhaps they hadn't been restrained in their praise. Will Stark was a man who knew what he stood for, a man who knew the price he was willing to pay to support those principles and those he loved. The hero he'd worshiped as a six-year-old boy was even more mythic now, after he himself had grown, married, had a child and watched those loved ones die. When Will stated he was willing to risk his own life for the mere chance to help Josh and Hope live, it was too much for him to take. He wished he had been given such a choice, for he knew that, like his father, he would have accepted any offer that would have altered the horrific outcome.

Adam arrived silently and sat down next to Fil. Adam glanced at the man and recognized the brooding face, read the emotions pouring from Fil. “We’ve done our duty, Fil. Now Will must do his.”

“I know,” Fil said. “When do we find out if he succeeded?”

“You’re still here. So is Angel. That’s the proof we need, and Will would say it’s the only outcome that matters.”

Fil rested his chin on his knees. “I know that that’s *his* definition of success. But I’d still like to see him again, when he knows the entire history of what we’ve all been through. That’s my definition of the success of this mission. Seeing my father again. No acting, no drama... and no crazy sunglasses.” He tapped the accessory.

“You do know that you don’t have to wear those anymore, right?” Adam’s voice was sympathetic.

Fil pulled the glasses off of his head, glanced at them, and put them back on. “Of course. I’ve grown rather fond of them, however. It’s how my father knows me now. So, they stay. For him.”

Adam said nothing.

“They’ll come after us, you know,” Fil said.

“Who? The Hunters?”

Fil nodded. “All of them. They’ll eventually stop waiting for Dad to do something stupid so that they can track us. They tried that the last time, gave it about twenty years, and then officially decided that he was dead. Now that they know he’s not... it can’t be good for your credibility for a man you’ve declared dead to show up, be hauled in for questioning, and then break his way out of Headquarters and possibly kill a Hunter in the process. No, they’ll come after all of us as accomplices. And truth be told, we’re just that.”

Adam glanced at him. “You know, you *could* simply go to the island and eradicate them.” It wasn’t a question.

Fil nodded. “I know I could. Yet that would make me no better than them. Sometimes, the easy thing to do, the emotional response, is exactly the wrong thing to do. I know that if I did what you suggest, I’d not only get the Hunters and Abaddon and the Leader—who would have earned their fate—I’d end up wiping out all of the Aliomenti there who are simply enjoying their lives, who don’t wish us to be destroyed, but who lack the will to stand up and tell the Leadership to stop. Worse, I’d kill the humans working there. It would make me no better than the Assassin who thought it fine to kill two good men that night in order to come after my mother.” He sighed. “There are many solutions, but none

that I like.” He glanced at Adam. “There’s precedent that my emotional responses hurt a lot of innocent people. I’ll make sure anything I do is targeted only at those who come after me and my family directly.”

The Mechanic, clad in his orange bodysuit, walked up to them. “I take it the time machine got away without fail?”

Fil and Adam nodded. “Everything went as planned,” Adam said. Then he sighed. “I wonder how long it took Will to forgive us for what we did?”

“I suspect forgiveness was immediate, that he understood the motives were pure, but that he was still disturbed about the approach,” the Mechanic said, rubbing his chin thoughtfully. “I don’t doubt he’d understand the reasoning behind it and appreciate it. Yet, I imagine he’d take a very long time to wonder why it was he was never given the chance to make an informed choice, to prepare himself for his journey.” He glanced at Fil. “Or to say a very long goodbye to his son and daughter.”

Fil nodded. “I know. Trust me. I’ve often wondered that as well. Yet, when I got the chance these past two months to see my father as he truly is, I couldn’t help but fear the long goodbye might be one he’d never finish. That decision would have been rather complicated for my actual existence.” He smiled. “Now, though, after it’s all done, after we’ve sent him on his way? I’m pretty sure he would have left no later than he did, and I do wish we’d altered the plan. With the time machine gone, there’s no chance to go back and change that decision, though.”

“Will has his own difficult decisions to make in what will become his future, our past,” the Mechanic noted. “He will undoubtedly come to understand that sometimes, the most difficult approach is the correct one, just as you’ve learned these past few months.”

“I wish I knew what happened to him,” Fil mused, more to Adam than the Mechanic. “Before he was, well, born.” He chuckled. “That statement would get me institutionalized in many societies.”

Adam laughed. “We’d be right there with you, since we’d nod right along. But yes, the disappearance of the historical Will Stark, shortly before the birth of the man we just sent back in time, is quite the mystery.”

The Mechanic glanced at him. “I’m not sure I follow. Can you explain?”

Adam nodded. “As you know, Will Stark was well known among our kind for centuries. He eventually clashed with the leadership over the establishment of the Oaths and the prescribed punishments that would be enforced by the Hunters and Assassins. That led him to leave the society he’d helped build to

establish the Alliance, which believed that controlled assistance in human development of technology was not only acceptable, it was a moral imperative.”

The Mechanic nodded. “This part I know.”

“He became a hunted man, of course, and as such he’d disappear from any contact with Aliomenti—Alliance or otherwise—for years or even a decade or longer. But he always did come back, except the last time. He vanished in roughly the year 1994, a year or two before the man we went back in time to rescue was born. The newborn Will Stark lived and grew following his birth in the year 1995, and that Will Stark was lost to history in the year 2030, the year we pulled him *forward* in time to send him *back* in time. The mystery is this: why has that historical, pre-1995 Will Stark never reappeared?”

“We can be fairly certain that if the Hunters or Assassin had gotten him, it would have been loudly trumpeted,” Fil added. “His continual escapes were the source of great embarrassment, and probably encouraged a third of our membership to follow their convictions and move to the Alliance. Capturing or killing him would be a tremendous victory for them, one they’d want to celebrate. He’s not vanished by their doing, that’s for certain.”

“Perhaps,” the Mechanic mused, “he became so proficient at hiding that he simply stayed hidden.”

“Perhaps,” Adam agreed. “And if that is the case, then we must wait for him to choose to show himself again.”

“I think he knows that the Elites are going to mount a large scale attack on the Alliance at some point,” Fil said. “And so he remains in hiding, letting them grow overconfident, and then he’ll appear at a time that tilts the battle in our favor.”

“Indeed,” Adam replied, as the Mechanic nodded, thoughtful. “Yet they must know that *you* are still out there as well, Fil. They can’t underestimate your abilities. And Angel, though not quite as powerful as you... she’s a total mystery to them.”

“I’m what?” Angel asked, walking up to join the group.

Fil gave her a quick recap of the conversations, and Angel smiled. “He’s out there, hiding in the shadows, protecting me, protecting Fil, and mostly protecting Mom, wherever she is. He’ll reveal himself only if he feels it necessary to make sure that all of us are safe.”

“Have you seen him?” the Mechanic asked.

“No, but I’ve sensed him, before, during, and after the time he was here with us from the past.” She looked into the forest. “He’s probably out there now,

listening in, but making sure that the Hunters are heading in the wrong direction.”

Fil nodded. “I agree. If that’s the case, then we’ll simply need to wait until Dad decides to reveal himself to us. Until then? We live, freely.”

STEPS

Will was completely oblivious to his surroundings in the time machine for several minutes, lost in the shock of the events of the last few moments at camp. He was aware only of the sound of his own gasping breaths, of his heart threatening to beat its way free of body.

He'd found his son. Josh had survived the attack and the fire. He'd grown into a man, had managed to meet up with and join the Aliomenti Alliance, and was a major force in their organization.

And Angel. He had a daughter? He'd had no idea. The only explanation that made any sense was that Hope had been pregnant at the time of the attack, and only recently so, if she hadn't told him yet. It wasn't something she'd keep to herself.

He'd found his children. They'd survived the fire. The Assassin who'd been sent after them had not killed them; he had, as he put it, failed in his mission. He'd only managed to burn the house down, but houses could be rebuilt. In the camp where he'd been living, buildings assembled and disassembled themselves on a regular basis.

Josh—no, Fil now—had survived. He was there. Almost two hundred years old, but he was there. And since Angel hadn't been born at the time of the fire—then Hope had survived as well, long enough, at least, to give birth to their daughter.

That meant his mission had succeeded. Or at least, it had succeeded in the last iteration of whatever time loop he was on. Time travel would certainly make your head spin.

He wished he'd gotten the chance to shake his son's hand, to tell him he was proud of him. Sure, Fil had been rather aggressive toward him, but he'd

explained why. Left unsaid was the obvious: for a man like Will, knowing his children had survived—and had actually been with him the entire time he'd been in the future—might have been enough to dissuade him from getting in the time machine. He'd want to spend time with his children, to be sure. How long would it have taken for him to decide to leave, though? He could talk of duty and claim he'd do what needed to be done, but that was a lot easier said when the desired result—healthy children, children who had survived an assault on their home—wasn't looking you in the eye.

The three of them—Adam and his two grown children—had manipulated him. They'd preyed upon his sense of duty, and Fil had ensured that at least one person in that camp made him feel unwelcome, that someone wanted him gone, that someone would make him feel as if his mere presence would be the death of all of them. It was certainly easier to leave that type of environment, real or imagined, than one that mirrored the future he'd always wanted. They knew him well enough to play their parts and ensure he made the decision he needed to make. It didn't make him happy, but he understood their logic.

Yet, in the end, they'd misjudged him. If he'd learned that Fil was his adult son, and Angel the daughter he'd never known he had, he would eventually have left, anyway. For there was one person he'd never seen in that camp while he'd been there.

Hope.

He would go back for her, even if everything else was as it should be. How long had she survived after the fire? Had she been hurt at all? Fil had said to focus on Hope, not him. That was disconcerting. Perhaps she'd been gravely injured in Fil's memory of the day, living just enough to deliver Angel, and then... He didn't want to think of it, but he must.

The larger issue is that he didn't know if Hope had been invited into the Alliance culture, gone through the Purge and whatever other treatments might enable all of them to develop their Energy and claim their immortality. She could have survived the fire, lived her life out, and died of old age. Perhaps Fil had been delivering that message: that Will needed to bring his mother to the future, or enable her to live to that future date.

Something nagged at him, though. Something he'd missed in the emotions of the moment, emotions that might be driven by a sense of duty or a sense of shock.

His mission, as they'd discussed it, involved him going back to the night of the fire. He was to rescue Hope and Josh from the Assassin, from burning to

death in the inferno he'd seen before the Hunters had jumped him and beaten him. Josh was saved. He'd grown into a man, becoming known as Fil, and had managed to live nearly two centuries before coming back to rescue his neophyte father. Likewise, his daughter Angel had been born, grown to adulthood, and like her brother had lived an impossibly long lifetime. She had joined her brother to risk her life traveling through time to save her father, a man she'd never met.

But they'd lived. More to the point: they'd *aged*. They'd existed throughout all of those two centuries between his disappearance in 2030 and his reappearance in 2219.

It could only mean that the time machine had failed. He'd not, in this cycle of history, saved his children by returning them to the future. They'd reached the future by living their way to it. And now that he knew that, he certainly couldn't take young Josh and unborn Angel back with him.

Was he to wait until Angel was born and then return to the future with only Hope?

He shook his head. No, he wouldn't do that to his children. He'd vowed that he would not. His birth parents had abandoned him emotionally when his older brother died suddenly at the age of five. Nothing Will did was satisfactory compared against the idealized image of the older son they'd adored in life and idolized in death. He'd later heard the expression that the opposite of love wasn't hate, it was apathy, and he knew it to be so from living that truth growing up. It wasn't that his parents hated him; they simply didn't care about him at all. When they'd died in a car crash when he was sixteen years old, people had remarked how well he'd handled it, how mature he'd seemed. The reality was that his parents had been dead for years. He'd lived in poverty; his parents had directed their meager estate to anyone and everyone but him. And in that poverty he'd vowed that he'd be rich and that when he had children, he'd never leave them emotionally abandoned, or devoid of a loving household, as he had been.

No, he would not leave his children behind. Not without their mother.

Perhaps that was Josh's message to him as the adult Fil, though. He needed to rescue Hope, even if it meant leaving Josh in the past alone. How would Angel come to exist in the past then? Had he waited the months it would take her to be born before leaving for the future with just Hope?

If that was the plan for him, he'd prefer the machine get stuck in whatever time loop he was in and never emerge on the other side. They wouldn't send him back expecting him to make that type of decision, would they?

He became aware of a sudden hush inside the machine. The top became clear

and vanished, and Will scrambled out of the craft and walked several yards away before he stopped and looked around.

He was not inside the forest of the De Gray Estates, but instead stood in a field, cleared for miles around in most directions, with no sign of his neighborhood or the rest of the town, including the massive dome over the main city of Pleasanton, in sight. He supposed that when traveling back in time the physical location on the planet might be only a secondary concern, so perhaps he was just a few miles from his destination. The concern there was that he doubted he'd been given any excess time to travel to the neighborhood upon arriving in the past.

He had the ability to travel instantly, however, though he didn't want to do so. No sense alerting the Hunters of his location. But if he had to do it, he would.

He chose to teleport to his watching post in the forest behind his neighbor's house. He'd walked among those trees many times, and knew the area well. Perhaps that was why he'd been so drawn to the majestic trees near the Alliance camps; they reminded him of home. He concentrated on the image of that spot, and pictured himself traveling there.

Nothing happened.

Will frowned. He'd never before failed in his teleportation efforts. Perhaps he was much farther from the location than he thought he was.

He needed to go back to see the people in the Alliance about this. And while he was there, he would take the opportunity to spend time with and to speak to his children. To find out what, exactly, he was supposed to do in the past, knowing they needed to stay there and age their way to their present. Perhaps they could install a GPS device in the craft that could give him directions.

He turned back to the craft and froze.

It was gone.

Lying on the ground where he'd expected to see the time machine were several objects he'd not noticed in the craft, possibly items that had been stored in the trunk. One looked like a bag containing clothing. He opened a pouch and was surprised to find a supply of copper, silver, and gold coins. He closed up the pouch and examined a third item, which looked like a piece of paper. He flipped it over and noticed writing there, which moved as he touched the surface of the paper. It was a computer, the thickness and texture of paper, operated by a touch sensor. Will read the note displayed on the paper computer screen.

Will Stark —

You are reading this at the end of your journey in the time machine, no doubt

wondering why the machine has disappeared, why you are in an open field instead of a dense grove of trees near your home, and why you have doubts about the actual nature of your journey.

You see, we've known since before we retrieved you from your back yard the true nature of the journey that awaits you, and we knew that, even for one as devoted to duty and family as Will Stark, that simply telling you what needed to be done could frighten any man into avoiding that duty. We say this not as an insult to you, but from the perspective of knowing how great the request of you would be.

We knew that, in order to complete your journey, you needed to be adequately trained in Energy usage, be well supplied with nanos, have a basic grasp of the history of the Aliomenti—and not have an Alliance tattoo on your palm. We also believed it important that you were the one to make the final decision to climb into the time machine and press the button, rather than being forced into it. Our actions since bringing you into the future have been designed to meet these ends. We realized that knowing the true identities of Fil and Angel would lessen the likelihood that you'd make that choice, and as such they hid their identities. Fil, against his every true desire, played the role of one seeking to push you away, invoking guilt and anger where necessary, to ensure that you'd be more eager to leave.

We created an elaborate story about the decisions you might need to make during your journey in time, knowing full well that you'd never need to make any of them in the context we described, but in entirely different sets of circumstances. We did this so that you would recognize that it was not a journey or a mission to take lightly, and thus we pushed various horrific scenarios at you to reinforce this truth.

On the night of the fire, you will, in fact, be responsible for moving your wife and son away from an assassin and into a secret underground bunker beneath your home, a bunker created by your wife without your knowledge. She built that bunker for just that occasion, for she knew the attack was coming, and knew that she'd need to teleport the two of them to safety. In the face of the assassin, however, she froze, and but for your action they might have died. You do, in fact, save them. You must.

How is it that Hope could plan to teleport anyone to safety? How did she know what would happen that night?

She knew because someone from the future told her. She could plan to save herself and her son because the woman you know as Hope Stark had been alive

for nearly a thousand years before the assassin entered your house that night.

The woman you know as Hope Stark was born in the village where the earliest Aliomenti made their first homes, the first and only child ever born to at least one Energy-trained parent until Josh Stark was born centuries later. Hers was not a happy childhood, Will. Her father decreed her to be the one subjected to all manner of experiments to find what exercises, substances, and foods would trigger the Energy they'd seen others use, the one to test if a given substance might be useful or harmful. Her mother fought for her, tried to stop it all, but in the end that greed—that desire to have another absorb the pain needed to make progress—won out. Elizabeth's mother died standing up for her daughter's safety, and with a broken heart.

This left Elizabeth, as she was known, without a true protector. Her physical and mental health deteriorated as she watched her own father grow his power over the community in exchange for his daughter's suffering. She needed someone to stand up for her, to remove her from her hellish existence. And her hero arrived one day.

Her hero was—and is—you.

You see, Will, the reason that the Hunters and the Leader and all the rest of the Aliomenti know of a mythic hero named Will Stark is because that man arrived in that first small Aliomenti village as Elizabeth celebrated her sixteenth birthday. Unknown to everyone in that camp, Will Stark had just arrived in their land from a different part of the world, and in their time from the distant future. That is why, Will, you are standing in a field in the wilds of northern England in the year 1018 A.D., armed with clothing and coins appropriate for the time and place. You will guard Elizabeth's life, not just in the near term, but for the next millennium, for she must survive to meet a young man named Will Stark in the twenty-first century. She must survive to give birth to Josh and Angel. And she must survive to ensure that the events of the night of the fire come to fruition, to ensure that Will Stark, a man born in the late twentieth century, is in a position to be carried into the future, trained, and sent to the past.

Would any man willingly make the decision to live a thousand years in the past, guarding the woman he loves, yet unable to marry her, so that his future self can do so? We know of a man who did, though he was deceived into doing so. Yet we believe that his love for her was so genuine that he would choose to make that sacrifice. It is easy to give your life for those you love through death; it is far more challenging to give your living in the same cause. You may see our dilemma; we needed you to be prepared for a mission of great significance in the

past relating to saving your wife, but we couldn't know if you'd make the decision to make that journey if you knew the whole truth. We hope you forgive the deception. The decision needed to be made, for you, Will Stark, are a critical piece of history, and it is a mission you needed to undertake.

We have supplied you with clothing and coins appropriate to this region. This paper will periodically provide you with key information through your journey. The first bit of information is this: the village with the early Aliomenti is to the northwest. Remember: you have yet to meet anyone in that village, no matter how familiar they might seem. You know nothing of Energy. And Elizabeth is not your wife. You must take the time to develop your back-story, acclimate yourself to this time, and set out on your journey.

We have ensured that nothing visible or tangible from the future, save for this paper, remains behind. You do not have a gun or a flying craft. You do have a massive swarm of nanos, for your future clothing and the entire time machine are now part of your arsenal. Use them—and your hidden Shielded Energy skills—wisely.

We wish you well in your journey, Will Stark. We beg your forgiveness for our deception. And we look forward to speaking to you again in our present, your future, at a time of your choosing.

Adam, Angel, and Josh

P.S. Josh nailed the assassin with a fastball that night. He learned well.

Will spent nearly fifteen minutes trying to process what he'd just read.

They'd sent him a thousand years into the past, and thousands of miles away from his home. That explained his inability to teleport to his home, as the building wouldn't exist for centuries. He glanced at the bundle of clothes and the pouch of money. They'd at least provided him with those essentials. The letter told him that he should travel to the northwest, for that was where Hope—no, Elizabeth—lived, and she needed his help.

For her, he truly would do anything, even live a thousand years to protect her from harm.

Will went to the pile of clothes after removing the nanos from his body. They joined his full original allocation, along with those which comprised the time machine. He donned the outfit in the bag, not without some difficulty as the style was completely foreign to him. He picked up his money pouch, and put his paper computer from the future in a pocket. Using the sun as a guide, he oriented himself to the northwest, toward his destiny, and toward Hope.

The journey of a thousand years would be taken one step at a time.

He took the first step.

BOOK II

PRESERVING HOPE

PROLOGUE

Will Stark watched the villagers seal the lid of Elizabeth Lowell's coffin.

She had been the daughter of Genevieve and Arthur Lowell. Genevieve wasn't here to watch as the simple pine box holding her only child was lowered into the grave. Genevieve wasn't able to cry until there were no more tears to cry, nor was she able to curse her every breath as one stolen from the young woman buried that day. Genevieve had found her eternal rest three years earlier, and she now waited in silence as Elizabeth became her eternal companion.

Arthur, though, had to live through this event, not shielded from every parent's worst nightmare, the nightmare of burying your own child. For Arthur, the experience was far more profound, for deep down, he knew that his only child was dead before her twentieth birthday because of his own greed and selfishness.

At least, he *should* have known that.

Arthur had been part of a group of slaves who had escaped into the wilds of medieval northern England, revolting against returning to a life of servitude. The group had been forced to serve as human test subjects for a Baron desirous of getting his slaves to live longer and work harder by freeing them of the diseases and ill health that lessened his return on his investment in human capital. If the experiments worked, they'd be healthy; if the experiments failed—as they had with earlier groups—then the slaves would die. The experiments with Arthur's group had succeeded, but had the curious side effect of giving that group of slaves a thirst for freedom that could not be quenched. Arthur and the others had escaped, built up modest wealth, and had constructed a thriving village. There,

they'd conducted experiments of their own choosing, seeking a far greater payoff than mere good health. The experiments were all conducted by a single "volunteer;" a young girl "hired" each day to test out every possible "magical" substance reputed to provide a payoff of mythical proportions. Though she worked against her will and received none of the money paid for her services, the young girl—Elizabeth—was expected to freely share any breakthroughs with those who enslaved her.

In the end, though, the experiments had led only to the early and violent death of that girl. Two women had protested her treatment—Genevieve and the woman who had come to be a second mother to Elizabeth—and those protests had led to those women preceding Elizabeth in death. For Arthur, these three deaths were a small price to pay to gain the knowledge and power he sought above all else.

Several of the men of the village pounded nails into the wood, sealing the box for eternity, just after Will caught a final glimpse of Elizabeth. Her hair was a flaming-red color like that of Will's daughter, Angel, but in death it lacked the same vibrancy. Elizabeth's hair now looked like the dying embers remaining from a once-great fire, the dirty hair matted against her head with blood and sweat. The bruises still marred her face, never having had the chance to heal before her bodily functions ceased. Her blue eyes, a window into the sadness of her life, were hidden behind eyelids sealed shut from the beating she'd endured. Her neighbors, roused to a fearful passion aided by Elizabeth's own father, had exacted their final toll. After a decade of physical trauma and emotional neglect, Arthur had disowned his own daughter in her time of greatest need and peril, delivering Elizabeth to her early grave rather than standing up for the daughter he'd long ceased to show any fondness. Instead, the former slave had discarded his own child when she no longer served him any purpose.

Will bent to the ground and grasped one of the three long, wooden poles used to lift and carry the coffin. At a count of three he joined the two women and three men in standing up and lifting the pine box off the ground for transport to the gravesite. They walked in silence, pausing as Will momentarily lost his balance. There were no tears shed during this solemn time, for outside of one of the men carrying the coffin, they all bore a share of the guilt for the young woman's demise, a fatality that seemed predestined. No priest presided over the ceremony, for none of them wanted to be reminded of the terrible guilt they all shared.

The earth had already been removed from Elizabeth's final resting place. The

dirt sat in a large pile atop Genevieve's grave, preventing anyone from stepping there. The pallbearers placed the pine box atop the open grave where the wooden poles allowed the coffin to remain above ground. Will and two other men unrolled three coils of sturdy rope, which were fed under the coffin. The pallbearers lifted the box a few inches off the ground using the ropes, and one of the villagers removed the three poles from beneath the coffin. Inch by inch, the six lowered the box down into the grave, until it reached the bottom with finality, a fitting end to a young life. They dropped the lengths of rope into the hole and stepped back.

Arthur Lowell stepped forward. As the father of the deceased, it was his duty to speak. "We have suffered a great loss. Elizabeth was a young woman of beauty, possessing a generosity of spirit rare among any I've ever met. She has uniquely contributed to the success of this community, and we mourn that she will be unable to continue to share in that success. In her memory, we must continue to move forward along the path she cleared, to see the sights she made available for all of us. In many ways, she epitomizes what we are striving to be, ever seeking to push the boundaries of human development. We will not let her death be in vain." There were murmurs of agreement and appreciation of his words.

Will looked around at the small assembly, incredulous. "That was a beautiful speech, Arthur. Why, if I didn't know any better, I'd think her death was of her own choosing. Let me offer *my* eulogy. Today, this young woman is laid to rest as a human sacrifice on the altar of greed, laziness, and cowardice. She is mourned by those gathered here, not because they truly sorrow at her loss, but because they do not know where the next sacrificial victim will be found. They cry not because she is gone, but because they fear they'll be the next chosen to join her, the next innocent bludgeoned to death by so-called neighbors. None of you have any right to be standing on this ground; you all bear the guilt of her demise, regardless of the number of blows you delivered."

Most of the eyes in the gathering fell to the ground, their silence speaking volumes to the guilt they bore and the truth of his words. Arthur's eyes blazed in anger. "How dare you!" he hissed. "How dare you belittle her in such a fashion! My daughter worked harder than anyone here to unlock the secrets we know wait just beyond our grasp, teasing us with their potential, and you tarnish her memory before the dirt is in her grave?"

Will marched straight to Arthur, until he could lean down and stare directly into the shorter man's terrified eyes. "Get out of here now, Arthur." Will turned

around, his gaze taking in all of those assembled. “All of you. Leave this place. You gave this woman no peace during her life. You failed to give her a childhood full of fun and play and laughter. You never gave her the love all children so desperately need. You feign interest in her now, as if you expect that to atone for the crimes you’ve committed against her. Her life is over; it’s too late to seek forgiveness now. Leave, so that her final burial is performed by hands that didn’t drive her into that grave.”

Will turned back to Arthur and again stared down the shorter man, who finally withered under his gaze. Arthur turned and left the clearing, followed by the rest of the villagers, leaving Will alone with the coffin and the empty grave. Silence followed their departure, suggesting that he was alone, but Will knew that Arthur had not gone all the way back to the village with the others.

After a few moments of quiet contemplation kneeling by the coffin, Will stood and seized a shovel. He began pushing the dirt back into the open grave, covering the coffin and filling the hole. He worked without stopping, ignoring the sweat beading on his forehead and dampening his clothes. Once the grave was filled with dirt, Will located a small piece of rope on the ground nearby, and used it to fashion a small cross from two tree branches. He pushed the marker into the ground, and knelt down. He allowed the tears to flow, weeping over the tortuous life the young woman had lived. He wept at the love she’d so desperately sought from her father, love that the man had never reciprocated. He wept at her horror at the realization that that same man had permitted and encouraged her final end.

Will rose to his feet and marched into the trees where Arthur stood watching the entire scene.

“You loved her, didn’t you?” It wasn’t a question that Arthur directed at Will. It was an accusation, one designed to twist the emotional knife just a bit deeper, and perhaps locate a weak point for future exploitation.

Will fixed Arthur with a steady gaze, his eyes bright with malice toward the shorter man. “I will love her until the end of my days.”

And then he punched Arthur squarely in the face, turned, and headed away from the village, ignoring Arthur’s cries of pain.

He needed to get as far from this spot as possible. Only then could he determine if the woman lying in the box was still alive, or if he’d accidentally killed his future wife.

VILLAGE

The morning sun rested low in the sky, casting its early summer rays over an empty field in the wilds of northern England. In the distance, off to the west and north, loomed a large forest boasting magnificent old trees that had survived for centuries. Two rivers merged into one north of the main body of the forest, the smaller branches of water surrounding the ancient trees in a loving embrace.

There was only a single human in sight, a tall man with jet-black hair carrying nothing but the bag of coins in his pocket. He walked awkwardly, his feet protesting the unusual shoes he was forced to wear, as he made his way through the fields between the two rivers and toward the forest. Two months earlier, as he'd lived those months, he'd experienced a similar issue with footwear. He'd tried to sprint the length of a long, winding driveway toward his home in business shoes not designed for such use. Those tortuous footsteps marked the beginning of a dramatic transformation in his life, a transformation that now saw him walking in an open field thousands of miles from the land he called home, a thousand years before he'd even been born.

Though he knew *what* he was supposed to do in these strange lands and stranger times, he had little idea of *how* it would be accomplished.

Two months earlier, Will Stark had been an incredibly successful businessman and philanthropist, living his dream life with the woman he loved and their young son. He'd arrived at the entry to their gated community—a community built to provide them security against those who meant them harm—to find the guards slaughtered and a killer on the loose inside the fortress-like walls. He'd run to try to save his family, for his car was blocked from entry by the very security he'd designed. He'd been too late. His house had exploded into

a massive fireball, ending the lives of his wife and son who were still inside. Will had been attacked and beaten as he'd tried to get inside the house in a futile effort to save them.

Two men and a woman had rescued him and healed him using incredibly advanced medical devices based on nanotechnology. Will was introduced to the Aliomenti, a group which had mastered the development and use of Energy, an inner force capable of incredible actions like Telepathy, Empathy, telekinesis, clairvoyance, and for the most advanced practitioners, teleportation. The Aliomenti prescribed harsh penalties for sharing the knowledge of developing this Energy and associated abilities with the outside world, and a small faction had broken away in protest, choosing to pursue the goal of advancing all of humanity from the shadows rather than suppressing them. The core Aliomenti leadership formed a trio of Hunters who would track down deserters. An Assassin would kill any "humans" suspected of having knowledge of the Aliomenti or their technological advancements. They'd believed Will the most prominent of the deserters, and the explosion, fire, and attack were triggered by the Assassin and Hunters for that reason. They'd realized Will wasn't who—or more accurately, *what*—they'd expected as they'd prepared to incarcerate him.

Will had been rescued by members of the breakaway faction, the Alliance, and they'd healed his wounds and taught him the secrets of Energy. They'd also introduced their secret technology based on self-directed, problem-solving nanomachines that could collaborate in sufficient numbers to perform nearly any activity, all without detection by the Hunters. Will, seeing in those skills and machines the chance to avenge his family or, failing that, to prevent others from suffering the same fate, had progressed in rapid fashion, until he'd drawn the attention of the Hunters and Assassin again. In the process of meeting the Hunters and their Leader, Will had learned he'd been living nearly two centuries into his future since the time of his rescue, among people who had learned to live, effectively, forever. Those who'd saved him admitted that he'd been brought forward to the future in a time machine.

When the trio offered him the chance to use the time machine to go back and save his wife and son, Will had literally leaped at the chance. He'd been made aware of several challenges in such a trip, the most notable being the fact that nobody named Will Stark existed on the planet after the fire. He'd either succeeded, or died trying, and in this case dying might mean he'd had to end his own life to protect the integrity of history. Even then, he'd accepted his duty. As the time machine started its journey, he'd learned that one of the men helping

him—and aggravating him—was his own grown son, Josh, and that the woman was the grown daughter he'd never known he'd had.

Now he found himself in the distant past, knowing only that a young Hope was in some unspecified danger and that Will, with his advanced Energy skills and nanomachines, was to protect her. The letter he'd received indicated only that she was sixteen years old. Will had also inferred, based upon his history lessons, that he was arriving at a time when the original Aliomenti hadn't yet figured out how to live forever or unleash their Energy.

His abilities and technology, therefore, would give him tremendous advantages. Yet based on his beliefs and the promises he'd made to his children, no matter the deception, he wouldn't use those advantages to impose his own will. That meant he'd rely on the skills he'd built in his business dealings to read the emotions and body language of others, rather than using Empathy and Telepathy to remove the risk of misreading. He'd use those advanced Energy skills and the nanos for protecting himself and others he found in danger—especially Hope—but he'd not actively try to hurt or coerce others. He also decided not to arm himself with a sword, or bow, or whatever form of weapon was common in this era. He could protect himself from any foe or weapon, and suspected that choosing to be unarmed would make him seem a lesser threat.

Then again, considering that he'd been thoroughly manipulated by his children into accepting this mission, he might not be much of a threat regardless of the advantages he held. They'd maneuvered every concern he had back to saving Hope and Josh from the fire, or guilt over having failed to prevent their deaths, until he'd finally snapped. When they'd offered him the chance to save the two of them, his affirmative response was assured. They'd done their duty, and it allowed them to send Will back in time to the year 1018 AD. Now they expected him to do his duty, and make sure that Elizabeth—her name in this era—survived.

Right now, he hated his future self for his good fortune in meeting Hope. And he'd like the chance to ground his children and take away their allowances for lying to their father and not allowing him to make his own decision, fully informed, about his centuries-long journey. He vowed he'd never mislead others in the way he'd been misled. And though he'd been deceived as to the nature of his mission, the objective was one he'd attack with fervor. Hope, regardless of her age or name, was someone he'd always be willing to protect, regardless of the inconvenience or pain it might bring to him.

His only guidance on this journey of a thousand years came in the form of a

piece of highly advanced technology, a computer that looked and felt like a blank piece of paper. He pulled it out and looked at it again. In reality, it looked like the type of paper he'd expect to see in a scroll, which would be useful if he happened to be caught reading the screen. He checked it, and found nothing useful. In fact, the original letter he'd read when he found the time machine gone had vanished. He remembered reading that his wife was now about sixteen years old, and that she'd soon lose her mother, if she hadn't already. His fist clenched. Elizabeth had been used by her own father. He remembered that. So it was his job to take care of her. She lived in the earliest group of the Aliomenti, and that meant he'd need to join up. He had no idea how to accomplish such a feat, though. If they'd developed modest Energy levels, he could pretend to be quite intuitive in the Energy's usage and help advance their skills. He suspected, however, that a group that would cause harm to a young girl wouldn't be trustworthy. Therefore, he'd show nothing of his Energy skills until he needed to do so, until he was sure he could trust them.

He stopped walking. He wasn't a compulsive student of history, but he did know that people had grown taller, on average, over time. At six feet tall, Will would likely be by far the tallest man around in this era, tall enough to cause fear and unnecessary curiosity. He also remembered that one of the Hunters mentioned that he was taller than they remembered. Both of those bits of information meant that Will needed to *shrink* before he met up with any of the Aliomenti.

Modern medicine might be able to use surgical procedures to reduce the size of his bones. Will had no access to modern hospitals. If he still had the time machine, he could go back to the future and undergo the surgery, after first berating his children and their friend Adam. That wasn't an option, and he had to work with the skills and technology he had. That meant his Energy and nanos, the microscopic intelligent machines that could combine to form nearly any shape or perform any task he could imagine, had to be the answer.

Will suspected that if he was about three inches shorter, he'd still be relatively tall, but not dramatically so. With nothing to base it on, he pushed his Energy around so that it surrounded his body and infused every cell, and pictured himself shrinking until the top of his head was about the previous level of his eyes. Much to his surprise, he could feel the effects of shrinking begin only a few moments later, a sensation that his body was being compacted. His muscles became larger and more defined. He realized that he was losing height without losing mass.

When he felt the shrinking effect stop, he glanced at one of the trees nearby. It was difficult to be certain, but the lowest branches of the closest tree did seem to be farther from the top of his head than they'd been just moments earlier. Satisfied that he'd succeeded in his height-altering goal, Will began moving again.

After walking deeper into the forest, Will spotted a high fence, more like the walls circling a town, ahead of him. It was a strange sight; he'd never considered that someone might build walls or a fence *inside* a forest, but conceded that it might be wise. In fact, for a group like the first Aliomenti, it was likely a necessity, for if they were found they could legally be required to resume their roles as serfs. It was unlikely they'd go quietly, however, and the walls suggested that they intended to fight anyone seeking to return them to their beginnings.

As he searched for an opening in the fence, he reviewed the back-story he'd invented for himself. Thankfully, it mirrored his actual story. Thieves, incorrectly believing that he'd stolen from them, set upon his wife and son and killed them, burning the family home down in the process. Left with no family, no home, and no possessions save for his money pouch and the clothes he wore, he left his town, walking aimlessly, and electing to do so until he saw a new town. He'd move into that community, if possible, and begin his life in new surroundings. He chose a random direction, started walking and found himself here. He'd been a merchant and had enjoyed modest financial success, so he did have some money to pay for food and lodging.

Will wasn't able to find a gap in the walls, and the only entry into the community, a gate, was locked. Since he'd neither seen nor heard any sign of inhabitants of the village, he climbed the wall and jumped down inside. Once inside, he walked around, observing the layout and looking for someone from whom he might request lodging. He suspected that this was where his future wife lived, for the obvious efforts at secrecy and defense fit with the few clues he had about her past, and with the earliest days of the Aliomenti.

The buildings were constructed of rough, hand-hewn beams and featured thatched roofs that sloped down in one direction. The bulk of the buildings on the perimeter were small, as evidenced by the closely spaced doors and tiny windows. Will was reminded of the college dorm rooms in his day. These small rooms shared common walls. A second double of rooms was built at the far end of the village, creating a small "street" within the village. Small wooden signs were fastened to each room's door with a single name scrawled using what looked like paint.

The center of the village was dominated by a series of shops that looked to provide the tools needed to create a wide variety of crafts. He saw large stone hearths, which he suspected could be used for baking or even smelting metal for shaping into weapons or tools. On the opposite side of the center section were buildings that looked like they were used to store finished products. Two of the buildings looked like grain silos.

Nearest to the gate was what amounted to a courtyard, an open area save for a large stone well with a winch used for fetching water. There were several paddocks he walked by to his left as he looked back at the gate, where he saw pigs, cows, goats, and chickens. A large stable occupied one corner nearest the gate, and Will suspected he'd find horses inside the structure.

Will turned to his right, where he spotted the two largest buildings inside the fortress. One was of similar construction to the other small buildings that Will had speculated were single-person dwellings, but was over twice the size of the others. Written on the nameplate were the words "Arthur Lowell and Family." Will frowned, realizing that none of the other nameplates mentioned families, or provided family names.

The other structure was the largest building he had seen, and he inspected it more closely as he completed his circuit through the community. It was unique in that it had no person's name scratched on the identifying plate, but rather a phrase. "ALIO INCREMENTUM SCHOLA." He choked back a startled gasp as he translated the Latin phrase: *personal growth school*. For Will, it was obvious that the small, hand-painted sign was the eventual source of the name of the group he'd come to hate. *Alio incrementum* would one day compress to form *Aliomenti*. He wondered idly when, and how, the name would come to be adopted.

In addition to the unique name, the "school" was also the only building in the entire community that possessed a lock, a large and visible one requiring a key to open. Clearly, access to this building was to be limited to only those with access to the key or keys that fit the lock. He wondered why a school would need to be locked up, but then realized that schools in his own day were heavily secured. Some things never changed.

Will heard voices in the distance. As the voices grew louder and more distinct, Will realized that it was a large crowd, perhaps forty people or more in total. Since he did not wish to surprise the villagers, Will moved to stand near the well where he'd be clearly visible to anyone entering the community through the gate. Hiding, only to be found later, would make it seem as though he had

negative intentions for his visit, and he wanted to avoid making that impression.

The gate opened, and the men and women of the community entered. And it was truly men and women; everyone was in their twenties or thirties, at least, with no children in sight. The people were clearly in high spirits, and despite the early morning chill in the air, every one of them was soaking wet in their clothing. Though it was early summer, it was cool here in the northern climate.

A man near the front of the group spotted Will by the well, and he held up his hand. The crowd stopped and fell silent, making Will quite aware that he was outnumbered by dozens of strangers who had the only exit blocked. He could escape, of course, but it would raise too many questions. Will knew that it was best for him to stay where he was, and adapt to the changing circumstances.

“Hello,” he said. “My name is Will Stark. I have traveled without pause these past many days and nights. My feet need a rest and my stomach needs a hearty meal. I was wondering if I might trouble you for a spot to sleep and food to eat. I have money to pay you for the trouble.”

As Will spoke, the man in the front who had halted the procession into the neighborhood moved toward him, eyes narrowed. He had wavy blond hair, rather longer than Will suspected was standard, and moved in a predatory fashion. Behind him, the other members of the community moved to a sufficient degree to enable everyone to enter the village inside the walls, and then the gate closed noisily behind them. Will was now trapped, or so they thought.

The blond man moved toward Will, drawing a short sword stowed in a sheath attached to the loose belt around his waist, and pointed it toward Will. “How did you find this community? How did you enter? Speak, sir, and truly, or your life will be forfeit.”

Will froze as he recognized the voice. The speaker was the man he knew as the Leader, who would, in the distant future, order the executions of Will, his wife, Hope, and their son, Josh. Thankfully, the orders hadn’t been successfully carried out. Will had to exercise iron self-control to avoid blasting the man with Energy. He’d promised not to hurt anyone before he’d left, and had reaffirmed that decision once he’d arrived. Though the promise had been made without full knowledge of his mission, he intended to abide by it. The crowd probably thought the deep breaths were to calm his fears at being outnumbered and facing the point of a sword, rather than to prevent him from destroying the man in front of him. It was an assumption he was glad to let them have, much as he’d let them suspect he had no Energy skills.

Will smiled, risking transmitting a small bit of trusting empathic Energy

toward the man and those behind him. “Peace, sir. I mean you no harm. I have been traveling many days outdoors, and wished for some shade. I spotted the forest and entered, and as I did I saw the wall. I called out, hoping someone would answer, but none did. For a community of this size I was surprised that none responded, and so I scaled the wall and entered, fearing I might find the residents in some form of distress. But I found no one here. A few moments later, I heard you returning from wherever you had gone.”

The man considered this, then lowered and sheathed his sword. “My apologies, sir. You strike me as an honest man. We value our privacy, as evidenced by our secluded location, and as such, visitors are a surprise and considered a potential threat until we can determine otherwise.”

Will raised his hands. “I assure you, I bear you no malice. I am unarmed, and thus could not harm you without first obtaining a weapon. I am no threat to any of the people here.”

“I believe you, and I did notice the lack of a weapon,” the man replied. He held out his hand. “Arthur Lowell.”

Will accepted it, shaking firmly. “Will Stark.”

“Welcome to the community, Will. We go by first names only around here, so I advise you to introduce yourself only as Will in order to fit it.” He smiled. “You now know my surname, but I trust that I shall never hear it uttered by your lips. We will provide you with water and you may tell us your story. We are a private community, but if the right man comes along we are always willing to add another to our number.” He looked around. “Elizabeth! Where are you?”

Will heard a strange sound, a sound like a flute producing a beautiful tone. He remembered that he could “hear” Energy, and that different people produced different sounds. Will watched as a girl of about sixteen, with vibrant red hair matted against her face from the moisture, emerged from the crowd and turned to face Arthur Lowell. Her appearance aligned with an increasing volume of the flute-like sound, a sound Will realized only he could hear. “I’m here, Father,” she said, her voice trembling, and she shifted her eyes to the ground after risking a glance in Will’s direction.

Will managed to keep from gaping. The girl was, indeed, Hope, though she was younger than when he’d met her and had red hair rather than platinum blonde. The eyes didn’t lie. He’d known his grown son just from seeing the man’s eyes, and was able to do the same with the woman who would become his wife.

Correction: with the *girl* who would become his wife. She was not the

woman he would marry, not yet.

“Fetch Will a mug of water and some bread,” Arthur snapped. “Be quick about it, girl!”

“Yes, Father,” Elizabeth replied, her voice lacking any emotion. She hurried off.

“Come, Will,” Arthur said, clasping Will’s shoulder. “We shall retire to my home to discuss your history and determine if there is mutual interest in your joining us. Are you married? Any children?”

Will shook his head. “My wife and son are very recently deceased. Murdered. I am looking for a new start to my life, away from anything that would remind me of my loss.” Will thought that comment ironic, given that his wife was on her way to get him something to drink

Arthur nodded, his face filled with sympathy. “I understand. I am recently widowed myself.”

“My sympathies.” Will said, wondering if that death might have been accelerated by the man called Arthur Lowell.

The crowds passed them, heading toward the buildings at the far end of the community. A young woman with platinum blond hair paused as she was walking by. “Is Elizabeth coming by later, Arthur?” There was a chill in her voice, and Will sensed powerful animosity toward Arthur.

“Yes, Eva. I’ll get Will situated and then bring her by.”

“Thanks, Arthur.” She headed toward the collection of small dwellings on the opposite end of the community.

Arthur glanced over his shoulder. “Coming, Will?”

Will glanced at the woman called Eva and found himself wondering what the verbal exchange was about. He walked with Arthur Lowell and entered the largest of the dwellings, the building nearest the ALIO INCREMENTUM SCHOLA.

As he watched Arthur walk in front of him, Will was bombarded with memories of the man, memories of the few moments they’d spent in each other’s presence in the distant future. In each of those circumstances, Arthur, as the Leader of the Aliomenti, had authorized his Hunters to kill Will. Arthur had also authorized the Hunters to kill Hope because of Will’s supposed transgressions. He’d most likely approved the murder of Josh as well. What kind of man would authorize the killing of innocents? What kind of man would authorize the murder of his own daughter? His anger began to simmer, and Will felt his Energy levels rising, striving to escape his body and end the life of the evil man walking in

front of him.

OATH

Will managed to calm himself as he entered Arthur's home. He'd promised his children and Adam that he wouldn't blast someone to death in the past, no matter how much he might think they deserved such a punishment. Though the terms of his travel had changed, he wasn't going to break his word. No matter how much a man like Arthur might deserve to die, killing him now would mean murdering a defenseless man in cold blood, and the alteration of history might mean other key events in his life would never happen. Would his children still exist? Would future Hope still meet future Will? Would future Will still exist? In an attempt to calm himself, Will looked around the house trying to adjust to eleventh century living.

Though larger than the single-person dwelling-rooms populating the community, the Lowell home was too small to allow for any room partitioning. Will, accustomed to separate rooms for sleeping, food preparation, dining, washing, and study, found the lack of walls almost disturbing.

To his right, Will saw a single bed against the back wall, and closer to him, he saw a single, sturdy wooden table large enough to seat four people. Three rough-hewn wooden stools surrounded the table. Will assumed those were for Arthur, his wife, and Elizabeth. He wondered where Elizabeth's mother was, then remembered Arthur had said his wife had recently died. Will noted the lack of a fireplace in the house, or anything that might be used to prepare meals. He wondered how the family secured and prepared the food they ate. He would learn in time.

To his left, Will saw two beds, and Will wondered why there were three beds in the home if the couple shared one and Elizabeth used the other. He was struck with an odd thought: did Elizabeth have a sibling, living here now, that he'd

never known existed? Had that sibling survived into the distant future as well?

Large chests rested at the foot of each bed, which Will assumed held changes of clothing or any valuables the Lowells might own. An additional chest rested against the rear wall. Two windows framed the single door into the residence, and two more could be found on the rear wall. The windows were simply openings cut into the wall and covered with pieces of cloth which could be tied back. Several candles were placed throughout the house, with the bulk of the collection sitting on the table near the door.

Arthur motioned to the table. "Please, Will, have a seat." As Will pulled out a stool and sat down, Arthur glared back at the door. "Where is that girl? It should not take so long to fetch bread from the stores and water from the well. She'll see the belt for sure over this." He turned to face Will. "My apologies, sir. You must think me a poor host. One should not wait long for hospitality."

Will shook his head. "Not at all, sir. Given that you were ready to run me through with your sword a few moments ago, I'm certainly not complaining about anything happening now." He smiled.

Arthur sighed. "A woman should learn her place at an early age. Elizabeth, I fear, has not had good role models in that regard. I should not have to tell her to fetch you refreshment. I hope you don't judge us too harshly for that." He looked up, a pleading look on his face.

"No," Will said, dryly. "I won't judge you too harshly for that."

The door burst open, and Elizabeth stood in the entryway. She held a pitcher in one hand, presumably filled with water, and a mug in the other, with a loaf of warm bread tucked under her arm. Will, who had not seen his wife in two months, had to fight not to stare at her. She was clearly younger, and the flaming red hair was a stark contrast to the platinum blond he'd been accustomed to since they'd met, but there was no doubt that this girl would grow up to become the woman he'd marry.

What caught his attention more than her appearance and youth, however, was the noticeable trickle of Energy coming from her. It had been his understanding that the Aliomenti were still working out the formula to unleash their Energy abilities. Elizabeth, however, already possessed them. Arthur most assuredly did not. Will wondered why that might be the case. Will stifled his look of surprise at his revelation, and a glance in her direction revealed that she'd made a similar determination about him.

Elizabeth's gaze, which had only briefly lifted up from the ground to spy on the stranger with the Energy, returned to its standard position, with her eyes

aimed squarely at the dirt. “Here, Father,” she said. Her voice was quiet and timid, a far cry from the strong woman he’d known and loved in the future. Of course, Will had the ability to sense her true emotions, and those emotions were powerful. She hated Arthur, but did not, despite her timid behavior, fear him. Rather, she was putting on an act, feigning timidity to hide her strength, waiting to reveal her strength at the appropriate time. Though Will refused to reach inside her mind, the intensity of her thoughts and emotions was such that he could not avoid them, even if he’d tried.

She wanted her father to love her. No more, no less. And it didn’t appear that she believed she’d see her dream come true any time soon.

“Girl, where have you been?” Arthur snapped. “Have you been playing with that hideous hair of yours again? Stop wasting your time; no man will ever love you and those devil-spawned locks of yours. Serve our guest his meal, and then leave us.”

Will, startled at Arthur’s angry outburst, glared at the man. “Sir, this girl is your daughter, and she’ll certainly never hope to earn a man’s love if she believes herself unworthy of it. She is a lovely young lady, and I’m certain one day she’ll make a fine wife.” As he said the words, Will realized he was expressing a sentiment based on twenty-first century sensibilities, a sentiment likely to get him in trouble here. He was also contradicting a man not accustomed to being challenged.

He sensed Elizabeth’s genuine thanks, though she kept her head down as she approached him. She placed the bread on the table, set the cup down next to the loaf, and poured water from the pitcher. “At your service, sir,” she said, in the same timid voice she’d used earlier.

Arthur was still staring at Will, dumbstruck at the comment directed his way. He seemed prepared to hurl Will bodily out of his home due to his guest’s rudeness, but reconsidered, looking at the tall man with the black hair with a deeper discernment. Will detected no type of Energy scans, but was left with a sense that Arthur was a man who could read—and therefore manipulate—people in his own manner.

“Perhaps you have a point,” Arthur conceded. “Elizabeth, you may leave us.”

As the girl turned to leave, Will spoke up. “I’d hoped we could share this bread together, before she leaves, sir. A full loaf of bread would be too much just for me, and as such I’d like to share it with the people who have made my meal possible.”

Elizabeth paused, waiting for Arthur to speak. Arthur looked at her, then at Will, and reconsidered before responding. “She may have a piece of bread, but she must leave,” he decided. “We have matters to discuss, matters which do not concern her.”

Will shrugged, tore a large chunk from the warm loaf of bread, and handed it to Elizabeth. “Thank you for your hospitality.” He made certain to look directly at her face.

Elizabeth nodded once, refusing to look up from the ground and meet his eyes. “I am delighted to be of service,” she murmured. She walked out of the small home and shut the door behind her.

Arthur turned to face Will, his eyes flashing. “Normally, I’d have you thrown out of this community for daring to question my authority over my own child as you have done, Will. However, it is clear that you speak for what you believe in, without regard to what it might mean for your own personal situation. That leads me to believe that you possess strong character, unlikely to bend to popular demands or personal threats, and as such you are a man able to keep secrets.” Arthur’s eyes softened. “I have a proposition for you, Will. You are a man in search of a new community. We are a community on the lookout for new men of character to participate in our mission, but our mission is one which cannot be shared outside these walls. It promises to be one full of personal growth and enrichment, beyond what you could possibly imagine. Would you be interested in living in that fashion?”

Will, trying not to chuckle at the phrase “beyond what you could possibly imagine,” considered his words, more so than his actual answer. He’d come here for just this purpose, after all, sent twelve centuries into the past to integrate into this community and protect Elizabeth from whatever threatened her. “That sounds very intriguing, Mr. Lowell.”

“Please, call me Arthur.”

“And you can call me Will.”

“You’ll want to use only given names in this village, Will. Family names weren’t used by the founding members of this village, and it is tradition that those who join give up the use of any family name they might possess. I have a family name because I married and had a child, but it is a name few utter.”

Will nodded. “I understand. Arthur.” He noted the brief flicker of pain on Arthur’s face as he instructed Will at this point.

Arthur smiled. “There is an oath of secrecy shared by those who live in this village. We may share of these secrets within these walls, but not outside. Do I

have your word that you'll not share these secrets, or our aims and goals, with anyone not invited to join our community?"

Again, Will chose his words carefully. "No one will hear about it from me." *But I can nudge them telepathically, or write about it all I want. And I will. And what if I want to invite them and you don't, Arthur? They've still been invited to join my community, haven't they?*

Arthur considered Will, studying his face. This was a man who seemed innately tuned to human body language and facial expressions, a man who would likely make a sound living in the future playing cards or interrogating prisoners. Will remained serene and calm, sending gentle waves of Energy at Arthur, giving Arthur the sense that Will was one worthy of trust.

After a moment, Arthur nodded. "Very well, then. You are hereby admitted to this community, and we will see to it that you receive lodging and become part of our operation in a manner that suits you best. What was your previous profession?"

"I was a merchant, buying and selling goods."

Arthur raised an eyebrow. "Very interesting. We have many carpenters, farmers, butchers, smiths, woodsmen, bakers, cooks, tanners, millers, cobblers, brewers, weavers, and even a locksmith living in this village. But we have only a small handful of Traders who can barter top prices for our goods in other towns, and secure low prices for the supplies we need. I believe you'll fit in well with that group. Does that suit you?"

Will nodded. He had no idea what it meant to be a Trader in this era, but believed he could adapt well.

Arthur stood and clapped Will on the shoulder. "Wonderful! I need to take Elizabeth to Eva, and Eva is our lead Trader. Walk with me, and I'll give you an overview of our group, and then show you to your room." He walked out the door, and Will followed.

"You see, Will, our group believes people are capable of a great deal more than most can imagine, let alone accomplish in their short, sickly, and frankly inconsequential lives. Our goal is very simple: we seek to find the limits of human potential and growth, streamline the means of achieving it, and then use those talents to increase our personal wealth." Arthur stopped at the small single-person dwelling next door, knocked, and continued walking. A moment later, Elizabeth stepped out, eyes facing down, not looking directly at either man, and followed.

Will, who had been walking behind Arthur, lengthened his stride and caught

up with the shorter man. “If we figure out the answers to those questions, wouldn’t it be beneficial to tell everyone? How can we stand by and allow our fellow man to live in sickness and poverty if we can show them how to avoid it?”

“There is no way to measure the success of these techniques if they are available to everyone,” Arthur replied. “Many would find a way to use our knowledge for evil; the only way to prevent that from happening is to carefully screen and select those we allow into this small community and limit the practice of what we’ve learned to those living here.”

Will shook his head. “I don’t agree with that. The best way to lift humanity as a whole is to spread this knowledge around as we learn it. The best way to ensure that no one uses the knowledge gained for evil is to make sure it’s spread so widely that no one can control that knowledge for their evil purposes.”

Arthur stopped and turned to look at Will. “You made an oath, Will. You gave your word that you’d share nothing of what you will learn outside these walls, and that means you can do none of what you just suggested.” His gaze narrowed, and his look became menacing. “Are you reneging on your oath only moments after it was made, Will?”

“I made my oath, and I am a man of my word,” Will replied. “But that doesn’t mean the community won’t agree to change its approach in the future.”

“It’s highly doubtful that will be the case,” Arthur said. “You see, in our earliest days, we were able to reduce our rate of sickness and improve our overall health. That’s helped us produce better goods to sell to other towns and cities, and achieve better prices for what we buy and sell. Our improved health means that our minds work better and more quickly than those we are dealing with. We’ve done well, and have developed modest wealth as a community. That might be enough for most, but not for me or the rest of the members of this community. No, Will, we believe we’ve only just begun to see what we’re capable of doing. And it has nothing to do with merely making a lot of money.”

“What do you mean, Arthur?” Will asked.

The man’s eyes gleamed. “Because some of our members have already *seen* what human beings are capable of becoming. And we aim to match and surpass such wizardry.”

TRADER

Will blinked. “What do you mean, they’ve already seen *it*? What is *it*? What wizardry are you talking about? What have they seen?”

Arthur laughed. “Come now, Will. You’ve been a resident here for mere hours, and you’ve pledged to remain here for the rest of your life. You’ll come to understand what I mean soon enough.”

They walked down the main pathway of the village, passing several nondescript buildings as they did so. “What are those buildings?” Will asked.

“We call them the Stores,” Arthur replied. “Our craftsmen use them to store finished goods that will eventually be carried to the various towns and villages visited by our Traders. The Shops are on the other side, where they work creating their goods. We also have spots for our bakers and cooks to make food for the community. Everyone pays them a copper a day for their food; they buy some of the raw grains, nuts, berries, livestock, and woodland creatures our farmers and foragers produce to make the daily meals for our community, and we store the rest in the silos to live off during the winter months. You can buy from the craftsmen here if you need such items as blankets and clothing. Since you’re to be a Trader, you can also buy those items in other towns if you’d like. Blankets and cloaks are very important here; we’ve found it does get quite cold in the winter.”

Each of the Stores was labeled with a sign indicating the type of wares inside. Fabrics, earthenware dishes, furniture, woolen fabrics dyed multiple colors, and blade weapons of various sizes and styles filled the interiors. “The Stores are nearly full, which means that Eva will need to commence a Trading mission soon,” Arthur observed.

The Shops used to produce goods stretched out behind the Stores, and Will

watched as a potter molded clay into the shape of a bowl while another stoked a fire in a kiln. Farther down the “street,” he could hear clanging sounds as smiths beat metal into swords, and hammering as carpenters assembled furniture.

“Many of our wares are larger in size. Our carpenters build wagons our horses can pull, and we load the wagons with as much as we can. We get the most out of each trip because each Trader drives a separate wagon to a remote town or city. Since we didn’t know you’d join us, you’ll need to ride along with someone else. Our Traders will typically return with supplies that consume much less space, so they’ll sell one or two of the wagons on each trip as well.”

They reached the end of the street and turned to the right. “This community is well-planned,” Will observed. “You have a wall and a gate, houses lining the wall as a second barrier, and your most valuable resources—the goods produced by the craftsmen, the grain in the silos, the well—those are all in the middle in the most secure positions. I’m impressed. Most towns aren’t built with that degree of foresight and organization.”

Arthur nodded. “Like I said, we need to protect our interests, and we built ourselves up from the start with that in mind, trying to anticipate how we might be attacked. We built our village in a forest, for example. That’s secure because, with good roads and two rivers nearby, people have no need to enter the forest. We have to keep our numbers down because too much expansion means extending the walls.” He paused just before the current “street” ended, in front of a house which bore a small slat of wood with the name Eva painted on it. “And this is Eva’s room. She’s the head Trader here, so I’ll introduce you to her.” Arthur knocked on the simple door.

A woman with platinum blond hair opened the door, revealing what looked to Will to represent the medieval English equivalent of a dorm room. One wall featured a small bed, more of a cot, and a trunk for personal possessions. The other wall featured a simple table with a wooden stool, and a stone basin, presumably used for washing. A single window was beside the door. Several candles were located on the table. The floor was dirt, and he could see embers from the small fires lit there for warmth. A small opening in the ceiling provided ventilation from the smoke.

The woman herself was imposing. She was tall by the standards of the day, and she displayed none of the timidity Will saw from Elizabeth. “Good morning, Arthur. Have you brought Elizabeth?” Her gaze was cool at best. Will needed no Energy or Empathy to detect friction between the two. Given his feelings about Arthur, he suspected this woman might become a strong ally.

“I have, Eva,” Arthur replied. Will expected some type of handshake, but instead the woman dropped a small silver coin into Arthur’s hand. Arthur pocketed the coin. “Elizabeth! Inside!”

The girl scooted past Will and into the small building. She’d said nothing during the walk, though Will had detected her emotional reaction to the conversation he’d had with her father. Her contempt for the man was so strong that Will almost didn’t need Empathy skills to feel it. He sensed that she felt a strong rapport with him, though. Will puzzled over both Elizabeth’s hatred toward her father, and the transaction he’d just witnessed. He did detect a quick glance by Elizabeth in Eva’s direction, and for the briefest moment saw a flash of a smile. Eva’s steely gaze softened for a moment at the look from Elizabeth, and she patted the girl on the shoulder as the young woman stepped into the room. The look was brief, however, and quickly hardened again as she returned her full attention to Arthur.

Eva’s hazel eyes fell on Will, and she perused him with a calculating, though not unfriendly, look. “And who might you be?”

“My name is Will. I’ve recently joined the community.”

Eva’s gaze snapped back to Arthur. “Really? And who was part of this decision-making process, Arthur?” It was quite apparent that these two were rarely in agreement. He also detected a faint hint of Energy at work, certainly more than a mere neophyte, not quite as strong as Elizabeth, but certainly something. He made a mental note of it.

“He checks out, Eva. And he’s a former merchant. We *need* more Traders. You’ve said so yourself.”

Eva looked at Will once more. “And what type of trade did you engage in, Will?”

Will thought quickly, trying to determine which of his businesses and experiences from the future would best translate into this time. “Tools used in construction, and medicines.”

Arthur gave him an appraising look. “Medicines, do you say? Intriguing. We have few injuries or illnesses requiring treatment here, but it’s best to be prepared. We’ll need to set you up as our village doctor.”

Will, who knew only the basics of first aid, thought to protest, but then nodded. “I’ll certainly help out in such circumstances, but I merely sold them. I did not make them. I am willing to learn, though.”

“Nevertheless,” Eva said, “that knowledge will be useful for our next Trading mission. We will always have need of medicines in this community, and

few have any knowledge of them. None of our number has a sense of how to price medicines; it is one of the few areas we suspect we are overcharged.” She glanced at Arthur. “I’m not sure how you found this man, Arthur, but you’ve lucked onto someone who appears competent.” She extended her hand to Will and gave him a warm smile. “Welcome.”

Will took it, and the Energy the woman possessed was even more apparent. Her eye contact was steady, but it was clear, as her grip loosened and then tightened accompanied by a barely-perceptible facial twitch, that she’d detected the Energy from him as an electric shock. He had no idea what her level of understanding of Energy was at this point, but one thing was certain: the ride for his first Trading mission was going to feature some very interesting conversations.

“Thank you,” Will replied.

“Will shall reside in the open room next to you, Eva, so you’ll be able to easily teach him how we prepare for our Trading missions.” Arthur glanced to the building to his right, situated in the corner of the running wall of rooms. It was also, Will noted, as far from Arthur’s house as one could get in this village. He smiled inwardly at the symbolism. “I note with interest that our last room is now filled. Will, perhaps it is an omen that you are the final piece to the success of our community.”

Will merely inclined his head, accepting what he assessed to be a compliment or, failing that, a positive comment.

“I have work to do to prepare for the Trading mission tomorrow, Arthur, so if you’ll excuse me, I’ll get to work,” Eva said. Arthur nodded, and Eva shut the door. Will was still unclear as to what Elizabeth was doing there, or why Eva had given Arthur a silver coin if the two had such an adversarial relationship.

Arthur walked the handful of steps to the room to the right of Eva’s and opened the door, ushering Will inside. The layout was a mirror image to that of Eva’s home, with the beds and tables sharing a common wall.

“This will be your room,” Arthur said. “We will get one of our scribes to write your name upon the door...”

“I can write my own name,” Will said. He immediately realized he should have stayed silent.

Arthur arched an eyebrow. “You can write? And presumably read, as well?”

Will silently cursed himself for speaking on impulse, but it was too late to deny it now. “I can, a little bit.”

Arthur smiled. “We’re talking about trying to teach everyone how to read

and write, for it's essential to our work. You can assist in that way as well. You've only been here a few hours, Will, and yet you're already proving yourself to be quite valuable."

Will sat on the small bed and looked at Arthur. "And yet, I don't know what it is that we're striving for here. You indicated that you've made some advances, but that there's still greater potential to reach. What does that mean, exactly? And what do you mean that some here have already seen it?"

Arthur sighed. "I feel that I'm doing all of the talking, and I'm sure that Eva will provide her rather *unique* views on everything. But, I shall answer your question. Tell me this, Will: do you believe in magic?"

Will blinked. "Magic? You mean, witches and cauldrons and wands? No, I don't."

Arthur nodded. "I don't, or more to the point, I *didn't*. And yet, somehow, we've always had stories of people doing the miraculous, haven't we? How do you suppose that stories of people flying or turning invisible or reading thoughts began?"

Will shrugged. "People have imagination. They see a bird fly, imagine that they can do it, and tell a story about it."

"Yet, we've been told all our lives that people *can't* fly. Why not simply talk about someone quite skilled at something everyone can do? A person who can run more quickly than anyone else, or cut down trees at a high rate of speed, or something of that sort? Why do our stories so often focus on what we *know* people can't do?"

Will considered the question, then glanced at Arthur. "I don't know."

"It's because we know, deep down, that we *can* do those things. It's simply buried inside us, waiting to be unlocked. We know that somewhere, out on this flat world under the great dome of the sky, there are people who are flying or reading thoughts or other such impossible things. They are seen, and those reports travel around. That's where we get our stories."

Will stared at him. "So, you're saying that there are people who actually *can* fly?"

"No. I'm saying that *all* of us *could* fly. Only a very few actually have unlocked that ability, however. But that will change, because that is what this group exists to do. Some of our members, our Travelers, track down these stories of people doing the impossible. They travel around until they find those actually performing these feats, and see them with their own eyes. Then, most importantly, they seek to learn *how* these people have managed to do it. We

assemble that knowledge here and teach ourselves to do the same.”

Will laughed. “So you’re telling me that there are people here, in this village, who can fly?”

“No, but the Travelers have seen it with their own eyes.”

“So, you have your own people return and tell you stories, and you believe it? Even though no one has yet flown here, in this village?”

Arthur’s eyes flashed, and Will could read his anger. This was a man who did not like being challenged. “Our Traders are quite skilled at what they do, and they seem to be able to accurately sense emotion and thought, beyond what mere chance or good fortune could explain. The information collected by our Travelers indicates that these abilities are the gateway into the more impressive feats of legend.” He looked uncertain, though only for a moment. Will suspected that he wasn’t quite as convinced of what he was saying as he seemed.

Will nodded. He could do everything mentioned, of course, though he’d not had much time to practice flying and only knew the basics of the theory from his studies with Adam. But he could see that this is where it all began, and decided he needed to show interest lest he seem in any way unusual. “I see. Those skills *would* be incredibly useful for a Trader. You’d know when to push for a better deal or when to stop, for example. How do I learn to do these things? It would certainly help me contribute.”

Arthur clapped him on the shoulder. “You can be part of the community effort to learn from the bits of knowledge the Travelers bring to us. That’s the purpose of this community. It’s a place where we share information so that we can all grow to be the most powerful people we can become.” He nodded to Will and headed toward the open door. “You’ll want to get some rest. Eva will likely be here shortly to prepare you for your first Trading mission.” Arthur shut the door behind him and left.

Will reclined on the small bed, arms folded behind his head, eyes closed. He could sense Elizabeth’s Energy in the room next door. As sensitive as he was to Energy at this point, it was as if she was shouting at the top of her lungs. His tracking senses picked her Energy, that beautiful tone he committed to memory and to his heart. He’d be able to track her easily with such a recognizable tone.

A knock at his door startled him, and the faint waft of Energy—with a harp-like sound—told him it must be Eva. He strode to the door and opened it, confirming his suspicions. “Will, we have a Trading mission starting tomorrow morning, and must prepare ourselves throughout the day today. Come with me.” She turned and walked away, clearly expecting him to follow. Will smiled. She

was a strong woman in a time where women were expected to be subservient. He imagined that caused Arthur no end of grief, and his respect for a woman he'd only just met increased as a result.

Will caught up with Eva, who began speaking without preamble. "Our carpenters ensure we have enough wagons to allow one per Trader, and that enables us to carry the maximum amount of material into each city. We obviously had no idea you'd be joining us, so you'll ride with me this time and we'll use that time to teach you our approaches. We rotate cities and towns randomly, because they've all started to figure out that we're quite skilled at what we do. The longer we can go between visits, the better. It's been at least a year since we've visited this particular destination."

Will noticed that the village had come to life during the time he'd spent walking to Eva's room and resting in his own. The craftspeople worked the various shops at full capacity, with much more noise emanating than during his previous pass. He watched as carpenters assembled components into wagons that could haul large amounts of material. "We've found that the wagons take up a large amount of space, and we don't have that kind of space inside the walls," Eva explained. "And we don't want to leave them outside the walls, lest any random traveler discover them and help themselves." She gave a pointed glance at Will at the last point, and Will smiled. "So, they build the bodies and wheels and axles and seats and store them in pieces, which is much more efficient than storing the entire wagons. It's unusual, but it's something one of our carpenters thought of a few years back and it seems to work."

Will nodded, impressed. They'd essentially arrived at the concept of an assembly line and interchangeable parts centuries before Ford and Whitney popularized them in the final quarter of the millennium. As each wagon finished assembly, the carpenters used horses to pull them in front of the Stores of finished goods, where they were loaded down with ruthless efficiency, and large tarps were added to constrain the bundles and provide protection from potential storms. The horses pulled the wagons into a line near the gate, as if they were preparing floats for a parade. Will, with nothing better to do, spent the day assisting with the loading of materials into the wagons, meeting people named Aldus and Maynard, Eleanor and Matilda, Joseph and Gerald, among others.

He watched Eva throughout, both with his normal sight and his enhanced senses, noting that she was painting numbers on thin slivers of wood which were loaded into the wagons. Clearly, Will wasn't the only Trader who could write. She also conversed with the various craft-masters as their Stores were emptied

into the wagons. Others approached her, appearing to rattle off lists of information, which Eva captured with her paint on similar slivers of wood while nodding. By nightfall, when Will was able to break for a meal of bread, vegetable stew, and water, he was sore and tired but felt like a greater part of the community.

The next day, he'd see if he could contribute as a Trader.

MISSION

Will woke early the next morning, stiff and sore from the previous day's exertions. Though he was in prime health due to the exercise and nutritious eating habits he'd developed while living with the Alliance—and that hideous Purge—he still wasn't used to intense physical labor. In the past, such exertion would have left him in pain; now, it was somewhat exhilarating.

He sensed that no one else was yet awake, and felt the need to explore the forest around the community a bit more. He knew that the gate at the front would be closed and locked, and given that the villagers had seemed ready to maim him for entering the village by climbing the walls, he decided he should leave the village without being seen. Eva, who lived in the next room, had shown a hint of Energy development; he wasn't sure if she'd be able to detect the burst of Energy he'd create by teleporting. Nor did he know the area around them well enough to visualize a target location. He glanced at the window nearest to the protective outer walls of the village, and smiled.

Will made more noise than he'd expected wriggling out of his room through that window, and he wondered if Eva, or others nearby, heard him. He used the wall of his room and the outer wall of the village to shimmy up to the roof, and then jumped onto the top of the outer wall, landing with a thud that temporarily knocked the wind from his lungs. He took several deep breaths, and then dropped to the ground outside the village. He felt an inordinate amount of pride in his accomplishment.

He wandered around, enjoying the fresh air and the sense of freedom. He'd only just now recognized how quiet it was here; he'd lived nearly all of his life in the twenty-first century, an era marked by a constant thrum of electrical

devices and motorized vehicles. The Alliance camp had seemed nearly silent by comparison, for the nanos used to perform most chores and build nearly all of the buildings, made no sound. The silence in this era was nearly deafening, and yet the silence provided him with a sense of tranquility he'd not felt in months. His children were alive and well, and his wife—young though she might be—was here, under his watchful and protective eye.

After spending time sharing Energy with the trees, a practice he resolved to perform daily, he decided he needed to get back to his room. He wasn't certain that he could get back in without causing a commotion, and appearing suddenly in his room seemed a poor idea as well. Somebody might be looking for him to start the day. He compromised; teleporting himself to the top of the roof, which slanted down toward the outer wall, and hoped Eva wouldn't notice the Energy burst. He then dropped the short distance to the ground—the rear wall was only around five feet high—and climbed back in through the window. He'd need to figure out a way to ensure sufficient privacy to allow teleporting directly out of and into his room, one that didn't rely upon him having to go in and out of the window and then onto his roof. Perhaps he could figure out how to use the nanos to accomplish this goal; he certainly had plenty of time to work that out.

Uncertain as to what was expected of him to start the day, Will elected to exit his room and head toward the front gate. The sun was just over the horizon, as best he could tell through the walls and thick cover of trees; he could see the drops of dew still on the leaves overhead. The five wagons, burdened with the goods produced by the residents of the community, sat in a state of readiness near the gate, as if they, too, were eager to begin their mission. Will passed the silos which held the various grains stored by the community, aiming for his target location. He slipped quietly past the Lowell house, moving to the largest building, the building with the sign reading ALIO INCREMENTUM SCHOLA.

Whatever secrets the building held would not be discovered by normal means, for a lock sealing a metal chain fastened the large double doors. Will reached inside with his Energy, but found it difficult to sense what was there. He could get in, of course, but doing so in any of the various approaches available to him would most certainly give away more about his abilities than he cared to reveal at this point. Though the community seemed sleepy, he had a hunch that his vanishing while standing in front of the Schola would be noticed.

He needed privacy before vanishing. Ah, the irony.

Will turned and began to head back to his room. The morning walk, though short, had the effect of helping to loosen his muscles. He could flood his joints

with Energy to the same effect, but found that working them in this way gave him more satisfaction.

As he approached his room, he saw Eva approaching his door. “Good, you’re awake. I wasn’t sure if Arthur had explained the community’s morning ritual.”

Will shook his head.

“Our original mission, years ago, was one not chosen by our founding members. There were ten of us—five men and five women—and all of us were serfs.”

“You were slaves?” Will asked, surprised.

“Serfs, not slaves,” Eva corrected, glancing at the ground. Will’s empathic and telepathic skills, however, caught the truth; being serfs was a modified view of their history. They had, in fact, been slaves. They were property to be used up as their masters saw fit, rather than serfs who retained some distinct sense of self and had the right to buy and own property. “The Baron who owned our lands watched many of his... serfs... die at an early age, and live their few days in poor health. He reasoned that if he could keep us in a less-sickly state, we could work harder. If we lived longer lives, he’d get more work out of us. It was easier to get work out of someone by extending their lives from twenty-five years to thirty, than to wait for a young child to grow strong enough to take the place of one dying so young.”

Will shivered at the cold calculation.

“So he pulled the ten of us out of servant quarters, out of mines, out of forests, out of his fields, off of the roads of his properties. He put us up in his smallest home, and charged us with figuring out why, exactly, we died so young. More critically, he wanted us to figure out how to change it so that he could get an extra five to ten years’ worth of labor out of us. He left a handful of servants to handle day-to-day chores so we could focus on completing that task, rather than the daily hard labor we’d been accustomed to performing.”

Will picked up on the historical revisionism once again. The other servants were there to handle day-to-day activities, to be sure, but the serfs in the experiment were not free to do as they wished. The Baron would suggest something to test, and the serfs being tested would be forced to do as he pleased. If the tests succeeded and the serfs showed improvements in their health, the Baron would order those techniques administered throughout his lands.

If those techniques failed, the serfs died. And those acting as servants moved in to take their place as test subjects, and were themselves replaced by other servants. Will felt a sudden sense of horror at the human test factory, but realized

he needed to go along with their revised history.

With some difficulty, he acknowledged her statement. “And I take it that you succeeded?”

Eva nodded, her face contorted in the pain of the memory. Whether it was the memory of the “research” or the memory of being a slave that drove the expression, Will did not know. “When we finished, when he’d found satisfaction with what we’d learned, he told us to report back to our old stations the next day. We didn’t. We took various supplies, coins, and horses, and fled as far away as we could. We had no interest in going back to being sla—serfs. We had tasted a small sliver of freedom, and we wouldn’t live any other way. We’ve been here since.”

“That’s why this place is hidden and has walls, isn’t it?” Will reasoned. “So that he can’t find you and take you back?”

“Initially.” Eva’s face turned cold. “He wouldn’t be able to take us anywhere, now.” The threat in the tone chilled Will to the bone. There were certainly more than ten people living here, and they were heavily armed at all times, both men and women, with two exceptions. Will and Elizabeth.

“So what did you learn?” Will asked, hoping to change the subject.

“It wasn’t terribly difficult to make a large difference. We found that something as simple as washing our entire bodies daily was a good thing, for example.” She glanced at Will. “I know most of us wash in that fashion once a month or less, but trust me, you’ll be glad of the results. We walk as a community to the Halwende each morning before beginning our daily work. I’m heading to the gate now to wait for the others.”

“The Halwende?”

She gave him an odd look. “Yes. That’s the slower moving of the two rivers surrounding this forest, the one to the east. Surely you crossed that one to get here?”

Oops. “Of course. I’ve traveled a long way, and have mixed up the names of the two rivers. I thought I remembered the Halwende being the one with the more difficult waters.”

She chuckled. “No, the Ealdor is that one. I suppose if you’ve not lived nearby it might be easy to get the two rivers confused; they are rather close together, and merge farther north. Where do you come from?”

“A town far to the west. Or at least, I think it’s to the west. I’ve been in such a deep state of mourning since losing my family that I’m not certain how far I traveled, or even which direction. But I have no expectation of returning.” They

continued the slow walk toward the gate, and Will was eager to learn more about their history. “What else did you learn?”

“While bread remains a staple of our diet, we found that by consuming fresh vegetables and meat each day, we could remain strong, even after long days of exhausting labor. We wash the vegetables after we harvest them; that seems to help as well.”

Will nodded. He wasn’t much of a history expert, but had gleaned that what he’d consider basic hygiene and food preparation practices were unknown in these times. Such simple techniques could indeed have a profound effect on the overall well-being of anyone who started to follow them, especially given the starting point for most of them in this era. It had clearly done wonderful things for the health of the original ten members of the community, as they’d recruited dozens of others and built an incredibly sophisticated hidden village squirreled away inside a forest. The labor to clear the plot of land of trees alone must have been monumental. “Those seem almost too simple to work, but perhaps what is simple is best.”

She glanced at him in a calculating way. “Indeed. We find it best to build on the knowledge of others who have already gotten to where we wish to journey, to ask questions and listen carefully to the answer of those who know.” The emotional intent behind that comment was quite clear to Will. She knew that *he* knew more than he was letting on, and was challenging him to talk to her.

He could speak in code as well. “Speaking of journeys, when will we be departing on ours?”

“Once we complete our morning washing and meal, we’ll gather our final supplies for the trip, and leave.”

Gradually, the crowd near the gate grew with people greeting each other and talking about plans for that day. With the Stores now empty, the crafters would be hard at work generating more goods to sell. The farmers would be out tilling soil in the open fields; they would have fewer horses to pull the plows during the Trading mission, and as such would make slower progress than usual. The carpenters would be working on building new carts for the next Trading mission, and would make sure that at that time Will would have one of his own to drive. Will realized that meant he’d have to learn how to harness and drive a horse-drawn cart, which might prove an interesting challenge for someone accustomed to driving a motor vehicle, and whose definition of horsepower was far different than that of anyone else here.

Arthur eventually emerged from his home, scanning the crowd. Will sensed

he was simply making sure everyone was present. Arthur frowned, muttered something under his breath, and then raised his voice. “Elizabeth! We’re waiting for you, girl! Get out here!”

The door to the room next to Arthur’s opened, and the girl emerged. She kept her eyes aimed at the ground as she walked toward her father, though Will detected a quick shift of her eyes in his direction as she passed. He also noticed a very brief surge of Energy as she walked by; presumably, she was trying to determine what he knew about the topic by alerting him to her own ability. Will elected to remain patient, though he found himself quietly amused. After all of the issues with his lack of Shielding at the Alliance camp, and after his own decision to hide his abilities and attempt to grow and develop with the others, he’d managed to be discovered for his Energy by two people within the first day. Perhaps one day he’d become better attuned to maintaining his Shield.

After directing a withering glare at Elizabeth, Arthur unlocked and opened the gate and led the way into the surrounding forest. They headed east, along a well-worn path in the forest, and he soon heard the sound of a river. Will noted, as the river came into sight, that it was roughly thirty yards across, and he hoped it wasn’t especially deep. The current moved along at a leisurely pace. This was the Halwende; Will made certain he mentally recited the name several times to ensure he wouldn’t forget it if asked about it again.

Despite the chill, the residents all waded into the frigid water, fully clothed. The waters were dark, and once submerged most removed their clothing. Bars of soap appeared, possibly stored in pockets during the walk, and the residents were soon using them to wash their bodies and clothing. Will hesitated, and then waded into the water to join the others. The cold water was shocking, yet refreshing, and though Will was fully accustomed to hot water showers, he gradually found himself enjoying the experience. Aldus, a man Will had met the day before while loading carts, offered him a bar of soap to use. Will happily accepted it, and used it to scrub away the dirt on his body. He was concerned about what might be swimming in the river, but there was nothing to be done about it.

Once scrubbed clean, the residents wrung out their clothes as best they could and dressed, then trudged out of the water into the relatively cool morning air. After the brisk chill of the water, Will didn’t notice the early morning chill to the degree he normally would. Still, it was brisk, and he was shivering by the time they arrived back at the gate amidst the lively chatter of his neighbors. The villagers headed to the center of the community, and gathered around as the

bakers and chefs fired up the stone hearth ovens and the smiths started up fires needed to heat metal, and soon everyone was drying out with the heat generated by the various blazes. After returning to his room to collect his money bag, Will paid a copper coin to the bakers and chefs and was soon enjoying breakfast. He'd foregone the bread offered to him and instead downed a healthy serving of the vegetable and meat stew.

Will wandered back to his room after eating, and retrieved the paper computer from the trunk. He'd been nervous about taking it with him during the trip to the river, primarily out of concern that the device might float away or be spotted by one of the villagers. He headed toward the front gate, patting his pockets one final time to make sure that he had his money bag and the paper scroll computer. After the horses were hitched to the carts, the caravan headed out through the gate on the journey. Will sat with Eva, and deferred to her when she offered to let him drive the horses. They traveled in silence for a few hours, and then stopped to let the horses drink water. The animals wearied quickly due to the heavy loads they were hauling. Will headed into the trees, ostensibly to attend to personal matters, where he took the opportunity to check the computer for messages.

The Traders are generally trustworthy; follow your instincts. Do not fear to confide in Eva; she is the antithesis of Arthur Lowell. Practice invisibility and flying; flood your cells with Energy and imagine them invisible or weightless to achieve the desired effects.

With the brief, vague insights from the future internalized, Will climbed back into the wagon seat where he'd ridden in relative silence the first few hours of the trip, well aware that Eva was casting glances his way. Her Energy, knowingly or not, was trying to gather information on him, but he was blocking her attempts. He wanted to focus on the new skill he'd need to master for the next Trading mission, when he'd need to be able to drive the cart with horses to the town with the rest of the caravan. He'd been running over the steps required to successfully hitch the animals to the carts. It would be an interesting experience trying to handle the task himself and look like something other than a man who'd never been near a horse in his life.

The caravan resumed its journey, with Eva and Will in the lead. Will wondered if there was some type of hierarchy revealed in the order of the carts. But that could wait. As the carts reached traveling speed and a natural distance developed between them, Will glanced at Eva. "You might as well ask what you want to ask."

Eva looked startled. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

Will sighed, and dropped his Shield a bit. He could sense her shock as she felt the Energy from him, though she attempted to stay stony-faced. “Nobody will hear a thing. Ask.”

She looked at him with that penetrating stare. “Who are you?”

“Will Stark.”

She sighed. “Then *what* are you?”

He laughed. “I’m a man. Ask better questions, and you’ll get better answers.” He smiled.

Eva faced forward, focusing on directing the horses over the dirt road. A moment passed in silence. Finally, she glanced his way, looked back to the road, and said, “What is the sensation I’m feeling?”

He nodded. “I’ve come to call it Energy. It’s something your body produces and collects naturally. It will go wherever you concentrate, and do what you ask. You’ve done enough to clear your body of distractions so that you can sense it in yourself and others.” He glanced at her. “There *are* others, at least one inside the community besides you.”

Eva wouldn’t look at him. “Why did you come here?”

Will glanced her way, trying to determine the intent behind the question. He sensed fear, not so much of the Energy he possessed, but what his arrival meant. He was already far along the path they were all striving to travel. Was he here to stop them? She wanted to trust him and learn from him, but the experiences of the Travelers—whoever they were—suggested she had reason to believe he might be there to sabotage their efforts.

He elected to go with an honest answer, with a bit of embellishment. “I was sent here to protect someone very important. I have no desire to restrain the development efforts of anyone, if that’s your concern. So long as you bear no malice towards the one I wish to protect, then I am happy to help you.”

“It’s Elizabeth, isn’t it?”

She was quick. “Yes,” he answered simply.

Eva nodded. “She needs all the help she can get.”

REGRETS

Will was stunned at Eva's statement. "She's in danger?"

Eva gave him an odd look. "If you were sent to protect her, surely you're aware of that fact." Her smile did not reach her eyes.

"I know only that she *needs* protection," Will said. "I don't know what she needs to be protected *from*."

Eva sighed, and her voice was tinged with misery. "You need to know our true history, then. If you knew our history, you'd know her biggest threat isn't from someone like Arthur. It's from someone like *me*."

Will nearly jumped off the cart. "*You're* threatening her?" Had his computer from the future gotten things so obviously wrong so early?

She shook her head. "Worse. I've stood by and let her be hurt, and said nothing, at a time when it might have made a significant difference in her life. Now, I try to protect her as best I can, but the numbers and the odds are against me. I'm but one person, but I do what I can on her behalf. Perhaps you're the one who can turn things in her favor."

Will relaxed a bit. "Maybe you need to tell me how she came to be in such danger, and what form that danger takes. She seems of unusually poor health compared to others in this community. That strikes me as... odd."

"Not odd, Will. Intentional. More to the point, it's an acceptable occurrence to those causing it with their direct behavior."

She took a deep breath. "You're not going to like this, and you'll likely be angry with me. I cannot make up for my cowardice and selfishness as it relates to Elizabeth, but I know I've done her wrong, and I'll give everything I have to try to make it right. Most of the Traders are of a similar mind, but that's it. Still, it's probably lessened her suffering, and let her know that there are a few people

living here who care about her and are on her side.”

Will put a hand on her shoulder. “I understand, and I’m sure she appreciates any effort on her behalf. Please, tell me how this came to be.”

“There were ten of us at the start. Me and my brother, Arthur, and Genevieve, and three other men and three other women. My brother has vanished, Genevieve is dead, and six left rather than participate in Elizabeth’s treatment. Only Arthur and I remain from the original group.

“We call ourselves former serfs because we all believed we were meant for something greater than being someone else’s property. In reality, all of us were born slaves. We worked the lands, the roads, the mines, the fields, the households... and we were all born in the same year.

“Life was brutish, short, and sickly for us. And that was common. Living for twenty-five years was a miracle, living for thirty years impossible. The Baron didn’t like this because his free labor wasn’t accomplishing much, and before we could develop any true expertise, we’d die. We were often too sick or injured to work, regardless of how many times we were beaten or whipped.

“The Baron decided that our short lives and poor health were too expensive, and so he decided to try something quite unusual. He’d pull ten of his slaves at a time out of their work environments and use them to figure out the simplest things that could be done to make us healthier and live longer. He didn’t want anything expensive; if he’d been told that giving us all gold bracelets would add five years to our lives, he’d be happy to let us die instead.”

Will winced.

The Baron put them in one of his smaller homes, and told the servants there to attend to their every need. “We went from being slaves to having servants,” Eva said. “For some, the freedom we lived with, no matter how fleeting, was incredible. But others liked having servants, of having the power to run the lives of others.”

“Arthur,” Will said.

She nodded. Arthur had grown to love the power to order others around, and his own megalomania combined with such a rapid change in position made him see himself as royalty in training. Eva noted that Arthur worked very hard to try to push beyond their simple mandate. They were supposed to focus on the simple; they quickly found that eating the produce of the manor—which had been washed—and wearing clean clothes greatly reduced the frequency of illness. “Arthur wondered if, perhaps, being clean in all ways would be healthy, and that’s how we started the tradition of the morning bath in the river every day.

Most of us had done little more than washing our faces or hands each day; spending time each day in those cool waters seemed to work wonders.” Arthur had them try other things as well; they found that one of the servants was literate and they had the man teach all of them to read and write and work with numbers, skills no slave ever learned. But they’d all made the decision that they had no interest in returning to their former way of life.

Two years later, the Baron remembered that they’d been tasked with the job, and found that they’d made great progress. The lessons learned were basic; the Baron would have scribes compose letters with his orders sent out to all of his slave masters. Arthur overheard him tell a small handful of knights to return the next day with horses to collect the slaves to return them to their previous occupations.

“But we weren’t there the next day. We moved quickly; we raided his safes for money, his silos for seeds and grains, and his barns for horses and tools. We never considered that we might possibly be stealing; it felt as if we were simply taking back what we’d earned in the past.”

They stole away in the night, without alerting any of the servants, and rode north, directly into the teeth of the bitter winter. They rarely slept until they were a week’s journey away, only then believing they might be safe from any type of tracking or hunting from the Baron. They moved at a more casual rate, until they came to the place where the Ealdor and Halwende rivers forked, with the gentle Halwende taking the more easterly route, and the rapid-filled Ealdor flowing from the west. Between the rivers was a dense forest, and the weary travelers were suddenly encouraged. They could live within the seclusion of those trees without fear of discovery; the lands between the rivers would likely be quite fertile, though certainly chilly.

“We traveled into the forest in the early morning, and found a small clearing where the water was bubbling up to the surface. We made camp there, and the next day, using the tools we’d borrowed, we began constructing a large building, large enough to house everyone, including the horses. A few days later, we built a second structure, and this time it was just for the people.”

Will nodded. “Those buildings were the stables and the Schola, weren’t they?”

She nodded as well. “The name on the building came early. Arthur said that we needed a vision to guide us, something that would compel us to keep working hard even when we were bone-tired and cold and aching. He spoke of a vision of this tiny set of buildings evolving into a village of like-minded people,

each plying their trade in relative anonymity, quietly growing our own personal wealth. Personal growth, in Latin, can be written as *alio incrementum*. As our village grew and we built personal rooms for shelter, we left that large room specifically free to store any books we might come across in our travels or Trading missions, or anything else that might educate us. We wanted to continue to perfect our ability to read and write, and that's really what we used it for initially. It was, in a sense, a school. So, it got the *alio incrementum schola* label, after a few of our best educated neighbors learned bits of Latin.”

It was a noble beginning, it seemed, to a word that would later provide Will with so much pain, separate him from his family, and take the lives of many innocent people. He promised himself that he'd use his far advanced abilities and technology to promote the original aims of education and improvement of self, rather than the eventual aims to limit those concepts only to a chosen few.

Eva told of their first two years, challenging years. The winters were harsh, and they were often hungry, but gradually they were able to exchange the money they'd taken from the Baron for supplies and tools they could use to create goods. They started weaving fabrics into clothes and, over time, used the profits from selling to branch out into nearly everything else: carpentry, the forging of swords, daggers and knives, and even brewing beer. They eventually added more people to the community, extending invitations to those they met who seemed capable of sharing their ideas. People like Will Stark.

“During one of those Trading runs to sell goods, Arthur heard travelers from distant lands telling tales of people doing what he called magic, feats like flying and turning invisible and reading the thoughts of others with perfect accuracy. Arthur and others applauded the man for such a wonderful and compelling tale, but the man stated with deep sincerity that they'd seen such feats with their own eyes, and even told Arthur where. He came back and told all of us that we should send two or three of our number to investigate. What if, he said, we learned what enabled those people to do what those travelers had seen them do? What if we could repeat that process here, and develop those same abilities? Could we imagine that success? As it turned out, we could imagine only too well, and Arthur, Genevieve, and my brother departed. They returned six months later, and the detail we found most notable upon their return was that Arthur and Genevieve had been married abroad and she was three months pregnant.”

Will blinked. It sounded almost as if the couple had eloped. “That... must have been a shock.”

“It was more than a shock, Will. In our community, it was, for lack of a

better term, illegal.”

Will tried to avoid gasping with shock, until he realized it was a perfectly natural reaction to the statement. “It was... *illegal*... to get married?”

“We’d agreed that until such time as our village was well-established, until we had time for true leisure, that we’d all abstain from such relationships, for a child would be unable to provide some useful service for the rest, or make crafts we could sell for a profit. Some of the villagers performed services in the community. We have farmers who tend fields to the east; we have hunters and foragers who gather berries, nuts, roots, and small game for everyone to eat. We have a couple of cooks and bakers who make soups and bread for everyone to eat. Everyone has a means to make money and develop wealth. Everyone who could perform such a service or make such goods for sale, that is. A pregnant Genevieve could not tend her share of the fields for several months during our critical planting season; her child would be unable to help with anything for many years after that. They were, essentially, forcing the community’s internal economy and way of life into a massive disruption, and people weren’t happy.”

Was this the cause of the future rules against marriage and children? Were the lessons of the transgressions by Arthur and Genevieve the cause of his own future suffering?

Arthur, who had been a driving force in getting the community to where it was, found himself shunned and rapidly losing his modest wealth as he paid for his new wife and daughter to eat. For a man who believed himself royalty, who believed himself deserving of tribute and honor, such shunning was a humiliation he’d never forget. Or forgive.

As his redheaded daughter reached the age of six, full of natural curiosity and good cheer that brought a smile to the face of all she encountered in that small village, Arthur began a subtle campaign. They’d brought back hundreds of different “foods” from the trip they’d taken nearly seven years earlier. Those foods were stored in the “school” for experimentation by any who desired to do so. But they’d been warned: the trials of testing everything were part of the journey; they’d only find the correct combination of “foods” after they’d tried everything. It was simply the way it worked. Nobody wanted to be among those who tried the first—and thus *wrong*—“foods,” for it had been noted by the Travelers that some substances might cause all manner of negative side effects, including death. For six years, they had, instead, focused on a relentless pursuit of their crafts and on wealth-building Trading runs, and saw the wealth of the village grow.

Arthur, as only he could, used his masterful persuasive skills to spread the idea that one noble soul among them could step forward and work through all of those “foods” in pursuit of the one that would unlock those magical abilities, protecting everyone else from danger. Those who were not this Volunteer would continue to produce the food and goods that enabled the community to thrive. Why risk multiple people becoming ill or dying at once and having less food to eat or fewer goods to sell? The village would greatly benefit from a single person making that research their only job, one which should pay them well enough to eat, even if they’d find themselves ill in the pursuit of those incredible secrets.

And once that secret was unlocked... wouldn’t it be advantageous to be the first to know? To be the first to develop those skills? It would be worth it to pay to be the one there in the Schola, watching the research unfold, waiting to see if the Volunteer would discover the secret that day. They could take turns paying the Volunteer for their work in exchange for exclusive access to the Volunteer during that day’s research. They should pay the Volunteer enough to ensure that they could continue to eat if they needed a week or two to recover. A silver coin per “food” tested, one “food” per day, would seem reasonable.

“We grew excited at the prospect. The idea that someone *else* would bear that risk was a great deal for all of us, for a silver coin was becoming a small price to pay for something we wanted. Nobody wanted to volunteer, though, and our tension increased. Arthur’s skills at manipulating people into the decision he wants are incredible, and we were all desperate for that volunteer to step forward.” She swallowed. “And then, she did.”

“Elizabeth,” Will breathed. “How could a child...?”

“Volunteer?” Eva snorted. “She didn’t volunteer, Will. Arthur said she had, said that she wanted her father to collect the silver coins on her behalf to pay him back for so many years of his selfless sacrifice while she grew old enough and strong enough to contribute to the community. So exuberant were we about this arrangement that we failed to realize that we were essentially selling a young girl into slavery one day a week for all eternity, or more often if her *loving* father determined she could handle a greater frequency. And of course, she could. Basically, we were treating her as the Baron had treated us, doing to her what we rebelled against.”

“Nobody protested this?” Will said, aghast.

“Some did,” Eva said, her tone bitter. “Genevieve did. Six of the original ten did. My brother was gone on a Trading mission at the time, but he was furious

about it when he returned. The rest of us? We said nothing and paid our pieces of silver so that we could imagine being the first to develop these fictitious magical powers. The protesters were outnumbered by a significant margin, and rather than fight or participate in this scheme, they left. My brother was devastated. He fought and argued, but he was ignored. I never rose to defend what he said. My brother and another man left on another Traveling mission to run down a rumor that had been reported of people similar to what we wanted to become. My brother left because he hoped that he could return with the answers, and spare Elizabeth what was to come. Neither of them has returned, though, and it's been a decade since they left."

She choked, and Will was surprised to see the strong woman fighting, without success, to hold back tears. "I was a coward, Will, blinded by my own greed. My brother scolded me, but I wouldn't listen. I know it now; I should have taken a stand, perhaps talked those who left into staying, or protested this scam with more fervor. I do what I can now. I pay my silver coin but let Elizabeth sleep through the day and recover. Genevieve moved into the room next door to the house she and Elizabeth once shared with Arthur, and Elizabeth went with her. Genevieve began to go to every session at "school" with Elizabeth, and subjected herself to the same treatment. I've talked many of the Traders into doing the same thing I do, Will, but most people have no interest in stopping the system they believe will give them magical abilities. It's a system that does nothing to hurt them, though it humiliates that girl and enriches her father. I've failed her, Will, and that's why she needs all the help she can get. She needs help because the people who should be protecting her are either directly causing her pain, or too cowardly and weak to speak up on her behalf."

She took a deep breath. "Or, in the case of Genevieve, dead at the hands of a mob spurred into action by her husband." Tears filled her eyes. "Please, help her. She's like the daughter I never had the chance to have, and I would give anything and everything I have to get her out of this. Arthur won't let her leave, ever, outside of the baths, and his minions include the most powerful warriors in our village, especially Maynard. Please, Will. Please, help me to save her."

Will nodded agreement and put a comforting hand on her arm. He would help save Elizabeth. It was why their children had sent him here.

SERVANT

They traveled in silence for several moments.

The emotions triggered in Eva by these memories were overwhelming Will. Clearly this woman had suffered tremendous anguish as a byproduct of her part in this shameful history. “That’s what the silver coin was for, wasn’t it?” Will asked, his voice quiet, as if it could have been heard by any of the drivers riding in the trailing carts. “You were paying for her time yesterday.”

Eva nodded. “Yes. The dream Arthur spread in all of us... it was more intoxicating than the ale we brew back home. After most of the original ten left, it took several years before a small handful of people gradually started to realize that what we were doing was wrong. We wanted to leave, too. By then, though, we’d realized that we couldn’t abandon her. In a sense, those who left were cowards, too, weren’t they? They feared fighting the majority, even though they were right. I know that in my case I realized that I was wrong to side with Arthur at the beginning, but I wouldn’t make my mistake worse by running away from it. I owe it to her to do what I can to make her life more bearable, until such time that we can truly free her from this condition.”

Her voice dropped into a whisper. “It sounds bad, Will, but it’s worse than you think. Some people here *enjoy* watching her suffer. They’re monsters and I’m surprised that I haven’t killed any of them. Maybe one day I’ll finally lose control and do just that. Some people think that the more she suffers, the closer we are to a breakthrough. Her suffering isn’t what makes them happy, it’s what they think her suffering *means*. Most people here, though, are simply glad that it’s happening to someone else, and not them. They fear that if they say something now, it will be *them* being marched into that building and forced at

sword-point to consume whatever is chosen by their tormentor.”

“That’s awful!” Will said, unable to restrain himself. “How could any of you not recognize what you were doing to that little girl?”

“She screamed so loudly,” Eva muttered, as if she’d not heard him, and was merely reliving the memories alone. “She’d scream when she saw what had been picked, and when she was told how much she’d need to take. If she refused, she was hit. For those who didn’t hit her on the occasion of a refusal... well, Arthur isn’t the forgiving type, especially with little girls who are impacting his clientele. He and Genevieve got into huge fights, public fights, about Elizabeth’s treatment. As I mentioned, she moved into the room next door and Elizabeth went with her. They wanted no part of Arthur anymore. He didn’t stop, however; he still makes sure people are well aware that hitting Elizabeth is both acceptable and encouraged.”

Will shook his head. “How can you have allowed it to continue?”

Eva glanced at him, glaring. “He’s a manipulator, Will. He could convince you that you are in the sweltering heat when your feet are covered in snow. He convinced nearly everyone, somehow, that the physical assault on Elizabeth would strengthen her to be able to do more research. In other words, by hitting her, they were helping her, and by extension, helping everyone reach their ultimate goals. In reality, everyone in this place is evil, greedy, a coward, or some combination of the above.”

“Which of those describe you?” Perhaps he was being harsh, but it was impossible for him to react with total compassion when hearing descriptions of how horrid her life was. He now knew why his children and Adam had made him promise not to use his new abilities to kill anyone before he’d left. At the moment, it took every bit of self-control he had not to teleport back to the village and kill every single one of them for what they’d done or allowed to be done to Elizabeth. And he wasn’t sure yet that he wouldn’t renounce his vow and start ending lives.

Eva didn’t answer his question, but after a time, she broke the silence. “He refers to her now not as a Volunteer, but as the Servant, a title of honor. He’ll reference a passage in the Bible where Jesus tells his followers that whoever wants to be the greatest must be the one who serves. She will be the greatest because she serves all of us, he says. Therefore, everything that happens to her is presented as her being the most honored of all of us, the strongest, the greatest. We all go along with it, though the Traders and a few others manipulate the system Arthur has. If you look closely when we return to the village, you’ll

notice a small number of people dressed more simply than others. Dull colors, no ornamentation or jewelry, no upgraded furniture in our rooms. Others use their wealth to enhance their physical well-being. We use ours to pay Arthur's daily fee, and Elizabeth comes into our room. We do not make her work; if we work, she joins because she wants to. If we go to the Schola to do research, we ask *her* to pick out what will work. She knows, Will. She *knows* what works. And we all do whatever she does. If she thinks a certain new herb will enhance our ability to sense emotions in others, then we all take it. She's rarely wrong, but most of the time she doesn't choose anything, just sits quietly and watches us. And at the end of the day, before Arthur arrives to collect her and walk her back to her room... we pay *her*. She's spent time working for us, and she should be paid. She has a nice bit of savings accumulating, but she says nothing and spends nothing for fear of reprisals from her father."

Will shook his head. "I need to free her, to get her away from here. Perhaps that's what I'm here to do. I need to free her, to get her away from Arthur's cruelty and scheming. I could easily do it, but it would draw attention I'd rather not have, not until I think things through and figure out how to leave everyone else unharmed and none the wiser. And I'm not yet sure where to take her once she's free."

Eva nodded, and Will could see the sadness in her eyes. "We're all trapped by something, Will. I'm trapped by the realization that I'm outnumbered today. I could say something, but I truly believe that Arthur would see me dead if I threaten his power structure, and his power structure today is the ability to barter his daughter. It's how he makes consistent income far beyond what is needed to eat and live. If I'm no longer here, that's one less person to keep her safe for some portion of the week, and that's why I don't leave the village in protest. So I wait, and work to convince others to join our cause to use our time to gradually free her and lessen her burden. I think I'm close to gaining another friend of Elizabeth. There is a woman named Eleanor, one of the Traders on this journey, who seems open to our thinking, but I must go slowly with her. I cannot have her expose what we're doing to Arthur."

"Sound thinking, Eva." Will wanted to be angry with her, but knew she was in a predicament. As a woman in this era, she'd have a difficult time surviving on her own. It wasn't because she wasn't capable; in the day he'd know her, he'd come to realize that she could handle anything life threw her way. Rather, she'd be shunned from what she needed to do if she was on her own. He realized that the true reason there were several men along was that it gave her credibility with

the merchants they'd deal with in each city; they wouldn't deal fairly with a woman. If a man was there, however, they'd assume she was with him—a wife or sister—and that he was simply letting her handle the negotiations for him. If she left the village, she'd have no such buffer. Thus, she needed the village as much as it needed her. Speaking up would have ruinous results for Eva and those she willingly served in her Trader role. As such, he suspected that her ongoing residence in the small village might have a practical motive as well as a humanitarian one.

“You spoke of freeing Elizabeth from our walls earlier,” Eva remarked. “Know this: Arthur will not let her go. If she leaves, his source of power leaves with her. He's commandeered enough money and favors through his sacrifice of her that he'd survive for a time, but his long-term fortunes are tied to her. It's why he's quietly circulated the notion that none of us can marry; it's not an accident that each of us lives in such a tiny room. It's Arthur's way of ensuring that nobody else has a child who can compete with his daughter. No, if she was to try to escape, he'd send the entire community after her to force her back, and the sad thing is he probably wouldn't need to say a thing for it to happen; too many people see her as their salvation in a sense. The only way she'll leave, as he's often said, is in a box made of pine. She wants to be a Trader, and he refuses. She could too easily get “lost” in one of the remote villages and towns we visit.”

She's a slave, Will thought. There was no other way to describe it. She was essentially bought and sold daily. She had no free will to go where she chose to go, or do what she wanted to do. Other than the secret payments from Eva and those like her, Elizabeth received no money of her own for her work. One slave to serve a community of over fifty people, only a handful of whom showed her any kindness.

But there was one bit of justice in the situation. “She has Energy. Few others have any.”

Eva nodded, her countenance brightening. “She knows what works and what doesn't, and I think she uses that... Energy... to look as horrible as she possibly can, though I'm not sure why. She's strong enough now that she can fight off any type of ailment she should get from what doesn't work. It's become a game to her. She'll never point to that one thing or things that work. I know she's intentionally suggested foods... with interesting side effects... that do work, however, and watches in silent laughter as the message spreads through the community.” Eva laughed, and Will smiled. “When people complain after they

get sick, she'll say it must mean they need to combine it with something else to work, but she's not sure what that might be. Naturally, nobody actually pursues that elusive combination. She's up to something; I wish she'd tell me what it is so that I can help. And I wonder if she is, perhaps, strong enough to leave and chooses not to do so."

"Why wouldn't she leave if she's able?"

Eva shook her head, avoiding anything more emotive than that as she navigated a particularly challenging bit of road. "I don't know, Will, and I've not earned the right to push the issue with her. I'm hopeful that she knows she can trust me, at least now, and will one day include me in her thinking."

He thought of the look he'd seen on Elizabeth's face as she'd entered Eva's room, and nodded. "She does know it, Eva, and I believe she's kept you out of it for your protection. Your care and concern have resonated with her."

Her face brightened. "I don't deserve it, but I'm glad that you think so. It gives me hope that I'm doing the right thing, even though it feels like so little. I hope she trusts me enough to let me help her more, though."

"She's obviously trusted you enough to give you some pieces of the formula. You have some modest Energy as well."

He saw a brief flicker of fear cross her face before she snorted. "Not like her. And most certainly not like you. Exactly how much can you do?"

Will considered. "Enough. Enough that I believe I can get her out of the village, once the time is right and I figure out the best way to do so. For me, the time was right when I showed up. If you're correct, though, she's not ready to leave yet, and I don't know that I'd force her to leave against her will. Like you, I need to find out why she might not want to leave, and understand what's holding her back. Hopefully, she'll reach the point of being ready to leave before Arthur manages to put her in that box, intentionally or otherwise. And... *I'm* not sure that she's ready, now that I think about it."

"She's been ready for years."

Will shook his head. "Even if she was willing to leave, is she truly ready? That I can't say. She would need to be prepared to deal with the world on her own. Could she, a sixteen-year-old girl, survive on her own in a distant town or city, and not suffer a worse fate than she's experiencing now? She would need to have better training on how to use her Energy power. That would enable her to protect herself against nearly any type of harm. I will work with you to help protect her from Arthur and his cruelty, and look for the chance to teach her as much as I can so that she can protect herself, just as we are trying to protect her."

Eva sighed. “So she’ll get to continue the honor of being the Servant to all of us?”

Will shook his head. “Never give in to the idea that what happened to her is somehow an honor, even in your words. If you call her a Servant, a title given to her by Arthur, to the others you’ll lend credence to what he’s doing. Call her by her name at all times. To do otherwise de-humanizes her into the slave Arthur wants her to be.”

“I just want her to be free,” Eva sighed. “She deserves a better fate than what she’s been dealt.”

“Perhaps what we can do is to silently help her build a small fortune,” Will said. “And then one day we break her out of here with that fortune, and the knowledge of how to use it. She’ll be wealthy in no time. At that point, she’ll likely be a young woman with a lot of money, and that should help her survive and thrive in freedom.”

Eva nodded. “And with that money, she’ll be able to find a good husband on the outside.”

Will stiffened. “Perhaps. Or perhaps she’ll meet someone who will love her for who she is, with no regard to money.”

Eva snorted. “I wish. She wouldn’t find someone like that on the outside if she looked for a thousand years.”

Will smiled. Little did Eva know that Elizabeth would do just that.

MERCHANT

They stopped for the night and made camp. There was loud chatter over the roaring campfire, and Will got better acquainted with the Traders. All five—along with Will—had joined this particular mission. They told Will that was unusual; normally, they only needed four Traders for each trip. However, the Stores had become so full that they'd needed all five wagons to carry everything.

Will met Aldus, who was the oldest of the Traders; like all of the Traders but Eva, he'd joined the group after it had begun, after watching Arthur and Eva work their magic trading in his home town. Aldus was a farmer by trade, but found that he was skilled at trading when offering his goods for sale at the local market. He'd proven to be a challenge, even for Eva, in negotiations. She was the first person he ever felt had beaten him in the negotiation game, and he followed the two of them back to the fledgling community. The villagers were in desperate need of farmers, and eagerly accepted him as one of their own. As they added additional farmers, Aldus focused his time on Trading, and only practiced farming between Trading runs.

Outside of Elizabeth, Matilda was the youngest member of the community. She'd been the daughter of a noble, promised in marriage to a man thirty years her senior. She'd run away and, like Will, had happened upon the village in the forest by chance, intercepting them on the way to the morning bath in the Halwende River. Her story, one of running away from a noble determined to make her live against her own will, resonated with the group, and she was invited to join. She'd learned to knit as part of her studies in the noble's household, and became one of the first weavers in the community. When she asked to join a Trading mission, she found her confidence and air of royalty an

advantage in working with buyers and sellers. She could also charm others with her youthful exuberance.

Gerald was an imposing man, one who'd run away from his life as a soldier. His commander had ordered him to participate in the looting and burning of a village as they'd returned home from losing a battle. He'd been horrified at the idea of attacking the people they were supposed to protect. Though he made decent pay as a soldier, he deserted, ripped up his uniform, and returned to the village after the soldiers had destroyed it. He helped the town rebuild, sleeping outdoors and earning money by picking fruits and nuts from the trees nearby and selling them. Eva's team had heard of this courageous man from the villagers and interacted with him as they sought to buy his produce in the town's market. They invited him to return with them to a community where he could be a full citizen with a roof over his head, and Gerald readily agreed. He learned how to work metal and became a smith, able to produce weapons and tools with metal heated in the blazing fires built each day in the Shops.

Eleanor had lost her husband and two young children to a rampaging army, and felt understandable unease around Gerald. Eva had found her during one of their trading missions, offering to work at the vendor booths in exchange for food to help stave off starvation. One man, for sport, had set her to bartering with Eva and Arthur, and the woman had held her own. The man, shown up by Eleanor, refused to pay her for her work. She left the town with Eva and Arthur, and had proved to be an excellent baker and cook. She advised others in the community on improving recipes for bread, and suggested spices to use with meat and vegetables. She also proved to be a savvy trader for seeds and food staples the community could not grow or forage for themselves.

They drove the wagons again the next day, and spent much of their time in silence. Eva refused to answer any questions about her own past; Will again became acutely aware of her emotions on the subject, and the pain and shame of her status as a slave. Unlike Arthur, though, she was determined to do what she could to free someone else from that bondage, rather than drive them further into it.

On the morning of the third day, they reached the outskirts of the town. "The town is called Richland, home to perhaps a thousand people," Eva explained to Will. "As we are so proficient at driving bargains in our favor, we try to travel in different directions and avoid going to the same location on a regular basis. Many merchants in these towns refuse to trade with us after our first encounters; we want to give them time to forget, or perhaps to increase their courage in

dealing with us.” She smiled, and Will realized it was the first time he’d seen her do so. It was a radiant expression, and he imagined that such a smile could win many transaction negotiations.

“Or perhaps they can be made to forget, or made to develop that courage,” Will mused.

Eva glanced at him. “You can do that?”

“Probably,” Will admitted. “But I don’t think it’s appropriate. If I force people to trade with us, and we know exactly what prices they’ll accept, buying or selling... well, doing both almost feels like stealing.”

“Fair point,” Eva conceded.

The caravan approached the gates of the city. Two guards, armed with prominent swords, scowled at them. “State your business,” one barked, nodding in Will’s direction.

“We seek to trade our goods,” Will replied, unsure of the proper form of address or etiquette for such questions. The guards were suspicious, however. Will probed gently, and found that there had been a series of thefts perpetrated inside the walls over the past few months, and the thieves always posed as traders in order to gain entry. “You’re more than welcome to examine our cargo,” he offered.

It seemed to work. The more senior guard nodded at his subordinate, and the second man loosened the tarp covering the wagon. “Why the covering?” the guard asked.

“It provides a means to secure our goods within the wagon, and also protects them against damage from any rains which might fall,” Will replied. The guard pulled back the tarp, glancing through the goods. Will could hear the man’s nervous thoughts quite clearly. *They have no one hidden in this wagon, so perhaps they truly are traders come to barter. If this group is together, however...*

“We come as a group with a large volume of goods to trade,” Will said. “If your city requires it, each of our wagons will be available for an inspection prior to entry.”

Dishonest men would not encourage me to check for hidden men or contraband, Will heard the guard thinking. Aloud, the man said, “That will not be necessary, sir. You and your companions are free to enter.” Will nodded in the guard’s direction, and after securing the tarp back into place, he climbed aboard the wagon. Eva snapped the reins sharply, and the caravan of wagons entered the town.

Will, wondering what, exactly, had caused the nervousness, decided to investigate. “Go on in. I’ll catch up.” He cast a knowing glance at Eva. Eva looked at him, nodded, and Will hopped out of the wagon. The other Traders gave him strange looks, but he waved them along as he walked back to the entry gate.

Will walked up to the guards. “Hello, there,” he said. The guards eyed him, less concerned than puzzled. They were unaccustomed to anyone addressing them, other than to request access to the city. “Might I inquire the purpose of the inspection earlier?”

“It’s our city’s policy,” the more senior guard barked. “It’s not your business to question it.”

“It seemed like it wasn’t a common activity in your city,” Will said. “For men of your experience, I’d expect less nervousness over a few horse-drawn wagons of goods with a few men and women.” When they didn’t respond, he leaned in a bit closer. “Is something happening here to cause you to be nervous? My friends and I... if there’s danger, we’d like to know so that we can protect ourselves.”

The guards relaxed a bit, and the more junior guard glanced at his superior. The older man sighed. “That’s a fair sentiment, sir, and you have shown us good cheer in accepting our searches without complaint. It is only right that we alert you. Only recently, our fair town has been subjected to a number of violent robberies, and in each case, the brigands were comprised of three or four men, only one of whom had ever been seen before. The victims were always heading home from our market after a day of trading, flush with coins. The unfamiliar men would maneuver the fearful victim into a trap, out of sight, and set upon him. The thieves would never be seen again, and we suspect they have been entering our town hidden in the wagons of strangers. That is why we searched your wagon, sir.”

Will nodded, his face grave. “I can understand your concern and actions, my friends, and I appreciate your alerting me to this issue. I will warn my friends to be alert to such mischief.” He held out his hand. “Thank you.”

The guards shook his hand and waved him through the gate. Will walked along, guided by the faint harp-like sound of Eva’s nascent Energy.

“What was that all about?” Eva asked, as he rejoined them. The wagons circled around, enabling the Traders to plan their strategy. They had mentioned this to Will the night before. Since they never went to the same town twice in succession, they were uncertain of the method of trade available to them or if

things had changed since their last visit. Would they find an open market where they'd be able to park their wagons? Would they need to visit the individual shops to buy and sell goods and supplies? Perhaps there were other systems in place. They would typically park their wagons together, have three members of the team stand guard—Gerald, the former soldier, always oversaw this part of each mission—while two others would travel into the heart of the city to ascertain their best next steps.

Once the Traders had parked their wagons and gathered, Will explained. “They’ve had people pose as Traders who cover their wagons, purportedly filled with goods for trade, which were actually filled with armed men. They enter the community, and while the men driving the wagons pretended to trade, the others would assault citizens and steal coins, jewelry, and other valuables. Our large caravan of covered wagons made them nervous; I wasn’t sure why, but thought it would be wise to make sure we didn’t seem like a threat. I talked to the guards now and they told me what’s been happening. Neither of those men wanted to be responsible for another Trojan Horse situation.”

“What’s a Trojan horse?” Aldus asked. “Is that a specific breed?”

“No,” Matilda replied, laughing. “It’s a story of myth. The great, walled city of Troy could not be defeated, and as such their enemies offered a giant statue of a horse as a sign of peace. Once inside the walls, soldiers hidden within the statue emerged and slaughtered everyone.”

Gerald stroked his beard. “Brilliant plan.”

Eleanor gasped. “Horrible. Simply horrible.”

Matilda shrugged. “It’s just a story. But I can see why they’d be nervous about unfamiliar people showing up in large groups if that’s been happening.” She nodded at Will. “That was a good idea, to talk to them and find out why they felt they needed to inspect our wagons. I’ve never seen that done before.”

Eva and Will were nominated to explore the town. They walked around, observing. There was a large central market area of the town where local merchants were setting up shop. Will was able to sense that there was no cost to doing so, though Eva seemed interested in asking one of the merchants about the propriety. “Don’t ask,” Will advised. “They’ll all tell you that a large fee is required, and one of their cohorts will collect the tax. In reality, all it will do is discourage us from setting up all of our wagons at a time.” They located a pub near the central market area where they’d be able to eat at midday. They also located an inn, with the curious name of the Dented Sayler, where they’d be able to find lodging for the evening. After prepaying for two large rooms—one for

the men and one for the women—and ensuring they could have their horses cared for during the day, Will and Eva returned to their companions, and the wagons were hauled into the market and backed into place. The horses were trotted off to the inn where the innkeeper, a jovial man named Nicholas, ushered them into stalls and fed them. Will tipped the man an extra gold coin, and could sense the astonishment at his generosity.

The town sprang to life a short time later. Will, though uncomfortable with forcing people to buy and sell, used his Empathy “push” skills to lessen the reluctance the locals had in terms of trading with strangers. While he didn’t care to use his skills to guarantee that they’d get the absolute best deal all the time, he did want to make sure that the locals weren’t afraid to talk to them, especially after the recent attacks. He moved from wagon to wagon, talking with the local merchants and buyers using the negotiating and people-reading skills he’d developed over his fifteen years of business transactions, and through the advanced classes on reading body language and eye movement he’d taken. He murmured such ideas to his friends, and watched as they each rapidly assimilated those skills and improved their trading success. The large volume of quality swords, daggers, knives, and shields were in incredibly high demand due to the recent armed thefts, and they sold out quickly. The tapestries, garments, fabrics, and beer kegs were quickly gone as well; the items were clearly of a high quality, and the townsfolk found them to be a good bargain. As per custom, the group also sold two of the five wagons as they’d need less space to haul back the raw materials they’d buy the next day before embarking on their journey home.

By midday, they’d sold all of their wares; Will could sense the thrill of his fellow Traders at the speed with which they’d completed the process. Though he did not manage a wagon and serve as a direct Trader, Will had become a true general merchant, smoothing the entire process of selling for his friends, a service each received with gratitude. The other Traders were thrilled with the techniques Will had taught them, but he recognized that even without his help, the team had genuine skill. Eva in particular had an innate gift for negotiation, even without his lessons or her Energy. She’d started using her Energy to improve her reads of people, and used Will’s techniques as well, all with great effect. Will knew, because of his telepathic skills, that they’d extracted nearly the maximum possible profit from their trades, and wondered if that news would lessen their eagerness to develop the “magical” abilities Arthur was preaching to them.

The team's emotions as they reconvened were upbeat. Matilda, an attractive and stately young woman, had been a popular visit of those men looking to buy; she thrilled over the attention she'd gotten. "Two of them proposed marriage," she whispered to Eva. "Was that appropriate?" Will barely stifled a laugh. Arthur had the community so unused to the concept of marriage already that she couldn't fathom something like that happening. At least the men proposing to Matilda were very nearly her age, rather than thirty years her senior.

Gerald, the solidier, had spoken to a number of the men purchasing the swords, daggers, and knives, and had asked about local preferences on blade type, level of decoration, and preferred lengths. "I can use this information when we return to our village to make sure our crafts meet current preferences," he explained to Will, who recognized this as a basic form of market research. Gerald was thrilled that his success in trading the weaponry was so dominant that buyers were asking *him* for guidance on the best type of weapon to purchase. Gerald liked the sense of power such questions provided him.

Eleanor was quite skittish; the news of the random, violent attacks sounded so nearly like the one that had left her widowed, childless, and impoverished that she very nearly elected to spend the day locked in the women's room at the inn. But she recovered, and did a fine job working with Matilda to sell the collection of quality fabrics and clothing the village had produced. Will sensed that he made her nervous; she wondered how he learned his techniques for understanding people, and worried that Will, perhaps, might be a Trojan horse himself for their village. She was unable to hide the fact that she hovered more closely by her coin purse when Will joined her and Matilda throughout the day. Will elected not to feel offended.

Aldus had tremendous success selling the woodcrafts and beer. The wood was of a different grain than this town had seen before, and the locals were accustomed to wine rather than beer; the novelty of these products helped drive sales. "Make sure to tell them not to drink beer and wine the same day, or at least not at the same meal," Will whispered. "They won't like you at all if they do."

The team retired to the inn, and after washing the dirt and dust from their hands and faces, joined the other guests of the inn for dinner, seating themselves at a separate table. Nicholas, the innkeeper, remembered the generous fee Will had paid earlier that day, and he ensured that the cook and serving girls kept the best of everything coming their way. The table was soon enjoying the type of revelry Will had seldom seen since the night his life had changed and his world had turned upside down.

He'd felt at home in the future in a sense; people were cordial to him, and politely applauded his successes. His son, Fil, had treated Will poorly for the purpose of encouraging Will to want to leave and travel to the distant past to fulfill his destiny. Beyond that he'd felt welcome there, more than he'd ever expected to feel again after believing his wife and son murdered. Yet, though it felt like a home, it did so more in the sense of visiting extended family once every few years. Will still felt a sense of isolation, as if he'd never truly fit in. Intentional or not, it wasn't what he'd come to expect in the household he and Hope had built.

Yet here, with these Traders, he did get that sense. He'd known them less than a week, and yet there was a sense of true bonding. Eva was already someone he considered a friend and trusted confidant; other than the skittish Eleanor, the other Traders were people he admired and enjoyed spending time with. Most notably, his wife-to-be in the distant future lived here as well, though as a girl in her mid-teens and under the thumb of a tyrannical and abusive father. Will knew he *could* kill the man, and he wanted to do so; he also knew his duty was to preserve the future as already written, and that future said the man would live another twelve centuries at least. He needed to free her of the man's clutches, and the men and women with him here tonight were of a similar mind on the subject, for they loved the redheaded girl named Elizabeth. He was confident that the people sharing a meal, a drink, and a laugh with him that night would, with no nudging necessary, join him in the effort to free the girl from her captivity, and that increased his sense of bonding and friendship.

For the first time in what seemed like a thousand years, Will felt that he was truly home.

INVASION

The Traders stayed up late into the night, enjoying the tales told by Nicholas, the innkeeper. Most of the stories revolved around local folklore, well known among the residents, and thus the man rarely had much of an audience. They listened with rapt attention, alternately laughing and gasping in horror, as the stories unfolded. He was a gifted storyteller, and Will found himself enthralled.

As the stories ended, the team made inquiries about the recent thefts described by the guards at the gate. “We were stopped entering the city,” Eva explained, “and were told that the thieves entered by hiding their numbers and weapons inside wagons they claimed held goods for trade.” Nicholas confirmed this. The thieves would typically arrive in the early afternoon, trade in a clumsy manner until nightfall, and then corner merchants heading home with their remaining goods and money earned on the day. The men dressed in darker clothing and were difficult to see in the twilight, and the victims could never see where the men ran after committing the crimes. They could not identify the men with any certainty, for even the guards at the gate would not recognize them. “If they stopped you when you entered the city, it’s likely that your manner of travel made the guards think you were repeating the same process,” Nicholas explained.

The Traders finally retired for the evening, enjoying the soft beds after spending the two previous nights sleeping on the rocky ground. They were all soon fast asleep.

Will woke even before he heard the shouting. Something was very wrong. He jumped to his feet, opened the door, and headed to the main room of the inn. He found Nicholas there, hovering over two men who appeared to be injured. As

Will approached, he could see noticeable lumps on both heads, and blood was staining their clothing. Nicholas, who had been seeking cloths and water, saw Will and stopped. "I hope we didn't wake you, sir."

Will shook his head. "What happened?"

"The hidden thieves. They must have been here yesterday. We didn't see them. These men were jumped from behind on their way home from the pub. Relieved of all of the coins they made earlier in the day."

"How long ago were they attacked?" As he asked the question, Will had an inspiration, and ordered his healing nanos to split up and move into the two men and help cure their injuries. He could sense the nanos' departure; with luck, they'd accelerate the healing process even with only half the usual number working in each man.

"They arrived here about fifteen minutes ago; I'd guess they were attacked in the past half hour."

Will nodded, and walked to the door. "Hey!" Nicholas shouted after him. "Where are you going? Didn't you hear me? These men were attacked not long ago!"

"I know," Will said. "It means their attackers are still nearby." He walked out the door, to the incredulous stare of the innkeeper.

Will sent out a blast of Energy, seeking out strong emotion. Most people were asleep, and any emotions they might experience due to dreams were heavily muted. He sensed two men, perhaps a quarter mile away, and the emotion was one of violence and greed, the thoughts of the large number of coins they'd stolen.

Gotcha, Will thought. He teleported to the spot.

He appeared behind the two men just as the thieves were joined by a third man, one Will recognized as a rather unskilled trader he'd transacted with earlier that day. He realized as he emerged from the teleportation that he probably should have avoided such an act. Thankfully, the men didn't see him appear in the darkness. Will used his push-Empathy skills, and the three men were suddenly quite aware that they were being followed, and were frightened about what might happen to them. They turned, skittish, and found a single man behind them, armed with... nothing.

Their nervous laughter quickly turned to the evil cackle of men ready to perpetrate a crime. Will could feel their greed and anger, and sense their glee at finding an unarmed man to provide them an even greater haul of treasure without needing to work, for they recognized Will as one of the master Traders

who had profited so greatly throughout the day. The three men drew their swords and advanced on Will.

Will sighed. “This happens to me all the time. Three guys with swords attack me when I’m unarmed. Is there no honor among you thieves?”

The man who’d joined the two who had jumped the local residents cackled. “Cut the fancy talk and hand over your gold.” He swiped his blade at the empty air in front of him, and the sword created a swishing sound meant to intimidate Will into surrender.

Will considered the demand, then shrugged. “No, I think I’ll hang on to what I have. And the three of you can return what you stole.”

The thieves looked at each other and burst out laughing. Then they advanced on Will, blades at the ready. “Hand it over, now!” The leader of the trio seemed to prefer the option where Will refused again, so that they could rough him up as they’d done to the others. Will guessed this without even needing his telepathic or empathic skills. Not wanting to disappoint, he complied with the unspoken wish. “I rather like my coins, so I’ll just keep them.”

The leader of the thieves laughed. “I’m not giving you a choice.” The three thieves pounced on Will, swords slashing at the man.

Their swords slashed through empty air, each man striking one of his companions. They were in shock, partly due to the savage wounds the blades had inflicted, but partly because they had no idea what had happened to their target, a man who just a moment earlier had been surrounded without means of escape by their tightening circle.

“You gentlemen okay?” Will called from behind them. “I hear there are some criminals on the loose. You should find shelter before you get hurt.”

“How... how did you get over there?” the leader spluttered. “We had you surrounded... and... you can’t be *there*, because you were *right here!*”

Will frowned. “I’m not certain what you mean, sir. I’m standing here and asking if you and your companions are well. Oh, dear.” Will saw the blood staining the men’s clothing. “It seems the criminals have found and attacked you. Did they take your money?”

“No,” the leader replied. “They—” He slapped at his pockets. “Hey, where did the money go? I just had it here in my pocket!”

“Yeah!” one of the others snapped. “The loot I took from that guy is gone now. Where’d it go?”

“Don’t look at me!” the third growled. “My money is gone, too!”

Will arched an eyebrow. “You’re all injured and you’ve all been relieved of

your coins. It sounds as if you've been robbed and hit on the head. Let's get you over to the Dented Sayler and see if we can't stop that bleeding."

The three thieves stared at Will. Was it possible they'd imagined him earlier? Had they actually been robbed and not realized it? The leader of the trio, the man who had feigned being an incompetent merchant, glanced at Will, glanced back at his companions, and shrugged. He walked after Will, and the other two followed close behind.

They arrived at the Dented Sayler and entered the building. Nicholas breathed an audible sigh of relief at seeing Will unharmed, but looked anxious as the three strange, bleeding men entered his inn. But he moved to fetch more cloths to use to cover the cuts and gashes. The thieves sat on chairs around a table, looking dazed, while the two men they'd robbed earlier looked at the trio with great apprehension. Finally, one of the victims swallowed and addressed the thieves. "You... you're the ones who robbed us earlier. Why are you here in this inn?"

The leader looked at him, dazed. "Did we, now?"

The victims looked at each other, and then at Will. "What did you do to them?"

Will looked confused. "I didn't do anything. I went to see if anyone else had been hurt, and found these men several streets over, injured, and complaining of missing coins. Since I knew Mr. Nicholas was already caring for victims, I thought I'd bring them back here as well. I don't think there are any more injured people out and about tonight, though."

Nicholas walked in, and nodded. "That's good, Mr. Will." He looked ready to add something else, but seemed to think better of it. Will pulled another gold coin from his pocket and handed it to the man. "You've been serving these men, though they aren't even guests of your inn, giving up sleep to do so. We've done well this trip, and I'd like to use some of my proceeds to thank you for taking care of them. You're a good man, Nicholas." With that, Will began to walk away.

He paused, as if remembering something. "I almost forgot," he said. Will reached into another pocket and pulled out two large coin purses. "I found these while I was walking, and thought they might be yours." He tossed the coin purses to the two victims, then left the room.

Will didn't go far, however. He paused, trying to read the thoughts of the thieves. It seemed unlikely that three men could be responsible for the wave of crime in the city brought on by outsiders; someone would have recognized a pattern by now. Even if they rotated the three men between the role of the trader

and the role of cargo, they'd eventually have to repeat the pattern and risk exposure and the end of their scheme. That could mean he was seeing one of two possible scenarios. The first possibility was that the men would only visit each town and city three times, rotating the "visible" person each trip, before leaving and moving on to the next town. If that was the case, then there could be other towns and cities they'd robbed, and more that they planned to go to next. The other possibility was that they were part of a larger group that rotated teams of men among towns and cities. With that type of organization, the criminals could attack multiple cities at once without allowing time for warnings to travel to other towns and cities they'd eventually target.

He needed to know which scenario was occurring, and the only way to be sure was to invade the thoughts of the three criminals. He reached out with his Energy into the minds of the three men, sensing confusion primarily. They were doubting whether he'd ever been in their clutches at all, for surely it was impossible for a man to move so quickly. The other thoughts were filled with worry, concern over their fate should they return to Richard empty-handed. The last group to do so had... well, they hadn't gone on any further treasure hunts. Will scoffed internally. People could use words to make anything sound noble; assault and robbery simply didn't have the same air of nobility as "treasure hunt." He'd learned that this was a larger scheme, though, orchestrated by a man named Richard.

He needed to know where to find this man, the general of an army of thieves. This crime wave needed to be stopped at the source. Stopping three of his men would simply tell Richard that he needed to send other men to Richland, or modify his scheme. No, Will decided, he could do this, using his abilities to prevent the robbery of good and decent people like those here in Richland.

Will walked back into the common room, feigning a yawn. Nicholas glanced at him. "Having trouble sleeping?"

Will nodded. "A bit too much exercise so late at night, and apparently it's not helping me."

Nicholas nodded at him. "I'll fetch you some wine; that should help."

"I'd be most grateful." Nicholas hustled off.

Will glanced at the two men victimized by the thieves. "How long have you lived here?"

"All my life," one replied. The other nodded in agreement.

Will glanced at the thieves. "And how long have the three of you lived here?"

“We are not from here,” one replied. “We’re from—”

“Shut it,” the leader snapped. He faced Will. “We’re simply weary travelers looking to trade honestly for a few coins and then will be on our way.”

Will nodded. “I know the feeling.”

He glanced up at Nicholas as the innkeeper hustled back into the room with his wine. Will sipped it; it was watered down, but he had no actual need for the alcohol. His conversation had gotten the reaction he’d wanted. The men hadn’t named the location of their headquarters, but he had gotten something even more valuable.

They’d visualized their homes when Will had asked about them.

Will chatted briefly with the five men, and offered to walk the two injured men back to their homes. “You gentlemen enjoy a good night’s sleep,” Will said to the thieves, and beckoned for Nicholas to follow him for a private conversation before departing.

“You’ll want to alert the sheriff come daylight; those men *are* responsible for the robbery of the two men I’m walking home. I don’t think they’ll cause any more harm, though, so you should get some rest until morning.”

Nicholas glanced at the thieves, a nervous look covering his face. “I’m uncomfortable leaving them unguarded.”

Will smiled. “Trust me, they’re not going anywhere.” As he spoke, he sent a small portion of his nanos to the three men, forming them into encasing shells, and ordered the nanos to prevent the men from standing up.

Nicholas tried to smile. “If you say so.”

Will nodded, and headed out. He walked both men back to their homes, figuring that anyone watching would think the two had been out late at the pub and needed an extra hand to make it home upright. After ensuring the second man had gotten safely inside his own small home, Will walked toward the shadows and the deepest darkness he could find in the town. After forming a thick, invisible exoskeleton of all his remaining nanos, he took a deep breath, pictured the scene the thieves had projected of their home, and teleported there.

It was a simple camp for wandering vagrants, comprised of a series of tents, and dotted with small fires built for warmth and cooking. The fires provided the added benefit of frightening away nighttime predators. Sentries armed with large, gleaming swords patrolled the perimeter for any who might look to relieve the gang of their ill-gotten gains. None of these precautions were sufficient to impede Will. He glanced around the camp, identified the largest tent, and walked toward it.

A shout went up; he'd been spotted. Men spilled out of tents, drowsy from a night of drinking, most still in nightclothes. All quickly mobilized, and Will found himself surrounded by armed men who slowed his progress. "I come bearing a message for the one called Richard," he said, his voice carrying throughout the throng of men, some thirty in number.

"I think he has a message for you as well," one man shouted, drawing his sword across his neck, simulating a throat slash or beheading. The crowd roared with laughter.

"I'd be delighted to hear it," Will said. "But I must deliver my message in person."

"We should give the boss the chance to kill this guy!" another man shouted. The crowd began to chant Richard's name. After a few moments, the tent flaps opened, and a tall man with long brown hair emerged. Will had to admit that the man looked the part of a leader, and Richard exuded a charisma that, while not driven by Energy, was still quite powerful.

"I see we have a guest," Richard said. The men laughed. "You've come at a rather inopportune time, I'm afraid. We can certainly offer you no hospitality at this late hour." He pulled a huge broadsword out of the sheath on his back. "But we can certainly offer you a place to... sleep."

"Very impressive," Will said. "Thirty armed men against one unarmed man. I can see why these men flock to you; your singular bravery must be an inspiration to all of them."

Richard's face darkened, and an uneasy silence fell upon the camp. "What do you want, stranger? And how is it that you know my name, and I know not yours?"

"The three sent to Richland have elected not to complete their mission. They had sufficient encouragement not to return, not the least being that they were discovered before successfully relieving the townsfolk of their hard-earned coins. Messengers will be sent to other nearby towns, alerting them to you and your schemes. My message to you is simply this: disband, and find honorable work to do. Your days of thievery are over."

Richard looked pained. "Oh, dear. We've been found out? Well, boys, I guess this is the end of the road. Pack it up and head home." He turned as if to head back to his tent.

There was a pause as the crowd murmured in confusion. Richard then lunged at Will, raising the massive sword over his head before bringing it down on Will's head with the force of both arms.

The sword bounced off the top of Will's head with a loud clang, and shattered in Richard's hands.

Richard stared at the hilt of his sword, the only piece of the weapon still intact, and then at Will. Will used his Energy and Empathy skills to encourage the fear felt by all of the men in the camp at that point.

Will walked to Richard, and removed the hilt of the sword from the man's hands. "I think that's excellent advice, Richard." He faced the crowd. "All of you! You heard the man! Pack up, head back to where you came from!"

The men, dazed, did as they were told. Tents were folded up as the emerging morning sun adding a small bit of light to the camp. As each man collected his belongings, he walked away, or rode a horse if he owned one.

Richard was the last to depart. "How?" Richard asked. "How did you do that?"

"How did I do what?"

"How did you shatter my sword like that?"

"I assume it was a combination of me having a thick skull and poor craftsmanship."

Richard nodded dully. "Yes, yes, of course." His emotions were a tangle of confusion.

"Find something noble to do, Richard," Will said. "You are a natural leader of men; they flock to you and listen to what you say. Surely you can put that gift to better use than organizing a band of thieves?"

Will turned and walked away, leaving the man alone with his thoughts. Richard was so deeply in his own mind that he didn't even notice Will vanishing into thin air.

PLAN

Will didn't bother returning to his room. He crawled into a chair in the common room, rested his head on the table, and was fast asleep in moments. It seemed only an instant later that Aldus and Gerald were shaking him awake, expressing relief that they'd found him. Rumors had spread through the inn that the armed thieves had struck again, and when they'd not seen Will in the room, they'd feared the worst. Nicholas arrived with the town sheriff a few moments later, and Will watched, bleary-eyed, as the three thieves were bound with rope. Once they were secured, Will recalled his nanos. Aldus and Gerald watched in stunned silence, having until that moment been unaware that the thieves had been sitting at a table in the inn's common room with no visible restraints.

The sheriff walked over to Will after Nicholas nodded in Will's direction. "I understand you're responsible for locating these men. As dangerous as that must have been for a single man... thank you for doing so." He extended a hand to Will.

Will shrugged, but accepted the hand offered, and the two men shook. "They'd been fighting amongst themselves apparently. They had their swords out and waving and they'd all managed to get cut. I suppose they were arguing over the shares of the loot. No honor among thieves. None of them noticed that they'd dropped what they'd stolen before they started arguing about it. Lack of honor and lack of awareness get you injured and jailed every time, I imagine."

The sheriff chuckled. "All that may be true, but it took courage to bring them in. Our town owes you its thanks."

"So long as my friends and I can visit Richland and trade, I'll have all the thanks I need for being in the right place at the right time." The sheriff nodded

and made his way out of the inn, towing the three thieves behind him.

Gerald looked at Will in awe. “You found them?”

Will yawned. “I couldn’t sleep. I think I’m ready for some now, though.”

Aldus nodded. “We only need to get the supplies the community needs and load up the remaining wagons. We’ll take care of that and get you when we’re ready to depart. It sounds like you’ve had a busy and productive night. Get some sleep.”

Will went back to the room shared by the men, and fell asleep again.

He woke, totally refreshed, and recognized yet another difference between his twenty-first century existence and what he’d experienced here, in the eleventh century. This was not a twenty-first century business trip with a single-occupant room in a fancy hotel, replete with bags holding multiple changes of clothing, computers, books, and papers. They stayed at a simple inn, sharing a room with two others; each traveler brought no more than some night clothes and a coin purse. Gerald and Aldus carried swords, but those were strapped to their backs while they weren’t sleeping. Departure and check out, then, was essentially a matter of walking out of the room. They needn’t worry about a later bill for raiding the in-room mini-bar.

Before he left, he reached into his pocket, past the coin purse—the contents of which he’d used to win favor with the innkeeper—and found the scroll of paper. He pulled the computer out, unrolled it, and tapped on the side to activate the screen. The paper glowed with text written in the future. *Congratulations on your success with the Richland trade mission. The outlaw known as Richard is one to keep an eye on in the future. Don’t be afraid to problem-solve in this century as you did in your own past.*

Typical. Enough for him to know he’d not messed up, but not enough to give him true guidance. The computer, he’d hoped, would give him a daily series of tasks to perform to ensure the safety of the young girl known as Elizabeth. And yet she was back inside the hidden village in the forest, under the watchful eye of her predator father, and likely suffering immense pain in the absence of her only allies. It was difficult to conceive of how this plan was going to work if he needed to leave her on a regular basis. Was he expected to teleport back home each day to watch over her?

Perhaps the critical message was in the last sentence. What type of twenty-first century problem-solving was he supposed to apply here? It wasn’t as if he could do research on the Internet or send a S.W.A.T. team after Arthur.

With no answers coming to mind, Will rolled the paper computer up into a

scroll and put it back into his pocket. He'd need to contemplate that message later. For now, he needed to catch up with his friends. He left the room, after first habitually checking in every corner and under every coarse blanket to see if they'd left anything behind, and wandered down to the common room. He found the innkeeper, Nicholas, clearing tables of clay and wood dishes used during lunch.

"Mr. Stark!" Nicholas said, surprised. "I thought you had left already. I have some vegetable broth and bread still available if you're hungry."

"I'd love some of the broth," Will admitted. Nicholas returned with a bowl soon after, and Will enjoyed his fill of the soup. They exchanged some small talk while he ate. Nicholas informed him that the others had already hitched the horses to the wagons and had nearly completed shopping for the purchases on their list. Will asked if the thieves had made it safely to the jail, and Nicholas reported that they had, and that word had spread rapidly through the town about the visiting Trader who had managed to apprehend the men. Will also learned that the two men attacked had suffered only minor wounds and were back on their feet already. Will smiled inside; the nanos he'd dispatched had done their work. Reminded of the fact that he'd done so, he recalled the nanos. He hadn't realized he could loan the machines in that fashion until he'd tried it overnight, and hoped he wouldn't have the need to do so again in the future.

Fully nourished for the journey ahead, Will thanked the innkeeper and headed out to the central market area, where he found his traveling companions. They were loading the wagons with all manner of materials requested by their neighbors. Eva checked items off on thin slivers of wood, using a piece of charcoal to make her notations as the purchases were made. Will received warm welcomes from his team; clearly, Aldus and Gerald had filled the women in on Will's exploits in apprehending the thieves overnight, which Will attempted to downplay. The two victims came forward, looking none the worse for wear, and thanked Will profusely for his efforts, and in particular for locating the bags of coins the thieves had taken and later dropped. Their genuine smiles were the best form of thanks.

As their departure time arrived, many in the town of Richland paraded with the caravan to the city gates and then out onto the open road. At the first stop, Eva asked Will to take over driving the horses, which he did with much trepidation. Eva spent that leg of the journey writing figures down on the slivers of wood, which Will understood to be her form of a transaction ledger. Will wondered how many in this century actually knew how to read and do

arithmetic; his understanding of history wasn't extensive, but it seemed to him that this woman was exceptional and unusual in many ways.

As the group stopped for the evening on the way home, Eva called everyone around them. "I'll make this simple: we just had our most profitable Trading mission ever. By far. Our split of the profits should come to approximately fifty gold coins each."

Gasps of shock and surprise rose from the group. Will had no basis of comparison for this level of profit. "What type of profit is more standard?"

"You must first understand, Will, how our community's system works," Eva replied. "We are given goods to sell and lists of supplies to purchase from everyone in the community. Each person provides a minimum cost to sell and a maximum price to pay for each item. Where we are able to negotiate better deals, we as Traders take half of the profit, and then we divide our total take among all of our Traders. Our total profit was three hundred gold coins, or roughly six gold coins per member of the community. Our previous best was about one hundred twenty gold coins in profit among five Traders, or twenty-four gold coins each. On this trip, we made double our previous best per Trader, and that's with adding one more Trader to the team."

Will was stunned. Had they truly done that well? He still had no perspective on what fifty gold coins meant in terms of living standard and relative wealth, but since it was double their previous best it was certainly a good thing.

Eva explained that when they returned, they'd be mobbed by their neighbors looking for reports on how they'd done. Eva would handle the distribution; she carefully tracked coins in and out, and ensured that each person got the correct share of the profit. For instance, they'd gotten a better profit on the swords created by the smiths than the fabrics created by the weavers, and she'd make sure that she got each person what they'd earned. Everyone would do better than they'd ever done before, though, so it should be a positive experience, though time-consuming.

"You should use some of your profit to get time with Elizabeth," Matilda said. "You could probably convince Arthur to part with her for a week for one of those gold coins."

"No!" Will said, his tone sharper than he'd intended. Five sets of eyes stared at him, surprised at the outburst. "I will not pay money to help keep someone in bondage."

"You don't need to have her do anything unpleasant," Aldus said. "Most of us encourage her to sleep off whatever she's dealt with previously."

“We don’t like the system that’s in place either,” Gerald said. “But fighting against the overwhelming numbers who support it? That would be suicidal.”

Will sensed Eva’s unease with this conversation, and he knew why. Eleanor, one of the Traders, was one who’d not yet been convinced about the impropriety of the community’s system of “hiring” Elizabeth to do the unwanted and unpleasant. The Traders had, unofficially, agreed to try to change that system, though they weren’t sure how. For the moment, they paid the fee to Arthur and refused to use Elizabeth’s time as others did; if she worked, she was paid directly.

“You do what you feel is best,” Will said. “I’ll do things my way.”

Eva studied his face. “I will do what I am able to do,” she replied. “But if I can do more, then I will do so.”

The others nodded, and Eleanor, after a pause, nodded as well.

“Here is my question, then,” Will said. “How much does Arthur charge to sell his daughter into slavery again and again, day after day?”

There was an uncomfortable silence. “One silver coin per day,” Eva said.

“Is it fair to say that most of our neighbors greatly value money?”

Heads nodded.

“Then I propose this: we do not give Arthur any money. We use the money we have collected through Trading to pay those “hiring” Elizabeth three silver coins each day. One will compensate them for what they’ve chosen to pay Arthur, and two more as well. So they have two coins in hand rather than one. As secrets are uncovered, and as Elizabeth recognizes exactly how to fulfill this dream Arthur is selling, the people we work with can use the money earned by not mistreating Elizabeth to purchase those secrets.”

“And where will they learn these secrets that they’ll pay for?” Eleanor asked.

Will smiled. “Why, they’ll learn them from Elizabeth, of course.”

Eva laughed. “So they pay one coin to Arthur, receive three coins from us, and pay two coins to Elizabeth?”

“Naturally,” Will said. “She talks to people once per day, privately. In fact, I think it would be appropriate if she has these educational sessions inside the Schola. She will make money twice as fast as Arthur.”

“One problem, however,” Aldus said. “Won’t we run out of coins eventually? This plan works until we don’t have the coins to pay people to do this.”

“Several scenarios are possible,” Will said. “First, people are likely to start seeing the benefits of this type of working relationship with Elizabeth. At some

point, if there truly are secrets to be unlocked inside the Schola, Elizabeth will be the first to know. We need to make the point that everyone has paid Arthur money, but no one has paid Elizabeth money, though she's the one suffering through all of the testing. When the payoff comes, it needs to be financially rewarding for her. It's possible that she could learn it's a process that has multiple steps, and they'll need to work with her over several sessions to start seeing any benefits. In other words, eventually people will choose to do this because it is valuable to them, and hopefully because the previous approach is simply evil."

He was aware of a range of emotions: guilt, primarily, but also anger. They'd been part of this system since its inception, or at least for many years, and he'd called it evil. They were angry at someone who would put the word to what they'd done. Yet for four of the five, the guilt came from understanding the reality that what he'd said, though painful, was true. They'd not made any type of public stand; they'd simply used the system as everyone else had, convincing themselves it was to Elizabeth's benefit to simply rest for a day. Will's proposal essentially involved paying Elizabeth directly for her knowledge, and the skills others could develop as a result would be incredibly valuable, far more than a few coins.

"Secondly, if this works as I suspect it will work, everyone will realize that Arthur is adding nothing to this process. He is claiming Elizabeth as property, as his slave, to sell off. She is not; she is nearly an adult, and as such should have the freedom to live her own life and profit from her own work and knowledge. Eventually, everyone will come to realize that there's no need to go to Arthur first, just to drop off a coin; it's more economical to go directly to Elizabeth. That will erode Arthur's own wealth and power.

"And third, if I'm wrong, the advances people make from learning what Elizabeth knows—once she learns something—should improve the quality and quantity of goods they make. We'll be able to make more frequent Trading trips, and earn greater profits with the quality of the goods produced. In other words, if we have to keep paying people to make good decisions for a while, until they make the correct decisions on their own... we'll have the money to do so."

"Let me see if I understand this," Gerald said. "In the current approach, Arthur gets wealthy for doing nothing, Elizabeth gets weakened by doing everything, and everybody else gets poorer. They get poorer because they are paying Arthur for the privilege of Arthur doing nothing, and they get poorer for perpetuating a system of evil. In the new approach, Arthur loses power and

makes no money, Elizabeth gets wealthy for teaching everyone, and we get wealthier both because we'll make more frequent and more profitable Trading missions, and because the whole community starts getting the new abilities we've all long waited to develop."

"Well said," Will replied, smiling.

Gerald smiled as well. "I'm in."

Eva, Aldus, and Matilda agreed as well. All eyes fell on Eleanor, who smiled. "That's a fantastic plan. I like it. How do we make it work?"

Will sighed. "Before any of us can make it work, we need to make sure that Elizabeth is on board. If she doesn't want to do this... well, then there's nothing further to be done. And it's possible she won't. Why would she want to help people who've made her life a nightmare for these past many years, people who were part of her mother's death? What if she's someone for whom a large amount of money is simply not a motivating factor?"

Eva sighed. "And unfortunately for your plan, Will, I think Elizabeth is exactly someone like that."

Will, who'd been married to the Elizabeth in the future, silently agreed. He had the feeling this complex plan was doomed from the start. But at least they would try.

RETURN

“No.”

Neither of them was surprised at this response. Still, Will and Eva—designated by the Traders to talk to Elizabeth—were a bit disappointed that she had no interest in going along with their plan. It was, after all, a plan meant to lessen her suffering.

“You’re sure?” Eva replied. “This will relieve you of the experimentation that’s been going on for so long, and you’ll get to make quite a bit of money, and —”

“I have no interest in money,” Elizabeth replied. “Everything that’s happened to me has happened because that man wanted money. I’m not his daughter; I’m his *possession*, to be sold to the highest bidder for his own profit, without concern to my well-being by him or the people who buy me. You want me to *help* the people that have supported this idea, the people who have *bought* me? No. I won’t do it. I won’t help them, not a single one of them.” She folded her arms across her chest and scowled.

Will was privately impressed with this spunk. He’s seen and heard little to suggest that the girl had much reason to be anything other than despondent, and as such her strong response was a pleasant surprise. Eva had shared more detail about Elizabeth’s life in the village on their journey back home, and Will wished he was one who couldn’t keep his word. He’d vowed he wouldn’t kill anyone, no matter how much they might deserve such a penalty, but he wanted desperately to make an exception for Arthur and several other members of the community. A man named Maynard, like Gerald a former soldier, seemed to be Arthur’s unofficial bodyguard, and he was known to talk to others to see what substances seemed to cause Elizabeth the greatest pain—and then force her to

consume all of them each time he hired her. He was the worst of the sadists, though certainly not the only one.

Eva noted that Elizabeth was routinely sad and depressed, though the girl said it wasn't caused by the testing itself. It was something deeper, something she couldn't—or wouldn't—tell Eva. Her only joy, Eva said, had come when Eva had privately apologized to Elizabeth for failing to stand up for the girl and her promises to do what she could to treat her well in the future, and try to convince others to do the same. Elizabeth would spend a great deal of time in Eva's room, where the older woman would feed her and hold her as her body struggled to process whatever poison she'd been fed that day. Eva had become the mother Genevieve struggled to be, the mother the girl had lost on that horrible day, and Eva provided the small sliver of love and compassion Elizabeth so desperately needed.

Elizabeth's overall impression of humanity, however, was horribly marred by what she'd experienced in her life, and she believed that kindness was a rare exception. People would use her up without concern of what happened to her, and Elizabeth frequently expressed a desire to die and be free of the pain of living.

The fiery response, then, suggested that she was fighting back.

"I respect that, Elizabeth," he said. "And I pledge to you that I will do everything in my power to make sure that the treatment you've received is eliminated. Not lessened, not made less frequent, but eliminated. I will work to make sure that it simply can't happen."

Elizabeth turned her dead eyes on him. "And how do you propose to do that?" It was a tone of extreme weariness, as if her frail frame simply couldn't bear the weight of any more scheming. That was how Elizabeth had always acted, with a few brief glimpses of the fire and determination he'd come to know so well so many years into the future. There was so much missing from her life that time spent in the presence of the handful of people who weren't out to hurt her in some fashion was the closest thing to relief she got.

"I am going to get you out of here, enable you to move far away, with plenty of money, in order for you to live a healthy life."

Elizabeth laughed without humor. "My *father*"—she spat out the word—"would seek me out and hunt me down, without question. His power in this community comes from holding the *keys* to the ultimate prize—my *volunteered service*." She rolled her eyes, an expression apparently common across the centuries for teenage girls. "And besides, I'm not the one who's done something

wrong. Why should I be the one to leave?”

Neither of them had an answer to that.

“I’ve just arrived here,” Will said, looking directly into her blue eyes. “It seems like a community with great promise, should it ever move away from a system that relies on the enslavement of one of its own. Yet, from what I’ve been told, this place is an earthly version of hell for you. I must ask: why do you *want* to stay? Don’t you want to *leave*?”

Elizabeth looked at the ground, her flaming red hair spilling over her shoulders as if to mask her face. “This is where I belong. I want to make it *right*, not leave it wrong. I know that I can make it right in time. I owe it to my mother, too. And to the people here who at least care enough to try to make this something other than hell on earth for me.” She looked up, and her blue eyes were moist with tears as she looked at Eva and then back to Will. “That is what I want, Mr. Stark. Do what you can to help that happen. I don’t need anyone trying to help me leave.”

Will simply nodded.

“The people here are overwhelmingly good,” Elizabeth said. “I *know* that to be true.” Will caught the quick flick of her eyes in his direction, a secret message only for him. “I want them to *change*. I *don’t* want them dead. If I leave, my father will pit them against each other and they will exterminate themselves vying for his favor. We have to expose him for what he is. We have to *depose* him, Mr. Stark. But I won’t kill him, or let anyone else kill him either. He’s my father. My greatest wish is that he will see this community thrive outside his control and realize how much his tactics *prevented* that improvement. What better punishment for a man so lustful for power and control, so desperate to find the secret to develop superhuman abilities, than to see them develop *after* he’s no longer in charge? I told you I won’t help the villagers develop the abilities they so desperately want, that they’re willing to watch me suffer so they can achieve them. They’ve not earned that right. But I *will* help them become people that I *want* to help reach those goals.”

Will smiled, and Eva joined him. Her spirit was generous and inclined to see and seek out the best in everyone. Though Arthur had wronged her, though she had every reason to want to see the man dead, she sought instead to teach him the error of his ways, and this from a girl who had rarely known kindness in her life. His admiration for this young woman, for the future version of her who would one day be his wife, grew ever greater.

“I will do what you wish,” Will said. “Tell me, and I will help you however I

can.”

“As will I,” Eva said. “However, Will, we must first return to the center of our community; it is time for our midday meal, and everyone will be eager to greet us and collect their purchases and profits.”

Will nodded, and with one last glance and smile at Elizabeth, he followed Eva out of the room and headed toward the front gate, leaving Elizabeth behind. The girl’s emotions trailed after him, a mixture of everything but happiness.

“I really thought she’d go along with that plan,” Eva mused, hefting a large sack full of coins and the slivers of wood recording the transactions from their journey.

“Yet, I think that’s part of the issue,” Will said. “We made a plan, one heavily dependent on her acting in a certain way, but we never asked her what *she* wants to do. She’s never in her life, from what you’ve told me, had the freedom to do what *she* wants. From her very childhood, she’s been shuttled around from one cruel master to another, living purely to help them succeed in areas where they weren’t willing to suffer through the pain of progressing toward their goals. They work hard at everything but what they most want, and demand that ultimate sacrifice from one unable to refuse that demand. I can see why she’d be upset; we show up under the guise of helping her, and yet we expect her to behave in the way we tell her.” Will motioned to Eva, and she handed over the sack, allowing him to share the burden of carrying it.

“We aren’t *telling* her to do anything,” Eva hissed, the tense whisper coming out more harshly than she might have intended. “It *is* in her best interest. We want her to succeed; doesn’t she know that?”

“I think she does,” Will said. “But we’ve not treated her as a human being either, have we? We’ve not asked if she wants help, or if she does, what form she wants it to take, or what she wants to do with her life. She’s developed incredible power, Eva; you know that as well as I. Perhaps she’s content to go through the guise of suffering to perform her own research without alerting anyone as to exactly how powerful she’s become.”

They were too near the village center for Eva to respond, but her face suggested she was thinking this through in depth. Perhaps, in the minds even of those who’d chosen to look out for her best interest, she was not a person, but a pawn to be manipulated to someone else’s ends.

They arrived at the opening near the gate. The horses they’d ridden and driven back were in the barns, watered and fed, and the carts they’d brought back sat there in their glory, the tarps still securely fastened down. The Traders

would distribute the requested purchases to each member of the community, along with the profits they'd earned from sales and the savings made on purchases. Eva's careful notes scratched on the tree bark "paper" would ensure that nothing was taken before it was officially handed out. If they were short any item or any money, then all members of the community would find their rooms ransacked to locate the missing goods, and the guilty parties would be expelled immediately. "We had that happen once," Eva had told him during the trip home. "I'd never seen a crowd so hostile up to that point; it was matched only by the crowd that... well, when Genevieve died. This community does not like to feel cheated, regardless of the form. As you might expect, it hasn't happened again."

Once the community had assembled, Arthur jumped up on the seat of one of the carts in order to be seen by all. "Our Traders have returned!" he shouted, and the crowd roared with excitement. "I invite Eva forward to provide a full accounting of the journey and oversee the distribution of goods... and profits!" Louder cheers this time.

Arthur reached a hand down and assisted Eva up to the seat. She gave him a sideways glance, as if surprised by the friendly gesture, and then stood to face the crowd. "My friends, we come bearing news of our most profitable Trading mission to date. I believe most of you will find your profits to be quite extraordinary. I do want to give credit to our newest Trader, Will, whose gifts for trade are matched only by his courage." The Traders applauded vigorously. The others looked toward Arthur, who was still perched on the wagon seat with Eva. After a noticeable pause, Arthur began to clap as well, and the rest of the community soon joined him. Eva shot Arthur a withering glare, and he returned a simpering smile her way.

Great, Will thought. Everything is a political power play, and I'm caught in the middle of it. It was concerning to see what amounted to battle lines being drawn, and the apparent inability of any villagers to act without some type of approval from Arthur. They couldn't even cheer the news of tremendous profits without waiting to see if Arthur approved? *He knows it, too. He waited just long enough to start clapping to make it clear to Eva that everyone follows his lead.*

Eva began calling out groups: smiths, farmers, millers, weavers, carpenters, foragers. Each group came forward and received their specific purchase requests and an accounting of the financial aspects of the transaction. Will worked with the other Traders to locate their purchases in the wagons, and brought them forth as Eva called everything out. Most people purchased necessary supplies and raw materials: seeds, yeast, needles, farming tools, saws, hammers, cookware, and

raw iron. Many also had requested various luxuries, including clothing, jewelry, and other items. Will hadn't noticed it before, but the Traders were certainly more shabbily dressed on a daily basis than others. He imagined that they'd been putting their earnings into caring for Elizabeth for quite some time, and had spent little on themselves. He experienced a feeling of gratitude for their sacrifice on her behalf.

The process took hours, and was highly inefficient. Will would often have to search each cart for the correct supplies, and the supplies required for the person waiting were frequently buried at the bottom, rather than at the top where they would be easily accessible. He made a mental note to think through a better approach to their return trip; perhaps separating supplies by profession and calling each profession in order to ensure no digging was required. He also wondered if they might, perhaps, be better off setting up a store of the likes he knew in his time. Rather than trying to make individual purchases for people and then match them up, perhaps they could purchase popular items in bulk, and then sell at a profit within the community. He'd need to talk to the other Traders about that idea. He scowled, realizing that they'd only be able to try something that different after getting the approval from the other villagers, and more specifically, from Arthur. Given that the idea would come from Eva's Traders... he knew already that the idea was doomed to failure.

It was nearly evening when the last individual received their money, supplies, and personal treasures. The Traders were exhausted, but happy, as Eva concluded the transactions by dropping fifty gold coins in each of their coin purses. They walked to the center of the community and had their fill of their evening meals, each dropping a copper in the hand of the cook, who ladled each a full bowl of a steaming beef and vegetable broth and a small loaf of bread. Many of their neighbors walked by, and called out words of thanks for the terrific profits they'd netted as the result of the Traders' efforts.

As the sun set, Will made his way back to his room, next door to Eva's. He'd not seen Elizabeth since that morning; she'd stayed put in Eva's room all day. Apparently, Eva had "purchased" Elizabeth for the duration of their trip to watch her room, so as to prevent her from being treated poorly in their absence. Will had a hunch that Arthur wouldn't honor that "purchase" since Eva wasn't around to verify that it had been carried out. He wanted to speak with Elizabeth, find out just how far she'd progressed, and talk to her about what she wanted to accomplish and how he could help. He could check on how she'd been treated in their absence as well.

Will snapped his fingers and turned around. He walked to Arthur's residence and, unsure of social conventions of the time, used his own and knocked. Arthur opened the door. "Will!" he exclaimed. "To what do I owe the pleasure of your visit?"

"I would like time with Elizabeth tomorrow."

Arthur blinked, and then smiled. "Will, Elizabeth's time is very valuable. I'm afraid she has quite a full calendar several months in advance."

"I'll give you a full gold coin instead of the usual silver coin."

Arthur paused to consider it. "I'm not sure if that's wise, Will. What will I tell Maynard? He has quite the temper, you know, and might not take kindly to having his schedule altered in that fashion."

"I'm certain that the gold coin can prove quite useful in changing his mind and easing his excessive pain and grief over the matter, Arthur."

Arthur chuckled. "You do have a way with words, Will, but unfortunately, words alone won't enable me to talk to Maynard. However..." Arthur paused dramatically.

Will sighed. "What do you want, Arthur?"

"If I had a gold coin for my own troubles, and another to ease Maynard's concerns, I believe we could make it happen."

Will paused for a moment, pretending to consider the offer. "Deal," he said. He pulled two of the coins from the bounty Eva had just distributed, and held them out to Arthur. "And I don't expect any further negotiating, Arthur. I will be here after our morning bath tomorrow, and I do not expect to see Elizabeth walking away with Maynard or anyone else."

Arthur nodded. "You will have no issues in that regard, I assure you. Do keep in mind the rules, however. Elizabeth is not to be terrorized or made to suffer needlessly. And she is not to be taken through the gate to the outside. Is that clear?"

Will frowned. "Not leave the gate? Why is that?"

Arthur sighed. "I fear my daughter has a great desire to see the world, and I dare say that if she ever leaves the security these walls provide as part of her daily work, her curiosity would drive her to escape her host and vanish from our midst. It is for her protection—and *yours*—that the rule has been made."

The pause had made the message clear. Whoever lost Elizabeth would have an angry community rioting at them, much as they'd formed a mob to kill the girl's mother. Anything preventing them from learning how to build the enhanced abilities they all so desperately sought would be at risk of serious

injury.

Will nodded. “We will go to the Schola, then. You may lock the door after we enter to ensure there is no escape. For *her* safety, of course.”

Arthur nodded. “Then our transaction is done. I will notify Maynard, and see you in the morning, Will.”

He closed the door, and Will walked back to his room, wondering if he’d just acted the part of the hypocrite for paying Arthur for the privilege of talking to a supposedly free young woman.

CAVE

Will woke at dawn and rose from the cot he used for a bed. He had no blankets for cushioning and the cot was little more than a plank of wood. It was something he'd need to correct quickly; his back, though quite limber after the past few months of living and eating and exercising with the Alliance, was sore after the night's sleep. He'd only slept on it for one night before going out on his first trip with the Traders, and he'd accepted the harsher sleeping conditions on the road. The bedding at the inn in Richland was comfortable, and Will wondered if he'd made a mistake in not purchasing blankets for his own use while he was there. Perhaps he could purchase some here in the village during the day.

He recognized that he'd need to spend these early morning hours, before the other villagers woke, doing his own Energy work. There were several skills he'd not practiced or perfected under Adam's tutelage, and he'd need a private locale to use for that work. The diary, as he'd come to think of the notes sent via the paper scroll computer, had recommended working on invisibility and flying, with basic instructions for each. Once he found a spot suitable for practice, he'd use the same place to work with Elizabeth on her Energy skills. She'd need to learn to control and grow her Energy, or she'd risk exposing her development to people who wouldn't take kindly to her progress. He'd teleport them both to the practice site, for he had no intention of walking out the gate with her and raising Arthur's suspicions, especially after he'd offered to let Arthur lock them in the Schola for the day.

Will had only had a single chance to experience the skill Adam had described as clairvoyance, and that experience came about by accident. Essentially, it enabled him to use his Energy to extend his senses of sight and

hearing to remote locations. His brief work with nanos suggested he could probably accomplish similar functions with the tiny machines, but he knew he needed to get as much Energy work in as possible. He climbed back on his cot and sat with his back against the wall, closed his eyes, and projected Energy out of his body, attempting to “see” via a connecting strand. It was a practice much like running a long connecting cable from a remote video camera, and he found himself “seeing” the top of his own small room. He allowed his viewpoint to float upward to get a better view of the village and its surroundings.

The vast forest containing the small walled village was nestled between two rivers, both of which flowed north and merged into one larger river north of the village. The two tributaries, which Eva had referred to as the Ealdor and Halwende rivers, cut through the forest before meeting and joining beyond the trees. To the east, nearer to the calmer Halwende, were larger clearings in the forest, where grasses and harvestable grains grew. That was where Will had arrived in the time machine. It was south of their primary bathing spot, and the trees to the north prevented any line of sight between the two spots. There had never been a chance that Will would be seen upon his arrival. The image of the village, situated in a roughly circular forest bisected by rivers flowing northeast and northwest to a convergence point, looked much like the future Aliomenti symbol he’d come to loathe. Was it a coincidence, or did the Aliomenti of the future eventually achieve the ability to see the world from this viewpoint and use it as both map and logo? He snorted at his doubt. Of course they’d get the ability. It was merely a matter of when.

He noticed an expanse of gray-colored terrain to the north, and wondered if that indicated the presence of a series of caves in the area. If he was able to locate one that was large and difficult to reach, he’d have the perfect spot for his own training and for Elizabeth’s as well. Will lowered his remote eyesight into the area, swooping down from the sky like a hawk descending on its prey, and found that the coloration did, in fact, mark a series of caves. The largest, at the top, was both spacious and nearly impossible for anyone to reach on foot, for the climb was fraught with sharp rocks and a nearly vertical incline. Satisfied, he cemented the picture of the area in his memory for later teleportation. He recalled his Energy, and found the experience of ending this session was much like waking from a deep sleep. He blinked several times to reorient himself, climbed off the cot, and exited his room. He walked to the front of the community and joined the growing crowd of people waiting for the departure for the morning bath in the cool waters of the Halwende River, accepting the

compliments of those still enthralled at the tremendous profits he'd helped them earn on the Trading trip to Richland.

Eva gave him an odd look as they walked toward the gate, but said nothing. He wondered if she'd detected the Energy he'd expended on his clairvoyant journey; this wasn't the time to discuss such matters, however.

Though he'd only participated twice, the morning bath provided Will with a sense of routine and normalcy. It was a time for socializing and laughter, much as those in his time socialized over morning coffee or tea in office buildings. Once they returned to the village, it would be time for all of them to begin their daily work. Will caught a glimpse of Arthur talking to Maynard, a huge, hulking beast of a man who worked as a smith forging weapons. At one point, Maynard looked in Will's direction, glaring, but then his gaze was distracted by a gold coin. The man seemed pleased with the money, but the gaze was still anything but friendly.

Will spent his bathing time trying to rationalize what he'd done the night before to secure time with Elizabeth. He'd chided all of them for "buying" Elizabeth's time, had called it slavery, and had said he'd never do so. Yet he'd gone to Arthur and had bartered a higher price for her time this day. Was he any better, playing into the system? At this point, he reasoned, he had no choice; Elizabeth had made it clear that she didn't want to change the system designed to enrich her father at her expense; she wanted to use the system to change *him*. He had also decided he would pay Elizabeth five gold coins as well, to help her start to develop savings she would need when she one day walked free. She could keep the coins in the cave; no one in the community needed to know she had any money, least of all her father. Will hoped to spring her free upon the world, away from the tyranny in this tiny would-be kingdom, and for her to survive on the outside, she'd need a large amount of money. This would be his method of getting as much of his money as necessary to her. He knew he could get more at any time; he could learn a craft and secretly build items for trade in the cave, teleport to a far-off city the Traders would never try to reach, and sell them. As best he could tell, he didn't need money for anything to survive here outside the daily copper for food and the rare handful of silver coins for clothing, boots, and blankets; if necessary, he was confident he could forage what he needed to survive even if he gave all his money to Elizabeth.

Arthur whistled, an indication that it was time to head back to the village. Will joined the others in wading out of the frigid waters, shivering and feeling more alert in the cool morning air. Though it was summer, the northern location

meant that the mornings were still relatively cool, and he once again lamented his lack of blankets for warmth. He could certainly warm himself with his Energy, but had decided since his arrival in the past to limit his actual usage within the village to what was absolutely necessary. He'd elected, before meeting anyone in the past, to prevent the discovery of his skills until the villagers were ready to learn of them. Now that he'd met several of them, he felt his decision was a wise one.

Maynard trotted up to him. Though Will had lessened his height by several inches, he was still the tallest man in the community, but Maynard was a close second. Where Will was lean, however, Maynard burst with muscle. In Will's day, he suspected that Maynard would be a man who'd spend hours every day in a gym working out.

"Why the rush to work with her, Will?" Maynard asked. "It's not like she's going anywhere." His voice gave Will chills; there was no warmth or humanity there, reminiscent of the way the Assassin spoke in the distant future.

Will shrugged. "I have some theories I'd like to test out. I don't care to wait to do so."

Maynard looked at him. "I heard you were pretty unreal on that Trade mission. That you just *knew* exactly what to say to everyone, without fail, every time. Also heard you apparently took out some criminals as well. You holding out on us, Will?" His fingers tapped the hilt of his sword. Maynard clearly lacked respect for a man who was unarmed, and had little concern about dropping veiled threats of violence.

Will glanced at him. "Don't trust rumors, Maynard."

Maynard snorted. "I'm just saying, Will... it doesn't end well around here for people who withhold useful knowledge from the main man."

Will rolled his eyes. "Yes, I'm sure I have a great deal to fear from Arthur."

"And don't you forget it, Will. You learn something, you talk... or else."

"You don't scare me, Maynard. Save it."

"Who said *you* would be the one to suffer for your misdeeds, Will?" Maynard asked, arching an eyebrow. He chortled, and then walked away.

Will didn't care for the sound of that. He knew that Elizabeth could take care of herself, and even more so after he had the chance to work with her. But if Arthur and Maynard set a mob on her as they had apparently done with her mother, she'd struggle mightily.

When the villagers returned, most stood by the fires that were burning in the metal forges and the giant ovens used for baking and cooking, letting the heat

dry out their clothing and hair. Will joined in, but eventually grew impatient and headed back to his room, where he used his Energy to heat his clothing and evaporate the moisture. He wondered if he could figure out a way to teach them to channel the heat from those flames and funnel it into each room; it couldn't be pleasant here in the winter. It would be quite an evolutionary achievement from a technology perspective. That, of course, was a reputed hallmark of the Aliomenti, and he realized he'd almost have to be part of those achievements, especially early on. It was easy to be a few centuries ahead of everyone when your number included a man from a thousand years into the future.

Before leaving his room, Will, on a hunch, collected a few coins from his coin purse and dropped them in his pocket, and paid an extra copper coin to get two loaves of bread he and Elizabeth could eat later on that day.

The villagers had all begun their respective work chores as Will walked toward the entry of the village. He knocked on Arthur's door, which opened at once. "Ah, Will!" Arthur said, speaking in an unnaturally loud voice. "So good to see you this morning! Have you your coin? I do have others eager to take your spot if you don't."

Too predictable, Will thought. He'd suspected that Arthur would try to "forget" about the arrangement they'd made, at a minimum trying to get the usual daily fee out of him. He hadn't suspected the threat of reverting back to Elizabeth's scheduled appointment with Maynard, though it was a moot point. He pulled the silver coin from his pocket and dropped it into Arthur's hand, starting the coin a foot above the man's open palm. It was unmistakable that Will had paid the fee. Arthur tried, without success, to hide his disappointment, but recovered quickly. "A pleasure doing business with you, Will."

Arthur led the way to the room next door. "Elizabeth!" he shouted. "Your day awaits. Move quickly!"

The girl opened the door and stepped out. Her eyes looked bloodshot, as if she hadn't slept much, and she looked quite sleepy despite having only recently returned from the frigid morning bath. She glanced at Will, and a look of surprise covered her face. Arthur frowned. "Will and Maynard switched days, so you will spend your time in the Schola today with him. And to ensure you don't try to flee, as you often have before, I have Will's permission to lock the door and seal you both in." A look of triumph covered Arthur's face, and Will could sense Elizabeth's disappointment in his agreement to such terms. Had she thought he might help her to escape that very day? Had she intended to try with Maynard on watch? She'd been adamant about not leaving until she'd completed

her mission in this town. Or was it rather that she was disappointed that he'd not fought Arthur with more gusto on those terms?

Little did she know that such terms were exactly what Will wanted. They'd prevent anyone from checking in on them, and finding that they'd left the village unnoticed.

Arthur led the way to the Schola building and removed a large key from his pocket. Will remembered that Arthur was a locksmith, and it was only logical that he possessed a key to the Schola. Will wondered if Arthur's key was the only one. Arthur undid the lock and opened the door, leading the way into the building. He lit the candles found on the tables inside the room. "I shall return at midday to let you out for your meal."

"There is no need," Will replied. He removed the loaves of bread from his oversized pockets and set them on a table. "I've prepared so that we may work through until evening. Do not interrupt us until then."

Arthur raised an eyebrow at this statement, but nodded. "As you wish." He stepped out and closed the door behind him. Will could hear the lock being fastened outside, and heard the sound of Arthur checking the lock to ensure it was securely fastened.

He turned to look at Elizabeth. The girl had seated herself at one of the tables, a forlorn look on her face. Will sat down across from her. "Why are you sad?" he asked, his voice quiet.

Her face snapped to him. "You *know*," she snarled. "You *know* how to do all of this, yet only now do you show up? Why did you wait until now? Why didn't you get here in time to save my mother?"

Because our children sent me a thousand years into the past and this is when I arrived, he thought. "I wish the timing had been different, Elizabeth. I heard about your mother, and I truly wish I'd been here in time to make a difference. I cannot change what happened to her. I can only do my best to ensure that the same doesn't happen to you." He looked at the floor.

She looked at him, and he could sense her Energy trying to test him, to sense his emotions and thoughts. He projected directly into her head. *You can always talk to me in this fashion, and I will always listen.*

Her eyes went wide. *I've never met anyone else able to do this. Mother was only beginning to gain the ability. Eva... I think Eva is close, but she doesn't trust what she's hearing to be someone else. Not yet.*

Will smiled. *There are many things you'll learn to do, as will Eva and others. Would you like to see?*

Her emotions were conflicted, a mix of fear and curiosity. Curiosity won. She nodded.

Would you like to leave these walls? Just for a short time? It's entirely your choice.

She considered this. She'd never been allowed to make her own choices before. *How? We're locked in this room.*

Will grinned. *Just say the word. The locks don't matter.*

Elizabeth tried to avoid showing her eagerness to see what he intended, but failed. *OK. Show me.*

He held out a hand, and she took it. He teleported them into the cave.

Elizabeth screamed, and tried to pull away. "Relax," he said, his voice soothing. "We just need light." He held up his hand, and his Energy danced from his palm, lighting up his face. Her face lit up as well, and he could see the wonder and awe as she watched the ball of Energy expand to cover the interior of the cave, flooding the dome with light.

"How... how did we get here? How are you making that light?"

"That warmth you feel inside? That's called Energy," Will explained. "You can learn to move it around, inside and outside your body. You can learn to increase the amount of Energy you can hold in your body and how much you can generate on your own. As you gain more, you'll develop new abilities and be able to perform others more easily, more powerfully. I will help you learn to use your Energy to protect yourself as well." He smiled. "You can probably make light on your own. I'm able to move myself instantly to another location; we're several miles from the village right now. While we're here, we won't be disturbed, and can work without worry on building your skills."

Elizabeth's look of awe was replaced with one of mischief. "I have learned to do several things on my own," she said, eyes twinkling. "I have used the warmth to destroy the bad foods before they can hurt me. I have used it to make me look sick. I have used it to know which foods and grasses and roots actually make the warmth. And I have used it to take money from my father." Her smile at this news lit up her entire face.

Will cocked his head. "How?"

"I have been able to move my Energy into his house and use it to touch the money. And in the past few months I have been able to move them into my room."

Will was intrigued. "Are you making the coins float into your room?"

She shook her head. "No. I am... *pulling* them straight to me."

Will burst out laughing. “So all of the coins your father is collecting...?”

“Are ending up with me. He has no idea that he has far less than he imagines.”

Will stopped laughing. “That’s... justice.”

Elizabeth looked at the ground. “I still feel like I’m stealing, though.”

“People are paying money for your time, not your father’s. Those coins always should have gone to you. I do believe that if you were to let it be known that you know the correct steps to take to develop these abilities, and that you’ll teach only those who directly pay you—and *only* you—for that information, that you’d become quite wealthy.”

Elizabeth sighed. “Yet it doesn’t solve the problem. I want my father to *choose* to do the right thing. All of these ideas and plans, they’re wonderful. I do appreciate the thought you and Eva and the others have put into them. But I will not leave until my father realizes the wrong he has done and tries to make it right. I want him to say he’s sorry. I want him... to be a good man.”

Will’s face fell. “Elizabeth...”

She shook her head. “I know what you’re going to say, Will. Even without reading your mind. But I will not believe that my father is an evil man at his core. They cannot hurt me, Will. I will let the system continue until he recognizes the evil in it. But I will not tell any of them what I know. Eva has figured out some of it, and a few others are starting to understand a small amount. But until my father repents, until each person says they’re sorry, I will not help them learn what I know.”

Will nodded. This spirit, this willingness to bear any difficulty to ensure that the right thing was always done... this is what had drawn him to the young woman he knew as Hope.

“I respect that, Elizabeth. My offer still stands, though. I will help you however *you* want me to help you.”

The girl with the flaming red hair smiled. “Teach me how to get more Energy, and show me how you got us here. The last time I was here, I had to walk.”

Will blinked, surprised. “You’ve been here before?”

She nodded. “I hid here for several days after Mother... left us.” The grief etched into her young face, and the depth of sadness bombarding his Empathy senses, broke his heart. “It’s where I realized for the first time that I could do something with that warmth. I wanted to die, or run... but during those days here in this cave, I realized that they couldn’t hurt me any more, or threaten me,

because they'd already taken everything I value from me. I'd stay and fight in my own fashion, to make my father find the good in him, and to prove to me that I'm not... like him. Like what he's been."

She wanted him to reform, because she feared that she was destined to be like him. If he couldn't reform... to her, it meant that she, too, was evil at her core and would one day brandish her own form of wrongdoing. She needed the reassurance that it wasn't preordained.

He held out his hand, and she took it. "Let's go build up your Energy. To do that, we need to go visit the forest." Together, they left the cave, forging the start of a relationship that would last a millennium. And the Energy they shared with the forest on that day, and on their trips to the cave for future training, left the forest buzzing with Energy and healthy trees and underbrush and vegetation, a situation likely to enhance the Energy development of any who unlocked those skills.

SCHEME

“**W**hy does that work?” Elizabeth asked.

They’d worked on some basic Energy manipulation to start. She’d learned much on her own, but had never learned how to “recharge” after using Energy for tasks, and as such had to wait until her body rebuilt Energy on its own. Will taught her the standard approaches of breathing deeply and pulling the natural Energy flowing in the air into her body. It was the technique that Adam had taught him. Will then shared with her his discovery: that pushing Energy into living things like trees had a synergistic effect, leading to the sender receiving more Energy than they’d supplied. Both sender and receiver would find themselves in a feedback loop, with the Energy growth accelerating the longer the connection was maintained. Will had never tried to maintain the link for long periods of time, for he’d always been worried about being caught, either by Adam and others in the Alliance, or later by the Hunters. Elizabeth would have the same problem; they’d need to get back to the Schola by mid-afternoon to avoid anyone figuring out that they’d somehow escaped a locked, windowless building.

Her question was one that Will had long wondered about as well. “I’m not sure,” he admitted. “I just saw a small tree that looked like it could use some help, and Energy was the only thing I could give. I found out by accident. But I suspect it’s simply a case that the act of giving always provides just as much benefit to the giver as it does to the receiver, if not more.”

“Perhaps that’s why so many in our village fail to succeed,” Elizabeth said, her voice quiet. “They seek only to take; if they’d learn to give, they’d have far more than they could imagine.”

Will nodded in agreement.

They spent time working on Shielding—though few would be able to sense any Energy from her right now, there might come a point where she'd make use of the skill—and then he had her try teleportation, warning her that it required large amounts of Energy to complete, and that she might feel quite drained. “That’s good,” she said, a dry smile on her face. “It’s best I look worn down when Father comes to retrieve me.”

To Will’s surprise, she was able to move about ten yards at a time. “That’s excellent!” he said. “You’re progressing very well!”

She beamed, clearly unaccustomed to any type of compliment. He had her spend time recharging again, and then, to their mutual regret, he took her hand and teleported her back into the Schola.

The building felt especially cramped and stuffy after spending so much time outdoors. The candles were burning low, and they took the time to light a new set. The room had been built without windows, which was because it had been built at a time when ten runaway slaves desperately needed shelter from winter weather, and windows would have detracted from that requirement. “Father believes that research should be done in total privacy and free of all distraction,” Elizabeth said. “If there are distractions, you might miss a key point, and in so doing, risk not finding key ingredients to the formula for unlocking abilities.” She snorted. “That’s what he *tells* people, and they believe it. The reality is that he fears people will figure something out and sneak the core ingredients out without telling him or, in my case, use a window above the wall to escape to the outside. Father is like that, Will. Never trust what he says; watch what he does. His actions and words rarely communicate the same message.”

Will nodded. “I’ve made that discovery. That’s why he told everyone, all those years ago, that you had volunteered to test everything, wasn’t it? In truth, he was afraid of the pain, or suffering, or sickness, or death that might actually come to him, and so he told everyone you’d volunteered to do it for them.”

Elizabeth nodded. “Nobody seemed to figure out that a six-year-old girl can’t make that type of promise, or actually understand what she’s offering to put herself through. And nobody stopped to ask why, if I was *volunteering*, they’d have to *pay* Father. He made them believe it, and between the money and promises of loyalty, he became royalty here. He does no other work. He does not farm, or forage for wood and berries, or make things of wood or metal, or cook food for anyone. He simply makes certain that everyone mistrusts each other, and as such, the only true friend they have is him, and he collects his pieces of silver every day.”

Will nodded, amazed at the level of perception this sixteen-year-old girl—no, young woman—possessed. This wasn't simply accessing thoughts and emotions to truly understand someone; this was the shrewd, intelligent young woman he remembered meeting a decade earlier in his life. "You still love him, don't you?"

She lowered her head to the ground, her flaming red hair falling forward to hide her face. "I have to love him, Will. He's my father. I must believe there is good in him, though it's as hidden as the abilities he so desperately wants. If there's no good in him... perhaps that means there's no good in me, either." His heart ached at the pain in those words.

Her head snapped up, her eyes full of challenge. "Don't pity me," she snapped. Such was the joy of conversations with people with strong empathic skills.

Will nodded his head. "My apologies."

A faint smile appeared. "For the curse of who my father is, or for feeling sorry for me?"

Will smiled back. "Mostly the former. I can't help but wish it were otherwise for you."

She shrugged. "It was difficult at the beginning, but after a while I realized something triggered the... what did you call it? Energy? I started sneaking previous items out once I noticed this Energy, because there was so much talk about these stories the Travelers told that we were always looking for something to happen. So if it was happening, I needed to know what was causing it. I traced it back to just a couple of herbs, but they worked very, very well. The first time I took both of them I got really sick, but after that I was fine. I was only eight at the time, so I'd been Father's little volunteer for about two years. People were used to me getting sick, and none of them cared. They just wanted me to get well so they could make me try something else. I got pretty efficient at looking sick and unhealthy, and I think the Energy helped me look like I wanted to look. I didn't want them to see me looking better, and have them realize something was happening, so I tried to look worse. It worked. Nobody suspected a thing."

"So you were eight years old and were scheming to prevent others from figuring out what you knew?" Will tried to put an accusatory tone in his words, but he couldn't keep himself from smiling.

"I wanted them to realize what they were doing was wrong, Will. If I looked healthier and they pieced together the combination, they'd consider my sacrifice worthwhile, and never regret it for an instant. If any of them were to realize the error of their ways and treat me well, I'd let them see things working. Eva was

the first one. Some of the other Traders as well.”

“What happened to your mother?” Will asked, his voice gentle.

Her face fell again. “I’d rather not talk about it.” She looked away from him.

Will sighed. “I know you don’t, Elizabeth. But you’re the only one who can tell me exactly what happened, and why. Eva’s shared what she knows, but it’s not enough. I can’t protect you if—”

“I don’t *need* to be *protected!*” Elizabeth shouted. “I *need* to be treated as the person I am, *not* someone *else’s* idea of who I am!”

Will held up his hands as Elizabeth’s eyes streamed with tears. “I’m sorry. I’m doing a poor job of this. I am here to help you in whatever way I can. Tell me how I can help.”

She glared at him. “Leave me alone. And don’t ask me about her again.”

He ignored her request. “Tell me how you plan to change them.”

She didn’t answer.

“Are you planning to try to... encourage them? With the Energy?”

Surprise covered her face. “You can do that?”

Will sighed. “Yes, you can. I prefer to avoid it. But yes, just as you can sense emotions, you can push Energy charged with an emotion to a person and it will influence how they feel. But if you did that in this case, then...”

“Then none of them have truly changed,” she said, sounding deflated. Her principles were rock solid; Will suspected most people in her situation would have given in to the temptation to impose their will on others. The fact that she didn’t... well, it simply reminded him of who this young woman would grow up to become.

“This wasn’t an option you had before, though,” Will noted. “It’s clear to me you’ve been thinking about this for a great deal of time. How were you hoping to achieve your goal before?”

Elizabeth glanced at him and looked away.

“Please, tell me,” Will said, moving closer to her. “I do want to help you achieve your goal, in whatever way you’d like me to help. What can I do?”

Elizabeth turned back toward him, and Will gasped in shock. Elizabeth suddenly looked as if she were deathly ill and had been subjected to physical assaults. Her left eye appeared swollen shut; her face was beaded with sweat and covered with bruises; her flaming red hair matted to her forehead. Her skin was pale and sickly.

“This is how,” she said, in a voice far too strong to match her appearance. “I want them to see what they’re doing to me, the harm they’re causing, and realize

that what they're doing is wrong. I want them to *choose* to do the right thing. When they do the right thing, then I will help them." Even as Will watched, the artificial injuries faded and her skin returned to its normal, healthy glow. But not *too* healthy; she wanted to look worn down and ailing even on her supposed good days.

"That's... amazing." Will felt he was understating the miraculous skills the young woman possessed to alter her appearance. He then realized he'd reduced his height by several inches a few weeks earlier; this was a similar application of the skill.

"You can help me," she said simply. "Try the foods I test. Make yourself look sickly as a result. Perhaps seeing you—a very tall, seemingly healthy man—suddenly fall ill will aid the cause."

Will nodded. "I'll do that." He nodded at the row of canisters on the wall. "Grab a few of those items and throw them on the table."

She gave him a look that clearly said she didn't like orders. "It needs to be items you've not used before. I don't know what you've tried, or I'd pick them out myself. You'll want to hurry, because your father is on his way."

Her mouth formed an "oh" and she darted to the walls of shelves, flitting like a bumblebee among flowers, and she returned with a half-dozen different roots, berries, and herbs. Will put his hand near them and gave a small burst of Energy, crumbling the roots and herbs into a powder form. As they heard Arthur outside, Elizabeth picked up the powder in her hand and resumed some of her sickly appearance. Will adopted a studious appearance, as if monitoring her reaction.

The door opened, and Arthur stood there. Both Will and Elizabeth blinked, their eyes adjusting to the sunlight. Will faced Arthur, a stern look on his face, while Elizabeth sat hunched over at the table, looking at the powdered concoction with revulsion. Arthur took all of this in and smiled. "I take it your day went well, Will?"

Will shrugged. "No breakthroughs. Elizabeth was just about to try one last combination." He turned and looked at her. "Weren't you?"

Elizabeth's eyes went wide. She shook her head slowly, then with more vigor. "N-n-n-no... I... I thought... I thought we were done." Will could feel the emotion coming from her; she was enjoying this charade, but only because it had the potential to change Arthur.

Will narrowed his eyes at her. "I say we're *not* done. Finish it!" He did his best to look menacing, which was difficult as he heard her laughing in his head.

Elizabeth shook her head again. "No... the smell... it will taste... awful..."

I'll be sick..."

Will rose to his feet, the tallest man in the community even after his self-imposed height reduction. He marched around the table. "You will do as I tell you!" he snapped.

Looking mortified, Will watched as Elizabeth poured the mixture into her mouth. He located a small pitcher of water, poured the liquid into a clay mug, and handed it to her, careful to keep his look expressionless, a man looking simply to gather information.

This stuff is great! Elizabeth's voice sang in his head. *It's one of the items that helped me out, and a few others that add a nice taste to it.* She choked, seized the cup of water, and gulped it down, letting the tears flow. The tears were real, Will decided. She was crying with laughter.

Will watched her for a few moments, but his focus was on the thoughts and emotions from Arthur. Elizabeth allowed her skin to become pale and clammy, and she wrapped her arms around her stomach as she began to wail. "It burns! It's going to eat through me!" She fell to her knees, gasping, and looked up at Arthur, tears in her eyes. "Please... Father... make it stop!"

Arthur leaned in closer, oblivious to her suffering. "Did it work?" he whispered.

Will wanted to punch the man. Or vomit. Preferably on Arthur.

Elizabeth's tears intensified, and she collapsed to the ground. Will wasn't sure if that was faked as well, or the genuine grief of a young woman whose only living parent cared nothing for her or her suffering. Her sobs gradually stopped, and she fell into a deep quiet, as of one asleep or unconscious.

Will glanced at Arthur. "It appears we are no closer to finding answers, Arthur. Perhaps we can recruit more volunteers to test? With only one, we are limited in the number of combinations we can try, and we must wait until she recovers to try again."

Will sensed fear from Arthur, but the man moved smoothly into his response. "Will, I fear that would be unwise. You see, we know that sickness or other maladies may appear after one ingests some of these items, and the degree may be intensified by combining them. If we spread that risk out, we may find ourselves incapacitated as a community for many days. What would happen if our farmers or smiths or carpenters or foragers were unable to work for days at a time? Elizabeth has recognized this fact for many years, and has been serving ably in this fashion."

"What if there were additional *volunteers*, though? What if there was a group

of our neighbors who *could* be sidelined for a few days without harming the rest? We could make much greater progress in that fashion. It will also help us to determine if one must reach a certain age before anything actually works.”

Will could sense the man’s thoughts. Arthur knew he couldn’t simply dismiss the idea outright, so he had to listen. But he knew that adding any adults to the mix meant he’d lose income. Why would anyone pay him to “hire” Elizabeth—Will cringed inwardly at the word—if others truly *had* volunteered? And there was no way to convince the rest that Arthur needed compensation for their time. “Will, all of our residents are essential to the success of this community, and we cannot afford any losses. Every single person is necessary every single day—”

“I disagree, Arthur.”

Careful, Elizabeth’s voice sounded in his head. *He doesn’t like people disagreeing with him.*

Arthur raised an eyebrow. “Really? Who around here doesn’t work every day? Who around here do *you*—a new resident, I might add—think is not essential every day?” The threat was there; Arthur feared Will would name *him* as the nonessential person, as did Elizabeth. That was a challenge that would undoubtedly get him banished for good.

But Will had other ideas. “The Traders.”

Arthur cocked his head. “You’re saying that the group you’re part of, the group that just returned with ample profits and the supplies we need... you’re saying that group is not essential to our success?”

“I’m saying the community functions fine each time the Traders leave to go on Trading missions. Between missions, yes, Traders can do work as farmers or foragers or carpenters; but the community functions fine while we’re gone. Right? If that wasn’t true, we would have returned after our week’s journey to find the rest of you incapacitated, or worse. No, Arthur, the community has adapted each time the Traders have left in the past—including the only Mission I’ve participated in. It could survive just as well if a Trader fell ill for a few days.”

Will could sense the rising panic in Arthur Lowell. Will terrified the man, for Will wasn’t mesmerized by his words, or fooled by his empty rhetoric. And Arthur knew he’d have to deal with Will, and likely as not a more senior Trader who’d put such ideas in his head. “That’s a very interesting theory, Will. I’d like some time to think over your proposal.”

Will nodded. “Take all the time you’d like, Arthur. I’ll talk to the Traders. It will be several weeks before we need to Trade again, so we should be able to get

quite a bit of testing done before we leave.”

Arthur’s eyes widened, and Will enjoyed the riotous laughter from Elizabeth in his mind as the man spluttered out his response. “But I haven’t told you my opinion on the matter yet! How would you go about such a thing?”

Will frowned, a puzzled expression on his face. “I’m not sure I follow. Elizabeth volunteers each day and has full access to this building and the potential unlocking substances. Would other volunteers not be able to do the same?”

Arthur’s eyes narrowed. “I have the key.”

One mystery. Arthur had the only key to the building. “You’re denying me the ability to test myself, then? Even if that’s what I choose to do? And others as well?”

“I own the key, Stark. And I’ll use it as I see fit.”

“I’d also note that you previously asked me to serve as the village doctor,” Will said.

Arthur blinked at the change in the conversation. “I did. Have you cured anyone, yet?” There was a sneer in his tone.

“No, thankfully, there have been no injuries, and no one has gotten sick. But I suspect that the Schola stores many plants and herbs useful in healing. I’d like the opportunity to take inventory.” Will arched an eyebrow, knowing Arthur was cornered. Word of Will serving as the village doctor had spread throughout the community when he’d arrived; to hear he’d been denied access to the Schola, where many mysterious plants and herbs were stored, would undermine Arthur.

“I... shall see about getting you access to perform an inventory. And I shall ensure that you have further access at such time as you need to retrieve something... to help someone who is sick or injured.”

Will smiled. “I thought that’s what you’d say.” He walked over to Elizabeth, bent down, and picked her up. She feigned sleep, but contentment flooded his Empathy senses; he’d done well by her account. There was still a tinge of sadness, however, for Arthur clearly wasn’t turning against his past freely, despite her suffering.

“What are you doing?” Arthur snapped.

“Carrying her home. It appears that today’s session has made her ill, and she’s unable to return home without assistance. As the village doctor, it’s my responsibility to make sure she’s adequately cared for. She needs to sleep and build up her energy. And possibly...” Will glanced back at Arthur. “Something in here, to help her fully recover. You might want to leave the door unlocked. It

will save you time.” Will could feel Arthur’s open-mouthed stare burning into him as he left the Schola.

Elizabeth shook with silent laughter all the way back to her room, curled contentedly in Will’s arms.

INNOVATOR

“This is insane,” Eleanor said.

Will had explained his idea to the Traders. They’d spend their downtime between missions—or at least parts of it—working in the Schola and learning what they could. They’d essentially fulfill the same role that Elizabeth had been performing on her own for a decade, but they would truly be volunteers. No one would rent their services from another and demand research from them; it would truly be a free choice they’d make.

“It’s not intended to be a daily activity,” Will said. “You spend most days between missions helping out in areas that function fine during your absence, as you’ve always done. If we each did one or two days between missions, that’s another dozen rounds of research... and whichever one of us actually finds the combination becomes the first one living here to develop those abilities. And... we’re setting an example for the rest of the community. We can simply explain that we want to speed up the results, and we’re willing to spend a few days a month doing our part.” He smiled. “It probably wouldn’t hurt to mention that one needn’t pay a fee to Arthur to make progress in this fashion.”

“I don’t like it,” Eleanor said. “What if we all get so sick that we can’t go Trading? What if... what if one of us actually *dies* from this? It’s not right.”

“You aren’t concerned that an innocent girl has suffered those exact maladies? Or that *she* might die from it?” Will’s eyes narrowed.

Eleanor looked at the ground, swaying in obvious discomfort, her toe tracing the dirt. She looked up, her face hard. “Better her than one of us. She adds no value to this community. After more than a decade of experimentation we have no results.”

Will had never hit a woman in his life, and it took all of his strength to

maintain that streak. “It could be argued the same for us. We do nothing that couldn’t already be done by others, a point proven each time we leave to go Trade, and our best work happens infrequently. Yet there’s a payoff for everyone for that supposed lack of contribution. By having us available to make those Trading runs, everyone gains wealth. If we were to adjust to having us hold full-time spots with the farmers or smiths or weavers, then our departure would mean less food to eat and less metalwork to sell. Yet that financial payoff is nothing compared to what will happen when the people in this community finally unlock the secrets to those abilities. Don’t you want to be part of that?”

Eleanor shook her head. “The risk is too great. I will not risk my health and my life, especially when it seems obvious that there will never be a payoff like Arthur promises. There are only so many foods and plants in the world, Will. Surely by now our Travelers have found all of them? Surely after ten years, Elizabeth has tested out every one of them in the Schola, in all possible combinations? If she’s found nothing... then there’s nothing to find. This is all a foolish dream spearheaded by Arthur as a means of controlling us and enriching himself.”

Will sighed, in part because he agreed with her regarding Arthur’s motivations. “The world is large, Eleanor; the Travelers have not reached every part of it. Perhaps even now one returns with the confirmed answers we seek. Perhaps the substances we need are even now in the Schola, needing only to be consumed in sufficient quantities over a period of time, or prepared in a specific way. Why quit now? It can be done, Eleanor; the Travelers, I’m told, have seen people with these abilities, seen it *themselves*, and thus I believe others can do the same. Isn’t that a worthy goal? If you never take risks, you’ll never reach your full potential.”

Eleanor shook her head. “I’m a widow, Will, and spent many years after as a virtual slave. Now I’m free. I’m a woman, and yet I hold a position of prominence in this community. I was never permitted to own anything; now I have my own money and can buy whatever I choose. I was married to a man by the choice of my parents and bore children for him though I did not love him; here I am free to be my own person and choose the relationships I wish to have. My family was murdered by an invading army; our location here is secret and the walls are secure, and I am safe. My wealth continues to grow, my health continues to improve. I have no desire to throw it all away on some foolish fantasy of developing magical abilities.”

Eva shook her head. “You have essentially called my brother a liar, Eleanor.

He saw it himself, has spoken to those who can do these things. I, for one, think it's foolish *not* to do what I can to help. Will is right. I will volunteer as well."

Eleanor's face was one of pity, rather than anger. "I hope you don't come to regret that choice."

"And I hope the same for you, Eleanor," Eva replied, her eyes flashing. "I will tell you this now: should I discover the secret combinations, I will ensure that *no one* shares it with you. You are content with your current self and turned down the opportunity to learn this on your own. If, when given this chance, you refuse... well, I will make certain that you will not grow beyond where you are, the state you truly love, on the shoulders of those braver than you." She scowled. "And frankly, that goes for *everyone* not willing to do this themselves."

Eleanor stormed away.

"That went well," Will said, arching an eyebrow.

Eva glared at him. Then she faced Aldus, Gerald, and Matilda. "I don't know where each of you stands on this plan, and I don't care to know. If you wish to volunteer, then do so. I have made my choice. I will test once per week and will stop one week before we leave on each Trading mission. Will, I believe it is best if you and I stagger our tests. I will take Monday, if you will take Thursdays."

Will nodded.

"Might I suggest Wednesdays for Will?" Gerald asked. "That would leave a gap between us if I take Fridays."

"I'll take Tuesdays," Matilda said.

"If it's okay with you, Will," Aldus said, smiling, "I'll take Wednesdays if you'd like to take Thursdays?"

Will smiled and nodded. "Thursdays it is."

Eva smiled, a rare sight, and her face erased any remaining gloom from Eleanor's earlier departure. "Thank you. This will be of great benefit to Elizabeth, and she's had precious little help in this regard from anyone, including me. Especially not since Genevieve's death. My request is that you keep anything you learn from those not willing to participate, and should Elizabeth be there with you... make sure you try to convince those she's with to participate in the research as well." With nods of deep resolve, the Traders dispersed.

Eva looked at Will. "Have you given thought to what you might be doing the other six days of each week? I sense you're not one to simply stand back and watch others do all of the work."

Will smiled. "I guess I'm pretty easy to read."

Eva laughed. "What skills do you have that you can perform around here?"

You're obviously skilled at Trading. Do you think your... *other* skills... might be useful in any specific area?"

Will sighed. "I don't know. But I'd like to move from group to group and see what I can do to help each of them. Perhaps my *other skills* will help me to think of ways to improve how we handle each of the major craft areas."

Eva's gaze narrowed. "Be careful, Will. People don't like being told how to do their jobs, especially by one as inexperienced as you."

Will nodded. "I'll be careful."

He left Eva's room. It had been quite crowded with all of them in there. They needed to find a place to meet as a group. He wondered if he could use the cave, and decided against it. That space was reserved just for him and Elizabeth; should any others develop Energy abilities, he'd use the cave to train them there as well.

Will walked among the Shops and the Stores, simply watching what people were doing. He chatted with those plying their trade, explaining that his previous trade was, simply, Trading, and he was trying to determine where he could best help the community. Perhaps aided by the financial gain they'd experienced in no small part due to Will's skills, everyone was eager to talk to him and convince him of the superiority of their craft, and the always-urgent need for more hands. None seemed terribly concerned by Will's lack of skill in their area, and his senses detected that he'd become something of a valuable piece in the social hierarchy. The group that landed the mysterious newcomer Will Stark would be the envy of the community.

Will sighed inwardly. People were always trying to win the status wars, rather than simply trying to do the right thing.

Will's primary skill wasn't trading. It was problem-solving. As he walked through the community, watching the bakers bake and the smiths forge, and as he walked with the hunters and foragers collecting food from outside the walls, and as he watched the farmers tend the crops they'd planted, he found one thing all of them needed.

Water.

The bakers would spend great amounts of time fetching water used in the baking process, and additional water to clean out their oven-safe dishes and mixing tools. The smiths needed water to cool hot metal, potters needed water to mold clay, foragers to clean the foodstuffs gathered in the forests. The farmers, of course, needed water to ensure their crops were adequately hydrated. Everyone needed water, and yet, within the village, water could only be gotten

from the single, modest-sized well near the gate. Could he use that twenty-first century mindset to solve an age-old problem? Could he bring them an abundance of water, easily obtained for all the various crafts, and help them thrive even further?

He vaguely remembered reading about artesian wells at one point, having considered adding one for decorative purposes at the entry to De Gray Estates. However, the engineers indicated that the nearest aquifer was several hundred yards away, and it would be highly impractical. Artesian wells were created by drilling holes into underground aquifers, releasing pressure restraining the water underground and enabling the water to bubble up above ground through the channel bored into the earth. He had no doubt that the metal workers here could create a metal bit and rod that they could use, but he wasn't sure how he could convince them to drill a hole in the ground in the hopes of finding water. They'd note that they already had a well, and the effort would be pointless. He shifted, and began to wonder if he could create a system of running water in the village.

In his day, of course, water was transported from various sources to homes, and could be accessed through various taps and faucets inside and outside the home. That would be too much to attempt here, at least at first. The well was the only source of water within the village, but the nearby rivers held essentially a limitless supply. Could he get the water here directly from the rivers?

He thought of the aqueducts built by the Romans, centuries earlier, and his fuzzy historical memory suggested that the Roman empire had spread far enough that it could have touched historic England. Could he work that in as the source of his inspiration for the idea?

When in doubt, of course, he could fall back to his reasonably true back story of being a merchant, and state that he'd seen various portions of the now-extinct empire of Rome, and marveled at the aqueduct system that could bring fresh water from far away mountains. The Romans had the advantage in that the mountain-based water sources were high above their cities, and gravity could help the water flow the entire journey. Both nearby tributaries were below the level of the village, with the fast-moving waters of the Ealdor flowing higher by a few feet than the slow-moving Halwende. He'd still need to raise the river water up into the air, dump it into the aqueduct-type system they'd need, and let it flow into the village. He wanted a separate system to remove waste and debris as well, but that would come later. For now, getting the water here in abundance would serve his purposes.

He saw the Store where they stowed the parts of the wagons he'd used with

the other Traders on the recent mission to Richland, and an idea formed. He'd use the power of the river to collect the water. He grabbed one of the wheels, and marched over to the carpenters.

Spotting a man named Joseph, the head carpenter, Will asked if they'd made any water troughs recently. "Sure have," Joseph replied. "You Traders sold the lot of them on your last trip, and a couple of the troughs here broke down. Just finished up several of them. Got the sap in place to keep the water from soaking in, too. Should have enough to replace the old ones here and maybe sell a few later."

"May I buy one from you?" Will asked.

Joseph looked at him in surprise. "Sure, I guess. I'd probably need to get a silver for it, though, because of the wood—"

He broke off as Will dropped a silver coin in the man's hand. "A pleasure doing business with you, Will," Joseph said, smiling. "Anything else I can help you with?"

Will smiled. "As a matter of fact... yes."

Drawing in the dirt, Will explained his idea. He would bury two long spikes into the river, and suspend a wheel between them. The wheel would have pieces of wood jutting out of it, much like flippers on a fish, and the water would turn the wheel.

Joseph shrugged. "OK, I guess you could do that. But why?"

Will grinned. "The river is going to send water directly to us, without our needing to draw water from the well." He showed how he'd add a bucket to the wheel, positioned such that as the wheel turned, the bucket would be submerged and scoop up water. As it started to turn upside-down on the way back into the river, the water in the bucket would fall into a trough, which would enable water to flow down to a position they chose.

Joseph gave him a blank stare. "So the ground near the river gets wet. Why bother?"

"What if a second trough caught the water leaving the first? And a third from the second? If you start the water high enough, and connect enough troughs together, then eventually..."

"The water reaches the village," Joseph said, nodding. He glanced at the wheel. "I don't think that wheel will get the water high enough in the air to reach this far."

Will grinned. "No, but it will let us test to see if it will work. If it can work on this small scale, then the community can decide to build larger wheels and

larger troughs.”

Joseph smiled back. “Let’s go see if this works.”

The two men left the village a short time later carrying a strange assortment of wood-based products, including the two long poles carried over Joseph’s shoulder. Will had gotten a bucket from one of the farmers in charge of the livestock, and Joseph had brought along the hand tools of the day along with several pieces of wood and rope they’d use to secure the bucket at just the right angle.

The two men spent several hours placing the poles into the Halwende River, which thankfully was only about three feet deep near the shore. Will expected that the fast-moving Ealdor waters would be best for a full-sized version, but for testing, the Halwende suited them. They mounted the wheel after attaching three “paddles” and gradually lowered it to the point where the water caught the paddles. As Will had predicted, the water turned the wheel. Joseph found himself fascinated.

They returned to the community at midday to eat, and returned to work the rest of the day on the contraption. Though they were soaked through, the daily bathing in the cool waters had acclimated them to the chill, and it failed to slow them down. Shortly before they were to return for the evening closing of the gate, they identified the correct angle for the bucket, and when they held the trough in place they were able to get an irregular, pulsing stream of water flowing through the trough. Elated at the possibilities, the two men returned to the village.

In the morning, the two men walked together as the community proceeded to the river for the daily bath. Arthur, walking in front, spotted the wooden wheel spinning merrily in the waters, and held up his hand. “What is *that*?” he roared. “How did one of our wagon wheels end up in the river, and why does it not float away?”

Will stepped forward. “Let me demonstrate.” With Joseph’s help, they showed that the water in the bucket could be directed into a trough and flow through it to a distant location. “If we can build this,” Will explained, “then the river can feed consistent supplies of water to our crops, even when it does not rain, and if we extend it far enough, it can reach into our village as well.”

“And why would we want to do that?” Arthur asked. “Do we not have a well centrally located?”

“We do,” Will said. “However, that water requires that one of the workers at each craft move in that direction, carrying a bucket each time. It takes time to

draw the water forth in that way, and is limited to the size of the bucket. If we were to extend the troughs to each working area, we could fashion doors in the troughs that could be opened as needed to fill buckets, pots, or pitchers as needed. A secondary system of troughs would carry unneeded water back to the river, along with anything else we might wish to wash away.”

There were murmurs in the crowd, murmurs of people contemplating the possibilities of having water running directly to their places of work, water immediately accessible in whatever quantity needed. The questions came quickly. How long would it take to build? Will didn't know; it depended on how quickly the team of carpenters could build the wheels and troughs, but he knew they could work quickly if needed. How high would the wheel need to get? Will said that they should only need to have the troughs drop slightly from unit to unit, so that the water could flow downhill, but probably would need to start twenty feet in the air or more.

The community bathed, excited about this new innovation, a project that would have water running to their shops. They'd no longer have to fetch small amounts of water one slow, laborious bucket at a time. Will overheard several of his new neighbors imagining the possibility of extending the troughs—smaller than those from the river—directly to their rooms, and at least one wondered if they might direct excess water back to the river with their waste, as “that would improve the smell inside the walls.”

Will smiled. The spark of innovation had been lit; his neighbors were considering the impossible, thinking in terms of technology rather than magic. Perhaps, just perhaps, this might ease them off the relentless pursuit of those supernatural abilities at the expense of the physical health and mental well-being of their youngest member.

WHEEL

The community rallied around the Wheel of Water. It was the first group project of such enormous potential and scope since they'd endeavored to build the walls and single rooms over a decade earlier, before most current residents had even joined the village.

After thinking through the project, a number of the villagers suggested starting at the neighborhood walls and working back toward the river, raising the level of the troughs as each was added, and testing each section along the way by dumping a bucket of water into the end of the trough to ensure the water flowed correctly. "The most difficult piece to build will be the Wheel," Joseph, the carpenter, noted. "It's critical that we know exactly how large the Wheel must be, and the only way to be sure is to build it last."

Will recommended that they mount the Wheel in the fast-flowing Ealdor River to the west. "The Ealdor is the better choice for several reasons. First, the Ealdor's waters move more quickly than those of the Halwende. That means that the Ealdor can deliver more water at a faster rate than we'd get from the Halwende. The Halwende moves so slowly that it might not be able to turn a larger Wheel at all."

"That makes sense," Gerald the Trader noted. "If this Wheel doesn't move, we won't get water. We don't bathe in the Ealdor because there's too much risk that the water might pull us away, but that same feature makes it ideal for this project."

Will nodded. "Secondly, the Ealdor is closer. This is a significant building project, and the Halwende is perhaps three times farther away than the Ealdor. We must continue to build goods for trade, and if we spend too much time building our aqueduct and Wheel, we may hurt our work in other areas."

Arthur nodded at this, though his perpetual glower at others' ideas remained. "We do not want to cut off the flow of profits to this village to create a flow of water; we've done without this contraption before. Let's not lose sight of our primary purposes."

Will couldn't argue with that, much as he wanted to do so. "Finally, the Ealdor is actually a bit *higher* above the ground than the Village. That means the Wheel won't need to be as tall. The natural elevation of the river is such that you walk downhill from the water to the village, and so it will be easier to get the water here."

The villagers agreed with the plan, and construction began.

Progress was steady. The carpenters, in addition to their normal workload, spent hours as a team, building the poles necessary to hold the troughs. Those normally working other crafts took time out of their evenings to help find more wood, gather the sap necessary to waterproof the troughs that would form the aqueduct, and otherwise help the carpenters. It took several months to reach the river, and the weather cooled as summer gave way to autumn. The Traders conducted several additional Trading missions to other towns and cities to the south, making solid profits on each trip, and rushed back with the supplies needed to shape the support beams. The village celebrated in late September, when the final trough was secured, and the test bucket of water from the river successfully traversed the aqueduct back to the village.

The extra work continued. The more senior carpenters, including Joseph, worked on shaping the massive Wheel and paddles now that they knew the actual size required. Others in the village, including Will and the Traders, worked on fashioning a large, wide dock along the shore of the river, extending out nearly ten feet. They built outward, one plank at a time, using each additional foothold to drive beams into the water farther and farther from the shore. Once the dock extended out the full ten feet, they tore out the middle four feet, forming the causeway that would contain the Wheel. They then began driving the vertical support beams into the riverbed, beams that would be used to elevate the Wheel and hold it in place as it turned with the current. Once the vertical beams were in place, they added diagonal beams to ensure that the weight of the Wheel and speed of the current wouldn't topple the entire structure.

The construction of the Wheel proved a challenge to the carpenters. They built two prototypes, in part because they weren't sure how to transport the Wheel to the river. They wanted to roll the Wheel to the river, but the weight

would likely snap the paddles off. In the end, they figured out how to build the paddles separately and attach them to the Wheel after transport to the water. That would enable the villagers to move the Wheel from the village, out to the docks, raise it onto the support beams, and only then add the paddles that would capture the energy of the flowing water and turn the Wheel. The carpenters did not attach buckets; rather, they used the prototype Will had created to observe the angles of the containers and simply carved the carrying structures directly into the side of the Wheel.

When the Wheel was completed, the entire village put aside their daily chores and worked to roll the massive structure out of the village and along the now well-worn path to the Ealdor River. They took care to ensure that the Wheel did not strike the overhead aqueducts or underlying support beams. Will, as the one who'd come up with the original design, was chosen for the honor of carrying one of the three-foot square paddles to the river. Arthur and Maynard, the village leader and his primary assistant, also carried paddles. The two men flanked Elizabeth, apparently concerned that she'd run off if they left her behind in the village during the event. Maynard, ever mindful of his grudge against Will, glanced back at Will and sneered, tapping the hilt of his sword and glancing at the girl.

Will sighed, wondering if perhaps he should risk squeezing the man with a nano-based cocoon until his eyes popped out. Realizing that he'd have to look at the eyeless man in such a case, he decided he'd need to figure out another way to put the man in his place. He needed to do so before Maynard decided to put that sword he so loved to improper use.

Will was the only Trader given the honor of carrying a paddle, and as such was isolated from Eva and the others. He was near enough to Elizabeth, however, to both catch Maynard's threatening glance and to notice Elizabeth taking advantage of her time closer to the trees and vegetation to build her Energy. She maintained her outwardly sickly appearance, so much so that Arthur had complained on more than one occasion that the village doctor was clearly not doing his job. Will replied that most doctors weren't denied access to the herbs and potions needed to treat patients, for Arthur had refused to allow Will or the other Traders access to the Schola unless they paid the silver coin fee for the day. Arthur eventually decided to drop his complaints, realizing he couldn't both complain and deny Will access to all possible supplies.

Noting that Elizabeth's Energy was growing nicely, he projected directly to her. *You're doing well.*

This is very exciting, but I can tell that Father's anxious. He's concerned that if this works as promised, he'll lose power and people will start treating you as their leader.

Will snorted, which drew odd looks from the people walking nearest him. *I have no desire to be a leader of that sort. People can follow my example if they choose; he wants them to follow because he ordered them to do so.*

They reached the shore and, after looping long lengths of rope through the gaps between the spokes of the Wheel, rolled the structure into the water upriver from the dock. Several of the men wrestled the Wheel into the slot between the support beams. They tried to lift the Wheel into place, realizing only then that they'd need to get the Wheel's axle nine or more feet above the surface of the docks. Amid much grumbling, they secured the floating Wheel to the docks, and decided what to do next. Arthur sent several glares in Will's direction, clearly attempting to suggest that this oversight was Will's fault, or perhaps even that Will's plan was fatally flawed.

"It's a Wheel," Will finally said. "If we build ramps on both sides, we should be able to roll the Wheel up the ramps and into place."

This suggestion was widely approved, and dozens offered to volunteer time to build the ramps, foregoing their usual chores and tasks to do so. Arthur waved his hand for silence, and when all eyes faced him, spoke. "My friends, like you, I am excited about the possibilities that the Wheel in the water will bring, and I am pleased at how we've all come together to work tirelessly toward achieving this goal. However, we must not forget to attend to our other duties as well. We must continue making progress toward our other goals, but more importantly, we must not fail to handle the basic tasks necessary to survive. I must ask that enough people in each of our trades remain on duty throughout this process of ramp building and Wheel mounting that we do not fall significantly behind in preparing for our next Trading mission. Or," he added, chuckling, "that we do not starve for lack of food to eat."

To Will's surprise, an angry outburst greeted Arthur's words. Many shouted at the same time, stating in various ways that the villagers were fully committed to the Wheel and would resume full production of their crafts upon the Wheel's completion. A few even shouted that it was an insult to the idea that Will had come up with to suggest pulling people off the Wheel and back onto normal work duties. Arthur glanced at Will, and shrugged.

To his regret, Will walked to the front of the group and supported Arthur. "I agree with Arthur. We still need to eat, and we can't forget why this community

was established, and its ideals, for one new idea. I think Arthur's plan is sound and I personally support it in full." Sometimes, supporting a good idea was painful, simply because of who voiced it first. Will realized that, in some small way, many who followed Arthur without thought had started to see Will, a member for less than two months, as a leader of their village, just as Elizabeth had noted. In looking to Will to support his plan, Arthur had essentially forced Will to acknowledge Arthur as the true leader. Will was the leader of a specific project, but Arthur was *the* leader of the community.

Though the grumbling continued, most were reluctantly convinced by Will's statement that Arthur's plan was sound, despite requiring that some of them would miss portions of the actual building process. In the conversations that followed, it was decided that when it was time to load the Wheel into place, they'd make sure everyone was available to help and watch to see if the Wheel worked as promised.

Promised? Will found himself nervous at the word choice, and the possibility that something would go wrong. This was a community which had killed a woman for allegedly keeping secret a means of unlocking enhanced abilities; what would they do to him for diverting so much time and energy to this project if the Wheel did not work? Would he risk using Energy or nanos to make *sure* it worked? Or protect himself from their wrath if it didn't?

On a late October day, the ramps were finally completed, and the villagers once again gathered on the shore of the Ealdor River to witness the raising of the Wheel. Heavy cloaks were worn by all to protect against the frigid winds blowing off the waters. Several of the men untied the ropes that held the Wheel in place, floating on the surface of the river, during the past several weeks. They tossed the ropes attached to both sides of the axle over the support beams, with several men and women pulling on each end. Others flanked the Wheel on both sides, pushing on the spokes and moving the Wheel up the ramp, a Sisyphus-like team moving the Wheel into place. Slowly, the giant Wheel rose out of the water.

Will joined the team pushing the Wheel on the shore-side ramp, and realized the problem when the Wheel was three-quarters of the way up the ramps. "Stop!" he shouted. "Stop the Wheel!"

He felt the eyes of dozens of exhausted men and women looking at him, teeth chattering against the chill. "What's wrong, Will?" Arthur asked, his eyes expressing anger at the interruption even as his teeth chattered. "We're nearly done. Why stop now?"

"The Wheel is in backwards. The buckets are on the *outside*. They need to be

on the *inside*, on the side with the aqueduct. The Wheel won't work the way it would be mounted now."

A collective groan arose from the crowd, and cries of "No!" and "Are you joking?" could be heard among those on the ramp and in the crowd watching the proceedings. "Can't the carpenters just move the buckets to the other side?" Maynard shouted from the opposite ramp, his arms shaking with the strain of holding the Wheel in place.

Joseph shook his head. "No, not without taking the Wheel back to the Shop. The buckets aren't separate structures that can be removed; if we tried, we'd damage the Wheel and it wouldn't last more than a few months before it would crack." He sounded worn down.

Will nodded, and sighed. "We have to take it back down to the water and start raising it all over again, after we turn the Wheel around."

Roars of protest sounded from those on both sides of the Wheel, arguing against the approach. Some said that the carpenters should have made the buckets more easily movable. Others blamed Will for not noticing the error sooner. Still others argued that they should finish installing the Wheel, and then determine if they could move the buckets to the other side, build separate buckets to attach to the shore side, or even extend the trough around to the opposite side. "That won't work," Will said, raising his voice. "The open ends of the bucket won't be facing in the correct direction to scoop the water as the Wheel turns."

That led to additional commentary on a poor Wheel design; the Wheel should certainly have worked regardless of which way they installed it. Will groaned. "The Wheel's design was fine. There is no option guaranteed to succeed more quickly than to simply let the Wheel back down the ramp, turn it, and reload it. And that is how I cast my vote." Will let go of his grip on the Wheel.

A few others on both sides of the Wheel followed his example, and suddenly those protesting the effort to reload the Wheel were left holding the entire weight up on their own. "Let it go!" Will shouted. "It doesn't matter how hard you pull on the rope if the Wheel isn't moving in the right direction!"

In the end, the effort to hold on and fight to complete the loading of the Wheel as it was positioned was too much, and even men like Maynard were forced to let go. The Wheel rolled back down the ramp on its wide axle and settled into the water with a tremendous splash. Will felt the glares from several of the men aimed in his direction, and he wasn't sure he needed his Empathy

skills to sense it. They felt they'd just wasted effort by starting over, apparently unconcerned about the potential wasted effort from continuing. The carpenters, at a minimum, would be forced to try to attach buckets to a Wheel already mounted, and that could keep them from continuing their work for several more days. And they might very well determine, after putting in that effort, that no amount of effort would get the Wheel working positioned as it had been. Worse, they might damage the Wheel and have to build another.

"I know everyone is tired, but this is the best way forward," Will said. "Since it is midday, may I suggest that we stop for a meal, and then resume this afternoon?"

The men glowered at him. More than one made it clear that they weren't coming back to waste their time on his crazy scheme yet again, and that included those who'd joined him a few moments earlier in releasing the ropes right away. Apparently, their gesture was done for reasons of fatigue, rather than principle.

He should have known better than to think that a community of people willing to enslave the daughter of one of their own to do their dirty work would have the character to respond to a setback like this. Will sighed, exasperated at the lack of perseverance.

Gerald and Aldus walked up to him, and Aldus glanced over his shoulder at the retreating crowd. "I really don't think any of them are coming back, Will. They see this setback as a failure, and proof that the idea itself was flawed. If we want this to work, it'll have to be done with just us."

Eva walked up to them, joined by Matilda and Eleanor. "We'll help as well. And I agree. The rest of them aren't coming back. It's a shame. I'm sure they'll be happy to avail themselves of the abundant water if it works, though." She snorted. "Reminds me of their attitude regarding other things of value."

Will chuckled. "In spite of that, I still want this to work. And I do have some ideas on how we can make this happen. The fact that this group—and Elizabeth—will benefit from it is enough to make me want to continue, even if we'll have to share the benefit with the others."

Will threaded a rope around the spokes and then tied the ends to the dock, explaining that he didn't want to find the Wheel washed downriver when they returned, and with the Wheel secured the Traders returned to the village for their midday meal. Will was surprised at the level of anger he could sense as they worked their way to the Stores, as evidenced by the paltry amount of vegetable and pork soup ladled into his bowl and the glare directed at him as he walked away. Many of the workers made a point to complain loudly about their tired,

sore muscles, and how they'd have to work extra hours to meet their desired quota for the next Trading run. Others made it clear, even to the Traders who'd previously worked with them during down time, that they were to stay away. "That's fine," Eva snapped. "We'd been planning to finish the Wheel project first before rejoining you anyway." Her proclamation was met with jeers and laughter.

After all, surely three men and three women couldn't accomplish what thirty had struggled and failed to achieve.

After eating, the Traders exited through the gate, with more than a few residents suggesting that they stay away for an extended period of time, lest they ruin more lives with their crazy ideas. "Weren't we heroes a few days ago for bringing back mounds of coins?" Will asked, grinning.

The Traders were silent.

Will looked at them, and ran Energy at them, attempting to get a read. They were scared, concerned about the shunning they were facing. The Traders, by definition, created nothing in the Shops that couldn't be created by others; they held nothing in the Stores they could sell within the community or on Trading runs. The craftspeople could always choose to Trade on their own, and prevent the Traders from working in the village to earn money needed for food and necessities. Taken to its extreme, the Traders could even be forced to leave the village to survive.

Will stopped. "Listen to me, everyone. We are going to make this work."

"How, Will?" Matilda asked. "I watched the first attempt. Every one of the men in this village was straining to push and pull that Wheel up the ramp, and there are only six of us. I'm not as strong as someone like Maynard, and even if I was, we still only have one person for every five that were working earlier."

Will tapped his head. "We're going to work smarter, that's how."

Gerald grunted. "Brains don't lift heavy Wheels, Will."

If only he knew I could float that Wheel into its place in a few seconds with the right thoughts, Will thought, and he grinned. "Who said anything about lifting a Wheel? We're going to roll it up that ramp."

Aldus frowned. "Isn't that what we were doing earlier? With, as Matilda noted, five times as many people?"

Will shook his head. "We're taking a different approach. Before we used the physical power of thirty people to push and pull the Wheel up the ramp. We're not going to do that this time. We're going to use the *water* to roll the Wheel up the ramp."

At Will's direction, the team rotated the Wheel around so that the buckets were facing the shore, as designed, and then they let it float down river to the opposite end of the docks, where they tied the Wheel down. Will then had them detach the temporary ramps. "We're going to put the ramps on the other side of the support beams, downriver from the posts." Despite the puzzled expressions, the team followed his recommendations, and the ramps were soon securely in place.

"OK. Now what?" Eleanor asked. Like the others, she was wet, tired, and sore, but curiosity kept her going.

Will pointed to the stack of paddles and the mallets near them. "Now, we attach the paddles."

"But *why*?" Eva asked. "All that will do is spin... the Wheel..." Her brow furrowed, and then her face lit up as she understood his plan. "Backwards."

"What?" Gerald asked. "Why is that important?"

"Because if the Wheel spins backward downriver from the ramp, the motion will cause it to roll up to the top without any effort on our part," Eva explained, smiling.

The other four Traders stared at her. Then Aldus started laughing, and before long all of them were joining in. For it was not simply a case now of *whether* they'd succeed at this impossible task, it was simply a matter of *when*.

The team rotated through the various roles, with the exception of Gerald, the tallest of them besides Will, and the strongest of the team. He had the unenviable role of standing in the river, up to his shoulders and holding the Wheel back from accelerating up the ramp as the paddles were added and the Wheel started to spin. It was a role that the former soldier demanded. The others took turns holding the Wheel back from the shore, and those on the dock strained to keep the Wheel still long enough to attach each paddle with a wooden mallet. After a time, the strain on those holding the Wheel from spinning and accelerating up the ramp was evident. "I don't mean to complain," Gerald grunted, his teeth chattering at the sustained exposure to the frigid waters, "but *please* hurry it up!"

Will directed several of his nanos to help hold the Wheel still, and sent a small bit of Energy to Gerald, Energy that would help ease the ache in his muscles and warm him, protecting him against hypothermia. He then continued hammering the paddles into place. At last, the final paddle was secured.

He moved into the water with Gerald, and directed Eva and Aldus to hold the rope on the shore. "We can't let go because the Wheel may move so quickly it will roll past the support beams and crash into the dock."

Gerald grunted again. “Yeah. Let’s not do that.” Will noted that his teeth were no longer chattering.

Eleanor waited on the shore-side dock, ready to help control the Wheel as it moved up the ramp; Matilda covered the riverside dock in a similar fashion. Matilda would have the trickier time of it, because Will and Gerald would need to get out of the water and onto the dock without getting crushed against the structure by the force of the Wheel. Eva and Aldus would merely need to step onto the dock from the shore.

At last they were in place. “Let’s do this!” Will shouted.

They gradually let their stances loosen, just enough for the backward momentum to pull the Wheel between the ramps. The axle, thankfully, was above the level of the docks due to the shallow water and made immediate contact with the ramps.

The Wheel started to roll up the ramps.

“It’s working!” Eleanor shouted, more joyful than Will had ever heard her. “It’s really working!”

They managed the transition to the docks with surprising efficiency, and the Wheel moved in a controlled fashion up the ramp, those on the shore-side dock getting doused with buckets of water as the Wheel worked its magic. When the Wheel reached the summit, it settled with a resounding thud into the support beams. Will tensed, fearing the supports might topple, but the carpenters had done their work well. The Wheel turned, and bucket after bucket of water fell into the waiting aqueduct, forming a river in the air that flowed toward the unsuspecting villagers.

“We should go and watch this,” Eva said. “I’d love to see Arthur’s face when the first water starts pouring into the village.”

“No,” Will said, stretching out on the ramp, quietly sending out Energy to warm and energize the tired crew of Traders. “Let them come to us.” It was time to turn the power struggle tables on Arthur.

Arthur Lowell stood before the community. “Though it pains me to say this, I fear that we may need to consider removing our newest member, one Will Stark, from these walls. While I fully recognize his reported contributions on the recent profitable Trading missions, disasters such as this Wheel of Water scheme will only set us back from achieving our goals: developing wealth and developing the

abilities observed by our Travelers. Therefore, I would like to propose that Will Stark be expelled—”

A torrent of water fell on Arthur, a downpour that drenched the man instantly. Spluttering, he moved from his spot, looking up to see where the water had come from. He saw only the edge of the aqueduct system leading out to the Ealdor River, to that accursed Wheel. His frown at the shock of being doused with cold water was quickly replaced by one of surprise, as realization spread to his face.

“They got it to work,” he whispered. “I don’t believe it. They got it to work.”

The community was stunned for a moment, and then shouts of joy rose from the crowd. There were calls for Arthur to unlock the gate from the inside, which he did despite the impending twilight, and the men and women raced toward the Ealdor River. They approached to find the six Traders sitting on the two ramps, watching the setting sun, while the giant Wheel turned without pause, dumping bucket after bucket of river water into the waiting trough. The crowd burst into applause, cheering wildly. Arthur stared at Will, and Will wasn’t certain if the look was one of admiration or hatred. Knowing Arthur, it was a combination. For Arthur knew he’d lost this round.

“We seem not to have a place to sleep tonight, or a place to get something warm to eat,” Will called out, his voice carrying over the crowd. “Do any of you know a place we could stay?” He dropped a slotted piece of wood into the end of the aqueduct, and the water dumped by the Wheel splashed against this shield, falling harmlessly to the dock below and preventing the flooding of the village until they finished the interior water ducts.

Laughter broke out amidst the cheers, and the community came to carry Will Stark, their hero, and his team back to the community on their shoulders. Will was only aware of one thing, however. He could sense the pride and admiration emanating with intense force from a soon-to-be seventeen-year-old girl, and an emotion he hadn’t noticed from her before.

Love.

His relationship with Elizabeth was certainly going to become complicated before long.

TRAVELER

They celebrated that night. Everyone chipped in a copper and the brewers cracked open two kegs of beer; the bakers lit their ovens and made cakes, and—much to Will's surprise—Matilda sang a number of songs he'd never heard before, in a voice both beautiful and mesmerizing. When he complimented her later, she told him that her upbringing as the daughter of a noble required her to learn to sing, and it was one of the few mandates of her life she'd truly enjoyed.

As November opened, the cold intensified, and Will experienced his first snowfall in the wilds of northern England. The cold was significant enough that the villagers elected to postpone the construction of the additional water ducts until the spring, when they could spend greater time outdoors working without getting frostbite. That didn't prevent them from discussing their plans in that regard, however.

As their initial water run demonstrated, they first needed a mechanism to return any unused water to one of the rivers, lest the flowing water saturate the ground and possibly flood their village. They settled upon a small stream that ran through the forest and emptied into the Halwende, downriver from their standard bathing spot. The water levels and flowing speed, even when the waters weren't filled with chunks of ice, wasn't sufficient to propel a water wheel or supply sufficient water to the community, and as such was best used as a drainage ditch. Will wondered how many environmental violations they'd be cited for in his birth era, for they very openly intended to use the drainage system to remove from the village wastes from their trades and their bodies. He made a mental note to figure out how best to break down those products as they traveled to the stream via the secondary aqueduct system they'd construct.

They decided to build the drainage system exit point nearest the gate, next to the stables. It was a simple decision for a practical reason. Nobody wanted what would one day be called a sewage system running near their rooms, and thus, the space nearest the large stables was the only option. Fortunately, they'd elected to run the inflow aqueduct into the village over the top of the stables, and thus they'd be able to run all or a portion of the water inflow directly into the drainage system. They planned to run this primary drainage duct system over the top of the stable doors to prevent blocking access to the animals housed inside.

The final step in the initial phase of construction they'd start in the spring involved getting the water to the shops. The water duct system would have a much lower rate of descent than the system bringing water into the village; the ducts would loop around and flow directly back to the drainage system. They discussed additional expansion of the duct system to run water directly to each person's room, but decided that it was simply too strange to consider seriously. Who would want water flowing into their room all hours of the day and night?

Will could only smile at the memory of his twenty-first century home, with multiple water taps indoors and out, and wonder how the villagers would react to such a design. Then he remembered that two of them would join him in living long enough to see that strangeness become commonplace. It frightened him anew to think that he'd live long enough to see his own birth, and gave him headaches at the same time.

The winter brought fewer Trading runs for Eva's team, and they spent their time helping to chop firewood from the forests. Indoor fireplaces weren't in use at this time, and as such they'd fire up the ovens used for cooking and the blazes used to heat metal, and they'd all huddle around for warmth for much of the day. The snow didn't help, as it kept them quite cold and damp, and Will wondered if they could somehow replicate the concept of central heat to help them lose the snow and warm the rooms during the frigid months. He was glad he'd been advised by Eva to purchase warm coats, boots, and blankets during their second Trade mission, for he'd likely find himself freezing to death. His Energy certainly helped, and he was typically one of those farthest from the central fires for that reason. Will even stayed farther away upon the return journeys from the daily baths; given the need to dry quickly and regain warmth, Arthur had them go to the river in groups of five. The trips weren't the social occasions they were in the warmer months; everyone ran to the river, cleaned themselves as quickly as they could, and ran back to the warm fires. Evenings were dreadful; darkness came early, and everyone huddled under piles of quilts and blankets to keep

warm. They were able to build small fires in their rooms on the dirt floor, which helped, but even with the small ventilation holes in the ceilings the smoke made sleeping difficult. On the windiest days, they all fastened wooden shutters over their windows to keep as much cold air out as possible. Will longed for his heavily insulated, temperature-controlled home in De Gray Estates.

Arthur, who'd noted Will's protective streak toward Elizabeth, ensured that the two were never part of the same morning group of five. Maynard, on the other hand, always accompanied Elizabeth, and passed leering grins at Will as they departed and returned each morning. Elizabeth's "work" continued throughout the winter, and the cold, by her own design, worsened the effects of each session. At least she had Traders there most days; they'd stand by the doors of the Schola as each day's "facilitator" arrived with the young woman and would join her inside. They endured the same trials Elizabeth endured, and Will noted with some satisfaction the looks of concern on the villagers' faces at seeing the suffering and pain extended to others. Perhaps they'd see Elizabeth's plan work, yet.

At long last, warmer weather returned, the snows melted, and the villagers were able to resume construction of the duct system. The extensions were far less a time burden than the construction of the original aqueduct, and the carpenters were able, with minimal assistance from Will, to complete an initial run that would direct water into the well. They finished the work two weeks later, and Will was sent to remove the blocking wood from the start of the aqueduct by the Wheel. By agreement, Will counted to one hundred, replaced the blockage, and returned to the village to see the results. He learned that the water from the river had filled the well quite extensively in the short period of time the water had run; in fact, taller members of the village were able to draw water with buckets without needing to use the rope system.

Many villagers said that the knowledge that the well could now never run dry was proof that the construction project was worthwhile.

The second phase was the creation of the drainage system, essential to allowing the Wheel to turn and supply water on a continual basis without the worry of flooding the village. They started once again at the endpoint—in this case, a stream only one hundred feet from the village gate—and started the first section of the drainage duct at the edge of the water, lying directly on the ground. When they reached the village wall near the gate, they were able to bore through the outer wall and feed a section of the aqueduct into the opening. They maintained the same upward angle, but with wider and deeper troughs, until they

reached the stable door frame and stopped. The last section had an end preventing water from flowing out the end in the unlikely event that the drainage water would flow backwards.

“Why not feed it directly up?” Joseph asked. “If we’d done that, we could connect it to the duct with the water flowing in.”

“We don’t want it to connect directly,” Will replied. “We’re going to make a duct system running off the inflow starting at that height and a somewhat modest angle, and allow the water to pour down into the lower trough like a waterfall, before it all flows out to the stream.”

Joseph frowned. “I don’t understand.”

“If the bakers wish to clean a dirty baking pan, they can hold the pan under the waterfall, and the water will clean it and carry the residue away. If someone wants to fill several buckets of water at once, they can do so quickly. And...” Will hesitated. “We can partition off the areas closest to the exit to serve as latrines.”

Joseph’s face wrinkled as he pondered this. Then his eyes widened. “The falling water would enable the... er, refuse, to more easily be washed away!”

Will grinned. “Exactly. We’ll keep that downstream from the place where we wash dishes or collect water, though.”

Joseph laughed.

The waterfall ducts proved somewhat challenging to construct, as they didn’t want all of the water coming out at once. Joseph’s team built a standard aqueduct section, and tapered the bottom away; it was widest at its highest point and narrowed into nothing as it reached the edge of the wide lower trough below. The carpenters built several poles, and the weavers created large tapestries to provide some degree of privacy for the latrine. They built a panel inserted into the incoming water aqueduct which controlled how much water went into the drainage system and how much would go elsewhere; elsewhere, at the moment, consisted solely of the segment used to refill the well.

On a cool April morning, the day after the Traders returned from another profitable trip, half of the villagers marched to the Wheel, a group which included Will and the Traders. Those remaining behind to watch the impact of the water flow included Arthur, Elizabeth, and Maynard. Joseph and the carpenters stayed behind as well; they’d need to watch for any sign of structural problems as the water coursed through the system. With little ceremony, Will climbed up the ramp on the shore-side dock and removed the water shield. The Wheel, as it had for so many months, continued turning as the turbulent waters

of the Ealdor River pushed the paddles, and bucket after bucket of fresh water was collected and dumped into the waiting aqueduct system. With the shield removed, Will and the others raced back to the village and entered the gate, watching in awe as the water from the river made its way over the protective walls and into the downspout, where it fell as a wide waterfall into the waiting trough below. The water continued flowing, and Will was one of a handful of villagers who trotted the length of the drainage system to watch the water reach the stream.

Aldus grinned. “That’s the most amazing thing I’ve ever seen. You’ve basically moved water from one river to another without anybody needing to do *anything*.” He laughed. “I can die happy, now, even if those mythical magical abilities Arthur keeps selling never appear. This is true magic, right here. Thank you for this, Will.”

Will chuckled. “We *all* did this, Aldus. Not one of us could have done it alone. Everybody chipped in, everybody believed.” He frowned. “Well, there was quite a bit of doubt when the Wheel went in the wrong way. If you’d told me back then, back when nearly everyone gave up, that we’d be watching this water from the Ealdor reach this stream... I’m not sure I would have believed you.”

Matilda smiled. “Will, I met with many dukes and earls and Barons, men who are supposed to be leaders. None of them... *none* of them... would have kept trying at that point. Oh, they might have beaten some slaves to get the job done, but it never would have happened.” When she realized what she’d said and saw Eva wince, she patted the older woman on the arm. “Sorry, Eva.”

Eva forced a smile. “You’ve done well, Will.” In his head, with her nascent telepathic abilities, she projected a warning. *Be careful. Arthur probably thinks you’re getting too popular.*

I won’t stop trying to help people due to his insecurities, Will replied. Aloud, he added, “Thanks, everyone. Let’s go eat.”

They walked back into the village, where a roar of applause greeted them.

Over the next several days, the community came to love the flowing water. They enjoyed the sound of the waterfall near the gate, and they especially enjoyed the fact that they’d eliminated the need for latrines. The metalworkers created sheets of metal, and they covered all of the former waste deposit sites with metal and a healthy coating of dirt. The smell, which Will had grown accustomed to after his arrival, all but disappeared.

The unlimited, easily accessible supply of water had a near-immediate

impact on the skilled workers. The metal workers were able to make longer and sharper blades, heating the metal to higher temperatures than ever before, because they could readily run to the waterfall to cool the entire lengths of metal. Prior to the running water, they'd focused on daggers and knives, needing to plunge the heated metal into the buckets so that it could cool and harden. They were able to make better tools for the carpenters, who in turn increased the speed of production and the level of quality of their crafts. The brewers were able to experiment with different combinations of grains and create ales and beers that were superior to any others of the time. Eva, Will, and the rest of the Traders were soon traveling with far greater frequency; often spending less than ten days in the village before overflowing Stores required them to travel again.

Will had little time to engage in Trade. He had consulted his diary during the winter, and was pleased that his children had elected to provide him with a list of herbs to treat most common illnesses, and he used this information to purchase a small supply of each. He also purchased a separate bag filled with the herbs, which he learned to identify by sight. He hadn't heard of most, save for a rather large quantity of poppy plant extract that he knew was called opium. The merchant selling it agreed to a price for a small quantity, and then decided—without any urging by Will—that she'd prefer to be rid of all of it. Will felt like an old school doctor because of the bag, which he kept stored in his room. The villagers were seldom sick, and as such he was rarely called upon to act in his role as a doctor. He was comforted to know that he was prepared if needed.

The Traders, for the most part, spent time between trips sharing information gathered in the towns, primarily relating to the types of goods and styles people wanted to buy, which enabled the workers of the various crafts to tailor goods for the various markets. The Traders were more inclined to visit towns again after the villagers created goods crafted especially for the tastes of such a town. Profitability soared again. Over the course of the year, their wealth continued to grow. It was likely that each of them had amassed enough gold and silver to rival many of the dukes, earls, Barons, and other nobility of the time.

Will oversaw the construction of the planned extension of the aqueduct system to reach into the Shop areas, which would further increase productivity. They wouldn't be able to repeat the solution used by the stables to enable a constant flow of water. Getting the water low enough to be usable would see a drainage aqueduct cutting off foot traffic between the Shops and stables. They needed to keep the duct system up in the air, above their heads, that enabled them to access water only as needed. "If only we could cut a hole in the

overhead duct that we could close as soon as we had the water we needed!” fumed Winter, a woman who worked in the Metal Shop.

That gave Will an idea. He explained to Winter that she would need to create a thin sliver of metal wrapped into a coil. The coil could expand when pulled with sufficient force, but would naturally contract back to its original size. They stopped the flow of water to the Shop aqueduct while the carpenters mounted ladders and cut a small, circular section on one of the sides, near the bottom of the duct. They then attached one end of the coil—which Will told them was called a spring—to the main section of the aqueduct, and attached the other end to the small door. Winter also created two small pieces of metal to use as a hinge. They coated the entire door in sap to waterproof it, and attached a length of rope to the door. Tests were successful; the door would open when pulled, and the spring would pull it closed when the rope was released. Will had recommended the side of the aqueduct for the door to avoid the possibility that the weight of the water might keep the door open, in spite of the spring. They put a trough beneath the door to catch the water collected, and tested everything before the water was allowed to run to the Shops on a continuous basis. Over successive weeks, they created hinged openings with springs near each Shop.

They spent time after the final harvest of grains in the fall using a similar technology to build a spur from the main aqueduct to the fields lying to the south of the aqueduct, and to the west of the village. The hinged door fed water into an aqueduct that carried water directly to the fields, which would enable the farmers to keep their crops watered even during conditions of drought.

Will asked for a few hinges and springs, and the metal workers happily complied. Will paid them a silver coin for their efforts. It was a sample of the innovation the village had produced, and he looked at the products with a sense of pride.

The community thrived financially, enjoying a huge abundance of grains grown in their fields. Their products developed a reputation; towns no longer shunned the skilled Traders, they welcomed them and the quality goods they brought. They added additional Shops and reached the point, as winter approached, that they were essentially self-sufficient. The Traders purchased only luxury items in the form of fine wines, silks, shoes, boots, and cloaks. During the winter, Will and Eva taught classes in the Schola—with the doors open—teaching the villagers to read and write. As spring dawned, the Traders received many requests to look for the rare book that might be available for sale.

For all of their success, however, one man was suffering. Arthur found fewer

and fewer people who still believed his tales of people with incredible abilities. His stories were widely dismissed, and were seen as myths perpetuated by a man desperate to believe in something that simply didn't exist. He was the only one remaining from that first trip who had seen the reputed abilities. Genevieve was dead, and Eva's brother had left over a decade ago and never returned. The other Travelers, outside a man named Roland, had returned long before Will arrived, returning without success. All had taken up new trades, and were among the most vocal doubters of Arthur's stories. Roland had departed three years before Will's arrival and, like Eva's brother, was presumed dead.

With the loss of belief in Arthur's vision, and the prosperity achieved through the innovations Will suggested, few bothered to pay Arthur a coin to hire Elizabeth to do "research." Instead, she was occasionally hired to clean rooms or perform other menial labor. As before, her pay went to Arthur. The few true believers left still eagerly tried new combinations of ingredients on Elizabeth; as always, the testing produced no results. She celebrated her eighteenth birthday without fanfare. Will gritted his teeth and paid Arthur five gold coins to ensure no one else scheduled her on that day and teleported her outside the walls to the cave, where she sat, brooding. He sat and watched her, not certain how to proceed. Her mood had been growing darker over the past few months, and though he suspected the reasons, he waited to let her speak.

After what seemed like hours, she finally turned to him. "Why are you avoiding me?"

Will sighed. He'd spent little time with her in any fashion, especially in this setting. She surely knew why, but that didn't mean she had to like it. "I've not been avoiding you, Elizabeth. I've been Trading in other towns and cities, and working to build all of the water systems. It's not a case of avoidance. It's a case of my being prevented from being around you."

She glared at him. "Are you afraid of him?"

"Who? Your father?"

She snorted. "No. Maynard."

Oh. "I am always worried about what he might try to do to you. I also recognize that the more I make my concerns in that regard clear, the more likely he is to act at Arthur's direction. They suspect there's a bond, though they most certainly have no idea as to the nature of that bond. And they see me as the ultimate threat to their control of this community." He opened his mouth to speak to what Arthur and Maynard might do to pressure him to alter his behavior and weaken his role in the village, but knew that would only further dampen her

mood.

She knew it anyway. “He doesn’t see me as anything other than a prop to use to grow his own power. I know that. If you’re the threat, and you care for me, then they’ll threaten or actually hurt me to subvert you.” Her mood darkened further. “Is it even possible for me to succeed in changing him?” Elizabeth sighed deeply. “I doubt he’d change even if I died, even if I died because of his need to control.”

“Don’t say that!” Will snapped. “Do *not* speak of dying!”

“Nobody would care but you and Eva, Will,” Elizabeth said.

And he knew she was right. “You need to leave, Elizabeth. *Before* they try to hurt you.”

She shook her head. “This is my home, awful though it might be. Until he changes, or until one of us dies... I’m staying.” She glanced at him. “Don’t force me to do anything else.”

He nodded. “Happy birthday, Elizabeth.”

She said nothing.

Will spoke to Arthur that evening. “She’s eighteen now, Arthur. She needs to learn a trade of some kind. Every trade here is looking for more people. Let everyone know that she’s able to work with them. She can sow seeds, she can forage, she can—”

“She is not to work outside these walls. She can work with the animals.”

Elizabeth, thankfully, took to caring for the animals with the closest thing to enthusiasm that she could muster. Will, who watched her over the next several weeks as she cared for the cows and goats that supplied their milk and the chickens that supplied their eggs, saw an occasional smile, which quickly faded to a gloomy frown.

Everything changed in an instant, as two words echoed from outside the gates.

“Roland’s back!”

The cry came from one of the foragers, who rushed through the gates to alert the rest of the villagers. Will, who had been talking to Winter about building metal ducts they could run under the ground, glanced up. He saw Elizabeth look up as well; turning her attention from the fresh straw she had been carrying into the stables.

Roland entered the village, carrying with him a large bag constructed of some type of animal hide. His face was joyful, and Will watched him look around the village in amazement, taking in the elaborate aqueduct system and

the coursing waterfall near the stables. As Arthur and the others gathered around, he began to share his story.

“I traveled west this time, heading for the coast, and then journeyed north until I reached a port city. I had previously only traveled south along the coast, and thus spent much of my time along the great sea in the lands once conquered by the Romans. As many of you know, the other Travelers and I have always been treated with great suspicion. We’ve been told thousands of things *might* help one develop the abilities we’ve seen, or that might do nothing, or that might make you desperately ill or even leave you dead. But we’ve never been told with certainty that a very specific item *does* work and *will* work.”

He took a deep breath. “But this time, that changed. I was told of a specific root. And this time, I resolved not to leave the place I found, there to the north, until I had watched the practitioners consume it consistently over many months. I would not simply purchase a large number of items and hope we might figure out the secret on our own. Once I’d found it to be safe, once I’d watched the people actually consume this substance themselves without harmful side effects, I began taking the root myself, ground into a powder and downed with water. My friends, it works. Over these past two years, I have taken this root daily, and I return to you as one now able to read the thoughts and emotions of others.”

Bedlam erupted, as the fifty adults all shouted in unison, demanding to know the answer. Will, suspicious and concerned, reached out to Roland with Energy, and found to his surprise that the man did have some very rudimentary Energy capabilities, enough to perform Telepathy and Empathy, but no more.

It seems he’s telling the truth, he projected to Elizabeth.

She didn’t respond, and he caught sight of her face. She seemed paler than usual. Elizabeth was worried, and he could just pick up a flicker of a thought from her. *He knows.*

Roland held up his hand. “We may have been told of this root before, and it’s even possible we’ve tested it. But unless things have changed during my absence, we have not tested any plant or root or berry or any other substance over an extended time period. This is the key. The development is subtle, and takes patience and perseverance before results come, but they do come.” Roland reached into a bag at his feet, and pulled out a craggy mass of plant roots. “The secret key to the abilities we’ve sought for so long. I give you... the root of the zirple plant!”

The crowd pressed in on him, everyone eager to get their hands on the zirple root. “I have gotten seeds as well. We can grow and tend these plants to ensure

we have a constant supply; they do require a damp environment to grow, and so our improved water situation will help in that regard.” Roland handed out roots to each member of the community, starting with Arthur. Will glanced at Elizabeth, and she slowly turned to face him. He needed no Empathy skill, whether formed by the root of a zirple plant or the nano-based concoction fed to him in the distant future, to know what her face meant.

This plant was indeed part of the concoction she’d been using for over a decade to develop her abilities. And with this revelation from Roland the Traveler, her usefulness to her father, and this community, was coming to an end. Though her will to live had long been fading due to the maltreatment by her father, she still held out some hope that her situation would improve. She’d long feared that a discovery of this nature would result in Arthur discarding her, for she’d no longer be of any use to him.

The look on her face said she doubted his severing of ties with his only daughter would be pleasant—or far off.

FEAR

Autumn dawned, and the villagers banded together as they had done while building the Wheel, this time focusing their collective efforts on getting an initial zirple crop planted and harvested before the grounds froze with the onset of winter. They wouldn't be able to grow enough to both last the winter and provide enough for everyone to get the required dosage. That meant that they'd need to ration the usage of the root in some fashion.

They had established upon Roland's return that the initial roots supplied to each villager were a gift, his thanks for the funds each of them had provided prior to the Traveler's departure. Will learned that Travelers were provided basic funds by each member of the community to enable them to make the initial leg of their journey; thereafter, they were on their own, and needed to earn money to survive and purchase anything they found that might progress them toward their goals. In the initial journey taken by Arthur, Genevieve, and Eva's brother, the product had been freely given since there was so much that needed to be tested. As such, the products had been considered community property, and were stored in the Schola. They'd agreed after that first journey that, since Travelers had to earn the money to survive as well as purchase anything they brought back, that such purchases were the property of the Traveler until they agreed to sell or give away what they'd brought back. Most Travelers accepted large payments collected from all of the villagers for the right to use or test what they'd brought back.

That, of course, added to the anger at the lack of progress on unlocking the secret combination of supposedly magical substances, and thus unlocking the mythical abilities extolled by Arthur. People felt they'd gotten no payback for their initial investment in the Travelers, or for the group purchase of the

substances they'd been led to believe would develop such abilities. That anger was directed at the child who'd had no part in deciding to send Travelers out into the world, or to fund the purchase of the various foodstuffs she'd be forced against her will to test for everyone. Arthur, who never owned any products sold back to the community, nevertheless collected a steady income, which had surged historically with each Traveler's return.

Now, however, a Traveler had returned with proof such abilities existed. He'd read the minds of any who tried to trick him, and all had come away convinced, for the first time in years, their patience was to be rewarded. They no longer needed to pay to have Elizabeth try out various combinations and concoctions, without success. Roland had been given the secret, tested it, and brought the product back. The products in the Schola were rendered worthless, as was Elizabeth's unique "service" to the community.

Roland was thus in a unique position of power upon his return and demonstration, and that became evident as they determined how to distribute the harvested roots. Technically, he'd granted the villagers the right to grow the crop using his seeds, but the output of those seeds still belonged to Roland. There were large offers of gold for the rights to the roots, seeds, and byproducts, but in the end, Arthur's offer was the one Roland accepted.

Roland would get his necessary daily allocation of the root. Arthur would handle the distribution of any remaining product, which he would sell at his discretion. Roland would receive a portion of the money Arthur received for as long as the two men elected to maintain the agreement.

It solved several problems for Arthur. He would still be seen as the one who enabled the villagers to develop the mythical abilities he'd long proclaimed; he'd have a steady source of income; and he'd be in a position of power as the distributor of the root. The scarcity through the autumn and winter worked to his advantage. Will suspected that the scarcity would continue regardless of how much the farmers actually harvested.

Rather than set a price, or even allow the highest bidder to purchase the root on a daily basis, Arthur established a form of lottery, with a chance at getting drawn selling for one copper coin. Arthur noted that he would draw unique names each day until the product allocated for the day was exhausted. The remaining chances would be burned, and Arthur would repeat the process again the next day. One of the carpenters, a man named Wright, benefitted from this system, for it was Wright who'd figured out the process to create the thin slivers of wood Eva used to track everything related to Trading missions. Arthur would

use the same product to track the zirple chances purchased each day. Lottery participants would write their name on a separate sliver for each chance purchased. Given the predictable popularity, Wright made a small fortune selling the product to Arthur at the rate of a copper per ten slivers. It became his full time job.

It was no surprise to Will when Arthur's daily zirple supply didn't include enough for everyone; if there was an ample supply each day, people would only buy one chance, or question why they needed a lottery at all. The scarcity drove up the purchases of lottery chances, as people tried to ensure they were one of the ones winning each drawing by purchasing multiple chances. Of course, it didn't escape Will's notice that the winners rarely included any Traders, but Maynard won each day. Three people never won a daily supply of zirple: Eva, Will, and Elizabeth. They weren't concerned, as all three had already developed Energy skills, and yet as the results of the lottery became noticed, the three became minor outcasts. Clearly, it was reasoned, a greater power had deemed them unworthy. Will found this amusing; the so-called greater power was Arthur removing the chances bearing their names, and likely removing all but one chance for each of the other Traders, before conducting the drawing. Arthur had a box he used to store the chances which he kept in his room overnight before conducting the drawings each morning. Will considered teleporting out all of the chances and sending back only those with Trader names, but decided that might raise some suspicions about hidden abilities or, at a minimum, potential thieves in the village. He suspected thieves wouldn't receive as punishment a mere slap on the wrist.

Elizabeth found herself hired—directly, now—by some lottery winners to prepare the daily zirple root mix, as the process was both complex and time-consuming. She'd spend most days at the newly constructed Zirple Store, working directly with Roland. The root had to be boiled to raise the temperature, charred on the outside, and then ground down by hand with a specific type of rock into a fine powder. The resulting measure, roughly the equivalent to two tablespoons, would be taken mixed with water. The taste was highly unpleasant, though Elizabeth confided that zirple wasn't close to being the worst-tasting substance she'd tried. In the early days, Elizabeth spent much of her time after delivering the mixture, caring for nauseated victims. None of the honored winners complained much, however, for their success in developing their "magic" was assured.

None thanked Elizabeth for her dozen years of testing everything else

without any guarantee of success, or even survival. She instead received a great deal of scorn from daily lottery losers who noted that if she'd found the zirple root earlier, they'd have enough for everyone by now. In their frustration of falling behind in the race to develop the enhanced abilities, more than one lottery loser physically lashed out at Elizabeth.

Will made certain that no one used that outlet for their frustration more than once.

Elizabeth's gloom intensified, for the current state of affairs showed that her plan, her efforts to get her neighbors to see the errors of their ways, had failed. They had achieved what they sought: the answer to the question of how to develop these mythical abilities, and none of them had paid any price, save for a decade-long delay in learning the correct process, and the forfeiture of some of their money. While they'd waited, they hadn't suffered; they'd gained their respective freedom, developed advanced skills in various crafts and professions, and without exception had amassed appreciable wealth. In the interim, those former slaves and servants had enslaved one of their own; those forced to perform deadly and dangerous tasks took delight in inflicting the same on the weakest among them; those horrified years ago at their own poor health and mortality ignored how their actions lessened both the health and life span of their youngest neighbor. And those attitudes were shaped and encouraged by Elizabeth's own father. To Arthur, all action revolved around consolidating his own power over this neighborhood and growing his own wealth. Elizabeth had served her purpose; Roland and his zirple were his source of power now.

Elizabeth knew what that meant for her, as her abilities, like Will's, enabled her to read the man's true beliefs and feelings as it related to her, feelings he allowed greater expression now that he had his financial and power apparatus back in place. What both Will and Elizabeth found in the man's thoughts and feelings suggested that Elizabeth's fears all along were well justified. Arthur's sole regret in relation to his daughter was that he'd not attempted to marry Elizabeth off in exchange for a large dowry, preferably to a potentially powerful ally like Maynard. There was no thought to her suffering, no regret for the pain he'd enabled in her life, no concern about the complete lack of love and paternal instinct he'd directed her way. Arthur had determined that the men of the community did not see Elizabeth as marriage potential, but as a servant girl. His chance to derive a final financial return on her was gone, and as such he gave her no further thought.

Will was sickened. Elizabeth was devastated. She'd wanted her father to

reform, to show the love a father should show to his little girl, to act as her protector. Instead, he'd been revealed as a monster, a man incapable of the love and self-sacrifice required of those serving as parents. Will was thankful that she'd moved to her own room, for seeing Arthur served only to further depress her already shattered morale.

Her only consolation was that Arthur relented on his rule forbidding her to go outside the walls of the community for anything other than community-wide activities such as the morning bath in the calm waters of the Halwende River. With demands for her hired help diminishing, she had sufficient time and need to choose a profession. None of the professions seemed interested in bringing her on board, except for the Traders, the group that had taken an interest in Elizabeth when no one else bothered.

Arthur laughed at Eva's suggestion that Elizabeth become a Trader, a suggestion made as the spring months beckoned and the snows melted away. "She's not capable of Trading, Eva. She stammers and looks at the ground and generally speaking makes a public fool of herself. Bringing her along is likely to ruin the profit you Traders make, and worse, the profits for the rest of us."

"She will learn, and I dare say she'll make a fine Trader in short order," Eva replied. She narrowed her eyes at Arthur. "It will give her the opportunity to make her own money as well."

Arthur snorted. "That idiot girl will likely spend it on trinkets and trivial items, wasting what little money she will actually earn." He waved them off. "You've been warned. If you wish to continue with this foolish fantasy, go ahead and waste your time with her. As for me, I'm waiting to experience these new abilities from my zirple consumption."

Will arched an eyebrow. "How long have you taken it?"

"Three months. I can feel something changing already. It won't be long now." He rubbed his hands together, his grin like an ice pick to the heart. Will attempted to avoid laughter. It was true—Arthur had developed a trace of Energy. But if it had taken three months to reach that trace, he wouldn't be able to cause damage for decades, assuming he lived that long.

Which, sadly, he most certainly would.

Will nodded. He'd declined to enter the lottery for the zirple, with the excuse that he wanted longer-term residents of the community to have the first chance at the benefits they'd so long coveted. Speaking of which...

"I'm assuming that Elizabeth, as well as Eva and the Traders, will start to receive their allotment of zirple soon? The first crops are being harvested now,

and there should be sufficient quantities for everyone.”

Arthur looked at him, and Will knew the answer before it was given. “Crop harvests are erratic and spoilage often occurs. As such, we will continue to have drawings for daily rations until such time as we are able to predict with confidence the size of the usable crop. The best I can tell you, Will, is that their allocations will depend on when their names are drawn and the success of the crop.” His thoughts betrayed what Will already suspected, that the drawing had been rigged. Arthur and Roland, of course, always received their share, and Maynard heard his name called every day. The Traders remained highly infrequent winners in the lottery, and both Eleanor and Gerald had been heard grumbling about switching professions as a result. It was lost on no one that the drawings were rigged. Given that most villagers won on a daily basis now, however, they had no reason to complain about the obvious maltreatment of their neighbors.

Though the numbers were certainly unequal, the village was clearly dividing itself. A small handful were intent on developing their professional skills and creating higher quality and greater quantities of goods for sale and trading those at the greatest possible profit. With the arrival of Roland and his alliance with Arthur, the greater portion of the community was now riveted by the possibilities the zirple root provided, and as such they once again followed Arthur’s lead without question. They knew the lottery was, to some degree, a charade, and that any that Arthur favored—like Maynard—would win, regardless of the number of chances they purchased. Yet they participated and curried his favor to ensure that they’d hear their name called each day. Arthur’s licensing deal with Roland had been a stroke of genius.

Will shrugged. “I’m taking a walk outside the walls, then, and seeing how the harvest is progressing. Elizabeth, would you like to join me?” He walked away, and was aware that Elizabeth hurried after him a few seconds later. The two headed for the gate, and Will could feel Arthur’s eyes boring into him as the man’s thoughts hammered in to Will’s mind. Arthur was suspicious of Will’s motives and successes in Trading, and was jealous of his ability to rally the community to projects like the Wheel in a way Arthur never could.

Let him wallow in his unhealthy emotions, Will thought.

Elizabeth, as was her custom, walked with her head down, avoiding eye contact and conversation. Previously, it was something she did to ensure that no one detected her incredible health and vitality by recognizing those “symptoms” through the glow of her eyes. She’d avoided questions that way, questions as to

how she'd achieved such health if she was suffering through so many experiments. Today, she walked with her head lowered as the reality of her existence weighed her down.

They walked beyond the path to the farms, and Elizabeth didn't even question why they weren't heading toward the zirple fields. She'd known they'd head to the cave, a place they'd not visited in some time. They walked away from the gate, and when they both sensed there were no eyes spying on them, Will took her arm and teleported the two of them into the cave.

She sat down on the stone floor and cried.

Will sat next to her and put an arm over her shoulder, and she leaned in, her tears wetting his shirt. He understood that she needed to grieve, that in so many ways she was now an orphan, losing her mother to a violent death, and her father to his megalomania. Though she'd soon turn nineteen years old, and possessed savvy survival instincts and intelligence, she was in many ways still a child, denied the nurturing so desperately needed as she'd aged from an innocent and happy little girl into a pawn during the always-difficult teen years. She was only too aware that her only living parent believed her existence only mattered when it furthered the man's own dreams, without regard to hers.

When the tears ended, there was silence in the room. And then, to Will's surprise, Elizabeth began to laugh. It wasn't a joyful laugh, meant to express happiness or humor, but a laugh of realization, that everything was not what it seemed.

"What is it?" Will asked, baffled.

She sat up, moving away from contact, and turned to look at him. There was a faint flicker of the fire he'd seen in her eyes when he'd first arrived, enough to let him know that she wasn't completely defeated. "It won't work."

"What won't work?"

"The zirple."

Will paused. "But Roland said—"

"Roland is wrong. Zirple is the *second* step in the process, an important one, but it's useless without that first step. He likely went through the first step and didn't know it, or thought he'd gotten very sick when in reality he was suffering through the first step in the process. Or maybe, just maybe, zirple works if you use it long enough, years and years. Zirple was one of the first things they forced on me when I was very young, and it did nothing for me, or to me. Then I did that first step, and after that, the zirple worked well, and very quickly. My father has been at it for three months and barely has enough Energy to warm his

fingertips. It shouldn't take that long. The others have gotten it less frequently than he has, and as such they'll take even longer to see anything happen."

"So there's another, secret ingredient?" Will asked.

She nodded, then frowned. "I don't want anybody to find out, though. I'd tell you, but..."

"But I don't need it." Will thought for a moment. "There's no need to tell me; I don't want to ever have the chance to let slip the name. I imagine it's still in the Schola?"

She gave him a vague look.

"Maybe you should start moving it to your room. The same way you've moved the money from Arthur's room. When we come here the next time, bring it with you and leave it here. Or let me know—in my head—where it is in your room and I'll move it here. Just make sure that you only do a little at a time."

Elizabeth nodded again, smiling, and Will understood. She'd already done that.

"I told Eva the secret ingredient, but not about the zirple. And now that makes me worried."

"How so?"

"What if Father *doesn't* prevent her from getting the zirple? She's used the first ingredient. If she takes the zirple now, her Energy will develop rapidly. She might even do some... you know... *magic* without meaning to, and people will see. My father... he killed my mother for just *talking* about hiding things from him. If Eva's the only one to develop any noticeable skills, more quickly than anyone else, after she's been denied zirple for so long... I'm afraid something similar will happen to her." Her eyes filled with tears. "I'm worried about something bad happening to Eva. That means I'm not like him, right?"

He put a comforting hand on her shoulder. "Perhaps it means you're like your mother."

Her eyes glazed over, and it was apparent that she was reliving memories made with the woman called Genevieve, Arthur's wife and Elizabeth's mother, a woman who had died at the hands of a violent mob before Will had arrived.

"She was the only one who always cared about me," Elizabeth whispered. "Others did eventually, people like Eva, but Mother always did. She hated what Father was doing to me, but when she tried to talk him out of it he got... scary. She was afraid of being hurt herself, and that's when all the time in the Schola started. I wanted to be angry with her, but she was so angry with herself that I couldn't bring myself to add to it. So she did the only thing she thought she

could... she went with me, and experienced everything I experienced. I didn't like to hear her scream when some of those foods would burn so badly and make us sick. I didn't want her to be hurt, too. But it helped to know that at least one person cared, and at least one person knew how I felt. I wished she had found a way, and the courage, to make it stop at the beginning, but when she couldn't do that, she did the next best thing. It was her form of courage."

She took a deep breath. "We figured out what happened at the same time. It was an especially nasty bit of food, a berry that smelled worse than manure, and tasted like... I've never tasted anything so awful. She was ill that day, and it was the only time she didn't go with me, but she took it two days later. It was the same experience for both of us, though. When we swallowed it, it started burning us up from the inside out."

Will blinked. This sounded like what he'd gone through with the Purge.

"Neither one of us could move, so people had to carry us back to our room. Father only said that he hoped I wouldn't be out of work for long. He didn't care that we were suffering, especially not Mother." She glanced at Will, her eyes dead of emotion. "I guess that's not a surprise to you, is it?" She sighed. "When we woke the next day, our bodies were trying everything to get that berry out of us. It was awful. We were so weak we couldn't even make it outside to go the river that morning, and neither of us ate or drank anything. By the next morning, we were well enough to go to the river, but still pretty tired.

"A few days later, somebody had me try the zirple again. This time, it didn't taste so bad. I acted like it did, because I was so used to everyone picking the most foul things that I just assumed I'd gag on the taste. But it wasn't bad. Mother ate it as well, and she kept her face without expression.

"The next morning, we found we could read each other's thoughts. Not well, but enough. We realized that the *combination* was needed: the berry first, and then the zirple. Each time we'd go to the Schola, one of us would grab some of each, not enough for anyone to notice. The Travelers had brought home a large amount of the berry, so nobody noticed that it was disappearing slowly. We ran out of the zirple after a year or so, but the initial combination was enough that we didn't really need to take it anymore. Nobody noticed we were getting stronger, because we were very good at making sure we looked worse and worse as we felt better and better."

Her eyes ceased blinking, and the pure terror on her face was unavoidable. "After a typical day of work a few months before you showed up, Mother and I were talking about the horrible tastes and smells, and joking about how nobody

in our community would have the persistence or courage to actually eat any of those things even if they did work. And Mother said that whatever we might figure out, we should never share with Father or any of the others, because they were unworthy to develop the skills described by the Travelers and Father. Father walked by our window at the moment she said that, and heard her: that directive to never reveal anything I might learn. That's why he did it. Father burst into our room—my room now—and hauled Mother into the courtyard and after his shouting drew a crowd, Father told everyone that she'd told me to never share anything I learned with anyone. He said that was against what we stood for. He said other things, but in the end, what matters is that he got the crowd so angry that they beat her until she stopped breathing.”

Elizabeth looked at him. “She could have saved herself. She could have told them that we *had* figured it out, because at that moment they suspected nothing, thought she was speaking about a potential situation in the future. If she told them then what she knew, she would have lived. She didn't. She had long since figured out what Father is truly like, something I took too long to understand. She knew that allowing him to have that information would be disastrous. And so she said nothing, and I lost my mother through her final attempt to hide my secret and save my worthless life.”

She looked at the ground, took a deep breath, and continued. “I told Eva because I needed to believe in someone, and I needed someone to know who and what I truly am. She's said nothing to anyone; well, she's probably talked to you, but only because you figured everything out immediately. She's the closest thing to a friend and a parent I've had since Mother died. And I don't want her to suffer the fate Mother suffered. That's why I want to be a Trader, Will. I need to watch out for her, and be with her. She's the only one who knows everything. If she goes... I don't know that I'd care to live. It will mean that all of the decent people in this community besides you are gone, and Father will have won.

“Father won't let me die, but he will not spare others the same fate. If Eva... shows, or if I do... his rage will mean the death of someone. He'll not let it be me, though. We need to keep Eva away from him as much as possible if she starts taking zirple, or she'll be dead soon after.”

FINALE

Arthur moved to consolidate his power by working to ensure that the two people most likely to disrupt it had their credibility destroyed.

The man spoke on many occasions about the fact that the Traders had no marketable skills, and relied upon the talents of others to earn their money. If the metal smiths and carpenters and weavers did not create any products, the Traders would have nothing to trade. Yet the skilled workers could, in fact, trade themselves and retain all of their profits, not just a portion. Why share anything with the Traders, Arthur asked, when all of the profits rightly belonged to those who created the products? With their growing zirple-enhanced skills, they'd be able to trade at a similar profit level; the Traders, meanwhile, who averaged winning the zirple lottery about once per month per Trader, would fall behind and have to beg others to hire them to perform chores to earn an income. If Eva and Will, potential threats to Arthur's leadership role in the community, were begging for jobs, it would effectively destroy any such illusions of supplanting Arthur.

Long forgotten was the first Trading mission Will participated in nearly three years earlier, where they'd generated massive financial gains for everyone, and the successive Trading missions in which ever-greater profits were derived. With the notable exception of Elizabeth and the Traders, everyone was dressed in finery and owned many changes of clothing and shoes, boots, silks, comfortable pillows and warm blankets for their rooms. A few had even purchased one of the few handmade books available in the era. They were able to read only after Will and Eva had taught them. When Will thought back to the wide availability of electronic books in his time, or even those which might be on his paper scroll computer, he could only marvel at the technological differences in the eras.

Such advances were far from his mind now, as were the joyous exultations greeting their return from Trading missions, for the villagers considered them a lower class of citizen now. The zirple was having its impact, slow though it might be, and with each passing day new members of the community boasted of feeling a small, strange warmth in their bodies, and of being better able to sense the thoughts and emotions of their neighbors. It had taken at least six months of zirple usage to achieve this development, however, and Will was able to tell that they were only able to read general intent, not precise thoughts.

Still, it was enough development to most of them that they felt emboldened to adopt an air of superiority toward the “less skilled” among them. They’d avoid looking at the Traders, for they believed the Traders to be their inferiors now, chosen by nature through Arthur’s lottery to fall behind in developing these new abilities. Will thought that perhaps, in light of the wealth the Traders had brought to all of them, that there might be some compassion—and learned that the thought that his neighbors possessed compassion was a terrible mistake. Arthur had by now convinced everyone that the Traders had been skimming profits for years, taking advantage of the illiteracy of the majority of residents to claim lower profits in their trades than they’d actually earned. He noted the ease with which all of them had paid for Elizabeth’s services—and in the case of the newcomer Will, above-market rates at that—despite not having any product of their own to sell. Arthur ignored the fact that the Traders did not spend their earnings on ostentation or excess, and were thus able to afford the things they valued. Clearly, they must be stealing earnings from the truly talented in the community.

It was no surprise to Will, then, that he, Eva, and the other Traders were jeered at as they gathered with the rest of the villagers and prepared to head out for a Trading mission. Arthur, as always, felt the need to address the entire community first, adding to the notion that nothing of any importance happened in this community without his blessing. “This, my friends, will be the last time a dedicated team of Traders will represent this community in neighboring towns and cities, siphoning from the hands of our skilled craftsmen profits that should rightfully go to those who make the goods, rather than those who merely deliver them.” Cheers rang out, and Will didn’t need his empathic skills to know that his neighbors were eyeing him with suspicion, certain that Will and the others had somehow hidden money from them, money rightfully theirs. Arthur turned to the Traders, who stood before the community in threadbare clothing, looking decidedly less excited about this Trading mission than any other since Will’s

arrival. Will allowed his face to reflect an air of bafflement at Arthur's statements. "We wish you well, our decidedly untalented brethren, you who eat our food and avail yourselves of our hospitality. May you find friendly faces in the town you elect to visit, and may you keep excellent records of all transactions. I truly hope that you don't find your numbers in disagreement with ours."

After suppressing the desire to levitate everyone in the community in the air twenty feet—and then let them fall—Will felt a chill as Arthur's thoughts projected his way. Will, in turn, projected the plan he'd seen to Eva, and then to Elizabeth, who would join them for the first time. *He means to alter their records of agreed-to pricing while we are gone; they will claim a higher percentage of profits than they are due.*

Eva's face twitched into a brief smile. *We can play that game as well. We shall simply ask for receipts written showing a lesser profit than actually agreed upon.*

No! Will's telepathic response was sharp, and Eva winced. *We cannot match a wrong with a wrong. That makes us no better than them.*

Elizabeth's telepathic snort was incredibly loud to his telepathic ears. Will smiled.

So what do you suggest, Will? Eva asked. *We must find some way to get enough money to survive.*

The answer came from the newest Trader. *Perhaps... perhaps we can earn our own monies, monies they cannot make any claim against.* Elizabeth's idea both surprising and welcome, for Will had been uncertain how to answer Eva's question.

Will's own fleeting smile flashed. *What do you mean?*

Father says we are untalented. I believe we have talents we can use to our financial advantage.

The exchange was rapid, taking only a few seconds, and there was no obvious delay between the end of Arthur's speech and the Traders making their final climb into the wagons. The gates were opened, and Eva led the group out with Elizabeth riding next to her, followed by Aldus, Matilda, Will, Eleanor, and Gerald. All six wagons were heavily burdened with the wares produced by the community over the preceding two weeks, and each wagon needed two horses to pull it along. The snows had melted in the springtime thaw, and the muddy paths and heavy wagons were a poor mix. Travel was very slow going, but none of them had any particular interest in completing the journey quickly. They'd made

only half their usual mileage when they stopped and made camp that evening.

“We’re going to Richland again,” Eva said. “If this is to be our final mission together, I’d prefer to work among friends.”

“Perhaps we can stay there longer than usual,” Elizabeth mused.

Will was surprised. When he’d mentioned permanent escape before, Elizabeth had been angry at him, angry that he failed to understand that she needed to remain in her home village in order for her efforts at redeeming the community to take root. Perhaps, as she’d recognized that futility, she’d become concerned about her own mortality, rather than converting those uninterested in changing their ways.

Seeing his confusion, Elizabeth elaborated upon her idea. “I’m not saying we should move there. But, rather than trading and returning as quickly as we possibly can... why not stay there for an extended trip and make our *own* money, money not related to trading those goods on our wagons right now?” She scowled. “Father means to rob us of our share of the profit, probably because some of it would go to me. I don’t want any of you suffering for agreeing to take me along.”

After Eva assured Elizabeth that they’d all be fine, Will addressed Elizabeth’s idea. “That’s an interesting idea. You’re right; there’s no reason we have to Trade in a rapid fashion. We’re typically gone about a week, but that’s with better traveling conditions than these, and that duration assumes that we only spend a day in the city. Why not stay there a week or two?”

“We need money for that, Will,” Matilda noted. “Where do you suppose we might get enough to stay in Richland for that long?”

Will shrugged. “I’ve saved up quite a bit. And we’ve quite a few friends in Richland, as Eva said. I imagine that if we tell them we’d like to stay a few weeks, we could negotiate an excellent deal. While we’re there, we look at other opportunities to make money. We still do our best work Trading, of course, but that’s subject to sharing with the others and will probably be forcibly changed, and not to our benefit. Let’s spend two weeks earning our own money. We’ll store our own earnings elsewhere, outside the village, before we return. In that fashion, even if Arthur manages to manipulate events to extract all profit from the trades away from us, we’ll still have money to survive.” He glanced at Elizabeth. “Even if that means we move somewhere else.”

They team exchanged glances. Finally, Gerald shrugged. “Nothing much waiting for me back home, outside of a bunch of ungrateful louts who think they’re special. Let’s stay for a while.” The others nodded in grim agreement,

resigned to their likely fate upon their return to a place they might never again call home.

The roads dried out, and they were able to make good time over the next two days, reaching the outskirts of Richland just before sundown. They pitched their camp again, with the expectation that they'd make their way into Richland in the morning.

Will found Elizabeth sitting with her back to one of the wagon wheels, facing the town from her distant vantage point, her knees pulled up to her chest and her arms around her legs. Her facial expression was difficult to read. Will sat down next to her. "Nervous?"

Elizabeth was quiet for a moment before responding. "Confused."

"What about?"

"About what I'll see there. I've never left our village before, other than the baths and that short time I hid after Mother's death. I don't know what other people look like, or what type of clothes they wear, or how they talk. I don't know if they're friendly or if they're more like Father. And I don't know how to Trade."

"I've met a lot of people," Will said. "And I've found that with very rare exceptions, people are good unless they are consumed by some type of fear. Some fear losing their loved ones, or their possessions, or their money. Others, like Arthur, fear a loss of power and control. Others fear the unknown. Whatever it might be, it's that fear that makes them behave poorly. If you show people how to overcome their fears, then the motivation for unfriendliness goes away."

"I don't know anything about him," Elizabeth said, her voice barely above a whisper. "Isn't that strange? I'm almost nineteen years old, and yet I know almost nothing about my father. If you're right, though, something in his life made him fear power held by others, and being controlled by others, and so he strives to gain it for himself and hold it, so that he need never feel that lack of power or control again. I wish I knew what that was, what that experience was, because maybe, if I can help him get over that..."

Will turned his head, and looked at her. "You are a truly good person, Elizabeth. No matter what happens in the future, never forget that. It doesn't matter who your parents are or what they're like. Despite everything, you are still here trying to find good in this man rather than taking the easy and safe route of running away, and for what it's worth, I'm proud to call you a friend."

Tears formed in her eyes. "Likewise, Will."

Will smiled.

They entered the town of Richland the next morning, greeting many of the guards and vendors by name. Elizabeth, the newest Trader, was an anomaly, and her flaming red hair made her stand out. Unaccustomed to the attention of others not intending her harm, Elizabeth folded her arms across her chest and kept her head down, fearful that someone would harm her in some fashion. “Keep your head up and smile,” Will told her. “Be confident. Arthur is nowhere near us. No one here will hurt you. In fact, you’ll find yourself happily accepted and welcomed here.”

Your doing? Her projection was loaded with the implication that any friendliness she’d experience would be due to him using his push-Empathy skills to instill such feelings in those they’d encounter.

Not necessary. One day you’ll understand you are worthy of love and friendship, Elizabeth. I’m hopeful you’ll start to see that during our stay here.

He could sense her disbelief that this could be true, but her doubt mingled with the hope that maybe, just maybe, Will was right.

They entered the market area, as was their custom, and greeted many of the merchants who had become familiar friends in the many visits over the past three years. The sense of familiarity emboldened Elizabeth, who gradually emerged from her shell and became invaluable in the purchases made for the villagers. She’d spent a great deal of one-on-one time with the neighbors over the preceding thirteen years, and in that time she’d become quite familiar with all of them in the Schola, learning their tastes, and fears, and interests. She’d familiarized herself with the list Eva built, and found herself a skilled shopper, able to pick out just the right coloring of clothing for the men, just the right style of jewelry for the women, or just the right types of supplies for the various master craftsmen. The Traders had always done well with their shopping, but Elizabeth knew *exactly* what those general lists meant. Her warmth came out, and between the intrigue of trading with a young woman with flaming red hair, the passion with which she fought for deals, or her impressive Energy development and corresponding empathic and telepathic skills, she engineered perhaps the most thoroughly successful purchasing mission in the history of the Traders. Elizabeth’s purchases were not only personalized, they had been procured dramatically below the required cost. More incredibly, those she’d traded with felt that they had profited from the experience as well, and not just in financial terms. They’d become familiar with the general sweetness of Matilda, the firmness of Eleanor, and the savviness of Eva over the past few years; in Elizabeth, they found all of that and more.

The innkeeper, Nicholas, greeted them with his standard warmth and showed them to their usual rooms. When they returned to the inn's common room for their evening meal, the Traders introduced him to Elizabeth. He shook her hand and smiled. "I do not know where my friends come from, but I've learned that the women there are clever as well as beautiful. You are perhaps the best example of both of these qualities." Elizabeth's face quickly matched the color of her hair. His compliment drew a look of annoyance from Eleanor, one of offense from Matilda, and one of pride from Eva. Will chuckled.

Her confidence buoyed by her Trading success and the compliments she received, Elizabeth took care with her appearance for the first time since Will had known her. As one accustomed to doing work each day which literally made her sick, she never bothered with brushing her hair or ensuring that her clothing was clean and well-maintained. At Will's suggestion, she had brought with her some of the money she had earned creating the daily zurple concoctions as well as some of those taken back from Arthur. With Eva's assistance, she purchased a hairbrush and a new dress, and the two women spent the next morning working the tangles out of her hair and brushing it until it looked like flowing fire. With her new dress on, she looked like a different person. And when she entered the common room for the midday meal, Will wasn't the only one staring at her. Will remembered her from the future, and today was the first time she'd had truly looked like Hope.

Elizabeth glanced around, acutely aware of the attention paid her, and, aware of the thoughts of jealousy in many of the women and the amorous thoughts of the men, she once again flushed crimson. *Why are they staring at me like that, Will? That's how people stare at beautiful women. I'm not beautiful. Eva is beautiful. Matilda is beautiful. I'm just the freak with the red hair.*

Will managed to project a smile at her. *It seems to be the unanimous vote of this room that you're wrong on at least one of those points, Elizabeth. You are a beautiful woman, inside and out.*

He saw her smile faintly from across the room. *Thank you, Will. I can always count on you to keep my spirits up.*

The Traders assembled at a table over their morning meal. "We previously decided to stay here for a few weeks," Eva said. "We've completed our sales and purchases for others, and thus we can spend our remaining time here working for ourselves and earning our own money. Now that we've had time to think about this, are there any suggestions on what we can do to accomplish such a goal?"

Silence greeted her. Each of the Traders looked at the others, hoping that

someone else would speak up. Will finally looked at Elizabeth. “Before we entered this town, you told me that this team has talents. Do you remember that?”

Elizabeth nodded. “We’re Traders. Why can’t we do that?”

Aldus looked confused. “We’ve already done that, though. We already finished all of the buying and selling.”

Elizabeth faced him. “Yes, we did. For *our* community. What about doing the same thing for the people in *this* community?”

Six sets of eyes stared at her, and Elizabeth became nervous, wrapping her arms around herself and looking at the floor, preparing herself for a verbal or physical assault like those she was accustomed to receiving. “Relax, Elizabeth,” Eva said, grasping her shoulder with a gentle touch. “We’re not angry, just confused. We don’t understand what you mean.”

“Right,” Matilda said. “Can you explain this idea?”

Elizabeth nodded. “We’re good at taking goods and going to a new community and selling them for a big profit. Why can’t we take goods from Richland and go to another town and sell for them, just as we always do? Same type of deal, where we split the profit?”

The confused faces became thoughtful, and slowly each of the Traders nodded. “I like this idea,” Gerald said. “I’m not a person who likes to stay long in one place, at least one that’s not my home. Let’s ask the merchants if they have extra goods to sell, and we’ll take them to the next town over and split the profits with them.”

Will nodded, then frowned. “We can’t simply leave with their goods. They like us, but they probably won’t trust us enough not to run off with their goods and never return. We don’t have enough money to buy their goods ahead of time, either. So we’d need to leave them something that would guarantee we’d come back.”

“Why not all of the goods we bought for the community?” Elizabeth asked. “That’s a lot of coins worth of material; we’d not spend the effort to buy them and then run off.” The Traders nodded, and then raised their mugs of wine—created by their own neighbors—in a toast to their newest member and her brilliance. Elizabeth blushed anew.

The next morning, the Traders left with two wagons full of goods from Richland. Two days later, they returned, each pocketing 20 gold coins in profits. They repeated the process with different merchants and traveled to other cities circling Richland.

Three weeks later, they left Richland, driving back three of the six wagons they'd started with, piled high with the goods they'd purchased for their neighbors. Their joy wasn't lessened as they thought about the people who would likely try to rob them of their rightful Trading profit of 40 gold coins per Trader, who would likely continue to deny them access to the zirple that would grant them the supernatural abilities they'd all long sought, and who would possibly even banish all of them to the outside world.

The Traders knew they'd be fine if that happened. They'd be hiding 150 gold coins each in a hidden space outside the community before returning home to the village. With the profits earned on this extended Trading mission, they could almost buy their *own* hidden city in the forest to live in, a place where none of them would need to worry about a tyrannical leader looking to deprive them of their freedom.

SHUNNING

The return to the community made the Traders wish they'd stayed in Richland.

There were no shouts of welcome, no warm greetings, no stories of happenings while they'd been gone. Instead, their neighbors gave them only cold stares, and the only words offered related to demanding their money and purchases.

Will realized that they'd misjudged what might happen in their extended absence. The Energy skills had improved in the weeks they'd been away, but none of the villagers had sufficient Energy yet to do much damage. They'd have minor successes in performing Telepathy with each other, but would only get fleeting impressions of emotions or thoughts in anyone not trying to communicate in that fashion. Nevertheless, even those small successes had emboldened them all, and Arthur had been sure to stoke those thoughts to their illogical but emotional extreme.

The Traders were the enemy.

The Traders took their profits in transactions, selling goods they had not and could not make. They did not contribute to the food production that fed the villagers. They merely consumed, and as such any small good they did in handling Trade and freeing the others to focus solely on production was overshadowed. With their newly enhanced mental abilities, the residents could handle their own trading, and keep all of their profits rather than just half. The Traders had also not participated in the zirple consumption with the others, which was only fitting, as one of their number had been testing products—including zirple—for a dozen years and had failed to identify in the simple root the secret to unlocking the abilities they were all now developing. They were

known, in at least one case, to have participated in conversations relating to denying others the fruits of that testing, and it was only right that these leeches were now denied access to the zirple. They had held others back in the past, financially and otherwise, and would continue to do so by draining food and other resources that could be better used by productive members of the village.

In the morning, the Traders arrived at the gate for the morning bath, only to discover that the others had already left. By the time the Traders reached the Halwende River, the others were already dressed and beginning the journey back.

Elizabeth had allowed her usual bedraggled appearance to return as they'd traveled back to the village. She was, however, emboldened by her Trading successes, and felt compelled to speak out. "And here I thought you'd miss me, Father. Why do you run away from me?"

Arthur ignored her, but Maynard did not. He drew his long sword, marched to Elizabeth, and pointed the sword directly at her throat. "Watch your tongue, you filthy mongrel. You'd do well to learn to show respect to your betters. You may otherwise find our community's generosity towards parasites like you... slipping." He feigned slipping forward, which would have plunged the sword through her neck, but he held the blade still.

"Do it, you coward!" she snapped. "The lot of you have been trying to kill me for years. Slit my throat, and my father will love you like the son he wishes he'd had. Or are you too weak to decide anything on your own?"

Maynard lunged at her, grabbed her arm, and spun her around so that she was pinned against him. He put the long edge of the blade against her throat, and the villagers stopped to watch, uncertain what to do. "Hey, Will!" Maynard shouted. "What do you think I should do here?" Nervous laughter flitted through the villagers. Their words were tough, their anger stoked, but they were uncomfortable with the idea of the cold-blooded murder of a young woman.

Will dispatched his nanos, creating a shield that covered Elizabeth's neck, and sent the rest to cover the surface of the sword. He directed the nanos to gradually pull the sword down toward the ground, and the sudden weight took Maynard by surprise. "Looks like you need to make yourself a lighter sword, Maynard," Will said. "That one appears to be a bit too heavy for you to control, and I'm concerned someone might get hurt." The weight of the sword increased to the point that Maynard could no longer hold it upright, and it swung down in an arc, gaining weight the entire time, and slipped from his grasp. The blade embedded in the ground only inches from Arthur, who looked startled and then

glared at Maynard. The metal smith looked at the blade, baffled.

“Be careful, Maynard,” Will said. “Whether it’s guilt over your bullying of an unarmed woman or weakness of your arm, you really need to get a new sword. One more move like that and you might find yourself...” He paused, leaned forward, glanced around as if to make sure nobody else could hear, and then looked back at Maynard. “You might find yourself forced to be a Trader. And we seem to be out of business.”

Elizabeth, who had managed to remain calm while having a sharp sword pressed to her throat, gathered her composure. *Thanks for taking care of me, Will.*

My pleasure, he responded.

Elizabeth turned to face Maynard, and patted him on the shoulder. “Maybe the zirple weakens sword-wielding muscles, Maynard. Perhaps you should consider cutting back on one of them.” And she walked away, heading toward the river, leaving Maynard confused as to what had happened.

Elizabeth elected to stay behind after the morning bath, and the six remaining Traders walked back to the village without her. The temporary joy they’d felt at the conclusion of the encounter with Maynard was undermined when they walked through the gate. They moved around to each of the craft masters, looking for opportunities to work, but none would take them on. Arthur and Maynard stood on either side of the collection of Shops, watching, ensuring that no one provided an opportunity for the Traders. Annoyed and hungry, they made their way to the chefs and bakers for their morning meals.

“Two coppers,” the chef told Will, his gaze icy.

Will stared at him. The cost per meal had always been one copper, and he had a hunch the sudden change wasn’t by chance. “When did the cost go up?”

The chef glared at him. “Just now.”

“And if I only pay one copper? The same price it’s always been?”

“Then you’ll get nothing.”

Will paid the two coppers for a meager ladling of the beef and vegetable stew. The other Traders, seeing themselves with no other options, followed suit. As they finished, Joseph, the carpenter, walked up behind them, handed the chef a single copper coin and received a generous portion of the stew.

Will looked at the chef and arched an eyebrow. “Another new price change?”

“What have you ever done for me, or for any of us?” the chef snapped.

In answer, Will reached up and grasped the rope controlling access to the overhead flowing water system. The chef’s eyes widened as Will gave a gentle

tug, and the falling water saturated the chef's clothing.

"Hey, Arthur!" Will called. "This guy's doing a great job of making me feel unwelcome in the village. You should give him extra zirple or something to reward him! Or, better yet, give him the portion of somebody who's not trying quite so actively to starve me and the other Traders."

Will felt the dagger-like glares on his back as he walked away. There were some, his senses detected, who felt some doubt about the scheme. The shunning was almost like a game when discussed in the absence of the Traders; seeing Elizabeth threatened by Maynard, seeing Will and the others provided with such meager quantities of food, had made the game quite real, and the impacts quite dramatic. Yet the self-doubt didn't translate into action. None of them wanted to risk their own wealth, health, or zirple allocation by speaking up or treating the Traders as they treated others.

Later that morning, the community came together, as they always did at the conclusion of a Trading mission, to settle up accounts. Will had recommended ordering purchases by profession and then by the purchaser, storing the wood-silver receipt written in Eva's neat script with the purchases. The settlement process had become far more efficient since then, but today would be a different story.

Eva had gotten into the habit of leaving the original wood-silver receipts behind when they left to Trade. In the past year, they'd actually fashioned a large piece of wood, the equivalent of a modern-day billboard, and would tack each silver up so that everyone could see what types of goods would be coming back. Eva would use those receipts and note total quantities and target prices on a single larger wood silver—essentially a ledger—which made record keeping simpler. People would bring their receipts from the billboard when their groups were called, the Traders would note the price they'd gotten for sold goods or the amount paid for supplies and other purchased goods, and they'd figure out how much each villager was owed. Payment would be made, goods delivered, and when everything was done, the Traders would split the remaining profit equally.

They'd learn today that Arthur wasn't above committing fraud to achieve his goals.

The first person to step forward was Joseph, the carpenter. Eva checked her list of transactions. "We sold 11 chairs for your team, Joseph, with a minimum price of eight silver pieces per chair—"

Joseph shook his head. "That's not correct, Eva. This shows eighteen silver pieces as the target price."

Eva frowned. "Let me see that."

Joseph handed her the sliver of wood. As he'd noted, the sliver showed Joseph's name, 11 chairs, and 18 silver pieces as the targeted price per chair.

Will frowned. "Joseph, this has been changed."

Joseph shook his head. "It's written down, Will. How could it be changed?"

Will pointed. "The number 1 in the target price is written by a different hand and with a different ink color than the rest of the letters and numbers on this. Someone added it after the fact."

Arthur walked over. "Is something wrong?" His face was smug, and Will could immediately read his thoughts and emotions. Arthur had engineered this financial coup.

Will pointed to the receipt. "This was changed, Arthur. See how everything is the same black ink color except for the 1 in the number 18?"

Arthur looked interested. "Perhaps Eva ran out of ink while writing this?"

Will shook his head. "She wouldn't go back and add in the number 1 afterward; if anything, the number 8 would be in the different ink color if that was the case."

Arthur now frowned. "What are you suggesting, Will?"

"This was modified by someone, Arthur. Look at the three number 1s on this. The two in the black ink, in the 11 for the quantity of chairs, both have little slashes at the top. The one that's part of the 18 is in the different ink color, and it doesn't have those slashes. Someone else wrote that extra 1 in to raise the target price after Eva and Joseph created this agreement."

Arthur looked at Joseph. "Did you change this, Joseph?"

Joseph shook his head. "No."

"Do you remember agreeing to a price of 8 silver pieces or 18 silver pieces?"

"It's been a long time, Arthur. I can't remember."

Arthur shook his head. "We have nothing to go off of other than this receipt, Will. Eva, you'll need to use the receipt to provide Joseph with his earnings."

This is ridiculous, Eva projected. "We sold the chairs for two gold pieces, or 20 silver pieces, each. Incidentally, I would have recorded the target price as 1 gold and 8 silver pieces each, not 18 silver pieces." She scowled. "But since the deal is being altered, the Traders keep half of the profit, or 1 silver piece per chair, rather than the six silver pieces per chair actually earned." Her eyes flashed. "Enjoy your extra money, Joseph. Make sure you buy something nice for whoever modified the receipt for you. I hear Arthur likes wine." She slammed the coins into Joseph's hands, and the man walked away.

Arthur fixed Eva with a stare. “Are you suggesting that we should trust your word and private notes over public records?”

“I’m suggesting we should accept the fact that what we just saw was blatantly altered, Arthur. Shall I just give you the entire bag of proceeds to distribute as you see fit, or are you quite interested in seeing us suffer through watching our profitable trades turned into nothing?”

Arthur feigned horror. “Eva, I have no idea what you’re talking about. Don’t blame me if your team is shown to be ineffective at their so-called profession.” He walked away, and his body language gave away his sense of triumph as much as any Empathy skill.

They worked their way through everything as usual, noting the telltale signs of forgery: the altered ink color, the extra ones added to create larger target prices, the modification of a 3 to an 8 to reduce the profit on a sale or a transaction. Eva had projected a profit of around forty gold pieces per Trader, even accounting for adding Elizabeth into the mix. In the end, they made only three gold pieces each. Eva handed out the coins to each of the Traders after they’d finished the distribution of money as defined by the altered receipt.

They walked to Elizabeth’s room, where the girl had elected to stay during the distributions. She’d reasoned what would happen, and hadn’t wanted to take part in the fiasco. In her sorrow, she’d passed the time by brushing her hair and changing her clothes, resembling now the radiant young woman who’d made such an impression in Richland. Her face clouded when Eva handed her the money from the trip.

“Thirty pieces of silver,” Will muttered.

Matilda, who had more education than the other Traders, allowed her face to curl into a wan smile. “Appropriate, isn’t it?”

“So, what do we do now?” Eleanor asked.

“We can leave,” Aldus said. “They’d love to have us in Richland. We could sell goods for the craftspeople there for as long as we like. We could even use that as our base and cross-trade between cities.”

Will nodded. “It’s a good plan, because there’s nothing—”

“I’m not leaving.”

All eyes turned to Elizabeth, to find her blue eyes flaming.

“Why?” Matilda asked, exasperated. “We’re not wanted here, Elizabeth. They’ll rob us of everything we own and see us starve to death. It’s a group not unfamiliar with violence and cruelty.” She fixed Elizabeth with a scathing look. “You, of all people, should be aware of that.”

Elizabeth's face clouded, then turned stony. "Then leave. I'm not leaving for good. I'll leave to Trade, but this will remain my home until the day I die."

Gerald shook his head. "Don't be naive, Elizabeth. If you stay long enough, someone's going to grant you that wish. Maynard almost did, not too long ago. Don't expect to be saved again by his arm getting tired; next time, he won't wait that long."

Elizabeth folded her arms. "I'm not stopping you from leaving. I will not join you in leaving forever, however."

Eva sighed. "Elizabeth, this is not a decision any of us will make easily, one way or another. But we must all consider what's in our best interest." She hesitated, and there was a brief quiver of her lip. "Should the others decide to leave... I will join them."

Elizabeth face filled with pain. "No," she whispered. "Please. Don't leave me here alone, Eva."

Eva shook her head. "Our time here is done, Elizabeth. It is time to say our farewells, to say goodbye to what might have been. This community will destroy itself before long, and I for one want to be gone when it happens." Her face clouded. "I only wish my brother had returned before we decided to leave."

The other Traders all indicated an agreement with these sentiments. Elizabeth, her face still marred with the pain of Eva's declaration, of learning that the woman who'd acted as the closest thing to a parent she'd had for many years was leaving, looked at Will, hoping to find some comfort. Will knew he would do exactly what she would do, for she was the reason he'd traveled centuries into his past.

Nobody else could know that, however.

"I promised you before, Elizabeth, that I would do whatever you asked me to do. And I think that extends to your decision here. I cannot help you if you are living in one village and I am living somewhere else. So... my decision is the same as yours. I will not break my promise to you."

Eva nodded, appreciating his loyalty, though the others simply stared at him in disbelief. "I don't understand, Will," Aldus said. "The rules are being blatantly set up against us, even something as basic as the cost of food—"

"That's a good point, Aldus," Will interrupted. "And regardless of whether any of us intends to stay or go, we're owed an explanation."

"Will..." Eva said, her voice a warning.

Will ignored her. "Excuse me, Arthur," he said, raising his voice.

The leader of the village looked his way, and frowned. "What is it, Will?" he

asked, with an audible sigh.

“I’ve noticed after this morning’s transactions that you’re exceptionally concerned with ensuring that agreed-to prices for various items are enforced. I think that’s very commendable, and it’s the sign of a true leader to ensure fairness for all those he leads.”

Arthur beamed. “I’m glad you feel that way, Will. I agree, ensuring agreed-to prices are enforced is very important, and I want you to know that everyone—even the Traders—are covered under that directive.” His smile held layers of meaning, and Will was able to sense that Arthur’s greatest sense of triumph was his belief that Will was finally, truly, defeated as a leadership threat in the community.

“I’m glad to hear that Arthur,” Will said. “For as a lowly Trader, I believe that I’ve been a victim of an agreed-to price being changed on me. This very day, in fact.”

“Yes, Will,” Arthur replied. “We’ve been taking care of the problem your team has inflicted upon us with your incorrectly recorded prices for transactions.” Laughter greeted this statement.

“It’s amazing how the writing on the altered numbers doesn’t match Eva’s handwriting, and how those numbers are written in different colors of ink. I’m certain that the problem will be investigated fully. We wouldn’t want everyone who lives here thinking that anything they write down might get changed on them if certain... conditions aren’t met. Perhaps we can have everyone here examine Eva’s handwriting on her private notes and the receipts stored publicly and decide for themselves if things look like they were written by the same person.” He paused. “Any reason we haven’t done that, Arthur?” He arched an eyebrow.

There were some murmurs in the crowd, and Will sensed that quite a few people wondered about that. He heard a few whispers of people wondering if, perhaps, Arthur had forged the numbers that had just been processed. And more than a few wondered if they’d been dishonest in their dealings with the Traders. They considered the Traders to be thieves, but didn’t want to be seen that way themselves.

Arthur, perhaps sensing that an examination of the evidence wouldn’t be in his best interest, changed the subject. “You said that there is a case of people not living up to agreed-to prices in the community that requires my attention?”

Not subtle about his role here, is he? Will projected to Eva. “Yes, sir. Since my arrival, our chefs have always charged a copper for a full bowl of stew and a

slice of bread.”

Arthur nodded. “Of course. Nothing has changed there.”

“That’s interesting. I was just this morning charged two coppers for a partial bowl of soup and no bread. I was told that the price had changed. And yet immediately after my payment, one of my neighbors received a full bowl of stew and bread for the usual single copper. That seems incorrect, doesn’t it?”

Arthur smacked his forehead. “Oh, my, I’ve forgotten that you aren’t aware of the new zirple discount, since you were away for such a long time. Since I receive the discount, I simply have forgotten how things have changed. You see, the price is now two coppers for a partial bowl of stew. However, for those receiving zirple, a special deal is in place, and they receive the old allotment for the old price. There is nothing amiss in your story.”

Will laughed. “Spin it how you want, Arthur. Let’s tell the truth here, shall we? You want the Traders out, and you’ve managed to rig everything to make us into lesser citizens. The Traders, against all laws of chance, receive essentially none of the zirple through the lottery. The Traders find written records altered to ensure that profits from their trips are under reported, and they receive less; nobody else cares because they get what the Traders lose out on. The Traders, who remarkably receive none of the zirple, find themselves charged higher prices for food. The Traders, who have always been welcomed members of the various professions between Trading trips, and who have always worked hard and added value in those roles, are shunned and prevented from the opportunity to do anything to help this community.

“And why is that, Arthur? It’s because you want the Traders gone, all of us, yet you realize you can’t tell everyone the truth. You fear the financial prosperity we’ve enabled here, which has nothing to do with your leadership, and nothing to do with the zirple. Consider this: if the zirple works as advertised, Arthur, wouldn’t it be better to have the Traders be part of this? Wouldn’t it be tremendously useful to have our Traders able to read emotions and thoughts, as this zirple is supposed to enable us to do, and then go trade, knowing you can tell exactly the best price?”

“Arthur, you believe that this is possible, and that this type of trading dominance is ideal—but only if done by the person who created the goods being sold. If you have others do that work on your behalf, you believe those people are stealing profits, and as such those people should be shunned.”

Will looked at the crowd. “And you all have come to believe that as well, haven’t you? Those evil Traders, finally gone! Oh, happy day! You’ll get *all* of

the profits on your sold goods! Isn't that *fantastic*? But think about this. How many of you have ever traveled to another town, or another city? How many of you have ever tried to negotiate a price on a transaction? Here, the prices are set—well, unless you're part of the current despised group of people and try to buy food, of course. That's not how it works elsewhere. You'll have no sense of what prices you might achieve, or even if you did, you'll not know how to get agreement on a price. You think you can simply walk into a new town, divine the best price, and simply demand it and get it? Good luck. And while you're gone, you can't build anything else to sell. You'll lose at least a week just traveling around. Think about that. You have to stop building chairs and swords and tapestries, because you have to load the carts, pack provisions, travel to the towns, buy and sell goods, pack everything up, and come home. One week, gone. But you'll be tired when you get back, so you'll probably lose another two days preparing to travel and recovering. Nine days lost. How many chairs could you build in nine days, Joseph? How many swords can you make in nine days, Maynard? How many tapestries can any of you weave, how many kegs of beer or wine could you prepare? Each time you leave, you lose that many sales. Your skills will falter, and people will see a lesser value in buying your goods. Fewer goods produced, less profit per transaction. Think that sounds like a good plan?

“So... do it. Cast the Traders out of this village. Do everything yourselves. See how your money situation looks afterward. Oh, and don't forget... if you're not here, you can't enter the lottery and get your zirple allocation. If the Traders are the only ones not winning the lottery, and they leave, then everybody has to win every day, don't they? No point in buying fifty chances if you're going to win every day only buying one, right? Still think kicking us out is a good idea? Fine. Tell us all to leave, and we'll leave. No argument. No protest. Go earn all of that extra profit Arthur says we're stealing from you.”

He paused, then thought of something else. “Oh, and when we're gone? Everything will be perfect, won't it? All that profit, nobody consuming food you might want to eat. But it won't be. Someone will become the next bad guy. Perhaps it's the foragers, who just gather stuff up that's fallen on the ground. Or the farmers: they plant seeds in the ground and then don't do anything until harvest time, right? Pick a group; it will happen to one of you when we're gone, because there must be someone to blame for any real or imagined problem, someone denied zirple through the lottery to keep everyone buying chances. By getting rid of us, you're just increasing the chance that it will be you shunned, instead. And don't forget... you'll have seven fewer mouths to feed, true, but

you'll have seven fewer people here to buy your food and other goods in this neighborhood. Who makes up the lost profits to the farmers and foragers and bakers and chefs when you eliminate one out of seven people who live in this village? But that's okay. If they become poor, then they can be the next shunned group."

Will turned and walked away, heading to his room where he could be alone. He didn't need to turn and use his eyes, or his other enhanced senses, to know that the Traders followed him, heads held high, leaving many confused neighbors in their wake.

Then he heard the crowd gasp, and this time he *did* turn around.

As the Traders had dispersed, Elizabeth, who'd been hidden by all of them near her room, was suddenly visible to her neighbors. But it wasn't the Elizabeth they were accustomed to seeing. This was an Elizabeth who'd cleaned and groomed herself, revealing her radiant inner beauty. It was an Elizabeth with the confidence built through her successful Trading efforts. It was Elizabeth infuriated at the way her friends were being treated. That confidence and anger were reflected in every step she took, and those steps took her straight to Arthur.

"Hello, Father," she snapped.

Arthur stared at her. "You... you're beautiful. How did *that* happen?"

"It's amazing what a girl can do when people care for her and believe in her, rather than try to kill her slowly, isn't it?" She folded her arms across her chest and glared at him, clearly intending to say more.

Rage covered Arthur's face. "How *dare* you speak to me in that fashion, you worthless child!" And he slapped her across the face, knocking her to the ground.

A blur flashed across Will's vision, a blur his eyes finally recognized as Eva. The woman moved with incredible speed, fury on her face, and she crashed into Arthur, sending the two of them to the ground. "Don't you *dare* hit her again!" she screamed, throwing fists and elbows at Arthur's face. Arthur was in shock at the attack, but finally regained enough composure to defend himself.

Maynard pulled Eva away, none too gently, and hurled her aside. When Eva scrambled to her feet to attack again, she found Maynard's sword in the way. "Give me an excuse, and I *will* run you through," the giant snarled.

Eva didn't move, but her glare never lessened in its intensity.

Arthur crawled back to his feet, stood up, and dusted himself off, matching Eva's glare. He ignored his daughter, who was crying on the ground nearby, and stalked toward Eva, a predator ready to finish off his prey.

“Will said that you’d leave if I told you to leave. He never said that you wouldn’t come *back* if I told you to leave. But that *is* your fate, Eva. For an attack on one of your neighbors, for an attack on *me*, you are hereby banished from this community, and you may *never* return.”

“Wait just a minute!” Will shouted, marching back into the crowd.

“Stay out of this, Will!” Arthur growled.

“I will *not* stay out of it, Arthur,” Will replied, his voice calm but firm. “If the penalty for attacking a neighbor is banishment, then you are banished as well. It was *your* attack on Elizabeth that provoked Eva!”

“You’re wrong, Will,” Arthur hissed. “My disciplining of my child is not an attack. It is just discipline, and nothing more, and there is no penalty. As for Eva, she will be tried tomorrow morning, and when she is found guilty, she will be escorted away, never to return.”

It was difficult to ignore Arthur’s sneer of triumph at the look of horror on Elizabeth’s face.

TRIAL

“**T**here is no defense. If attacking him is a crime, then I’m guilty, and proudly so. There’s no purpose in the rest of you dragging your images in this community down any further.”

Eva, Elizabeth, and Will were crowded into Eva’s room the next morning, discussing what might unfold that day, and Will wanted to figure out what type of defense Eva should mount.

“We can’t simply let him win, Eva. If you say nothing, you’ll be banished. And then what happens?”

Eva snorted. “I’m a big girl, Will. I’ll go to Richland. Nobody *there* wanted us to leave, did they? And none of them was hitting Elizabeth, either.”

“You can’t leave, Eva,” Elizabeth whispered, and her blue eyes filled with tears. “You *can’t* leave me here alone like that.”

“You’re an adult now, Elizabeth,” Eva said, her tone firm. “You must make your own place in this world, wherever in the world you wish to make it. Do not change your mind because of me. You’ve stated that your place is here, and that you wish to help your neighbors—and especially your father—rediscover the good they possess. You can have an impact here that you can’t have anywhere else. These people...” Eva glanced out her window, then leaned in closer, and lowered her voice to a whisper. “These people are developing abilities now. Nothing dramatic yet, but at some point, they’ll get there, and they’ll need someone who knows what they’re going through. They’ll need *you*.”

“Will can do it,” Elizabeth whispered. “He knows more than I do. I can’t lose you, Eva. You... you’re the only parent I’ve ever truly had, the only person who treated me like family. I *need* you, and my place is with you.”

Eva shook her head. “No, Elizabeth. You’ve made your decision to stay, and

it is the correct decision. Do not change your mind because of me. Do *not* follow me. Do you understand? Promise me that you won't follow me. Promise me that you won't walk out that gate and try to track me down."

Elizabeth looked at Eva's expression, and realized arguing was futile. She lowered her head, eyes on the ground, and folded her arms across her chest, a stance Will recognized as one signifying defeat. "I promise." Her voice was barely audible, and Eva moved to hug the young woman as a mother might embrace her daughter.

Will watched the display with sadness. He'd seen how Arthur treated Elizabeth, and had never known Genevieve, her mother. Elizabeth was desperate for a parental figure in her life, one that she could count on, and Eva was the only one who fit that bill. Will, going off the statements of those in the village, had portrayed himself as the twenty-five year old man they all believed him to be, which made him far too young to fill the role... even discounting the *other* complicating factors. The other Traders saw their positive treatment of Elizabeth as simply something they needed to do, but with Eva it was personal, something maternal. Even Will hadn't moved to defend Elizabeth at the speed Eva had demonstrated when Arthur had attacked her, though he told himself that was simply because Eva had moved faster. He wondered what that said about *him*.

"Our best solution to this issue is to make sure Eva wins this trial and doesn't *need* to leave, regardless of what she *chooses* to do afterward," Will said. "If that happens, the rest of this conversation is moot." He turned his attention to Eva. "How do these trials work?"

Eva snorted. "They're a sham, Will. Arthur announces the crime and his verdict, and invites any in the community *without a stake in the outcome* to step forward if they disagree with the verdict. If no one speaks, then the verdict is upheld. Arthur says the rule is to make sure that only impartial witnesses speak. But the issue is that anyone who actually could speak in their defense is ruled to have a stake in the verdict, and is not allowed to testify. So if your friend is attacked by someone, and Arthur rules that the attacker did nothing wrong, even if you were there and saw everything, you're ruled ineligible to testify because it's your friend and you have a personal stake in the outcome of the trial. Anyone else who might want to speak is often reminded, privately, that going against Arthur means some type of negative impact. They'd probably lose that cursed zirple root now. Do you think anyone that meets the criteria would speak under those circumstances?"

Elizabeth turned to him. "You could impact this, couldn't you? You could

make them side with Eva, make somebody allowed to speak do so.”

He could hear the question in her tone, the faith she had in his abilities, the desperate need she had for him to say yes. And yet...

“It would be wrong, Elizabeth,” he said, and the look of devastation on her face broke his heart. “I don’t believe in forcing people to my viewpoints. I’ll talk to whoever I can and try to persuade, but I won’t force anyone.”

“Then what’s the point of *having* those skills, if you won’t use them?” Elizabeth snapped. “How can you sit back and do nothing when an innocent person like Eva is threatened?”

Will sighed. “I’ve seen a lot in my life, Elizabeth. I’ve seen people who try to use various types of force to make others believe what they believe. And what I’ve found is that it never works. If I did that, and Eva is cleared, what happens next? Arthur won’t quit; he wants Eva gone. What if he frames her for something worse, Elizabeth? What if, because we force his hand, he goes so far as to end her life? What have we gained then?” He sighed. “Even if we lose, Eva is still alive out there, and we know that one day we can go find her again. The next time something happens?” He shook his head, not liking his answer any more than she did.

Elizabeth, who’d been sitting on Eva’s bed, pulled her knees up to her chest and wrapped her arms around them, clearly conflicted. “I know I need to do the right thing. I just want the end result to be that I still have Eva with me. If she’s gone... it would kill me.”

Will swallowed hard, for her words triggered a memory. He’d arrived here in the past nearly three years ago, and when his time machine had dissolved into nanos, he’d been left with a few items, including a computer that looked like a piece of parchment, rolled into a scroll. Visible on that scroll was a note from the three people who’d sent him here, who had manipulated him into willingly getting into that time machine and traveling to the past to save his wife’s life. Elizabeth wasn’t his wife yet, but she would be in the future. In that note, they’d mentioned that Elizabeth would be in danger, and that he’d need to save her.

Had he reached that point now? Was this the event that would put her life directly at risk? Or were they referring to Maynard’s previous attack with the sword? He’d need to be on the alert at all times.

The trio eventually moved to the courtyard area, where a crowd was gathered to watch the trial. Arthur, as was his custom, was at the head of the crowd, waiting to begin the trial, joking with Maynard, likely discussing how Eva’s banishment would further cement Arthur’s grip on the community.

That sparked an idea.

When the crowd finished gathering, Arthur moved to speak, but Will shouted out. “Point of order!”

Arthur blinked at the interruption, puzzled that it had happened before he’d even spoken, and glared in Will’s direction. “You are not permitted to speak, Will. We are preparing to start the trial. Perhaps no one has bothered to explain to you how the trial system works here.”

“They have, Arthur. And the rules tell me that *you* may not speak during this trial.”

The crowd went silent, the tension palpable. Arthur was clearly stunned at this challenge, and rather than address it, he simply laughed. “Nice try, Will, but —”

“No one with a stake in the verdict, in the outcome of the trial, is allowed to speak during the process, correct? How could the person alleged to be attacked be said not to have a stake in the outcome?”

Arthur opened his mouth to respond, then stopped.

Maynard jumped up. “I will run the trial in Arthur’s place, then. I’d like—”

“Sorry, Maynard, you have a stake in this as well. You’ve clearly been acting as a guard for Arthur for quite some time, and if the alleged attack occurred, it would mean you’d failed. It would mean your status in this village would be damaged for failing to protect Arthur. You don’t qualify, either.”

“Fine, then. Let’s pick you, or one of your people, Will.”

“Our leader is on trial, Arthur. We don’t qualify, either.”

Arthur, recognizing defeat, began scanning the crowd, looking for someone who would qualify to speak the charge in the format of a trial. “And Arthur? Remember, everyone, by your rules, has a stake in the outcome of this trial. Everyone here relies on receiving the zirple from you, and so if they speak, it could be said that they’d fear possible reprisals from you or from Eva depending upon the verdict they speak or testify to. *Everyone* has a stake in this.”

Arthur realized his own rules had trapped him. He looked at Maynard, desperate for some guidance on this matter, and yet there was no such guidance forthcoming.

“By the trial rules of this village, Arthur, this trial cannot take place, and therefore guilt cannot be established. If guilt cannot be established, then no sentence may be pronounced, and the accused is free.”

Arthur’s face turned red, and his eyes burned with hatred at Will. The members of the crowd stood looking at each other, whispering, wondering what

it all meant. Was Will correct? Was there no one who could legally speak to even *start* the trial?

He could feel the triumph of the Traders. He could sense the joy and adulations from Elizabeth, and the feelings she had for him, verging on love, intensified. He had saved from banishment the woman she loved like a mother, given her the chance to try to talk Eva out of leaving. And from Eva...

From Eva, he sensed sadness. Disappointment.

He turned to her, to try to understand, when Eva stepped forward to face the crowd. "I agree to waive the rule."

Arthur and Will both stared at her, equally incredulous at these words. "What?"

"I agree to waive the rule. I agree to let Arthur run the trial under the established rules of the community. For that to work, the rule about stakeholders must be waived. For *everyone*."

And there it was. Eva was letting Arthur get his trial of her, but she would get the chance to have people speak on her behalf.

Arthur's gaze focused and narrowed. "The accused has no say in how the trial is run, Eva."

"Perhaps. But in this case, the accused has *everything* to say in whether a trial *will* run. Take it or leave it, Arthur."

Will winced at the strong emotion from Arthur in response to these words, and he'd come to understand enough about the man to know why. She'd just challenged his authority as leader, offering him a deal that he hadn't and couldn't win in every possible fashion. Worse, she'd done so in front of everyone in the community.

"Let me rephrase that, Eva. The accused have *no rights*. You cannot make motions to change our trial rules. You are simply subject to them. I run all trials, and that is my job. This trial is underway. The accused, Eva, is charged with attacking me, Arthur, with clear intent to do severe bodily harm. The penalty for said crime is banishment from this community. Is there anyone *eligible* to speak in her defense?"

"You're overriding the trial rules of this community?" Will asked.

Arthur ignored him. "I repeat: is there anyone *eligible* to speak on behalf of the accused who is *willing* to do so?"

"If you can change the rules whenever it suits your fancy, then the rules have no meaning, Arthur," Will said, his voice rising in warning to the community.

"It seems that there are no individuals willing to speak on behalf of the

accused who are actually eligible to do so. In that case—”

“If he can change the rules you’ve agreed to live by without your consent *now*, he can do so again to the potential detriment of each of you in the future.” Will’s voice was loud, but firm. “If you don’t speak, you have essentially made this man your king. Is that what you want? To live in fear of a monarch? After all you’ve done to live in freedom, after you’ve thrown off the shackles of actual *slavery*, you’d throw it away for this?”

“The accused is hereby banished from this village,” Arthur continued, raising his voice a notch louder than Will’s. “She will be accompanied by me and one guard, Maynard, to the periphery of the lands we work, to ensure that she does indeed depart.” He fixed Will with a stern gaze. “No others may follow.” He turned his gaze back and forth over the crowd. “This trial is over. Depart, and return to your daily activities.”

As the crowd began to leave, Will sprang in front of them. “Before you leave, be certain to bow to your king. You have all just given up any rights you have in this village, and have consented to live your lives at the whim and pleasure of one man. He’s told you to leave; I tell you to hang your heads in shame for your cowardice, and the eagerness with which you threw away your own personal freedom.” He went to the Schola and tore down the sign hanging on the building, and held it up. “This sign says that the building is a school for personal growth. It is clearly misnamed.” And he threw the wood against the well, where it shattered.

The villagers gaped at Will and the broken sign... and as if to prove Will’s assertions correct, looked at Arthur for guidance. “Go to your Shops and fields and resume your normal activities. The trial—and the theater surrounding it—are over.”

The crowd, save for the Traders, dispersed, much to Will’s sadness. The only sounds from the courtyard were Elizabeth’s sobs. She raced to Eva and embraced her, and Eva returned the gesture, running her hand over the young woman’s head in a gesture meant to comfort. Arthur watched the exchange, a smug look on his face, and Will had to resist the urge to force his own trial for an attack on the man, though if he’d given in to his temptation, Arthur wouldn’t be able to officiate.

Elizabeth finally composed herself, and turned to face Arthur, her hatred and anger blazing in her vibrant blue eyes. “I’m leaving, Father.”

Arthur laughed. “You aren’t permitted to leave, Elizabeth. Your trip to the outside this time was a clear mistake, one that has encouraged far too many to

question my authority.” His gaze flicked briefly to Eva, and then to Will, before returning to his daughter. “You’ll leave this village permanently in a box, and under no other circumstances.”

“You’ve already killed her, Arthur,” Will said, his voice quiet. “The box is already around her. You just can’t see it. How long until you and the rest of those living here are able to do so?”

Arthur glared at him, and then turned to Maynard. “Escort Will to his room, and station someone there to ensure he does not leave.” He smirked. “Any man with a small knife should be able to guard him. Tell the guard that Will is not to leave until we return from our trip to remove Eva from our midst. And station another at the gate, in the event this *girl* elects to try to escape.” Maynard nodded, and seized Will by the arm. Will looked at Elizabeth, and watched as her face clouded into despair. *Do something, Will. Please.*

I will not do anything to force people to behave against their will, Elizabeth. That would make me no better than Arthur, and he’s not a man whose example I want to follow.

It would better for all of us if he was gone and you were our leader, Will.

Perhaps. But I will not force that outcome. This will work out for the best in the end, Elizabeth. It looks grim now, but it will get better. One thing I promise you, though, is that I will get you out of here. I don’t know how, but I will see that it’s done. First, though, I need to make sure that Eva gets away from here safely. I don’t think that’s Arthur’s intent.

Thank you, Will. But he could hear the disappointment in her thoughts. She wanted him to make things right, to use his ability to force the community to do the right thing. And yet he didn’t. The disappointment was powerful, more so because it came from her, and he began to wonder if his philosophy of using his power to persuade, rather than coerce, was wrong. He then thought of Arthur’s approach, using fear and jealousy and the threat of Maynard’s sword to persuade, and realized that Arthur’s way was a form of coercion. There was no greater example possible to show him that, no matter how bleak the situation seemed, his approach was the right one.

Maynard smirked at Will as he shoved Will along, an expression of arrogance reminiscent of the future Hunters. “One day you’ll learn not to question authority, Will. Shut up, like the rest of them, and do as you’re told. One day, perhaps, you’ll learn to carry a quality blade so that you can defend yourself and those you seem to care about. How is it that you don’t carry a weapon, and how is it that you simply stand by and watch us batter your people,

doing nothing but talking?”

“One day, Maynard, you’ll learn that the man to fear is the one who has weapons you *can’t* see,” Will said, his voice a whisper. Maynard blanched, undoubtedly remembering the mysterious heavy sword. “One day, Maynard, you’ll learn to read people better than you do. I’d have thought all that zirple would have done the trick, but apparently it’s not quite as powerful as Roland would have you believe. But I will tell you this: I will continue to be a thorn in your side, and Arthur’s, until I see your tyranny end.”

They’d reached his room, and Maynard threw him forcibly inside. “Then I suppose it’s best if you get used to this little prison cell, Will.” He motioned for one of his men to stand outside. “This *man* is under arrest for threats made against me and our leader, Arthur. See to it that he doesn’t leave this room. If he tries?” Maynard shot another smirk at Will. “You have a sword. He doesn’t. Make him regret that choice.”

The door slammed in Will’s face.

BANISHMENT

Will knew his first priority was to exit his room and go after Arthur and Maynard before they harmed Eva. In order to do so, he needed to ensure that the guard stayed out of his room. He closed the curtain to his room. “I have no interest in seeing you, hearing you, or...” He sniffed the air, loudly. “Smelling you.” The guard snorted, and turned his back to the room.

He considered going out the rear window immediately, but he heard noises back there, and saw Maynard arriving with Joseph the carpenter, armed with several wooden planks, nails, and a hammer. Will leaned out the window, and Maynard spotted him. “We’re well aware of this window, Will,” the man said, grinning. “But don’t think you’ll be trying to escape through it.”

The first plank slammed into place, and Will pulled back just in time to avoid having his nose broken. The men worked quickly, sealing up Will’s primary possibility of a more mundane exit, and then left. The only positive point was that if Maynard hadn’t left yet, neither had Arthur or Eva. He still had time.

But he needed to work and think quickly. He needed to be there to watch Arthur and Maynard escort Eva away, because he was fairly certain she wouldn’t otherwise leave the forest. Arthur wasn’t going to let her get away with attacking him and suffer a mere banishment as punishment. He was acting the part of a monarch, one who would see any insult, real or imagined, as an offense punishable by death. Maynard, and his sword, would carry out the punishment Arthur truly wanted, but one with which he knew the community would never agree. It was a punishment that none would ever learn about either, unless Will got there. None of them expected to ever see her again; both punishments had the same visible result to the villagers, but entirely different repercussions.

Will knew he could leave the community easily enough through teleportation, but if it were necessary for him to come back in through the gate, he'd need to explain in more mundane terms how he'd gotten out past the guard. He could probably make the man sleep, but didn't like that idea. He'd need to show how he'd gotten away in a manner that would have escaped any reasonable guard's notice... and something that any normal man could have accomplished.

He sat down on his cot, then rolled onto his back, staring up at his ceiling, hoping for inspiration.

The ceiling?

Will stood on the cot and reached up. Yes, he could definitely touch the ceiling in this fashion, for at its lowest point the ceiling was only about five feet off the ground. The peak of the roof faced the community, which meant that the lowest part of the roof was shielded from the viewpoint of any villagers.

He sat back down on the cot, and focused his senses on the grounds outside the village walls, looking for something specific. He finally found a stack of branches, and he teleported them into his room, and used his nanos to shape and weave them into a reasonable facsimile of a panel, one large enough to cover an opening that he could fit through. He then pulled the sample hinges and springs he'd been given from the spot under his cot where they'd been stored, and attached them to the panel. Will then floated the panel up to the ceiling. He attached the other half of the hinge to one of the cross beams supporting the roof, and used nanos to cut a hole the size of the panel into the roof. Finally, he attached the spring to the panel and roof crossbeam on the outer side, so the spring would hold the panel shut. The panel would open by pushing it up from below. He quickly cut a small notch in the panel that he'd be able to grab from the roof.

He did all of this without leaving his bed and in a matter of minutes; the nanos had enabled him to create a door in his ceiling that he could, if needed, use to pull himself out of his room and sneak back in.

After recalling his nanos, Will tested the approach to ensure he could perform the movement if challenged. He stood on the bed, pushed the panel open, grasped the sides of the opening, and pulled himself up and out onto the roof without too much strain.

Once on the roof, out of sight of everyone in the village, he jumped, using his Energy to float down to the ground on the outside of the wall. He closed his eyes, and his senses found Eva, tracking the harp-like sound of her Energy. They were still in the forest, though a good distance away from the village. Eva was

walking, while Arthur rode next to her on his favorite horse. Maynard, armed as always with his sword, trailed behind. Arthur was talking to her, though Will couldn't hear them. It mattered not. Focusing on the spot, he teleported into the trees above the trio, out of sight. Once certain that he'd not been spotted, he floated down to the ground once more, careful to remain silent.

He'd been practicing his invisibility skills now for the past three years, initially in his room at night, and later in the cave during his private morning training sessions. Flooding his body with Energy, he focused on making each cell transparent, letting the light waves hitting his body pass through rather than bounce off. He glanced down at his arm, and could see nothing. Mission accomplished.

He still found it unnerving trying to walk in such a state. Even though he didn't need to look at his feet or arms to walk, he was accustomed to seeing them in his peripheral vision during daylight hours. He felt momentarily out of balance as his mind worked to adapt to this new reality, but after a few moments he was able to walk at a brisk pace and catch up to the trio leaving the village.

He had to remind himself that he was invisible, not inaudible or weightless. On more than one occasion, he snapped a branch or twig underfoot, and Maynard would swirl around, looking for the source of the noise. If the situation weren't so serious, Will would have enjoyed spooking the man in this fashion.

Arthur was questioning Eva with fervor. "I know that some of your team members have been developing abilities for some time, Eva." Will was shocked. The three of them—Will, along with Elizabeth and Eva—had all been quite careful to hide their development. "I just don't know for certain *who* has developed them. You? Aldus? Matilda? Tell me!"

Eva simply shrugged. "I don't live in your neighborhood anymore, Arthur. You have no power over me here, any more than you did before. Stop wasting your breath."

Arthur leaned lower in the saddle. "I could make things uncomfortable for you, Eva."

Now she laughed. "I'm *leaving*, Arthur. What could you possibly do to me that would hurt? It's a bit late to threaten me with torture now."

"Who said *you* would be the one tortured, Eva?" The man's smile was cold and calculating, and his eyes lit up as understanding reached Eva's face.

"Your own *daughter*, Arthur?" Eva's voice was one of despair, and Will noted with a sickening sensation the look of triumph that flitted across the faces of her captors. "Not even you could be so cruel, could you? You've already

tortured her enough her entire life. Did you ever tell her you love her? Or was she just a slave, a piece of property in the form of your own flesh and blood that you introduced into a community of people who fled their own bondage?"

"She wasn't a slave, Eva. Payment was made for her services. And your affection for her has been obvious, which is my concern at the moment. If you don't talk before you leave this forest, then Elizabeth will suffer as a result."

"She was never a person to you, was she?" Eva's eyes were no longer angry, but full of pity. "How empty a life without love must be."

Arthur snorted. "My life is far from empty. I need names, Eva, not moral commentary. If you love her as you imply, then you won't allow your inaction to cause her harm. Speak!"

Eva rolled her eyes, but said nothing.

The head nod was subtle, but Will caught it. He saw it happen in slow motion: the sword moving silently from the sheath on Maynard's back; Arthur's sudden halt of his horse; Eva's movement stopping as well, as she looked up at Arthur with a questioning look on her face, puzzled as to why they were stopping; the look of horror on her face as Maynard's blade pierced her back below her rib cage and exited out on the other side; the look of triumph on Arthur's face as Eva's eyes began to cloud, matched by Maynard's face as he pulled the bloodied blade from her body.

Will dropped the invisibility and ran, screaming, toward the men. "How *could* you? How could you *do* this?" As he ran, he dispatched his healing nanos to Eva and sent a bombardment of Energy to her, praying it would be enough.

Arthur and Maynard looked stunned at Will's appearance. "How did you get out?" Arthur hissed, anger replacing the shock on his face.

"Same way I got in originally. I climbed." And before they knew what he was doing, Will had seized the sword from Maynard and hurled it back toward camp and buried an Energy-backed fist into the man's abdomen, then pulled Arthur from the horse and threw him bodily through the air. "Leave! Both of you! Go slinking back to the village on your bellies and brag about your deeds. There's no desire for such a sentence in our community. You've lost them now, Arthur."

And for the first time since he'd known the man, Arthur did as he was told. He made to mount the horse, but Will slapped the animal on its haunches, and the horse bounded away. Will's eyes burned with anger. "Walk."

As he moved away, Arthur twisted around. "What are you going to do?"

"Give her a proper burial. Leave."

Maynard stopped to pick up his sword. Will sent his nanos at the man, using them to form a glove around Maynard's hand, binding the sword to him. A thin coating of nanos surrounded the blade, outside the thick coating of blood still present there. Maynard would not be able to clean the blood from the sword, nor would he be able to remove it from his grasp, until Will decided to allow it. With luck, that would occur *after* Maynard's next trip to the latrine... and after his possession of the blade showed his guilt.

Once he was certain the two men were gone, Will dropped to his knees and held Eva, flooding her with Energy, amplifying the healing work the nanos were performing. *Stay with me, Eva. It's not your time to go just yet.*

I'm... so... tired... hurt... so... bad.

"Stay with me, Eva," Will said. He kept the avalanche of Energy up, then glanced around him. The trees. The trees were buzzing with excessive Energy, left in a heightened state by the frequent interactions he and Elizabeth had with the living things of the forest. He sent secondary Energy streams to the trees with what amounted to a plea: help me help her. Please.

The response was powerful: the influx of Energy poured into Eva's body, and the oxygen levels in that clearing rose dramatically. Will felt it, but it was obvious that the greater oxygen was doing wonders for Eva. Her complexion deepened from the ghost-white pallor she showed only moments earlier, and her breathing stabilized.

I'm going to make it, Will. You've saved me.

Will choked up, and curled his arms under Eva, holding her tight. When her eyes opened a few moments later, the light in them was strong, and she looked at him with admiration.

"I... don't know... how... you did... that... but... thank you." It was still a strain to speak, but she did manage a faint smile.

He smiled back. "You're welcome. I need to get you someplace safe, and I think I know just the spot. Ready to experience something a bit strange?"

Her laughter was weak, and she winced. "I should be... dead, and now... I'm... alive. What... could be... stranger... than that?"

With his Energy stores replenished, and with his thanks sent to the trees, Will teleported them into the cave he and Elizabeth used for Energy training.

Eva's eyes were wide with shock when Will set up Energy lights in the cave. "Elizabeth and I have come here to work on her Energy skills. I don't think anyone will find it from the outside, so it should be a safe place for you to stay until you fully recover. I have to finish a few things and then go back to the

village to deal with Arthur and Maynard.” His face fell. “That will include dealing with a young woman who will be devastated to learn of your death.”

Eva looked at him. “You aren’t going to tell her the truth?”

Will shook his head. “Not right away. She has to act in an expected manner, at least for now. And that will be best accomplished if what she hears about you remains true in her mind.”

“She’s going to hate you for this,” Eva said. She looked at him with compassionate sadness, a means of telling him that she didn’t disagree with his decision.

Will sighed. “I know. Right now, I need to keep her safe physically until she decides she’s ready to leave, and I don’t think that will happen if Arthur and others mention your death and she looks anything less than devastated. Arthur thinks she’s staying because he’s forbidden her to leave, but as soon as she’s ready? We’ll be gone.”

“You need to get going, Will. Take care of her. She knows that you care about her, and as much as your decision on telling her my actual status might sting in the short-term, in the long run she’ll understand it was for the best.”

“Thanks, Eva.” Will rose and teleported back to the spot he’d left earlier, wondering why it was that her statement about withholding information from someone he cared about for their own protection seemed so poignant.

He found a section of soft dirt, and using his hands—with an assist from his nanos—he dug a hole a few feet deep. He picked up a stone, tossed it in, and pushed the dirt back in. He found two sticks and used some vines to fashion a simple cross, which he pushed into the freshly dug dirt next to what he’d tell everyone was Eva’s grave. He stood, noted the blood staining his clothing and hands with a degree of grim satisfaction, and headed back to the community.

FALLOUT

Will entered the opened gate to the community, not certain what he'd see. Would it be business as usual? Would Arthur and Maynard be trying to spin what had happened after they'd left with Eva? Would they be trying to pretend *nothing* had happened? Would they be attempting to convince the community that Eva was dead and that Will was responsible?

Arthur was standing in front of the crowd, and from the looks on their faces, he'd at least told them that Eva was dead. "The criminal Will has been ordered to bury the dead woman, the woman that he murdered in cold blood. It is for us to decide his more permanent punishment."

"You are perhaps discussing the murder of the Trader Eva using the sword that Maynard never allows another person to touch?" Will asked.

The crowd turned to him, and the looks were, to his comfort, confused. Were they looking at a murderer, or a wrongly accused man?

"Will, there are two witnesses to your atrocity," Arthur said, trying to sound bored, attempting to use the tone to convince the crowd of his truthfulness. "And those two witnesses have informed everyone that you took Maynard's sword, stabbed Eva, and handed the sword back."

Will laughed. "That's interesting. So you expect these intelligent people to believe that one unarmed man took a sword away from our greatest warrior while you stood by and did nothing, stabbed a woman, and then handed the sword back?"

"We were caught by surprise."

"In the forest? Where leaves and twigs announce every step? How could you claim to be surprised?"

"Do not ask me to explain the actions of a criminal, or how he manages to

conceal himself until he is able to spring into action. You have blood on your hands, Will. What greater evidence is needed?”

Will arched an eyebrow. “There’s blood on the sword in Maynard’s hand. Should that not condemn him, rather than me?”

“As I’ve said, the sword was retrieved by Maynard after you used it to stab Eva. Do not blame him for your actions. That blood is on your hands, literally.”

“The sword was *retrieved* by Maynard? But I thought you said that I *handed* it to him?”

“The words mean the same thing, Will.”

“They most certainly do not. In the one case, you’re alleging that I gave him the sword. In the second case, you’re alleging that he had to act to get the sword back. Which is it?”

“Since your memory is so foggy, I will refresh it for you. Maynard had to remove it from you by force after you stabbed Eva. It took him very little effort. I was attempting to spare you your pride by saying that you handed it back to him. The lack of effort required by Maynard was truly a credit to his strength, and a condemnation of your weakness.”

Will paused. “If Maynard is so strong, and never lets his sword out of his grasp, and I’m so weak... how do you explain to this crowd that I’m supposed to have wrestled it away from him, and then controlled it long enough, without action on his part—or yours—to stab Eva?”

Arthur opened his mouth to speak, and then realized he was trapped. The murmuring of the crowd made it quite clear that they knew he’d manipulated them, that he was trying to blame something on Will.

“How did you get out?” Arthur asked, pivoting the conversation. “There was a guard posted by your room. He was still there when we returned, and said he’d not seen you leave.”

“Yes, you posted a guard by my door. I hadn’t been aware that I was under arrest, or had been charged with a crime. Why did you post a guard, Arthur? I’d been charged with nothing this morning. There was no purpose in posting a guard at all, and certainly nothing gives you the power to do so. Or perhaps you truly do believe yourself a monarch here, able to do whatever you wish?”

The crowd was noisier. And the angry looks were now being directed at Arthur and Maynard, not at Will.

“You have the abilities, don’t you?” Arthur shouted. “That’s how you got out! He’s been hiding information from us!” That at least got the crowd to pause.

Will shook his head. “I’ll show you how I got out,” he said, and watched the

look of triumph vanish from Arthur's face.

He led the crowd to his room, stepped past the surprised guard, and opened the door. He invited several of the villagers, including Silver the metalworker, and Joseph the carpenter, to join him inside. Arthur and Maynard were left outside, buried behind the crowds near Will's room.

Will showed them the hinge he'd built into the roof, using materials he'd been given during the construction of the Wheel and the water distribution system, extras they'd not needed. "I like to sit on my roof at times and look up at the stars, so I made this door in my roof to let me climb out. When I was trapped earlier, I suspected that I was being kept prisoner to make sure I couldn't follow Arthur and Maynard, and I worried that they intended to make Eva's banishment something she never *could* overcome, even if she wanted to do so. So I crawled out onto my roof, onto the wall, and slid down. Then I ran in the direction I suspected they were heading, and found fresh tracks I could follow."

"Show me," Joseph said, indicating the hatch.

Will pushed the hatch open and grasped the roof, using his forearm to keep the hatch open. He crouched as low as he could on his bed, then sprang up with his legs while pulling with his arms, and popped out the top of the opening, just as he'd done earlier that day. He sat himself on the edge, nearest the cross beam, so that his weight didn't damage the thatched roof. He then dropped back into his room, onto the cot, and let the spring pull the panel closed.

Joseph and Silver nodded to the crowd when they emerged. Will's story checked out. A few others pushed inside, including Arthur and Maynard, and they gaped at the contraption.

"When I finally caught up to them, Arthur was trying to get Eva to say that some of the Traders had developed special abilities, and name names. She didn't do so, of course, because she *couldn't*. All of the Traders have been denied sufficient zirple to develop any type of skills. Arthur waved his hand and stopped his horse, causing Eva to stop walking. Maynard kept walking and stabbed her through the back from behind. I was enraged and attacked them, unarmed though I was, but the damage was done. I buried her in the ground where she fell, stabbed in the back by a coward of a man too frightened to face her, and a so-called leader who made the order against the wishes of those he wants to lead."

The crowd was silent, and Arthur was sputtering, trying to find some way to regain his advantage. "I'm telling you, Will has abilities! He's been hiding them from us!"

“How can that be, Arthur?” Will asked. “As I just said, you’ve made it a point to keep me—and all of the Traders—away from the zirple. Yet you accuse *us* of having abilities, and hiding things from you and the others? You, who *openly* deny us the ingredient we need to *develop* those abilities?”

“Roland!” Arthur shouted. Will, sensing what was to come, made sure his Shielding was up. “Roland, you are the most advanced in abilities here. You can tell if someone has these abilities, can’t you?”

“If they’re strong enough, yes,” Roland replied. “After a while, I could feel when I’d walk by someone in that remote village who had been using the zirple for a long time. I should be able to do that here as well.”

Arthur smiled. “Check him, Roland.”

Roland walked toward Will, and the crowd tensed. Roland leaned in closer to Will, seeming almost to sniff for a hint of what Will called Energy, a move that was highly uncomfortable for Will due to the invasion of personal space.

After a few moments, Roland turned to Arthur and shook his head. “Nothing. There’s nothing there, Arthur. He has no more ability than I did ten years ago.”

Arthur’s eyes flashed with anger. “This isn’t over, Will,” he snapped. He then walked away, back toward his home, with Maynard in tow.

The crowd gradually dispersed, with many of the residents stopping to offer their apologies to Will for doubting him. Roland promised to make sure that he got his zirple, but Will shook his head. “Eva was killed over the obsession with that plant and what it’s supposed to do for us. Taking it now, for me, would be an insult to her memory, as if her sacrifice was my payment to receive it. No, give my share to the other Traders, and especially Elizabeth.”

Joseph, the carpenter, was the last to walk by. “That was an impressive thing you did in there. The door in the roof. How did you think of it?”

Will shrugged. “We used the same idea to open a door and let water out of the ducts. I thought I could make a larger one that would fit me.”

Joseph laughed. “It seems to have worked.”

As the carpenter began to move away, Will put a hand on his shoulder to stop him. “One moment, Joseph. Has anyone told Elizabeth about Eva yet?”

Joseph shook his head. “Not directly, Will. I was close to her room when Arthur told everyone, and I’m pretty sure I heard her crying. But I don’t think anyone has talked to her directly.”

Will took a deep breath. “That’s what I thought. I suppose I need to be the one to tell her.”

Joseph nodded. “I think that would be best. Eva was... Eva was like a

mother to her. We all saw that. I wish we'd done a better job of acting more like Eva. I truly hope that her loss helps us all to become better people."

"Don't hope for it, Joseph," Will replied. "Hope without action means nothing; it's just words and an idea. You have to make the decision on how you'll behave, and simply not accept any excuse or difficulty as a reason to act in any other way."

Joseph looked thoughtful, and then nodded. "Then I'll look for the strength to do the right thing. Thank you, Will." And the carpenter walked off.

Will headed to the right out of his room, and then turned left, heading toward the gate, toward Elizabeth's room. As he neared, he saw Arthur standing outside her room, as if undecided about something. When he saw Will approaching, the man frowned. "What are you doing here, Will?"

"I've come to talk to Elizabeth," Will replied. "She needs to know about Eva."

Arthur's face flickered with fear, but he composed himself. "What... what are you planning to tell her?"

"The truth. I doubt it will surprise her, but she will still be upset."

Arthur looked at the ground. "Can you... put in a good word for me?"

Will stared at him. "Why would I do that? More to the point, why do you *care* what she thinks? Her feelings—and her health—have never been a priority for you, or even a consideration. Why, now, should it matter?"

Arthur's face was like stone. "I don't expect you to believe this, Will, but I do love my daughter. She is going to be very angry at whomever she believes killed Eva, or anyone who even had a hand in it. I can't bear the thought of her looking at me like that."

Will glared at him. "Where was this parental conscience for the past dozen years when she needed it, Arthur? You can't say 'sorry' now because the community has turned on you, and *you* need *her* to have some semblance of control. Your behavior and choices put you here. I can't talk her out of what she's going to feel, and she has every right to whatever feelings she experiences. Don't ask me to tell her that you meant well when you thought you'd be getting away with stabbing the best friend she's had in the back—and the only parent and role model she's had since her mother was murdered—her mother died."

Arthur looked at him, a pleading look on his face, but Will's stony expression made it clear Arthur would get no words of assistance from him. The man turned without another word and entered his own home, his face clouded in concentration, a man still determined to turn this tragedy to his own advantage.

Will knocked lightly on the door. "Elizabeth? It's Will."

The door opened immediately. Her eyes were red, and her face was stained with tears, marred further by a look of pure anguish and desperation. She said nothing, but threw herself into his arms, sobbing without tears.

It's true, then, isn't it? Eva is gone.

Yes. Will replied, sensing the irony, and feeling the anguish at the lie he allowed her to believe. *She is gone.*

I don't want to live anymore, Will. They've taken my childhood. They've taken my real mother. They've taken my freedom. They've taken the woman who became my role model, a second mother. I don't have any hope left to keep me going; they're all beyond repair, no matter what they say. Help me die, Will. It's too painful to live anymore.

Will squeezed her tighter. *When my wife and son died, I felt as you did. I had nothing to live for. Yet I found my purpose in coming here and trying to make this community the special place its residents believed it could be. It's what you've always said has kept you here, that belief that something great will happen. That is your purpose. Eva would not want you to give up hope. Stay strong.*

Her body shuddered. *I can't do this alone, Will. I need your help.*

He smiled. *And you'll always have that. Forever.*

PARTY

The community returned to a degree of normalcy following Will's dismantling of Arthur's lies regarding the murder of Eva. The first day was one of silence and shock, but the days after brought forth tears of grief over Eva's death, and the circumstances that brought it about.

Arthur found himself shunned, at least to a degree. He wasn't denied food or water, or prevented from working, or excluded from the community bathing time, in a manner reminiscent of the shunning of the Traders. However, no one sought out his guidance, or listened to his commands. All who walked near him were wary, concerned that they, too, might be the victim of an order to Maynard or others to execute them in cold blood. Maynard suffered a similar treatment, but as a skilled metal worker, he at least had an activity to occupy his time.

Arthur had nothing, and no one, for he had isolated himself on a pedestal now cracked at its very foundation. The villagers realized that he'd never had any power over them. By silent consensus, the villagers all stopped paying into the lottery, realizing it was merely a mechanism for control of their most valuable resource, and Roland publicly severed his agreement with Arthur. The farmers tending the zirple crop were given the freedom to sell the zirple at whatever price and quantity they could fetch from the villagers—though they were forbidden from selling it to outsiders—and simply paid a percentage of their profits back to Roland. With that transition, Arthur lost his last source of income.

He didn't want to tap into the savings he'd accumulated over the years, and Arthur eventually found work, handling the cleaning of the barns and paddocks for the farmers. It was grueling, smelly work, of a type he had long avoided through his various schemes and manipulations. He'd long ago ceased to work

directly for his income, having received sufficient monies from Elizabeth's work and the lottery to keep himself well-fed and well-coifed since the earliest days of the village. The obvious shame he felt made Will want to feel pity, except that the shame he felt was over the work he was doing, rather than the circumstances forcing it.

Elizabeth had been invited to join a group of weavers traveling to a nearby city to sell their creations. The group wanted to try selling directly to others, but recognized that having an experienced Trader along would be beneficial, and Elizabeth was the obvious choice. She had a tremendous eye for fashion and, when not in a despondent mood, she had proved to be an excellent Trader. Will got nightly telepathic updates from her on the situation in the remote city, and he kept her up-to-date on the events back home. It was clear from these discussions that Elizabeth was still emotionally devastated over Eva's murder, for her purpose—trying to rehabilitate her father and the others—had so utterly failed that the woman she admired most in the world and tried to emulate the most, was dead. Elizabeth believed it was her failure to meet her goal that enabled Eva's death, and no amount of counterarguments from Will would change her mind. With each such discussion, Will's doubt over withholding the truth about Eva's current condition deepened, and he knew he'd need to tell her the truth before long.

Elizabeth wanted to know what Arthur was doing, and Will provided her with updates. Yes, Arthur was still slopping the pigs. No, he'd not expressed any remorse over Eva's loss. Yes, he still seemed to want Elizabeth's forgiveness, though he seemed incapable of voicing what he thought *required* forgiveness.

The man continued taking his zirple, chewing the powdered form with great concentration, seeming to want to will the root to work more quickly. He became proficient in its preparation, and like Elizabeth before him, he began earning a few coppers a week preparing the concoction for others, funds he used to purchase his meals. He also began to work with the bakers in preparing the daily bread the villagers consumed, and was eventually granted entry into their profession, thus becoming entitled to a share of their income. Will refused to buy anything from the man out of principle, though he heard from others that he showed some promise as a baker.

When the weavers returned with Elizabeth, it was clear that the young woman was still struggling to recover emotionally. Her traveling companions raved at her skill, and Elizabeth let Will know that she'd made about twenty gold coins in profit, after she'd purchased another new dress. Her hair had been

recently brushed, likely as part of her work in Trading, but her eyes were still red and sunken. She'd clearly spent most nights in her bed crying, a fact confirmed by several of the weavers who had accompanied her.

When Elizabeth entered the gate wearing her new dress, surrounded by weavers chattering about the success of the mission, Arthur, standing in the manure he was shoveling in one of the paddocks, glared at her. When she looked his way, though, his face softened, perhaps as a means to earn some sympathy. But Elizabeth merely looked at him with her dead eyes and walked to her room, shutting the door behind her. Will watched Arthur, watched as his face got the look he wore when scheming, and became quite worried. Whatever thoughts he had, however, he buried quickly. Outside his moral issues with probing someone's thoughts, Will was concerned about exposing his own abilities; many, including Arthur, had progressed enough in that area that they'd notice someone else picking through their minds.

After dark every night, Will climbed out onto his roof in the manner he'd described during his verbal take down of Arthur, jumped down outside the walls, and walked a few hundred yards into the forest. He'd move in a different direction each night, building his Energy and building up the plant life in the forest. The trees, in their fashion, seemed to know him, and he'd often feel the flow of Energy start toward him before he was able to initiate the process. There were other benefits as well; the foragers began to report that there was an unusually large crop of larger-than-usual fruits, berries, and other plant produce in the forest.

After his private meditation with the trees and other wildlife, Will would expand his senses to ensure he was alone, and then teleport to the cave to visit with Eva. She'd progressed remarkably well, and just the day before, Will had felt comfortable recalling the healing nanos that had helped save her life following the sword attack by Maynard and Arthur.

"How is she?" Eva asked. It was the first thing she asked each day when he arrived.

"She's still very sad, and her primary thought is that her life isn't worth living anymore," Will said, his head low, his voice dull and full of pain. "I've asked her to consider if you would want her to give up and quit, with the hope that it would motivate her to find a new purpose in life, or even ask me to help her leave this village for good. She just says that it's no longer possible to ask you your opinion, because her father ordered you murdered." He glanced up at Eva. "She believes that she's destined to be just like him, and if that's her

destiny, to be one so full of evil and hate, that she doesn't deserve to live, that someone—specifically, me—should kill her now and prevent the unleashing of another monster upon the world.”

Eva sighed. “She needs to get away from him, Will. I know she went on the trip with the weavers a few weeks ago, but it's not the same thing. She doesn't even have the spirit to run, and certainly not enough to try to figure out how to survive on her own. She doesn't see her own worth, her own capabilities... and she doesn't seem to want to consider that you might well be joining her when she leaves.”

Will nodded. “I know, and that's my concern. I'm always trying to find a way to get her to leave, now that Arthur's lost the ability to order her to stay, but I can't *force* her to want to live and survive. She has to regain that desire on her own, and once she does, she'll thrive. I know she has much to mourn and has had far too much to mourn in her life. There needs to be a spark to relight that fire we both know is inside her... and I'm not talking about her Energy.”

“You could tell her. About me.”

Will sighed. “I'd like to do that, because I know it would make all of the difference in the world. It's just that...”

“You're afraid of how she'll react after all of this time.”

Will nodded. “I'm a coward, and I know it.”

Eva laughed. “You're not a coward, Will, any more than Elizabeth is. You've spent three years in a strange new world doing what you thought best to help an enslaved young girl become a free and independent woman. I still don't quite understand *why* that's been your purpose, but you've done an admirable job. You've bettered the entire community in the process, as stubborn as the lot of us has been in accepting that help.”

Will sighed. “I'll tell her tomorrow. I owe her the truth, regardless of her level of disappointment in me.”

Eva nodded. “And on that note, I'll tell you my own news. I'm heading out tonight.”

Will stared at her. “You're leaving at night? Isn't that...?”

“Dangerous? Of course.” She smiled. “But I'm already dead, so what's the risk? At night, there's no chance I'll run into anyone from the community who might ask difficult questions about how a dead woman is walking around. My Energy skills are reasonably strong thanks to your tutelage these past few weeks, which should help me. And I do have my share of our profits from the last Richland trip.”

“Take mine,” Will said. “I doubt I’ll need it anymore, and you’ll certainly want as much in reserve as you can. I can always make more if I need it, but with the current state of the community I don’t think I’ll need to worry about fleeing any time soon.”

Will countered Eva’s protests, and in the end they agreed that she’d take half his gold; the remainder would be for use by Elizabeth should she ever decide to leave as well. Eva embraced him, and gave him a kiss on the cheek. “Thank you, Will, for everything. Now, go and take care of our favorite redhead.”

Will smiled, and teleported back to his room. He lay down on the cot, and was soon fast asleep. He woke some time later, refreshed, and walked outside to discover that twilight had fallen over the village. He’d slept the day away. He walked toward the gate and discovered an unusual bevy of activity for the hour.

The carpenters were handing out several dozen long poles to all who walked by, including Will, who accepted it with a look of confusion. “What’s this for?”

“Far too much gloom around here lately,” Joseph replied. “We’re going to have a celebration for all of the success we’ve achieved. The torches will keep everything visible until late into the evening. The cooks and bakers are making pies and cakes, the brewers are going to put kegs of ale and wine out, and in general, we’re all going to have fun.”

Will grinned. “That sounds delightful.”

Joseph nodded toward the front. “Arthur’s handling collecting a donation to pay everyone for their contributions.” At Will’s look of dismay, Joseph shook his head. “Don’t worry. We’ve calculated it at 5 silver pieces each. Everyone knows how much they should get. He can’t keep any extra without our knowing about it. Says he’s trying to get back into everyone’s good graces after... everything that’s happened lately. The party was his idea, in fact.”

This time, Will frowned only inwardly. Arthur was up to something. But what?

Will helped drive the long torches into the ground, and Silver lit one torch that was used to light the others. The ring of torches provided a steady stream of light, and the mood was one of happiness. The cakes seemed to taste better than ever, the wine was delicious, and more than one villager remarked that they could make a fortune selling the ale they drank.

“You mean *another* fortune?” Will asked, arching an eyebrow. Roars of laughter erupted.

As the evening wore on, Arthur began making his way around to the bakers, chefs, and brewers, his face flushed from drinking his share of the ale. He

distributed the monies out to the bakers and chefs, his obsequious praise for their effort obvious in its intent to pander, but appreciated nonetheless. When he reached the brewers, however, he found himself five silver coins short. He frowned, then slapped his head.

“I forgot to contribute my share. I’ll be right back.”

Arthur left and ran to his room. He emerged, just a few moments later, looking both confused and concerned. He scanned the crowd, as if trying to divine the answer to some unspeakable question, and his eyes fell upon Elizabeth. His daughter had brushed out her flaming red hair, put on a new dress, and generally looked as happy as he’d seen her for a while. She was still quite reserved, but did engage in some conversation with the weavers, likely discussing their recent Trading mission.

Arthur’s eyes lit up at the sight of her, and he turned on his heel and marched into Elizabeth’s room.

When he emerged a moment later, his face had turned purple with rage, and he stalked toward Elizabeth like a crazed lion hunting its prey. She noticed him coming, and her eyes widened in fear at his approach.

“Thief!” Arthur raged, as he continued to move toward her, drawing the attention of every villager. All conversation ceased as they watched the man.

“You worthless child!” Arthur screamed. “After all of the years I cared for you and fed you, after all the years I provided for you when you had nothing... you would *steal* from me?” He seized her by the hair and hurled her to the ground, where she looked up at him, fear on her face and tears in her eyes. Those she’d been talking to, nervous at what might happen, backed away rather than stand up to Arthur. Their disgust at his actions in murdering Eva failed to extend to standing up to him when he looked like he might harm someone else.

“I went to my hidden space for storing my coins, because I need to pay my five silvers to the brewers. I keep track of exactly how many coins I should have, Elizabeth. And they are *all* gone. I know there’s only one person in this entire community who knows where I keep them. And I *know* that means that only one person could have stolen them from me!”

The villagers had gathered around, the tension palpable. Will was becoming concerned, for Arthur’s rage at all that had happened to him was coming out in an uncontrollable fashion.

Arthur advanced on Elizabeth as the young woman tried to get back to her feet, pushing her back to the ground. “Where’s my money, Elizabeth?” he screamed again. “Where is it? I demand that you give it back!”

Elizabeth finally found her voice, and her courage, as she scrambled to her feet to face him. “No,” she said, and her voice was firm. “I’ll give nothing to you. Any money you had was earned through *my* labor, through *my* suffering. Any material benefits you gave me, however grudgingly, were given to me as part of your duty as my father. Those coins were, and are, rightfully mine.”

Arthur’s eyes widened. “You admit it,” he whispered. “You admit to stealing from me. You won’t even deny it.” He leaned toward her. “And you *will* be punished for this.”

For the second time, Will saw Arthur hit Elizabeth across the face.

“Stop!” Will shouted, trying to work his way through the crowd. For the second time, he found himself seized from behind and thrown through the air, away from someone he loved who needed his help.

Maynard advanced on him, eyes glinting in the twinkling torchlight. “Stay out of it, Will. The girl is a thief, and she’ll be punished as she deserves.” He drew his sword and advanced on Will. “Give me an excuse,” he whispered, a maniacal grin spreading on his face, “give me an excuse to run you through like I did Eva.”

Will spun, bringing his leg up to knock the sword aside, while simultaneously forming a protective skeleton around his body with the nanos. Maynard recovered, and raised his sword high overhead, looking to deliver the fatal blow.

Will risked a quick glance at Elizabeth. The first blow from Arthur had bloodied her mouth and loosened a tooth, but she still stared him down, defiant, her blue eyes blazing. “Stop hitting me,” she said, her bloodied teeth clenched.

Will rolled backward, avoiding the sword, and sprang to his feet, in time to witness Arthur strike Elizabeth across the face again, bruising the other side. Her eyes remained defiant, mocking him, warning him. “I said, *stop hitting me!*” Her voice was a snarl.

Maynard’s strike had embedded the sword into the ground, and Will raced around him, trying to get to Elizabeth through the crowd, but Maynard caught him again and the two men tumbled to the ground, rolling around, each trying to get the upper position to better enable their punches and elbow blows to land.

Neither of them could miss the verbal altercation, however, as the rest of the villagers had gone silent in morbid fascination at the scene between Arthur and Elizabeth, none of them saying a word to defend the young woman from the man they’d finally unmasked as a manipulator seeking power. They saw the palpable rage in Arthur’s face; saw the vein pulsing in his forehead. “You *stole* from me,

you worthless child, and now you talk back? That will *never* happen again!” He pulled his fist back, not intending to slap her this time, but rather, intending to shatter bone and cartilage with his fist, to scar her permanently for her offense, to finally break her spirit entirely to his will. With a battle cry, he hurled his whole body into the punch that sailed toward her already-battered face.

The punch never landed.

EXECUTION

Everything happened in slow motion after Arthur's fist began to move towards Elizabeth's face.

Elizabeth's face contorted in anger, and her blue eyes burned with an internal fire. Hers was an anger fueled over a decade of mistreatment, a decade in which Arthur had made it clear that he saw her as nothing more than a means to an end, the ends being his own personal wealth and power. He had been quite willing to discard her when it became clear she would no longer be able to help him reach those ends. And it had gotten worse; she'd learned to earn her own way, and any dependence she had on him, and thus any power he held over her, had vanished. His response was not pride in her accomplishments, but fury that she'd ruined yet another opportunity for him to use her. And now, the physical pain of his blows was the final ignition on the powder keg of anger. Her fury exploded, and Will and all the others watched as Elizabeth's Energy exploded outward, knocking Arthur fifteen feet through the air, into the paddock housing the barnyard animals. Others standing close to them were knocked off their feet by the force of the blast.

The entire courtyard went deathly silent; even Will and Maynard, locked in combat, stopped to stare at the sight. Elizabeth had not moved. Arthur had flown back from her as if hurled. Yet he'd flown much too far for anyone, even Maynard, to have thrown him—and Elizabeth had never touched the man. The conclusion reached by all of the villagers was immediate and unmistakable: Elizabeth had developed the abilities they'd all long desired, and to a far greater degree than any of them. Even the Traveler Roland, who had brought the zirple root home with him, was incapable of such an act, of such power. Clearly, Elizabeth had learned of something extra, something special, and she'd kept that

knowledge to herself.

Will looked at Elizabeth, her flaming hair matching the still burning fire in her blue eyes, and then looked at Arthur, as the man slowly struggled to rise to his feet inside the paddock where he'd landed. The initial look on his face gave away everything, his emotions and thoughts so loud that Will believed he would have heard them before he ever knew what Energy was.

It had all been a farce.

Arthur had seen amazing things, but he believed those things were the realm of witchcraft, practiced by those well-trained in such arts. It wasn't something a normal person like him could ever achieve, or any of the villagers, and certainly not a little girl. But the *dream* could still be there, a dream that could be sold as much as a well-crafted chair or a finely-sharpened dagger. And it was a dream that only he would have the ability to sell. He'd sold it well, had earned a comfortable income and became the dominant political force in the village because of it. It had all been predicated on using the young woman he now stared at. By demonstrating the abilities he'd long preached, but had never believed, this young woman had defied him and his understanding of reality.

In Arthur's mind, Elizabeth had betrayed them all, but most of all, she'd betrayed him.

She'd done exactly what her mother had told her to do in such a circumstance, and her mother, in doing so, had committed an act considered the highest treason by this village of newly wealthy, aspiring magicians. That Elizabeth could watch her own mother die at their hands and dare to deny them her knowledge was the worst sin, the greatest sin possible, and the flame of anger needed no spark from Arthur to ignite.

Something primal cracked in the psyche of the community. They'd believed in the zurple, had seen minor advancements, and yet, none of them, not even Roland, could have done what Elizabeth had just done. They did not understand, and they were fearful. And they reacted as human beings have often acted throughout history when confronted with something strange and unexplainable.

They lashed out.

The crowd roared in its fear and its fury, and advanced as one angry mob on Elizabeth, seemingly oblivious to the possibility that she might do to them what she'd done to Arthur. She was still in her own shock over the events, stunned that she'd lost control, and she didn't realize what the crowd was doing until it was too late. She was suddenly on the ground, being kicked and pummeled by those who hated her for her silence, and feared her for her skill. Every villager

pressed in to lay a hand to her, including the weavers she'd recently befriended, and including the Traders, who'd welcomed her when no one else would.

Maynard recovered from his initial shock, and took advantage of Will's stunned surprise to roll on top of Will. "Now she'll join her mother and Eva, three troublemakers, all getting their just rewards." His verbal jab startled Will back to his senses, and awakened Will's own fire. Maynard threw a punch which Will easily blocked, and Will flipped them around, watching as Arthur moved into the angry mob. Surely he'd speak up. Surely, he'd defend his child.

The mob froze momentarily, as if suddenly unsure of what they were doing, and Elizabeth looked up at her father through the defensive mask of her arms, one eye already swollen shut, her nose broken, cheek bones shattered. "Help... me... Father!" she gasped, as best she could with the oxygen pummeled from her lungs, and with her face bashed by boot and fist.

Arthur stood where he was. "Father? Why do you call *me* Father? I have no child." His eyes turned completely cold. "I wish you'd never been born."

With his words, Elizabeth's will to live shattered, and she lowered her arms to the mercy of the crowd, no longer caring what happened, no longer bothering to defend herself from the death they wished to inflict upon her.

"Elizabeth!" Will screamed. *Elizabeth, don't you dare give up!*

Maynard, noting his distraction, pummeled Will in the stomach, leaving Will gasping for air, and suddenly Will no longer bothered to maintain the charade. He allowed his Energy to fuel his muscles, and suddenly he was a demon, too fast to be seen, too strong to restrain, and within only a minute, Maynard cowered before him, too terrified to move or resist. Will seized the man's beloved sword, the sword used to murder Eva and threaten Elizabeth, raised it high overhead, and slammed it down... through the man's tight, thick leather clothing, effectively pinning him to the ground. He threw an elbow to Maynard's head, rendering him unconscious. Then he turned, and was horrified at the sight of the mob.

He sent every nano he had to form a protective shield around her, to prevent any further damage being done, and dispatched his healing nanos from his own body into hers, calling forth Energy from every living thing in the forest to aid in her healing. *Elizabeth!* He screamed into her mind. *You cannot give up. Eva wouldn't want that.*

Somewhere deep inside, she found the strength to respond. *If I die, I'll see her again.*

And Will realized the time for truth had come. *She's not dead, Elizabeth. She*

fought, and she lived. She's waiting for you, and has been waiting for you to decide to leave. Fight, Elizabeth! And I'll fight as well.

He stood, screamed a battle cry louder than any mortal man had ever screamed before, and launched himself at his full Energy-enhanced speed into the crowd, acting as a battering ram, knocking the incensed villagers away from her like bowling pins. As his Energy recharged, he blasted out an Empathy push of intense guilt and remorse, a deep shame for what they'd done.

He rolled out of his dive on the ground, sprang to his feet, and crouched over Elizabeth to protect her from further attacks. "What are you people *doing*?" he screamed, disbelief etched into every syllable, his head moving to look at each and every villager.

"She's got *powers!*" one of them shouted. "She's been hiding something from us, from all of us! She threw Arthur across the courtyard without touching him!"

"And this is your response to someone who's figured something out? You beat her to death? You *murder* her in cold blood? Not a single one of you was attacked, were you? Did she threaten any of you? How will you ever learn what she's learned if you've killed her—no, *murdered* her?"

The silence was deafening, and in the early evening darkness, illuminated by the burning torches, Will could hear crickets chirping outside the walls. *Elizabeth! You must stay with me. I will get you out of here.* He projected Energy to her, willing her to live, but he received no response. He reached down to cradle her in his arms, and her head lolled to the side. Had he been too long delayed by Maynard's attack to help her? If she died because of his actions... Will knew he'd kill the man, all sense of self-control abdicated to his grief over the death of the young woman he'd been sent back in time to save. Not for the first time, he wished he'd acted differently and simply taken her away as soon as he'd arrived. But he'd hated being forced into making his decision to travel here, even though it was the decision he would have made anyway, and he refused to use the same tactic with Elizabeth.

And now she was dying due to his dedication to that principle.

Will returned his focus to the crowd. "All of you have fallen into a trap. No, it's not a trap set by Arthur, though it's one he's manipulated to his advantage for a very long time. The trap is a comfort, a satisfaction with things the way they are. Even a dozen years ago, those of you here the longest, found yourselves with freedom and prosperity you'd never imagined possible for someone with your background. Before you'd reached that level of comfort, no effort was too

great to meet the goals you'd set for yourselves. As you began reaching those goals, as that first small camp became a village with walls, with its own private economy, with the foresight to plan plenty of room to produce and store those products of your labor to sell elsewhere... you feared the loss of that comfort more than anything else. That vision of the first Travelers, the mere *idea* that you could develop abilities so incredible, was desirable... but you were *comfortable*. You wanted the benefit, to be sure... and who wouldn't? But the fire to achieve something new had vanished, the desire to risk it all for a greater goal snuffed out, because you had health, you had freedom, and you had *money*."

He felt a new surge of Energy from the trees, and redirected it to Elizabeth. *Stay with me*. His thought was forceful, a shout to wake her up. *It's not your time to go*.

Aloud, he continued speaking to the crowd. "You had become so proficient at *making* money, however, that you were able to spend it without great concern. None of you were in danger of starving to death. And so Arthur, ever the manipulator, but one not able to make crafts and earn an income in that fashion, offered to trade his daughter's time—and her health as well—to all of you in exchange for a portion of that money. It seemed like a great benefit to everyone, didn't it? All of you stay comfortable, working your crafts and trading them for money; Arthur collects money for the potential—the *potential*—to do the impossible. Everyone is happy; it's a tiny amount of money to you, and the payoff, if it ever comes, is more than worth such a small amount. Everyone is happy that is, except the forgotten one, the child of slaves made a slave, the child who had no say in the role she'd play in this community."

Will slid his right arm under Elizabeth's legs, keeping his left around her back, and he stood, lifting her limp body off the ground, cradling her head towards his chest. "And this is the result of that approach. You showed fire and resolve in building the Wheel, but that was still *comfortable*, wasn't it? You were just building something else, and that was easy."

Will turned and started walking away from the crowd. Arthur, who had watched, expressionless, as his daughter had been beaten with his blessing, walked toward Will, his face full of fury. "Will!"

Will paused, and then turned to face him.

Arthur approached with caution, his steps reminiscent of a man advanced in years, but he wasn't looking at Will as he moved. He looked at nothing but Elizabeth's shattered face as he moved with a leaden pace towards them. Arthur's expression changed, first as if he'd undergone some type of internal

trauma in looking at her, though it seemed more the face of one reliving their own nightmare than truly seeing the nightmare of another. It was the second expression that intrigued Will; it was the look of a man who has realized something shocking and profound.

After a moment, Arthur finally looked up at Will. His eyes showed none of the fury of a moment ago. "Is she... gone?"

Will glared at him. "I will do what I can, Arthur. But I fear you are looking at the third woman this village has murdered in the past five years."

He turned and, with some difficulty, pushed open the door of Elizabeth's room, using extreme caution to lay her on her bed. He then walked back to the door, glaring at the crowd that gazed at him with eyes of fear and remorse, none daring to ask the question they all wanted answered.

Will looked at Arthur. "Do not disturb me, Arthur. I suggest you engage the carpenters to build that box you always said Elizabeth would use to exit this village. Barring a miracle, she'll need it."

And he shut the door and closed the curtain.

Will flooded Elizabeth's body with Energy as he checked her pulse; it was there, but quite faint. He listened to her heart, uncertain why he did, but he learned nothing new. He took her hand and squeezed.

Talk to me, Elizabeth. This is not the end for you. You must fight to live!

He finally felt it, a small trickle of Energy back, and smiled. She was still with him. *I'm still here with you, Elizabeth. And I won't give up until you're walking around and smiling again.*

He heard a sound he'd never heard before, a sound he couldn't recognize, coming from outside her room. He heard something even more remarkable. *What... is... that... noise?* Her voice, though it might be inside his head, was one of the most beautiful sounds he could ever remember hearing.

Let me check. He made as if to let go of her hand, and felt her grip tighten.

No... please... don't... let go.

He nodded at this request, though she couldn't see him. *I'm going to try something.*

The Energy in her body was doing its job; she was still physically decimated, but if Energy was coming from her, her body was producing more, something it wouldn't do if she was still in danger of dying.

He sent his Energy out of the room, out into the courtyard area where the crowd had gathered, and increased the amount until he was able to see and hear outside. *Can you see that?*

Yes. Her inner voice was still weak. *What... are they... doing?*

Will had no answer to that for several moments. He watched as Arthur stared at the door, his face contorting more and more as the moments passed, until his face shuddered and a trace of moisture fell from his eyes. His grief forced him to his knees, and he bent over, the only sign of his grief the heaving of his body.

As they'd so often done since Will arrived—and likely before he'd arrived—the villagers took Arthur's lead. The grief in their faces when Will had shut the door had been genuine; the wracking cries and sobs were now acceptable to display in public, and many joined in the tears.

He did love you, Elizabeth. Will felt almost guilty for saying so; despite the visual evidence, he had no reason to trust anything about the man.

Neither did his daughter. *He's... not grieving... my loss... Will.* Her voice betrayed no sense of hurt. *I... was never... a daughter... to him. I was... a possession... to be sold... over and over... again... for money... and power. He... said so... himself... remember?*

Will did remember, since it was the time he thought he'd lost her. Not physically; the nanos and Energy combination could work miracles. When Arthur's response to the mob attack on his daughter was to deny her, her spirit had been crushed, and without the will to live, no amount of technology or Energy could keep her alive.

I'm getting you out of here this time, Elizabeth. Don't argue with me. Please.

She didn't. *How?*

He considered. *You can't walk out of here; they'll hound both of us the rest of their days if you seem to come back from the dead.*

You can't... teleport me... out of here either. Too many of them... would detect that. She paused. *They need to think... I'm dead... don't they?*

Will considered. *What do you want to do, Elizabeth? If you want to walk out of here in full sight of everyone, completely healed, then we'll do that. If you want me to teleport you out of here so that they know you're alive but aren't sure how you left, then I'll do that. If you want them to think you're dead so that they never bother you again... then that's what I'll do.*

It wasn't lost on him that she'd not opened her eyes or moved since they'd entered this room, and yet he was having a complete conversation with Elizabeth.

I don't want them... to come after me.... And I don't want you... staying here... if that's what... you want to do... having to... answer questions... about how a... nearly dead woman... got away from you... and escaped.... That

means... I need to seem... dead to them. They need... to see me. I... I'm not sure if I can pretend to be dead.

Will considered this point. How could he help her to seem dead? He couldn't stop her from breathing; she'd most assuredly die in such a scenario and likely panic and move around. He needed to ensure that he was the only one to touch her; a touch of any type would provide the chance to *feel* her breathing or pulse or heartbeat or warmth. Yet at her current rate of healing, she'd clearly be fully alive and healed in only a few hours. He'd need her to leave this village, in full sight of everyone, but keep her *out* of sight as much time as possible.

An idea formed, one so crazy it seemed impossible that it could work. It was also incredibly risky.

I have an idea, Elizabeth. We're going to have to put you in a coffin, though.

He felt her panic at these words. *No! Will, please... don't do that... to me. I'll be... too frightened... to pretend to be dead.*

You won't have to pretend, Elizabeth. I have a way to help you seem dead, so that you won't have to act. There is a risk, though. Do you trust me?

Her answer was immediate. *I trust you, Will. I trust you with my life. Do what needs to be done.*

He nodded, though she'd still not opened her eyes. *I'll need my hand back for a while.*

With reluctance he could sense, she let her grip loosen.

Will took a deep breath, closed his own eyes, and extended his senses out once more, this time to his room, to the bag with his medical supplies. He teleported the small bag into the room; he'd tell anyone who asked that he'd been in the habit of carrying it in one of his pockets lately. That much was true; he'd mistakenly left it behind this evening after his much needed bit of rest.

He rummaged through his bag, digging through the various herbs he'd purchased for his role as village doctor, until he found the item he was looking for.

I have something here called opium, Elizabeth. It will make you very, very sleepy. I need to give you enough to make sure that you stay asleep until I can safely teleport you. You will be asleep when you are in the coffin. When you wake up, you will be free. Do you understand?

There was only the slightest hint of hesitation. *It sounds scary... but I trust you.*

He hoped he was worthy of such monumental trust.

He used his nanos to form a crude syringe, small enough to be hidden in her

clothing, but large enough to hold the entire quantity of opium. He wasn't sure if opium was typically injected or absorbed by other means, but doubted that having a "dead" woman chew or swallow medication was in line with their goals.

There was a knock at the door. "Will?" It was Arthur. "Is she... is she..."

"I have one last thing I can try, Arthur. But I need quiet. Move away from the door, please."

He carefully injected the smallest possible amount of the opium into her system, and a few moments later her internal sigh of relief told him that it was working. *I don't hurt as much anymore, Will. Is this what dying feels like?*

I haven't died recently, Elizabeth. He smiled faintly. *The opium lessens the pain as it makes you sleepy.*

He took his time, injecting minute amounts of opium into her body and assessing the effect, until her face seemed a serene picture of the perfect calm of one no longer suffering. Her breathing wasn't noticeable unless he laid his head down on the table next to her; only then could he detect the faint rise and fall of her chest as she breathed. He used additional nanos to attach the needle to her arm inside the sleeve of her dress. He withdrew most of the healing nanos, leaving behind only one-tenth the full amount. Not certain if it would work, he directed them to work only on internal injuries; surface injuries and cosmetic repair would need to wait until the ruse of burying a dead Elizabeth was completed.

He steadied himself into an appropriate mix of anguish and anger, took a deep breath, and walked to the door. Every eye in the community snapped to him immediately, their grief-stricken, tear-lined faces hoping that he'd bring news of a miracle, rather than the news of dread they knew must be true.

Allowing a tear to form in his eye, Will choked out the words. "She's gone. I tried everything I could. The injuries were simply too much."

The silence was so complete that it seemed that even the nighttime wildlife had gone silent in mourning. Arthur was, for the first time since Will had arrived in the village, unable to find a thing to say. Will felt he must provide the guidance they needed.

"We must perform a proper burial for her. We will need a coffin; nothing fancy, a simple wooden box with a lid." Will looked at the carpenters, and especially Joseph, as he spoke the words, though his eyes flicked to Arthur at the word "box," a gesture the man noticed.

Will then faced the Traders, a group that had made the most notable effort to

act as a type of family for the troubled young woman they were about to bury. Yet in the end, they'd aided in her final destruction, a fact that their faces reflected all too clearly. "She should be buried next to her mother. There should be shovels among the tools the farmers use. The torches will provide the light you need. Go now." They did not question the request to dig the grave in the darkest part of the night, for none of them would be able to sleep. They turned as a group to seek out the shovels they'd need to dig.

"The rest of you should help those two groups," Will said. "Help the carpenters find the wood they need to build her coffin. Help dig the grave. I will prepare the body for burial. Do not disturb me." He turned and re-entered her room, shutting the door behind him. He directed his nanos to seal the door and window shut, in the event the curious might want to know what he was doing.

He walked over to her, rested a hand on her warm, bruised cheek, and bent over to kiss her on the top of her head. He thought he detected a twitch of her lip, the closest thing to a smile she could manage in her opium-induced sleep.

Then he lay down on the dirt floor, curled up into a fetal position, and cried silently as exhaustion took him and he fell into a deep sleep.

BURIAL

Will woke, his back in pain from sleeping on the dirt floor. The pain was a reminder that the nightmare of the previous evening was no dream. He stood and walked over to Elizabeth, noting that her external injuries—bruises, swollen eyes, lacerations, and cuts—were still extensive and visible. He put his head down on the cot next to her, watching, ensuring the faint rise and fall of her chest still occurred, showing that she lived.

Satisfied, he reached out to her. *Are you awake?*

I'm starting to hurt a lot again, Will.

He nodded, then smiled, realizing she couldn't see him. *The effects of the opium wear off after a time. I need to talk to the people outside and then I'll come back in and give you more, so that you're asleep when we put you into the coffin.*

I mean I'm hurting about what he did to me, Will. About what he allowed everyone to do. About what he said last night, when he could have stopped all of this.

Will cringed, his anger at Arthur having reignited. *It infuriates me, Elizabeth, to know what's been happening to you. I wish you had let me take you away from here when I first arrived, but I know you wanted to try to help him redeem himself. I fear there's no redemption for him, though. The fact that he's hurt you in so many ways... it makes me want to end his life.*

No, Will. Her plea was plaintive, the emotional trauma dampening her usual forcefulness in their conversations. That's what he'd do, what Maynard would do. Don't be like them, Will. Don't ever be like them. Don't ever, ever kill anyone, least of all on my account. I'm not worth it.

You're more than worth it! Do not let them define who you are, Elizabeth,

any more than you want me to define myself by what they are. The world sees you as the citizens of Richland see you, as the citizens of the town you visited with the weavers see you. Don't define the world by the attitude and approaches of two evil men. You are your mother's daughter, a woman full of love and compassion, even for those who would harm you and hurt you for their own good. If that's not someone worth saving, and admiring... then I don't know who is.

There was a pause. *That attitude only succeeded in getting me killed.*

You're very much alive, Elizabeth. And soon, you'll be more alive than you've ever been before, finally free of the clutches of those who seek to do you harm. Free to live as you see fit, to have the love you offer to everyone returned in kind, rather than abused. Yours is a life worth living, Elizabeth, and a life worth saving. It's been my personal mission to make sure that you are able to do just that.

She was quiet for a long time. He took the opportunity to inject more opium into her system, enabling her to relax into a deep, death-like sleep. He injected as much as he had the previous night, and a bit more besides; it would not do to have her wake up prematurely.

He opened the door to find all of the villagers milling around outside. They were prepared with a coffin for her body, a simple pine box with a lid that would be nailed shut to seal her in for all eternity. The Traders had returned; he could see the shovels leaning against the wall by the gate, still covered with dirt from their exertions.

He glanced once more at the coffin, and realized he was going to put the woman he loved into that box, that airtight box. She'd have no air to breathe. Would he allow her to be killed under the guise of smuggling her seemingly-dead body out of the village? How could he keep her breathing? He choked up at that point, wondering if, after everything he'd tried to do to save her life, he'd managed to set himself a trap he couldn't escape, a trap that would mean her death after all. How could he fail now?

Aldus walked over, along with Matilda, and the two of them put comforting hands on his shoulders, attempting to help him through his grief. "We need to finish this, Will," Aldus said. "The Traders will carry the coffin. But we need... her... before we can do that." He allowed himself to glance through the open door at Elizabeth, and he choked up a bit himself.

Will composed himself. "Not all of the Traders, Aldus." He looked over where the remaining trio stood. "Not Eleanor."

The woman blinked, her face full of shock and anger. “Why... why do you say that?”

“Elizabeth should be carried by those who were her friends, who never truly denied her. While none of the Traders hurt her and did nothing to stop those who did last night, they did do everything they could to ease her life of pain while she lived. All but one. You were advised to treat her better, Eleanor, and advised *how* you could do so. The Traders repeatedly made you aware of her suffering. Most here followed the example of Arthur because no one ever suggested to them to do otherwise. Not so with you. Your words, as I recall, were: ‘better her than me.’ She was a far better woman than you, and you denied her a better chance of living a decent life here. No, Eleanor, you verbally and directly rejected her. You’ll not carry her to her final resting place. Step aside.”

Eleanor opened her mouth to speak, anger on her face, but was silent at a withering glance from Will. She instead chose to look closely at her feet.

Will glanced into the crowd and noticed one of the weavers, a woman named Kay, standing there. He recalled that Kay had, in a fashion, befriended Elizabeth, and had, in fact, been the one chatting amicably with Elizabeth the night before, right when Arthur’s rampage triggered the events leading to this moment. Kay noticed Will’s glance, looked around, and then back at Will. “Me?” she asked.

Will nodded. “Though it started late, you did become a friend to her. I think she’d want you to be here. Please, join us.”

Kay, nervous, moved toward the coffin, avoiding the withering glare sent her way by Eleanor.

Joseph put a hand on Will’s shoulder. “We’ll need the body,” he said quietly.

Will took a deep breath and nodded. He walked into Elizabeth’s room and scooped her into his arms, wishing he could hold her forever, but knowing his duty. He carried her to the coffin and laid her inside with a gentle touch, laying her head back slowly, the bruises and lacerations still noticeable. His eyes, attuned to the movement, caught a very slight movement in her chest, and he had the syringe nanos inject a small amount of additional opium. He recalled the words of the woman who’d sold it to him, words of caution about injecting too much. He’d never asked how much that was. A chill covered him. Was he, even now, killing her, before he even dealt with his concern over her air supply?

He stood back, thinking quickly. Gerald handed him a long coil of rope, and Will noted that he and Aldus had slung the coils over their shoulders, and he followed suit, not troubling himself to wonder what purpose the rope might serve. His panic rose as Joseph and another carpenter began to slide the lid atop

the coffin.

“Stop!”

Arthur moved forward through the crowd, and the carpenters stopped and looked at him. “Please, I... I need to put this with her,” Arthur said. He held a small pouch in his hand.

Will stepped forward, glaring at him. “What is it?”

“It’s... it’s jewelry that Genevieve loved. She stopped wearing it years ago, before she died. I think she would have wanted Elizabeth to have it.” He looked at the ground. “I waited too long to give it to her. She needs to have this, for Genevieve’s sake.”

Will held out his hand, palm up. Arthur hesitated, then handed the pouch to Will. Will opened the pouch, and inside was a simple necklace and a golden hairpin. To the crowd, it looked as if Will choked up at the sight of the necklace because he was touched at Arthur’s moment of sentimentality, no matter how suspiciously or posthumously it arrived. In reality, Will was choking up because he was holding the necklace Hope had worn on their wedding day. She’d never told him where she’d gotten it, only that it had been a family heirloom rescued by a friend.

The pin, for some reason, spawned an idea. Pins were used to puncture, and pins—or needles—could be used to do things like draw blood, puncturing the skin and enabling blood to flow out of the body through the needle and into a tube. He could create microscopic punctures in the surface of the coffin with small “needles” built of his nanos, opening up passages for oxygen to enter the coffin. Elizabeth would be able to breathe. He retained his visual focus on the necklace and pin as he directed many of his remaining nanos on this task.

Once the puncture holes were built, Will heaved a deep sigh of relief, a sigh likely seen as a final farewell to his friend. Will placed the necklace and pin back in the pouch, noting the red, velvety texture, and leaned over the coffin to place it on Elizabeth’s stomach. He took her hands and wrapped them around the pouch, a symbol that even in death Elizabeth held strong to the memory of her mother. He then stepped back and nodded at the carpenters. The men slid the heavy wooden top onto the box once more.

Arthur walked to stand next to him. “I can’t believe she’s truly gone.”

Will! I can’t breathe!

She was still awake? Weren’t his puncture needles working? *There’s air in there, Elizabeth. You must be calm.* He focused on the nano-needles, ordering them to expand the size of the puncture holes to allow more airflow, and at the

same time, he focused on the syringe, emptying more of the contents into her bloodstream.

After a momentary delay, he finally replied to Arthur. “Nor can I.”

The carpenters worked, pounding the nails into place.

“She looked so much like her mother, except for the hair.”

“Did she now?”

Will!

He tried once more to focus, but Arthur spoke yet again. “Beautiful, golden hair, much like Eva’s. Elizabeth always loved Genevieve’s hair. She thought her hair looked like pure gold, and loved to touch it. She said it made her feel like a princess.”

The last nail was completed, and the carpenters tested the lid to make certain it was secure.

Wi—

Her voice cut off, leaving Will in a panic. He had no way of knowing if the opium had finally had its effect, if the air had truly run out and she’d lost consciousness, or both. He focused his Energy inside the coffin, pushing calming Empathy Energy at Elizabeth, willing her to sleep and to breathe. The puncture holes provided a minimal amount of light, and he dared not light up the inside with more Energy to confirm, but it did look like she was breathing. He exhaled deeply, but still worried that, between the opium and the air situation, he’d somehow hurt her permanently. The worry was draining him, and he wondered if he’d have the strength to help carry the casket.

“I wish you could have met her.”

Will looked at him, his face fatigued and anguished; momentarily forgetting who it was he hadn’t met. “As do I, Arthur. It seems that I would have had a better chance of doing so if certain people had better control of their emotions and tempers.”

Arthur glared at him, eyes flashing anger, but then he relented. “I suppose I deserved that.”

In most cases, Will would have felt sorry for a man reacting as Arthur had, accepting responsibility for his actions when directly called upon for them. It was an act Will felt to be a sign of true character, the ability to recognize one’s mistakes and to learn from them. He’d rarely promoted anyone within his businesses until they’d made their first mistake so that he could see how they handled failure. Then again, fewer people seemed capable of handling success any more easily than failure.

Will took several deep breaths, trying to calm himself, trying to convince himself that Elizabeth was fine, the opium was working as designed and keeping her in a deep sleep, and soon this would all be over. It would have been an easier task if the last thoughts she'd projected weren't those of a woman suffocating, however. He moved with the other pallbearers, taking his place in the front on the right-hand side, with Matilda and Aldus behind him. Gerald, Kay, and Arthur lined up to the left of the coffin. Will sent a withering glance at Arthur, who seemed to realize that, as the one who had disowned the deceased and thus enabled her slaughter, he had little right to a position of honor in her funeral procession. Joseph the carpenter moved to take his place. The six pallbearers bent down, grasped the poles set under the coffin, and stood, lifting the box from the ground.

Will felt more drained than he'd felt in years, sick with worry that this funeral procession was not a mirage after all, but the real deal. His deepest desire was to drop the handle, tear the lid off the box, and teleport the two of them away, nurse her to health, and then escape to live out the next ten centuries together. What would they do for that vast amount of time? There would be plenty of opportunities for travel; they could explore the "New World" centuries before European settlers would consider the possibility. They could watch historical events unfold: see the invention of the printing press, watch Martin Luther nail his Ninety-Five Theses to the door of the church, witness the battles of Joan of Arc. They could make themselves invisible and watch the great Italian masters like DaVinci and Michelangelo create their masterpieces, and watch the settling of Plymouth Rock by the Pilgrims. They could witness the crafting of the Declaration of Independence and the debates around its passage. There were many experiences they could share until he was finally born and ready to meet her—but she needed to survive his own carelessness first.

He reached his Energy inside the coffin once more, trying to sense and to feel her breathing. In the process of doing so, he didn't notice a large rock in the path and stepped on it, twisting his ankle and stumbling in the process. He recovered quickly, and glanced behind him.

"Are you all right?" asked Kay.

Will nodded, and faced forward again. He wasn't certain, but in the course of his stumbling, he thought he'd heard a small exhalation of air as Elizabeth's body had shifted inside the coffin. It gave him enough hope that he was able to make the rest of the journey to the gravesite without further misadventures with rocks in the path. He did keep his Energy flowing into the coffin, calming

Energy meant to help her relax and breathe in her opium-induced sleep.

The grave had been dug deep into the ground, deeper than the six feet Will had expected. Perhaps everyone had taken a turn digging as some form of penance, though the depth of the hole would have no impact on the level of tragedy that had occurred. The pallbearers walked on either side of the open grave and gently lowered the coffin to the ground. The box sat atop the support poles, perched over the open hole, and Will wondered how they'd get the box into the ground. They wouldn't just *drop* it, would they? But he then saw Gerald and Aldus threading the ropes under the coffin, and did the same with his, until they created a small bit of netting under the coffin with the three ropes. They lifted the coffin in the air, and Winter moved forward to pull the support beams away, enabling them to lower the box into the grave until at last it rested at the bottom. All six pallbearers dropped the ropes into the grave and stepped away.

Arthur stepped forward. Though he was no longer held in great esteem, he was still a senior member of the community, and as the father of the victim was expected to speak in her memory. Will began channeling Energy to the trees all around them, recharging himself for the effort to come, as Arthur began his speech. "We have suffered a great loss. Elizabeth was a young woman of beauty, possessing a generosity of spirit rare among any I've ever met. She has uniquely contributed to the success of this community, and we mourn that she will be unable to continue to share in that success. In her memory, we must continue to move forward along the path she cleared, to see the sights she made available for all of us. In many ways, she epitomizes what we are striving to be, ever seeking to push the boundaries of human development. We will not let her death be in vain." There were murmurs of agreement and appreciation of his words.

Will looked around at the small assembly, incredulous. "That was a beautiful speech, Arthur. Why, if I didn't know any better, I'd think her death was of her own choosing. Let me offer my eulogy. Today, this young woman is laid to rest as a human sacrifice on the altar of greed, laziness, and cowardice. She is mourned by those gathered here, not because they truly sorrow at her loss, but because they do not know where the next sacrificial victim will be found. They cry not because she is gone, but because they fear they'll be the next chosen to join her, the next innocent bludgeoned to death by so-called neighbors. None of you have any right to be standing on this ground; you all bear the guilt of her demise, regardless of the number of blows you delivered."

Most of the eyes in the gathering fell to the ground, their silence speaking volumes to the guilt they bore and the truth of his words. Arthur's eyes blazed in

anger. “How dare you!” he hissed. “How dare you belittle her in such a fashion! My daughter worked harder than anyone here to unlock the secrets we know wait just beyond our grasp, teasing us with their potential, and you tarnish her memory before the dirt is in her grave?”

Will marched straight to Arthur, until he could lean down and stare directly into the shorter man’s terrified eyes. “Get out of here now, Arthur.” Will turned around, his gaze taking in all of those assembled. “All of you. Leave this place. You gave this woman no peace during her life. You failed to give her a childhood full of fun and play and laughter. You never gave her the love all children so desperately need. You feign interest in her now, as if you expect that to atone for the crimes you’ve committed against her. Her life is over; it’s too late to seek forgiveness now. Leave, so that her final burial is performed by hands that didn’t drive her into that grave.”

Will turned back to Arthur and again stared down the shorter man, who finally withered under his gaze. Arthur turned and left the clearing, followed by the rest of the villagers, leaving Will alone with the coffin and the empty grave. Silence followed their departure, suggesting that he was alone, but Will knew that Arthur had not gone all the way back to the village with the others.

Will knelt by the open grave and inhaled deeply, a man grieving in silence at the loss of a loved one. He then rose, seized one of the shovels left behind, and began pushing the dirt into the grave. He was doing more than that, however. He sent his entire collection of healing nanos into her once again, and directed them to focus on extracting the opium from her system, not knowing if the nanos could process a command of that nature. He was also sending his Energy to every living thing in this part of the forest, and receiving greater Energy in return, and when he felt his Energy stores filled he teleported Elizabeth’s still form into the cave. The mindless work of shoveling was the perfect cover for him; it enabled him to focus his attention on the cave, projecting Energy there, willing it to be used in her healing.

When the grave was filled, Will found a small length of rope on the ground nearby, and used it to fashion a small cross from two tree branches. He pushed the marker into the ground, and knelt once more. He allowed the tears to flow; weeping over the life the villagers had wasted here, and hoped he hadn’t ended it prematurely.

Ready to face her again—hopefully alive—he rose to his feet, marching into the trees in the direction of the cave. Much to his disgust, Arthur stood in his path, leaning against a tree, appraising him, as if trying to decide on something.

As Will approached, Arthur reached his conclusion and addressed Will. “You loved her, didn’t you?” It wasn’t a question that Arthur directed at Will. It was an accusation, one designed to twist the emotional knife just a bit deeper, and perhaps locate a weak point for future exploitation.

Will glanced at the man. “I will love her until the end of my days.” And then Will punched the man squarely in the face, turned, and headed away from the village, deeper into the forest, ignoring the cries of pain and shock as he focused on his goal. He needed to get to Elizabeth and learn the truth. Had he accidentally killed the woman he’d been sent back in time to save?

Arthur waited until Will had left, until he was all alone there outside the clearing, before he made his way to the grave. He fell to his knees, taking deep breaths.

“I know you can’t hear me, Elizabeth. I know you’d never believe that I loved you if I told you. I don’t know how to show love, Elizabeth. I never received it when I was a child. My parents were court jesters, and they divined the perfect act for entertaining the nobles. I was constantly in chains, chains that gave others control over everything I did. They’d hold me down with the chains and beat me. They’d use the chains to prevent me from eating, yanking my hands away from my mouth just as I’d be ready to put food in my mouth. And everyone laughed at me, my parents loudest of all.

“The chains remained when the act wasn’t going on, when I’d be in a cage, never allowed out for any reason. I finally figured how to open the locks on my chains, and I ran away. I was captured and made a slave, but it was better than what I’d known.”

He took a deep breath. “I treated you as I’d been taught, but I refused the chains. Never the chains. I wouldn’t let anyone ever be in chains. It was a vow I made to myself. And there was one other. I’d never be subservient to anyone again. They’d be subservient to me. I’ll rule the world one day, Elizabeth, and they’ll all fear me, and I’ll never be in chains again.”

Arthur picked up some dirt and let it sift through his fingers. “I didn’t know what I was doing as a father, and I know I did the job poorly. But for whatever it’s worth now, Elizabeth... I’m sorry.”

He rose and headed back to the village, steeling his emotions, searching for the next means he could use on the way to his ultimate ends of controlling the whole world.

CONFESSIONS

Will flexed the muscles in his hand. Satisfying as it had been, he knew he shouldn't have punched Arthur. But the words had hurt him on multiple levels, and in ways Arthur would never know. The cruelest was the fact that Arthur's words had revealed a truth to Will, one that he'd known deep down since he'd arrive in the past, but one which he'd avoided facing until now.

He'd known that the purpose of this mission had been to ensure that Elizabeth survived into the distant future, so that she could meet his younger self. He'd known that meant that at some point, he would need to step aside, so that the younger Will could meet the woman he loved. Yet, he knew he could never leave her in that manner.

If he'd never leave the woman he loved... he must never be with her during this time in the past. It was the cruelest part of this mission and the one he knew would test him far more than resisting the temptation to kill Arthur, Maynard, and the others. He didn't know if it was a burden he could bear.

Time travel really sucked at times.

He winced. What if Elizabeth had one or more relationships before she met him in the future? It was not an impossibility, was it? She was a beautiful, intelligent woman, and he'd no doubt that she'd have her share of suitors. Could he deny her that?

What if she had other children, born before Josh and Angel? Unfair though it might be, such knowledge would devastate him.

Could he ask her to wait for him for an eternity, when he had a strong suspicion that she'd be perfectly content to settle down with him now—so long as it was far away from the village in the woods?

He sighed... and then realized he might have the answer to his questions close at hand. He reached into his pocket and pulled out the paper scroll computer. It had indicated that Eva was someone he could trust and confide in, and he had confided in her, at least to some degree.

Would it provide him guidance in this troublesome situation? He unrolled it, and as he tapped the surface the screen lit up.

You are her first and only love, as she is yours. The sanctity of your vows to each other will never be broken by either of you in any era. Be at peace.

He rolled the scroll up and put it back into his pocket. One mystery solved, at least for him. Elizabeth might have an entirely different perspective on things.

As he walked, he could feel the trees refueling his Energy, and he responded with gratitude, all the while walking with great haste away from the village. When his Energy reached the necessary levels and he was a sufficient distance from the village to be certain he wouldn't be seen, he teleported into the cave. He lit his Energy lights, spreading the flame around until it illuminated the cavern.

She was lying flat on the ground. Her eyes were open, but she did not move. Her breathing was strong and deep enough to be noticeable; it was steady and without strain.

He dispatched more Energy into her, continuing the healing process. The oxygen content here was high, and he found himself feeling better as he breathed in the purified, energetic air. He suspected that, after their monthly sessions building Energy, there was some strange affinity between the trees and Elizabeth; the slight trickle of Energy she was able to produce in her condition was enough to initiate the feedback effect, and the trees in the region had, in their growth due to that feedback, saturated the local area with the oxygen they produced. She was recovering in the natural equivalent of a hyperbaric chamber.

Her physical recovery no longer in doubt, Will set about determining her mental recovery. She'd endured so much in her life, and yet the last few weeks, and especially the last few days, had amplified the pain she'd endured. Her mother had been taken from her for recognizing what Elizabeth had refused to acknowledge about her father, and her own generosity of spirit had refused to believe that what she recognized that day could not be changed. Even when Eva, the truest friend and protector and parental figure she'd known since Genevieve's death, had been murdered at Arthur's command, she'd still believed she could redeem him.

And then, at her own greatest time of peril, when whatever goodness in him

had its chance to rise to the surface and defend her—he'd disowned her, casting her aside to be destroyed by an angry mob.

She'd identified herself by her parents, and especially her mother, believing that her blood was her destiny. What Will wanted her to recognize was that she was able to define her own character and her own destiny. For that to happen, he needed her to understand *his* background, and the past he'd worked hard to move beyond and define himself as *he* wanted to be.

He moved to her and dropped down on his knees by her side. "Elizabeth?"

He put a hand on her forehead. She was cool to the touch, but not cold, much as one might be after recovering from a fever or a cold. He noted her steady breathing, and the fact that the swelling and bruising had cleared from her face. But her face was contorted, as if dealing with emotional agony. He could almost see her reliving the terrors. He took her hand and gave it a gentle squeeze. "Elizabeth?"

She didn't speak or project to him, but he did feel a gentle squeeze of his hand. It wasn't much, but at least she was acknowledging his presence.

"I'm going to help you recover, Elizabeth, and then—"

Why, Will? Her projection was powerful and full of despair. Why do you want to help me? No one else does. No one else ever has, at least not at first. My mother feared him so much that she didn't defend me; Eva only did what she did after first rejecting me. My own father...

He waited for her to finish her thought, but the mention of Arthur was sufficient to silence her once more.

He took a deep breath. He'd been deceived, denied critical information, and in general not been trusted to handle that information well. He'd told Angel that he believed knowledge, once understood, should be shared widely, and not kept in limited hands. He'd never had the chance to make decisions about his own life and his own destiny at any point after the fire. Instead, he'd been tricked about the actual nature—and duration—of his mission. Though he'd understood the motivation and reasoning, the reality was that he believed he deserved the right to make the decision about this journey knowing what he was *actually* going to do. He was angry about the lack of trust shown him.

He was now in their position, the one with the answers, with someone who lacked that complete information, someone whose life was at stake. He looked at her, and as he watched, her eyes, finally free of swelling, fluttered open, and he was able to look into the eyes of his wife.

She deserved the truth.

“Why?” He spoke aloud, because he could not be overheard, and because he wanted her to speak aloud as well, to force her to be awake and responsive. “Why do *you* deserve to live and thrive? People like you are rare, Elizabeth. It would have been easy to quit on that village and run away, and yet, even when people saw it would be to your advantage to do so, and offered to help, you refused. Why? You wanted to make things right there, especially with Arthur. You didn’t wait for them to change; you figured out how you personally could be that force for change for the good, and you did what you needed to do. Do you understand how rare that is? Most people would have quit, would have waited for ‘somebody’ to make the change. I think that’s one reason why I was sent here to save you—we need *more* people like you, Elizabeth.”

Her eyes had been unfocused, but they now sharpened at his words. *What do you mean about being sent here, Will?*

“I did not arrive here by chance, Elizabeth. I was sent here, with the specific instructions to protect you and save your life. I could have forced you to leave, but I don’t believe in forcing others to behave how I want them to behave. When I learned you wanted to stay, I worked to enable you to do that, but always watched to make sure that, at a minimum, no one could ever physically hurt you.”

Her eyes filled with tears. *That makes no sense, Will. Why would anyone want to save me? I’m nothing. I’m nobody.*

Will shook his head. Her shattered confidence was another terrible consequence of the scheme Arthur had executed, one which, Will now knew, had been based on what Arthur believed was a lie. She needed the truth, the full truth, but he still feared saying the words.

He chose to provide something else instead. “He said you looked like your mother, but for the hair. He said she had hair the color of Eva’s.”

Elizabeth shuddered. *Yes. She did.*

“And he... gave you something to take with you, forever. Something he said you were meant to have, something she wanted you to have.”

At this, her eyes opened wide, not shining as brightly as he’d seen in the past, but hardly looking like one who’d been recently beaten to death. The swelling, lacerations, and bruising were still fading. “What was it?” She’d finally spoken out loud. Progress.

“It was a necklace. And a hair pin.”

“My mother loved that necklace,” Elizabeth said, and it was clear that the nanos, oxygen, and Energy flow were working a miracle. “Before my father...

employed me, back when there were just a few people in this community, they'd all travel to neighboring towns together to trade what they made. They'd leave one man behind to guard the neighborhood. It wasn't like one man could stop an army, but then, what good would ten of them do against a large number of knights, right? On one of those trips, they sold everything they brought with them and split up the profits. They all walked around that town, marveling at everything they could buy, and most everything spent was practical. But they all had enough left over to buy something nice. My mother saw this necklace and loved it, but she'd already bought a few other things and couldn't afford it. Somehow, and I still don't know how to this day, he got enough money to buy it and give it to her. It's the only time I've heard of him doing something so selfless.

"She treasured that gift, because she knew how much of a sacrifice it had been for him. When they decided to send three people to travel abroad, she went, because she remembered that kindness." She closed her eyes again. "I wish I knew what happened to *that* man, a man who was capable of an act of... love... like that."

Will, who felt himself at nearly full strength, visualized the inside of the coffin, focused on the velvet pouch, and teleported it to the cave. He then focused on her room, ensured that nobody was inside, and began teleporting everything she owned to the cave, all of the bags under her cot and under a loose floorboard in her room. Elizabeth gasped as a dozen bags of coins appeared at her side, but her still-recovering eyes focused with the greatest intensity on the pouch. Will picked up the small pouch, and emptied the contents. He held the necklace out to her.

She accepted it, and held it up to look at it, seeing in that necklace the story of the first woman to sacrifice a life on her behalf. She glanced at Will. "Will you help me put it on?"

He nodded, and helped her to a sitting position. Elizabeth held up her hair, matted together still from the blood and sweat that coated it after her beating. Will fumbled to open the necklace, but in the end managed to fasten it around her neck.

She looked up at him, and he gasped, for the machines and Energy had done their work at an exceptional rate, and the swelling and bruising were now fully gone. In that moment, the look on her face reminded him so much of her future self that he had to look away.

"What's wrong?"

He tried misdirection. “You never told me how you learned about your... abilities.”

She paused, as if sensing he was avoiding something. To his relief, she didn’t push it. Yet.

“It was one of those days when I went to the Schola, the only day for many years that Mother didn’t go with me. I don’t even remember who I worked with... wait, no, it was one of the Travelers, but I can’t recall which one. I don’t think he’s here now, though. At any rate, he pulled out a handful of berries and handed them to me. They smelled like manure and tasted like... well, they tasted like they smelled. The man showed great sympathy as he watched my reaction, which was unusual. Most of them seemed to be waiting to see if I’d suddenly start floating or something. He didn’t. He put a hand on my shoulder to comfort me as I choked those berries down, and tried to soothe me as it seemed like my entire insides were being scraped with a knife and set on fire. When I thought it was over, it got worse. I... well, it wasn’t a pretty scene at the end. He didn’t scold me, or complain that I’d failed, or hit me, like so many eventually did. What was truly strange was that it looked like he *expected* my reaction, and was bracing himself for it. His face looked terribly pained, like it hurt him more than me. He carried me back to my room, put me on my bed, and brought me some water to drink. I found out later he’d cleaned up the mess in the Schola. Most of the time, people expected me to clean up everything, even if what they’d forced on me left me sick or unconscious. It was so much worse to suffer through something like that and then, after I’d recovered, to have to go back and clean and remember what I’d gone through. It was as if suffering once wasn’t enough.

“He left the next day on a journey, and as far as I know, he hasn’t been back since. But the next day I felt better than I’d ever felt, and I noticed some warmth. And I could hear what people were thinking, and knew what they were feeling, but I figured it was just my imagination.

“Over the course of the next few years, I eventually realized that if I took those berries every few months, and the zirple every day, I never got sick and that odd warmth got a little stronger each day. I didn’t know what the warmth was, though. I just knew that I could *look* sick if I wanted to look sick, but I felt terrific. Physically, anyway. Emotionally, I was truly starting to realize what was happening to me was wrong, was... evil, and that my father knew it and didn’t care. Mother knew that, of course, and that’s why she’d come with me, why she’d moved us out of the large home built specifically for our little family and into the one-person room next door. She wanted to keep me away from Father,

because she could tell what was going on with me, especially when I'd wake up in the morning. She didn't want Father to see that and realize what was happening. She hoped I'd get strong enough to fight him, and the others, before they realized the truth. If not, she feared they'd destroy me.

"A few months before you got here, Mother and I were sitting at the table in my room. I whispered and told her that I'd been feeling wonderful, even though I did everything I could to look terrible. I didn't want these people figuring out that I'd discovered *something*, even if I didn't know what it was. She smiled at me, and I know now it was because she was proud of me, proud of me for figuring it all out. About the berries and the zirple and... about Father.

"While we were there, that warmth got more intense than I'd experienced before, and I was uncomfortable. I just tried to throw it off, and a cup across the room suddenly slammed against the wall and shattered. It was right where the warmth would have gone if I had actually thrown it, which is exactly what I'd done. Mother nodded at me and smiled, and told me to never tell Father about anything I actually figured out how to do; she was cautioning me for the future. But Father had started to listen outside the room; he'd been walking by and had heard the cup shatter. So he was there, listening in, and heard her tell me not to share what I knew." She looked at him, and he could see the effort it took to hold back the tears. "You know what happened next."

He nodded.

"When we buried her, I managed to slip away. I wandered around, and somehow found a cave. *This* cave, in fact. I stayed here for three days, and didn't do anything but try to figure out what the warmth was. I realized it went where I put my attention, and that I could control it wherever I sent it, even outside of me. I could heal myself, or make myself look horrible, or move things with my mind, even move things instantly from one place to another, though only a dozen feet or so. I figured out that I could wrap that warmth around everything I was ordered to eat or drink and basically guide it through me without my body actually trying to *use* it, so I wouldn't actually get sick. I could *look* like I'd been made sick, of course.

"While I was here, in this cave, I realized it was my chance to leave. They didn't know where I was. I could run away, and they'd never find me. But I didn't. I thought that would make me a coward. I was fifteen years old, and I'd never really had a childhood. I was basically a slave. The people who made me a slave had escaped from being slaves themselves, and one of them was my own father. I had no reason to hope that life could get better, but I also had no reason

to think life would be any different anywhere else. I had no basis to think that people could be anything other than those in the village; that was my whole world, and my whole impression of what people are. I had no reason to think that my father would start treating me as his daughter, as someone he actually loved. Yes, I could leave the familiar evil, but without reason to believe I'd be trading it for something better, there was no reason to move.

"But, I wanted to hope for the best. I wanted to be there and help them, however I could, to be better people. I knew what they were doing was evil, and I worried that it meant that they were doomed forever. And I worried that if I didn't help to... cure them, I would be evil, too, and I didn't want that. I don't want to be evil, Will! So I went back, full of hope, but each day proved to me that they were beyond help. Eva was the only one who truly came around; she treated me like I was her daughter, like I thought a parent should treat their child. Some of the others treated me with some decency, but I knew how they really felt. They were just doing what they thought they had to do to remain Traders, because they liked that work. Being decent to me was just a means to an end, not what they truly believed and felt. Eleanor, at least, was honest. The rest? They were doing it to feel good about themselves, but they would be happy to let me suffer if needed. They proved it last night, when the mob attacked.

"Then you showed up." She looked at him with a strange longing, and he knew his earlier impression was accurate. "You were new, and you were different. I knew right away you had those abilities all of the Travelers talked about, and the abilities I knew I was developing, because I heard the noise around you, and it was louder when I guessed you were doing... things."

Interesting. "Noise? What noise?"

"I don't know how to explain it. I heard someone playing an instrument at the inn we stayed at, back when I traveled with the weavers. It had strings. That's the sound I heard, but the noise around you sounded... purer."

Stringed instruments that were smooth? Perhaps a violin? "Your Energy sounds like a flute. It's a beautiful sound, produced by a beautiful soul."

She smiled, but it lacked warmth, for she didn't believe him. "So if we listen well, we can always find each other?"

He nodded, and then took a deep breath. "I don't think you can go back to the village."

Elizabeth laughed. "I'm dead and buried, and I'm happy to be away from them."

"So you should go to Eva."

She looked disappointed. “You don’t think we should go to Eva?”

He sighed. “My place is still here. I know that I’m meant to help this community become what it’s supposed to be. My first and most important mission, though, was to see you safe and out of harm’s way.”

She bristled. “I can take care of myself.”

“I know that, but it’s far better if you don’t need to do so. Your methods of taking care of yourself would cause a lot of questions to be raised.”

She considered that. “Will... please, come with me. I... I know how you feel about me.” At his shocked look, she laughed. “I’ve told you for quite some time that I can sense emotions and thoughts, even yours. You can’t hide anything from me. I knew about Eva the instant you got back, knew why you didn’t tell me, knew it was to protect me. And I know how you feel about me; your emotions aren’t subtle.” She took a deep breath. “I feel that way about you, too.”

And there it was. He couldn’t deny what he felt for her, for she knew the truth as well as he did. He knew how she felt for him as well, for the same reason, though she had stated so out loud. Thus, he couldn’t lie, even if he wanted to lie, and that was something he simply couldn’t do. Not to her.

It couldn’t be done, though. He couldn’t do it, couldn’t be with her every day, knowing he shouldn’t and couldn’t, because it could mean that Josh and Angel might never come to exist. Given the situation they’d thrown him into, all without telling him the truth, however...

No, they were his children, and he’d fight for them, even if they’d done him this wrong.

He refocused on her face. “I was sent to save you, Elizabeth...”

“You never told me *why*, though, Will,” she replied. “Why? You said that they thought I was worth saving, but why? How did they know enough about me to decide I was worth saving? Why would they care enough to send someone like you to save someone like me, someone they’d never met? It makes no sense.”

He’d asked the same question in the future... and his son had suggested that the move had been a mistake. An accident. It was a lie, of course; they’d known who and what he was the entire time. He’d not liked what they’d done.

He made his decision. “They knew who you were, Elizabeth, and knew you to be worth saving, because to them, it was literally a matter of life and death as to whether or not you survived your treatment in that village.”

He took a deep breath. “They knew all of that, Elizabeth, because the people who sent me to save you... they’re your children.”

REUNION

Elizabeth's face was one of baffled incomprehension. As the implications of Will's statement permeated her mind, a truth she could affirm with her own Empathy and Telepathy skills, she sagged back to the ground and curled up. Will was hit with a broadside of overwhelmed emotions as her breathing hastened, sounding much like one hyperventilating.

Will was surprised that his own reaction to his statement was one of relief. He no longer needed to hide who he was from Elizabeth; she'd know he'd come from the future if he'd been sent by her children. He gave her the space she needed to reach a degree of acceptance. The notion of time travel had been difficult for him to accept, and he'd grown up reading books based on the topic. In this era, where traveling machines of any type, save those pulled by a horse, were unimaginable, it had to be a much more difficult concept to grasp. He would allow her all the time she needed.

Gradually, he heard her breathing stabilize, and she was simply silent. A few moments later, she sat up. He looked at her in anticipation, wondering if this was the emotion that Adam, Fil, and Angel had experienced as they'd made their own time travel revelation to him. It was far more difficult on this side; he knew the truth of it, and all was dependent on her acceptance of the truth.

She finally turned to look at him, took a deep breath, and asked her question.

"Who is their father, Will?" Her eyes suggested she knew the answer.

Will lowered his head. "It's not important."

He could feel her eyes flashing. "Not important? It's *very* important! I can't risk their existence by choosing incorrectly."

Will smiled faintly. "You aren't questioning if I'm telling the truth? You do realize what it means, if your children sent me to save you, right?" He finally

raised his head and faced her again, refusing to back down from her withering gaze.

She smiled back. “You may have forgotten... someone’s taught me to develop my Energy skills. You couldn’t successfully lie to me even if you wanted to, Will. Somehow, through some form of magic I can’t imagine, you lived in my future and came back to me. My children are the ones who made it happen. I can’t quit now, not if I’m to give birth to children able to figure out how to accomplish something like that.” Her gaze narrowed. “If they’re capable of something like that, though, I rather suspect that their father must be rather special as well.”

Will said nothing.

“How far into the future did you live, Will? How far back did you have to travel to come to me?”

He grimaced. “Your children won’t be born for a very long time.”

“After you were born? Or before?”

Intelligent women could certainly be a curse. “After.”

She sighed. “I suspect I’ll have plenty of time to figure out the answers.” Her face suddenly filled with mischief. “Perhaps when I leave this place I can find a good man to settle down with, who’ll help me create these future children...”

His eyes flashed with anger at the idea, and he realized she had her confirmation.

He groaned.

“I suspect *my* children were adults when they sent you back to me?”

Will nodded.

“What were their names?”

He hadn’t been expecting that question, and he stepped back, almost as if he’d been hit. “What?”

“What were the names of *my* children?”

Now she was teasing him. It gave him an odd sense of comfort, for it meant that she was healed enough emotionally to derive humor in such a fashion. “Your son’s name was Joshua Phillip. I did not know our daughter until she was fully grown. Her name was Angel, and she looked exactly like you. Including the red hair.”

She looked at him, and he could feel the sadness from her. “Why didn’t you know her until she was fully grown? Why only Joshua?”

“They rescued me from three men who wanted to kill me and pulled me into the future, and then sent me here. She hadn’t yet been born when that rescue

happened; I didn't know she existed when the grown-up Angel rescued me from my own tormentors."

"You don't know her middle name?"

"I didn't ask. I found out who they were right before they sent me here. Mere *seconds* before, actually. They hid who they were from me. I didn't want to do the same thing to you."

"Oh," she said, as if this made perfect sense. He watched her as she worked through the details, reminding him of their first meeting in the future, when she saw him reviewing plans for a walled, gated community, and told him exactly what was wrong with it. It was that same look of calculation, an expression of deep concentration that told him that she was examining every detail, developing a thorough understanding.

"Can we go back to your time, in the future? To have our children?"

Ouch. "The means... they were destroyed. We cannot go back the way I came."

She considered this, and nodded. "I'm going to live for a very long time."

He nodded.

"How long?"

He looked into her eyes, trying to assess her readiness for the news, and then realized he was judging her again. "At least a thousand years."

Elizabeth's eyes widened, her face telling the story. She knew it would be long enough for any children they'd have to grow to adulthood, so it had to be several decades. And yet, if he knew they were to be together, but was sending her away while he remained behind, he clearly must know nothing happened for a while. She was already nearly twenty years old; their children must both be nearly that old or older before they'd be capable of developing the ability to send Will back in time. Will was in no danger that he couldn't handle right now, no matter how many men came after him. She'd rationalized that it would be several decades before he'd start his trip back to her. She never questioned how she could live so long; perhaps, even now she sensed that she'd live a long time, though probably not a thousand years or more.

She also hadn't asked how long she'd lived after giving birth to their children. The reality was that he himself didn't truly know the answer to that, didn't know if, in the future he'd visited, she'd still been alive.

She accepted her future destiny, much as he had. "I will wait for you, Will, until it is our time. There is no hurry, is there, if one has that much time to live?"

"I suppose not. I will visit with you, of course. And Eva as well. You should

go to her as soon as you can.”

“She knows that I’m coming?”

He nodded. “She suspected that at some point circumstances would lead you to leave those walls forever and at that point, the two of you could reunite. She loves you like a daughter, Elizabeth. You’ll finally know what it means to live in a home where you’re truly loved.”

Her glance was full of meaning, one that suggested another alternative to forming a home, but she said nothing.

“We do need to get you moving. They will know that I need some time alone to grieve, but eventually many will wonder why I am away for so long.”

Elizabeth nodded. She moved with a grace that one would never suspect of someone who had nearly died only a day earlier, and had come close to dying again earlier this day. They left the cave, walking through the forest. Will’s senses were on full alert, constantly scanning their surroundings for any sign of human activity. It would do neither of them any good for a member of the community to see him walking through the forest with a woman they thought they’d buried that morning.

That thought gave him pause, and he stopped. “We need to work on your appearance.”

She gave him an amused look, masked by a scowl. “You look lovely as well.”

He laughed. “I didn’t express that very well, did I? Your hair, in particular, makes you very notable. I don’t know if red hair is very common in these parts, but it’s something that identifies you very clearly to this village. It wouldn’t take long for people to mention seeing a lovely young woman with red hair. Eventually, the Traders would probably hear about it, and word would get back to Arthur. The hair... it needs to be a different color.”

She sighed. “That’s a wonderful idea, Will. But how do I change that? I was born with this hair color. I cannot change it, Will. It’s impossible.”

“Nothing is impossible, Elizabeth. I arrived here taller than the man you see before you, yet that changed. You can change the color of your hair; it’s a matter of choosing it.”

“Like my mother’s. Like Eva’s.” There was no hesitation; she wanted to look like the two women she most admired, the two women who’d been willing to sacrifice their lives to protect hers.

“Move that warmth, that Energy, so that it covers all of your hair, and imagine it changing to that color, and it will. That’s the thing about Energy; what

you can do with it is truly limited only by what you can imagine and the amount of Energy you can build up.”

She acted without hesitation, her trust in his guidance total. He watched as the flaming red hair slowly lightened, the red becoming yellow and finally white, and the transformation was complete. He choked up very suddenly; she now looked just like he remembered her from his younger days, before time travel threw his whole world out of focus.

“Did it work?” she asked.

“It most certainly did,” he replied. They began moving again, and passed a small stream. She stopped to look at her reflection, making as if to pause only briefly, but she stopped. She stood there for several moments, and then knelt down in the grass, continuing to look at the reflected image.

“I miss you, Mom,” she whispered. She glanced up at Will, her face damp. “I look just like her. I know you didn’t know her, Will, but with the hair now a match, I look just like her. I can look at my reflection now and remember her. And I can remember that she’s the parent I want to emulate.”

She took one more glance into the water, took a deep breath, and stood. “I’m ready. For the first time in my life, I know things are going to be better tomorrow than they were today. You’ll help me to be sure that’s the case.” Her face was still damp, but there was a new fire in her eyes, a belief that her life was going to get better. Seeing her mother’s face in her own reflection seemed to steel and ground her. “I need you to know something, something nobody else knows now. They all know about the zirple root, but none of them know about the berry. It’s called morange, Will. Morange berries. They’ll make you horribly sick for a while, but it’s less painful each time you take it. Don’t use it every day. You need to take thirty each time; it will seem terribly painful, but you must struggle through it.”

He nodded at her. “Thank you for telling me. I know it’s something you’ve not been eager to share.”

She shrugged her shoulders. “I didn’t want any of *them* understanding it or finding out. You never needed it for yourself; no sense giving them another person they might find it from. Now, though? You may need that information when I leave.” She glanced at him. “I’m glad that you know.”

“Me, too.”

They walked along the stream, one Will hadn’t seen before in his visits to the woods, until they came to the edge of the forest. He closed his eyes. “I can sense Eva’s Energy. To me, it sounds like a—”

“Harp.” Elizabeth grinned at his look of surprise. “I’ve heard it before, too. It’s never been quite as loud as yours, and I can’t sense it now, but I’ve heard it.”

Will spread his Energy to Elizabeth, and then reached out with it to Eva, setting up a telepathic three-way conversation. *Eva, can you hear us?*

Her response was nearly immediate. *Will? Is that you? Is Elizabeth with you?*

I’m here, Eva.

There was an audible sound of relief from Eva, and Will felt as if the breeze which kicked up at that moment was somehow tied to Eva’s doubtless audible exhalation. *I was so worried. I had a terrible dream yesterday, Elizabeth. I dreamt that they had all hurt you, that you had died, and I feared I’d never see you again.*

Will put his hand out to steady Elizabeth, who had reeled at the memory the words evoked. *That wasn’t a dream, Eva. Arthur threatened her in front of everyone, and Elizabeth let loose with a burst of Energy that knocked him backwards. The entire community became fearful and attacked her. We are very fortunate she’s still here. All of them think she is dead, and that I am grieving privately at this time. I must return, but before that, I must be certain that Elizabeth reaches you. I can teleport her to you.*

There was a noticeable pause, and Will wondered if they’d lost her. *You don’t want to do that, Will. If someone new is suddenly inside these walls, it will raise suspicions. She needs to travel here in a traditional manner, arrive at the gates, and enter in that fashion, fully visible. She will stand out because of her hair, but she will still fit in better than if she is suddenly... here.*

Elizabeth chuckled. *The hair won’t be an issue any more. It looks like yours now. It looks like Mother’s now.*

Will became aware of someone approaching. His senses suggested it was someone he’d met before, but he couldn’t place the emotions, couldn’t tell if it was friend or foe. *We have a problem, Eva. I can tell you’re a great distance away, farther than we can comfortably walk. I need to return to the community to begin the rebuilding process, and Elizabeth needs to get to you. While I know she’s capable of taking care of herself, I’d be more comfortable knowing she was with someone else. Are you able to come to her?*

Elizabeth turned to Will, her face full of concern. They could hear the clatter of hooves growing louder, and closer, and the unknown identity of the rider made them fearful. Instinctively, they moved back into the fringe of the forest for cover.

I can't, Will. I am only now establishing myself here, and if I was to leave for several days and return I would be viewed with suspicion, especially if I suddenly returned with my daughter. Elizabeth smiled at this statement. *This is a very secretive place. It is not exactly like our village, but similar, and they are wary of outsiders.*

Will tried to think of a workaround. Could he teleport her close, and then walk her to the gate? *I can hear you, Will. No, they have guards watching the horizon. If you get close enough to walk her to the gate in the time you have, they'll see you appear. Showing up at the gate on foot as a weary traveler will make them curious unless you look worn down. And if you arrive with her, see her inside, and then leave... they will probably evict her. She needs to arrive with someone who can stay.*

The horse and rider rounded the bend. The rider was taller than most men of this time, and his brown hair was long. His eyes held the expression of a man lost, not in terms of his location, but of his purpose. Will finally recognized him as the man rode past the tree they'd hidden behind.

He stepped out of the forest. "Richard!"

The horse came to a stop, and the rider turned around. His eyes widened in surprise. "You!" His facial expression was a contorted mix of fear, awe, and confusion. "You truly do exist?" Richard climbed down from his horse, sizing up Will. His eyes flickered briefly to Elizabeth.

Will smiled. "I'm right here."

"I thought you were a ghost... or maybe a demon."

Will walked over to him. "None of the above. Just a man."

Richard snorted. "I dare say the word *just* rarely applies to you. Except, perhaps, in terms of punishing those who deserve it." His eyes fell to the ground.

"Have you chosen a noble purpose to your life?"

The man shook his head. "I've been wandering these past three years, trying to find something, some purpose to my life. I've done honest work for honest pay, never enough to be wealthy, but enough to eat and shelter myself. And eventually buy a new sword." Will recalled that the man's sword had shattered upon striking his nano-based exoskeleton, and no doubt the former crime lord felt emasculated without his weapon.

Will, who wore no weapon, held out his hand. "May I?"

Richard hesitated, but then pulled the sword from the sheath across his back and handed it, hilt first, to Will. Will examined it, noting the etchings and designs carved into the blade's handle, before handing it back. "An excellent and

beautiful weapon.”

Richard seemed relieved when Will handed the sword back, perhaps believing Will meant to execute him with his own weapon. “I want to do something noble with my life, as you said, but I’m afraid I’m not skilled in work of that type, or knowing how to *find* work of that type. I don’t know *how* to make the proper choices. I only know that I want to be proud. And... a few spare coins beyond those required for basic expenses would be a nice change.” He smiled. “But I think I’d rather know that I was doing something... good.”

Will suddenly realized that Richard could meet his own goals while helping them with theirs, and sent a telepathic message to Elizabeth. *Do you trust him?*

I do. He means what he says. I know what you’re thinking, and I agree.

Will returned his focus to Richard. “I believe I can help you there. This young woman requires a guard to see her safely through to her journey’s end. She knows the path, but requires a strong sword wielded by a man of bravery to ensure none of ill-will does her harm.”

Richard bowed toward Elizabeth. “It would be an honor, my lady, to see you safely to your destination.”

Will pulled five gold coins out of his pocket. “Your fee for the journey. The lady has sufficient funds for lodging and provisions for the journey. I will know if she has reached her destination in safety.” Will allowed himself to frown, indicating that failure would not be tolerated.

“I will perish, myself, before I allow the slightest discomfort to befall her, my lord.” Will almost choked, but realized it was a respectful term, rather than a title, and allowed it to pass without comment.

Richard nodded. “And where are the lady’s possessions?”

Elizabeth glanced at Will, who nodded. “One moment, Richard. They’re in the forest still. I’ll get them for you.”

Will walked into the forest, just out of reach, and teleported one of the bags of coins to the spot, along with the pouch now containing just the hairpin. He carried the two items out of the forest to Elizabeth and Richard. “My lady, here is your coin purse. I pray that you always find it overflowing.” He knew Elizabeth would catch his meaning; if she was running low on money, he’d ensure more appeared in that bag if she alerted him to the problem. “And here is the hairpin my lady wishes to take on her journey.”

Elizabeth accepted both, and put the pin in her hair. She handed the pouch back to Will. “Thank you, sir. For everything.”

Richard held his hand out to Elizabeth, and she took it without hesitation.

“My lady will ride and I shall walk.” His eyes appraised her, and his face made it clear he was quite pleased with what he saw.

Will heard Elizabeth giggle. After years of mistreatment, after being made a slave, after being told she was worthless, she was being treated by this man as if she was royalty. Will smiled at her, pleased that her prospects had brightened so thoroughly a mere day after being beaten nearly to death by her own community.

Will leaned toward Richard. “To be clear... the lady is to arrive unharmed. *And* untouched.”

Richard’s face blanched pale white, a coloring in conflict with his deep desire to turn beet red. “Of... of course, sir.”

Elizabeth glanced at Will, scowling, but there was no anger in her eyes, merely amusement. *Getting practice now at protecting my honor, I see. You’ll have plenty of time to practice.*

He just managed to avoid smiling back at her.

Richard helped Elizabeth into the saddle. “And what is my lady’s name, if I may ask?”

Will wondered about that question. Would she stay with her given name, the one that all in her community knew? Or would she take this opportunity to make a clean break from her past? He watched her face, and his Empathy and Telepathy could trace along with her thoughts as she rapidly made her own decision. Elizabeth was dead to the world, and she must take on a new name. But it must not be a name chosen at random. It must have meaning, a meaning corresponding to the new life she was beginning, and the fact that everything was possible. Everything, including eventual marriage and children with a man she’d grown to love. In her mind, there was only one name she could take.

“My good man, my name just happens to match what this journey—and those facilitating it—mean to me.” She glanced at Will as she spoke, and then turned her attention back to Richard.

“My name is Hope.”

BROTHER

Will watched them ride over the horizon, as if his gaze could prevent any evil from befalling them, and then turned back into the forest.

In many ways, the new skills he'd developed, especially those involved in reading people, were a curse. He wasn't required to spend time getting to know them to understand who was friend or foe, who was strong of character and who was weak, who was brave and who was cowardly. Most people, regardless of their Energy stores or skills, projected it so clearly that his enhanced senses dissected the person's character to its very soul. And he recognized that this fact had been such a hindrance to Elizabeth's self-esteem. She could never truly believe, no matter his actions or deeds, that Arthur cared for her, for she would be bombarded with his true intent in every interaction. It made him admire her even more, for she'd continued to fight to redeem the man despite every possible indication that it was a futile effort; she could see into his very soul, and yet still held out hope that he could change.

She'd wanted to die rather than face the reality that his true character, revealed to her ever more fully through his actions and words and her own increased ability to read people, was accurate. She'd been despondent and wanted to die, for she believed she couldn't run away from her own blood, literally or figuratively, and she didn't want to become like Arthur.

Yet, in that moment, as the blows rained down on her, when Arthur had disowned her, she'd suddenly been freed of that burden. If he could deny her, then she could deny his identity and character and become an independent person, freed of the restrictions real and imagined he had forced on her. In a sense, she had been reborn, not as Elizabeth the slave, the daughter of an evil man who sought to exploit her at every turn; but as a beautiful, brave, and

courageous, woman brimming with confidence.

She was Hope.

In a way, her departure also freed Will. He no longer needed to worry about her safety in the village, and he could seek to enact his own vision for the village's future without needing to worry about who might hurt her—namely, Arthur and Maynard. As he had always done, though, he would resist the temptation to use his Energy abilities to enforce his views. He would persuade, not coerce; he'd gather others to his viewpoint and philosophies through dialogue and his own example. It was an approach to life that he knew Arthur would heartily reject... which made Will embrace it even more fully.

There was a reason he chose not to carry a weapon. He knew that he couldn't be hurt; between the Energy, his enhanced senses, and the nanos, it would be essentially impossible for anyone to surprise him in an attack. If he knew an attack was coming, as Richard had learned, he was also impossible to stop. He didn't need a weapon for defensive purposes.

Yet, the fact that he refused to keep a weapon made him seem less a threat to others as well, and rather than being wary of a possible attack by Will or a battle with him, people felt at ease. They believed themselves in a position of superior strength due to the swords, daggers, and knives they openly carried with them; and that sense of confidence prompted them to speak with honesty and confidence in Will's presence. They'd learn of their mistake in underestimating him at their own peril if they sought to pursue some type of intimidation, as Maynard had learned the night before. Will might be unarmed, but he was anything but defenseless. He'd become a man in the village who was respected on multiple levels, and thus direct threats to him were unlikely.

Arthur's reaction to the events of the past two days, and to Will, upon his return to the village, would be telling. Arthur's belief—no, his *apparent* belief—that Roland's travels had uncovered the methods to develop the abilities they had so long sought through Elizabeth's sacrifice had exposed him to risk, for he'd stopped the research and tied his income and power to the zirple. Elizabeth's explosion of Energy had put the lie to the belief in zirple as the single component they'd been seeking; there was something else, something they'd not yet found, and now they'd need either to practice patience with the zirple, or begin anew to figure out what Elizabeth had found.

They'd probably search her room for the mystery ingredient, but they'd find nothing. Will had transported all of it to the cave, after Elizabeth had transported all of it from the Schola. They'd find nothing, for it was all gone. The only risk

was that the missing Traveler would return with a new supply, or that another set of Travelers might be dispatched to seek out the mystery substance. They might even send Roland back where he'd been, in hopes that he could determine if there was something else he was missing.

Without question, everything would change. Will could only hope it was for the better, and that he'd be able to persuade the others to his vision of change.

He finally reached the gate, which was open, and he walked in. The community was going about its usual daily activities, but there was a noticeable pall in the atmosphere. The community had known death once more, losing its youngest member, and the one who'd progressed farthest along the path they all sought. Whether it was guilt or a sense of loss of the potential all of them might have achieved, Will noticed a lot of eyes looking at the ground, and much less conversation than usual.

Arthur was feeding the pigs when Will walked by the paddocks. The self-styled leader of the community looked up, his face red from the exertion and sunlight, a look of cool calculation on his face. Whatever grief the rest of the community might feel, Arthur was clearly spending his time trying to figure out how to exploit the situation and return to his former position of power. Will wondered if the man had requested donations in Elizabeth's memory, payable to him, of course.

Arthur seemed to want to talk, but Will ignored him and marched off to the right, moving down the rows of rooms to the far corner. He opened his door, walked in, and shut the door behind him. He shut the curtain as well and stretched out on the cot. He'd not had much sleep, and the day's events had exhausted him. He allowed sleep to claim him.

He spent much of the next few days alone in his room, or sitting in the cave, using his clairvoyance to follow the journey Hope and Richard took, and felt a great sense of relief when Elizabeth reached a large, walled city. They entered, and Elizabeth's joy at reuniting with Eva was an incredible joy to behold, even at a distance. Eva thanked Richard with such enthusiasm that the man was embarrassed.

Satisfied that Elizabeth was safe once again, he returned to his room. It was early afternoon, but he elected to sleep for a bit, rather than eat. A short time later, he woke, staying in a calm state between sleep and being fully awake, aware of a commotion of sorts in the courtyard. Yawning, he stretched out his limbs, rose from his bed, and headed out of his room back towards the gate.

He heard the whispers as others moved in the same direction.

“Is it true? Has the last Traveler returned?”

“That’s what I’ve heard.”

“I thought he was dead!”

The crowd had already gathered around the man. Will couldn’t get much of a glimpse of him, but realized that this man must be Eva’s missing brother, and likely the man who had encouraged Elizabeth to consume the morange berries that had unlocked her Energy abilities.

“...lived there for many years, and saw that this community had, over time, discovered on its own the secrets we have sought. They did not seek it; they discovered it by sheer chance, for the food we have sought grows in abundance there.”

The man paused in his story, and Will felt the mental connection the Traveler made to his mind, probing it with a ferocity that shocked him. This man wasn’t Roland, a mere neophyte. His skills were a near match to Will’s, and the mental probe triggered Will’s memories of the past three years, looking for memories of Eva, and of Genevieve, and of Elizabeth. The probe finally ended after what seemed hours, though it was likely that it had taken mere seconds. Will, staggered by the intensity of the mental probe, took several steadying breaths, and moved toward the center of the group.

The man’s back was turned to him, but there was something very familiar about the brown hair, and the build, and the voice.

“I stayed there, and I learned. I suffered greatly the effects of this particular item early on, which many of the more senior members of the community could recall experiencing as well. Their children had never known a time without this substance, and were born with abilities we can only dream of.”

He turned around, and as his gaze traveled the crowd, his eyes met Will’s and locked on. Will just managed to maintain his composure as recognition hit him.

The mysterious Traveler long thought dead, the brother of Eva, the slave part of the original group of ten who had founded this community, the man who had aided Elizabeth... was Adam.

Will inclined his head. “Hello.”

Adam returned the gesture. “Greetings, friend.” He returned his gaze to the general crowd of villagers. “It seems, then, that the effects of these abilities are cumulative; the children of a parent are far more powerful than children born without such a parent; the children of *two* such skilled parents even more so. It is difficult to explain just how powerful these people, and their children, are.”

He paused, carefully considering his next words. “Yet they were generous

souls. They recognized that I was a fellow seeker of knowledge, and were eager to share what they'd learned. They welcomed me, and I became part of that community. Like my sister, I was best able to help by Trading, but they were quite content with the wealth of materials they could produce from their own lands and with their own hands, their skills in production enhanced by the near-magical abilities they'd developed.

“They worked with me, and encouraged me. They found joy in seeing my look of surprise as my abilities began to develop. They taught me how to develop my skills further, and demonstrated how I might apply them. I learned. My friends, the stories are real, the myths are true, and I, one of your own, can prove it.”

Adam gestured to the crowd to stand back, to give him space, and to provide everyone with a view of what he was doing. Then he held his hands together, and slowly spread them apart, his fingers curled around an invisible ball of what Will knew to be Energy. It was visible, a tongue of blue fire blazing between his hands, and the crowd gasped. Will glanced at Arthur, and saw that the man was stunned, unable to believe what he was seeing. Arthur likely realized that he'd not be able to take advantage of Adam as he'd done with Roland. His dreams of power were likely dying as the flames grew between Adam's hands.

Adam ceased the demonstration, and the blue flames disappeared. “My friends, these are skills I am able to teach all of you to develop. I do not seek compensation, for I recognize that the sooner all of us put this to use, the sooner we'll be able to transform our village into the vision of what we'd all like it to be.” He paused. “Though I ask no compensation, I do wish to provide this gift first of all to those of my choosing, and will then move on to others. I would ask that I may speak privately to my sister, Eva. I would like to speak to Genevieve, she of the gentle heart. And I would also like to speak to Genevieve's daughter, Elizabeth, who must now be a young woman, rather than the happy little girl I so fondly remember.” He glanced around. “Where are they?”

Faces fell to the ground. Adam looked around, confused. “Why are you reacting in this manner? Where are the three women? Are they out Trading?”

Will walked forward. “Come with me. I'll show you where they've been sent by the residents of this village.”

Adam nodded, and moved toward the gate with Will, as Arthur and the others stared after the two of them in horror.

Will walked the path that Eva had traveled that fateful day with Arthur and Maynard. “Your sister was a delightful woman, Adam. I considered her a true

friend—”

“Wait,” Adam said, stopping. “What do you mean that my sister *was* a delightful woman? Has she changed?”

In answer, Will kept walking, and Adam followed, until they came upon the small cross marking the fake grave Will had created for Eva. “Much has changed since you’ve left. The village has devolved into a place of jockeying for political power, and your sister found herself on the wrong side of that struggle. She was banished, and I was locked in my room as her opponents walked her away from the village. I escaped, and raced after them, arriving in time to find out that they’d never intended to simply banish her.” He gestured at the cross.

Adam’s face contorted, first in disbelief, then in rage. “They *murdered* her? They *murdered* my sister?” His voice rose barely above a whisper. “Who has done this, friend? I sense no evil in you, no evidence that you lie.” He frowned. “I also sense that you are, perhaps, well along the path I described to the villagers.”

I am, Will projected. *And I beg you to resist sharing your knowledge with your former neighbors. All three of the women you seek have met unhappy ends.*

Adam’s face showed that he heard, and Will projected images and memories of Eva’s stabbing and Elizabeth’s beating. Adam’s grief was overwhelming, and the man fell to his knees, sobbing.

“I was gone too long,” he whispered. “I’ve failed them. I should have come back sooner.”

Will looked at him. “I arrived too late to know what happened to Genevieve. But I believe she met an end similar to her daughter’s, for she told Elizabeth to never share anything she might learn with the villagers.”

Adam’s grief poured out once more, and then he looked up. “What she might learn?”

Will nodded, and outlined the bizarre structure of the village after Adam had left. Adam was stunned. “How could they allow themselves to be so deceived? It’s wrong. Why did they do nothing?” His eyes narrowed at Will. “Why didn’t you do something? You would be capable of changing everything immediately.”

Will sighed. “It’s a question I ask myself constantly. The answer, quite simply, is that Elizabeth asked me not to interfere. She wanted the villagers—especially Arthur—to find their own goodness and change of their own free will. She’d never been free to do as she wanted, and I relented, and did what I could to set a positive example.” He shook his head. “It didn’t work.”

Adam’s eyes flamed. “That’s all you can say? It didn’t *work*? My sister and

Elizabeth were *murdered* because of this system, and you elected to have your actions directed by a girl who'd had no taste of freedom?"

"So, you're saying I should have treated one used as a slave by others as my own slave by forcing her to do something against her will?" Will's eyes flashed. "She had the right to live as she chose. I refused to force her to pick a path of my choosing."

"Her choices have left her dead, and Eva and Genevieve with her," Adam seethed. "Could you not see the danger?"

"Of course," Will said. "That's why I went after Eva. That's why I broke up the mob attacking Elizabeth despite having a sword-wielding maniac trying to kill me."

And that's why Eva and Elizabeth are still alive, and you're the only one in the village who knows it.

Adam's eyes grew wide at this, and his mouth, opened to deliver a stinging reply, snapped shut. *Prove it.*

Will projected a web of Energy to envelop Adam, and then reached out. *Eva! Elizabeth! Adam sends his greetings!*

There was no reply, and Adam's gaze leveled on Will, growing angrier and angrier. Will was worried. Had something happened to Elizabeth and Eva, despite the extraordinary measures used to save their lives.

And then they heard it. Adam? Is it really you? I had feared you dead!

Adam's face shifted from anger to joy in a near instant. *Eva! You're alive! I heard what happened and I feared the worst. Is... is Elizabeth there with you as well?*

Yes, she's here and she's fine. I can't wait for you to see her again, Adam. She was just a little girl when you left, and she's a beautiful young woman now. She's alive due to the man you're with right now; treat him well.

Adam's look at Will was one of appreciation. *I will do that. I miss you both. I should have come back sooner, to help protect you...*

You did what you needed to do, Adam. Make things right there.

I will.

Eva broke the connection, and Adam studied Will again. "She's not easily impressed, Will, and you've clearly had an impact on her." He took a deep breath. "I don't agree with how you've chosen not to use your abilities, but I appreciate you doing whatever it was you did to save both of them. You have my eternal gratitude for that."

He held out his hand, and Will shook it.

“Why did you leave?” Will asked.

“I’m a Traveler, Will. It’s my job—”

“No, not here. *There.*” Will waved his hand, as if referring to the faraway village Adam had called home for so long. “It sounded like a wonderful place.”

“It was,” Adam said, his voice heavy. “But word spread of our skills, and with it came word that we were witches, consorting with the devil, and other such tales designed to frighten people. It worked. While I was away Trading, another local town rounded up an armed force with swords and pitchforks and torches, invaded the community... and slaughtered every single person there.” He choked back another cry. “I returned home just as the last of my friends and neighbors perished; he lived just long enough for me to learn what had happened. After his burial, I left and came back here.”

He took a deep breath. “Will, I’m tired from my journey, but I’m sickened by what happened here. I don’t know if I can live here with these people, knowing what they’ve done. I don’t have that capability to forgive.”

Adam turned and walked back toward the village, leaving Will with a very bad feeling in the pit of his stomach.

REBIRTH

Will followed after Adam, as the incensed man made his way back inside the walls of the village. Adam didn't ask to see the graves belonging to Genevieve and Elizabeth; he knew what had happened to them, and it mattered little where they'd been laid to rest. It only mattered that their lives had been destroyed by those in the village. They were all still standing where Will and Adam had left them, their faces expectant upon Adam's return. Will almost laughed. Did they truly believe Adam—or anyone else—would share the knowledge of how to gain incredible power with people who'd shown such capability to do violence against others?

Adam marched past the waiting villagers, past the Stores and Shops, and down the corridor rooms until he reached Will's room, which he entered. Will, following behind Adam, saw him exit and return outside. Seeing Will, Adam gestured with his head toward Will's room. "Who is using my room these days?"

Will gingerly raised his hand. "It's the room I was assigned. They believed that—"

"That I was dead," Adam said, frowning. "It matters not." He spun on his heel and entered Eva's room, shutting the door behind him. Will stood staring at the door for several moments, uncertain what to do. The look on Adam's face suggested that he was incredibly angry, and perhaps capable of violence. He'd done nothing so far, however, to earn Will's mistrust.

He walked back to the courtyard, where the villagers still milled about. Arthur walked over to Will. "What... what did you tell him? He seemed very angry when he came back."

Will snorted. "I told him the truth about why the women he was looking for aren't available."

Arthur stared at him. “How could you do that? Why would you want to make a man like him angry? He knows, Will! He truly knows how to do what we’ve all wanted to do for so long, and he was prepared to tell us. But now... for your own selfish purposes, you’ve told him exactly the wrong things, and made him angry. He’s no longer likely to share anything, Will. How could you do this to all of us?”

The man’s ability to spin any event to his advantage was uncanny, and even now, Will still marveled at the fact that many of the villagers were nodding at Arthur’s words, angry at Will for likely denying them the chance to make blue flames with their hands.

He rolled his eyes. “Arthur, stop it, now. He can read minds, Arthur. There is no denying a man like him the truth; he knew the truth before I ever chose to say a thing. I dare say he has, or will, be checking each of you for the truth of your involvement in the deaths of those women. He will know. And how could you deny the man the right to his anger at the truth of what happened? There is no defense against the truth; you may try to persuade him to alter his opinion of the facts, but you will not be able to deny him access to those facts.”

Arthur’s glare intensified. “I cannot believe you’d do this to us, Will.” He glanced at the crowd. “They seem quite angry at you, don’t they?”

Will merely laughed. “You’re actually going to try to incite violence against me *now*, when the truth of those actions will deny you everything you’ve sought? Your need for vengeance against imagined wrongs is why you’re in this position.” He glanced around at the waning daylight. “I’m going to bed. I’d recommend that all of you do the same, and think about apologizing for murdering that man’s sister.”

Before Arthur could respond, Will turned around and left, walking back to his room, stopping only when the door was shut behind him. He used the hatch he’d built into the roof, climbing out of the room and onto the roof, where he lay down, looking up at the emerging stars. Elizabeth was out there somewhere, having ridden to Eva with Richard as her protector. He hoped the journey was uneventful. And Eva was in a mysterious town, which she’d not yet identified, a location where entry was difficult and suspicion of newcomers was equally high. Should he go there to check on the women? Did they *need* him to check on them?

He sighed. Right now, he needed to be alert to what Adam might try. Would the man be so rash as to try to go after Arthur? Would he simply steal away into the night? The latter, of course, was Adam’s choice, but Will had no interest in

letting the man commit the type of atrocities—against, effectively, an unarmed opponent—as those committed against the three women who’d died during his long absence. If Adam forced his hand, would he reveal his own abilities in the effort to stop him? Will struggled with that dilemma for hours, even after he climbed back into his room and lay on his cot, eventually drifting into an uncomfortable sleep.

He awoke to a gentle but urgent tapping on his door. “Will, are you awake? It’s Adam.”

Stifling a yawn, Will rose from his cot and opened the door. “Isn’t it rather late, Adam?”

Adam shrugged. “I thought so, too, but Arthur asked me to get you. It seems something is wrong with the water Wheel, and he needs you to try to fix it.”

Will arched an eyebrow. “What’s wrong with the Wheel?”

“Listen.”

Will listened, trying to figure out what was wrong, and then realized what he wasn’t hearing. Water. The water wasn’t flowing from the Wheel, wasn’t flowing through the aqueducts and out through the waterfall and drainage system. Something was wrong, indeed. “I’ll go look.”

Adam nodded.

Will walked out to the courtyard, and found that the gate was already opened. He grabbed one of the torches they’d used at the party a few nights earlier—the party at which Elizabeth had been beaten to death—and pulled it from the ground. He walked out the gate and, once out of sight of the village, sent a sheet of Energy flames at the torch, lighting it and providing a source of illumination to the path, which moved toward the Ealdor River and the Wheel. He marveled at the urgency of restoring running water to villagers who had never known such marvels until a few years ago; now, they felt they couldn’t survive without it.

He walked, aware of how quiet the forest was at night. He’d expected more noise as nighttime predators and scavengers emerged, but perhaps this forest was unique in its lack of nocturnal nightlife. Well, except for him.

He approached the Wheel and frowned. The Wheel was still turning, still scooping up buckets full of water and dumping them out. Yet the water was splashing down on the shore-side dock, rather than reaching the aqueduct system. He wondered what type of debris blocked the structure.

Will reached the dock and hiked up the ramp, and looked inside the aqueduct.

His heart sank.

Arthur was bound and gagged, crammed into the opening of the aqueduct system, his body acting as a shield preventing the water from flowing. The man's eyes widened at the sight of Will. Will seized Arthur and pulled him out of the aqueduct, and tore away his bindings and gag. "What happened?"

Arthur's shock was too great to speak, however. As much as Will savored the man's silence and terror, he needed answers. "What happened? Who did this to you?"

Even as he asked the question, however, he knew the answer. The more critical question, though, was why. Why had Adam abducted Arthur and left him in this spot? And why had Adam sent Will here to fix the problem with the Wheel, since Arthur himself had clearly not requested Will's presence?

The sound of screaming rose in the distance, and Will noticed the bright glow from the direction of the village.

He scrambled down the ramp and off the dock, seized the torch, and ran toward the village. Running toward yet another fire. This time, however, it wasn't just his twenty-first century house; it was this entire eleventh century village. And this time, Adam wasn't rescuing him from a fire. Adam had set it.

The images came to him as his pace increased. Adam had used his Energy to lock down the village and everyone in it. He'd seized Arthur, bound him, and carried the man to the Wheel where he'd left him in the aqueduct. After getting Will out of the village, Adam had used his Energy to smash the kegs of wine and ale over the exteriors of the rooms, and then sent his flaming Energy into the alcohol, setting the entire village ablaze. Only when it was too late for any of them to escape did he release their bonds, to enable them to be fully aware as death claimed them all through the fire.

Will saw Adam standing outside the village, a look of grim satisfaction on his face, which was illuminated by the flames destroying everything in sight. Will absent-mindedly felt the paper scroll computer in his pocket, as it was the only truly irreplaceable item he owned. He had money aplenty buried in the hidden cave he and Elizabeth had used for training—and more recently, healing—and was unconcerned about losing his wealth.

Now, though, he recognized that Adam had decided to use his abilities to act as executioner of the villagers who had, to the best of their knowledge, murdered three innocent women. Adam's earlier words—"I don't know if I can live here with these people"—took on new meaning. He hadn't been planning to move away to avoid the villagers; he'd been planning to exterminate them all.

“I did what you wouldn’t do, Will,” Adam said, as Will walked up next to the man. “I made sure those cowards and evildoers never again had the chance to harm innocents.”

“But why, Adam? Why do they not get the chance to redeem themselves?”

“They’ve had chances, Will. Your memories tell of that fact, and you’ve been here for only a short time. *Their* memories told of daily choices made, concerned only with themselves, and rationalizing the ill treatment of first Genevieve and then Eva, but always of the child known as Elizabeth. Grown women might have the chance to defend themselves, but a child? It is that crime for which I’ll never forgive them.”

Will shook his head, still too much in shock to recognize that he’d never again talk to any of them. “The child you speak of—she specifically told me that she associates those who would commit murder with Arthur, the one who wounded her the most deeply of all. Make no mistake, Adam. What you’ve done here is murder, not vengeance. You may have found yourself unable to forgive them what they’d done—but will Eva ever forgive *you*? Will Elizabeth? Would Genevieve?”

Adam’s face showed the slightest tinge of doubt. “What’s done is done.”

The walls finally collapsed, lit by the burning rooms, and the two men watched as the entire village smoldered into nothing but ashes.

Will glanced at Adam. “What about the animals? Are they guilty as well?”

Adam shook his head. “They were freed before I woke you. Only those with the free will to choose their actions paid the ultimate price.”

Will heard a sound behind him, and turned to find a bedraggled Arthur shuffling into view. The man’s face was the epitome of confusion, as if his brain simply could not understand what he was seeing.

“Only two were saved from the fire,” Adam said, without turning to recognize Arthur. “One, because he and he alone worked to change the village for the better, refused to participate in the evil it had become, and tried to save those persecuted within the walls. The second? He will serve as a constant reminder of what the face of incorrect choices looks like. He will live the rest of his days having to remember what he’s done, and live with the fact that his choices led to the deaths of over fifty men and women who likely would still be alive now if not for him. He will have to live with the knowledge that he murdered his wife and daughter.”

Arthur had no response.

Will looked at Adam. “You’ve destroyed our home, Adam. We have nowhere

to live, no means of making an income to buy the supplies we need to survive. What do we do?"

Adam suddenly whirled upon Arthur, threw the man to the ground, and forced something into the man's mouth. To prevent gagging, Arthur was forced to swallow the food Adam had injected into him.

As Arthur recovered, Adam turned to Will, and offered him a handful of pungent berries, and Will recognized what they must be. The morange berries, the trigger for the abilities that Elizabeth had developed and, most likely the basis of the Purge Will himself had taken in the future. Arthur would now, after a great deal of pain and suffering, build the abilities he'd so long desired.

"Eat them, Will. They develop the abilities I demonstrated earlier. We will let the two of you recuperate from the effects of the berries, and then train you in how to use them."

Adam turned back to face what remained of the village, as the flames died down and they were cast into darkness. "This effort at building a village of high commerce was a failure. The three of us will use our abilities to rebuild, and recruit others, and build another home upon the ashes and memories of what we left behind. We will have rules about how we treat each other, so that we avoid the disaster here, a disaster that ended today. And we'll have a name to define us."

He motioned to the ground, where shards of wood were scattered, and Will recognized the shattered remnants of the sign on the Schola that he himself had hurled against the well. Adam laid the pieces out on the ground and, by the light of Will's torch, he assembled the pieces to form a single long word.

AL IO I NC RE MENT UM SCH OLA

Adam looked at the letters. "Our name should be formed from the shattered remnants of the building where so much potential good might have been done." He began shuffling the pieces of wood, removing some chunks and moving others around.

He finally looked at Will. "What do you think of this?"

Will looked at the ground, but he already knew what it said.

AL IO MENT I

Will pushed the letters together. ALIOMENTI. "I like it. I think it will define our group for a very long time."

Adam nodded. "Arthur, what do you think?"

The morange berries began to have their effect at that moment, however, and Arthur's opinion on the name was lost to the sounds of his screams.

But Will knew what his answer would be.

BOOK III

ASCENT OF THE ALIOMENTI

PROLOGUE

They met in secret once more, a couple betrothed, promised to each other in a future one had not yet lived. Circumstances forced them to live apart, for one man would seek to destroy her should he learn she'd survived an apparently violent death. Their knowledge of the future, a future in which that evil man still lived, prevented them from eliminating him first.

The journey would be a difficult one, fraught with risk, and the greatest risk was that anything they might do would alter their chances to bring forth the children both so desperately wanted.

They'd both need to survive that long, and though both were now immortal, it did not mean all those they knew and cared for in the eleventh century would join them.

"I didn't meet Eva in the future, Hope," Will said. "I don't know how long she lived. That doesn't mean she's not still around in the future, though."

Hope nodded, but she looked uncomfortable at the news. Eva had been her constant companion, and though the course of thirty years had changed their actual if not their public relationship, the two women were still close, still bonded by the secrets they shared.

Hope took a deep breath, and he caught a strong emotion from her, of a type he couldn't identify. "I think I need to branch out on my own, Will. Somewhere completely different. And I think I need to learn to survive without Eva."

He was surprised, though he quickly understood what she was trying to do. Her childhood had been a disaster, and Hope had been in desperate need of someone to show her she was loved without qualification. Eva had provided that in her own fashion, just as Will had in his. But in many ways, her relationship with Eva had prevented Hope from developing a true independence. The

understanding that Eva might not always be around further necessitated that development, and Hope had the wisdom and maturity now to understand what she needed to do.

“How did she take the news?”

She looked at the ground, her only response silence.

Will sighed. “Do you want me to break the news to her?”

Hope shook her head. “No, I need to be the one to tell her, and I know that. It’s difficult to share news like that, isn’t it?”

Will smiled. “Having been on both sides, I can only say that in my experience, it’s best for both parties that the news be delivered without delay. The message will come out, no matter what. It’s best to let the person receiving the news know without delay so that they can prepare themselves and comport themselves as necessary.”

She nodded. “I know.”

“Where do you think you’ll go?”

“Back to the island, initially. Then I’ll decide. The world is large, and most definitely not flat.” She smiled, and Will remembered the global tour he’d taken her on decades earlier. “I think I’ll travel a long way this time, and put a very large distance between us.”

Will winced involuntarily. “That’s... probably for the best.”

She grimaced, but then her face turned to stone, and he recognized that something else was coming, a message causing her far more distress. “This whole situation is very difficult for both of us, Will. Unless we change our minds, and risk the fate of history and our children, we must live through a chaste millennium-long betrothal. Distance helps, but if we make it simple to see each other with teleportation... at some point, we’re going to fail at that.” She took a deep breath. “My traveling to a far distant locale solves that dilemma as well.”

He felt as if he’d been slapped, dealt a blow that crippled him, and stepped back.

It had been a long series of discussions, merging the practical, knowledge of future history, and Hope’s own strong beliefs. She would do nothing which had any chance of posing any possible risk to the children she’d not bear for over nine centuries. And that meant she would not consent to marry him, nor engage in related acts, until the appointed time. He’d protested, noting that there was no risk of other pregnancy now with the ambrosia’s corrupting influences on both of them.

“We won’t know that, Will, until it’s too late,” she’d replied. “Then what happens? What if our children don’t exist anymore because we make that decision? Will you disappear immediately? They won’t be around to rescue you from those men, will they? You’ll probably die in that fight, just as I would have died eventually if you’d not been there to rescue me, mentally and physically, from Arthur’s schemes and mobs.” She’d shaken her head, her face resolute.

They’d still seen each other, still shared in those Energy-enhanced embraces. And though it wasn’t what he’d become accustomed to in their days of marriage, it was, somehow, enough.

Now, she was leaving, severing even that bond.

He couldn’t keep the look of shock off his face.

“A thousand years is a long time, Will,” she said, and he could see tears rolling down her face. “We can each help half the planet in our own way. Don’t forget that in the end, I will always be there for you. For now, though, at this point in this journey, I must be much farther away.”

She put her fingers to her lips, then reached out to trace them across his. “I love you, Will.”

And then she vanished.

ARGUMENT

1021 A.D.

The last screams of the dying had finally faded, the horrors carried away with the smoke rising from the still-smoldering remains of the inferno. Fifty men and women had perished in the blaze, their deaths made certain as the arsonist used his special skills to ensure they'd remained in a deep sleep, unable to awaken and escape their fate. Only in the final moments of life, as the voracious flames began to consume their very flesh, were they permitted to regain consciousness. Their final minutes were a nightmare of terror and agony; pain the entirety of their existence for those final smoke-filled breaths they inhaled.

Adam stood, alternating his gaze between the flames and the man whimpering on the ground at his feet. Arthur had deserved to die more than any of those executed in his stead. They'd suffered judgment and penalty at Adam's hands for partaking in the deaths of three women, allowing their raw emotion and greed to goad them into destroying what they themselves could not have... or could not have *first*. Adam might have overlooked the death of Arthur's late wife, Genevieve, a woman he'd not seen in a decade. But the beating death of the only child the village had known was unforgivable. The cold-blooded murder of his sister, Eva, however, had sent him over the edge of sanity into a mindset focused solely on vengeance. Eva had been sent away from the village, only to be stabbed in the back at Arthur's command by a man whose body was now ashes.

Adam had gotten the truth of what had happened in this fledgling village from Will, the only one who'd worked to improve and then save Eva and

Elizabeth's lives. Will had been spared for that reason, sent out of the village on an errand in the middle of the night before Adam unleashed the inferno of death upon the others. Adam had elected to spare Arthur's life as well.

"Why?" Will asked.

"Why?" Adam snorted. "Men and women who cannot bear to see anyone get the better of them, who so easily allow themselves to be sold a story of scarcity in a village grown so wealthy? Men and women who speak of learning, of sharing knowledge, who have a building named for just such a use, who then destroy those who are making progress? Men and women who will commit murder and stand by to allow others to do the same?" He shook his head. "Such people do not deserve the answers they seek, for their judgment in small things suggests they would be untrustworthy in large things. Better to eliminate them now, both as punishment for past wrongs, and to prevent the future tyranny they'd impose if given what I'd returned to provide them."

Will stared at Adam. His experience and impressions of the man had come from a thousand years in the future, when Adam still lived through the advances they were now unlocking, when Adam would teach a confused, distraught Will how to mold and manipulate Energy to do as he wished. Will knew Adam as a patient man, a kind man, a practical man. Those impressions had not prepared him for Adam as he was now, an angry and impulsive man who acted upon his anger to murder the guilty.

"They all acted because *that* man"—Will nodded toward Arthur, prone and writhing on the ground—"manipulated them into their behavior. But for him, they would have done nothing of the sort. Genevieve, Elizabeth, and Eva would still be alive."

Adam shook his head. "They were weak-minded, fearful people, Will. Had Arthur not come along, someone else would have manipulated them just as he did. Theirs were minds begging to be molded to another's vision. Before, that meant cruelty. What might happen when such people developed sufficient power to do something like *that*?" He nodded toward the fire, and then leaned in closer to whisper in a conspiratorial fashion. "Or do what *you* are capable of doing?"

Will knew all too well the answer to Adam's rhetorical question, for he'd seen the future Aliomenti, under Arthur's direction, work to stifle human innovation and progress in his own time and in his own future. They'd amassed incredible wealth; wealth Will had seen evidence of during his visit to their Headquarters. He suspected they'd infiltrated human governments and businesses as well, seeking to control, seeking to stifle, seeking to keep the mass

of humanity downtrodden in order to raise their own absolute and relative stature and influence in the world.

“Many of them were slaves, Adam. They were men and women accustomed to living their lives at another’s whim, for another’s pleasure. They’d tasted freedom, and their greatest fear was somehow losing that freedom, having to once more bow to another. They knew the power that would come with the successful completion of the experiments they’d all forced upon Elizabeth; failure to be the first to acquire the power they expected her to discover would mean being a potential victim yet again.” He quieted as that realization hit him. “She never had a chance, did she?”

He’d seen through most of Arthur’s manipulations. Arthur’s facial expression during Elizabeth’s first public display of Energy showed Will that Arthur’s supposed dream, a dream of a future where they’d all developed “magical” abilities, was nothing but a facade, a straw man to make himself of critical importance in the village. Only Arthur, through Elizabeth, could unlock the code. That meant Arthur would be the first to reap the rewards... along with the special few he chose. It had been a decade-long accumulation of influence and power over the villagers, who had willingly handed over their gold and human compassion to Arthur to ensure they’d be an early adopter. When Elizabeth finished unlocking the code, they believed, she would tell Arthur, and Arthur would tell his inner circle. They’d be the leaders of a powerful new alliance.

But Elizabeth *hadn’t* told Arthur. Elizabeth held the secret, held all of the power in that singular instant. In that instant, all of their individual scheming and plotting and influence building were rendered worthless. They were once more at the mercy of another, a person who had no obligation to treat them well. Given her treatment at their hands, they’d realized they were at her mercy, for they’d shown no compassion toward her and would receive none in return.

Faced with a loss of all status, faced with control by someone who owed them nothing, they’d lashed out and destroyed her, their pride preventing them from delivering the apologies that would have thawed Elizabeth’s chill toward them. They’d fallen on her en masse and beaten her, urged on to greater levels of ferocity by Arthur’s public disowning of his own child.

Adam said nothing, but his face revealed his agreement with Will’s words. “And yet you think it would have been wise to give those people yet another chance?” He spat on the ground, the spittle narrowly missing Arthur. “Your unwillingness to see people for what they are is going to lead to your demise,

and the demise of those you care for. I am willing to act when I see the truth, regardless of what that truth might be.”

Will seethed inwardly. It was more than his personal philosophy that prevented him from acting. Much as he believed many in that village deserved punishment for their behavior, he lived with knowledge of the future. That knowledge was both a blessing and a curse, for any action—especially murder—could lead to an altered future. Will had met both Arthur and Adam in the future, and that knowledge meant he could not kill either, and that he’d even need to *protect* both men if necessary. And while he’d not met any of the other villagers in those future times, taking any of their lives could end the lives of those he *had* met in that future. A death at his hands in this era might eliminate the direct ancestor of someone he’d met in his business dealings, neighbors in his community, friends and colleagues he’d known in his philanthropic endeavors.

The premature death of any person here could even mean that he himself would cease to exist in the future.

He wondered what the diary, the computer in the form of a scroll of papyrus gifted to him from the future, might have to say about all of this. What might Adam say about his decision, with twelve centuries of intervening time to consider it? Would he express regrets? The Adam in front of him now would say he’d done what needed to be done, and express no remorse. Would the future Adam wonder if there might have been another way?

What would *he* do, he wondered, if the diary provided no message of explanation or remorse from the future action? And what would he do if, at some point, the diary told him that he must kill someone because history said he’d done so?

He glanced down at Arthur, distracted out of his thoughts by the sudden silence from the man on the ground. “What did you give him?”

Adam arched an eyebrow. “The same thing I gave you. Morange berries. They are the ultimate key to unlocking the Energy you need to be able to do what I did. With time, some are able to do... far more than what I’ve shown here.” He let those words hang in the air, heavy with accusation and meaning. Will held far more ability than he’d let anyone know, but his ability to mask his skills was rapidly coming to an end.

“I went through this process, though the people who gave me the berries mixed them with other substances, and didn’t tell me what the ingredients were. The process was far more painful, and far more... messy, than what Arthur has experienced.” Arthur was quiet now, merely inhaling deep gulps of air. There

was no indication that the expulsion of matter that Will had experienced would occur.

Adam's hard expression softened, and then turned crafty. "It's the zirple," he whispered, more to himself than to Will. He spoke in more normal tones and volume. "They work together. The zirple makes you sweat out or otherwise get rid of anything in you that's in your blood and unhealthy. If you take just the zirple, you'll probably avoid getting sick and you'll feel wonderful. It's possible, if you take it long enough, that you'll start to develop some limited Energy.

"The morange berries, on the other hand, scrape everything possible *into* your blood and out of the skin and muscles where it had been stored. Once the morange completes its work, your blood is basically poisoned. So you need to consume zirple, or you'll get sick, and even die. If the morange does its work and you take the zirple... it can get very unpleasant. I suspect you were given large doses of both, if you experienced a lot of pain in the process. It usually takes many rounds before you start to see the best results. I suspect if you've taken zirple for a while, the process is less painful than if you haven't." He arched an eyebrow. "How many rounds did you take?"

"One," Will admitted. "As far as I know."

Adam scoffed at this. "How can you not know if you'd been through *that* more than once?"

It was certainly possible he'd had more rounds of the Purge treatment. Was it possible they'd injected him with their equivalent of the zirple before he'd undergone the Purge? Did the healing nanos in his body alter the impact? "I remember a very painful round. It left me unconscious. It is possible that I was given additional rounds without knowing it. I do not remember more than one, however." He fixed Adam with a pointed stare. "I was in the care of people who were... deceptive."

Adam raised his hand in triumph. "See? Sounds like people who are untrustworthy to me. You'd have been better off eliminating them."

Will shivered at the words, though the irony of Adam's statement curled his lip for a brief moment. "I've since learned *why* they were deceptive, and it was a necessary act, done for my benefit. Eliminating them would have been impossible."

Adam shrugged. "Nothing should be impossible for you."

"Murder always will be for me, no matter how you might try to justify it."

Adam whirled on him. "*Murder* cannot be committed against those who have destroyed the lives of the innocent. What I did was justice, not murder. *They*

were the ones guilty of murder. Not me. With those cowards and weaklings gone, we can start anew, with better people... and a better result.”

Will shook his head. “I am here with a manipulator who caused the deaths of his wife and daughter, and a man who felt it his right to judge others as worthy of death. How can I trust either of you? You’ve both caused death... and my reasons to live are far too great to risk my life with the two of you.”

He turned and walked away, sensing Adam’s widening eyes tracking him.

“Will! Where are you going?” Adam shouted. “You *can’t* leave! We’re going to do this right this time! Where there are no manipulations possible! Nobody used, nobody murdered! Will! Come back!”

Will glanced over his shoulder in Adam’s direction. “Until we meet again, Adam. Goodbye.”

With that, Will Stark, a man history recorded as one of the founders of the Aliomenti, vanished into the darkness of the forest.

EMIGRATION

1021 A.D.

Will walked away from the smoldering remains of the southern half of the village, the darkness becoming total as he escaped the light of the flames. His shadow preceded him into the darkness, as if it was a scout searching for danger. It wasn't necessary to scout in front of him, however, for the most dangerous beings in the vicinity, and perhaps in the world, were behind him. Will tensed at the thought, wondering if Arthur might talk Adam into chasing Will down to stab him in the back, just as he'd convinced Maynard to stab Eva. Will's normal senses were much sharper than those of most men and women, his Purge and Energy work enhancing them far beyond what he'd known for the first thirty-five years of his life. He'd hear and even feel a person sneaking up on him before a stabbing became a possibility. But he looked over his shoulder anyway; just to be sure he wasn't followed.

He'd walked away, and doubted his parting words meant a permanent separation in anyone's mind. At the moment, though, Will simply had no interest in being around either of the two men he'd just left. He knew from his own future that at some point he'd go back, for Will Stark was supposed to be a key founding member of the Aliomenti, driving innovations and becoming their greatest practitioner of Energy skills. His departure, therefore, could not be permanent, at least not yet, not until he departed centuries from now to form the Alliance. But that didn't mean he couldn't choose a temporary separation. He had a thousand years to accomplish all he was meant to accomplish.

Will walked for nearly twenty minutes before he realized he was heading in the wrong direction. He needed a place where he could reflect quietly on what

had happened. He needed a place where he could rest and sleep without concern about an attack by humans or other predators. He needed a place where he could review the diary for any guidance that his children and, yes, Adam, might choose to provide. And he needed a place where he could reach out and talk to Eva and Elizabeth. Correction: Eva and *Hope*. After spending three years learning to refer to his future wife by her original name, he now had to teach himself to refer to her once again as Hope.

Arthur's recovery from the morange berries that Adam forced upon him was still ongoing, and eventually Adam would be focused on helping the man in his recuperative efforts. With Adam's attention distracted, Will could teleport safely to the cave without drawing attention.

He frowned. Did he want to risk that? Adam seemed to know Will was no neophyte with Energy; he hadn't asked *if* Will had taken the necessary ingredients, but rather how often he'd done so. He'd handed Will a standard dosage of the berries at the same time he'd forced a similar portion down Arthur's throat. Will hadn't realized until then that his hand was still clenched around the berries. That would be something else he could do in the cave; he was long overdue for another Purge. He frowned for a moment, concerned. Adam had said that taking the morange berries without following it up with zirple could be unhealthy, but he'd not offered Will any zirple.

Will snapped his fingers. Zirple still grew in the fields, fields that would never again be tended by the village farmers. He'd been headed in the right direction after all.

Twenty minutes later, he'd collected a large quantity of ripened zirple plants, digging them out of the ground so as to gather the all-important roots. The leaves and fruit were useless, but the roots provided such an improvement in health that Roland, the Traveler, had believed zirple to be the secret ingredient to unlock those mysterious abilities Arthur had long fantasized they'd all develop. They'd started raising the zirple crop here, and Arthur had engineered an elaborate lottery system to determine who would receive the daily rations. Arthur ensured scarcity in those rations, ensured there were always fewer rations each day than villagers desiring them. The lottery had become such an income-producer for him, so powerful a method of accumulating power and control in the village, that Arthur had forgotten about his daughter. Her worth to him had ended, a truth proved when he'd ultimately disowned her.

Prepared now for his journey to the cave, Will elected to avoid teleportation. He needed to practice some of his skills, and with only two men left alive in the

forest, there was no better time. Will flooded his entire body with Energy, enabling his cells to be both transparent and lighter than air. Within moments, his body was invisible, and so light that he could lift it off the ground with his mind with minimal effort. Clenching the zurple roots and morange berries in his invisible hands, he soared into the air.

The closest he'd ever come to this sensation was during the clairvoyance sessions he'd performed, in which he was able to use Energy to change his point of perception to an area away from his physical body, seeing and hearing the sights and sounds in remote locations. He'd used the technique to locate the cave three years earlier. But it was a far cry from the actual experience of flying, for those sessions produced no remote physical sensations. He felt the wind on his face as he flew, and he also experienced the innate terror that he might fall, a sensation that lessened as time passed and his mind and body learned that he wasn't capable of plummeting to the earth. The thrill was comparable to the roller coaster rides he'd experienced in the twenty-first century, but there was no need to pay an admission fee, wait in line... or have the experience end before he wished. He relished the sensation, and though he'd come upon the location of the cave, he flew past, soaring higher into the air, viewing the entirety of the forest and river landscape below. He could make out, in the light of the early dawn, the water Wheel they'd constructed and recalled the social challenges they'd needed to overcome to complete the project. The fiery embers of the burning village walls and rooms were visible as well. Will looked away, not wanting to think about the deaths of so many.

After thirty minutes, he flew into the cave, and allowed his body to solidify and return to visibility. As his corporeal presence returned, he was better able to sense the Energy flowing around him. Over the preceding three years, he and Elizabeth had spent several hours each week inside these stone walls, working together to grow their ability to produce and absorb the substance which enabled all manner of unique abilities. Three years earlier, Will had started his own initial Energy work, trained in the basic skills by Adam. His greatest progress came through his own work, where he learned that willingly sharing his Energy with other living things, including the trees in the forest surrounding the Alliance camp, produced a feedback effect that dramatically grew his own Energy stores. When his Energy grew, new skills beyond those taught by Adam, revealed themselves. He discovered his ability to project his senses outside his body and eavesdropped on a conversation held far away, and accidentally teleported before ever learning the correct process. Adam had briefly touched upon other skills,

such as flying and invisibility. Will realized Adam knew their time in the future was coming to a close, and Will would need to teach himself those skills without Adam's guidance.

That was a fortuitous decision. Right now, Will would sooner learn about Energy from Arthur than Adam.

Will allowed the Energy to flow from his body outward into the canopy of living greenery surrounding the cave, felt the familiar impact of the feedback effect, and breathed in the oxygenated air. Both sensations bolstered his spirits somewhat, but he was still left with two uncomfortable tasks. He needed to take the morange and zirple combination to Purge himself, a word that seemed appropriate now only if it removed the memories of the screams of those dying in the fire. He needed to report in to Eva and Elizabeth—no, Eva and *Hope*—about Adam's return and subsequent arson exploits. He elected to start with the latter; perhaps after *that* conversation, he'd find the experience of the Purge less painful.

He reached out with his senses, listening for the sound he'd come to know so well, the pure flute-like music generated by Hope's Energy. In this calm environment, he realized that he'd heard it long before his time travel had ever begun, a sound that he'd heard many mornings as his body moved from sleep to conscious waking. Perhaps, as she slept, her Energy seeped into him, filling him with its purity, calming his mind with its sound. He'd always thought it was simply his imagination, but he realized now that he'd been hearing her Energy throughout their married life together. That raised a question, though. How had he heard a sound based upon Energy? He'd had no discernible Energy until his children and Adam had snatched him from the Hunters and delivered him to the twenty-third century. It was a sound he should not have heard.

It was a mystery he'd have a thousand years to solve.

The flute sound called to him, and he chased it with his mind, seeking and finding Hope, who was just waking from a long night's sleep. He linked into her mind, and projected words of greeting along the trail of Energy connecting them. *Good morning, Hope.*

In his mind's eye, he watched as she woke with a start, sitting up in the small bed she used for sleeping. *Will! I've had some terrible dreams lately, and I worried I'd not see you again.*

Will sighed, a sound that echoed within the empty walls of the cave. *I'm fine. Your father is fine.*

She waited for him to continue, but when the silence became unbearable, she

was forced to ask the question she did not want answered. *What of the others?*

Arthur and I are all that remain save for the missing Traveler, who returned with powerful Energy skills and who judged the entire village guilty of murder, a crime carrying a penalty of death. The Traveler sent me away to fix a problem with the Wheel, and while I was absent held the others asleep and set fire to their homes. They are all... gone.

With his mental connection to her location, he could hear her gasp of horror, the sharp inhalation of breath as she realized that every one of the villagers, even those like the Traders and Kay who had treated her with some kindness, was dead. The tears came soon after, and he could see the moisture streaming from her bright blue eyes. Her sadness made him ache inside, and he found himself wishing he could resurrect the time machine and take back what he'd said, to prevent her from experiencing the pain she felt at that moment.

He'd once told Hope that she was a truly good person, one who could feel compassion for those who least deserved it. She'd refused his offers to escort her away from the village ruled by Arthur, preferring instead to work her own plan to try to improve Arthur as a man and a father. She'd never once asked Will to injure the man, to force her father to act as a father should, to be her protector rather than her tormentor. She wanted him to change of his own free will, not through any type of coercion, a philosophy toward life that mirrored Will's own, and in his mind meant she was one well suited to the burden of the abilities possible with Energy development.

Now, after hearing of the deaths of the men and women Arthur had manipulated into murdering her, she did not cheer or gloat their demise. She wept. Will let her cry until her tears fell no more.

We have to tell Eva, don't we? That Traveler... I think he's her brother. She needs to know.

Will sighed. *She does. Is she there with you?*

She's already off to her work for the day. She is acting as a medicine woman and healer, using Energy to help the sick. She is gradually trying to work me in as her assistant. It is good work, though it does not bring much pay. But we don't need much, and we both have plenty of money saved up.

That was a relief to Will. He'd not yet discussed with Eva how she was planning to survive in the remote city she'd reached, but it appeared she'd settled in nicely. She'd developed sufficient presence in these few weeks that she'd been able to bring Hope into a highly-secured city without issue. *I'm glad to hear that, Hope. I may be joining you soon.*

He felt the jolt his words had on her. *I thought you were staying there? To help them rebuild, to become what they're supposed to become?*

He'd shared with her that he'd come from the future, and she'd known from her Energy training that he'd been telling the truth. When she'd asked him to leave with her after her burial, he'd declined, indicating that he knew he was meant to stay. But now...

I know that I'm meant to be there, eventually. In the aftermath of the fire, given that the only two men remaining are the two I trust least in the world at this moment... I simply need to get away for a time. If I don't, I fear I might lose control. I don't want to do what Adam has done.

Hope seemed to think that through, for her thoughts were quiet for a moment. *I don't think you could ever do that, Will. No matter how angry you might become, I don't think you could intentionally end someone's life. If you need to spend some time away, you should come here. The three of us can be together again, without having to worry about... him.*

She meant her father, of course. It wasn't unreasonable for her to feel that way, given the manner in which her life had unfolded. But it angered him that there was someone in the world who had such a profound, negative effect on her. He wondered what he'd do if Arthur ever found out that his daughter still lived, despite seeing her die and hearing Will's pronouncement of death. Perhaps, he mused, he *would* find himself capable of murder in such a circumstance.

I think you're right, Hope. I'll find you and be there in a few days. When Eva returns, let her know that I need to speak to her. I want to ensure she knows what happened here, and I also want to figure out if the two of you think it best for me to arrive as one looking to see the two of you, or to attempt entry on my own. I don't want to endanger what you've already built there.

Don't forget, Will... you don't want to do anything to make them suspicious. Make sure you walk or ride into their view. If you appear suddenly, they'll assume the worst and won't let you in.

I think I know an excellent way to ensure that happens, Will projected, thinking about his invisible flying session earlier. He could fly over the city, even look around the inside, and then descend just beyond the visible range of the guards and walk to the gates providing entry. I'll sleep here in the cave tonight, tell Adam and Arthur that I'm leaving for an indefinite period of time, and then I'll try to make sure I'm at the gates in the afternoon.

Be safe, Will. Her thoughts were tinged with concern and worry. *I know there's nobody better able to keep himself safe than you, but please, be careful*

around those two men.

Will smiled. *I will, Hope.*

He spent the day in quiet contemplation, wandering around the forest, visiting areas he'd not previously inspected in his three years in this era. He sat quietly and marveled at the sight of the roaring Ealdor and the calm Halwende Rivers merging to form a third river, which he suspected would flow north until it reached the sea. He walked among the cave formations near the one serving as his second home, fascinated at the idea that massive glaciers had carved everything over a period of thousands of years. He grazed on vegetables he dug from the ground, and used his nanos to catch a fish, amusing himself as he tried to figure out how to prepare the food for cooking.

As night fell, he steeled himself and consumed the morange berries. The Purge was nowhere near the intensity he'd experienced during his first round, and he quickly followed the morange berries with the zirple root he'd prepared. Exhausted in the aftermath of the Purge, he fashioned a bed with the invisible nanos, surrounded his body with the warm touch of Energy, and fell into a deep sleep. When he woke, he felt a deep sense of peace, and his body was refreshed.

He rose and walked to the spot where the rivers merged, and performed his morning bathing routine. The water moved more quickly here than it did in the gentler waters of the Halwende farther to the south, and he found the water's movement invigorating. Moving to the shore, he used a burst of Energy to dry his skin and clothing, and then floated himself above the ground and flew in the direction of the village. He dropped to the ground just before he reached the clearing, his nose assaulted by the overwhelming aroma of burning wood. He directed a portion of his nanos to surround his shoes, hiked to the immolated southern portion of the village, and climbed atop the burning remains of the walls and rooms.

He had a brief, fanciful notion that he'd hear or sense someone still living in the debris. It took only moments to confirm that was untrue. He glanced north, and caught a glimpse of Arthur moving toward the spot where the chefs and bakers normally ladled out breakfast. Still dazed from the effects of the morange berries, Arthur seemed confused at finding no one there. Will watched as the man's face contorted, memory and recognition appearing on his face mere moments apart. He turned, apparently to walk around to look in the food Stores to see what might remain, and caught sight of Will. The man's face was pitiful, or would be if Will hadn't watched him direct a population, over the course of three years, to murder his own daughter quickly after they'd failed to do so

slowly.

Will moved toward him, climbing through the wreckage until he was able to walk the rest of the distance to Arthur. As Will approached Arthur, Adam walked around the corner, apparently having just come from the Stores himself. He held two loaves of day-old bread. At the sight of Will, his face froze and his gaze narrowed.

“I came to tell both of you that I am going away for a time,” Will announced. “I cannot tolerate being in the presence of either of you.”

Adam scowled. “I thought you’d already made that clear yesterday.”

“One of you was effectively unconscious at the time.”

Arthur finally found his voice. “You’re going away for a time? What does that even mean?” Will noted a slight tremor of fear in his voice. The man didn’t relish being left alone with Adam.

“It means that I need separation to assess what’s happened here, what went wrong, what could be done differently. I think I’m meant to be here one day... but that day is in the future.”

Adam waved him away. “Leave, then. Arthur and I will rebuild on our own. But understand this, Will. We will define the rules for acceptance of new members of the Aliomenti. If you aren’t here, you’ll have no say in what those are, and you won’t be able to join if you don’t assent to them.”

“I’ll take my chances. So long as the rules don’t involve murdering our neighbors, I can likely live with them.”

Adam considered him, then nodded. “Good luck then, Will. Until we meet again.”

He held out his hand, and Will, after a moment’s hesitation, shook it... and staggered out of the grip.

Arthur offered his hand as well, and Will, still dazed, shook it. He turned and walked back out of the village the way he’d entered, his mind still buzzing at the message Adam sent during the handshake.

Take care of Elizabeth and my sister. Don’t ever let Arthur find out about either of them. And Will? I exterminated all of them because they were planning to kill you next.

SCOUTING

1021 A.D.

Will walked through the forest, his mental fog deep as he processed Adam's words. They'd been planning to kill *him* next? He recalled the deep mental probe Adam had conducted on him the day the man had returned to the village, and realized that Adam had likely done the same to the others. Will suspected that the other villagers hadn't felt a thing, a positive side effect for those who'd not had their Energy unleashed. The probe had likely revealed the truth of those past three years, along with details of events that had occurred long before Will's arrival. Adam had read their thoughts with sufficient clarity and had come to the conclusion he'd shared with Will moments earlier.

Had Adam actually "heard" those intentions, surmised them based upon the evidence found inside their heads... or simply invented the story as a means to appease Will? Will wasn't certain. Adam was a man he did not and could not trust at this time, yet eventually he must. He would come to work with Adam through the Alliance, and the patching of the relationship would need to be a point of emphasis over the next thousand years.

Regaining control of his thoughts, Will realized with a dull sense of irony that he was leaving the forest by retracing the steps he'd taken his first day in the eleventh century. That was the day on which he'd become a time traveler, unknowingly cursed to live a thousand years to reach the home he'd been pulled from by the members of the Alliance. It was the day on which he'd learned that his son had lived despite the inferno that had engulfed his home, the day that he'd learned that Hope had been pregnant at the time of the arson and would later give birth to his daughter, Angel. And it was the day he'd learned he'd been

manipulated by his children and Adam into stepping into a time machine, willingly accepting a perilous mission to rescue his wife from danger, promising not to use his advanced abilities to destroy his enemies in the process. Those enemies, the men he'd come to battle at some point in the future, must continue to live in the past if he was to fight them in the future. He'd thus unknowingly promised not to kill both men like Arthur Lowell, a man he knew to be a future enemy, but also by extension *anyone* else. An unknown person could be his ancestor, or the ancestor of someone who'd change the course of history.

Will reached the spot where the time machine had coalesced into existence in this era, allowing himself a brief moment of recollection. He'd been shocked to discover that the time machine had vanished into a swarm of nanos which augmented his existing allocation. Much had changed in three years, but his mission had not. He would protect Hope and do everything in his considerable power to ensure that she lived to meet the future, younger Will Stark.

Yes, he'd be setting his wife up with someone else with his blessing and encouragement, for the fortunate suitor was... him. The quirks of time travel were vast.

Will flooded his cells with Energy, willing them to become transparent and weightless, and a moment later he rose into the air. The fields, forests, rivers, and exposed stone were laid out in a variegated pattern below him, a patchwork of colors and textures no human hand could duplicate. He circled high above the forest embraced by the waters of the Ealdor and Halwende Rivers once more, and then turned his attention inward. He needed to locate Hope, and the best method was to trace the pure, flute-like sound her Energy generated within his mind. It was a process he'd perfected over the past few weeks, one he used to initiate the Energy equivalent of a long-distance telephone call. He'd used the approach to track her safe arrival at the remote city with her guide and protector, Richard... and the day before to share the news of the massacre.

He oriented on the sound, which came from the northeast. Will found that interesting; the Aliomenti village was located in the northern parts of what would become modern England, and the weather there in the winter was brutal. Their new location would be even further north, and winter weather would prove just as harsh. He recalled that the future Aliomenti Headquarters was located on a private, isolated island in what modern day cartographers would call the Bermuda Triangle; he could certainly see the appeal of the location for weather reasons.

He flew in the direction of Hope's Energy signal, accelerating until the wind

gusts began to injure him, the sharp winds slicing at his skin and eyes with a viciousness worthy of any assassin. He slowed briefly, and then directed his nanos to shield his body, including transparent goggles to protect his eyes. Once he'd protected himself like a modern superhero, he accelerated to a high rate of speed, and covered the distance to the great city to the north in less than 30 minutes. Given that the women had traveled nearly a week each on horseback to reach their destination, and that he'd used ten minutes touring the Aliomenti forest and figuring out how to set up the nanos to protect against the effects of high-speed flight, he reasoned he'd been flying at several hundred miles per hour. He knew he could travel faster if the distance permitted.

The city shamed the villages, towns, and small cities he'd lived and traded in these past three years. The walls surrounding the city were at least thirty feet high and ten feet thick, and featured knights in armor standing on the precipices, constantly shifting from side to side as they watched for intruders. Will was reminded of his first visit to the city of Richland; these men seemed greatly concerned about a possible attack, much as the guards outside the walls of Richland. Perhaps, like those guards, the knights here had recent evidence that attacks were probable. The words of caution from Eva and Hope reverberated in his mind, and he made a series of circular passes over the city in an effort to find the best location to land and resume tangibility and visibility. He located a small copse of trees, just on the periphery of the visual range of the city, but a mere thirty minute walk to the gates. He'd need to explain how he'd arrived in this area without a horse or evidence of travel, including changes of clothing. He had money; he'd snagged his money bag from the final trip to Richland before he'd left earlier that morning.

With his landing point identified, Will turned and flew back to the city, over the walls, and into the city proper. He hovered well off the ground, committing to memory the layout. The city was roughly square, more than a mile on each side, and Will marveled at the ingenuity, or more likely the backbreaking slave labor, required to build such an impressive structure in an era without heavy mechanical machinery. Or nanotechnology. The interior teemed with activity, with multiple markets featuring vendors selling various vegetables, fabrics, seeds, cuts of meat, jewelry, beads, breads of all types, numerous varieties of wine, and livestock. Housing was squeezed into every available square inch, and Will was again reminded of the planned nature of the now-destroyed Aliomenti village. This city grew haphazardly, mixing housing and iron smelting, food vendors with livestock, and public latrines with the handful of medical service

providers. The primitive nature of medical care in the day was graphically displayed; Will's attention was drawn to a man screaming in agony due to a massive gash to his leg, and he watched as two men covered in dirt restrained the patient, shoving a stick between his teeth, while a third tied a tourniquet around the injured leg and a fourth sharpened an ax.

Will turned away as the ax flashed. He'd seen more than enough sharp blades in action.

His attention focused on a stately woman in the area, a woman with platinum-blond hair and crisp, clean clothing. She was speaking with an older woman, listening as the woman's mouth and hands explained the ailments she suffered. Will watched, his senses detecting the Energy moving from Eva to the woman, diagnosing the causes of the aches and pains the woman described. After the patient finished her description, Eva nodded, reached into her bag for a handful of herbs, and began mixing them into a small mug full of water, a simple herbal tea. The tea, though, was a mere placebo, providing only temporary relaxation and comfort. The real healing came as Eva pulsed Energy into the problem areas, and as the woman drank the tea, Will could see her pale face regain color and vitality. The woman thanked Eva, her profuse praise drawing the attention of others seeking medical care, and earned the former Trader a handful of copper coins. As the patient left, Eva glanced directly at the invisible Will, and he saw a small smirk form on her face.

He almost laughed. *Just scouting the city. I'll start my formal approach soon.*

I think you're just showing off. Eva's thought was full of good humor. *It will be good to actually see you again. Just... be careful.*

After a telepathic nod of agreement, he resumed his tour of the city. It took only a few moments to understand why the city was so heavily guarded. A huge portion of the northern half of the city teemed with knights in armor, tended by pages of varying ages sporting bright colors identifying the man they served. They'd stumbled upon some type of staging area for a massive quantity of warriors, perhaps a local lord's effort at military defense against invasion, perhaps an invasion force itself. The town and its walls provided secrecy and defense lest any enemy seek to lay siege and decimate the armored warriors. They'd allow private citizens inside, but only those they believed could provide some level of support to the training efforts, or enable the enhancement of the weaponry.

Will had seen enough. He flew back to the copse of trees outside the walls of the city, landed within them, and, after ensuring no other human creatures were

in the vicinity, resumed his normal physical, visible existence. His body felt strange and heavy after nearly an hour invisible and weightless, and he took a few moments to acclimate himself to gravity once more. He found a stream nearby, and splashed the cool water on his face before drinking deeply. He then went back into the trees and recharged his Energy, as he contemplated his next steps.

He could certainly pass for a medical professional; he'd served as the village doctor for the Aliomenti, though he'd rarely needed to act in that capacity. Presenting himself as a doctor, though, might raise suspicion in a city prone to such emotion. If Eva, and then Hope, had both arrived with such skills in the past few weeks, and he followed soon after, many might suspect the three of them of some type of malicious intent, infiltrating the city for the purpose of committing some future, unknown misdeeds. He decided it best that he pursue entry with a different profession in mind.

He decided to present himself as a carpenter. Though he'd done little heavy work, he'd spent significant time with Joseph's team during the construction of the Wheel and aqueduct systems, reaching a sufficient level of skill that he was permitted to work with the tools used to cut, shape, and join wood. He learned quickly, in part because the men and women working in that area tended toward powerful, loud thoughts that he could not close himself off from. He could pass as a carpenter, one who'd fallen victim to a band of thieves who'd relieved him of his horse and tools as he slept, but thankfully had left him—and his money—untouched.

Fully charged and prepared for the trial of entering this massive city, he began his walk.

The thoughts of the knights guarding the gates and manning the tops of the walls revealed that the city was called Abrecan, that about 15,000 people lived there, that the city existed purely to train knights to fight against larger armies, and that word had come of a potential invasion. Such concerns explained the extra security endured by Eva and Elizabeth as they'd entered this city. His initial bafflement at Eva's choice evaporated; in a city on edge, *everyone* would be under suspicion, whether new arrival or long-time resident. In a city living under such a heightened state of tension, a stranger appearing inside the walls would incite deep fear, and he understood why Eva had discouraged any teleportation into the vicinity. With a potential invasion and a lack of trading opportunities available to outsiders, it was a place where the Traders – and now Arthur – would never think to visit, and thus they'd never run the risk of

exposing the fact that Eva and Elizabeth still lived.

Will wondered if they'd struggle more to escape the city, should an attack come, than they would to enter it initially.

He approached the gates and strode toward the guards, putting effort into acting in the proper fashion. He needed to appear confident that he'd be granted access, for to act otherwise would be to invite suspicion. He needed to show evidence that he was no threat, which his weaponless status should provide. And he'd need to be convincing in his need to enter, seeming vulnerable enough to evoke compassion, but strong enough to thrive in this militaristic, walled city.

The pair of knights stood guard at the gates, unmoving. Will could feel their eyes watching his every step, ready to spring into action at any indication that Will was there for nefarious purposes. Heavily armored hands rested upon swords plunged into the earth at their feet, available to stab and sever upon command.

Will glanced back and forth between the two of them, waiting for them to challenge his approach, to demand to know his purpose here. Neither man spoke. Perhaps it was a test of some kind. Perhaps those who lacked the nerve to request entry were frightened away, leaving in a show of timidity unworthy of a city of warriors in training.

"Good morning, sirs. My name is Will. My home has been lost to a fire which consumed my entire village, and as I set out to find a new home, brigands set upon me during my evening camp, relieving me of my sword, tools, and many possessions. I am able to provide skilled work to any carpenters within." He opted to ignore his earlier plan. "I have also worked as a doctor in my village, and can provide assistance there as well. I ask entry to the city of Abrecan as a man of honor." He believed that any single skill in need would help, but admitting to more than one would surely cement his permission to enter.

The knights remained motionless for several moments, as if communicating telepathically, debating the truthfulness of Will's statement, determining if his words should grant him entry. After several moments, Will wondered if he'd perhaps failed some test, but decided that patience was in order. As a man destined to live many centuries, waiting was a luxury he could afford.

The closer of the two knights finally spoke. "Your words ring true, sir, and your skills will provide value. Entering this city comes with restrictions, however. You may enter now, but know this: these doors open only once each week to allow those desiring egress their opportunity to leave, and those granted

entry the opportunity to move inside. The doors open in one hour. Choose well, sir; entry binds you to our fair city for seven days.”

Strange though the rules were, Will found them sensible, given the nature of the city. Frequent turnover of people in the city invited any with ill motive ample opportunity to enter, to bring in supporters, or to smuggle in weapons. Limitations as described would slow down such plans, and enable any security within to ferret out the malcontents before they gained sufficient numbers and armament to carry out their plans.

Will nodded to the knight. “I understand and accept your rules. I will enter this city when the gates open.”

The knights spoke no more, leaving Will to wait in silence, contemplating the contrast with his entry to the Aliomenti village. The walls there were almost decorative in nature. They could slow down a small, armed force, or a sufficiently disinterested individual, but they could not withstand anyone with intense interest in gaining access. Will had been able to climb the walls with relative ease, even without using Energy. As he’d stood outside the Aliomenti village, he’d heard nothing. The village was enveloped in a profound silence, for it was empty while the residents completed their morning bathing ritual. Here, outside Abrecan, he’d been greeted by two men who were heavily armed, and those men were aided by a silent support group atop the walls, watching Will’s every move. The walls themselves were reminiscent of those surrounding his home at De Gray Estates, tall and wide and topped with defensive mechanisms, from armed knights to barbed wire.

The noise was overpowering. He’d come to appreciate the tranquility of the village, and even more the near silence outside the village and in the forest or the cave. Here, the sounds of thousands of people moving, talking, and shouting seeped through and over the walls, joined by the sounds of men and women creating and building as they tried to earn a living, buying and selling within the many markets inside the city walls. He let his hearing reach out, enjoying the banter in the marketplace, as a farmer argued and bartered with a woman over the price of the grain he offered for sale. It was a discussion that reminded him of the many trips he’d made with the Traders over the past three years, trips he’d never again enjoy. All of the Traders were dead. Officially.

Will heard the sound of chains and wheels moving, and realized that it meant he’d soon see the two Traders who were still alive. Unofficially. The gates of the military city of Abrecan were opening, the yawning doors providing entry to a city certain to provide Will with copious amounts of unpredictable adventure.

ABRECAN**1021 A.D.**

Stepping inside the city of Abrecan was, for Will, like entering a major twenty-first century metropolis after weeks or months in the smaller, cleaner, quieter city of Pleasanton. The Aliomenti village offered an efficient, planned layout designed to keep common resources together. They'd put the Stores and Shops next to each other to eliminate the need for the craftspeople to cross great distances to store finished goods; they'd save time they could better use creating more. Will asked why they didn't have the Shop fronts and Store fronts facing each other, rather than back-to-back. Eva explained that the back-to-back design meant fewer walls to build and used less space. They'd also realized that, unless they spaced the facing fronts a significant distance from each other, they'd struggle to pull the horse-drawn wagons between the buildings during loading or unloading of material.

Abrecan was, in contrast, built in a chaotic fashion. It seemed that they'd built what they needed, when they needed it, in whatever open spot they could find. Lodging, training grounds, apothecaries, bakeries, markets, latrines... all were crammed together with no thought as to the efficiency, safety, or hygienic propriety of the layout. As if to illustrate that point, Will watched a young girl dance out of her home, right into the midst of two knights engaged in swordplay just outside her door. She was saved from immediate death only because the blade that struck her was made of wood with a dull edge.

The knight seized the unconscious child, looked around, and spotted Will. "Here," he snapped, thrusting the unmoving child into Will's arms. "Take her."

Will blinked. "Shouldn't we get her back to her parents?"

The knight ignored him, instead returning to his swordplay with his counterpart.

Will shook his head, threw a wall of nanos around himself and the child, dispatched some of his healing nanos into her body, and moved to the door of the residence from which she'd emerged. Shifting the child in his arms to free up one hand, he knocked.

The door opened a few moments later, revealing a woman in disheveled clothing with a blank, emotionless face. "Your daughter has been struck on the head by the knights behind me, ma'am. We should get her medical attention."

She stared at the child, as if unwilling to admit what she was seeing in front of her, her face growing ever more devoid of any life or emotion. Will trickled a small bit of Energy to her, both to help her respond to the situation and to try to determine the cause of the misery shrouding her face.

The knights had been practicing with wooden swords today due to a similar accident a week earlier, when her husband, a carpenter, had exited their small home at the moment a sharpened metal blade slashed toward the door. With his brutal death, all joy had left her, and though she'd fought to maintain her grip on life for her daughter, she'd failed. She'd prayed daily for death for herself, yet had instead seen her daughter injured in the fashion that had ended her husband's life. Her despair and grief became complete.

Will sent cheerful Empathic Energy into her, and she regained focus. "Let's go take care of your daughter, ma'am."

The woman simply nodded and followed him, but not before closing the door. She did not fear theft; she feared finding another severed head inside.

She finally found her voice. "Where are you taking her? I have no money."

Will smiled. "Don't worry about that."

"I don't take charity, sir."

"The money will never touch your hands, ma'am. I will not allow a child I can help to suffer for lack of funds."

She opened her mouth to protest again, and then simply nodded. Her tears, for the first time in a week, were tears of joy, grateful for the compassion of a stranger.

Will tuned in on Eva's harp-like Energy sound, weaving through the complex maze of buildings as if he'd lived in the city his entire life, and the child's mother hovered close, glancing at the unconscious girl. "Is she still..."

"She's alive," Will said. "She'll be fine. I've heard of a very good doctor who will help her feel better in no time."

They finally approached the small pod of doctors dispensing medical care in one of the few open spaces within the city not designated as markets or training areas for the knights. Will spotted the platinum-blond hair over the masses, and was reminded once more that Eva was a woman of exceptional height. He strode toward her, projecting a thought her way. *Coming to visit, doctor. The woman with me knows only that I've heard of you.*

Making friends already, Will? Very impressive.

Will and the mother approached Eva. "Excuse me, ma'am?"

Eva turned, frowning as she spotted the young girl in Will's arms. "What happened to your daughter, sir?"

Will smiled. "She's not my daughter, ma'am. Her mother is here, though." He nodded to the woman hovering nearby, amused at the woman's awe of Eva. "She was struck on the head with a wooden sword swung by one of the knights, and... well, she's got a nasty bruise on her head as a result, I'm afraid."

Eva sighed. "Let's put her down on the table, and I'll take a look." She motioned to the table behind her, and Will deposited the girl there, taking great care to protect her already-damaged head. Will could detect Eva's Energy trickling into the girl, aiding and encouraging the healing process.

Eva stooped to check on her patient, analyzing the well-formed and colorful lump decorating the side of the girl's head. "We mostly need to help control the pain she'll experience when she wakes up," Eva said to the mother. "I don't think you'll find any permanent damage has occurred, but we certainly don't want her to suffer while her body heals. I have medications that can provide that pain relief, but they aren't cheap."

The woman hung her head. "I'm sorry, I don't..."

"Make sure she has enough," Will said. "I don't want to check on her in a few days and find she's feeling any pain that's not necessary." He leaned closer to Eva. "How much?"

"A gold coin," she whispered. "I assume you don't want her to know?"

He nodded.

"Swing by later; your credit is good with me, sir." He stifled a chuckle.

"Let me have my assistant collect the medicine, then, and show you how to prepare and apply it," Eva said, directing her attention to the girl's mother. She glanced around. "Hope? Can you help prepare a bundle of medicines for this woman and her daughter?"

Hope emerged from the crowd, pausing only briefly as she caught sight of Will. She quickly recovered, remembering that they'd never met in this town,

and hurried to Eva's side. "Of course," she replied. "What does she need?"

Eva explained the proper combination of herbs and the application schedule to Hope, who listened attentively, nodded, and began rummaging through a large bag stowed beneath the table. She pulled out a collection of plants and a bag, and began showing the mother the proper technique to grind the plants into a paste, which could be applied to the lump.

With the mother distracted, Will fished a gold coin from his own money pouch and handed it to Eva. "Thank you, ma'am. I understand they've recently lost their husband and father, and I feared the mother had lost hope after seeing her daughter in such a condition. Thankfully, I'd heard of your skill and recommended we bring the girl to you. I trust she'll recover soon."

Eva nodded. "That was a kind thing you did, sir. Generosity and compassion from a stranger can be powerful recuperative tools, as much as any herb."

Hope finished providing instructions, and had the girl's mother prepare and apply the herbs under her direction to ensure that the woman could repeat the process on her own. The woman profusely thanked all of them.

As she began gathering the bundle, a man's voice rang out over the crowd. "Will! Is that you?"

Will panicked momentarily, for no one here, outside the "doctor" and her "assistant," should know his name. He turned as a tall man with brown hair strode toward the group, and recognition hit. "Richard! How are you, sir?"

Richard had once led an organized group of criminals that had preyed upon vendors in the small towns and cities that Eva, Will, and the other Traders frequented. They'd smuggle two or three men into the city in a covered wagon driven by a companion, and at night the men who'd entered the city unseen would stalk vendors returning home with the money earned from a day's work. The men would leave the next day in a similar fashion, and no one would ever find the culprits. Will, using his advanced Energy skills and nanos, had captured three men engaged in a heist during his first Trading trip to Richland, and had destroyed Richard's alliance of thieves in dramatic fashion. Richard had turned from his evil ways, and had served as Hope's escort as she journeyed from the Aliomenti village to Abrecan. Richard, a tall and powerful man, had been defeated in battle by Will while the latter was unarmed. Richard had eagerly accepted the more honorable work Will had recommended and provided.

"I'm doing well, Will. The lady was a charming traveling companion, and I was happy to serve in that capacity. I have found work with a master sword-maker here, and have, in a short time, become a sparring partner for several of

the knights. They've spoken of considering me for knighthood, Will. *Me*. I cannot believe that is possible."

Will smiled. "I told you; you were meant for something greater, didn't I?"

Richard glanced at the mother and the unconscious girl, and his face fell. "What happened here?"

Will explained the situation, and Richard nodded, thoughtful. "I believe I've found my good deed for the day." He turned to the mother, who was trying to figure out how to carry her daughter and the bag of herbs supplied by Hope. "Excuse me, ma'am? May I be of service to you?"

The mother turned, and found another smiling face ready to help. She dissolved into tears.

Richard looked abashed. "Was it something I said?"

Will laughed. "Yes, Richard, it was. And that's a good thing. She's had little happiness in her life, especially this past week, and yet strangers have suddenly come forth to help her. Those are tears of joy, shed at learning that there are good people left in her world."

Richard nodded, thoughtful, and went to put a comforting arm around the woman, who turned her head into his chest and continued weeping. Richard's face softened. "It's going to be all right, ma'am. Let me carry your daughter back to your home."

She nodded, wiping away the tears. "You've all been so kind. I... I don't know how to repay you."

"One day, you'll have the chance to help somebody else, and you will," Will said. "That will be all the repayment necessary." He glanced at her. "I never asked your name, though."

"Rachel," she said. "My name is Rachel. My daughter's name is Miriam."

"I wish you well, Rachel," Will replied. "Take care of Miriam."

"I will, good sir," she said. "I will."

Richard gently cradled the girl in his arms, and walked away with Rachel, chatting. His face had taken on a gentle look, one Will recognized. He'd become quite smitten with the young widow and the little girl he held. Will smiled. He could think of nothing more noble than becoming that missing void in a family torn apart by senseless violence.

"I'll take my leave then, doctors." He nodded at Eva and Hope, and walked away, leaving the women to tend to their next patient.

He meandered through the structures built in their haphazard fashion, wondering how the residents were able to find anything. While the Aliomenti

village was relatively small, especially compared to a thriving city like Abrecan, the planned layout was one Will would insist upon in future building activities. Given that Arthur and Adam had been part of the group of ten that oversaw construction of the original village, a layout planned for maximum security and utility, he doubted that would be a problem, regardless of the length of his absence. Will realized, even though he'd just left in anger, that he was already thinking of his future return, and planning enhancements to the layout of the neighborhood.

He occupied his time by tracing the Energy trails left by Eva and Hope, using it to trace a path back to their humble residence. It was, like much of this large city, crammed into a space that would have been better served providing a function other than housing. They lived above a bakery, and while Will suspected the aromas were far superior to what they might experience elsewhere, it seemed a room better suited to housing a baker working in the shop below.

Will found a small pub nearby, and was able to secure a warm meal and wine. He wasn't accustomed to drinking so much wine, but the city had no ready source of fresh water, unless one wished to hike a significant distance to a point upriver from the town itself. And there was simply no way he could know if other cities, upstream, might be dumping refuse into the water he'd eventually drink. The wine, though not nearly as refreshing as the clear waters of the Ealdor, was clear of most impurities.

He wandered about the city again after his meal, and found an inn where he could lodge until he found more permanent quarters, and used the time to contemplate what he'd do next. Even now, only a few hours after arriving in this city, he found himself wanting to leave. Entry hadn't been easy; exiting would be a greater challenge, especially for someone like Will, a man who had arrived earlier that day. A city founded on suspicion and under constant alert for attacks would believe him part of an advance scout group for such actions.

He could simply teleport away, or turn invisible and fly out of the city under the cover of darkness. That approach would work if it was just him, but he worried about the impact his actions would have on Hope and Eva. Rachel might recall him mentioning that he'd heard of Eva's medical prowess that morning, and if it was ever revealed that he'd made that comment only minutes after entering the city, others might question his motives. That would bring Hope and Eva under suspicion as well, for it would associate them with a suspected future troublemaker. Will wasn't concerned that they'd be hurt in an actual fight, one in which they had the chance to observe their attackers and leverage their Energy

skills to their advantage. Yet those under suspicion in a city such as Abrecan would not be given a fair fight. It was far more likely they'd find their room invaded in the dark of night, while they slept, their throats cut before they had a chance to react.

He'd wait to leave until they did. It would ease all of his concerns, for they'd be with him, rather than at the mercy of a far larger community, a community which had no reason to trust anyone, and far more reason for paranoia. Perhaps they, too, longed for a greater freedom than what existed here, a city in which people of all ages might find themselves gravely injured due to poor planning, tossed aside due to lack of concern, or executed for suspicion of treason. Will wanted to believe that the three of them could find a better alternative home.

After securing lodging, Will retired to his room for a brief bit of rest. He projected a telepathic message to both women, a mental picture of his current lodging, and suggested that they converse at some point that evening. They need not be seen together; both women could teleport the distance to his room, and he could move to theirs unseen as well. Two hours later, as night fell, they elected to meet in Will's room at the inn. The women didn't want their neighbors to become suspicious upon hearing a man's voice through the walls. Far better, they'd determined, to meet in Will's room, where extra voices would be considered nothing out of the ordinary.

"How's the little girl doing?" Hope asked.

"I suspect she's doing quite well," Will replied. "I started giving her assistance before we got to you. She'll probably enjoy the best health of her life when she wakes up. More importantly, I think she'll see her mother happy and smiling again."

Eva grinned. "You noticed that, too, did you?"

Hope glanced between the two of them, confused. "Noticed what?"

"Richard and Rachel seemed rather taken with each other, and he seemed to feel quite an attachment to the little girl. I think they may become a wonderful family at some point in the future."

Hope sat down on the cot, folding her arms across her chest. "I hope not," she said, her voice low and quiet. "I've seen that situation before, that combination of parents and child, and it didn't work out very well."

Eva sat next to her. "Your situation was unique, Hope, and not in a good way. Families are far more often a source of joy. Consider the time you spent out Trading, whether with our group or later, with the Weavers. That companionship? That sense of belonging? That's what most families feel. There

are squabbles and arguments, but when those end, you're always left with something wonderful. I agree with Will. That's what we're likely to see with Richard, Rachel, and Miriam."

Hope looked up, and her eyes were moist. "I wish I could believe that," she whispered. "I wish I could *experience* it."

"We are your family, Hope," Eva said. Her voice now was stern, one that permitted no disagreement. "The previous family, such as it was, is gone. We've both accepted you because we *want* you to be part of our lives. Accept that. Accept that we care about you for who you are."

Hope nodded, but it was clear it would take time for such acceptance to take root.

Eva turned to Will. "I know you've only just arrived, Will, but Hope and I have been here long enough to realize several problems with long-term residency. First, we've apparently been too successful in our practice; there are whispers of witchcraft around us already. Secondly, we feel unsafe, due to all of the knights who train in the open spaces, without concern about injuring or killing others. Third, we wish to experience forests and trees and rivers again, at any time, not just once per week. We want to leave, Will. And we'd rather not wait. Will you join us in leaving this city before the gates open again?"

Will smiled. "Let me know when you're ready."

NORTHWEST**1021 A.D.**

The women returned to their tiny room to fetch their few belongings for their departure. Eva returned to Will's room at the inn with her bag of medicinal plants and herbs. Hope brought only the hairpin and necklace that had once belonged to her mother, Genevieve. The items had been gifted to Hope—then known as Elizabeth—by Arthur as they'd prepared her burial. Will knew only that Hope would one day wear the necklace to their wedding. At the thought of that day, a thousand years hence, he felt a sudden surge of fatigue.

Though they were paid up on their lodging, the women left a gold coin for the landlord, believing it was the proper thing to do. The trio debated leaving a note, but were unable to devise a plausible explanation for the sudden disappearance of three people. The gold coin was intended to be an indication that they'd not been taken against their will, though they were uncertain if an escape or forced abduction would cause greater concern.

With both rooms emptied of possessions, they each teleported in turn to the copse of trees outside the walls of the city, where Will, unbeknownst to the two women, established a protective physical barrier with his nanos. Each of them generated a personal barrier of Energy as well; they'd wake if anything threatening approached and pierced those fields. With their defenses set, the trio slept in peace and comfort under the stars, unconcerned about discovery or stealth attacks.

When they awoke in the morning, they shared a meal of fruit collected from the nearby trees. The fruit was exceptionally succulent, enhanced in size and flavor from the Energy emanating from the trio. All felt sated and prepared for a

journey.

“Where should we go next?” Will asked.

“We moved northeast when we left the village,” Eva said. “Since we don’t want to go *closer* to the village, perhaps we should consider continuing in that direction.”

“That makes sense,” Hope said. “There’s just one problem.”

“Right,” Will said. “We have to go past the city to do that.”

Eva glanced at Will. “Is there a way to ensure we aren’t seen? I’d prefer not to travel several miles off course to avoid detection. And we can’t teleport to the other side, because we have no visible markers.”

Will returned the glance. “Off course? Are we heading in a very specific direction, or just generally northeast? If so, why not just go north for a few miles and resume the northeasterly route? Or just go southeast, which still gets us farther away from our... origin.”

“I’d prefer not to go *too* far north,” Eva said. “I’m worried about the weather we might encounter during winters if we do so. The farther east we can go, the better.”

“Then let’s go south first,” Hope replied. “Go far enough to avoid detection, and then pick up a northeasterly route once we’re certain the scouts from Abrecan can’t see us.”

Will found the suggestion reasonable. Eva seemed prepared to protest, but then agreed, noting that Hope’s suggestion addressed the concerns Eva had expressed. After they packed away more of the fruit and refilled their water skins, the trio set off south. They walked until they could just detect the city walls to the north, and then turned due east. Once they had traveled for a mile, they changed course again at Eva’s urging, this time to the northeast.

“I’m curious,” Will said. “What made you move northeast when you left? We tended to travel north on most Trading runs, so you would have gone past several of those towns and risked detection. You also expressed concerns about weather, specifically weather that became bitterly cold. Why not head south and avoid all of those problems? Why continue to push movement northeast?”

Eva hesitated a moment, and then sighed deeply. “I was not born in this area,” she said. “I never knew my parents. I was brought to the baron, through channels I haven’t quite worked out, when I was a newborn. The only information they had about me...” She paused, unable to continue.

“They were told you’d come from the northeast,” Will said, understanding. “You were hoping to use this time to find your original hometown?”

Eva nodded. “It’s a foolish fantasy, of course. I wouldn’t know my home community if I found it, because I have no memories of the area. I wondered, though, if I might come across a town or a village where the people look more like me.” She indicated her hair with a wave. “Not many people where we lived, whether before or after we escaped the baron, had hair coloring like mine.” She looked thoughtful for a moment. “Of course, even if I find an area with people of a similar appearance, who can say if it means anything? After all, my brother and I look nothing alike.”

Will nodded at the observation, a curiosity he himself had noticed. Eva was tall for both her era and gender, and her hair was snow white. Adam, in contrast, was of an average height, and his brown hair bore little resemblance to Eva’s. “It certainly can’t hurt to look, though. It’s not as if we have another target in mind. Moving farther away from the Aliomenti village seems like a good idea.”

“Aliomenti?” Hope frowned. “What’s that?”

“Adam recommended that we give ourselves a name. He found the remnants of the sign on the Schola, and the letters from *alio incrementum* were reformed into Aliomenti. Choosing the name... that was part of his speech after the fire and massacre.”

“What?” Eva asked, and the coloring of her face nearly matched that of her hair. “What fire?”

Will found it hard to look at her; he’d left so quickly after talking to Hope that he’d never related the events to Eva, and now he didn’t want to say anything. But he did. “Adam returned from his journey, Eva. He brought word that he’d found the true secret, the way to unlock those abilities in everyone. And it was no mere boast; he demonstrated abilities far in excess of anything Roland ever suggested. Everyone was quite excited, until he stated he wished to share it first with three people. When he found out what happened to the two of you and Genevieve... he became angry. I believe he probed the memories of everyone there, because I *felt* him digging through my mind. What he found horrified him, Eva, to the point that he decided to take action. He wanted to punish them for what they’d done to the three of you, and prevent future atrocities. He kidnapped Arthur, made up a story to get me out of the village, and then...”

Eva was no fool, and the pause following the comment about the fire and massacre were all the clues she needed. Her horror, shock, and grief were suffered in silence. The only indication of her understanding and acceptance of Adam’s actions were the short, quick breaths she inhaled, the sounds coming

from her a tearless, heaving, silent cry. Will stepped closer to put a comforting hand on Eva's shoulder, and Hope gripped Eva's hand.

"I can't believe he's done it," Eva finally whispered. "Why didn't he tell me? Why wouldn't he talk to me?"

Will, uncertain if these questions were rhetorical, elected to reply. "It is not something I think he felt comfortable sharing. He may have been embarrassed or ashamed."

Eva blinked, as if waking from a dream. "What?" The sound of her voice seemed to jolt her to full awareness. "Yes, of course he was. He should still talk to me, though. You say he now has very strong abilities? Like you do? That those abilities enabled him to... start the fire?"

Will found her resilience at the news that her brother had murdered four dozen people remarkable... and slightly unnerving. "Yes, Eva. He has strong Energy skills. That's how he restrained fifty people in their rooms as he doused the exteriors using kegs and casks of alcohol. That's how he scooped flaming embers from the fires burning in the ovens to ignite those buildings. That's how he held them all still until they were burning to death, freeing them only to sense their own skin burning off and feel themselves suffocating in the smoke. That's how he ensured that they knew they were dying." His own voice choked with emotion as he recalled the sensations he had felt as he'd realized what Adam had done, what Will himself, despite all of his Energy skill and nanotechnology, had been helpless to stop.

Eva stopped walking, halting so quickly that her arm was stretched via the hand Hope continued to hold. Will continued walking until he realized his hand was no longer sitting upon Eva's shoulder.

"There's more to it than that," she said. "There *must* be more to it than that. My brother has never feared to make a difficult decision, has never shied away from taking an action he might find objectionable under normal circumstances if he believed it served a greater good."

"*Objectionable?*" Will was stunned. "How could he find the cold-blooded murder of fifty people anything but abhorrent?" She seemed immune to the reality of what he'd done. Or was she merely trying to rationalize it away, in an effort to shield herself from the ramifications? Perhaps, like the woman next to her, she was looking for the good out of fear that her relation to mass murderer meant she was capable of similar atrocities.

"I'm not explaining myself well, Will," Eva said, and Will heard the fatigue in her voice, fatigue borne of trying to understand what couldn't be understood.

“I am not saying *he* believes murder is acceptable, any more than *I* believe it is acceptable. He does not. He has always tried to protect the innocent.” Her eyes flicked in Hope’s direction, and Will was reminded that it was Adam who had argued against Arthur’s scheme, specifically because it would harm a young child. “What that tells me is that there is some missing information that we don’t have, information that Adam *did* have, and that he felt he needed to act as he did to prevent an even greater tragedy.”

Will opened his mouth to protest this, and then realized that Adam *did* have that type of information. “I argued with him immediately after it happened. With Arthur present, he simply said that he found the victims to be too weak-minded to be trusted with Energy abilities, too easily swayed by someone like Arthur. He felt they would be turned to some evil purpose because they’d lacked the character to stand up to evil, just as they’d failed to stand up for Elizabeth.”

“That’s closer to what I expected,” Eva replied. “But I’m not sure he’d act so quickly unless he knew that Arthur was *already* in the process of plotting something.”

“It was *me*,” Will whispered. “Adam told me that Arthur was already working to set them on *me* next.” The cold reality bludgeoned him like a hammer. Fifty people had been murdered before they were able to form a mob and attempt to take *his* life.

Will walked in silence, internal demons swirling in his mind. Did this revelation make *him* complicit in those murders? Adam had thought of it as justice, though none of those people had acted yet, and few were likely to have directly thought of raising a hand against Will. Should Will feel gratitude for Adam’s decision and action, motivated as it had been toward saving Will from attack? It was unlikely they’d be able to penetrate all of Will’s defenses, but Adam had no way to know that was the case.

He felt the sudden need to act, to do *something*, as a means of purging that nagging sense that those murders were his fault. The frustration he felt at this moment was complex, in part due to the sudden moral ambiguity over Adam’s action, and in part due to the fact that someone had tried to protect *him*, and in part because they’d felt there was evidence that he *needed* protection.

Mixed in with those concerns was an even larger question: why did Adam care if they *did* want to kill Will? He had no chance to ask that question now.

He reached out his hands to the women, and they each took one without question, likely suspecting he was seeking comfort. And, on some level, he was. But he felt the need to speed everything up, hoping that it would clear his mind.

“Hang on,” he told them.

He flooded his own body and cells with Energy, and extended the field to cover and infuse both Hope and Eva, willing the three of them to become invisible and weightless. With the transition completed, he lifted off the ground and into the air, pulling the two of them with him.

The telepathic gasps of surprise flooded his mind. In this phased existence they could not speak out loud, for their bodies lacked sufficient substance to generate audible sound. He’d essentially rendered them all mute in his haste to move, flying away from the spot where he’d realized why fifty people had died. Energy had rendered *those* people mute as well. Permanently. They were people he cared about. His mind flashed a millennium into the future, to a time when the son he and Hope would bring into the world would likewise be muted because of Energy. The Energy he and others had been entrusted with provided the power to create and amplify, and yet improperly applied, it could cause incredible harm, even if that harm wasn’t intended.

They rose above the tree line, rising several hundred feet into the air, and the land spread out before them. The women were alternatively terrified and awestruck, incredulous at the beauty below them, fearful that they’d plummet to their deaths. Despite being nearly permeable, he could sense the pressure as each tightened her grip on his hand.

Where do you wish to go, Eva? We can travel more quickly this way, and perhaps see what we’d never find traveling on the ground.

I... I’m not sure. I want to believe that there’s something special about the land where I was born, and yet I don’t know that that’s the case. And I certainly have no idea what it might look like.

They flew for several hours in this fashion, passing over a great body of water that Will suspected was the North Sea. Soon after, Hope gestured with her free hand, farther north. *What’s that?*

They looked where she’d gestured, and her find was indeed intriguing, something worth exploring. In the midst of open plains and patchwork fields of flowing grasses, a vast forest stretched before them. What intrigued all of them, though, was the coloring of the trees, a vibrant green that seemed almost unnatural. They could also make out a clear depression in the canopy near where the colors were their most vibrant, suggesting a clearing below.

Will gave a faint smile, and added an ironic tinge to his thought. *Perhaps you were born in a village located within a forest?*

Let’s go take a look, Hope replied. Her tone was full of anticipation.

Adventure and exploration had been denied her the first nineteen years of her life, and even with uncertainty heavy in the air, she was eager to find whatever they might discover.

Eva merely nodded, though Will detected none of Hope's exuberance in her. If anything, she seemed quite fearful, an understandable sentiment. She might find her home village without realizing it, or learn it had been destroyed, or perhaps find that her people were not what she'd hoped.

Will landed them among the trees and allowed them to regain substance. The forest air was pure and clean, naturally energizing them. The trees bore a strange fruit, unlike anything they'd seen before. The smell was mesmerizing, and all three found their mouths watering. While they'd eaten recently, none had eaten to excess, and the hours of walking had stimulated powerful appetites. More than one stomach rumbled in anticipation of imminent consumption.

Before Will or Eva could stop her, Hope sprang upon the nearest tree and seized a piece of fruit, tearing into the skin and flesh. As the juice seeped out of her mouth, she moaned. "This... is... incredible! You really need to try this!"

"What are you doing here? How did you get in?"

The woman's voice startled them, and Will was stunned. He'd failed to notice her approach or presence until she'd spoken. How had she managed to elude detection?

The woman was short, with dark hair only slightly lighter than Will's. Her eyes were a piercing green color, able to bore through whoever met her gaze. That gaze fell upon Hope, and spotted the fruit still in her hand, the juice still trickling down her face. The woman's green eyes widened. "You have eaten of the fruit?"

Hope, suddenly wary, nodded slowly.

The woman shook her head in disbelief, and her face betrayed a deep sense of sadness. "Come with me. All three of you."

AMBROSE**1021 A.D.**

The woman headed deeper into the forest with the trio in tow, arriving moments later at a small hut formed of sturdy branches and a thatched straw roof. The door went only to waist level, and she opened the door and waved the trio inside. The interior was simple, dominated by a stone hearth fireplace in the wall across from the door. The only furnishings were a small cot and a table with four stools. The woman gestured to the stools, and they all sat down, as Will marveled that the hut hadn't burned down. He then realized this might not be her original hut.

“How did you find this place?” she demanded. Since arriving in this era, Will had noticed that questions meant for a group were generally directed at the man assumed to be the leader, and he was therefore expecting to be the one questioned. Instead, the woman glanced once more at the fruit in Hope's hand, and directed the question to her.

“We have been traveling, fearful for our lives, trying to escape from those who would see us dead,” Hope replied. “We last camped outside Abrecan, and set forth when we learned some there were becoming hostile and suspicious. This forest looked to be a place we could lodge safely for a short time, impossible to find by those who would do us harm. We hoped to find food as well.”

The woman studied Hope, as if assessing the truthfulness of her story, and nodded a moment later. “You could not have known, of course, that entering this forest and eating of the fruit brings with it tremendous change and responsibility. I cannot undo what you have done, but perhaps it is best. Your companions will

have the chance to hear the story of this special fruit, and decide if they wish to join you in your sentence.”

Hope’s face turned pale. Will realized it wasn’t a repeat performance of the cosmetic change generated by her Energy while still living in the village, when she hoped to gain sympathy with a haggard appearance. This was genuine fear. “What is this sentence you speak of?”

The woman sighed. “This is a large forest, one which appears impenetrable from the outside. That is by design. We, the residents of these parts, plant brush filled with thorns and odors that drive many away, and we have patrols ensuring none enter without being spotted. This central area is special and sacred to us, and the trees here grow thick and nearly impenetrable. Yet despite these defenses, defenses that have prevented entry for generations, the three of you have entered and traveled to this central section without detection. We have established those defenses both to ensure the privacy we desire and to prevent any from eating of the fruit without knowledge of what it does. Having eaten already, my dear, you must know the consequences, and your friends, who have not, must know as well. Any who eat that fruit will cease to age and never die.”

Hope gaped at her. Will was experiencing a different type of shock. When he’d learned the Aliomenti had unlocked the secrets of immortality, he had assumed that his Purge had conferred this upon him, aided by the eventual knowledge that he must live a thousand years to fulfill his destiny. It hadn’t occurred to him that he might need to work out the formula for immortality on his own. Must he, too, eat of this fruit in order to ensure he lived long enough to see the now-immortal Hope safely to the twenty-first century? And if so, why hadn’t the diary mentioned that detail, before he potentially aged and died in standard fashion?

Eva studied the woman carefully. “You speak the truth, but not all of it. There is more, and it is something you do not wish to tell us. This woman must understand what it is she has unknowingly undertaken. And the two of us must understand also.” She motioned to indicate that she was referring to Will as well.

The woman turned her gaze from Eva back to Hope. “This immortality comes with a dear price, young woman. The price is simply this: whoever eats this fruit, male or female, can never bring a child into this world. The fruit prevents it, without fail, forever.”

The jaws of the trio fell open simultaneously, and Will felt a profound sense of failure. It was his mission to ensure that Hope survived to the twenty-first century because she must give birth to their children. If this fruit rendered her

immortal, then she would live long enough to do so. But if it rendered her sterile... her immortality was irrelevant.

Hope's face betrayed her own deep sense of failure, as she, like Will, recognized the precariousness of the mission to ensure the future birth of their children. "I do not wish this gift if the price is so high. I am young, and wish to one day bear children. How can I reverse the effects of this plant? I accept that I will no longer be immortal."

The woman shook her head. "Once eaten, the effects cannot be undone. The fruit does not negotiate. If you eat the fruit, it will convey those changes upon you, regardless of your desire to be without one or the other of those changes. Many have sought immortality without sterility; others would go childless but have no interest in living longer than their brethren. In spite of what is desired, the results conveyed cannot be separated or reversed."

Hope's face clouded, and her tears burst forth.

Will turned on his heel and marched out of the hut, ignoring the shouts from the woman, demanding that he return. He found one of the fruit-bearing trees, snatched several pieces of fruit from the branches, pocketed all but one, and returned to the hut.

"Where did you go?" The woman stood at the doorway, waiting for him. He could hear Hope crying inside, and the muted voice of Eva attempting to provide comfort.

"She will not undergo this trial alone," Will replied. He entered the hut with the piece of fruit in hand, and Hope raised her tear-filled eyes to him. He put the fruit to his mouth.

"No!" she screamed. "Not you, too!" She leaped to her feet and attempted to seize the fruit from him, but he'd already bitten into the succulent flesh.

He found the fruit to possess an incredible taste, a deep, sweet flavor that could become quite addictive. He took another bite, ignoring the look of horror on Hope's face.

He finished chewing, swallowed, and returned her gaze. "I cannot fulfill my mission if I cannot be with you until that mission ends," he said. The words had deep meaning for Hope, and provided a seemingly noble sentiment to Eva and the strange woman.

The woman looked at him, and he sensed her deep respect for him. "You speak with great nobility, sir. This woman could suffer far worse eternal companionship."

"Who are you?" Eva asked. "What is this place?"

“This place has no official name for it needs none. Those who live here do not leave; those who do not, have no knowledge of its existence, and there is thus no need for a name to be used by others. As for me, my name is Aina. What might you be called?”

“I am called Eva. My companions are Will and Hope.”

The woman nodded, thoughtful. “It is wise to have companions such as those at all times.”

Will narrowed his gaze. “You said that there are more of you living in this forest. Do all of you who live here eat this fruit? Where are the others?”

The woman nodded. “Our numbers are not large, and grow only infrequently, through bringing in outsiders by choice. Most of us have lived here an exceptionally long time, and have come to tire of constant companionship. I chose to build my hut in this spot, away from the others, because the isolation is preferable to the potential companions. Others, those who are younger, do live in a sort of community, but after decades together most move away to isolated parts of the forest. But yes, all of us have eaten and continue to eat the fruit. As you’ve discovered, it is delectable.”

Eva’s face tightened. “How did this place come to exist?”

“Don’t tell her, Aina.”

The man’s voice was a deep baritone, and the trio spun to find a man of modest height and build, sporting light brown hair, in their midst. His lips were pursed in an unmistakable show of displeasure. Will was uncertain as to the cause of the expression. Was he angry that Aina might have been prepared to tell the history of this group? Or was he instead disturbed that three strangers had worked their way into their impenetrable forest?

Aina glared at the man. “Ambrose, leave me. My guests require hospitality.”

Ambrose folded his arms across his chest. “I don’t think so, *Aina*. Your *guests* are not residents. They must stand before the villagers and request leniency for their trespass. The crime is not minor, nor is the punishment.”

Aina waved him away. “Be gone, sir! We shall arrive as we are able. Tell them to prepare for us if they so desire.”

Ambrose rolled his eyes, and moved with effortless grace as he vanished into the trees.

“Trespass?” Will asked.

Aina shook her head. “It is an ancient law. We have long sought to protect this forest from outsiders and keep the fruit from others, though our reasons have varied. Many believe outsiders incapable of handling the gifts, and that is their

reason for enforcing our boundaries. Others wish to keep the benefits only for themselves, and thus seek to restrict access to the chosen few. Ambrose has held both viewpoints in greater dominance at times, but feels both are valid and encourages both. We typically have greater time to assess each new entrant to this forest, for the thorns and bristles surrounding the perimeter cause significant physical damage, and we must first nurse those individuals to consciousness before assessing their candidacy. We can discuss current community needs and necessities during the recovery period.”

“Wait,” Will said. “What do you mean by a candidacy?”

Aina shook her head. “I am not permitted to explain further. You must come with me to the remnants of our village, where our people centralized for centuries before electing to lessen their proximity to each other.” She stood and strode into the forest on the same path Ambrose had followed. With a shared glance and no other available options, the trio followed her.

The well-worn trail meandered through the trees like a river carving the land, curving and undulating like a snake slithering through the dense forest. Without any indication that the visit to the village proper would be pleasant, it was difficult for the trio to enjoy what might have been an enjoyable walk. The air was fresh and pure, the plant life colorful, and the sounds of the wind in the trees melodic.

After a brisk fifteen minute walk, they came upon a clearing filled with huts of a style similar to that used by Aina. Ambrose was one of several individuals milling around, huddled with several others in deep conversation. Will had little doubt as to the subject of that conversation. They did not allow others in the forest, they did not permit others to eat the fruit, and in the minds of the forest residents the three of them had committed the most serious of crimes.

As he walked, Will wondered about the fruit—and more specifically, if its consumption had been more than ceremonial. He’d been under the impression that the Purge had been sufficient to render him immortal, especially given his younger appearance the process had produced. Those living in the Aliomenti village had believed him to be in his mid-twenties, rather than in his mid-to-late thirties, which had added to his belief. Yet, now he wondered. Had the original Purge contained this mysterious fruit? Did the morange and zirple combination merely unleash and build Energy abilities, but fail to confer immortality?

If they did not, would he be the one to deliver the fruit back to Arthur and Adam, and confer upon the men he’d most like to see dead the gift of immortality?

Ambrose turned, sensing the approach of Aina and the visitors, and his face turned stony. He did not seem unfriendly, merely one accustomed to the normalcy that defined the life of one who'd lived so long in isolation, with so little change. They'd interrupted his routine by their arrival.

The new arrivals approached Ambrose and the others. He nodded in greeting, and Aina returned the gesture before stepping aside.

Ambrose fixed each of them in turn with an intense gaze, as if trying to assess their trustworthiness. The trio, with nothing of ill will to hide, returned gazes of patience to their inquisitor.

Ambrose stepped back so as to see all of them at once. "You have intruded upon a forest meant for isolation and walled off from intrusion, meant to be impossible for outsiders to enter. Yet here you stand. Upon discovery, one of you was found to have eaten of the special fruit. Explain yourselves."

The trio exchanged glances, and Will spoke. "We had been journeying for some time and spotted the forest. We have few provisions, and thought to check for fruits and nuts and berries for sustenance, and perhaps find shelter for the evening when the winds might chill us. The fruit in question looked edible, and thus we ate."

Ambrose shook his head. "How did you manage to enter? The perimeter of this forest is lined with thick brambles and thorn bushes, and yet you enter with nary a scratch on you. How is that possible?"

Will shrugged. "Where we entered, there were no such obstacles." That was true, of course, though Will didn't think it wise to mention they'd entered from the sky rather than from the ground.

Ambrose looked concerned, and turned to those gathered behind him. "We'll need to perform a perimeter check. It's possible that some of the plants were damaged in the recent storm and have not yet grown back. We'll need to ensure those are fixed."

Returning his gaze to the trio, Ambrose looked at them. "Though I have no sense that you wish us harm or would do us injury, the fact is that you have trespassed here, and for those who live here, for whom privacy is the greatest desire, and for whom departure from this forest is treason, this is a serious crime indeed. And the fruit is the reason it is such a serious crime. The twin effects are momentous indeed, and we wish to ensure that no one feels the effects without the chance first to consider the consequences, including the mandatory permanent residency. Thus—"

"Wait," Will said. "What do you mean, 'permanent residency'?"

Ambrose focused his gaze upon Will. “When we vote to allow a specific candidate into this forest and introduce them to our lifestyle, we are certain that they are aware of the consequences of those choices. The fruit renders consumers both immortal and sterile. As the guardians of this powerful formula, we require that any who consume the fruit remain here permanently to aid in its protection, to ensure that the fruit and its incredible power do not spread widely.”

Will sighed. The man would make a tremendous member of the Aliomenti Elites, certain as he was that such incredible knowledge ought to be limited only to those deemed worthy by a select few. “I see the problem where we are concerned. We were unaware of your rules prior to consuming the fruit, and thus cannot be bound by them.”

Ambrose shook his head, his gaze ominous. “No, sir, you misunderstand me. Your fate, and hers—” he gestured at Hope “—are sealed. You *must* remain, under penalty of death. We are, however, uncertain what to do with *her*.” And he turned his gaze upon Eva.

“Wait!” Hope said. “We’re prisoners here?”

“No,” Ambrose said. “The two of you will not be restrained in any way, other than being denied any attempts to leave this forest. Nor will you be forced to act as slaves in any manner. You are to be treated as any other here; the eating of the fruit is treated as your acceptance of our requirements, irrevocable as the effects might be. This woman, however, has not yet made her decision.”

We could learn a lot while we’re here, Will projected to the women.

Perhaps we can even learn how to undo the effects of the fruit, Hope added.

Eva looked at Ambrose. “What if I choose not to accept your rules, and choose not to accept the fruit?”

Ambrose looked surprised. “You should consider yourself honored. Not one person a century is deemed worthy of such a privilege. Why would you decline?”

“You haven’t answered my question.”

Ambrose glanced around at his companions, and then he returned his steady gaze to Eva, his eyes colder than they’d yet been. “The secrecy of this group, and of the fruit, cannot be threatened and will not be threatened.”

Eva cocked her head. “You’re saying I will be detained, then, if I refuse? I am not simply free to choose to leave, vowing never to speak of this place?”

What are you saying, Eva? Hope’s thoughts were frantic. She’d literally died for the chance to be around Eva again; hearing the woman question the leader of this group about her ability to leave frightened her.

Be patient, Hope. I am assessing the nature of these people.

“You will be... permanently detained, in a manner of speaking.”

Eva nodded. “So my choices are acceptance or death, then. Hardly a choice.”

Hope sucked in a deep breath, eyes widening.

Ambrose nodded. “It is nothing personal, I assure you. The knowledge held here is simply too profound for widespread consumption, and that is why we do not allow others in unless they have been personally vetted, a process which happens infrequently. Those who learn our secret, learn our rules, have already made their decision. I do not envy you your position... but I do recommend accepting our offer.”

Eva rolled her eyes. “I suppose I have no choice, then. But I do wonder... how does one choose to reverse the effects of the fruit? What if one wishes to die? What if one wishes to bear children? In all the years your community has existed, surely you solved those mysteries.”

Ambrose looked hesitant for a moment, glancing at the assembled masses. Then he laughed, but Will noticed it seemed forced. “Why... would we want to answer those questions? We have all here accepted our condition, the gift we have been given. No... it is not something worthy of our time and consideration. Now, do you accept our conditions or not?” He spoke quickly, and Will noticed that Eva had detected that oddity as well.

Eva sighed. “I will eat your fruit.”

Ambrose walked to the nearest tree and plucked a piece of the succulent, fragrant fruit. He walked back and handed it to Eva. She held it, looking at him, as if waiting for approval. Ambrose nodded, and she bit into the fruit, chewing it slowly, and then she swallowed.

Ambrose smiled. “Welcome to the community. Welcome to the Ambrosia forest. As residents, you will find that the ambrosia fruit provides all the nutrition you need for survival and good health. You will find your health improving over time. And time is something you will have in abundance. For though you can be killed, you cannot die due to the accumulation of years.”

Aina stepped forward. “I will show all of you to your housing.”

She walked forward, and the trio once again followed her. “We have a larger home free, and as the three of you arrived together, you will reside here until such time you decide you desire separate quarters.”

The home was, indeed, spacious, similar in style and construction to the other homes in the community, and featured a half-dozen cots and a large wooden table. The trio walked in and, after a shared glance, retired to individual

cots to rest after their morning travel.

Will eventually drifted off to sleep, but not before he had a sobering thought. In a community of immortals, where departure was considered treason... why would they have a large hut suitable for housing at least three adults available?

ISOLATION

1021 A.D.

The trio referred to their time in the forest as a holiday, a time away from their normal work in a land of temperate weather and incredible sensory beauty. The fruit was delicious, with a sweet taste that remained on their tongues for hours after consumption. The vegetation provided a natural fragrance that seemed to heighten all of their senses, and the air seemed somehow cleaner. Will theorized that the trees might be thousands of years old and grew in such density that they created a micro-climate of highly oxygenated air and mineralized soil, resulting in the sensory opera that played out each day.

Over the course of their first few weeks, they determined that there were no Energy users living in the forest, which meant that the semantics over their status as prisoners or guests was a largely irrelevant distinction. All three could leave at any time.

They elected to stay for an indefinite period of time, and use their “vacation” to study the society of immortals, the future state for the Aliomenti. It was also probable that they’d need to provide the Aliomenti with the fruit to confer immortality upon the membership, and since Hope and Eva were believed dead, it meant that job would fall upon Will. That knowledge alone made Will want to extend his stay in this forest to the greatest duration possible, for he now dreaded returning to the Aliomenti forest and presenting his “gift.”

The most critical information they needed to extract was the secret to reverse the effects of the ambrosia fruit. All agreed that both body language and emotive energy revealed the same truth: Ambrose was lying about the permanence of the effects. The other residents, such as Aina, truly believed the story, but Ambrose

did not.

Life settled into a routine in the village and among the villagers. They were an aloof group, for most had lived for centuries and had little or no recent exposure to the outside world. New residents arrived every forty to fifty years, when Ambrose—and *only* Ambrose—would leave for a time and return with a middle-aged man or woman he'd located in some far-off village, a candidate he'd judged worthy to receive the gifts of the forest. Even the newcomers would, after a time, grow bored of the others, and as such they tended to drift away into their own isolated worlds. Will found the concept depressing, for there were many people, not the least of whom was his future wife, he'd spend many centuries knowing. Would centuries of constant contact render communication and any type of relationship so unpalatable that they'd choose to live apart?

Observations did not suggest open conflict among the residents of the forest, or certainly nothing to the degree they'd observed in the Aliomenti village, which had turned combustible well before the fire Adam used to erase the original community from existence. The Ambrosians merely ignored each other unless contact and communication became unavoidable. They all foraged for the fruits which were plentiful in this northern climate, a state Will found quite odd, and further proof that this old-growth forest had developed a climate and botanical variety unique at this latitude. They failed to locate any non-human animal life they could use for meat, and needed to ensure adequate protein consumption through the incredible variety of plants and insects that called the forest home.

Over the next several months, the trio began to piece together the social hierarchy and history of the forest. Ambrose was the first to wander in, and he himself had no idea as to his true age; his status had earned him the nickname "Father Ambrose" among the other residents. He'd chased game into the trees, leaving the safety of his tribe to do so. All had advised him to stay out; they'd considered the forest to be haunted with evil spirits. His actions did little to counter that belief, for he'd never returned, and they'd considered him dead. Time, Ambrose told them, moved at a different pace when you needn't worry about death. There would always be another day to finish a project, or start one. If the day didn't move you to action, then there was little need to try to compel yourself. They did not trade, and had no currency or need for money. Material possessions lacked meaning, which was one of the few attitudes expressed by the Ambrosians that Will found agreeable.

The trio, sensing a lack of motivation or spirit among their new neighbors,

set out to find their own patch of forest, isolated from prying eyes, where they could freely talk, practice their Energy development, and avoid the depressing view of long life displayed in front of them. Conversation routinely focused on memories of life in the Aliomenti village. Eva shared the story of Elizabeth's birth, and noted the universal tears of joy shed at the event. It was a far cry from the type of reception Hope had experienced, and the young woman was mystified as to the cause for the change in attitude. It was no stretch of the imagination to understand that Arthur was behind that transformation. Still, she wondered how people who cried tears of joy at the birth of a child could, a few short years later, subject that same child to a form of slavery, a fate even more cruel given that so many of those neighbors had been slaves themselves.

Will told stories of his son, stories that were especially poignant for Hope. Will had confessed to her, after her "death," that he'd been sent back in time by their children to save her from some unspecified calamity. In the process, Hope learned that Will had never had the chance to know their daughter as a child. Angel, the adult, had been delightful, but had been nearly two centuries old when Will first had the chance to meet her. Hope was left with the knowledge that she'd raise two young children by herself at some point in her life, and had a thousand years to prepare mentally for that future.

If, that is, they figured out how to reverse the sterilization effect of the ambrosia fruit.

Will wondered if, by his absence, he hadn't been as much a negative influence on Angel as Arthur had been on Elizabeth. "She risked *her* life to travel through time to save *your* life, Will," Hope chided him, after Eva had left the two for a solitary walk. "I suggest that means that any ill will she might have borne you as a young child was forgiven and forgotten over the years. And..." Her eyes twinkled. "You forget who will raise her, who will tell her of her father and shape her views of him. She will know the man to be a hero."

"Some hero," Will groused. "I let you suffer horrific injuries when I had the power to prevent them entirely. Josh specifically noted that my job was to save you, and yet you've lived through a fate no one should ever experience."

She shook her head. "Everything you do, Will, you do because it represents who you are, and what you believe in. You forget: you have no secrets from me. You wanted to remove me from that village, but you did not do so because it was against my wishes. I prolonged my fate by *choice*, Will, and I knew that. And it would have been impossible for you to protect me with Maynard swinging that sword at you. You kept fighting, you defeated him, and then you *did* save me. It

seems to me that I am still very much alive, thanks to you.”

When he tried to protest, she raised a hand to his lips. “Shush. You seek forgiveness for something which requires none, and seem desirous of performing a penance when no penance is required. Stop torturing yourself, Will. All who know you have no doubt of your goodness; you need to accept that as well.”

He was so struck by the similarity to Angel’s speech to him following the accident in the flying nano-based aircraft that he was left speechless. And he still wondered how it was that a simple matter of altered hair color prevented him from seeing in Angel her mother’s twin, for the similarities in appearance were truly striking. *Angel, you are truly your mother’s daughter, and I can offer no higher compliment than that.*

The months passed, and Will spent his time thinking about the future Aliomenti village. He knew he would return, knew he *must* return, and when he did he’d be expected to be a major part of the rebuilding effort. His role might consist of recruiting and growing their numbers, training those recruited in their newly unleashed Energy skills, or leading efforts to construct the buildings they’d need to operate both commercial and training efforts in relative obscurity.

He suspected that they’d need to focus on recruiting skilled craftsmen and craftswomen to ensure the resurgent village had steady income that might be used to undertake the creation of what would become a global empire. Will knew from his time at Aliomenti Headquarters that the Aliomenti would become involved in banking, but suspected they’d initially focus on the craft areas they’d perfected in the first village, before Adam’s inferno had erased it from existence.

Though the village had been planned to maximize the use of space, it hadn’t been designed with Will’s innovations in mind. The individual rooms, built of flammable wood and thatch, were a fire risk even without incensed, Energy-wielding arsonists looking to initiate devastation. Could he identify the correct formula and materials for creating concrete? Having such a material would enable him to recommend building underground, where they could practice Energy skills even when strangers might visit. Concrete would prove a critical development in their future building endeavors. With luck, his children would think to provide him the correct recipe using easily available materials from the region.

Will also wanted to develop a duct system underground that could pipe heat to buildings during the long, frigid winter months, including heating the walkways to melt snow and enable easy travel within the village. Such a heating system would enable them to continue producing goods throughout the year, and

allow them to grow crops within their walls in even the most brutal weather conditions.

The Wheel still existed, as did much of the aqueduct system used to transport water from the Ealdor River to the village. Will wanted to try to develop primitive versions of water pumps, and construct aqueducts at ground level—or even underground—to handle water and sewage. Will had other plans for the existing Wheel and additional wheels he wanted them to build, for they could eventually build factories using water wheels to power looms (which they'd need to design and build) using simple gears.

He wondered how many of these innovations they'd complete, and realized that eventually they'd do all of those and more, long before history recorded such innovations as commonplace.

He spent his ample free time sketching in the dirt, planning the ideal layout of the village. He also noted the innovations he'd need to work out with those they'd recruit, as well as the best construction schedule. The waterwheel-based factories, for example, would need to happen later in the process. Underground infrastructure would require construction early in the process. Recruitment of skilled workers would need to include focus on those craftsmen able to handle the demanding work schedule and innovation Will would seek. Will knew that his schedule might not happen as planned—in fact, it was highly unlikely that it would—and he couldn't take his dirt-based sketches with him in any event.

Will wondered if Arthur and Adam had already started recruiting and rebuilding, and if his plans would need to change based upon actions they'd taken in his absence. Of course, he noted to himself with a wry smile, if the construction undertaken during his absence was incompatible with his recommendations, and those recommendations were preferred, he could always have Adam burn everything down. His face fell; it would never seem enough time had passed to make light of an action that had ended the lives of dozens of people.

In an effort to distract his mind from the memories of that horrible night, he removed the paper scroll computer. His children hadn't seen fit to provide him with much information, and the diary had been silent for quite some time. He wasn't surprised when the comments in the aftermath of the fire referred to the event as an accident, rather than a willful act of mass murder. Adam hadn't seen fit to tell his younger colleagues the truth about how the fire had started. Will suspected it wouldn't be the last time Adam would smooth over the more unpleasant events or aspects of events in Will's life. Though he recognized that it

would be impossible to think of every event in which guidance might be useful, he would think that the destruction of his first home in the distant past would qualify. It hadn't.

Today, though, he was provided with extensive information about the manufacture and usage of concrete, including the best approach to build forms to use in shaping the concrete to the desired dimensions. He committed the information to memory; the diary wiped itself clean after each revelation, and he'd yet to determine if, or how, he might retrieve the text from earlier messages. He wondered if the computer would allow for the searching of information regarding *future* events; such a loophole would eventually be subject to exploitation. Perhaps that was the purpose of the dearth of guidance; the idea of Arthur finding the diary and possessing knowledge of future events was a terrifying thought. As he read through the final details on concrete, the warm sun and melodic tones of the wind lulled him into a deep sleep. Naps, though common in this forest, were becoming so frequent that he found them annoying. He needed to leave just to regain his normal motivation, for the primary consequence of living here the past ten months was becoming apparent.

Will was bored.

"We need to leave," he told the women as they gathered for a meal. "I think we've learned what we'll learn from them. It's unfortunate that we learned nothing about reversing the effects of the fruit, though."

Eva looked puzzled. "Reversed? Why would you want to reverse it? We've been granted an incredible gift. Why would you wish to reverse it?"

"I'm still young, Eva," Hope replied. "The concept of living forever is difficult for me to grasp, but what I've learned in living here these past several months is that life for these people has lost meaning. If the gift of immortality means I'll lose interest in being alive, then I'd prefer to reverse it and live, age, and die as I was born to do. Perhaps we'll learn that it's not so much the gift of immortality that has led this group of people to behave as they do. It's the fact that they've chosen to isolate themselves away from the rest of humanity, with only the rare new candidate to add variety." Her face fell. "But that's not the real reason I want to know how to reverse the effects of the ambrosia fruit. I'm only twenty years old, Eva, and my life has been lived in nearly as much isolation as these people. I don't know much about the world. What I've learned, though, is that there are experiences I've yet to have that I'm certain I *want* to have. And one of those experiences, one that is critically important to me, is denied to me by the fruit that grants me immortality."

Eva looked surprised at this. “After what you’ve lived through, after the way you were treated... you want to be a parent? You want to bring a child into this world?” She shook her head. “I don’t understand that, Hope.”

“Perhaps you don’t,” Hope conceded. “But the reality is that I think I’m well-suited to be a parent after my experiences, because I’ll be motivated to treat my children as the treasures they are. They’ll never feel neglected, or like a piece of property to be bartered, or wonder what it means to be loved. For that? I’ll give up immortality, even if it means I have to spend the next thousand years trying to figure out how to do it.”

Will nodded. “It’s the lack of choice, Eva, at least in Hope’s case, and in my case as well. It’s true that I was told of the consequences before I chose to eat the fruit, but I will not let Hope work through this challenge alone. It’s one of the reasons I think we need to leave here.”

Eva hesitated. “It’s not the only reason. Something has bothered me since I arrived, and I’ve followed that hunch. It suggests this place is more dangerous than we think, but...” She hesitated.

“What is it?” Hope asked.

“The stories about this place don’t make sense, and haven’t since we arrived. They all agree: Ambrose was here first. Others arrived, by his invitation, roughly two per century. He’s been alive for a long time.”

“Right,” Will said. “So what of it?”

“Don’t you think it’s rather odd that only Ambrose is allowed to leave? And how he always finds a new candidate worthy of admission?”

Will shrugged. “We don’t know how long he’s gone each time. If he’s gone for a year and tours several towns, he’s bound to find someone he thinks is worthy.”

Eva shook her head. “I’ve asked leading questions about that, and people have volunteered that he’s gone maybe two weeks.”

Hope frowned. “That’s... suspicious.”

“It’s more than suspicious,” Eva said. “He *knows* who he’s looking for. And how does he know that?”

Will and Hope exchanged glances, and then shrugged.

“He knows... because he planted the person there on his previous trip.”

She let the statement hang in the air, watched as Will and Hope tried to work out the truth, and finally made the revelation. “Every person here is Ambrose’s child. He leaves this place, he finds and impregnates a woman in one town, and then goes to the village he visited during his last excursion. They come because

they recognize him as their father. He considers them worthy because he knows them to be his children. The others living here know that he's *their* father, but don't know the others are. But they trust him. That's why Aina got scolded that first day for calling him Ambrose. It was disrespectful to him. The whole 'Father Ambrose' bit isn't really a title of honor... it's a literal fact."

Hope stared at Eva. "But that means... he knows..."

Eva nodded. "It was pretty obvious he was lying about the effects not being reversible. He knows they are, and he knows *how* to make it happen. Perhaps the effects wear off after fifty years. I've tried to watch him to see if he avoids the fruit, but he's never in the area, like he's trying to avoid me."

"We have two choices, then," Will said. "We can try to extract the information out of Ambrose now, then leave. Or we can leave now, try to figure it out on our own, and then come back, if needed, to learn what Ambrose knows. But when we leave, I need to go back to the Aliomenti. I know that's where I'm supposed to be."

Eva looked at him. "You're actually going back?"

Will sighed. "I always knew that I would, because I believe in what the supposed goals of the Aliomenti village were. What can we achieve as individuals if we focus our efforts on it? I've learned I can fly and teleport and heal people of seemingly fatal injuries. I can't help advance that cause in any other way." He dropped his eyes to the ground. "But there's a major problem with that."

"We'd need to split up," Eva said. "We'd need to find somewhere else to travel and live, while you're there contending with Arthur and my brother. And others." She shook her head. "You do realize that you'll need to share this fruit with them, don't you?"

Will made a face showing his displeasure. "I can't think of two people right now who I'd less want to see live forever, but I fear that you're correct, Eva. In the interest of meeting the goals of the group... I have to tell them. But there's a larger reason to take the fruit back with me, and it's not to give it to those two, or even any innocents who might join once I return. It's that a group like that, so motivated to pursue money and, yes, power... they'll eventually have a core of people who will study that fruit, understand how it does what it does. When they do that, they'll be able to develop the cure, if we're not able to get it from Ambrose. And I can't think that Ambrose will tell us willingly."

Eva shook her head. "It's hard to believe that anyone would view immortality as something requiring a cure."

Hope looked at the ground. “There’s always a cure for immortality, Eva. It’s just not one you want to consider. I do not shy away from that part, but I’ll sacrifice immortality for the ability to bear my children.”

Will nodded. “Then we need to leave. I suppose we do owe our host, Ambrose, the courtesy of telling him that we’re leaving, don’t we? Perhaps ask some useful questions in the process?” He gave a wry smile.

The women nodded. “Once we leave, we’ll need to figure out where we need to go,” Eva said. “It needs to be far away from the village so we don’t run the risk of Arthur seeing us.”

“Perhaps someplace... warm?” Hope smiled, and Will laughed.

They gathered their few possessions, and Will gathered several pieces of fruit. He pocketed several, and then smashed several others open. “I’m collecting the seeds,” he explained. “We’ll need to grow this near the village if we’re to use and study it. It’s not practical to think I can teleport here and back each time we need more.”

They marched into the village proper, and located Ambrose, Aina, and others dispersed throughout the center of the main housing area. They approached Ambrose, the leader of the forest residents, and asked to speak with him privately. Ambrose frowned, but excused himself from the others and walked with the trio.

“What’s the purpose of this discussion?” Ambrose asked.

“We know the effects of the fruit can be reversed,” Eva said. “And we know *you* know the trick.”

Ambrose startled, then composed himself. “I’ve no idea what you’re talking about.”

Will glared at him. “Don’t patronize us, Ambrose. There are an awful lot of noses in this village that look just like yours. Tell me, where will your next miraculous candidate be located?”

Ambrose folded his arms. “Are you threatening me? I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“But we do,” Aina said, as she and a dozen others stepped into the clearing, surrounding them. “They are threatening harm against Father Ambrose. And that won’t be allowed.”

Will glanced at the women. *Do we fight them, force the truth out of him?*

No, Hope replied. *I don’t agree with that.*

Then we need to be prepared to leave. Everybody got their target in mind?

He received assents from both women, and turned to look at Ambrose.

“Father Ambrose has been less than truthful with us. He refuses to correct the problem. Thus, we choose to leave.”

Ambrose shook his head. “You’re not permitted to leave. I do believe that you made a promise on that topic. And you are now guilty of a crime, one you must answer for.”

“None of us made promises of our free will. Hope ate the fruit without knowledge of what it was, I ate it to ensure she had companionship, and Eva ate it under the threat of execution. Such promises are hardly binding. And your alleged crime is more a crime *against* us than one committed *by* us.”

Villagers began circling them, and for the first time the trio noted the presence of weapons, primarily long lances that were aimed in their direction.

“Perhaps you misunderstood me,” Ambrose said, without emotion. “You will not be permitted to leave.”

Will sighed. “Again, we thank you for your hospitality, but our time here is at an end.”

Ambrose nodded, as the trio began flooding their cells with Energy.

“So it would seem,” Ambrose replied, and nodded at the circling army.

The lances were thrust at the trio.

But they met only empty air.

SEPARATION

1022 A.D.

The trio reappeared outside the Ambrosia forest, separated from each other by a distance of thirty to forty feet. The air seemed stale by comparison, and the sweet scent of ambrosia, so prevalent over the past ten months, was gone. They walked toward each other, each glancing about to ensure that Ambrose and his immortal children had remained behind.

“I cannot *believe* they tried to kill us!” Hope snarled as they converged. “Why would they do that? Why do they *care* if we choose to leave?”

Will shrugged. “I’ve seen people behave quite irrationally when in possession of knowledge that gives them a pronounced advantage over everyone else. Withholding that knowledge isn’t uncommon, and neither is erasing any threat of exposure.” He sighed. “Do you think someone like Arthur will willingly allow the secrets of morange and zirple to reach the masses?” He gave a meaningful glance at both of them, and both looked troubled.

The exterior trees of the Ambrosia forest were regaining their green color in the early spring, as the temperatures in the northern climate reached levels required for the growth and proper pigmentation of the leaves. The sun flared high above, and it was only now, freed of the thick canopy of trees that shaded their relocated homestead, they realized how dark it had been inside the forest. Will, who’d read numerous books and articles about the impact of environment, color, and layout of space upon mood and worker productivity, recognized that the general morose mood of the villagers might well arise from the lack of sunlight. *They’re killing themselves in the process of living forever, denying their skin the exposure to the sun required for the overall health of their bodies.* It was

no wonder they'd been such gloomy people.

They realized that the vows the Ambrosians swore about remaining in the forest might be forgotten in an effort to track them down. The trio began walking south, primarily to escape possible attack, but also to give each of them the chance to recharge their Energy. They had no specific destination in mind, but all three knew that they'd separate once the women were entrenched in their new hometown. Their mood as the new journey began was somber.

Discussions focused upon the ideal living arrangements for a pair of immortal women. They would need an isolated area where they could perform and practice Energy work without fear of exposure. Such a base had an added advantage for immortals: they could go there to "die" every few decades and then emerge in a different locale to begin their lives anew. Will, familiar with the general geography of Europe, suggested that they locate a small island within the Mediterranean Sea, one too small to interest sailors looking for temporary relief from storms or treasure hunters seeking potential gold mines.

They spent several months working their way to the south. The flight to the Ambrosia forest had taken them over the North Sea into Norway, and working their way south and, periodically, east, had brought them into modern-day Sweden. They were eventually able to fly west into modern Denmark, minimizing the time they needed to spend in the air, and then resumed their way south once more.

Their first stop outside the Ambrosia forest had brought to light a challenge that Will had, to his chagrin, not considered. He'd been fortunate to travel back in time to medieval England, where the residents spoke the same language he spoke. The Ambrosians had, to his relief, spoken a modified form of English as well.

But in the first village they'd encountered following their escape, they learned that language was not universal. Though their money talked a bit, they struggled to communicate their needs, simple though they were. To save funds, they posed as a woman traveling with her daughter and son-in-law, and thus customs of the day enabled them to retain a single room. They'd managed to communicate their situation and needs with gestures and pointing, but the fact remained that they were among people who spoke a different language.

"This is going to get frustrating," Eva muttered.

"With Energy, though, we ought to be able to figure out a solution," Will replied.

Hope looked thoughtful. "I think I might have an idea." She paused, as if

collecting her thoughts. “It’s not an issue to understand what’s being said; we’re all able to perform telepathy to understand ideas, and empathy to understand tone and intent.”

“True,” Will agreed, and Eva nodded.

“The trick is talking *back* to them. And here’s where *our* intent becomes important. If we impress upon the minds of the people we’re speaking with the ideas we want to communicate, it works, but it’s confusing. They’re hearing confusing sounds in their ears, but clear thoughts in their minds.”

“Exactly,” Eva said. “So... we’re able to get close, but how do we overcome that last part?”

“Why not convince them that they are seeing and hearing the concepts we’re pushing into their minds? We’re not trying to persuade them to do anything they don’t want to do; we’re simply encouraging communication.”

Will and Eva looked at each other, surprised, and then Will smiled. “I think that’s a great idea. And when we get to a village where we’ll stay for a longer term, that language will eventually become one we can understand and speak without any additional help.”

They tested the process the next day, as they went to the local market to purchase some provisions. Though the process was difficult and required a higher degree of concentration than most conversations, they were able to make the process work. They left the first village with a greater degree of confidence about their ability to communicate with others throughout the remainder of their travels.

The patient, casual journey enabled the trio to continue deepening their bonds, and, as they moved ever closer to the Great Sea, they were able to enjoy the scenery and the gradually warming temperatures. As they located small villages upon their path, they’d stop for several days, utilizing the ever-present inns available for weary travelers. Most expressed surprise that the trio was traveling on foot, but all had great concern about them traveling on the roads connecting cities without any type of weaponry. On more than one occasion, Will was taken aside and scolded for his lack of a weapon, and many expressed the belief that the women must be of little concern to him if he refused to arm himself.

“But I don’t *need* a weapon,” Will fumed, his voice quiet as the trio enjoyed an evening meal at an isolated table.

Eva looked thoughtful. “You don’t,” she agreed. “But perhaps, in the interest of avoiding significant attention, it would be best to carry a weapon, though

you'd never need to actually *use* one."

Will frowned. "I don't like it, Eva. I don't want to spend money on something I don't need. I'd prefer to conserve as much as possible until the two of you are permanently settled, and a sword would make a huge dent in our money supply."

Hope glanced at Eva. "Will, we're trying to make certain that there's nothing to draw attention to our travels, aren't we? What would be a more obvious identifier to Arthur than an unarmed man with dark hair? Should anyone remember you... they'd probably remember us as well." She shuddered.

Will purchased a sword the next day, strapping it over his back. It was a shorter sword, reminiscent of those used by the future Hunters and Assassin. The choice was a practical one, for he had no interest in carrying the weight of a larger sword that he'd never use. Since the blade was primarily a diversion, a means to make the trio less memorable as they traveled south, he kept his expenditure at a minimum, concerning himself little with quality, decoration, or sharpness.

Eva frowned at him. "You're going to regret that choice at some point, Will. We're all rather proficient at making more money, and we have no specific schedule to keep. Why not spend the money on a quality blade, one that others will see as an actual deterrent against attacks? They'll see *that* blade and think you're asking for trouble, and you may well get it."

Will sighed, and replaced the low-end blade with one far more decorative, light to the touch but still sharp, and invested in a quality scabbard across his back as well, along with supplies necessary for cleaning and sharpening.

Hope winked at him. "Now I feel safe in your company, Sir Will."

He laughed.

They were never approached on the roads. Will had taught them how to project Energy laden with emotion, and the trio broadcast a veritable force field of Energy suggesting that they weren't there and wouldn't be worth attacking in any event. The few travelers who passed by paid them no attention. Those thieves they were able to sense with their telepathic and empathic skills all reasoned that an attack on the trio would be pointless, not yielding sufficient treasure to make an attack worthwhile.

Over the course of the months spent on their journey towards the Great Sea, their feet would blister on a regular basis, forcing them to extend their stay at a town until the injuries healed. After intense discussion, they elected to once again expend funds, this time on horses. They'd resisted, not because of the cost,

but because they knew it would bring their journey to an end more quickly. It was an end none of them wanted. Will found himself suggesting longer stays in each village they visited; he had no interest in trading Hope and Eva's company for Arthur and Adam's.

At long last, they were on the shores of the Great Sea. The Mediterranean stretched out before them, the waters vanishing from sight into the horizon and beyond.

"It's the edge of the world," Hope whispered. "You can see where it ends, where sailors fear to travel. I hope we are never near the edge."

Will smiled. "You are no nearer the edge today than when we started our journey."

Hope turned upon him, her eyes wide. "How can you say that? Can you not see the end?"

"I do see it. It is not the edge. It is simply the edge of what we can see."

Eva rolled her eyes. "Stop telling her tales, Will. You shouldn't put fanciful ideas into her mind."

"They are no tales, Eva, but truth. Would you like proof?"

Hope eyed him with great curiosity. "You're serious, aren't you? You truly believe there's no edge of the world, or, at least, that we aren't seeing it up ahead?"

He held out his hand. "Would you like to see?"

She hesitated, and then took his hand. "Show me."

His Energy had grown throughout their travels, for they'd spent a great deal of time working to expand their skills. Hope and Eva both lacked the comfort and confidence he had with clairvoyance, the ability to transfer one's senses outside the body to see and hear events happening at a distance, though both had more than enough Energy to accomplish the feat. Will suffered from no such lack of confidence. He took his senses outside his body, transferring the sights to Hope's mind, so that she soared above the ground with him.

He took them up several thousand feet, a height which afforded them the sight of a beautiful patchwork of plant and sea, and she gasped in appreciation of the natural beauty before her. "Look closely into the distance. You are now seeing much farther than you did before. You are seeing past that edge you expressed so much fear of earlier. Does it look like the edge of the world?"

"There is still an edge, Will," she told him, their voices echoing in each other's minds much like their remote telepathic conversations. "The fact that I now see that it's farther away... that doesn't mean it isn't there."

Will soared higher, stopping only when he reached ten miles into the air. "Look again."

She looked, and the horizon was even farther away than before. And she noticed something more. "Why... why does it look like it's... crooked?"

He smiled. "Hang on tight."

They flew higher and higher, up through the clouds, higher and higher, through the atmosphere, to such great heights that she feared to look down. He could sense her thrill, but recognized that she was frightened at the possibility that, though she knew her body remained safely on the ground, she'd somehow fall from this great height and suffer mortal injuries.

They burst through the atmosphere. Will knew that if they were truly flying, they'd be incinerated instantly at these speeds, speeds that left Hope screaming, though whether in terror or exhilaration he did not know.

"We're going to crash through the dome!" she screamed.

"No," he whispered back. "We're far beyond the reach of any dome."

They burst through the outer atmosphere, and suddenly they were in outer space. Even in non-corporeal form, she knew something was strange and different about this experience, for she no longer saw grass and trees and mountains, no longer saw the waves of the Great Sea lapping against the shore.

"Where are we?" she whispered.

"You live on a giant sphere, a giant ball, called Earth," he explained. "It is not flat. It is a circle, in every direction, and impossible to fall off." He nodded downward with his head. "Look."

She looked, and marveled at the sight of the massive sphere below. They floated farther away from the planet's surface, even as she watched, and the enormity of the world she inhabited became far more real as he pointed out the small blue speck that was the Great Sea, and noted the small sliver of greenery that represented the distance they'd taken months to travel.

They floated there, their consciousness, in space marveling at the grandness of all creation, and realized the very small portion of the world they'd actually seen. He felt her understanding grow, an understanding that would not reach the general population for centuries, as she realized the size of the world she inhabited.

She asked the question on her mind. "Where are you from? Show me."

In answer, they flew to their left, moving to the west, and she saw the enormity of what would become known as the Atlantic Ocean, an overwhelming sight. She saw the huge mass of land on the opposite side, and as she did, he

zeroed in on the area that would become Pleasanton, and they flew down through the atmosphere. The speed was fantastic, every sight crisp and pure. As they reached more normal altitudes, as they flew back beneath the clouds, Will wished that they were in physical form, to feel and marvel at the wind in their faces and to truly experience the speeds they attained.

“This is where I lived, or very nearly so,” he said, stopping just a few miles above the surface, with the river that would become known as the Ohio well to their south. “And one day, this is where you’ll live as well. Our home will be beautiful because you’ll know *exactly* how it should be built. It will be built to be safe, a place where anyone who might want to hurt you can’t get through. Except...”

She’d heard some of the story, but not all of it. She knew *he’d* been attacked, and that the attack had been the event that had started him on his journey through time to find her. But he’d never mentioned that she and their son would be attacked as well that fateful day.

The emotion was transparent to her. “I’m hurt as well? Am I... killed?”

He shook his head in her mind. “No, you aren’t. Angel is born after that. I don’t know how you survive, just that you do. As does Josh. Everyone survives. I wish... I wish I’d known who they were sooner, so that I’d been able to ask them more about that day.”

“We have the time to figure that out, Will.” Her voice was strong, and it soothed him. “We have a thousand years to figure it out, and a thousand years to figure out how to make sure that... the children can exist.” She was worried about the sterility caused by the ambrosia fruit, and yet the immortality conferred might well be the key to finding that cure.

“We need to go back,” he told her. “Eva will probably wonder why we both seem to have fallen asleep.”

Hope smiled. “It’s not difficult to be tired after such a long journey. After all, we *did* just travel an incredible distance.”

He chuckled at her double meaning. “When you return, take a moment before you open your eyes and move. It’s like waking up from a deep sleep; don’t move too quickly.”

As they both slowly regained consciousness on the shores of the Great Sea, they found Eva hovering over them, her face lined with worry. “Can you hear me, Will? Hope, can you hear me?”

“We’re fine, Eva,” Hope replied. “I now know I need to work on my clairvoyance skills. It’s an incredible ability, and can be highly educational.”

They both sat up, and Eva arched an eyebrow. “How so?”

“Give me a few moments, and I’ll show you,” Will replied. “We’ll explore the area, looking for an island off the coast here, and a village that will be an ideal fit for the two of you.” He glanced at Hope, memories of her deep concern and worry about the fate of their future children still weighing heavily on him. “I know now that I must get to work back at the Aliomenti village, trying to understand how to reverse the effects of the ambrosia. But I also know that I can visit with the two of you at any time. And I will.”

After Will had the opportunity to recharge his Energy, he took Eva and Hope on a tour of the Sea, during which they located a small, uninhabited island with plenty of fruit trees and small freshwater lakes full of fish they could use for sustenance. They teleported to the island, and found a cave the women could use for shelter during their periodic stays on the island. They then teleported back to the mainland, and went on an invisible, flying tour of an arc of land near the shore, locating and exploring villages. They were looking for a place ideally suited for the arrival of two unknown women, a place large enough for them to avoid standing out, but small enough that they could make a difference in the lives of people.

“I don’t simply want to vanish into the background,” Hope said. “With the Energy skills I have now, I can help a lot of people, just as we were doing in Abreca. We can do the same in our new home... but without the large quantity of knights fighting everywhere.”

Eva nodded. “That’s something important. We’re going to be here for ten or twenty years. We need to find a place where we can make a difference, make friends, and become part of the overall community. This is not a quick Trading mission.”

Will felt his throat tighten, and he glanced at the beautiful young woman before him. “Friends?”

Hope looked puzzled, but Eva burst out laughing. “Don’t worry, Will. I’ll make sure that any man who looks at her inappropriately gets quite uncomfortable.”

Hope frowned. “I’m not entirely sure that’s going to work, Eva. If we’re going to help heal people who are sick, it’s probably *not* a good idea for them to suffer after being around me.”

“Fair point,” Eva said. “But I think we need to figure out how to prevent every man in the city from considering you marriage material.”

“It would be nice if that was done in a way that didn’t make me seem deeply

flawed,” Hope grumbled. She glanced at Will. “Perhaps you need to be the traveling merchant who only returns sporadically to shower me with gifts and money, and who glowers at everyone to let them know I’m off limits.”

“That’s a very good idea,” Will said. “It’s a good way to explain long absences and unexpected returns to the city.”

Eva nodded. “I like it as well.”

Two days later, they arrived at the outskirts of a city slightly larger than Richland, with walls of only moderate size. It was a town not expecting any type of attack, but rather one which sought to keep the casual traveler away. The trio gained entry, explaining that Eva and her daughter, Hope, were skilled with herbs and plants and had tremendous success in healing illnesses. The guards were eager to allow them inside, for the city of Healf was suffering through a minor plague. The thin walls surrounding the city were decorative, more effective at quarantining the city than preventing an invasion. Word of a minor plague was the most effective defensive measure any city could make.

They found lodging quickly, for the plague had claimed the lives of many residents. They presented themselves as a married couple and the mother of the bride, a charade easy to maintain due to the common hair color the two women now possessed.

The women put out word that they were skilled at curing illness, and the next morning found a long line of patients waiting for them. Will, playing his part, spoke to the healthy members of the city and learned the type of supplies and goods they were interested in acquiring. Making no promises, Will said that he’d keep his eyes open for the desired goods during his travels.

By the time evening arrived, the women had treated many of those who were ill, and had made sufficient money in the process to assure them that they’d be able to make a sound income. Will was relieved; he knew they had savings stashed away, knew they could travel to make money if needed, but such activity was inadvisable. The fewer who saw them, the fewer places they traveled, the better.

The morning dawned, and Will gathered the few possessions he’d carried with him since leaving the Aliomenti village nearly a year earlier. They’d spent a significant portion of the money they’d accumulated over the past several years during their slow march from Abrecan, to the Ambrosia forest, and finally to Healf. The primary items of concern were the ambrosia fruit seeds, which he’d stowed in the velvet pouch that once housed Genevieve’s necklace and hairpin. The pouch was stored safely in a pocket, with the handful of coins he believed

he'd need to reestablish himself in the remnants of the Aliomenti village.

Hope and Eva walked with him through Healf toward the gates, and he could sense their sadness and concern. They were concerned about the future treatment they'd receive in this city without his presence; no amount of Energy power could eliminate the city's perception of a mother and daughter living alone, not even for two already well respected for their healing abilities. They were concerned as well for Will's future; Arthur had, by Adam's statement, been plotting Will's murder prior to the inferno that eradicated the original village and all who lived there. Adam had scoffed at Will's restraint in the face of the ill treatment directed at Hope and Eva while he'd lived in the village, despite having the ability to end such treatment permanently. Both men, by now, would have strong Energy skills, which limited Will's advantages should disagreements arise.

They reached the gate, and Will took a deep breath. "I'll be back," he said, trying to hide the emotion he felt at his departure. Though he could still "call" both women telepathically at any time, the past year had strengthened his attachment and commitment to both. The thought of being away was crushing.

For their part, Hope and Eva struggled to restrain their tears. "Good luck, Will," Hope whispered.

Will turned, but one of their new neighbors spotted him as he prepared to exit. "Sir, you're leaving on a long journey," the man said. "Should you not kiss your wife goodbye before your departure?"

His face fell upon Hope, a pained look that only two people could possibly understand. They'd long been concerned that any action they took could threaten the future births of Josh and Angel; to that end, the long separations were an essential part of the thousand year journey. They'd used the ruse of a supposed marriage to explain why Will would live in the same house with two women, why he'd return to visit so often.

That ruse now trapped him.

She looked back at him, similarly pained.

And yet...

"Of course, sir," Will said, his voice cracking.

He moved to her as she watched him, unblinking, uncertain of what to say, or how to react. He simply let instinct take over, fueled by his now seemingly distant memories of their future life together, and acted as he naturally would. She was in his arms, and their lips touched, their Energy sparking and surging in the process, and the temperature rose while their faces remained so close

together.

At long last, and yet far too soon, he broke off the kiss, watching as her eyes remained closed in a joy and sadness both infinite in their depths. He watched until he saw her shining blue eyes, and then nodded his head.

“Goodbye, Hope,” he whispered.

Then Will walked out of the gate and was gone, the ache in his heart larger than the city he left behind.

WALL**1022 A.D.****Three months later**

“**P**ut your back into it, Arthur!”

Amusing as it was to watch the man’s struggle, Will knew it was more critical that they finish stirring the mix of rock and gravel. The handful of journeymen carpenters Adam and Arthur had recruited to the village in his absence had already built the forms for the walls, but if they couldn’t get the mix stirred thoroughly, they’d remain nothing but hollow shells.

Arthur glared at him. “I could do this a lot faster if I could put more than my *back* into it.”

Will stifled a laugh at the thought of Arthur falling into the test batch of concrete they were stirring. “We’ve already settled that point, Arthur.” *It was you who set the rule, long ago, that we not tell anyone not part of this village about our true aims, remember? I can’t see how showing these men how quickly we can stir this mixture would be in line with that particular oath.*

Will had returned to find the village still in some degree of shambles. Arthur and Adam’s distrust of each other was so complete that they couldn’t use their new Energy abilities to do more than blast away the remnants of the fire. They lived in the Schola, the only human dwelling Adam’s inferno had left untouched, and survived the first few months by wandering through nearby forests, foraging anything edible. Once they’d eliminated the debris, however, they’d looted the metal coins that had survived unscathed, and had gone their separate ways, leaving the remains behind.

Will found that unsurprising. Arthur had overseen the murder of three

women that Adam had cared deeply for, and Adam had destroyed Arthur's nascent commercial empire with his act of arson and mass execution. Neither man seemed able or willing to forgive the other, and given the nature of the crimes in question, it seemed unlikely such forgiveness could ever come.

"What is this stuff again?" Arthur asked.

"I heard it mentioned a few times during my little trip," Will replied. He'd referred to his year away as a trip or holiday, a time to reflect upon what had happened and how they could prevent such tragedy in the future. Arthur would never know the true nature of the journey. "It's called concrete. It's... basically it's liquid rock, and you can pour it between pieces of wood to create walls." He glanced a dozen yards away, where Adam was working with the journeymen to stabilize the forms for the first wall section. "And it's fireproof."

Arthur snorted, then wiped the sweat from his brow. "That's certainly something we need to consider around here."

"We're lucky we hadn't had a fire before that," Will noted. "Lots of wood. Lots of fire in the rooms and in the kilns and bakeries and forges. It was going to happen eventually. Now, we're reducing the chances to nearly zero."

"*Nearly* zero?" Arthur arched an eyebrow. "You said this stuff is basically rock. How can rocks burn?"

"People around here are rather talented," Will replied. "The means would be discovered."

Arthur looked thoughtful, glanced at Adam with a scowl, and continued stirring.

Adam jogged over to the duo, trailed by the journeymen, each of whom carried buckets. "How is our mystery mix coming along?"

Arthur glared at him, and Adam returned the look of distaste.

Will sighed. "It's ready, Adam."

Adam nodded at Will, and the construction crew began filling the buckets, setting up a human chain that delivered the contents of the large, earthenware "mixing bowl" to the ladders leaning against the forms. The men at the top dumped the mix in, sending the empty buckets back to the "mixing bowl" for refills. Will had Arthur continue to stir the mix, and moved to a second "mixing bowl," where he and Adam began adding ingredients to make a second batch of the concrete. The fire had left the system of running water intact, and they'd constructed the "mixing bowls" under the downspouts they'd created, making it easy to add the necessary water.

"Hey!" Arthur called. "Why is *he* over there doing the easy work, and I'm

over here sweating?”

Will shrugged. “He got up earlier than you did to work on setting up the forms. This is the next step, and he’s available.”

Arthur glowered at Will, while Adam snickered quietly.

It was exhausting work, and they had weeks, if not months, of similar work ahead of them. It was a fatigue as deep as Will had felt when he’d finally returned to the village. The distance was too great to teleport, and Will had instead chosen to fly invisibly toward home until he was able to teleport into the cave. He’d not reckoned on the exhaustion the effort would bring, and he’d found himself depleted of Energy and famished, armed with only a few coins in a strange city where not a single resident spoke English. He, Hope, and Eva had become so proficient at using telepathy to communicate with residents of the villages they’d lodged in that it seemed everyone truly *did* speak English. With no Energy, though, he was helpless.

Thankfully, the paper scroll computer diary saved the day, providing him with key phrases, reasonable prices, exchange rates for the coins he carried... and a map to the nearest forest. Will had successfully procured food and drink, and had sufficiently recharged by nightfall that he was able to fly over the walls of the city and walk to the nearest forest. A full night of Energy exchange with the plant life in the region, along with adequate sleep, had been sufficient to refuel him for the remainder of the journey home.

Will motioned Arthur over to the new batch of concrete. “I need the two of you to start stirring this,” he said, glancing between the two adversaries. “And yes, I do mean *both* of you, at the same time. If not, I will personally plant both of you inside these walls so that you are buried together forever.”

He sparked a small bit of Energy at both men, the equivalent of a shock of static electricity. Adam and Arthur both jumped. It hadn’t hurt, but the message had been received. Neither of them wanted to cross Will, not because he could best both of them with his Energy skills, but because both recognized that only Will could provide the character necessary to keep the rebuilding process going. Will was, at this stage, the leader of the Aliomenti, a title he neither sought nor wanted, but a role he accepted nonetheless.

Arthur had, at Will’s request, traveled around and found a handful of metal workers, and the men had been at work creating thin metal rods. Though Will was no expert in concrete construction techniques, he knew that metal spikes called rebar were part of the poured mix, providing material the concrete could adhere to for added strength. It was too much to ask these men to build wood

forms so perfectly aligned that they could connect them via rebar, however.

Will collected an initial batch of the individual spikes from the metal workers and walked over to those hauling the concrete up the ladders. "Let's pause for a moment. We need to add these first."

The workers gave him a look reminiscent of those he'd received during the mounting of the Wheel, when he'd realized the structure was being loaded backwards. The journeymen, however, merely grumbled and walked off to drink water, leaving Will to alternate dropping the spikes in vertically and horizontally. With the journeymen otherwise occupied, he used Energy to properly align the spikes into a lattice with the forms, and forced the structure down into the still-liquid concrete. Satisfied that he'd accomplished something worthwhile, he climbed back down.

Will found Adam and Arthur joining the men near the well, where they were using the winch and bucket to retrieve water. The men had seen the aqueduct system in operation, but found the delivery system so strange that they refused to drink water collected from it, preferring instead to draw water directly from the well. All of them stood around, chatting. The men were pleased; they were being paid well for their work in constructing the wall, and the unusual building material was something many relished experiencing. The work would be grueling, and they'd already agreed to rotate chores every hour or so. Arthur would be joining Adam in transporting concrete for deposit within the forms, as the first batch proved that the mixture worked as expected.

Adam walked over to him. "I'm guessing this would progress more quickly if we built more forms."

Will glanced at him. "Possibly. It looks to be working well right now, but I'd rather build one section at a time. If we find a flaw, if the mix doesn't harden enough, if there are air pockets... I'd rather have to redo one section, not the entire wall."

Arthur glared at Adam, and Will recognized the agony of agreeing with an adversary. "We're going to lose a lot of time waiting for the first section to harden before we decide if this material works."

"Sometimes, Arthur, you simply need to be patient. Rushing something can produce far worse results, and far more rework, than simply working through everything with patience." Will flicked his eyes toward the overhead aqueduct system, and Arthur muttered under his breath.

"But..." Adam and Arthur both looked toward him. "I think it's correct to say that we should know if the mix works with this first section. If we're

satisfied, then we can ramp up the production schedule. So... I agree. Let's construct more of the forms, but we won't use them right away. Once we're convinced the first section is strong, then we'll set up larger sections of wall forms and really crank up the production of the concrete." He paused, looking thoughtful.

"I already recognize that look," Adam said. He waved his hands at the men. "Pay attention, men. When Will looks like that... he's going to think of something impossible that proves to be so simple in the end that you wonder why you didn't think of it."

The men laughed, and Will grinned. "Nothing yet, Adam. Just wondering what *else* we can build once the wall system is done. But there's time enough to worry about that."

That was a partial truth. Will had wanted to perfect the concrete, and the strategically important walls provided the ideal opportunity to do so. They'd torn out the remnants of the previous walls still embedded in the ground, dug trenches several feet deep around the revised perimeter of the villages, and started preparing the forms, a series of tasks that had taken several weeks. Will had "experimented" with the formula for concrete using material available to him, with the proper formula provided via his paper scroll computer. Will suspected that knowing the correct formula for a material with little or no usage in much of the world in the eleventh century would be suspicious, and so he'd just speculated about the potential of a mix of water and gravel as a building material. The trick had been to create the cement mix that would cause the mixture to solidify into something strong and stable as it dried. He'd very publicly tried many incorrect mixtures before following the recipe on the computer exactly.

He still wasn't certain he'd gotten it exactly right, and was genuinely worried that the wall would collapse when they pulled the forms away. Would the walls withstand brisk winds that whipped through the dense forest? Would they handle the expansion and contraction that came with changing temperatures?

Will didn't know the answers to those questions, but he recognized that Arthur and Adam were correct. They couldn't simply build a small section and wait weeks to see the effects. They'd soon lose any momentum with the journeymen, who might take the latest scheduled payment and decide to move on to the next job. They needed to make a quick judgment on the first section, and either tear it down or move on to building the rest of the wall.

"The problem," Will murmured, speaking in a low voice only Adam and

Arthur could hear, “is that we cannot expect to keep this group around long enough to *rebuild* the walls.”

“We can always... encourage the walls to finish drying more quickly than they otherwise might,” Arthur suggested. He glanced at Adam.

Adam smirked. “I’m game. Unless someone has huge concerns about this approach being somehow... unethical.” He offered a pointed glare in Will’s direction.

Will rolled his eyes. “My concern is hardly one of ethics. I’m not sure how artificially drying this wall will affect it. We need to make sure it dries from the *inside* first.”

Adam nodded. “I think we can handle that. Let’s reconvene after the men retire for the evening, then, and make sure we’re able to pull the forms off in the morning.” He chuckled. “Then we can figure out how to make the concrete faster.”

Will smirked back. “Patience is essential here, just like with Arthur’s project.”

When Will had returned to the village following his journey with Hope and Eva, the three men had agreed to take on one specific area of focus in the Aliomenti rebuilding effort. Adam, as the most experienced user of Energy (to Arthur’s knowledge), would focus on developing training methods for new recruits. Will, who had envisioned and directed the construction of the Wheel and water delivery system, would focus on construction, rebuilding the village to accommodate the number of residents and goods production efforts they envisioned. Arthur, who excelled at mobilizing and motivating people, would be in charge of recruiting permanent new residents. Questionable though Arthur’s motives might be, Will and Adam reasoned that their Energy skills meant Arthur couldn’t conspire against them, and the man’s gifts with words couldn’t be denied. Arthur had made periodic visits to neighboring villages and towns, seeking those with deep crafting skills, but also open-minded attitudes that could accept a life of relative isolation in return for the chance to do what few others could ever accomplish.

Arthur’s process wouldn’t pay immediate dividends, in part because they were at least a three day journey by horse from other congregations of people. Arthur suspected that he’d need multiple trips to each location to identify the best candidates, and his blossoming Energy skills would help in that regard. Arthur, as the most junior Energy practitioner, spent time between trips acting as Adam’s first pupil, an arrangement that neither man liked. Adam developed

methods to gauge the volume of Energy Arthur had developed, and tested his ability to perform different tasks. As Arthur's Energy grew, Adam was better able to assess the amount of time it took to reach the necessary Energy levels to perform tasks. Empathy required the least, then Telepathy, and then Telekinesis. Adam didn't mention additional skills, but Arthur was enthralled at the possibilities those three abilities promised.

With the break finally over, Adam and Arthur resumed their efforts to transport the current batch of concrete to the wall forms, while Will and two of the journeymen worked on stirring up the next batch of concrete. They repeated the process, interrupted periodically by Will adding the makeshift rebar spikes into the mix, and by nightfall, they'd completed pouring the first wall.

The workers retired for the evening, but Will, Adam, and Arthur stayed outside, explaining that they would be standing guard, just as they'd done each night since the workers arrived. Once the sounds from the former Schola building suggested the men had entered a deep state of slumber, the trio focused their Energy on the concrete, attempting to heat the mixture up from the inside, evaporating the moisture, and enabling the concrete to settle and harden into its permanent form.

Once their work was complete, the men fell asleep under the stars, a wave of Energy surrounding them for warmth and protection. Will, as he had each previous night, elected to spread a protective dome of nanos around all three of them as well, resisting the temptation to use the tiny machines to nibble bite marks into the skin of the two men nearby, men who had done so much to annoy him and hurt others. He knew both must survive into the future, though, and that one of them would become a close friend. Such a relationship seemed impossible in this time.

In the morning, the journeymen they'd hired as cooks prepared their meal, and while they waited the trio led the way to the wall, making a show of testing the structure for solidity, declaring to their great surprise that it seemed solid, and announced that they'd pull the forms off as soon as they finished eating. The excitement was palpable, and everyone wolfed down their breakfast and made their way to the southernmost point in the village, the spot where the new concrete wall structure began.

They wedged iron bars between the wood forms and the concrete, levering the wood away from the wall. There was some stickiness, for the wood and concrete had adhered as the mixture had dried. Will made a note to the carpenters that they'd need to add a substance to prevent the concrete from

adhering on future forms, or they'd need to recreate the wood structures each time they poured a new section due to the damage. After thirty minutes they'd pulled the wood completely off the concrete wall, which stood, shining and gray under the bright morning sunlight. Will walked over and began tapping the surface, listening for any hollow spots or any sections which remained soft, and Adam and Arthur joined as well as they circled the wall to test the structure.

At last, they assembled the eager workers before them. The trio exchanged glances, and Will turned to address the men.

He waited for the silence to become total, and then pronounced his assessment. "It worked."

The roar was contagious, and the three men, often at odds, joined in the cheers and the back slaps of triumph as they celebrated their next technological breakthrough.

PLANNING

1022 A.D.

Once the hoopla had died down, the carpenters set to work repairing the damaged forms, coating the inside with an oily substance to prevent the concrete from adhering. The metal workers spent time sawing off the protruding ends of the rebar spikes on the side of the wall facing the interior of the village. “I think we could use the metal spikes as a weapon of deterrence,” Will noted, when asked why they weren’t trimming the ends on the outside. “Any who try to charge or scale these walls will wish they’d done otherwise when they impale themselves.”

This was met with roars of laughter. Will wondered if they realized any of them could be the ones charging the walls in the future.

They started assembling the next batch of forms, and Will and Adam focused on preparing two mixes of concrete this time, for they were going to pour two additional sections this day. They measured out the ingredients and poured them into the giant earthenware mixing bowls they’d had a potter create, and spent the next several hours stirring the mix in a rotation. When the forms were up and the ends sealed off, they began the process of transporting the concrete mix once more, filling the forms in with the thick, soupy mixture.

As the earthenware pots were emptied, Will overheard one of the men grumbling about the need to carry the buckets of concrete from the well all the way to the southern wall.

“That’s a great point,” Will said. He clapped the man who’d made the observation on the shoulder, startling the man, who looked frightened at having been overheard. “Let’s take the time tomorrow morning to figure out a way to

fix that.”

The men did just that, constructing sturdy platforms with wheels that could be moved around the interior of the village as necessary, enabling the concrete mixing to occur within a few yards of the target walls. They needed fewer men to transport the buckets in this fashion, and they had the potter—who had been aiding with the cooking and concrete stirring—start to make additional earthenware stirring pots. If they needed fewer men to transport the concrete, they could dedicate more to stirring and thereby fill an even greater number of wall sections each day.

With the construction project operating smoothly, Arthur decided to leave on a recruiting trip. “I think I have a couple who will likely return with me this time,” Arthur said. “They were very interested in what I was talking about, and I was able to *sense* that they’d be trustworthy with our special advances.”

Arthur liked to brag about his new abilities in any manner he could; his emphasis on the word *sense* was one of the means of displaying his arrogance. Will was tempted to turn invisible or teleport in front of Arthur, merely to put the man in his place, but felt that would be its own form of bragging. “I hope so. We need to start growing our permanent numbers soon. The journeymen won’t stay forever, and they’re costing us each quite a bit of coin. It’s worth it given the progress we’re making, of course.”

Adam nodded. “Go, Arthur. We’ll manage here. There should be a horse available for your usage.”

With a nod, Arthur left them.

Adam turned toward Will. “At some point, you need to give me the directions to make my *own* journey, Will.”

Will sighed. Adam had wanted to know where Hope and Eva were living, and knew that Will had spent the past year not on a private journey, but rather secreting the two women away in a far-off spot, well outside the potential range of Arthur’s curious ears. He knew the distance must be great, for Will never inquired as to where Arthur was traveling. If the man had been anywhere near the trail the three of them had taken after the “deaths” and Will’s departure, Adam knew Will would do everything he could to steer the man on another path.

“Adam, the important thing is that they are safe and they are well. They need us to avoid interfering with their lives, because they’re going to need to spend a significant amount of time away from us, at least until...”

“Until Arthur dies,” Adam muttered. Will hadn’t mentioned that he, Eva, and Hope were no longer subject to that particular affliction, and that both Arthur

and Adam would become immortal as well. At some point, a time that Will didn't relish, he'd need to introduce both Adam and Arthur to the ambrosia fruit, sealing his own fate to deal with both men for centuries.

"He's too stubborn to die," Will muttered in reply, and Adam couldn't help but laugh.

They spent the rest of the day mixing the concrete, filling the forms, and placing the rebar spikes in the mixture for stability. With the distance between concrete mixer and wall form now greatly reduced, they were able to fill the walls to the top more quickly than they had the day before, when they'd filled only one form.

The men were happy when the wall forms were dubbed full, though they had excess concrete remaining. At Will's suggestion, the carpenters formed a large square box of wood, coating it with the same oily substance used on the wall forms, and poured the remaining concrete inside. With the mixture smoothed over, Will printed the word *ALIOMENTI* in the concrete using a sharpened stick.

"This will be the cornerstone of one of our buildings," he announced. "I don't know what form that building will take, but the first major structure we build will use this block."

It would be far more durable than the wooden sign he had shattered just over a year before.

Once the evening meal was completed, Will told Adam that he was going for a walk. Adam nodded, but a shrewd look covered his face. Adam certainly suspected that Will's walk would involve a destination Adam would find extremely interesting.

Will walked south, toward the part of the forest where he'd first arrived in the eleventh century, making sure the entire time that he wasn't being followed. Once he'd traveled for about a mile, well past the possible range Adam could sense Energy usage, he teleported into his cave, three miles to his north.

Once he arrived, he climbed out of the opening, into the lush underbrush and thick tree canopy. He marveled as always as the enhanced oxygen supply energized him physically, and he began a brief Energy exchange with the wildlife, recharging himself. He then walked a few hundred yards farther north, where a small pocket of strange trees grew, and exchanged Energy with them as well. The ambrosia trees were growing well, and already he saw seeds and fruit forming near the leaves. It wouldn't be long before he'd be able to pick the fruit and start his examination, attempting to unravel the riddle Ambrose had long ago

deciphered.

He knew that it was *possible* to reverse the sterility effects of the fruit with current technology, for Ambrose had done so. If Will had figured out the secret, though, it wasn't something he'd shared widely. When the Hunters had assaulted him in 2030 outside his home, they'd been shocked that anyone had been able to "reverse the protocols," which Will now believed involved taking prepared rations of ambrosia fruit, morange, and zirple. Perhaps they'd identified additional benefits of repeated consumption, for the residents of the Ambrosia forest had made it clear that a singular act of consumption was sufficient to confer the "benefits" of the fruit. That didn't stop them from eating additional servings of the succulent fruit on a regular basis, however.

He suspected this would be a project he'd continue for the remainder of the time he had until his future, younger self met Hope. How close would it be, the discovery of the reversal process, to the time when they needed to ensure that Josh was on the way? Would the reversal be maintained long enough to ensure Angel's arrival as well, or would he or Hope need to go through the reversal process—whatever it might be—a second time?

He glared at the tree, innocent though it seemed, and seethed at the lifetime of hardship it had bestowed on Hope and on him. The only positive was that he knew that they would be together or in contact throughout the process, though she might be a thousand miles or more away.

He reached out his thoughts to her, stretching his mind out to the distant city of Healf on the shores of the Mediterranean Sea. The mental journey to Abreca had seemed simple and short, a minor expenditure of Energy. The connections he'd made with her in Healf had left him thoroughly drained. Long distance telepathy was more Energy-intensive than he'd suspected.

It was several moments before he located her mind and indicated a desire to speak to her. Yet she was sleeping, and he dared not wake her. In their infrequent conversations, discussions that always ended long before he was ready, she'd noted that she and Eva were constantly besieged by new patients. The plague had spread to a handful of nearby cities, and word had circulated of the two women with the white hair who alone had the ability to eliminate the illness and reverse the symptoms. They did not lack for matters to occupy their time, nor did they lack money. They stored excess money in a hidden cave outside the city, for they'd detected thoughts in healthy and sickly alike indicating that potential theft was always a possibility. They lived simply, avoiding any indication that they were becoming wealthy, eschewing fine dresses or jewelry. Their only

extravagance was a relative abundance of meat in their daily diet, a method of eating which shocked most of their neighbors. The standard diet of the era and locale was one based heavily upon vegetables and roots, and meat was a rare luxury.

The two women spent time each morning journeying to the Great Sea only a few miles distant, wading into the waters and repeating the bathing ritual they'd learned and grown accustomed to during their time in the original Aliomenti village. Hope told him that the waters were much warmer, and they found the process far less refreshing and invigorating than the baths in the cold waters of the Halwende. They'd return, eat a morning meal, and treat patients until sundown, when they'd eat again before retiring for the evening.

He felt horribly deprived at the inability to talk to her that day. Rather than sulk, though, he continued to work on building his Energy stores. He wanted to be able to teleport to her side, instantly, but at present he knew he could not travel such a distance. He had repeatedly flown farther and farther from the cave and then teleported back, expanding his distance over time. It was his own measuring stick to track his growth, and he'd not be satisfied until he could reach her anywhere on Earth.

Still somewhat deflated, he walked back to the village, looking at the forms of the two wall sections, trying to picture the future village layout. The success with the concrete enabled him to consider far more elaborate buildings than anything he might have considered before, when he could only consider wood-based structures. Concrete would enable him to think about multi-story buildings or subterranean rooms. He thought about the future Aliomenti Headquarters, a massive building in which the aboveground floors were "human" facing, the location where the group's business interests were managed. The floors underground, however, were a place where Aliomenti could practice and perfect their Energy skills, or work on technology centuries ahead of anything available to the general population. He found the setup appealing, outside the knowledge that any advances made within the lower levels would be denied to those working on the upper levels. It was a major point of contention with Arthur from the moment he'd arrived in the original village four years earlier. Will wanted the knowledge perfected and then disseminated to the world; Arthur wanted it kept only for those accepted into the Aliomenti group and lifestyle.

Clearly, it was a disagreement that they would never resolve.

Still, that future gave him some direction here in the past. He walked into the village proper and looked at the space between the remnants of the Shops and

the southern wall, and began pacing off the distance. Could they successfully construct a large, multi-story concrete building in the eleventh century in the planned space?

The area seemed adequate to fit a two-story building with a potential basement level. Will decided that they'd build the basement after the aboveground floors, after they'd perfected the process they were undertaking with creating the walls and transferred that knowledge to creating buildings. If they built it correctly, they could fully seal the basement area. Access would be limited to those who could teleport, or those who could gain the favor of one who could teleport them to the lower levels. It was the ultimate security; they needn't worry about practicing Energy techniques and being caught if only those so enabled could even reach the training level.

Even excluding the future underground area, constructing a multi-story building would be a great challenge. They'd build the main floor of the building with concrete, and construct metal beams to use to support the ceiling. How much weight could the support beams he'd envisioned support, though? Would they support enough weight to handle a second story? He shook his head, wishing he'd spent time learning more about the math and science behind engineering, since he'd be able to answer his questions with that knowledge.

A sudden inspiration struck. He didn't need to build the subterranean training area under a building; he just needed to build it underground. In fact, he'd recommend building it close to the Ealdor River, near where the Wheel turned eternally, dumping in the fresh water so eagerly used by the villagers once, and now by the journeymen. He thought they might find additional uses for the Wheel if they could isolate such research below ground. They could also build additional Wheels, if necessary, to aid any projects they'd want to research.

Those would be future projects. The next project, after the city walls were erected, would involve constructing a two-story concrete building for living quarters. It would mimic the single room layout of the original, but would use concrete rather than wood as the primary construction material. *Try to burn that down, Adam*, he thought to himself.

Will grabbed a handful of wooden stakes, and began hammering the stakes into the ground where he projected the future residence building would stand.

Adam walked over to him. "What are you doing? Shouldn't we be focusing on drying out the new wall segments?"

"I'm thinking of what we should build next," Will replied. "And if it's the size I think it will be, then we'll need to move the exterior walls out a bit more."

“What are you thinking of building?”

“The concrete is significantly stronger than the wood we’ve always used for construction. That strength means that we can consider buildings we could never consider before. I want our next construction project to feature a single large building, concrete for the most part, which will serve as our place of lodging. It will be some time before the walls are done, of course, but it is never too early to begin planning the next step.”

“The walls won’t be finished for months, and then it will be wintertime,” Adam noted. “Why worry about the next thing now? Why concern ourselves about the future?”

Will smiled. “We’re going to *create* the future, Adam. And that means we need to create it in a manner that is exciting and motivates us. And we need to know about it now, because the original walls would not be large enough to handle this building. So I’m pushing the walls farther out.”

Adam looked thoughtful. “That makes sense. Anything else I should know about this building?”

“It will have two levels, with staircases providing access between floors.”

“Wait,” Adam said. His jaw was agape. “We’re going to construct a building, out of this concrete you’ve taught us about, and... you’re going to put a second level on top of the first?”

“Exactly.”

“That’s impossible,” Adam said, shaking his head. “Any other crazy ideas I should know about?”

“I have a lot of crazy ideas,” Will replied, grinning. “And if I’m right about one of them, we’ll never worry about the chill of winter again.”

This time, Adam looked *very* interested.

HEAT

1025 A.D.

Three years later

“**Y**ou can’t seriously think that’s going to work.”
Will laughed. “Arthur, why would you think it won’t work?
Everything else has.”

Arthur scowled. “It just seems so... strange.”

“Strange? This from a man who started teleporting last week?”

“That’s strange, too. It terrifies me. What if I start to teleport... and I don’t reappear?”

Will couldn’t resist a smirk, and slapped Arthur on the back. “Don’t tease me like that, Arthur.”

Adam, who walked by at that moment, couldn’t help but laugh out loud.

The concrete walls gleamed around them. They’d made it a point to keep the walls scrubbed down on the inside, a symbol of the high expectations and demands they placed upon themselves. It was a task delegated to their newest residents, the neophytes, those with minimal Energy stores and training. They’d practice projecting Energy, a precursor of telekinesis and other Energy skills, by blasting dirt and debris off the walls.

The village had grown over the past three years, since the days when they’d brought in journeymen to help frame the concrete walls they’d ostensibly use to secure themselves from outside attack. The walls were not there for physical security, however. They served to hide the true secrets of the Aliomenti, secrets that extended beyond the strange, stone-like material that formed many of buildings in the village.

Will pointed to the dirt. “We’ve established that warmer air moves up, not down.” He gestured toward the large residence building dominating the southern third of the village. “That’s why we pipe the hot air in through the bottom floor, and then let it rise up to the top.”

“Right, I get that,” Arthur replied. “But why would you even want to heat the common walkways? Or create a space where the earth remains warm during the winter?”

“We don’t want to lose out on the opportunity to produce goods during the winter,” Will replied. “When we’ve visited other cities with our goods, they’ve always been desperate for anything of quality as the snows start to melt. We usually have a bit, simply because we produce items more quickly than other cities or villages do. If we can actually produce throughout the winter, we’d have a tremendous storehouse of goods to sell and plenty of highly motivated people looking to buy.”

That part was true. Most cities and villages in this area of the world went into a human equivalent of hibernation from November through March. Bitter cold and heavy snowfall prevented any type of travel and limited the ability of anyone to farm or produce any goods for trade. If the Aliomenti could be the sole exception to that rule, they could make even greater profits through trading than they’d ever generated in the past.

“And,” Will added, “keeping the grounds warm will melt the snows before they can accumulate, and we’ll be able to move around far more easily than we do today. The warmth should enable our master craftsmen to continue working regardless of the outside temperature or snowfall.”

Arthur shrugged, a mannerism he adopted when uncertain of how to attack another’s idea. “And why do we need to have the winter garden?”

Will had postulated the idea several months earlier. They had to finish harvests in October and store sufficient grain and vegetables to last the village for four months or more, until the snows melted, the grounds thawed, and they could plant new crops. Will suggested his “heated walkway” idea, and added that doing so would provide a small amount of “farm” space within the walls, earth that never froze and therefore would enable them to grow their most important crops year-round. The zirple root and morange berries were well-known at this point, and Will wanted to add some “decorative” trees as well to add some color inside the walls. Those decorative trees would be the ambrosia. And if they structured it correctly, they could continue to grow a modest variety and quantity of vegetables to supplement that which was stored in their silos.

They'd need to enhance their food production efforts in any way they could, for their numbers continued to grow. They'd made it a rule to recruit ten new members each year, and thus far the experiment had produced an overwhelmingly male population. Arthur's original twenty had grown to fifty now, and there were only five women in the midst. Will suspected Arthur's open misogyny would cause problems, and he was proven correct.

After a number of fights over disagreements around companionship, an inevitable consequence of the numbers and ratios of people in the village, Arthur finally relented. He agreed to look to add more women to his recruiting trips the following year, though it was clear he didn't consider it important, whether for companionship, the variety of viewpoints, or the skilled craftswomen they could add to their team.

"It gets complicated when there are so few women around," Adam complained. "Nine men want to kill the tenth, for he's the one the woman wants."

Arthur looked disinterested. "We have to focus on bringing in the best craftspeople and farmers and potential Energy students," he replied. "I'll bring women when I find those who are capable of meeting those requirements."

"Perhaps you need to consider recruiting women even if you *don't* think they're the best candidates," Adam said, continuing the train of thought. "We're having quite a few arguments and fights because of the lack of women in this village; there's no reason not to correct the problem when it's relatively easy to do so."

"It's not that difficult, Arthur, unless you're trying to ignore what's in front of you," Will replied, his tone more scathing than he'd intended. "The women were a critical part of our initial population, were our best at Trading and metalwork and—"

"And look at where *that* got us," Arthur hissed. "Let me repeat: I'll grow the village head count with the best people. And yes, Will, I will ensure that I am not excluding women."

Adam's original comment had struck a chord with Will, for it reminded him that it had been nearly three months since he'd talked with Hope. It wasn't possible for them to meet in the Aliomenti village. Arthur believed Hope and Eva dead at the hands of the original Aliomenti, and neither trusted Arthur not to try to correct the error should he ever discover it. They'd only be free of that concern when either Arthur, or the two of them, were dead. Since Will knew all of them were still alive ten centuries hence, they reasoned that the only option

available was for Hope and Eva to stay far away from the Aliomenti.

Arthur frowned. “Is the problem that we have too *few* women, or that we have too *many*? I’d suggest that the men consider traveling outside this village if they are having problems on that front, rather than try to correct the issue by degrading the pool of people here.”

Will arched an eyebrow. “The women here are wonderful. Arielle has probably progressed more quickly than any of the men here. Why would we deprive ourselves of anyone with talent like that?”

“Despite what you think, Will, the issue is that women like Arielle are an incredibly rare exception. The women in the villages I visit are rarely like that. They are too timid and too deeply trained not to think or express opinions or strive to grow. In the rare instances that they are *not* like that, they are typically the daughters of nobles, have received some type of education, and as such are far better able to accept the new reality we tell them about—and those women rarely want to leave. You may not like my opinions, but the reality is that the pool of women we can consider, truly *do not* meet our standards.”

Will sighed. “I don’t like your opinions, Arthur, and that’s no secret. I’ve not been traveling much and I don’t know what the women are like in other cities and villages these days, but don’t let your opinions cloud your assessments. I still *strongly* encourage you to work on balancing our numbers here. But we need to figure out how to stop the fighting, and that’s not something you can correct overnight. Perhaps we need to schedule group visits to nearby villages for a week or two at a time.”

Adam looked thoughtful. “That’s a good idea, actually. And we don’t need to promote such trips as being for just that purpose, either. *All* of the people here practice different crafts and create goods, and all could stand to visit their future customers and understand exactly what they are looking for, and why. In the process of learning better what they should build, they can deal with other concerns as well.”

Will nodded. “I think there’s a lot of merit to that point. We needn’t explain the true motivation to the men as we send them out. Simply explaining that it’s an opportunity to better learn what specific designs or colors or level of decoration are desired by customers is sufficient. If they pursue other options as well... then so be it.”

Arthur’s idea and Adam’s follow-up point were both valid and addressed the key points and areas of contention. Will wanted to make sure that such a plan was implemented and communicated to the residents as quickly as possible.

“We should start socializing the idea. Everyone picks the group of five they’d like to travel with, and we schedule sending them out. We have enough people here to perform the daily chores even if we’re short a handful for a week at a time. Their Energy skills are improving to the point that we can accomplish far more with fewer people. Individual trips outside the village are a good thing; eventually, if only trading specialists leave, we’re going to have a lot of very powerful Energy users wondering why they’re being held prisoner inside these walls.”

Arthur’s face suggested that he wasn’t opposed to such retention methods, but he nodded his assent. They weren’t having any retention issues, though, so it was a moot point. The benefits of being part of the group were apparent long before new residents learned of and unleashed their Energy skills. The comforts and advances found in the village were too impressive to make departure a reasonable option.

They’d built the underground furnace during the previous warm season, and it had proved to be a success. It was by no means as efficient as the central heating and temperature control systems Will had grown accustomed to in the twenty-first century. But the insulation from the concrete and the warm air rising through vents in the floors had made winters far more comfortable for everyone. In fact, some had complained of being *too* warm during the cold winter weather. In one notable incident, several of those complaining of excessive warmth were seized, carried outside the walls, and tossed into heaping snow drifts, where buckets of water were dumped on them. Thankfully, the spirits in the village were high, coin purses were heavy, and bellies were full, and such frivolity was treated as nothing more than fun by all involved.

When they’d built the underground furnace, they’d originally envisioned it to serve as a secondary kiln for the potters, present and future. However, they’d built it to handle a far more massive fire and heat capacity than the one that existed above ground. Will’s concept of leaving the fires going at all times, and using the excess heat to warm the residence building during frigid winter months, was first mocked and later praised. He’d asked the metal smiths to forge the connecting bit of ductwork, which attached directly to the kiln, so that the heat could be channeled up into the building. He’d also asked them to include a second branch of ductwork heading in the opposite direction, away from the residence hall toward the main part of the village. That portion was currently sealed off, but Will now intended to make use of it.

He had the villagers dig trench lines, starting just above the underground

furnace and expanding out through the village. The trench lines ran down the center of the primary walking paths, and he'd had more than a few glares sent his way as they maneuvered their way into the Shop areas. While they appreciated what he was trying to do, few seemed willing to dodge trench diggers in their workspace to achieve that vision.

They began laying the metal ductwork nearest the Shops to enable the workers to resume their work schedules as quickly as possible. With the ductwork in place near the Shops, they worked from the ends of the trenches farthest from the furnace and worked back, joining the tentacles together until a single branch ended at the furnace.

The ductwork was built in a different manner than what they'd created to carry heat into the building. In the former case, they wanted no heat to escape the ducts until it reached the residence building for distribution. For heating the walkways, they needed the heat to seep out as it traversed the length of the ductwork. They therefore built the sides and bottoms to be thicker and more insulated, while the tops of the ducts were thin. They covered the ducts with a few inches of dirt, and were finally ready to test the system.

"This should be interesting," Arielle said. "Do you think the heat will make it all the way to the ends of the trenches?"

Will grimaced. "That's my largest concern. We're going to have heat leaking out the entire length of the ducts, and it's likely that it will run out before it hits the end. But," he added, grinning, "if the process works other than the heat fading before it reaches the ends, we can always build additional underground kilns at strategic points. That will give us more fires to maintain, but it's still far fewer than we would need to maintain in everyone's individual room."

They lit the fire and removed the seal blocking the heat from heading away from the residence hall, enabling the warmth to spread. To Will's surprise, they were able to feel the warmth beneath their feet to an appreciable level nearly 30 yards away, and to a minimal degree, at the Shops. As expected, they noticed little or no change in temperature at the far ends.

"Still," Arielle said, "that's better than what we had before. I think people are going to be very happy when the snows come this year." As one of the best metalworkers in the village, Arielle had created much of the ductwork now running under the village. She and Will had discussed creating a manual seal that could halt the walkway heat and pipe all of the warmth from the furnace to the residence hall if necessary.

"I agree," Will replied. "And they'll be extremely happy when we're able to

sell a huge inventory of finished goods we've completed during the winter to all of the cities and towns that spent the time indoors and away from their crafts. But we'll need to keep track of the impact of the heat levels in the residence hall when winter arrives. People will be OK with snow by the gates, but they won't be okay shivering in their rooms when they were complaining of excessive heat last year. That's when that seal will become important."

Will then focused on the next part of the project, which involved setting up miniature gardens throughout the village, leveraging the new heat system to enable an extended growing system. Since the greatest amount of heat would come from directly above the underground furnace, he'd recommend growing their most critical vegetation there: morange and zirple, supplemented with fragrant fruit trees to provide decoration. Little would the others know the importance that fruit would play in their lives, for he would circulate the idea that the fruit was likely poisonous, something they could only verify if someone would volunteer to take a bite. The experience with the girl previously known as Elizabeth, with the search that ended with zirple and morange, told him that was highly unlikely to ever occur, and that was fine with him. He had no interest in enlightening any of them to the truth until it was necessary.

There was no reason to help Arthur start growing his immortal army before it was time.

BUNKER

1029 A.D.

Four years later

Will teleported into the cave. To the best of his knowledge, it remained undiscovered; surprising given the relative longevity of the current incarnation of Aliomenti. Then again, even the most senior Aliomenti had only modest capabilities in the area of teleportation. None of them had any reason to practice Energy-based spelunking, either, since they weren't trying to hide their actual skill level from the other Aliomenti as Will continually did. Will needed to keep the actual extent of his skills a closely guarded secret, for he'd learned that too many in this era didn't handle power well.

In the twenty-third century, Adam had been stunned at Will's technique for rapid Energy growth, using a feedback effect generated by willingly giving Energy to other living things and receiving a greater quantity of Energy back in return. He had elected not to share the technique in this time for that reason; if Adam didn't know about it by then, then nobody else did either, except for Hope. No one had told him of the technique; giving without concern of getting something in return was simply in his nature. You couldn't be told that you should choose to share your gifts; being told that giving would result in getting more than you gave meant people would engage in the activity with an expectation of payback, not for the good it could do. It wasn't an attitude you could teach; it was something you were.

His own growth in Energy had been matched, thousands of miles away, by a similar growth in Hope's skills. They had grown stronger in their ability to

communicate telepathically, and at this point it was nearly effortless, much like dialing a mobile phone. The most demonstrable benefit of their rapidly growing Energy stores was their ability to teleport extensive distances, enabling them to cover the distances between them in far fewer hops, with far less fatigue, than when they'd started their respective paths to the future. They had located a city between their current homes where they could meet, face-to-face, for short periods of time. They would both teleport and meet outside the city, before entering together in Energy-supplied disguises. Will's teleportation journey would begin with several short range hops first, before the longer hops needed to reach their joint destination; he had to concern himself with the possibility that someone—Adam, Arthur, or any of the others—might detect the huge bursts of Energy that arose from such travel, and took steps to mitigate that risk. They'd find a tavern and sit down for a long meal together, sharing stories of their time apart, reveling in each new breakthrough, and simply enjoying each other's presence.

Those times were difficult, though. They both recognized the other as their spouse, not some random stranger, or someone they were dating or courting. Both wished to marry, to simply refuse to wait the thousand years until a younger, naive Will Stark would meet Hope. But they'd agreed after much discussion to postpone that next step lest the future be irrevocably altered, and through the years it had become a painful subject for discussion, one they'd finally agreed to keep off-limits until the time was right.

Hope reported that she and Eva were working to gradually age themselves. Hope was, now, in her mid-twenties and she looked more like his twenty-first century memories of her each time they met. She'd officially been twenty-eight at the time of the fire that had destroyed their home and initiated the entire adventure through time he was presently living, and her actual age and visible age were coming into closer proximity.

"We're starting to scout out cities several hundred miles away," Hope told him. "In a few years, we'll need to move on, before people start to wonder why we age so slowly." They wanted to be far enough away that none of the people in Healf would have a chance to run into them. That would prove disastrous, for Eva and Hope would need to rejuvenate their appearances upon arriving at the new city, and then allow themselves to visibly age again. If a resident of Healf saw them looking younger than they did at the time the two women left the city, they would find their anonymity and secret very much at risk of exposure.

Likewise, they didn't want to move closer to the Aliomenti village, for if

their healing exploits became well-known, word might very well reach Arthur. They still had no interest in alerting the man that two of the women he had thought dead still lived and thrived thousands of miles away. As the Aliomenti prospered and grew their wealth and power, they'd start to expand their trading territory. It was best for the two of them to move farther east. She promised to send "pictures" telepathically of the new cities they scouted. After their meal, they left the city together, found a secluded spot, and reminded each other to eliminate their respective disguises. After a warm embrace, they each returned home.

Will smiled as he returned to the cave, as he always did after spending time in her presence. He glanced around, making certain that his most secret supplies were not disturbed, and then he teleported to within a few hundred yards of the village.

Several of the more senior members were outside the village that day, and rather than enter the open gates, he instead walked the path to the Ealdor River, where a massive hole had been dug near the shoreline. The villagers had decided, after many years, to build the underground bunker he'd recommended, a bunker that could be entered in no manner other than teleportation. It would be there that they'd learn and train for their most advanced capabilities, and perform research into technologies heretofore unknown in this era and location in the world.

Arthur was there watching as well, and Will wandered toward him. Arthur noticed Will's approach and turned toward him.

"Remind me again why we need to have an underground bunker with no actual point of entry?"

"In part, it's motivation to continue to improve," Will replied. "Some of the older members have become quite proficient at the most basic skills, like telepathy and telekinesis. They aren't trying to grow any more. They just make their products, head out to sell and have fun, and return. We know, though, that there are more advanced skills, and among those skills I'd include teleportation. People are often heavily motivated to achieve when they feel they'll be denied something if they don't."

Arthur considered briefly, then nodded. "I'll grant you that, though it's hardly a universal motivator. What else?"

"As isolated as we are, people do travel along the rivers. They do ride on and walk along the roads a few miles away. If we have a few residents get into a heated argument, or even decide to engage in some raucous Energy-based fun,

the sights and sounds of Energy use might draw unwanted attention. We all have our reasons for wanting to maintain our privacy here, and our people getting aggressive with Energy usage won't help."

Arthur nodded, thoughtful. "But if they have a place where they can do that with complete privacy, without having to worry about holding back..."

"Then they'll be more inclined to try to improve." Will grinned. "Especially if they have to work hard just to get into that place."

Arthur looked thoughtful, gave a brief nod to Will, and headed back toward the village.

Arthur had initially been the most vocal opponent of the bunker. In a move that Will considered ironic, the man who had once kept a village inspired by dreams of supernatural abilities now wished to focus on monetary growth. Will suspected that Arthur's stance was based on something more basic and personal, not a desire for fiscal focus. Arthur feared above all else a loss of control, a personality trait Will had unearthed over the past seven years. The teleportation process included a brief moment in time in which you ceased to exist, in any form or place, and in that instant you had no control over your body or your very existence. Energy skill was something Arthur couldn't control in others, couldn't manipulate in them, couldn't suppress in them. His eyes and demeanor were unchanged from the years in which he tried to destroy the growing influence of Eva's Traders in the village, seeking to poison the minds of others against those he perceived as personal threats. Yet with Energy, there was no turning back. Once new recruits received their initial allotment of morange berries from him, once they began regular doses of zirple that he supplied, his ability to forever control them and forge them to his will was gone.

Arthur was also beginning to worry about his own mortality. Though he remained in robust health, he was now in his mid-fifties. In Will's day, a man of Arthur's years would be considered middle-aged and one in position for prime leadership positions, but in this era he was viewed as an old man. Their recruits were uniformly in their mid-twenties or early thirties, and though they offered Arthur respect due to his stature in the community, none of them resisted the occasional age-related barb. Will, whom they believed to be in his early thirties, was seen as much more of a peer. Will's obvious prominence was grating to Arthur and, combined with his sense of his impending demise, he realized that his dream of world conquest was one he'd never achieve.

Will dreaded the fact that he'd need to be the one to make the realization of that dream a possibility once more.

He wandered over to the giant Wheel. It was one of the few edifices left unchanged since the days when he'd tried to show a stubborn group of men and women that they could, in fact, do something new, something they believed impossible. The incredulity when he and the Traders had, by themselves, moved the massive wheel up the ramps and onto the support beams was a look he'd never forget, and his satisfaction with the accomplishment was genuine. Today, nearly a decade after he'd arrived in the eleventh century, it was one of the few reminders left of those earliest days.

The Wheel would change as well. Will had plans for it, plans that would enable the Aliomenti to make their next evolutionary step toward financial and technological prominence. Now was not the time for that, however.

He wandered through the forest again, finding it strange that there was so little for him to do, and the sensation of restlessness was growing. Their numbers had grown, and the newcomers earned the right to consume the morange berries only after they'd been part of the village for a year, performing the most grueling and unpleasant of chores, and working the most difficult construction projects. They also watched more senior villagers undergo what Will would come to know as the Purge, though without the internal nanobots used in Will's case. Still, the formula used to accelerate the elimination of contaminants that blocked the formation, sensation, and control of Energy, was quite effective, far more so than the zirple-only route prescribed years earlier by Roland. Those senior enough to watch the initiation process were given a taste of what that temporary pain and agony would enable them to do, and to date, no one had left after seeing those demonstrations. Arthur had recruited well.

Will moved past the double gravesites of Genevieve and Elizabeth, Arthur's deceased wife and daughter. No one, outside of him and Adam, knew that one of those graves was empty. Arthur had watched them lower Elizabeth into the coffin and seal it shut. Will had, with Adam's assistance, managed to keep Arthur from guessing that he'd been an Energy practitioner since before the men ever met. That was a critical deception, for Arthur was no fool. If he knew Will had been able to teleport dozens of miles away at their first greeting, he might well suspect Will could teleport someone *else* as well. Given that Adam had boasted in the aftermath of his inferno that he'd controlled the dying villagers, putting them into a state of sleep they could not overcome, it wouldn't be difficult for Arthur to suspect Will might well have done the same with Elizabeth.

Arthur would figure it out someday. Will would deal with it then.

Adam came up behind him, glancing around to be certain they were alone. “How are they?”

Will arched an eyebrow. “What makes you think I know?”

Adam rolled his eyes. “Will, the rest of them may not have the ability yet, but I can tell when an explosive amount of Energy is used nearby. An Energy burst that would coincide with someone teleporting many miles away, or returning here in a similar manner. I can only imagine you have one purpose in mind when that happens. So tell me... how are they?”

Some of his trips involved just a brief visit with Hope. Others, in line with his story of being a traveling merchant, involved him traveling the long distance to Healf to make an appearance and remind the men there that Hope was neither single nor a widow. He typically flew most of the way, for he enjoyed the sensation it provided, and it gave him time to think.

“They’re fine. They’ll move again soon. They don’t like the idea of being too long in one place.”

“Why would they worry, Will? What would make them want to leave a place where they’re well-liked and respected?”

He’d not told Adam about the ambrosia. Like Arthur, Adam would still be alive when Will was born, over nine centuries from now. He’d learn the secrets. For now, though, Will felt it appropriate to withhold that information, and provide instead a partial truth. “They’re afraid of being too successful. They have far better success curing the sick than do other doctors there. People will wonder. They’ve heard a few mutterings of witchcraft. They need to be very careful and, unfortunately, they can’t be careful and still do what they’re trying to do there successfully.”

“Where is *there*, Will? Why won’t you tell me?”

“Have you talked to Eva? You can, you know. Telepathically. You should be able to reach her. Have you tried? Perhaps you can ask her yourself, then, where she might be.”

Adam’s face spoke volumes, but he said nothing.

But Will knew what his silence meant. “You *have* talked to her, haven’t you? You’ve talked to Eva, and she hasn’t told you where they are.”

Adam turned away. “Why doesn’t she want to see me, Will?”

“I think you know exactly why, Adam.”

He shook his head. “No, Will, I don’t think I do. If you’re referring to my handing out of justice several years ago... understand that she knows why I did it, what the true reasons were, and she has no qualms about it. Uneasiness,

perhaps, but it's not something that would keep her from me. No, there's something far deeper than that."

"Perhaps you should try asking *her*, Adam. You know my reasons for not divulging their location. And now that I know Eva has chosen to keep her distance as well, I'm further resolved in not revealing where they are."

Adam looked at the ground, his face registering confusion more than anger. Will watched his face, watched as he muttered the word "Why?" repeatedly, until at last, comprehension dawned on him. It was a truth that registered with him so briefly that his face was almost instantly back to one of confusion, as if he, too, had a secret he wanted to hide from Will.

Adam turned to Will. "I respect your decision, Will, and I suspect that there's a greater reason behind it than even you know. Perhaps even more than Eva knows. I will respect her wishes and not try to find them until such time as they contact me."

Will arched an eyebrow. "What is this, Adam? We've had this conversation many times before, always reaching the same conclusion, and you've always continued to badger me about where they are. Yet suddenly you've realized something, something that makes you not only respect why Eva—not me, *Eva*—wants to keep you away, but agree with her decision. What could possibly make you change so suddenly?"

Adam looked at Will, seeming to be on the verge of explaining something so deep and profound that it would shake Will to his very core, and then he resumed a stoic look. "When it's time, Will, you'll know the answer. But not before. And I'm not sure I'm the right one to tell you."

He turned and walked away, leaving Will baffled as to the meaning of the words.

Will returned to the bunker, where the team was laying the old concrete forms down atop the walls of the vast underground bunker. They'd left the space open, much as if it were a vast underground basement from Will's era, leaving only support posts below. They'd not partitioned the space into rooms yet, preferring to wait until they had further insight into what they'd like to accomplish inside. They knew only that the space would accommodate 30-50 people easily.

The old wall forms would act to support the weight of the concrete being poured atop the walls and support joists, preventing them from having to pour molded concrete slabs that would be moved into place after they hardened. They had no cranes or other heavy equipment capable of hauling such an enormous

weight, and this solution, while imperfect, was the best they could provide. The crews hadn't thought to engage someone like Will to move those completed slabs into place with Energy, and had settled upon a working solution.

Will left, letting the construction process finish on its own. This was one endeavor he need not see through to the end.

Two weeks later, after vigorous rounds of stirring concrete, pouring, smoothing, and Energy-enhanced drying and hardening, the structure was complete. They used shovels to move dirt over the top of the concrete, trusting nature to spread good grass seed through the air and make the covering of the bunker look just like the spaces around it. Will, having designed the structure, was the first to enter. He closed his eyes, used his clairvoyance skills to find a spot inside, and teleported in.

It was completely dark and a bit unnerving. Each footstep echoed. He lit the space with Energy from his hands. His mind began to fill in the openings, picturing rooms for training, tables laden with research tomes, and rooms that could be used for private research. Research like that which he'd be performing.

Research that would enable him to save the lives of his children not yet born, and at the same time save the life of the man who would one day try to kill them.

RESEARCH

1029 A.D.

Three months later

“**S**eriously, could you *please* try to keep it down out there?” Will’s voice was nearly a shout, but it was unlikely that he could be heard above the melee. They’d developed a tournament of sorts, a series of obstacles and head-to-head competition in various Energy skills, as a way to encourage all of the Aliomenti. The bunker had had the intended effect; word that it was a secret club of sorts, with marvels none had ever seen before, had spread, and Will and the other leaders of the village had done nothing to quash the rumors. Those who developed the ability to teleport in on their own were sworn to never reveal the secrets of what went on inside, in part because there was no great secret. It was simply the joy of trying to compete and advance that made access to the bunker so desirable.

The tournaments Adam had developed were exceptionally competitive, and it was that spirit of competition, of defeating fellow Aliomenti in an Energy-based competition, that drove so many to greater heights. The obstacles included guessing a number in Adam’s head (which he would try to shield from them), levitating objects from one point to another, teleporting through a series of points, and then blasting a piece of pottery with Energy from a healthy distance. The first competitor to complete all of the tasks was ruled the winner. The exercise became competitive when the participants realized that playing defense was not only permitted, but encouraged. Competitors would try to blast each other off balance to disrupt timing, or impress thoughts into each other’s heads with incorrect numbers. The mere anticipation of being blasted led more than

one participant to fail the telekinesis test, in which they were required to move a full pitcher of water from one table to another without spilling a drop.

The loser had to mop up the spills.

Will had partitioned off his own research room, a request granted given his seniority in the community and his efforts to bring the bunker into existence. He told them he was researching “nutrition,” explaining that he was trying to determine the best combination of foods to ensure continual Energy growth and general health. In reality, he was spending days trying to penetrate deep into the fruit, skin, and seed of the ambrosia plants he grew near his cave and as “decoration” in the gardens inside the walls. He would occasionally announce that he’d learned that increasing consumption of a certain vegetable had beneficial effects on health, and his recommendations were acted upon as soon as the farmers could adjust their crop schedules.

Yet the fruit proved difficult to crack. What he needed was a twenty-first century laboratory with electron microscopes and other advanced equipment, where he could watch the ambrosia fruit work its way through the human body, watching the impact it had at a cellular level. It must alter the cells of the human body at the most basic level, for the impacts were eternal. He knew he was not aging, and both Hope and Eva had confirmed the same was true for them. Though they weren’t likely to show many signs of aging only seven years after eating the fruit, each of them was convinced it was working. Will was forty-five years old, but looked and felt twenty years younger.

Arthur, on the other hand, looked much older than his fifty-five years. His blond hair had become streaked with gray, and his skin had wrinkled. He’d stopped many of the health rituals he and the original band of slaves had discovered and mastered nearly three decades earlier. Will suspected that much of the health damage was self-inflicted. Arthur was a man who expected to die of old age soon, regardless of his general level of health, and his exterior appearance and health reflected his viewpoint of himself as an old man. His tremendous desire for control, combined with his assumed loss of the battle for his very life, made him an extremely angry, bitter man. He snapped at the villagers for no reason, deriving from their brief looks of terror a sense of the power he’d once enjoyed over the first generation of Aliomenti, the generation that never reached the Promised Land.

Will, thinking of Arthur’s bullying, sighed. He’d have to give Arthur the greatest gift the man could possibly imagine, a gift he’d use to do more than bark at frightened youngsters. But he’d wait as long as he believed possible. He was

in no rush to bring Arthur back from the brink of death.

Adam poked his head into the room, grinning. “Sorry, Will. John just pulled the water out of his pitcher and threw the *water* at Arielle. Not the pottery. The actual drops of water. It was crazy. She threw the whole pitcher at him. Hands behind their backs the whole time. It was...”

Adam broke off, realizing that Will wasn’t listening, and he moved into the small room. “What are you doing?”

Will glanced down at the ambrosia fruit. “Studying this. I think it might be poisonous, and I’m trying to be certain of that. We might need to pull it out of the interior gardens.”

Adam moved into the room, studying the fruit more closely. “I thought that looked familiar. That’s the fruit from the tree we mixed in with the morange and zirple plants?”

Will nodded. “It smells delicious, but I’ve never seen any wild creatures eat it. That usually means there’s something wrong with it. If I can figure out a way to test the effects of the plant, we can make sure. But...” He paused. “I’m just concerned that whoever eats the plant will get sick, or even die. I know I’m not the only one concerned that might be the case, either. Nobody will eat it.”

Adam smiled grimly. “It’d serve Arthur right to be the one to eat it first, after what he did to Elizabeth.”

Will couldn’t argue that point. “I’m trying to see if the juice will damage the wood right now. It’s not a great test for poison, but if it damages the wood it probably isn’t something we want inside our bodies.”

Adam laughed. “I seem to recall the morange berries aren’t exactly pleasant, and yet the impact is rather positive overall.”

Will inclined his head in acknowledgment.

Adam glanced at the ambrosia fruits, thoughtful. “I wonder... is it possible that the more unpleasant a food, the more likely it is to be beneficial to one’s health, and more importantly, to one’s Energy development?”

Will shook his head. “Morange isn’t terribly pleasant, of course. But there’s nothing exceptional about zirple. It’s a bland taste, not something you’d want to eat, but it’s not something that causes great pain.”

Adam nodded. “So something painful unleashes Energy, something bland helps to continually enhance what you’ve unleashed.” He inhaled deeply. “What might a fruit with such a powerful, pleasant aroma unleash?”

Will smiled. “Perhaps just a happy tongue and a full belly? Or perhaps death. Often in life, that which is most pleasing to the senses ends up as the most

dangerous thing you can ever associate with.” He glanced down at the berry. “Perhaps this fruit provides a great gift, but at a terrible price.”

“By whose definition, though? Perhaps the gift is worth the price.”

Will sighed. “I suppose that it’s going to be the case that what one might consider a gift, another might consider a curse.”

Adam looked thoughtful, and then left the room, returning to the melee of the tournament.

Will glanced down at the fruit, thinking. The challenge with this fruit was that Will knew what consumption conferred upon the consumer. And it was true: there would be widely different opinions on whether that which was conferred was a gift or a curse. But the critical item was to ensure that the outcomes were known, and then enable everyone to make their own decisions.

He was also troubled by a comment Adam had made, about making Arthur the one to test the “mystery” fruit, and suffer whatever consequences came from it, consequences most in the village believed would be harmful. The ambrosia tree had been planted by Will, and had not come with the promise of miracles like those passed along via the Travelers. Yet Arthur and Adam, at least, had learned the lesson of the previous village, to proceed with great caution in the face of the unknown, regardless of the source. And so, they’d advised everyone to avoid consuming the fragrant fruit on the decorative trees.

Will had taken the time to show the fruit to each resident, asking if any had seen or eaten it before. None recognized the fruit, and Will became concerned. They had no alternative experiences to fall back on, no one who could identify the fruit as safe or dangerous, and nothing which would give any indication of the immortality and sterility it would actually provide.

Will, of course, could not prove or disprove those claims either. He had only the word of Ambrose and Aina and the others who lived in that forest. Their claims were impossible to prove without the passage of time, for none of the trio had lived long enough to prove the claims of immortality. And, he thought grimly, none of them had had the opportunity to prove the claims of sterility either.

His breath caught in his throat, understanding dawning on him.

He and Hope had, after their marriage, tried to bring a child into the world. When they’d struggled, they’d visited specialists. The specialists had concluded that Will was the source of their issues, and he’d been devastated at his inability to give Hope the child she so passionately desired.

And yet it wasn’t true. The ambrosia fruit Hope had eaten a thousand years

before that time... the fruit had made *Hope* infertile, in a manner suggesting that Will was at fault. And it meant they'd figured out, quietly, how to cure *Hope* after their marriage, and thus they'd been able to have two children.

He knew, then, that the fruit was at least capable of rendering the consumer infertile. He'd seen none of the morange or zirple plants in the forest, and as such knew that the two plants could not be the cause of the immortality the Ambrosians claimed. But he could not disprove their claims.

He rose from the table, knowing that someone would need to eat the plant, running the risk that the plant was poisonous. Every person in the village would test that plant without any knowledge of the side effects, and while they'd do so of their own free will, such a volunteer would still be serving a role much as Elizabeth had served. Yet there was one person in the village who knew the effects of the plant, who, unlike Elizabeth, could eat the plant knowing the changes it would bring about.

Him.

He sighed, rose from the table, seized the full piece of fruit, and walked out into the common room.

Adam was standing, walking through the rules with the next two contestants in the tournament. He stopped in mid-sentence as Will approached, and glanced up as Will neared him.

"Did you figure it out yet, Will? Is the plant harmful?"

"I don't know, Adam, but I do think I'm uniquely qualified to find out. If something happens to me... well, let's just hope that doesn't happen."

And Will bit into the fruit, even as Adam shouted for him to stop, even as Arthur's greedy eyes found life again at the thought that Will might meet his own mortality before Arthur did.

Those in the common room grew silent, recognizing the sacrifice Will had made, not realizing that the sacrifice had been made years earlier.

After a few moments, Will cracked a smile. "Well, if this fruit contains a poison, it's certainly not one that acts quickly. I don't think it will be useful in warding off any invasions."

Nervous laughter greeted his words, emitted from expectant faces, waiting for some macabre ending to his consumption of the mystery fruit. After several moments of silence, during which their faces showed disappointment at the lack of change in him, Will teleported out of the bunker. He did not want to be watched, did not want to see the eager thrill on their faces, did not want to think those looks meant they were eager to see him collapse and die.

He knew it wouldn't happen. Or at least, he knew it *hadn't* happened in the last cycle of time. He felt jealousy toward *that* Will now, too, for having completed the long journey, much as he felt jealous at the younger Will. But there was nothing to be done with such jealousy. It would not help make his journey easier, or shorter. The only way to finish this journey was to move forward, and that he would do.

Will put his mind to work on other tasks, to distract himself from the long journey and painful decisions he knew he'd need to make, and from those decisions he suspected he didn't even know about yet. He watched the great Wheel turning, powered by the eternal flow of the rushing waters of the Ealdor River.

What else might the river move? What else might need continual turning?

His mind clicked: *gears*.

He'd had a thought of this type when he'd recommended the location of the bunker, wanting it near the Wheel for its potential use as the engine to drive a series of gears that they could use to produce some of their products more efficiently. He noted with a smile the fact that such a capability would have been useful in stirring up the endless batches of concrete they'd needed to build the walls and the rest of the village, but they had no use for such a machine at the moment. The general idea was there, yet he needed a specific use to gather the attention of the villagers, a means to motivate them as he had done a decade earlier through the construction of the Wheel.

Will wanted them to build the rudimentary equivalent of a factory, powered by water wheels turning a system of gears, operating below the ground.

The challenge, though, was that he wasn't sure what they needed a factory *for*. They made everything by hand, from beginning to end, and mass production was not a concept they'd come to embrace. Could they use it for weaving? They wove thread by hand as well, and he doubted they'd be able to make the mental leap from hand weaving to water-powered loom immediately. He recalled the analogy his daughter, Angel, had used in explaining the Alliance's view on revealing their advances to the world. Machines of that type were so beyond their concept of thinking that he'd frighten them. He preferred to give people the truth and let them determine how they'd react, but this seemed to be pushing those boundaries too far, even for him.

Perhaps, then, he needed to start at the beginning.

He walked back to the village. This project would not begin with one wagon wheel.

He'd need *two* this time.

GEARS

1029 A.D.

“**W**hat do you need *two* wheels for?” Wayne asked, puzzled by Will’s request.

“I have an idea I want to try out, and for that test I need two wheels to start with.”

Arthur walked by at that moment, his face looking ever more haggard and worn, but his eyes seemed sharper than Will had seen them in quite some time. “Let me give you some advice, Wayne. Years ago, Will asked for one wheel, and we ended up with *that*.” Arthur gestured at the overhead water delivery system, and Wayne’s eyes widened. “If he wants *two* wheels? We may end up with... with... with a flying machine or something.”

Will laughed, amused at the idea and surprised that Arthur had spoken on his behalf. “Nothing quite so grandiose, Arthur. At least, not yet. But given enough time? Anything is possible.”

The fire left Arthur’s eyes. “Time. Right.” He turned and walked away.

Will leaned in and whispered to Wayne. “Just for reference, when I’m ready to build Arthur’s... flying machine? I’ll ask for at least *four* wheels.” He grinned.

Wayne chuckled, then shook his head. “I don’t think the old man has much time left.” He rummaged through the Store and found two wagon wheels, which he handed to Will, refusing any payment. “Sorry, Will. If you’ve got something interesting in mind, it’s worth it to me to find out what it is.”

Will thanked the wagon-maker, testing various ways of carrying or rolling the wheels. “Do you really think Arthur’s time is running out?”

Wayne glanced after Arthur, who was moving at a tentative pace. “I don’t know, Will. But he’s not getting any younger. Maybe you can use those wheels to find something to make him live a little longer.”

Will nodded briefly and wandered off.

Was that the common perception around the camp; that Arthur was on death’s door? Will still intended to work on the gears, but he realized he was going to have to watch Arthur carefully. He was no longer the official doctor in the village; they’d brought someone else in two years earlier. Yet no doctor would consider old age a disease to be treated or an illness to be cured. Dying and death were simply a part of life, an experience they’d all have at some point.

One day, all too soon, they’d find out that was no longer the case.

Will walked through the Stores, a structure they’d expanded over the past few years, including the addition of a second story to the rebuilt concrete structure. The upward expansion had reduced the footprint of the Stores and opened more space within the village for Shops. Seventy people required a great deal of space to prepare their crafts and perform the services the village needed. They’d moved the cooking stations nearer to the residence hall, though they’d not implemented Will’s suggestion to move them inside. The changes had provided a much more expansive space for the Shops.

Current conversation in the village focused on construction plans for the next warm season. There was significant interest in creating additional underground facilities they could use to store finished goods. Will had privately smiled at that. In the long run, he had visions of creating a Store more like that in his day. They’d invite their customers to come to *them* to purchase goods, and they’d have an inventory of finished products they could tap into to ensure they could meet demand. That was a long way off, most likely, and he’d reminded himself more than once that he could only focus on one project at a time. Each successive project might never come to pass, due to intervening events.

In theory, he had a way to know what those intervening events would be, knowledge that would let him plan with greater certainty. His “diary” was a gift from the future, where all of those future events had occurred, where they’d be able to provide him information and guidance. That guidance was so rarely forthcoming, however, that he’d stopped checking for it over the past several years. It bothered him that he so rarely got information from the future, and yet, if he was honest with himself, that was as it should be. He couldn’t review the diary in secret every time he needed to make a decision, and if he was given that guidance on a regular basis, it would be as though his life was being lived for

him. The scant information he'd gotten had been undeniably useful, as with the information on making concrete, or the key phrases for surviving his layover during his first flight home from Healf. And it wasn't as if he didn't know what he'd eventually do with Arthur and the ambrosia. Would it truly matter if they gave him a date, time, and location to do the deed?

He sat down in an open patch of ground near the well, pulled out a sharp chisel and mallet, and began whittling the wood away, create teeth in the outer edge of the first wheel. When he finished an hour later, he carved teeth into the side of the second wheel. He pictured a rope or band attached to the water wheel, with the motion turning one wheel mounted vertically on an axle. The second wheel would be mounted on an axle and mounted horizontally. The teeth would interlock so that the first wheel, powered indirectly by water, would turn the second wheel.

As he chiseled the teeth into the second wheel, Adam wandered by, watching him.

"What are you up to, Will?"

Will didn't look up. "I had an idea, and I want to see if it will work."

"Tell me." Adam sat down next to Will, watching the dark-haired man work. Will shivered; he hadn't forgotten that this man had murdered fifty people only a few years earlier, and the proximity unnerved Will, regardless of Adam's stated motivation for his actions.

"Well..." Will paused, for he wasn't sure how to explain how he'd come up with the idea. "I was watching the big Wheel turning, using those paddles that get pushed by the water."

"Okay."

"And I wondered, what if there was no water to turn this Wheel? What else could turn the Wheel? The answer was *another* Wheel with paddles. Turn one wheel, and those paddles connect with and push the paddles of the second wheel, and that means *both* wheels turn just by turning one of them."

Adam considered this. "I'm not sure I understand the idea, but even if it works, so what? Why do we need to make another wheel that's turned by the first? I mean, I guess I can see that you *could* turn two wheels like that, but... why bother? What would it mean?"

"That's the thing. I'm not sure *what* we could do with it yet." He chuckled. "Actually, that's not true. I have an idea about what we *could* have done with it, a few years ago."

Adam waited for Will to continue, and finally asked the question after a long

pause. “OK, what could we have done with it several years ago?”

“Think about this: what if the paddles aren’t facing the same way? What if the second wheel isn’t mounted vertically?” Will held the second wheel, the one he worked on now, vertically, and stood the original wheel on end, also vertically. “What if the second wheel is mounted horizontally?”

He flipped the second wheel so that it was lying on the ground, and set the first wheel on top. When he turned the vertical wheel, the horizontal wheel, with a few notches already carved, turned just a bit.

Adam’s eyes lit up. “That’s... very interesting. But what does it mean?”

“What if, instead of attaching that horizontal wheel to an axle, we mounted it to the top of a large stirring mechanism? And put a large bowl underneath that wheel, so that the stirring mechanism was down inside the bowl, and then filled that bowl with the ingredients for concrete?”

Adam looked at the two wheels as Will demonstrated how the teeth would interlock. Will watched Adam’s face, as he slowly put the information together and realized the implications. “The water... the big Wheel... they’d turn the stirring device and stir up all of the concrete! We wouldn’t destroy our arms in the process!”

Will nodded. “That’s what I was thinking as well. It would be interesting to see what else we could do with it. I think we’d need to set up some type of leather band that would connect the larger Wheel to the smaller wheel with the teeth.”

“Teeth? Oh.” Adam noted the ridges in the two wheels at Will’s feet. “That makes sense; they do look a lot like big teeth. We’d need some way to stop it though, wouldn’t we? We probably don’t want that tooth wheel turning all the time.”

Will frowned. “Why wouldn’t we?”

“How would we get the stirrer back out of the mixing bowl in your example? We’d need to stop it to lift the stirrer out of the way, then roll the bowl away to use. And if we have all of this set up near the Wheel, we’d need to run it underground most likely.” He scowled as realization dawned. “You’ve had this in mind for a while, haven’t you? That’s why you insisted on having the bunker built where it was.”

Will shrugged. “I like to think ahead a bit.”

Adam laughed. “I wish you’d mentioned this idea back when we were rebuilding.” He rubbed his shoulder. “My arms still hurt now, all these years later.”

Now it was Will's turn to laugh. "I know what you mean. It seemed too outlandish at the time, and I didn't know if it would work. And it didn't seem like a great idea back then, when we truly needed to focus on rebuilding, to try out something so unusual, especially without knowing if it would work. Now, though? We have a large and stable population, we have excess money, and more importantly, we all have plenty of time. Having a community of Energy users saves us a great deal of time that we'd otherwise spend doing much more mundane chores."

Adam nodded. "Understood, Will. Now we can set this up and see what we can do with it."

Will nodded, and then frowned. "But you've said something that gives me pause. I'm sure that these toothy wheels will work." He paused as Adam snorted at the name. "But you're right; we need to have some means to disable the mechanism that turns them. The problem is that the Wheel won't stop. I wonder..."

"Another dramatic pause? Do tell, Will."

Will chuckled. "We had the same problem when we built the aqueduct system years ago. We got the system set up to run the water to the village, but we couldn't run it right away, not until we figured out where to put the water. If we'd done nothing, the water would have run through the aqueduct and landed on the ground in the village, and eventually the ground would saturate and the village would flood. So we built the shield, the piece of wood that stopped the water from flowing into the aqueduct system. Once we got the return mechanism built, which runs extra water out to the creek, we removed the shield."

Adam shook his head. "That can't work, Will. The Wheel will keep turning no matter what you do with the water that it scoops up. We can't stop the Ealdor River, after all."

Will nodded. "Agreed, and I do understand that. But recognize what we did. We had to build a water *return* system to be able to use the aqueduct."

"So what?"

"So... maybe the answer is that we need another water return system."

"Why would we need that?"

Will grinned. "Why not run another aqueduct spur, and a second wheel, closer to the bunker? The water would flow down that spur and drop on the second wheel to turn it and power the... toothy wheels below ground. The new waterwheel would be suspended up off the ground, and the water that turns it would eventually end up in a return system that would take it back to the Ealdor

River. If we don't want the toothy wheel to turn..."

"Then we set up a second shield that stops the water from flowing that way to begin with," Adam finished, understanding. "And we can do that and then stop the... the... toothy wheel from turning when we're done using it. That's a brilliant idea." He glanced at the work Will was doing. "I don't think I can chisel at the same time that you are, so what can I do to help you figure out if this will work?"

Will considered the offer. "Axles for both wheels, and a few people to hold the axles in place while we check to see if turning one wheel turns the other. If it works, we'll show more people, explain the idea, and then see what everyone wants to do."

Adam nodded, and glanced at him. "This is what it was like back then, wasn't it?"

Will arched an eyebrow. "I don't follow."

"This is what it was like back when you came up with the idea for the first Wheel, wasn't it? You came up with an idea, tested it out, and then got everyone interested and excited about being part of it."

"Not everyone was excited about it, especially not right near the end." The Wheel had been rolled up the ramps toward the support beams while facing in the wrong direction, and the frustration at the error boiled over into anger at Will and the other Traders. Only the Traders returned to resume the task, and the six of them completed a job that thirty could not.

"Yet, in the end, they followed your lead, Will. They knew that the idea you'd described had merit, and, no matter how bizarre it sounded, they believed it would work because they believed in *you*."

Will shrugged. "Perhaps. Plenty of people played a role."

"And plenty will play a role in this effort as well. I'll be one of them. But I guess what I'm trying to say, Will, is that I don't know how many men could announce something that seems impossible and yet have so many people believe completely in the vision they propose. When you talk, others listen. More importantly, they *act*. That's impressive. And never, even back then, did you... manipulate anyone."

Adam stood, prepared to walk off to get the extra supplies Will had listed. "I'm glad I spared you." And he walked away.

Will stared after him. "Yeah. Me, too." His stare turned to a glare, and he felt the urge to give Adam a demonstration that he'd never *spared* Will's life. Will's life had never been at risk, even if Adam's decision had been otherwise. But he

took several deep breaths, calming himself, before he returned to chiseling the last pieces of wood away.

Adam returned with the necessary wooden axles. He'd managed to attach what looked like a small wheel to the end of one of the axles, which created what looked like a bolt. Will nodded in approval. Adam had done well, for the horizontal lower wheel would need to rest on something to keep it off the ground. While the wooden "bolt" wasn't ideal, due to the friction that would be generated, it would at least show if the concept itself was sound.

Will finished whittling the teeth in the second wheel, and Adam walked off and returned with Arielle and Wayne. They, like Adam, found the idea bizarre at first, but quickly saw the potential that the toothy wheels might provide. Will mounted the horizontal wheel on the wooden stake with the "bolt" side underneath, and then he and Adam fed the second axle through the vertical wheel and held the ends. Will, the tallest, held the vertical axle for the horizontal wheel stable, while Adam and Wayne held the horizontal axle supporting the vertical wheel. With Arielle's assistance, they guided the vertical wheel so that the teeth met up with those on the lower horizontal wheel.

Arielle turned the vertical wheel. The interlocking teeth of the two wheels caught, and the horizontal wheel began turning as well.

Arielle grinned. So did Adam.

Will smiled, though it was a faint smile. The prototypes were always the easy part. The implementation of the full-scale model? Well, that was when tempers could flare and unforeseen problems could arise. He had only an idea for an expensive, time-consuming project that *might* provide them some production efficiency, in ways he couldn't explain. It was the type of uncertainty and challenge the original Aliomenti would run from.

It was time to see if this group was different than the last one.

FACTORY

1029 A.D.

There was significant interest in Will's concept. Like Adam, many in the village were puzzled as to what, exactly, the "toothy wheels" could do for them. Why should they devote the time necessary to construct this contraption? They weren't concerned about the costs, and Wayne said he'd happily contribute a large wheel without any payment.

None of them understood what they stood to gain from the undertaking, however.

"What led you to think of this in the first place, Will?" Arielle asked. Unlike the first batch of Aliomenti, the questions like those from the metal worker were asked with genuine interest, not to trap or argue or confuse.

"I'm not really sure," Will admitted. "I saw the wheels turning on a wagon once, and for some reason thought of them turning while on their sides. Then I thought of them turning at the same time, and thought they might crash or stop each other if they collided." He chuckled. "And then I curled my fingers together, and realized if I could make fingers, or teeth, on the wheels, they'd actually fit together well. And if I turned one, the next one would turn as well. Add in the Wheel getting turned by water at all times, and it seemed like it could be very useful."

"So the idea, then, is that we'd use the water Wheel to provide the power to turn this? No more sore arms?" Wayne's question was met with appreciative laughs, primarily from those who'd been there long enough to remember the major construction projects.

Will chuckled as well. "Exactly. Well, maybe not. You'll still find *some* use

for your arms.” The crowd chuckled. “But this could give us the ability to use the power of the river yet again. We’ve used it to scoop up fresh water and deliver it to where we need it. Now we can use it to turn something a short distance away. Anything that we do repeatedly, anything that requires turning, well, that’s something these special wheels can do.”

One of the carpenters raised his hand. “Just wondering... could we fit *more* of these... toothy wheels together like this?”

Yes! Will thought. *Someone’s thinking.* “That’s a great question. I don’t see why not. Why do you ask?”

“I make a lot of legs for tables and chairs, and I use a lathe to do that. I have to turn the lathe by using my foot on a pedal. It’s not difficult, mind you, but it does get a bit tiring after a while. I was thinking, though, that if the first wheel is vertical and the second wheel is horizontal... could we make a *third* wheel that was also vertical? One that could turn my wood stock for me while I shape chair legs?”

Will nodded, as the murmuring started. People were intrigued. “That’s a fantastic idea. I think we should definitely try that out. That may help you make a *lot* more chair legs.”

One of the bakers raised her hand. “I think this could help us as well. We could always use help mixing dough for bread or cakes. We could mix much larger batches and then make more at a time. We could also use the second vertical wheel, possibly, to flatten out the dough. That would save us a great deal of time and effort as well.”

In turn, another dozen people hypothesized how the “toothy wheels” Will had described could help them perform their various crafts and professions with greater ease or increased speed, and soon they *all* wanted to build the special “toothy” wheels. Will suggested that they call the wheels “gears,” rather than “toothy wheels,” and the name stuck.

They first built an aqueduct spur which stretched from the primary aqueduct to the ground above the bunker. That was the location where they’d build the smaller water wheel used to power the gears in the bunker below. Tanners began work on the leather band that would connect the rotating axle of the aboveground wheel to the gear in the bunker. Wayne, the wagon-maker, built several larger wheels, and worked with Will to identify the depth and spacing of the teeth. Several masons worked on drilling through the concrete ceiling of the bunker, where they’d need to pass the leather strap through to turn the wheel below. They also joined forces with the carpenters to make certain that the

wheels had solid bracing and support beams to turn on.

The project took several months to complete, and included time spent building a return system for the water used to turn the aboveground, gear-powering wheel. The teams put the wooden shield up to block any water from entering the aqueduct system after collection by the Wheel, essentially turning the water off at the source. While the water was shut down, they built a shutoff valve, the equivalent of the water shield for the aqueduct. The valve was a door hinged so that it could be pushed open into the flowing water, the open end diverting water from the main spur into the side spur. The valve did not open far; it was widely agreed that they did not want to see the flow of water to the village slow significantly to turn the wheel powering the gears Will had designed.

The only issue they identified was with the leather band used to transfer the movement of the aboveground wheel to the belowground gear. The band wore down and frayed through, and Will realized that the friction in the wood caused by the constant turning was wearing through the leather. Rather than see this as a setback, the tanners and metal smiths saw it as an opportunity to improve upon Will's original design immediately.

Their solution was simple and elegant. They created a linked chain which ran between the axles of the two wheels, and added teeth to the axles to catch the chain links as the wheels turned, mimicking the interlocking and turning action of the gears themselves. With the transference problem between the secondary water wheel and the primary gear resolved, the gear system became operational.

There was an unexpected benefit in creating the underground gear system. When those able to teleport into the bunker reported the significant advantages they enjoyed in their craft work from using the new system, they motivated those who hadn't yet mastered the skill of teleportation to ramp up their efforts to build their Energy stores. Everyone wanted to use the new tools.

The villagers devised multiple innovations utilizing the gear system once it was available. If they put the first horizontal wheel on a rolling cart, they could slide it in and out of interlocking contact with the vertical wheel directly powered by the flowing water. It wasn't a perfect system, though; they snapped several teeth off both wheels with their first attempts. Their solution was a hinged door on the bottom of the spur aqueduct that fed the gear-powering water wheel, which included a rope attached to the door mechanism. When they wished to stop the gears, they pulled the rope down, and the water would spill directly into the return system, rather than onto the paddles used to turn the wheel. It was, in effect, an off switch, and it worked quite well. When the water

stopped flowing, the first gear wheel stopped turning, and they could move the first horizontal wheel in and out at their leisure.

The carpenters, who used the gears to power their lathes for creating chair and table legs, realized that they could attach a smaller lathe-turning vertical wheel to the initial horizontal wheel. The combination of sizes resulted in a lathe that turned much, much faster than the water could power on its own. The additional lathe speed further improved both the quality of their goods and the speed of production. This innovation was copied, and they developed a series of wheels of all different sizes that those using the gear system could mix and match to create the speed and turn angle they desired. Potters, for instance, would use a combination of wheels to produce a slower turning wheel for molding clay.

Scheduling use of the gears became problematic. More villagers developed the ability to teleport into the bunker, more crafts identified means of using the gears to accelerate their work, and eventually the demands for the gears surpassed the time available. Villagers began to work during late evening and overnight hours. Someone suggested that they have a lottery to determine which time slots each person would get, in order to split the burden of late night hours equally.

Will strongly argued against that idea. Arthur smirked.

As the scheduling problems worsened, it was decided that the best solution was to revisit the plans to build additional bunkers outfitted with gear systems. Given the demands, they'd need several, and the water demands for powering those systems would fully tap the water supply generated by the original Wheel. With the village continuing to grow, they needed to supply *more* water to the village, not less.

That meant they'd need to build a second Ealdor River-powered Wheel.

The second Wheel, unlike the first, would not provide any water to the village. Rather, it would do nothing but supply water to a series of gear-turning wheels sitting atop separate, smaller bunkers. Each bunker would be for the exclusive use of a single professional craft, and time within the bunker would be scheduled by a leader chosen by the practitioners of that craft. The other professions would continue to use the larger community bunker for work until their specific bunkers were complete.

Adam chuckled as this decision was made. "Looks like we'll get to use your gears to stir up concrete after all, Will."

Will smiled. "It seems that was inevitable."

Adam nodded. “The village continues to grow, we continue to produce more and more goods, and we’re getting more efficient at it. At some point, we’re going to need to make a major decision.”

“What’s that?”

“We may need to start a new settlement.”

Will was startled. Though he’d known the Aliomenti Headquarters were based on a small, private island in the Bermuda Triangle, he hadn’t thought what might prompt movement away from the original village. They seemed content here, and moving was not something Will had considered. But it made sense. They were running out of room for people to do what they most wanted to do, and their continual building outside the privacy and isolation provided by the forest increased the likelihood that someone from the outside would notice. As it was, Will was surprised that no one had sailed by on the Ealdor and spotted the Wheel turning; if they had, there was no mention of it made during their travels to trade. Perhaps there was a mere handful of sailboats or barges in this era and region of the world. Those who left the confines of the forest found roads nearby they could travel upon to reach distant towns and cities. That meant others must travel those routes as well. Yet their innovations had never been spotted, at least not that Will could discern.

They built the secondary Wheel first, running the new aqueduct at a modest downward slope for several hundred yards along the shoreline, until the aqueduct fed water back into the river. They then commenced digging operations on the second mini-bunker, angling the hole so that the long ends angled away from the river, and in short order had the next structure completed. They built a spur off the main aqueduct trunk to feed a portion of water across the aboveground wheel used to power the gear system below. Given the proximity to the river, they didn’t create an entire return system. Instead, they built a slanted structure to funnel water back into the river directly.

They held a lottery, with each profession getting a single entry, and Will was chosen to draw the name of the group which would get the first new private bunker. After winning, the bakers promised to use the gears to increase their production of baked goods for the village, which meant happy villagers with full bellies.

The process of building specialty bunkers continued over the next several years. As they reached the capacity limits of each Ealdor-powered water wheel, they’d build a new one for the next batch of bunkers. The production of goods within the village ceased, as every craft group used the gear-powered machinery

they developed in all aspects of production. Newer residents were highly motivated to develop sufficient Energy skills to teleport, for those who could not were relegated to cleaning and maintenance work inside the village, a job none of them wanted.

With a self-sustaining, profitable village rapidly reaching its population limits, the talk of moving or developing a second location began in earnest, just as Adam had predicted. The Aliomenti village wasn't the only location soon to see some of its population depart, though. Hope and Eva were starting to plan their migration from Healf, Hope explained, as she and Will met outside Healf's walls prior to one of the "traveling merchant's" visits to the city.

"We've been here for ten years now, and while people are pleased with the work we've done, it's reached the point where we've run out of difficult cases to treat. If we don't have cases like that to treat... well, people have come to see us as the miracle workers, and they don't bother to come to see us for more basic health woes."

"You both do amazing work," Will said, as they walked toward the city gates. "I can see why people would specifically pick to visit you if they suffer from something unusually bad. But why would they otherwise avoid you?"

"I think there are two reasons, at least after all this time," Hope replied. "For one thing, if they see us as the miracle workers, then they don't want to bother us for something minor, for fear that it will keep us from treating something far more serious. And secondly, well... the others in the city who treat sickness have gotten a bit jealous of our success."

"Story of my life," Will said, smiling. "Let me guess. They've complained loudly that you've taken on too much of the work, they're not getting enough work to make a living, and so they've used every form of pressure available to them to encourage patients to see them instead of you."

Hope smiled back. "Right. They spell it out as if it's for us, that they want to ensure that we can maintain availability for the most difficult cases. They don't want the desperate to wait for treatment from us while we treat something far more minor, cases they could work and manage without much difficulty. We've made the point that we can shift from patient to patient without concern if the need arises, but that isn't a message that's heard."

"How is the aging process going?"

"If you're asking if we're still aging naturally, the answer is no," Hope replied. "I have no reason to doubt that the ambrosia fruit works as we were told. I didn't get the impression that Ambrose was lying to us, so I have no reason to

think that I'm still aging at a normal rate. I've... helped to make sure I look a bit older than I am." She raised an eyebrow. "Have you shared the fruit with anyone else yet?"

He shook his head. "My research, such as it was, proved inconclusive, as you might suspect." She looked puzzled. "I basically cut the fruit up and stared at it, as if trying to divine what type of impacts it might have. I finally decided to eat it in front of everyone else."

Hope looked surprised. "You did? Why?"

"I was, and am, the only person there who knows the true effects of eating that fruit. I'm the only one who knows that eating that fruit is not a death sentence. Having someone else eat it without that knowledge seemed... hypocritical." Hope winced, but nodded once. "Nobody's asked about it since then; I suspect the idea that the fruit is some kind of poison took hold rather well." He sighed. "But I think I'm going to need to use it soon."

"For what reason?"

"Arthur," Will said simply.

Hope looked troubled. "Must you?"

He nodded with regret. "He looks terrible, like a sickly, old man. It means that he's not going to live much longer without it. And I know that he *must* live much, *much* longer. I know I have to give him the fruit, Hope. I don't like it. I think dying at a normal age for this era is hardly a punishment, let alone murder, yet I feel like I'm guilty of something because I know how to stop it."

She sighed. "I understand, but I wish you'd reconsider. I know that he's still alive in the future you've come from. I know that I'm not an expert on how traveling through time works. But... isn't it possible that there's an alternate future, a better future... one where he dies of natural causes, of old age?"

Will thought about that alternative future. Arthur's death would free them both in many ways. They'd not need to worry about Arthur discovering that she was still alive, and taking whatever action he might deem necessary upon discovery of that knowledge. There was little doubt that such action would be unpleasant for her, and probably for Will.

"I could move back home again, Will. Nobody there knows I'm supposed to be dead. They probably don't even know I was ever *alive*. Do they?" She looked at him, her eyes searching for the answer. "They wouldn't know me by my new name, either."

Temptation tore at him. A lifetime—no, dozens of lifetimes—with Hope, lived without fear of discovery, lived with the knowledge that the man who

authorized the attack on their home was gone. Lived with the knowledge that they'd grow to raise their children together, not torn apart by the actions of the Hunters and the Assassin. Lives spent together every day, rather than every few months, only as they were each able to sneak away.

And yet...

“If we change that, Hope... it's possible that I'll never get sent back in time. It's possible that the events that brought our children to us will never come to pass. And we'll know what's coming, be able to prepare for it...”

He saw the tear drift slowly down her cheek, and he wasn't sure if the crushing blow it dealt his heart would drive him to kill Arthur.

Or himself.

GIFT

1032 A.D.

The village settled into an easy routine. Villagers would produce goods within the bunkers using the tools enabled by the gears until they developed a surplus, and then set off for a short-term trip in which they'd trade, make money, and enjoy a brief spell of recreational downtime. On most trips, a handful of those not travelling for trading purposes—including those who made food and hunted in the nearby forests—would join in, as well.

Will served as something of a journeyman, either overseeing new construction projects or helping train others in Energy skills. Teleportation tended to frighten those who'd never experienced the process before, and so Will would teleport new residents once or twice to get them accustomed to the sensations involved. Will remembered his own first experience with teleportation, a situation in which he'd performed the act involuntarily, and suspected that was far less frightening than performing with intent. Often, the best way to make progress was to act, rather than to think.

He also sought to familiarize himself with the various trades, spending time each day with the different craft workers, and learning the tools and terminology of each trade. Will wanted to be certain he could step up and fill in when trips to other villages and cities left a particular craft short of the people necessary to do critical work.

The talk of moving, or of expanding to a new location, became more animated as the bunker project finished. Others argued, instead, that the Aliomenti should cease head count growth, and should add members only when existing residents were no longer part of the group. Given the prosperity they

enjoyed, and the new abilities they all developed in the form of Energy skills, there was little to suggest that any would leave voluntarily. They'd only add new people when existing residents died.

Few doubted that Arthur, the man who had recruited all of them, the man who worked them through their initial consumption of morange and zirple, the man who had enabled all of them to experience all the Aliomenti had to offer, would be their first casualty.

His health continued to deteriorate, and his opinions on the issues the community faced were heavily influenced by the short-term impacts those decisions would have on him, an attitude Will considered the norm for Arthur. He had no interest in expansion, for his health wouldn't permit him to travel. A second site meant others would recruit new members; having personally selected each resident for inclusion in the community, save for Will and Adam, Arthur had no interest in others taking over that responsibility. Arthur also argued that they'd made such immense progress because they were able to bring all of the resources and skills of the community into common projects like the original Wheel, the setup of the bunkers, the gears, and the cultivation of Energy and growth of Energy skills.

None of that, he said, would be possible if they continued to grow without restraint, and certainly not if they developed a second community. A second community, Arthur argued, would do nothing but diminish what they could accomplish. If the new community was close to the current one, they'd be trading in the same cities and towns, perhaps at the same time, and diffuse their efforts through competition. If they were to relocate a portion of their population to a new location far away, they'd cease to be able to share new ideas and grow as a group.

Most of all, Arthur pleaded for restraint on such a monumental decision. "It is always possible to change our decision and elect to expand. It is far more difficult to rush to expand, realize it was a mistake, and then attempt to contract."

Will, who had seen Arthur deliver such speeches before, suspected that Arthur's reasons for opposing moving or expanding weren't guided by such high-minded ideals. Arthur's mortality was becoming more evident by the week, and with his impending death, Arthur was faced with the loss of control of the most important thing for any mortal. He faced losing his life, and with that knowledge, the success of the Aliomenti, their ability to dominate in the world at large, no longer mattered. Arthur didn't fear poor results from expanding or

moving to a different location. Rather, he feared that they *would* succeed, and would do so with no reason to credit him for their success. In dying, Arthur was looking to plant the seeds of death in the group he'd helped start. In Arthur's mind, the group would not and should not succeed, should not continue, without him.

"I agree with you, Will," Adam said, when Will shared his concerns. The two men were walking, by choice, toward the largest of the underground bunkers, the first ever built, where they'd train a group of less-experienced Energy users advanced techniques for telekinesis. "But it's hardly something you could prove, even in a group of telepaths like this. Arthur's crafty enough to make them think what he wants them to think. He may have even convinced *himself* that those are his true beliefs."

"His reasoning is sound and may well be true," Will admitted. "Yet I don't think it appropriate that a man who expects to die soon is arguing so forcefully in favor of an approach that limits our potential for growth after he expects to be dead and gone."

Adam arched an eyebrow as they continued their leisurely stroll. "You know something, don't you?" he asked, speaking slowly. "Everyone expects him to be dead within months, perhaps weeks. Yet your words suggest you don't believe that to be the case."

Will glanced at Adam, and then stopped walking. "Let me ask you this, Adam. You know Arthur, you know who he is, his motivations and weaknesses. He's knocking on death's door. If you knew how to prevent that... would you?"

"No," Adam said. "I wouldn't. I spared him many years ago not because he deserved life, but because death was a kindness he hadn't earned. His crimes were too great to exact justice in one moment. Yet I knew this phase of his life would arrive, when his body and mind would begin to fail, when his dreams of domination hadn't been achieved, when others who hadn't waited for answers so long, developed Energy skills far superior to his own. His survival allowed him to experience the greatest punishment possible for a man like him: irrelevance. Would I change the path he's on, this slow, painful path to death? Absolutely not." He looked at Will. "But *you* would."

Will looked away, then started walking again. "I don't know what I want to do, but I suspect I know what I *must* do."

Adam stared after him. "So you *do* know how to save him? What's the answer? How?"

"I can help him," Will said. "But he has to decide if he *wants* that help."

Adam opened his mouth to say something, then reconsidered. They continued their journey in silence.

The training sessions were spirited, but Will's mood was heavy. He knew that the time had come to bestow the greatest of gifts upon the man he most despised in all of history. It was time to give Arthur Lowell the gift of life, the gift of immortality.

The only solace in the decision was the knowledge that Arthur would never again father a child he could abuse, as he had Elizabeth. Arthur *could* refuse the ambrosia on the grounds that he wanted more children, though there was scant evidence in his past to suggest he'd do so. It was also possible that he'd so accepted his imminent demise that he'd refuse the cure, but that seemed less likely. No, he feared, Arthur would welcome the effects of the ambrosia, and Will would have chosen to indefinitely extend the life of the man who would cause him so much grief in the future.

Will walked alone in stony silence back to the village after the training session, opting to walk rather than teleport. He knew his duty, knew what he must do, yet it didn't mean he needed to like it or accelerate the process.

He stopped at one of the gardens inside the walls, the plots of earth kept perpetually warm even in the deepest winter by the furnace beneath. He smelled the fragrance of the ambrosia, its scent as intoxicating as its promise. The pungent aroma of the morange and the dull scent of the zirple were a stark contrast to the aromatic sensory feast of the ambrosia. Nature might endow such characteristics in a plant of a predatory or poisonous nature as a form of population control, as she had done with the ambrosia. In this case, though, the poison would affect those never to be born, rather than the living.

He plucked a piece of the simple fruit, took a deep breath, and entered the concrete residence hall.

Arthur lived on the upper floor, his room in the center of the building, with a window opening to the north. It was a location that gave Arthur an unrivaled view upon the entirety of the village, a view that, in Arthur's mind, was likely that of a monarch gazing down upon his lands and subjects.

Will tapped on the wooden door. "Arthur? Are you in there? It's Will."

The silence was lengthy. As Will prepared to knock again, he heard Arthur's faint voice through the door. "Come in."

Will pushed the door open and stepped inside. Arthur's room was spartan and bare, with little decoration, a far cry from the gaudy ostentation in his virtual throne room of the future. Arthur's wealth had grown slowly in this iteration of

the Aliomenti, as he'd not developed any marketable skills, limiting his income potential. He worked as a baker, a craft which provided value to the village but only modest income to the practitioners. Arthur's skill lay in manipulating others to give him money in exchange for questionable value. In a village comprised of telepaths and empaths, such machinations were impossible. And so Arthur, the would-be king, lived in simplicity and relative poverty in a village of plenty.

As Adam had noted, it was the most intense, most powerful punishment possible for the man.

"How are you feeling, Arthur?"

Arthur turned his head slowly, as if the effort required every bit of energy he could summon. His hair had turned color, moving from the dirty blond Will had always known him to possess to a faded color tending to gray. Wrinkles surrounded his eyes, eyes sunken in with fatigue and resignation. "How am I *feeling*, Will?" Arthur snapped. "How do I *look* like I'm feeling?"

Will appraised him. "You've looked better."

Arthur slowly turned his head away.

"Let me ask you something, Arthur. If you lived another twenty years, what would you do with your life?"

Arthur didn't bother to turn and face him. "What kind of question is that supposed to be?" His tone was bitter. "What difference does it make, anyway? Look at me, Will. I'm not making it another twenty years."

"Humor me, Arthur. What would you do?"

Arthur sighed. "I'd love to travel again, Will. I've not traveled since... well, since I returned here in time to become a father." He snorted. "You know how well *that* turned out. No, Will, I think I'd travel. I know all of you are going to set up a new location once I'm gone, so I think I'd travel there and see how it's going, what kind of progress they're making. I think I'd travel far to the south, where I'm told it's warmer all year long, perhaps spend time near the Great Sea. I'd try to make a lot of money so that I could enjoy that trip." He coughed. "Why do you want to know?"

"If you were as healthy as you were twenty years ago, thirty years ago... would that change your answer?"

"Not really, no," Arthur replied, and Will could hear the frown in his voice. "Will, I'm tired. What purpose do these questions serve? Are you gloating? Are you mocking me with your perfect health as I lay here, dying a slow death?"

"If you could live another twenty or thirty years, Arthur, if you could do it feeling like you did when you were thirty... would you want to be a father

again?”

“No,” Arthur said. There was no delay in his answer, no time for consideration. Though the answer was no surprise, the speed certainly was. It was a question which required no contemplation. “I don’t want to screw up that badly again. Children and me... we simply don’t mix.”

Will nodded. He pulled the fruit from his pocket. “Recognize this?”

Arthur’s head turned, and Will could feel the agony in the man’s arthritic joints. His eyes fell upon the fruit. “That’s the fruit you planted in here, next to the zirple and morange. What of it?”

“I came across this during my time away, all those years ago, Arthur. The people I encountered, the ones who told me about this fruit... they told me amazing stories about it.”

“You’ve led us to believe that it could be quite fatal. I doubt anyone has tested it on themselves. Except you, right?” Arthur’s eyes narrowed, a shrewd look forming upon his tired face. “You ate it because you knew it wouldn’t hurt you, didn’t you?”

Will nodded. “I know what they told me happens to someone who eats this fruit. You wouldn’t have noticed because... well, because I got tricked into eating it before I knew the alleged effects.”

“And what are those alleged effects?”

“It renders the consumer incapable of reproducing.”

Arthur’s eyes widened. Then he laughed. “This mystery fruit will make me incapable of having more children, just as it’s done with you?” He coughed. “I really don’t think that’s going to be a concern for me.”

“That’s not the only thing it’s supposed to do, Arthur.”

“Do tell.”

Will took a deep breath. “It prevents you from aging.”

Arthur’s jaw fell, and Will could see the gears turning in the man’s mind, mental gears assessing the implications, a trickle of Energy seeking to assess the truthfulness of Will’s response. He resorted to his innate people-reading skills, skills he’d used to assess Will as one worthy of joining the first Aliomenti community. And those skills told him that Will believed what he was saying to be true. “So what’s the catch, Will? I eat that, I can’t have more children and I don’t age?” He snorted. “I don’t much care for the age I’m at.”

“I’m fairly certain it will erase all signs of aging, even if they’d already started. You’ll be in your physical prime. But... no more children.”

“Give me the fruit, Will.”

Will picked up the fruit, then hesitated. “Are you sure about this? There’s no turning back, no way of reversing the effects so you can have more children, no way to choose to die a natural death. Are you absolutely certain...”

Arthur leaned over and snatched the fruit from Will, and pressed the fruit against his mouth, chewing slowly. “I’ll use this time I now have to meet those goals I mentioned, Will. I won’t just visit the expansion sites; I’ll go there to help set them up. I won’t travel just to the Great Sea; I’ll travel to see the whole world. I’ll become wealthy, and I’ll become powerful.” He swallowed and took another bite. “This is the most amazing gift I could ever receive. And it’s my birthday. Thank you, Will.”

His eyes were full of greed, as if eager to experience the effects, to envision his dreams coming true. But the effort of conversing with Will took its toll on the old man, and his eyes closed in sleep.

Will watched as the wrinkles smoothed before his eyes. The fruit was working.

He left, returned to his own room, and wept.

EXPANSION

1035 A.D.

Three years later

The terrain of the island wouldn't strike anyone who might look at it as the type of place a secret society of supermen and superwomen would choose to make its second outpost. Yet the small, craggy island off the southwest coast of England would serve just such a purpose, despite boasting such an unfriendly environment.

The Aliomenti scouts had traveled far and wide, their only guidance for their second settlement being that they must find a place within a population that spoke English. Though they would eventually expand to all corners of the world, even corners those in the eleventh century didn't know existed, they had no interest in learning new languages.

Will was relieved at the choice. Hope and Eva had relocated, after first spending time on the small island the trio had discovered prior to their entry to Healf. For his part, Will had encouraged the southwest corner of England as the best place to target for their new outpost, as it would be the opposite end of the English-speaking territory they wished to conquer first. Others had argued for the southeast corner. The Aliomenti would, eventually, move on to the European mainland, and such a location would be better suited as a launching point for their economic invasion. Will's arguments had carried the day in the end, and with the two women moving east and the Aliomenti moving west, the distance between the groups grew.

Locals living on the mainland near the island confirmed that it was uninhabited, and, in their minds, a place no one would be able to survive. The

Aliomenti scouts, hearing music in those words, rented rowboats to take them out to view the island. For most, it was their first time in such a vessel, and they found the strenuous effort a challenge.

Once out of sight of the mainland, though, they pulled the oars in and used Energy to propel the boats at high speed to the island. The trip proved that the surface was as unfriendly as rumored—for *human* settlement.

The scouts asked if anyone owned the island. “Even the king has no desire to possess such a property, and he is most desirous of expanding the lands under his banner,” one villager reported. “I tell you, nothing can live there.”

The Aliomenti decided to prove that statement incorrect.

Arthur had not come, not yet. After eating the ambrosia fruit, he’d made a remarkable recovery from old age, racing away from death’s doorstep, away from the end of his life’s journey, and on the path to immortality. Will explained that, as he’d journeyed on his own after the fire, he’d found another village in a wood, had seen a woman there eat the fruit, and had then done so himself, thinking her wise to the edibility of the food. Only then did she explain the effects caused through consumption of the fruit, effects she’d long ago accepted. Arthur found the story fascinating, and listened to it many times before Will’s departure to the new village on the rocky island.

Arthur’s remarkable recovery meant that they’d need to talk to the villagers about the fruit. “It will be the next phase for our members, similar to our process for exposing them to Energy, in which they are prepared for the impacts of morange and zirple,” Arthur said. “We cannot simply walk into villages and ask who is willing to give up fertility in exchange for immortality. We must bring them in with the promise of wealth, just as we always have, suggest the possibility of Energy and its potential, and finally expose them to the reality that immortality is within their grasp. It will give us time to make sure they are prepared to handle everything; if a recruit proves unworthy, we will... encourage them to leave.”

Will thought that sensible. No one was being denied the gifts and knowledge they’d found; they were ensuring each person had the ability to determine if they were prepared for each step in the process. “What happens if they want the Energy, but not the immortality, for whatever reason?”

Arthur frowned. “I’m not sure, to be honest. I think we’ll certainly have people make different choices in that regard, but we must be sure that no one who chooses to eschew immortality flaunts their fertility.”

“Meaning?”

“Meaning that we’ll have a lot of immortal people who have made the conscious choice not to bear children. It’s possible that if others *do* make the decision to have children, there will be... repercussions.” He looked pointedly at Will, and the inference about Elizabeth’s demise angered him.

“This isn’t the original village or the original group of villagers any more, Arthur,” Will snapped. “I certainly hope we’ve *all* learned from those mistakes.”

“It is clear that the original Aliomenti were not prepared to have children and should not have done so,” Arthur replied. It was the closest thing to an admission of guilt or error on his part Will had ever heard. “We... made a terrible mistake in allowing all of that to happen. And we need to be very careful how we handle the topic this time...” He paused.

“What?”

“Well, do you recall what Adam said when he returned from his travels, before he... leveled the village and exterminated everyone but the two of us?”

“About what, specifically? I’m a bit foggy on my memories in the vicinity of his genocide.”

Arthur glanced up, as if trying to remember. “He said he got the morange berries at a village where the berries grew naturally. The inhabitants there, if you’ll recall, *did* have children. And...”

“And the children were far more powerful than their parents,” Will replied. “So? That seems like a wonderful benefit to me.”

Arthur shook his head. “Will, I don’t think you’re understanding what’s going on here. This gift that we have, this gift of Energy? It’s not something you can safely instill in the young. They’ll have no control, no ability to ensure they don’t show off in front of a young friend, or otherwise expose those who wish to keep their abilities secret. And... well, don’t you think they’d be *dangerous*?”

Will thought about Josh—or Fil, as he was known as an adult—and Angel, his own children. They hadn’t hurt anyone or blown them up or otherwise exposed themselves. Adam had shared that Fil’s wife and daughter had been murdered by an Assassin while Fil had been forced to watch. Will felt a lump in his throat, wondering how he could have allowed such a tragedy to happen. Perhaps it meant he truly *had* died at some point in time around the fire at his home. He doubted he’d be able to live with himself, allowing his granddaughter and daughter-in-law to die at the hands of an Assassin. Yet, to the current point, the fact that the Assassin and Hunters had found the woman and the girl didn’t mean that either had done something with Energy to raise human attention to herself.

“Perhaps they *could* be, Arthur,” Will replied. “But there’s certainly no reason to assume that must be the case. A child who is born bigger and stronger than the norm does not always use his size to intimidate others, and there’s no reason to think such an Energy-enhanced child would be any different. And don’t you think that a young child, possibly able to communicate with telepathy while still in the womb... don’t you think a child like that, would grow up far more in control of their abilities than those who come to them in adulthood? Children expect life to be like what they’re born with. For a child born with these abilities, it might be as normal as walking or running or jumping. They’d feel no need to show off, any more than an ordinary child shows off to friends by walking.”

“A child doesn’t show off by walking, true. But he might show off by running in a race, and deciding to win by adding something a bit extra. Don’t you think a child would do that?”

“Arthur, any child like that would be born in one of our villages, either the original one or the one we’re going to build in the near future. They’d grow up among adults with Energy skills who could help them to learn how to control their abilities, how to temper them and use them only when necessary, and only to the *degree* necessary. With that type of oversight, and that type of isolation, a child is unlikely to have the opportunity to expose themselves or the rest of us until they have the maturity to make the proper choices in that regard.”

Arthur sighed. “But children are so unpredictable, Will. We have no idea *what* they’ll do.”

“I’ve remained on speaking terms with men who caused the deaths of a combined fifty people whom I considered friends, Arthur.” Will glared pointedly at Arthur, who had the decency to look uncomfortable. “I certainly didn’t expect a mass slaughter from Adam, because that’s hardly something you can predict, can you? Yet Adam’s a grown man, an adult who got his Energy abilities *as an adult*. You think a child would be able to do anything quite so dramatic, so violent, so... well, so *wrong*?”

Arthur grunted. “I concede that you have a point. I do *not* concede that it means children are not, as a rule, more unpredictable than adults. With more time, I suspect we would have noticed Adam’s emotions and desires, and in so doing we could have stopped him. He’d not be able to suppress his ideas in that regard now, now that Energy skills are so common and so strong. You’ve noticed that, haven’t you? It’s difficult for anyone to possess strong emotions around here without the entire village knowing. I think we need to ask people to be very

careful, to avoid having children until we have better information to go on.”

“I don’t have a problem telling people that there are unique risks to becoming parents once they adopt our lifestyle, once they start developing their skills. Those skills will pass to their children at a more advanced level than they’ll find in any person they’ll meet. There are risks that any children they have *might* lose control and risk hurting someone or exposing our group. I *don’t* agree with telling people that, given those risks, they must forever forgo being parents, for that reason or because it might cause some undue grief for an immortal who made a different choice.”

“So you’re in agreement, then?”

“Asking people to promise caution in that type of decision?” Will shrugged, then nodded. “I don’t have a problem with that. It’s wise advice to anyone thinking of becoming a parent, Aliomenti or not.”

He was struck by the idea that this was the forerunner of the fourth oath, the one that Arthur would use centuries from now to order Will’s execution. *This* promise, a promise to exercise caution over a decision with consequences none of them could possibly understand, was nothing more than a caution signal. He supposed that at some point these suggestions would become rules, and then Oaths with prescribed, extreme punishments for violation. Those rules would one day lead to the formation of the Hunters and an Assassin, men with the duty to mete out the prescribed punishments for those Arthur would deem guilty.

Arthur nodded as well. “Then let’s do that. We need to warn people of the risks, and let them know that if they wish to permanently and forever be free of that risk, we have a means of granting them that request.”

“One moment,” Will said. “Are you suggesting we have a rule that only those who first agree to give up having children, *without* knowing about the ambrosia’s effects, be given the ambrosia?”

“Why not?” Arthur asked. “It’s unlikely anyone will have issues with immortality. They’ve all noticed that *something* has happened to me, and it won’t be difficult to figure out that I must have done something remarkable to undergo such a transformation. They *all* want it, too, Will. Can’t you feel that?”

“Of course I do, Arthur,” Will replied. “Yet that’s not my concern. We’re setting people up to have an attitude that’s opposed to children. We don’t have any in our village now, and when I leave with the others to start the new location, we’re going to change that.”

Arthur stepped up to Will and glared at him. “They *must* be made aware of the consequences of their choices, Will, especially the foolish ones. They must

understand what they are giving up if they choose to reproduce. And that's... *everything.*"

The argument with Arthur, so many months earlier, was still fresh in his mind as they waded ashore. The island looked more like the surface of the moon than a future home to the Aliomenti, more reminiscent of death than home to a group that would soon unleash a band of immortals upon an unsuspecting world.

David, a member of the Aliomenti for two years, glanced around. "How are we supposed to grow any crops here?"

"I'm not sure we'll *need* to grow much, at least not right away," Will replied. "We have the ability to trade and purchase food from coastal villages, so we're in no danger of starving. We're going to need to do some work, though, in order to be able to build anything on this island. Once we're settled, we can start working to get soil suitable for growing crops."

David, a farmer by trade, looked nervous. "I hope we're able to do that."

Will grinned. "With this group? Anything is possible."

They spent the day touring the island. It was spacious, and though the terrain was predominantly rocky around the perimeter, there were plenty of trees and grassy fields farther inland, where the terrain bowed down to a point well below sea level. A few large streams fed into a lake near the center of the island. Will felt that they'd lucked out in their choice of location. The rocky shoreline and lack of apparent arable soil discouraged others from making a claim on this land, and it would suit the Aliomenti perfectly.

Will led the way toward the lake, looking around. For purposes of isolation, they could pick no more perfect location for their new community. His concern was the elevation. The valley was likely thirty feet below sea level. Even a modest storm surge would propel massive amounts of water into the valley, wiping out this community just as Adam's fire had destroyed the original.

"We have to figure out how to protect our future shelter from the sea," he announced. "It looks idyllic, but I suspect it's uninhabited for a reason."

James, a metal worker, looked puzzled. "Isn't that what we want, though? Isn't that why we're building here?"

"It's not a reason to abandon this island," Will admitted. "But listen carefully."

They stood in silence, hearing nothing but the rustling wind and the somewhat distant roar of crashing waves. "I don't hear anything," James said with a shrug.

"Exactly," Will replied. "Shouldn't we hear birds? Insects? The occasional

sound of furry creatures in the trees? We don't hear anything, and why? Because this valley probably floods every time there's a major storm. Any wildlife living here has been wiped out. And with no insects to feed upon, birds have no reason to nest here. We must exercise caution, and we must figure out how to predict the flooding so that we might move to higher ground, or determine the means to minimize the effects of the flooding."

"But that's impossible!" David protested. "No one can predict the weather, or flooding. And we certainly can't alter the waves of the seas." He glanced around, nervous. "Perhaps we need to consider a different location after all."

"We do not, at least not yet," Will replied. "But everyone must work on their Energy skills. Until we have perfected those skills, we need to station watches throughout the day and night to look for signs that the sea is rising, and to raise an alarm telepathically. Everyone must learn teleportation, and we must find the highest ground on this island as a safe point during flood season. Those able to teleport must make their abilities known, and be prepared to aid those who have not yet progressed to that level. We will have drills to practice evacuations."

He looked at all of them. "Our first project here is therefore determined by Nature. We must build our city above the ground, *far* above the ground, high enough to sit above the floodwaters, where we can all live in safety."

They all nodded, eager for the challenge. Most were new recruits, and only a few were able to perform the teleportation that might one day save their lives. But they were also new enough that they'd not been part of the reconstruction of the original Aliomenti village, or the bunker and gear system that drove Aliomenti productivity and wealth. All relished the opportunity to build their own monument. The city would need to rise some forty feet into the air and withstand a storm surge from the ocean without toppling. It was a structure the likes of which the senior members at the original village had never attempted, and they were eager to prove themselves.

"We should give this place a name," Elise, a metal worker like James, said. "Any suggestions?"

"City in the Sky?"

"Water Town?"

Many other suggestions were tossed about, as Will mused privately. He was, of course, familiar with the city of Venice, Italy, a city formed from the land of 117 tiny islands, with natural canals formed by the water flowing between the bits of dry land. He suspected that the city might be familiar to some of them as they traveled to trade, and came into contact with others who had seen Venice.

They might wonder why Will, who to their knowledge was from and had never left England, would be familiar with the name of an obscure city so great a distance from home.

Yet his mind wandered elsewhere, thoughts triggered by the idea of a mysterious city on an island under a constant threat of flooding into oblivion, a city that, according to legend, developed into a great power before submerging beneath the waves forever. It seemed both a perfect, and ironic, fit to what they were looking to accomplish.

“Atlantis,” he said. “We’ll call this place Atlantis.”

TERRAFORMING

1035 A.D.

Will was concerned that the elevation, below sea level, along with the provable massive flooding, had left the soil unstable, without a bedrock that could provide the anchoring they required. Rigid anchoring was critical to the successful completion of the aggressive construction project they'd set for themselves.

“We’re dealing with immense pressure from the water that will rise and probably cover this island, and will certainly have the opportunity to flood this valley,” he explained. “We can’t trust that our city will remain standing, because the water will push relentlessly. There are a few ways we can counteract that, but anything we do will require that we put into the ground strong piers of concrete and metal that can hold the tower in one place.”

They got to work, openly using Energy to accelerate their efforts, no longer concerned with the possibility that outsiders would walk by and observe them. Seeing Will and the more senior Aliomenti work their Energy on the project motivated the others to focus with greater intensity on building their own Energy. They wanted to be able to contribute as their more senior counterparts did.

Their first step involved burrowing deep into the island soil and bedrock, which would lock the piers in place and give them a firm foundation for construction of the towers. That, of course, meant they'd need to find sufficient rock below the surface to hold those piers steady. Will and others used Energy to both loosen and remove rock and soil in the area where they'd build; thankfully, the soil was rocky just below the surface.

The carpenters and metal smiths worked on rigging up a gear-based mechanism they'd use to stir the concrete mix in huge containers being built by the potters. They did not spend time trying to figure out how to create water wheels, for the small streams lacked both the water volume and speed to turn the wheels with sufficient force to mix the concrete. Instead, they created cranks to turn the wheels which formed the gears. With the correct combination of wheel sizes, they minimized the effort required to turn the crank, yet still maximized the speed of the concrete mixer.

They worked methodically over the course of two weeks, generating a half-dozen evenly spaced piers drilled into the ground, piers that would provide the anchoring needed to build an incredibly stable tower for their elevated city.

During the evening hours, they went out in teams, scouting the island for any animal life or edible vegetation they might use for sustenance. They found none. It meant they'd need to travel once per day to one of the nearby coastal towns to purchase sufficient provisions for the thirty-five residents. David the farmer, thus far unable to provide specific expertise to move the building project forward, led the daily food shopping efforts, ensuring that they procured both a sufficient quantity and variety of food for the hard-working villagers. He used his background, expertise, and Energy skills to ensure that he got the best possible prices.

James and Elise, their best metal workers, were the primary duo planning the actual construction of the towers. They realized that a series of freestanding towers would not provide the strength necessary to support the weight of the city, and they conceived a flat-topped pyramid to serve as the base instead. The height would make it impossible to build simple wooden forms they could use to contain and shape the concrete as they'd done in the original village. They would first create inclined walls roughly in the shape of a pyramid, one that was wide and flat at the top. The structure would be hollow on the inside, an interior they'd use to store finished goods or excess provisions secured from the mainland.

After several months of effort, they were able to complete the base pyramid and the flat top of the structure. The top was sufficiently elevated that it would remain above any future flood that might arise. They'd next work on a more ambitious project: a large, wide floor seated on top of the pyramid base. It would serve as the "ground" for their elevated city, and it was there that they'd construct homes, workshops, and storage for goods they'd use for future trade.

As they'd worked on the construction of the massive pyramid base, they'd

also looked for safe shelters in the event the first bit of flooding occurred before the “ground floor” was complete. The ideal solution was to locate a system of caves above sea level, which would provide them both elevation and shelter from any storms, along with a modest degree of certainty they wouldn’t be swept away in any flood that began in the middle of the night. They were able to locate a large cave on the western edge of the island, of a sufficient size to hold their entire population. Though it was cramped, it was preferable to exposure. If they were spending time in that cave, comfort would not be their top priority; survival would be the only concern.

They also had to work on their water supply, for it had taken them little time to discover solid proof that the ocean waters overran the inland surface of the island on a regular basis. The water in the large streams and inland lake were salty, not quite to the degree of the sea itself, but enough to make the water undrinkable.

“Now what?” James wondered aloud.

David, the farmer, finally had a project he could lead up. He’d learned in his youth to boil water, and with the help of the metal workers was able to set up a small-scale system to purify the water they’d need for drinking.

Will realized that while the system worked as designed and produced fresh water, the quantities would be insufficient for what they needed, and the system might not be a practical one at the scale they required. They needed water sufficient for drinking, bathing, and future farming efforts. The brackish water would be of little use for any of those activities.

They decided that they needed to move water automatically and continuously through a system that could purify water for their purposes in the quantities they’d require. After purification, they’d funnel the water up to the top of the platform, where it would be accessible to them in their elevated homes.

“The primary concern here,” Will noted, “is that this system needs to work even if the island is flooded, even if the base of our living space is essentially floating on the top of the sea. We cannot rely on pulling water out of the streams, for example. What if they’re buried under thirty feet of sea water?”

“So how do we get a system that does this regardless of where the water is pulled from?” David asked.

“We can’t pull purified water from the surface up to the city floor,” Will realized. “We should put the purifying system at the city level; otherwise, it will get flooded and possibly destroyed each time the sea rises. Our system needs to gather salty water from whatever depth necessary and bring it up to us for

purification and usage.”

A small group mocked up a sample of the water purification system, even as the bulk of the Aliomenti completed the base of the pyramid and started to build a flat surface atop the base to serve as the new ground level of their city. Their prototype used a series of aqueducts, in which brackish water moved over rocks that naturally attracted the salt in the ocean water along with other impurities, and emerge fresh on the other end. They would rebuild it at full scale at the new city level, near where they’d construct the stores, shops, and residential areas. The fresh water would be distributed in the manner used back in the original village. On Atlantis, they simply faced a greater challenge in getting a source of fresh water. But it was a challenge they could meet.

“We need a way to make the collection system automated,” Will noted. “And we need to get the source water high enough above the city base that it can drop into our purification system and flow through our aqueducts. How do we do that? We could probably do something with gears and a hand crank, but we don’t have an Ealdor River here to provide a steady source of power. There’s nothing we can capture here that we can rely on, nothing that moves all the time like the river.”

Elise raised her hand. “What about wind, Will? The winds here are strong, and pretty constant. I’ve felt myself pushed by the wind more than once. Could we use wind to turn a wheel like we use the Ealdor River?”

Will stared at her. “Elise, that’s *brilliant!*”

The wind had been a source of complaint since they’d arrived on the desolate island. The constant movement of the ocean tides triggered brisk winds that often made it difficult to keep one’s balance. More than one person had suggested that the city in the air would need small perimeter walls to ensure that none of the residents plunged to their death after a strong gust of wind drove them off the platform.

In this circumstance, one problem came with the seeds of the solution to another.

Will had Elise, James, and David work on building a wind capturing device. “If we’re lucky, we can have it work somewhat like the water wheels back home,” James mused. “That means everything else we build—all of the gears, for instance—will work just as it did in the original village.”

“And if not,” Elise replied, “we’ll make something that works with what we’re able to capture.”

Will and Wayne focused their design and construction efforts on creating the

water delivery system. This critical system would capture water from the lake and raise it to the elevated city, where it would enter the water-purification system.

“I’d like to figure out how to make this system adjust to the height of the water we’re using as our source,” Will told them. “If we don’t, we’ll have cases where the water is forty feet *below* the city, and some where it’s *level* with the city. I’d rather not have to build several of these and switch between them depending on the height of the water.”

They discussed the best mechanisms for raising water, for regardless of the flood conditions, they’d need to raise water at least twenty feet for deposit into the purification system. They envisioned a system using a band much like they’d fashioned to transfer the power of aboveground water wheels to belowground gears. Instead of turning gears, this band would have buckets attached to the exterior. As the wheels turned and moved the band, the buckets would scoop water, and the band would lift the buckets up and over the top wheel to fall into a waiting water collector.

They used a rope to form the connecting band in an early prototype, but problems became apparent immediately. “The buckets of water are *heavy*,” said Daniel, one of the carpenters working with Will. “Lifting one isn’t a huge problem, but lifting *dozens*? I’m afraid the rope is going to snap due to the weight. And if the rope gets wet, well, then it’ll snap even faster.”

Will turned to Wayne, the wagon maker. “Didn’t you work with some of the tanners back at the old village? How strong is leather? Can we use something fashioned of leather to lift a large number of buckets full of water?”

Wayne shook his head. “I think Daniel’s point still holds, Will. It would be stronger than rope, true, but the water would ruin it in time. And even though it’s stronger than rope, it’s still not strong enough to lift that much weight. We need something much, much stronger.”

“Right,” Will said. “We need something made of metal.”

“Won’t metal rust, though?” Wayne asked. “Sure, it’s strong, but if it rusts through we’re still left with the problem of our band breaking.”

“Possibly,” Will admitted. “We’ll need to ask our metal workers about that. Let’s mock our system up with rope for now and see what they can come up with. It’s going to have to work much as a rope would, which means that our design should still apply.”

They used thick rope and a pair of smaller wheels that Wayne put together for testing, mounting the upper wheel on posts fifteen feet in the air above the

water. When Wayne asked how they'd get the wheel and rope up there, Will used Energy to float himself, along with the wheel and rope, to the top of the support posts and complete the task.

Wayne was amazed. "I've never seen anyone do that before. How... how can you..."

"Keep practicing, Wayne," Will replied, clapping the man on the shoulder. "Keep building your Energy. Soon enough, you'll see something floating a few feet off the ground as nothing to be excited about. You'll get there."

Wayne nodded, though he looked doubtful. Wayne had long struggled to build his Energy. Most others who had joined the Aliomenti with him, and who had taken their morange and zirple allocations at the same time, had by now progressed enough to perform tasks like basic levitation. Some had even started short-range teleportation. Wayne, though, still struggled with basic telekinesis, a basic Energy skill. No other Aliomenti were able to make wheels and other wood products with curved elements as well as he could, though. Will knew that Wayne felt inferior to his fellow Aliomenti, for though he tried to look excited and inspired by the progress of the others, he was unable to hide the pain in his eyes or emotions at the realization he was being left behind.

The two men attached a pair of buckets to the rope, and turned the lower wheel with a crank to see how the buckets would move as they rounded the two wheels. When a bucket hit the upper wheel, it would fly over the top, splashing the water to the side before flipping clumsily over the wheel.

"This isn't going to work," Wayne said, scowling. "The cranking mechanism isn't smooth, and the bucket is going horizontal too soon. The water is going to completely miss the aqueduct because it will spill out before the bucket turns upside down."

"Right," Will said, grimacing. "The trick is to figure out why it works on the original Wheel, but not here."

"It works on the original Wheel because the buckets are built into the Wheel," Wayne said. "It's impossible for the Wheel to turn without actually moving the buckets. And the buckets are angled."

Will grimaced. Would they need to build a new wheel large enough to collect water from the lake and lift it to the elevated city? And even if they could build such a massive structure, what force could possibly turn it?

"What we need to do," Wayne murmured, "is build the band so that it's basically a chain of buckets..." His eyes seemed to light up, lit by the fires of inspiration.

Will was intrigued by the statement. “Show me.” He found a stick and handed it to Wayne, motioning for the wagon maker to demonstrate his idea in the dirt.

“Well,” Wayne replied, suddenly hesitant. “I’m not really sure it will work, so maybe...”

“Wayne,” Will said, “nobody’s ever done this before. We don’t know if something will work until we try it. You may have the answer in your head right now, so it’s best if you draw the picture. Drawing it may trigger a different answer from either of us. We’ll keep adapting it until we get it right. But we have to start somewhere.”

Wayne nodded, still cautious. “What I’m thinking is that we build panels that fit together, and the outside of the panel is the bucket.” He seemed to find inspiration as he drew and explained. “We build a lot of wheels that fit together like gears, and we position them so that the panels get passed up the whole length with the teeth.”

Will grinned. “I love that! Let’s try it!”

Wayne shook his head. “We can’t try it yet, Will. See, the wheels will turn, but each gear goes in the opposite direction of the previous one. So every other wheel would push the panel *down*, rather than pull it *up*. The gears would work against themselves.”

Will thought about that. “But don’t we need to pull those panels *down* as much as push them *up*? Pulling down on one side is helping lift everything on the other.”

Wayne’s eyes widened. “If we space them correctly, so that the teeth only extend out to the panels on the correct side, and make the panels large enough.... yes, those gears will pull and push at the same time.”

“Let’s give it a shot,” Will said.

Wayne looked up. “It’s getting dark. How about we get started first thing in the morning?”

“Sounds like a great idea,” Will said, yawning. “This is going to work, Wayne, and everyone’s going to thank you for it.”

Wayne’s smile was genuine. It was the first time he felt he’d contributed to the community.

WATER

1035 A.D.

The sun rose, casting shadows through the few trees on the island. Clouds provided minimal cover against the warm summer rays, only just preventing the island from baking under the intense heat.

Will stretched and rose from the small reed mat they'd all woven for themselves. The reeds washed up on the shore, and they'd collected them early on to weave into makeshift blankets and sleeping mats. Will used extra clothing he had for a pillow. Since it was summer, and the weather here was noticeably warmer than it was back at the first village, it was a comfortable way to sleep.

The small huts were meant to be temporary. None of them wanted to be sleeping in the valley when the first storm drove the sea over the island, and they'd agreed that making the huts too comfortable might dissuade them from working as hard as they otherwise might to finish their permanent residences. The construction and creative efforts were to be focused on the completion of the megalithic concrete city in the sky.

After eating a morning meal, Will and Wayne began working on the design Wayne envisioned the day before. "I think the panels you envisioned can be thought of as hinges," Will said. "That's what they are, really. We can make teeth on the outside of the gear wheels specifically to fit into the gaps between the hinge panels. But I'm still worried about the size of them. They'll break as they round the wheels at the top or the bottom."

Wayne nodded, grinning. "I had the same thought, Will. And I think the problem is that we were thinking in the wrong direction. We don't want to make the panels *bigger*. We want to make the panels *smaller*."

Will blinked a few times. “Come again?”

“You’re exactly right, Will. If we make those panels, say, ten feet tall, they’ll bend and snap when they round the wheels at the top or the bottom. In addition, the direction of the water pour at the top would be unpredictable. So... we make them *smaller*. Maybe a couple of gear teeth tall each. The gears can be much, much smaller this way as well.”

Will considered this, and then realized what Wayne was proposing. It was the equivalent of the chains used to pull roller coaster cars up the hills at the beginning of the ride. The individual links could easily bend around the wheel at the top and return back to where they’d started. In their case, the links wouldn’t pull wheeled vehicles up a large hill and then return to the ground empty. Instead, they’d attach buckets every few panels to scoop up water from the source.

“We can add buckets as needed this way.”

“Exactly.”

“The panels can actually extend off to one side which will make pouring the water into the aqueduct much simpler.”

“Agreed.”

“And we probably don’t need to worry so much about the water over the top. The gears, the buckets, they’ll all be so small that there won’t be as much weight.”

“Exactly.”

“It’ll be a huge number of very small buckets, moving a small amount of water each, but at a high rate of speed.”

“Whoa, wait just a moment,” Wayne said. “Why a high rate of speed?”

“To get a steady stream of water, we need to dump it into the initial aqueduct at the very highest point as smoothly as possible. That’s what we had with the water wheels back home. Here in Atlantis, though, we don’t have wheels continuously dumping water into our aqueducts, because it’s more difficult to obtain the water. We’re getting a smaller quantity of water with each scoop. That means we have to dump those scoops out more quickly, which means...”

“Which means that we need to move the entire system more quickly,” Wayne finished, frowning. “That brings up my next concern. I think we can build this up a bit at a time, add each new gear and then add additional small panels and buckets as needed. But... how are we going to turn the top wheel? It’s going to take a huge amount of force to get that many gears to turn at once.”

“Whatever it is, it needs to be up there,” Will said, pointing at the pyramid.

“It can’t be down here. The water might very well topple the entire gear turning mechanism, and then we have a problem. If it’s up there, we can reach it and fix it if needed.”

“I need to see what it looks like from up there,” Wayne said. “Perhaps James and Elise have ideas about how to use wind to turn the gears.”

Will nodded. “Ready?”

Wayne took a deep breath and nodded. “Let’s go.”

“Fast or slow?”

“Fast,” Wayne replied.

Will grasped Wayne’s shoulder and teleported both of them to the top of the pyramid.

The structure was immense and awe-inspiring. Will found himself incredulous that they’d built as much as they had. The volume of concrete in the base of the city alone was staggering.

“What’s really impressive,” James said, walking over to them, “is that this structure, this giant block if you want to think of it that way, is almost entirely hollow.”

“Really?” Wayne said. “Why would we want it to be hollow?”

“Several reasons, actually,” James replied. “First, having it hollow when we’re all up high means that the water has somewhere to go. We thought about it, and realized that having a giant building there for the water to hit would make it *more* likely that it would be damaged. So we worked to make the inside as hollow as we could, and put holes in the walls so that the ocean water could actually flow through and out the opposite side.”

“Interesting,” Wayne said. “I wouldn’t have thought of that.”

“Actually, we got the idea from the wagon wheels you make,” James said with a grin. “When we drive those wagons and the winds are strong, you’d think the wagons would get blown in the direction of the wind. But the wagons don’t move. Why? Because the wind can flow right through the wheels. The wheels don’t try to block the wind, because it doesn’t take much speed for the wind to win that battle. We actually wanted to make a series of giant legs, but we simply didn’t have the ability to put up forms high enough to do that. The walls are built atop the piers, and taper in from the outside. On the inside, though, they go straight up, but the walls are fairly narrow at the top. The walls are only thick enough to hold the top part of the pyramid, which will support the city itself.”

“I like that,” Will said. “You also don’t have to make quite so much concrete. It’s got to be difficult enough to get that much material; if this structure was solid

we'd have a tough time getting enough rocks here to get the platform even half as high as we need it."

"Exactly," James replied. "The teams have been smart about this. They were telling me about this earlier, and I was very impressed with how they've managed to think of so many possibilities before we started to build."

"What else?" Wayne asked.

"Well... we wanted to make sure that we had a means of getting stuff up from the surface. Not everyone can fly or teleport, but everyone can walk. It's not just about those who are here now, either, or where they are in terms of Energy skill progress. Eventually we'll have to recruit again, and those people will need to walk up and down steps. So we have to account for that. There are staircases carved into the inside of the walls, very wide stairs that run against those inside walls. We have staircases that start on opposite sides of the structure so people can move up whichever side is nearest to where they entered."

"I think that's a great idea," Will said.

"I agree," James replied. "The plan right now is to build using wood, rather than concrete, just because of the weight. And we're pretty much out of rock to use as the raw materials for the concrete anyway."

"So the next phase is to start building places to live up here?" Wayne asked.

James nodded. "Once we get enough places built, we'll start living up here. We built areas that could be filled with soil where we can farm and grow zirple and morange, so we'll never lack for at least some vegetation to eat. We'll build out shops after that, probably starting with ovens for baking. We'll need to get the water problem fixed by then though."

"Right," Will replied. "Wayne's come up with a brilliant plan to get the water up here."

James looked surprised. "Oh? Tell me about it." He turned his gaze to Wayne.

"Um," Wayne said, suddenly nervous. "That is, we want to use panels. To move the water."

James frowned. "That doesn't make any sense. How would panels hold water? Aren't they... *flat*? Wouldn't water just slide off the panels instead of getting collected and moved where we need it?"

"Right," Wayne said. "The panels, they would have... things... to get the water."

James shook his head. "What things? How would they get the water? Are you still talking about flat panels? If not that, what? I'm confused."

Will stepped in. “Wayne’s idea is to use small, short boards which attach together in a type of continuous metal panel that can bend smoothly around the wheels that form the top and bottom of the lift system. We’d set it up as a continuous gear system; the alternating gears turn in opposite directions, and would pull the panels up on one side and push them back down on the other. The gaps between panels would catch the gear teeth. If we attach buckets to those panels, much like the ones on the Wheel back at the village, we can move the water all the way up from the surface.”

James stroked his chin, nodding slowly. “I see what you mean, Will. We’re basically trying to capture the same effect as the water wheels back home, but without needing to build a wheel big enough to do so.”

“We don’t have enough water to turn a wheel that size, either,” Wayne noted.

James laughed. “That’s very true.” He glanced at Will. “Great idea.”

“It was Wayne’s idea, actually,” Will replied. “I’m here to help him build it so we can make sure it works well before we build the full-size version.”

“Got it,” James replied. He turned to Wayne. “Great idea. I think it’s going to work. What can I do to help?”

“Aren’t you helping to build the upper platform?”

“Not any more,” James said. “With the pyramid built and the concrete pouring completed, it’s primarily an effort for the carpenters at this point. I’ve been trying to figure out how to capture all of this wind to turn a wheel, just like the river turned the wheel back home. Getting the water up here is of vital importance, so if there’s something I can do to help, then that’s what I’ll do.”

“We appreciate that,” Wayne replied.

“Can you show us where you’d look over the side to see that large stream empty into the lake?” Will asked.

“Sure,” James replied. He led the way to the northwest corner of the structure, and, after warning them to be careful because of the strong winds, leaned over the side. Wayne and Will followed suit.

“Wow, that’s a long way down.” Wayne’s nervousness was genuine; as a man not able to levitate himself, fly, or teleport, a fall would be fatal.

“It is,” Will replied. “But we’re not going down that way. We’ll use the stairs, fly, or teleport.”

He leaned over the side and looked down. The estuary where the stream fed the lake was about ten feet off to the side, which meant that they’d need to construct the lift system that far over.

He had an idea. While Wayne watched, baffled, Will got a long length of

rope and tossed it over the side until the end of the rope hit the ground, several feet away from the stream. Will pulled the rope up until the tip just touched the ground, making sure the drop point wasn't just nearer that specific lake because of how the rope landed on the ground. He found a length of board and slid it over the length of the top of the wood, and moved the board until he got the rope over the lake, using Energy to hold the board in place until they could secure it with more traditional means.

“OK, that's how far out from the wall the water lift system will need to be built in order to reach the lake. So we need to build a platform of some type to reach that far away from the primary base of the city, and probably have the edge of our aqueduct system that far out as well. We need to make sure that it's strong and secure so that any high winds don't damage the structure or knock it off into the water below.”

Wayne nodded. “That makes sense, Will. I like the idea of having the rope there; it shows us exactly where it needs to drop from here, but it will also give us a target to start with down below. We could actually build from both directions at the same time if we follow the path of the rope.”

“Good idea, Wayne. Right now, we need to start making those gear wheels and panels. The prototype works; now we have to start working on the full size version.” Will glanced at James. “Once we get this built, we'll need your wind-based system to turn the gears and get the water up here.”

James nodded.

They began constructing the wheels for the gears a week later, when the pyramid top was confirmed fully hardened and ready for regular use and additional construction. As they built the water lift system, David and many of the others began constructing residences, shops, and stores. They also, at a suggestion from Will, created buildings just for social experiences: small restaurants and pubs where those who brewed ale, baked, or cooked could sell their wares and provide an atmosphere for socialization. They also kept a bit of space set aside for a sort of amphitheater, where the residents could come to sing and dance and celebrate their successes.

Ideally, such celebrations wouldn't be followed by anyone being beaten to death.

After Wayne turned in early—he and David had night watch duty, protecting those who slept from any storms and storm surge that might strike overnight—Will spent his time thinking of Hope, as he so often did. She and Eva had moved east after a brief hiatus away from Healf, and were reportedly in a small city

nearly four hundred miles away from their first home, a journey of such distance that they were unlikely to be found by anyone they'd seen in the past, whether Aliomenti or from Healf. Will grimaced. If Atlantis was a success—and he had no reason to believe it would be anything else—the Aliomenti would want to expand again, and this time they'd insist on moving east for their next settlement. Will admitted to himself that that would be the correct decision. In business terms, they needed to enter new markets, and that meant they'd need to step outside the boundaries of English-speaking territories into those that spoke French and German and Spanish and Italian. They'd need to establish a school to train residents to speak those languages, as well as Latin, so that they could understand what was being sold to them and explain what they were selling. They'd need to learn new customs and manners of negotiation if they hoped to continue the successes they'd always enjoyed in their efforts to the north, and which they'd soon commence here in the south based out of Atlantis.

Hope, of course, was excited for the next round of her journey. Though she knew that she'd need to repeat this process many times over the coming centuries, she still treated her new home as the start of a new adventure, one which promised new experiences. She and Eva had used their downtime to learn how to weave, and had become extremely proficient. Will had managed to sneak away during early phases of construction and visit them on their hidden island in the Mediterranean, and had to admit that, even with his natural bias, they had produced beautiful work. They'd succeed in their new home just as they had in Healf.

If only their home and his could be the same.

It was agonizing for him. Though both he and Hope enjoyed the work they did, though both were making a positive difference in the lives of those they lived with, such contribution came with the cruel requirement that they stay apart. The brief meetings in person were bittersweet, a reminder of what could never be, what they'd need to wait until the twenty-first century to experience. And even then, only one of them would actually be able to experience that ultimate joy at the end of their thousand-year journey.

Will turned his thoughts away from it immediately. As time wore on, as cruel fate demanded he and his wife keep their distance and act as anything *but* husband and wife, he was forever jealous of what he'd not appreciated to a great enough degree while he'd had it. Though he suspected that future Hope had seen no such failure on his part, he realized now just how remarkable the woman he'd married was. Though he'd been ignorant of the true strength of her character and

the sacrifices she'd made to be with him and bear their children, he still felt that he should have appreciated her more. Perhaps, when this was all done, he could tell her, with both of them fully aware of their entire histories and stories, how much he wished he'd appreciated her more.

That was assuming he'd ever get that chance, for he had no guarantee that either version of him would be alive in the future after the fire.

GRIEF

1035 A.D.

They went to sleep that night with no indication that the morning would not come, that Nature would declare judgment on their effort to thwart her plans for the island.

The shouts woke Will, and he sat up, startled but dazed. The taste of salt water touched his lips and tongue, and suddenly he was wide awake, sitting up on a cot that was floating, barely, in water that rose waist high.

His empathic senses were on high alert, screaming, as those around him realized in great terror what was happening. Those who could teleport moved in an instant high above the water, upon the top of the city platform in the sky, initially forgetting in their own panic that they were to help other Aliomenti. The many who could not teleport, abandoned by their peers in the face of the rising waters, struggled to their feet, barely able to move against the rushing water of the ocean. But as they calmed, those up high began returning to the flooded valley, locating their peers and taking them to the safety of the platform that was slowly transforming into a new city.

The storm thrashed the waves against the shore, pounding upon the beach, and breaching the minimal defenses the island mounted against such fury. As they had suspected and speculated, the water surged over the beach and poured down into the valley they now called home, threatening to fill the valley with the angry water of the ocean. They had tempted fate by continuing to sleep on the ground, fearing the winds that might rise up and knock them from the lofty perch in their sleep far more than the speculated threat of rising water.

They had chosen poorly.

And now Will could not find all those who screamed.

The darkness hid them, and the water tossed him around as though he was in a whirlpool. Will used his long-dormant nanos to form an exoskeleton around himself, less for protection from the floating debris than a means to float himself above the surface, conserving his Energy for the rescue ahead.

“Light up!” he screamed aloud, before realizing that no one could hear him above the fury of the storm. He repeated the broadcast telepathically, trying to wake the minds of those who had not yet succumbed to the waves. Those able to do so used their Energy to illuminate lights that he could see, but even those pinpricks were barely visible in the downpour... and he did not know how many remained to be saved.

He caught the minds of James and Elise, their voices feeble against the winds that shredded the hut he’d slept in, and he flashed to their sides and teleported them to safety atop the pyramid, before flinging himself over the side once more. The nanos provided the levitation, keeping him safely above the rising waters, his Energy beaming forth in the form of a human searchlight, seeking for those still floating in the flood.

James! Elise! Find those who have reached the top. Count those who are there! How many remain below?

He located the farmer David, who was clinging desperately to a piece of driftwood, his grip losing the battle against the raging waters. David could levitate briefly, but could not teleport, and it was evident he’d drained himself in the effort to find the driftwood, and his fatigue carried over into his waning grip on the wood and on life. Will flashed to his side.

He reappeared in time to see David crushed against the side of the concrete megalith they’d constructed.

The injuries were too great for even Will’s Energy skills and nanobots. The light left David’s eyes, and his body slipped beneath the waters.

Will flew his exoskeleton below the surging waters, seeking out the body, foolish though he knew the gesture might be. As his hand touched David’s lifeless corpse, he flashed them to the top and returned instantly, looking for more.

We’ve done well, Will! Elise’s telepathic voice reached him. All are accounted for save for David and Wayne.

I have retrieved David, Will’s telepathic voice stated. We will be able to bury him when the waters recede.

There was a pause, and her grief-filled voice reached him. *Please. Find*

Wayne. We cannot lose another. Not like this.

Knowing now he had but one more to find, Will expended more Energy on his light, brightening the surface of the rapidly rising waters as if it was daytime, searching for any sign of Wayne. There was nothing. Where could he be?

Will took a deep breath. He urged the nano-based flying suit into the water and projected the light forward in a wide beam, all the way down to the floor of the valley, now buried under a dozen feet of water, water that continued to rise even as he searched. He rose once above the surface, his lungs burning, and after refilling them with precious oxygen, dove again.

There was no sign of Wayne.

Will rose, looking at the concrete monolith, and as the memory of James' description of the structure crashed into his mind, he suddenly knew where he would find Wayne. He teleported inside the tower, where the stairs had been built, a means of reaching the summit on foot for those not yet able to teleport.

The stairs were there for those like David. And for those like Wayne.

It took only an instant to have his worst suspicions confirmed.

Wayne's body floated face down in the rising water inside the tower. His final moments seemed clear. He'd managed to enter the tower as the waters began to pour into the valley, and his race up the steps to safety had ended when he'd slipped in the darkness. Will flew to him, trying to control his grief long enough to dismantle the nano exoskeleton, long enough to touch Wayne's lifeless body and teleport both of them to the safety at the top of the structure.

The safety offered by the top of the structure came too late for Wayne, just as it had for David.

Will appeared with Wayne near the body of David, who lay there amid the few who had thus far come to pay their immediate last respects and show their grief at the loss of their friend. David had handled the immediate adversity of Atlantis well; his deepest skills would have been useless until they'd managed to terraform the rocky surface into the floating city in the sky they'd envisioned, a floating city with artificial gardens David would tend to ensure all of them were well fed. He'd not waited around until they'd reached that point; instead, he'd found a way to contribute, working with all those who toiled stirring the mixture of the massive volumes of concrete they'd needed to build the monolithic structure. It was the structure they now rested his body upon, and the structure that had ended his life.

Wayne's usefulness had been shrouded initially, but he'd adapted his knowledge of the structure and operation of wagon wheels into the design of the

system that would supply the city with clean, fresh water. He'd done it when no one else, not even Will, had figured out how to overcome the obstacles in their way. Though he'd struggled to develop his Energy skills, he'd not ceased contributing as best he could, and his final contribution would literally make life possible on the barren land.

Will wept at the loss of both men, and at their failure that night. It was a failure to save all those entrusted to their care, the failure of those able to do so to save all who needed their assistance. Yet even as he grieved, he remembered a detail that none of them wanted to voice, as they gazed at the lifeless remains of those they'd bury once the waters receded.

David and Wayne had been the two on watch that night, the two scheduled to watch for storms. Their responsibility that night: to sit on opposite ends of the island, looking for any indication of imminent flooding, any sign of an impending storm surge putting all of them at risk. It had been their duty to raise the alarm telepathically, to alert everyone to wake up and move to high ground immediately, to save their lives.

They'd tried to do so. Yet their Energy had been so dissipated by their construction efforts that they'd been unable to rouse anyone from a distance. Their Energy had been so low that David, who *could* teleport short distances, had been unable to move so much as a yard, and both men had run, run as fast as they could, screaming as loud as their lungs would allow them, screaming to their friends and neighbors to move to higher ground.

The first they'd reached had sounded the alarm, sounded the telepathic cry that had roused Will. Those woken first by the watchmen had teleported to the top with neighbors unable to do so.

None of those able to teleport had noticed the storm criers racing past, still working to ensure that everyone was awake and alert and able to move to safety. No one noticed them, not even when the first massive surges of water raced over the tops of the hills and smashed both men to the ground. Both had recovered sufficiently to try to survive. Wayne had managed to dive into the dark, salty water where he knew the doors into the tower would be found, in the hope that he could swim to the stairs and race the water to the top. But the effort had exhausted him, combined as it was with his efforts to run and warn everyone, and in his fatigue the water caught up to him. The surge had made the steps slippery, and he'd fallen, bashing his head against the concrete steps, and he lost consciousness before he'd drowned. David had managed to stay afloat until he'd found the driftwood that had eventually rammed his helpless body into the

concrete wall, killing him instantly.

The grief was overwhelming. The two men had done their jobs, despite being poorly equipped to do so. In doing those jobs to the best of their abilities, they'd lost their lives, even as they'd saved the lives of everyone else.

The faces of the survivors, lit by the brilliant flashes of lightning of the now-distant deadly storm, showed that they'd all reached the same conclusions, had all realized exactly what had happened, had all realized that the two dead men before them had sacrificed their lives so that all the others might live.

Will vowed he'd let no one else die like Wayne and David, even though he knew such promises could not be kept. He could not have prevented their deaths, and even if they'd taken the ambrosia, they'd still lie dead before him as they did now. Yet that did not mean there were not steps that could be taken to reduce the risk that others would suffer such a fate. They'd need to finish the structure. They'd need to get the fresh water system built so that no one needed to go to the valley for any reason, whether to sleep near the grass or to collect firewood or supplies. They could make this work, could ensure that Atlantis would not be cursed like the Atlantis of legend, destined to be consumed beneath the raging waves of the sea, but it would take work.

They were all looking at him, expecting him to speak, but Will felt no source of inspiration. He shook his head, bowed in a sign of respect, and allowed the silence and the darkness to consume them all.

At long last, the words came. "These men sacrificed their lives that we might live. And to Wayne and David, we promise that your sacrifice will not be in vain. We will ensure that we allow no others to find themselves in a situation like you found yourselves. We vow to work on our Energy skills, to ensure that we are able, at a minimum, to fly or teleport from the valley floor to the city floor in times of great urgency, in times like what we experienced tonight. We will use our grief at your loss to improve everything about our city, and about ourselves, so that we can be worthy to be called Aliomenti and citizens of this city-in-the-sky called Atlantis. We believe anything at all is possible, and in saying that, we say that we believe that you will be proud of us one day for what we accomplish here on this rock."

Will took one of the blankets lying nearby, used it to cover Wayne's body, and then took a second to cover David's.

He turned and walked away, leaving the dead to sleep in peace.

The morning dawned after a sleepless night. The concrete was cold and unforgiving, but none of them complained, for they were alive to feel that chill

and experience that pain. The flood waters had receded rapidly, and Will wondered why the water could drain so quickly after the valley had filled up as it had the night before. It was as if there was a drain clogged somewhere. He needed to figure out where the waters flowed to escape the valley and return to the ocean. Perhaps they could expand upon and unclog that drain to prevent such horrific flooding in the future.

That would wait until the burials were complete.

Will and several others returned to the mainland and one of the coastal towns to purchase their daily rations of food and casks of fresh water for the villagers to drink. They also bought two simple pine boxes, which raised some eyebrows from those in the village. But no questions were asked of strangers who spent good coins of silver and gold in their town; the sound of metal changing hands was the only answer needed.

They rowed back to the island and transported the simple coffins to the city in the sky, where they placed the bodies inside the boxes. The waters had receded now to the point that they would merely splash through ankle-deep water in the valley, and Will wondered once more where the water went after the storm ceased pushing the waves into the bowl of the valley. They'd wait until the excess water fully receded before lowering the boxes to their final resting place.

The construction teams were hard at work on the city floor, working to build out the temporary housing they'd sleep in until the more permanent structures were completed. Others were examining the foundation of the pyramid which held the entire city safely above the flood waters when the storm surges came. They proclaimed the Energy-hardened concrete sound, and the structure safe to use for the base of their homes, and everyone returned topside briefly.

They used the rope that Will and Wayne had used to mark the location they needed to reach to tap into the stream and lake below, treating it as a makeshift crane as they lowered the two coffins with the bodies of the dead men inside to the valley floor below.

Will was reminded of the effort to lower the coffin with the body of Elizabeth Lowell into the ground a decade earlier. This pair of coffins, though, would not be emptied of the living, but would forever hold the bodies of the dead.

They used Energy to clear the land near where the stream joined the lake, the spot targeted for the construction of Wayne's water transport system. Given enough time, and the ability to predict or prevent the type of flood experienced the night before, it might have been a prime spot for David to raise crops and

livestock.

Instead, it was the spot where their coffins were lowered into the ground. The sounds of the dirt hitting the wood echoed throughout the valley, each echo like a hammer to the hearts of all those present.

They stood there for an hour, all in silence, each wondering how it had happened. How had they, the Aliomenti, so wealthy and powerful, lost two good men in so senseless a manner? They believed their abilities made them impervious to any type of attack, that only old age could sap the life from their veins. And yet, on the verge of completing their greatest project and fulfilling their most ambitious achievement, Nature had won.

They gradually dispersed, and did the only thing they knew how to do. They returned to their projects, many moving to the top of the city to construct the buildings they'd use for lodging and their future daily craft work.

Will returned to the ledge he'd stood on the day before, the ledge where he and Wayne had planned the process for creating the water conveyance system. He'd need to continue on without Wayne, and as he thought of what they'd need to do, he realized with a sudden start why they'd suffered such a tremendous loss.

Pride.

They had come to believe themselves incapable of failure, and time and again they'd found evidence to support that belief. And yet, as with all human beings, failure was a part of life and death. Pride prevented them from seeing the obvious, that with the support pyramid completed they'd be wise to require everyone to spend all time on top of the structure except when they were required to spend time below. Yet they'd believed themselves invincible against even the dangers they'd identified. Their arrogance had left two good men dead.

Will turned and looked at the thirty-two other residents of Atlantis, and resolved that they'd not make that mistake ever again. The cost was simply too high.

IMMORTALS

1036 A.D.

One year later

Will knelt by the graves, thinking of the times he'd spent with David and Wayne. Their sacrifices had not been forgotten. Both men would be proud of what the Atlanteans had accomplished since their untimely deaths a year earlier.

Will stood, and his gaze shifted from the ground to the sky, taking in the enormity of everything they'd accomplished.

When the Aliomenti had arrived, the island had been a craggy, desolate mass of rock on the exterior, with a beautiful scenic interior that sloped down into a valley below sea level. Will had correctly guessed that strong storms could push the water over the beach and rock, flooding the valley, and they'd discovered that all bodies of water on the island were salty, seemingly proof of that theory.

Using the design Wayne had envisioned, they were able to raise the water consistently, using a combination of wind and gravity, to a purification system some ninety feet above the ground, well above the base level of the city they'd constructed in the sky. The water exited that system fresh and clean, but it wouldn't have mattered without Wayne's design; they'd have been unable to move enough water above the surface to survive.

The elevated city was itself an impressive sight. Concerned about the flooding, the Aliomenti had banded together to raise a massive pyramid with a platform top, a structure built of concrete that would rise above the flood level of the island. The platform acted as the ground level for a small city built of wood, where they'd managed to create gardens of rich soil and grow crops. The city

also served as home for the many Aliomenti shops that kept the Atlantean Aliomenti busy.

The city featured the type of variety so lacking in the original village. Where the northern village's dwellings were uniform inside a single two-story building, the southern outpost featured multiple buildings of different sizes, shapes, and colors. They interspersed dwellings and shops, enabling the craftspeople to live and work in the same part of town. The city also boasted actual pubs where the citizenry could eat and socialize, typically before or after their work was completed for the day.

They used the hollowed-out inside of the pyramid for storage, but they avoided filling it to capacity, using only the space near the top for fear of future flooding. One could still enter the structure at the ground level and walk up stairs to reach the city center, but more and more Aliomenti were able to levitate themselves or teleport to make the trip. The stairs were another reminder of the tragedy the two graves represented. Both David and Wayne had failed to progress sufficiently in their Energy development to master those rapid transport skills, and both had perished when confronted with the flood a year earlier.

The Atlanteans pursued Energy growth with explosive intensity after that flood and the tragic deaths. Almost all could now teleport at least a dozen feet, and that meant that they'd be able to instantly move ahead of a torrent of water, reaching the stairs and teleporting up them. A simple majority now could teleport the fifty feet or so necessary to move from the island valley to the edges of the city, meaning they'd be safe from the flash floods in an instant. They'd also worked on their telepathic sending skills, for Wayne and David had been unable to wake the villagers quickly enough due to their low Energy stores that fateful night. Had they been more powerful, had the two watchmen been able to awaken everyone sooner, one of the more powerful Aliomenti would have had the opportunity to teleport both men to safety long before the flood waters filled the bowl and led to their premature and unnecessary deaths.

With the city finished, life settling into a routine, and survival skills for the unique challenges of the island well-developed, the Atlanteans had thirsted for a new challenge. They'd found it by beginning to build ships. That was one of the reasons Arthur and Adam had announced they'd be visiting the southern Aliomenti city this day.

They'd been using rowboats to move their goods to the mainland for trade, and the small size limited the amount they could transport. Larger goods, like tables, proved impossible to move, until the innovative carpenters figured out

how to disassemble the furniture into component parts for more efficient transport. Will had to stifle a laugh, wondering if they should include indecipherable instructions for reassembling the pieces. It wasn't necessary, for at least one carpenter would be part of each trip to the coastal villages. Still, it took a bit of restraint for Will to avoid checking for part labels on the pieces in the boats during the trips he made to the mainland.

While they were able to grow appreciable amounts of food above ground, they still relied heavily on the moderately arable land below the city. The farmers had figured out how to apply the lessons of the water purification system to remove the excess salt from the soil, and the reclaimed material proved excellent for growing all manner of produce. They could not rely on the crop, however, for they never knew when the next powerful storm would strike, leading to floods and total crop destruction. The farmers planted faster-growing produce on the surface, while crops with long growth cycles, including zurple and morange, were planted in the city. But they could not grow everything there, and with limited space for livestock they struggled to keep protein intake at the levels they'd determined to be ideal.

This lack of self-sufficiency meant that the Atlanteans spent more money on essentials than their northern brethren, and though they made a great deal of money from selling their products, they could not develop wealth at the same pace. Few complained about their financial situation, however, but that didn't prevent them from seeking means to accelerate their financial growth. The larger ships being built would mean they could transport a greater volume of finished goods for trade. The increased capacity would also mean they could return with extensive provisions the Atlanteans could store to supplement their local efforts.

When the audible and telepathic shouts arose, announcing the arrival of Adam and a rejuvenated Arthur, Will left the graves and headed toward shore on foot. The grass and soil were soft, the air was salty, and the warmth of the sun filled him with a strange sense of contentment. It was a strange sensation, for he was leaving the graves of two men he'd admired in order to meet with two he would far prefer to see buried in the ground. Walking, rather than teleporting, gave him the time to calm himself to once more be in their presence.

The two men stepped off the boat as Will arrived, glancing at their surroundings. They'd built up a ring of trees on the perimeter of the island, which Will had privately coaxed to greater heights at night when others were sleeping. Sailors would ignore a rocky island, and might continue on their way at the sight of a flat piece of land in the midst of the sea if they saw nothing but a

few tall trees. But few would ignore the sight of the city they'd built, even less so if they ever realized the city rested upon a platform forty feet off the ground.

"This place really doesn't look inviting, does it?" Arthur asked, looking askance at the crusty exterior of the island. Will found the comment ironic, given that Arthur was rather crusty on the outside as well. Unlike the island, however, Arthur had no scenic interior to redeem him. "I suppose that's useful for maintaining isolation."

"The island reserves its best for those bold enough to venture within," Will replied. "We've added our own enhancements to its natural charms, as I mentioned in our communications."

"Yes, I'm quite eager to see this *supposed* massive city sitting upon a giant... what did you call it? A pyramid?"

Will shrugged, not bothering to remain annoyed at Arthur's skepticism over their reports of the city construction. He'd see it soon enough. "We call it that. It's basically a huge block of concrete acting as a table, with the city resting on the top."

Adam nodded thoughtfully. "I suspect it looks impressive, and I can't wait to see it."

Arthur snorted.

Will nodded at Adam. "You can see for yourself." He glanced at Arthur. "Or hop back in the boat, if you prefer. Better yet, teleport far, far away."

Arthur winced, then shuddered at the idea. He'd not overcome his fear of teleportation, and Will smirked at the impact the barb had generated.

They walked through an opening in the rocks, maneuvered through the trees, and emerged at the threshold of the great interior valley.

Adam gave a low whistle as the city came into view. "Will, I don't think your descriptions have done this place justice."

Even Arthur couldn't hide his awe at the sight, his jaw agape and, in a moment Will would long savor, Arthur was in his presence and speechless.

They marched toward the city on foot, parading down the sides of the valley toward the base of the city, following the path worn in the soft grass from those moving toward the door and the stairway. "So what is it you want to talk to all of us about?" Will asked.

"Several topics, actually," Arthur said. "First, I understand you're planning to build larger ships. May I ask why?"

"Sure," Will said. "Our markets are reachable only by boat. The boats we currently use are small and cannot carry much product, or the people who can

sell that product. With larger ships, we have the option and chance to move more product to the mainland on a regular basis, and that will improve our profits.”

Adam arched an eyebrow. “Is that all?”

Will arched his own eyebrow back. “We’re considering longer trips to the south. There are rumors of English-speaking people having success trading there in the past, so we’ll have more places to sell. They may offer products and materials we’ve not encountered before, and that can only help us. And... eventually, we’ll want to expand again. We may look to go south. Might as well keep our eyes open and start looking now. For trips of that length? We’ll need larger ships capable of journeys lasting several days.”

Adam nodded, but Arthur looked perturbed. “Should we not be moving east, where the greater portion of the civilized world might be found?”

Will almost laughed. “All directions will yield great opportunities, Arthur, if we give ourselves enough time.”

Arthur almost choked. “I suppose that’s true. East seems a better choice. But while your ships and trading proposals are interesting, that’s not the reason we’re here.”

“We’re here for two reasons, actually,” Adam noted.

Arthur leveled a glare in Adam’s direction. “The first item we wish to discuss relates to growing your numbers in this location. We’ve added about fifteen new members to the northern village since you’ve left, and are at fifty strong now. How are your numbers?”

“We’ve replaced no one since we lost Wayne and David a year ago,” Will replied. “Several of our villagers have married, however, so—”

“*What?*” Arthur whirled on Will, his face full of rage. “We spoke about this, Will! The dangers of childbearing for one trained and awakened in Energy are too great to take that chance! I would think you’d have been a bit more... articulate on the matter.”

Will scowled. “Yes. We said we’d make people aware of the risks. They’re aware. We’ve made it clear what might happen should they bear children. Most are content remaining childless, at least for now, until they feel more confident of their ability to restrain their offspring. I doubt that will continue indefinitely, however.” In fact, the metal workers, James and Elise, had talked to him on the topic quite extensively; they’d likely be the first Atlantean couple to choose to have a child.

“Perhaps a compromise,” Arthur mused. “Perhaps bringing a child or two in from a village, orphans, who do not bring with them the social awkwardness of a

family unit or innate Energy skills—”

It was Will’s turn to interrupt. “There is no ‘social awkwardness’ here in terms of family units, Arthur. We have many couples here, and they are quite content. A family unit including a child would fit in just fine.”

Arthur’s eyes flashed his disagreement. “Be that as it may, children cannot replace the skills and mastery lost a year ago, regardless of how they might be... acquired. You will need to seek out skilled adults to do that. I will accompany you to the mainland to seek recruits, as it is something I excel at.”

Will sighed. “Fine. Join us. We have another outing in a few days.” He paused. “What was the other topic?”

“We’ll save that topic for a meeting with everyone in Atlantis,” Arthur said, his interruption of Adam quite evident. Adam looked as if he was considering making his statement even after Arthur spoke, but a glare from Arthur silenced him. Will had detected the trickle of Energy that had occurred; Arthur had spoken to Adam telepathically, and whatever he’d said had silenced the second man.

Will could only wonder what Adam had wanted to say.

The Atlanteans, who had all come from the northern village with Will, greeted the two visitors warmly, and they gathered around to get updates on close friends left behind. Arthur and Adam reported that they’d found a few new cities available for trade, and that they’d made a few adjustments to the concrete formula that enabled them to use less material than before.

Will glanced down at his feet, at the concrete monolith beneath him. “We could have used that knowledge a year ago,” he deadpanned. Everyone laughed.

Will gave Arthur a look. “You’d mentioned having something you wanted to discuss with all of us?”

“I did, and I do.” Arthur paused, his eyes flicking up as if deciding how best to word his comments, and then he continued. “A few years ago, as most of you remember, I was near death, aging as many do, and I fear I was far nearer to meeting my Maker than even I suspect. And yet here I stand today, a man nearing sixty, yet I look and feel far younger. Many of you have undoubtedly wondered why, and how, that change took place.”

“Arthur!” Will spoke sharply, realizing what was happening. “This is *not* the time or the manner in which to discuss this.”

“You wish to hide from these good people the secret of my remarkable recovery, Will?” Arthur asked, arching an eyebrow, his tone innocent.

Will silently cursed himself. Arthur was his old self again, all right, and not

merely in terms of appearance. He would empower himself as the granter of immortality, a gift which would engender a loyalty no other gift could ever provide.

“Each of you has a decision to make. You see, just as we’ve learned of substances that unleash our Energy and gradually expand upon our stores, so we’ve found another food that provides something of a far, far greater value. But there’s a price to be paid, you see, and you must first decide if you are willing to pay that price before you learn the nature of that gift. If you agree, you will receive that gift and learn its incredible nature. I will simply tell you this: the gift available is one that, in my mind, is far greater than those provided via morange or zirple.”

“What’s the price we must pay?” James asked, curious. He stood next to Elise, the pair of metal workers united in more than merely their craft.

Arthur turned to look at him. “What would you give up to earn the gifts of the morange and zirple, James? How much are you willing to sacrifice?”

“I’m not sure what you mean, Arthur,” James replied, frowning. “With Energy, I know that I can make more money than I could before, so I could, and would, pay a great amount.”

Arthur shook his head. “The price is not one payable in money, or goods. It is a gift of self you must pay, a sacrifice very personal in nature. It is a price I myself had to choose to make on that day, and it is a price I was in many ways *forced* to make. You will have the time to decide.”

Arthur let the words hang in the air, as he turned and looked at each of them. “The price you must pay to receive this gift, this gift of... infinite value, is no more and no less than this: you must give up forever the ability to have children.”

A gasp rose from the collected crowd. Whatever price they might have expected to pay, it was certainly not this. Couples stared at each other, and the silent communication raged. Would they agree, jointly, to make that sacrifice? Or would they agree to postpone that remarkable gift promised by Arthur, a gift greater even than Energy skills? Would they be of one mind on the topic? What would happen if one made that choice, and the other did not? What if one party wanted children, even if it meant sacrificing that incredible gift, and the other did not?

“There is more to it than that,” Arthur said, as his words began to sink in. “You may imagine that it would be... awkward to have a mixture of those who’ve made this choice and those who have not. While it is a choice you may

make freely, it is not one without consequence. Should you choose to retain your ability to bear children, you must leave this community. You must, in fact, choose to cease being a member of the Aliomenti. You must... forget.”

Will’s eyes widened, and he was not alone in staring, aghast, at Arthur. “Arthur, this is insane,” Will said. “It is one thing to alert everyone to the price one must pay. But expulsion from the group? That’s unnecessary.”

“It is not, Will,” Arthur replied. “I speak with the voice of experience. In the home village, we had some choose to make the sacrifice and accept the gift, and others who did not. They were unable to live and work together after making their individual decisions. The decision and the gift are too profound to be experienced in a community of anything but like-minded individuals. We had numerous altercations, and eventually we needed to make a decision. That decision was made.”

Will snorted. “Choice? Perhaps, to a point. I could see the decision being a divisive one, and that many might choose to leave. What I’m not clear on, though, is why you want a ‘no’ choice to mean you must ‘forget.’ What does that even mean?”

“To forget?” Arthur replied. “You must forget how to be Aliomenti. You must forget your Energy. You must stop being something more than human, of having abilities human beings only dream of, and return instead to a life of living as a normal human being does. To do otherwise risks the exposure of those who’ve chosen to remain behind.”

Will, who recognized the beginnings of the “human” epithet, opened his mouth to speak once more, but Arthur spoke first. “You may not *bear* children, in the acceptance of this gift. This does not mean you may never be a parent. I spoke earlier about including orphaned children in our recruitment efforts. Young orphans will need adult supervision and guidance. You may still love and raise a child, though that child will not come from you. You will still be able to raise a child with morange and zirple, just as you might if you’d borne that child yourself, but without the risks Will has described in the past. But, in this fashion... you will be able to receive... *the gift.*”

His words were powerful and intoxicating, and Will could feel the mood of the group shifting. Arthur had offered them something powerful, something they couldn’t fathom, and had provided them a means to solve their population problem in a manner that enabled them to receive that amazing, unidentified gift. He had made them understand that they’d lose everything they’d gained if they did not agree to accept his gift, somehow getting all of them to forget that a gift

cannot be something forced upon a recipient. They were curious. They were tempted. And they were oblivious to Will's protests, noting that Arthur had no authority to force them into a choice like this, to choose his "gift" or cease to be a member of the Aliomenti.

That day, many elected to eat of the fruit of the tree from the Ambrosia forest, a fruit supplied by Arthur, a man they now saw as their unquestioned leader, a man who had provided them an incredible gift that Will would have denied them. With receipt of the fruit, they learned of the gift they'd earned through their sacrifice.

The Aliomenti had, only decades after their founding, managed to isolate the ingredients to transform themselves into immortal supermen. World domination was only a matter of time.

And their supply of time was now infinite.

HOPELESS

1058 A.D.

Twenty-two years later

In a previous life, his sixty-fifth birthday would have marked the beginning of a new era, a probable decline in his health and vitality, until death claimed him. That was before three armed men attacked him outside his home while another destroyed it from the inside, before his adult children rescued him from certain death, before he'd been sent a thousand years into his past to rescue his wife from the clutches of a tyrant.

And it was before he'd eaten the fruit of the ambrosia tree, which so altered his body that he looked to be in his mid-twenties, a look that would remain his for the remainder of his immortal life.

He'd now lived nearly half his years in that distant past, and his memories of the twenty-first century were becoming fainter and fainter as time passed. It wasn't because his memory was failing; on the contrary, both his memory and mental sharpness had never been better. The current present had become home. The future was now a past he could never regain.

He spent much of his time traveling now, ostensibly seeking out the next spot for Aliomenti expansion. While they enjoyed the island life afforded by Atlantis, it was agreed that they needed to identify a mainland location for their next outpost. Their target zone would be a point on the southeastern coast of modern England, providing them future launch points into France and Germany. Atlantis, located on the southwestern coast of England, would, with its fleet of ships, provide access to the future nations of Spain and Portugal as well as portions of France.

The newest Aliomenti traversed much the same path as their predecessors, coming aboard as virtual apprentices, developing awareness that their local Aliomenti community was more than a mere town of incredibly skilled craftsmen and craftswomen. It was a place where the impossible could happen. After vowing to reveal nothing of the Aliomenti advances they could see—the concrete building material and the various water systems, for example—they'd eventually be allowed to learn about Energy and begin developing their skills. Long-term residents would discourage them from entering any committed relationships; in a society of immortals, they believed the risk of betrayal and infidelity was high, and the resulting trauma of such actions would be something they'd all feel. The Aliomenti believed it best to learn to avoid thinking about relationships lasting forever; forever, for them, was quite literal.

By the time they were asked to sacrifice their ability to procreate, they had so bought into the Aliomenti lifestyle of wealth, influence, and incredible Energy power, that most would have happily consumed their own limbs and asked for seconds if that was the sacrifice demanded to maintain that lifestyle for an infinite period of time.

They failed to see the cost when immortality came wrapped up as a fragrant, sweet fruit, with the trappings of wealth and power as appetizers.

Arthur continued to lead any recruiting efforts; he had a natural rapport with people in that manner, able to articulate a vision that motivated each individual, able to assess if a stranger possessed the character attributes that would drive them to become a successful, and permanent, member of the Aliomenti. Something about this nagged at Will. A man like Arthur, a man desirous of nothing less than world domination achieved through a group of all-powerful immortals, an organization grown in stature through the efforts and sacrifice of many who'd gone before him... a man like that seemed incapable of handling such an important process with impartiality and ethics. Yet nothing suggested anything was amiss with Arthur's process. All of the new recruits Will had met were wonderful people, men and women he was happy to call friends.

They'd set up a village rotation, in which three people from Atlantis would travel to the North Village, to be replaced by three traveling from the North Village to Atlantis. That gave everyone an opportunity to live in both locations, sharing new craft techniques and word of friends with both those they'd never met, and those whom they'd not seen in years. And even if good friends hadn't seen each other for years, their appearances hadn't changed. None of them had aged a single day.

The lack of aging, and the growth of wealth, had an unfortunate side effect: arrogance.

Will overheard two new arrivals in Atlantis discuss a trip to a coastal village, and it was in that conversation that he heard the word “human” used as an epithet for the first time. It was a term used in reference to his wife by the Hunters, uttered with great scorn, some three decades earlier. Their words still haunted Will’s memories. The words spoken now chilled him. Though they’d existed for mere decades, the Aliomenti attitude of superiority was already starting to show.

Disappointed as he was in their attitudes, Will wasn’t surprised they’d developed. They’d all developed incredible power; even the most junior, unskilled neophyte possessed a strength and mental intuition enabling them to best any “human” in any endeavor with ease. The level of wealth would have made many of them the equivalent of millionaires in Will’s time, a level of financial success that equated with the life of luxury they were now enjoying. They rarely bothered growing their own food or hunting their own game now; they merely teleported to nearby villages to eat in the pubs and restaurants, making them quite popular with tavern owners. When the Aliomenti showed up, locals knew that food and drink would soon flow freely. After the locals were well fed and drunk on wine, they stood little chance in negotiations, and the Aliomenti would come out ahead every time, even after their earlier largess. Few could resist their proposals, and after the generosity, few *wanted* to resist. Even government officials fell under their sway, demands of payment of fees and taxes forgotten under the “charms” of the Aliomenti come to trade.

They’d built the first large ship two years after Arthur arrived on Atlantis to dispense the ambrosia fruit. Will and others had sailed south to the northern coast of the Iberian peninsula. They’d not fared as well as they normally did when trading, for the language and customs were strange. Will was reminded of his warning to the first of the Aliomenti decades earlier: simply knowing the price someone was willing to buy or sell at was insufficient to execute a trade. Unless that individual knew you, trusted you, and wanted to do business with you, they’d choose not to transact. And if you *forced* them to transact, you were stealing from them.

That didn’t stop many of them from stealing in just such a fashion, a practice Will put a stop to immediately. The defrauded victims found themselves in possession of double the amount of profit they’d lost in the theft, and the thieves were publicly shamed. The practice ended quickly.

Over the years, they built additional ships and sailed farther and farther away from the shores of England, encountering strange lands, strange customs, and strange languages. Their telepathic capabilities enabled them to learn languages in rapid fashion, and Will was now fluent in medieval forms of Portuguese, Spanish, and even a bit of French. And those were the languages *others* knew about. His travels to meet with Hope had left him fluent in early forms of German and Italian as well.

His language skills were advantageous as he, the world-traveling merchant, visited Hope and Eva. They were living in their fourth new town, and had grown powerful in Energy. Time had enabled them to develop deep expertise in other skills as well. In addition to her expanded language capabilities, Hope had also developed skills in medicine, weaving, painting, sculpture, a half-dozen musical instruments, farming, and metal working.

She'd also managed to convince several knights to teach her the art of sword fighting, and she passed that knowledge along to Will in sparring matches during their irregular meetings.

"Your future husband is a fortunate man," Will remarked, as metal clanged against metal, at speeds far in excess of those any normal person could manage.

"And why would you say that?" she asked, her blue eyes twinkling.

"There's nothing better than a woman who can defend her man from harm," he said, trying to keep his voice innocent.

She read the amusement in his tone. "Is that so? And who, may I ask, is looking to harm you?"

Will laughed, and in that instant she'd disarmed him. "There's a beautiful blond woman with startling blue eyes pointing a sword at me right now. I could use some help."

With a smirk, she dropped the blade and stepped forward to embrace him. "I hope the experience wasn't *too* traumatic for you."

"Not really," he admitted, securing her in his arms. "Of course, I do have a strong affinity for women with blond hair."

She snorted. "I'd better warn Eva to keep an eye on you."

He laughed, and then turned somber. "I wish things were different."

"They're not, Will. As challenging as our circumstances are, we know the ending is what we both seek, and we're both staying active and productive as we wait."

He nodded, and contented himself with holding her. There was an incredible sensation of peace in their simple embrace. The Energy both possessed was

palpable in their immediate vicinity, even for those who had no Energy skills, their combined touch the equivalent of an electric shock. Many would wonder how two people so in love could choose to restrain themselves in so many ways, but they'd never experienced what Will and Hope were experiencing now.

"So how are they dealing with everything, all of these new immortals that are running around?" Hope asked.

"Reasonably well at the moment," Will replied. "I think it will cause a greater emotional reaction when you hit an age where you'd once expected to be dead. I suspect that hitting a century in age will be a traumatic experience for me, much like when Arthur reached his late fifties a few decades back. He could not comprehend how he'd lived so long. I can comprehend living a century; it wasn't terribly uncommon in the era in which I was born. But actually reaching that age when, physically, I'm still thirty years old? I think that might be moderately terrifying." He stepped back a bit and took in her face and those radiant blue eyes. "What about you?"

"It's not so bad." She paused to think about it. "What's nice is that we've got the opportunity to learn at great depth, and about a wide variety of topics. I couldn't have hoped to learn as much about any single topic as I might learn across a dozen or more now. I think that's part of it. You have to keep learning and growing as a person, or eventually that gift of long life will become a curse, and you'll prefer death to a life without joy."

Her comment jolted him, for it was something he'd noticed among many of the longest-lived residents in Atlantis, his home for the past two decades. For people like Daniel, James, Elise, and the other founding members of Atlantis, the apparent lack of new experiences was becoming a source of emotional angst. Life was starting to become routine, boring, and many of them were becoming restless. Will didn't think any of them would do anything foolish in their frustration with life—with living—but he kept a close eye on them.

"I can understand that," he replied. "I can't truly experience it, because I have something worth living for. And I have a problem to work on, a riddle to solve, one that may take me... a *very* long time."

Her face fell slightly. "Nothing yet?"

He shook his head. "Nothing."

He had plenty of time for leisure and research. The newest citizens in the community happily took on odd jobs in exchange for money from the more senior, wealthier residents of their Aliomenti locations, and Will was one of those with money to spend. He spent his time on research, leading the newest

development efforts for the Aliomenti in general and the Atlantean outpost in particular, including the creation of a fifth long-range sailing ship they'd recently started. His primary research, the work he did in his own room at night long after others had gone to sleep, was the formulation of something that would reverse the effects of the ambrosia. If he and Hope failed to find a cure, they risked never bringing Josh and Angel into the world.

Hope and Eva had both worked on the effort as well, something they could practice in the isolation of the desolate island they referred to as their "summer residence." Their work in medicine enabled them to collect and study new healing substances, and they were able to test the concoctions upon themselves. The challenge each of them faced was the same: they had no means of testing the results of anything in a manner they found palatable. How did one test if immortality was reversed, other than by waiting? Hope had made it clear to Will that she'd not risk her future children by testing a possible reversal of the sterility; Will, for his part, considered Hope the woman he'd sworn fidelity to in the twenty-first century, and he refused to break those vows.

Learning they'd found a cure in that fashion presented its own unique risks and challenges for a man not due to be born for another nine centuries.

He knew that the solutions would come, eventually, even if in this day and time he had no idea *how*. The advantage of immortality was that it provided both of them with the opportunity to spend literal centuries researching the problem, even though neither of them knew how to find a cure but through the trial-and-error approach they'd both shunned. Worse, if the solution reversed their immortality just as it reversed their infertility, they'd die before they could bring their children into the world.

For that reason, he found it difficult to conduct even the scant bit of research he'd performed.

He knew that he needed a modern laboratory, where he could study the cells in their bodies, compared to "normal" humans or even Aliomenti who'd not yet consumed Ambrosia, and try to identify exactly what it was that changed when one consumed ambrosia fruit. If he could figure *that* part out, he had a chance to reverse it, perhaps reversing just the infertility aspect that so haunted him and Hope.

They'd both happily give up their immortality to give their children a chance to live. They'd not give it up, though, until such time as they knew for certain that the desired outcome would occur. And they'd do it even if they learned they couldn't reverse the process, couldn't become parents to Josh and Angel and

then consume the ambrosia once more to resume their immortal lives.

And after a thousand years... perhaps they wouldn't *want* to regain their immortality.

He wished they'd never found that accursed forest and the fruit sheltered within.

"We'll figure it out, Will. We have, oh, *nine centuries* or so."

He smiled. "Eighteen, between the two of us."

She caught the math. "What about..."

He shook his head. "I didn't meet Eva in the future. I don't know how long she lived. That doesn't mean she's not still around in the future, though."

She nodded, but she looked uncomfortable at the news. Eva had been her constant companion, and though the course of thirty years had changed their actual if not their public relationship, the two women were still close, still bonded by the secrets they shared.

Hope took a deep breath, and Will caught a strong emotion from her, of a type he couldn't identify. "I think I need to branch out on my own, Will. Somewhere completely different. And I think I need to learn to survive without Eva."

He was surprised, though he quickly understood what she was trying to do. Her childhood had been a disaster, and Hope had been in desperate need of someone to show her she was loved without qualification. Eva had provided that in her own fashion, just as Will had in his. But in many ways, her relationship with Eva had prevented Hope from developing a true independence. The understanding that Eva might not always be around further necessitated that development, and Hope had the wisdom and maturity now to understand what she needed to do.

"How did she take the news?"

Hope looked at the ground, her only response silence.

Will sighed. "Do you want me to break the news to her?"

Hope shook her head. "No, I need to be the one to tell her, and I know that. It's difficult to share news like that, isn't it?"

Will smiled. "Having been on both sides, I can only say that in my experience, it's best for both parties that the news be delivered without delay. The message will come out, no matter what. It's best to let the person receiving the news know without delay, so that they can prepare themselves and comport themselves as necessary."

She nodded. "I know."

“Where do you think you’ll go?”

“Back to the island, initially. Then I’ll decide. The world is large, and most definitely not flat.” She smiled, and Will remembered the global tour he’d taken her on decades earlier. “I think I’ll travel a long way this time, and put a very large distance between us.”

Will winced involuntarily. “That’s... probably for the best.”

She grimaced, but then her face turned to stone, and he recognized that something else was coming, a message causing her far more distress. “This whole situation is very difficult for both of us, Will. Unless we change our minds, and risk the fate of history and our children, we must live through a chaste millennium-long betrothal. Distance helps, but if we make it simple to see each other with teleportation... at some point, we’re going to fail at that.” She took a deep breath. “My traveling to a far distant locale solves that dilemma as well.”

He felt as if he’d been slapped, dealt a blow that crippled him, and stepped back.

It had been a long series of discussions, merging the practical knowledge of future history and Hope’s own strong beliefs. She would do nothing that posed any possible risk to the children she’d not bear for over nine centuries. And that meant she would not consent to marry him, nor engage in related acts, until the appointed time. He’d protested, noting that there was no risk of other pregnancy now with the ambrosia’s corrupting influences on both of them.

“We won’t know that, Will, until it’s too late,” she’d replied. “Then what happens? What if our children don’t exist anymore because we make that decision? Will you disappear immediately? They won’t be around to rescue you from those men, will they? You’ll probably die in that fight, just as I would have died eventually if you’d not been there to rescue me, mentally and physically, from Arthur’s schemes and mobs.” She’d shaken her head, her face resolute.

They’d still seen each other, still shared in those Energy-enhanced embraces. And though it wasn’t what he’d become accustomed to in their days of marriage, it was, somehow, enough.

Now she was leaving, severing even *that* bond.

He couldn’t keep the look of shock, the look of deep emotional trauma, off his face.

“A thousand years is a long time, Will,” she said, and he could see tears rolling down her face. “We can each help half the planet in our own way. Don’t forget that, in the end, I will always be there for you. For now, though, at this

point in our journey, I must be much farther away.”

She put her fingers to her lips, then reached out to trace them across his. “I love you, Will.”

And then she vanished.

FINANCIER

1158 A.D.

One hundred years later

The initial construction of the new Aliomenti outpost, located on the northwestern coast of what would become Portugal, was complete. The Aliomenti were less concerned with isolation now, though privacy and protection of their secrets were still core principles. New members joined on a regular basis, identified and vetted through Arthur's exhaustive recruiting process. Each began as a neophyte, and developed skills in their craft of choice under the tutelage of an Aliomenti master. Those who joined the Aliomenti after previously receiving the "master" designation from guilds found they had much to learn from Aliomenti masters who often had a century of experience. New members, who started as mere *humans*, gradually became Energy neophytes, and eventually they, too, joined the ranks of the Aliomenti immortals.

A century of advances led to the introduction of the principles of mass production of popular items, and the advanced age of more senior members enabled them to make connections that younger minds simply hadn't had the time to develop. The Aliomenti had expanded to a total of ten locations, providing coverage for much of the northern portion of continental Europe. Their knowledge of the planet they called home had advanced to the point that they realized the vast potential of lands that their earliest number hadn't realized existed.

Centuries before it was proved conclusively by others, the Aliomenti knew the Earth wasn't flat, knew that their home did not possess edges that doomed foolish sailors to instant death in a void of nothingness. Centuries before the

printing press was invented by Gutenberg, the Aliomenti had perfected the process of creating paper and mass producing volumes that were transported by teleportation specialists. Those men and women were Aliomenti who could travel hundreds of miles in two to five mile hop sequences, terminating each hop inside property owned by Aliomenti who did not live in the established outposts. Those outposts were, more and more, exclusively business and manufacturing fronts, rather than residential areas, and the mastery of teleportation, much like the advent of the automobile in the twentieth century, made on-site living an option, rather than a requirement.

Will Stark was one of those who didn't establish a specific home base. He traveled among the various outposts throughout modern day England, Portugal, Spain, France, and Germany, and had been part of the scout teams sizing up the lands that the former great empire of Rome called home, more specifically what he'd known as Italy.

"I have a feeling about this place," one of the scouts had told Will, as they traveled through the cities of Florence and Milan. "There's a creative energy here that simply demands some type of outlet."

Will wondered if the man would live to see the great Italian Renaissance unfold.

On a personal level, while the Aliomenti had thrived, Will had stagnated. He had not seen Hope in person since she'd vanished from his side. She'd communicated with him at least, though on a far-too-infrequent basis, via telepathy. He knew where she'd traveled, at least after she left, for she'd arrange to send him gifts at the various outposts that he helped establish and build. She'd traveled far to the East, and he knew, from her gifts, that she'd spent time in places as varied as Greece, India, and China. It meant that she'd certainly mastered the art of rapid travel, via teleportation or other means, for the distances she'd covered were staggering. She seemed to stay in a region a significant period of time, for the gifts arrived only every fifteen or twenty years. When she'd lived with Eva, the women had changed homes after a mere eight to ten years.

As for Eva, Will had not heard from her since Hope's disappearance, though he'd searched for her regularly, tried to sense the harp-like sound of her Energy whenever he thought of her. He had no idea if the woman still lived, and if so, where. He'd felt her powerful empathic push of grief when she'd first learned of Hope's decision, a desperate burst of emotion of an intensity only Will could understand. Will had still not fully recovered from that decision, a century after

the painful encounter.

The greatest pain came from his eventual realization that her decision was the correct one.

Will had immersed himself deeply with the Aliomenti as a means of distracting himself from that pain. They continued to find new and innovative ways to make money, the latest being the most unusual. They'd mastered the art of making and selling quality crafts at impressive profits; it had been their model since their founding fifteen decades earlier. But they had, ironically, become almost *too* wealthy. The piles of coins each possessed were massive, especially for those like Will who'd undergone the ambrosia protocols. They had reached the point where they literally could not spend the amounts of money they possessed.

The latest idea had been Will's, and, like many ideas, it was strongly resisted at first. It was an idea that required giving before getting, and as the first group of Aliomenti had demonstrated, men and women already possessing more than they'd believed possible were all too often unwilling to expend it on anything but themselves.

"We all have huge amounts of money that are doing nothing," Will had noted. "There are piles of coins sitting in vaults we've constructed. We cannot spend them, because there's not enough for us to buy. The money is doing us no good."

"We've bought land," Arthur noted. It was true; the Aliomenti had purchased the land for every outpost after the first two. And they'd abandoned those original two outposts over the past few decades, demolishing all evidence of their existence. Will had been pained when they'd destroyed the original village once more, though this time no one had died in the process. After blasting every concrete building and every wooden aqueduct to ash, they'd temporarily dammed the two rivers to wash away any remnants. The Aliomenti mark upon the land had disappeared. They'd similarly destroyed Atlantis, a site that had become too difficult to maintain after a century of flooding threatened the structural integrity of the base of the elevated city. It had also become the place of choice for those immortal Aliomenti who had given up on life. They'd simply camp out in the open valley when they heard the distant sounds of an approaching storm, and wait for the waters to come and claim them.

Will refused to bury them next to men like David and Wayne. When he was present in the aftermath of such suicides, they hurled the bodies far into the sea.

Yet it wasn't enough. "There's not always land to buy, though. We can only

buy so many pieces of clothing, so many kegs of our favorite wines and ales, so many rugs and carpets, so many books. Our funds, and our incomes, are far in excess of what we can spend. I repeat: there are not enough goods and services in the world for us to be able to take advantage of our wealth.”

Arthur shrugged. “So what?”

“So why not put the *money* to work?”

Adam arched an eyebrow. “How can money work, Will? Money is nothing more than pieces of metal. It is not a machine or a gear.” His eyes widened. “You’re not suggesting we melt our coins down to make gears or machines, are you?”

Will sighed. They’d invented the first machine several decades ago, when they realized they could generate something other than a circular motion with the gears. By changing the shape, and not just the size, of the items included in the gear sequence, they could generate side-to-side and up-and-down motions as well. They’d built automated looms for the weavers, and figured out how to build machines that could cut pieces of wood or metal using sharp blades. Productivity had skyrocketed, and wealth had soared to then-unimaginable levels.

“I’m not suggesting that, though in fairness that would be a far better use for the metal than it’s providing sitting in a vault. No, I’m saying, we should find people who need money to create the things we want to buy, and give them the money so that they *can*. If we do that, we’ll have something useful to buy and still have the means to do so.”

Arthur looked horrified. “You want me to *give* my money away to someone, and then pay to buy things from them, too?”

Will shook his head. “We’d charge them to use the money.”

Adam’s face turned stony. “You want us to become moneylenders.” It wasn’t a question.

The idea wasn’t popular. At all. Money lending in this era was not thought of in high regard.

“I think it’s something we need to consider. We loan someone a thousand gold coins, which for any of the three of us is an amount we wouldn’t notice missing. They pay us back fifty gold coins each year. After ten years they pay the original thousand coins back to us. We wouldn’t miss those coins. They’d build the things we want to buy, and the products exist so that we *can* buy them. They can make money and become wealthy themselves over time. We get back 500 gold coins beyond the thousand we gave them. Seems like *everybody* wins.”

“What if they *don't* pay us back, though?” Arthur demanded. “What do I do if they don't pay?”

“This is not something you do during a drop-in visit to a small village, Arthur,” Will replied. “We can get some of our people to do this full time. They live in the larger cities. They can ask questions to see if the person has a good idea, one likely to make enough money to pay us back, and determine if they'll honor their commitments. We'll have them sign a piece of paper promising that they'll pay before we give them anything.”

Arthur shook his head. “I still don't like it. They can still lie.”

Will sighed. “Excuse me, but are you, or are you not, able to read the thoughts and emotions of people accurately? You're telling me you could *not* tell if someone planned to run off with your money?” He arched an eyebrow. Adam snorted.

Arthur looked befuddled. “Well, sure, but... they could change their minds, right?”

Will laughed. “The paper they sign can say that they have to show proof that they are making progress and making money, not just spending it, or the entire amount comes due right away.” He steadied his gaze. “Think our people could check in on occasion to see if everything is going well on those fronts?”

Arthur looked at the ground, seeking a counter argument to torpedo Will's idea. The dirt, unimpressed by his Energy power, wealth, or relative youth, provided him no answers.

“I do agree with Arthur that such an approach brings with it inherent risk,” Adam said. “I don't think it's a sufficient reason to not pursue it. I do have a question, though, on that point. If our concern is getting our customers to return our money, perhaps we can ensure that by holding on to something of theirs that they value as much, or more, than the money.”

Arthur's eyes snapped up, flashing, sensing a return of control. “Go on, Adam.”

“Let's say that someone wished to use our money to purchase a kiln with which to make pottery, and that he required, as in Will's example, one thousand gold coins to do so. Perhaps that man possesses a family heirloom of some type that can be left in our care to ensure he pays. If he fails to pay, we keep the heirloom. Once he pays, we return the heirloom. We both benefit if the transaction succeeds, but we at least have this item to sell to cover some part of our loss if they do not.”

Will nodded, forcing himself to act as if he'd never heard of the concept of

collateral before. “I think that’s an excellent idea, Adam, and fair. The longer we work with someone, the more we come to trust them, the less we need them to provide to us before we lend them money. In fact...” His look changed to a thoughtful one. “We might be better off asking to *buy* a part of the profit of the business. So if someone starts up as a potter, we may ask to buy a permanent part of his profits or income for a certain number of years. If we look to get one tenth, and he makes 1,000 gold coins per year, we’d get 100 coins, not for a few years, or until the 1,000 coins are paid back. We’d get that 100 gold coins every year, for as long as our agreement holds.”

“I don’t understand,” Arthur replied. “Why would they do that? Why would we do that?”

“Think about it,” Will said. “I have 1,000 gold coins that I do not need any time soon. They are sitting in a vault, getting dusty. Someone wants to start selling pottery or weaving. I look at their work, find that they do a good job, and the only thing they need to start making more things is the money to buy the kiln or the loom. I can either loan them the money and they pay it back, or I can buy the kiln or loom for them in exchange for a part of their future profits. The second one, to me, makes a lot of sense for *them*. They may not make much money in the first few years, so if they owed me 100 coins that first year but only made 75, they’d have a problem. But if I told them I would take one tenth of their profit, they’d pay me seven coins and keep the rest to help them keep growing. It may be that they’d start making 5,000 coins by the 10th or 15th year, and suddenly I start making a large amount of my investment back each year. It’s okay with them, too, because they’re making such a large amount of money. Everybody wins.”

“What if they fail, though?” Adam asked.

Will shrugged. “That’s always a risk. But again, think about this: the people most likely to fail are those who would only be thinking about the money they’d have to spend. The people who will succeed will be those looking at the money as the way to get started on something great. The first group will probably not like the repayment required, whether it’s a loan or a purchase of profits. The latter will see it as a fair arrangement. We have the ability to understand the type of person, because we can read through any disguise or trickery.” He paused. “Think about what this could do down the road many years, for people who might live several centuries. Eventually, you’ll start to collect so much money from these arrangements that you won’t need to produce new goods yourself; you’ll be able to buy everything you need with ease, and in the process help

others become wealthy. And again, yes, some will fail, but not all of them will. You'll make enough from the ones who don't to more than make up for the loss of money from those who do."

"I'll have to think about this one, Will," Arthur replied. "This is very complicated, all of this money lending and this buying of profits from people ahead of time. It's confusing and I need time to think about it."

Will smiled. "Think about it all you want, Arthur. Meanwhile, I'll be talking to others in the outposts, and I'm guessing that there will be a few interested in participating." He turned to leave.

"Wait!" Arthur said. "I haven't told you my opinion on whether you should do this!"

Will laughed. "We've had this conversation before, Arthur. I neither need nor want your opinion. Nor do I need your permission. I have more money than I can spend, and I'd rather do *something* with it than have it sit around doing nothing. And if I do this right? I may never run out of money anyway."

This time he left, ignoring Arthur's further protestations. But Will realized that the long-ago exhortation in his diary, one that said he should apply twenty-first century problem-solving to issues, wasn't limited to thinking about running water or heated rooms. It was also meant to direct them on what to do with the fortunes they were amassing over the decades. He'd still be collecting a fortune, but he'd do it *his* way, by helping others to do the same.

It wasn't something the Aliomenti came to naturally. They saw threats in every person, saw every *human* as one who'd expose their secrets and end their "game." But it wasn't a game. Will realized that the Aliomenti had an opportunity like no group in history to impact the entire world in a powerful, positive way. Will intended to do just that.

And if Arthur didn't want to participate?

So much the better.

ISLAND

1250 A.D.

One hundred years later

Will pulled out a piece of paper and started sketching ideas for his new home.

It was nothing like any home he'd seen owned or lived in before, and it was unlikely anyone in this era would think to build something like it. He was applying memories built in the twenty-first century to the present, and those memories included technological advances that wouldn't be part of the general consciousness for centuries.

He had plenty of income and plenty of spare time. As he'd predicted, there were plenty of Aliomenti interested in his "money sharing" idea, where they'd provided the money and the other party the talent and time, and together money would be made that would be shared by all. They'd had some failures. Not every venture succeeded, and as Arthur had worried, not every successful venture owner paid them as initially agreed. People could and did change over time, in ways that not even the Aliomenti could accurately detect and predict. Some became upset with the arrangement and fled. Others became enamored with their sudden influx of wealth, and lost their desire to build what they'd originally planned to build. They changed, and the investments were lost.

Some, including Arthur, wanted to go after those who didn't pay up. Will elected not to worry. "The word of what they've done will precede and follow them, and everywhere people will find that they are not one whose word can be trusted. That will cause them all manner of worry and concern, and they'll realize the error of their ways. They may elect, after the fact, to come clean and

make good on what they owe. They may not. But I for one do not want to get into the business of chasing people down.”

Not everyone agreed with Will, and several *humans* had been found dead after defaulting on an agreement with a member of the Aliomenti. That incensed Will as well. “Life is too precious to eliminate over a dispute over money. Talk to them. Persuade them to do right. But do not take their lives in lieu of money. You still get nothing that way.”

Some of the Aliomenti, though, began to develop a habit of bullying humans. While most did not resort to killing, many thought it great sport to leverage their abilities to make humans squirm in discomfort. They’d force the victims to forget their names, to say things that would cause public humiliation, or to agree to terms on deals they had no reason to partake in.

Arthur found this type of activity “rewarding” and “a means of enforcing just how unique and special we are.” Will found their attitudes and behaviors revolting.

Their numbers and locations continued to grow, but they’d had their first few defections. Will wasn’t surprised by the defections of those who wanted to have children and were willing to forego immortality to do so; he’d warned Arthur and Adam that immortality wouldn’t be the greatest gift they could give everyone. What surprised him were those who left after learning of the Energy skills that provided the Aliomenti with their incredible records of success in business dealings.

It was a case of people seeing the reality of what Energy enabled the Aliomenti to do, and believing that it was witchcraft or the work of the devil. No amount of protestation to the contrary could change their minds.

Will wanted to be surprised, but he found that difficult. He, too, would have once thought of Energy skills as the stuff of magic and sorcery. Even after the innate abilities within him had been unlocked, even after he began to develop them, he still wondered if it was a form of magic and he simply wasn’t seeing the reality. He’d long since changed his mind, and had his opinions reinforced after two centuries of living. But his own experiences enabled him to understand why so many elected to go elsewhere.

The vast majority who wished to leave were honest, openly expressed their concerns and desire to withdraw, and accepted the terms of their departure. Those departures went smoothly; they’d talk to the emigrants while simultaneously working to erase their memories of the true nature of the Aliomenti. They’d leave knowing nothing of Energy, merely with the reinforced

opinion that the Aliomenti crafters and investors were exceptional talents at their respective crafts.

While the departures occurred and new recruits joined, Will, who had been wildly successful, whose wealth was, proportionally, starting to approach what he'd left behind in the twenty-first century, was growing restless with life among the Aliomenti.

Much of that was driven by the fact that he'd not seen Hope in person in so long. She continued to send gifts, indicators of where she'd traveled, gifts that showed she'd visited much of the known world. She'd checked in telepathically on an infrequent basis, but the conversations were brief. He still felt a sense of betrayal at her departure, an impression she knew she could not overcome. When their conversations ended, Will felt worse than when they'd started.

He needed a major project, something to keep his mind off his pain, the sense of gloom he felt. It needed to be something far more challenging than a water wheel or a gear system, though, and something he'd do entirely on his own. He had a substantial amount of money hidden in vaults spread throughout most of Europe, along with a significant amount of free time. He therefore decided to try to build something impossible in this era, a new home to last him for centuries. The project would serve as the ultimate challenge and distraction, a way to keep his focus as he sought to mentally survive the looming centuries stretching out into the distance. It would be something the world had never seen before.

A submarine.

It was something that others would never understand, a boat that could sink under the waves *intentionally*, could propel itself without wind or oars, and which could return to the surface at the direction of its pilot with all occupants unharmed. He'd suggested concepts relating to modern banking and, as it related to stock, modern corporations. He'd shown the Aliomenti how to use gears and how to harness the power of wind and water to make the gears turn, and they had learned how to use those concepts, along with the powers of perception they enjoyed through their Energy, to become phenomenally wealthy.

Somehow, though, he knew that the concept of an underwater boat would be impossible for them to conceptualize. Everything else he'd suggested was something they could fathom; gears were merely wheels with some enhancements, for example. A boat that could propel itself underwater combined too many evolutionary leaps and concepts to handle all at once.

It was a project, therefore, that he worked on in secret. The biggest challenge

for him would be the propulsion system. He still had his nanos, and the swarm of tiny machines remained in operation to this day, over two centuries after he'd received them. He didn't think it a practical choice to use them for propulsion, though. He preferred to conserve the nanos for use inside the boat on an as-needed basis. The craft needed to be built of standard, non-nano materials, not because he *couldn't* build it with nanos, but because he *chose* not to do so, a means of increasing the challenge of the project.

He wanted the craft to become his private home, a place where he could live and a means to travel without anyone—human or Aliomenti—following him. One day, he hoped, he'd be able to bring Hope aboard the craft, and together they'd travel under the sea, exploring a part of the planet largely unknown even in his own original time.

He wanted to build the craft because he needed to try to truly *accomplish* something, to do something where he didn't know the outcome ahead of time, where failure was a real possibility.

Everything else he'd accomplished since being sent back in time, everything else he'd built and created and taught, was due to the knowledge he had from having an additional millennium of human experience at his disposal. He'd accomplished them personally in the future, or used concepts he knew well enough to work out the details and specifics quickly. As a result, he'd reached the pinnacle of achievement within the Aliomenti community. While he suffered bouts of sadness or boredom, as did many members of the Century Club—Aliomenti who'd lived at least one hundred years—he did not look at his life with dread that pushed him to the point of suicide, as so many did. Instead, he sought out a new challenge, a new project, and found that such challenge invigorated him. Perhaps, one day, he wouldn't be able to use that approach to motivate himself, and he'd be unable to go on without intervention by Hope, but that day had not yet arrived. He did not know when he, the elder Will, would see her again, and had no indication that he ever would. There was no history or indication from his long-dormant diary to tell him whether they'd reunited, or whether he'd next see her as she met his much younger self in the diner outside the city of Pleasanton, Ohio. Would she leave him alone that long? He shook the thought from his mind.

The technical challenge of the submarine would give his mind a long-term, complex problem to solve, one that would help him push the boundaries of technology in this era. He envisioned a modern submarine, with its own navigation system, autopilot, and air purification systems. The amount of work

he'd need to do was staggering, given that none of the technologies or materials he'd need to complete the project yet existed. He'd need to invent all of them.

Will had made no progress on the ambrosia fruit, having resigned himself to the reality that he needed to encourage a level of technical innovation conducive to cellular research. He'd offered random thoughts, wondering what properly shaped glass might do with light, if there was no reflective background to show a reflection. Anna and Sarah, sisters who lived in the southeastern English outpost known as Watt, had started working on the idea, and had already recognized that the lenses gave them the ability to manipulate light. When those lenses were properly shaped, distant objects looked larger. The women were eager to discover the many practical uses of the "new" technology. Will was likewise eager to discover advances in engine and propulsion technology he could use in his submarine. The allure of advances never failed to motivate even the most despondent of souls.

His construction efforts were based on an island he lived on during his "vacations," a spot he'd never told another of the Aliomenti about. He'd flown over the Atlantic on many occasions, and located the small island after several months of scanning the seemingly endless waves. It was a perfect spot, with fresh water, sufficient elevation to ensure that he and his projects would remain dry during even the most intense storms, and adequate vegetation for fresh fruits and vegetables. He could fish from his boat in the small river that bisected the island before emptying into the Atlantic Ocean.

The boat served a dual purpose. He'd purchased it for his personal use during one of his stays at the Aliomenti outpost on the Iberian Peninsula. It was relatively small, meant to hold only two or three people, but he never invited guests on board. He told those who eyed the boat with curiosity that he was using it to transport rocks to a small island community that used them for construction. The news failed to inspire any interest in other Aliomenti to join in; in fact, most suspected that Will, one of the three Old Guard along with Arthur and Adam, was becoming senile after living for a quarter of a millennium.

Will was content to allow that perception to continue.

His story was, to a large degree, true. He was, in fact, transporting "rocks" to his own "small island community" and using them to construct the submarine. The "rocks" were ore mined from several caves he'd located, with rocks containing iron, manganese, and other elements needed to create steel. It was not a perfect system; he was not proficient at producing steel, nor familiar with all of the component elements, and certainly not proficient at identifying them. What

he *did* have were the time, money, and patience required to identify the formulas and develop the skills and technologies to make everything work.

Will maneuvered the boat through the ocean waves, several miles off shore, and rapidly left the visible range of the Iberian Aliomenti outpost. The boat was filled with the “rocks” he’d collected and stored under tarps he kept aboard the small ship. As the boat cleared the horizon and left sight of any of the Aliomenti, Will began to cycle the Energy in his body, feeling the power that never ceased to amaze him. The Energy he possessed now would stun the man who had arrived in the early eleventh century with a mere two months experience in Energy usage. His advanced skills enabled him to detect the Energy levels of others while masking his own, and he was aware of the continually increasing gap between his own Energy skills and those of others. That gap was such that he could use his Energy to transport his raw materials to the island he thought of as home.

The swarms of Energy surrounded Will, the boat, and the cargo, as he pictured a spot within sight of the island. He felt the familiar sense of displacement as all of his senses went dark. An instant later, his senses were restored, and he was floating in the boat a mile away from the island paradise he’d discovered.

Will had considered several names for his island home. The flooding and deaths associated with Atlantis had eliminated that name from consideration. He’d also considered Ararat, the name of the mountain where the ark built by Noah was said to have come to rest as the waters receded, but that didn’t seem right either. He finally settled on Eden, for there seemed to be no evidence that any human being had ever set foot on the tropical island paradise before.

He wrestled the sails into position, capturing the wind and maneuvering the vessel around to the opposite side of the island, where he found the mouth of the river he’d traverse to reach his home at the island’s center. When he arrived, he tethered the boat to the dock he’d constructed and anchored it before moving to dry land.

Will walked toward the house he’d built. The structure consisted of two buildings. The smaller served as his living space, a place for sleeping, reading, and food preparation. The larger building served as a laboratory, the place where he did the planning work for his submarine and built and tested out his ideas. Prototypes of earlier propulsion systems rested to the side, discarded for various failures that combined to point him in the direction of success. With unlimited time and funds, he wasn’t obligated to use known fuels in his design due to

monetary constraints. Nor did he wish to squander space for fuel tanks in the cramped quarters necessitated by the submarine.

Ocean water was plentiful, surrounding him at all times, and it contained vast quantities of salt. He'd spent nearly forty years focusing his efforts on a means to use the salt in the water as a fuel source. As he tested propulsion system prototypes, he also extracted metals from the rock samples he'd collected to create metal alloys. He'd molded those alloys into prototype submarine hulls, which he tested for leakages and the strength to withstand the weight of the water. In the prototypes built for the submarine's body, he propelled the vessel with his Energy. The vessels he tested were intentionally small for that reason. He wouldn't build the final vessel until he'd perfected the propulsion system and knew its size.

That didn't stop him from sketching ideas on the paper the Aliomenti had recently started using. He wanted to be able to see his exterior surroundings when underwater, which meant that he needed a large portion of the exterior created from a transparent material. Glass wouldn't work, for the pressure of the water would shatter it before the craft reached a depth Will considered a minimum requirement for the vessel. At some point, he'd need to travel beneath the massive ocean-going vessels European explorers would operate on their many exploratory missions, and he wanted to be certain those sailors couldn't see his submarine in clearer water. Thus, depth was critical.

His years of experimentation and careful note taking had finally resulted in the recipe for the composite metal he'd use to construct the outer hull. He'd taken the most recent experimental craft to a depth he'd estimated at nearly 1,000 feet, and had used nanos to simulate an external view screen. The nanos were so small that they were impervious to the pressure at these depths, and they were wired into his brain so that he could see the images they collected, collated into a single image. When he closed his eyes, it was as if he was looking out through a large screen, seeing the incredible underwater imagery of the sea floor.

It wasn't what he wanted for a permanent solution, but it would work in an emergency.

Today, as he thought of the completed craft, he also thought of Hope.

Their separation had lasted an impossibly long time, and though he understood her motivations for doing so, he missed her terribly. He stood up from the rough desk he'd built for himself years earlier, moving away from the sketches he'd drawn of potential cabin designs, and glanced at the shelf. He saw the red velvet pouch he'd been given years earlier by Arthur, at a time when

Arthur believed his daughter dead and sealed inside a pine coffin. His anger at the sight of the pouch and his longing for her made him feel the need to take action, for it reminded him that the cause for all of this, including her need to see the world and live in independence away from him, was her upbringing at Arthur's hands. Though a woman of incredible spirit and vitality, she'd lived in virtual chains, a prisoner and slave in a village her father controlled, a home in which she was never permitted the opportunity to grow through childhood into adulthood. The period where she'd traveled from town to town with Eva for several decades after her supposed death had in many ways been an extended adolescence, and her current stint of isolation from Eva and Will was her transition into adulthood.

It was necessary only because of Arthur and his actions.

Would Arthur one day learn that Elizabeth had lived, had changed her name and become immortal just as he had done? Will frowned. She could hide far more easily now, but the progression of the Aliomenti suggested that they'd eventually cover the world, and hiding a woman of such immense power from them forever would prove an impossibility. It would take no more than a brief slip from any of the few who knew her to reveal the secret. His frown deepened. It seemed likely that Arthur would recognize Hope as Elizabeth if he ever saw her picture, and certainly he'd have the chance to do so when the Hunters located the original Will Stark in the twenty-first century. Arthur would have a deep interest in the woman that Will had chosen to marry. Certainly, he'd recognize in Hope's eyes his own daughter, just as Will had recognized Josh in Fil's eyes.

Would Arthur resume his efforts to control her again, even after a thousand years?

Will's frown turned menacing. He'd never give Arthur that opportunity. No promise would keep him from protecting Hope, for protecting her was the promise that trumped all others.

He grabbed a slip of paper and tore off a scrap. Fighting to keep his hand steady, he wrote a message to the future Arthur, a message of warning. Will would not tolerate a future in which Arthur and his minions hunted his bride. The Hunters, along with Arthur, would become the hunted if and when they did so.

He finished the note and considered where to put it. Sending it to Arthur now was pointless; he didn't want to *tell* Arthur that Elizabeth still lived. When Arthur realized that Elizabeth might still be alive, he'd seek confirmation, and

Will wanted to be certain that his warning message was waiting for him. His eye fell upon the red velvet pouch, his memory moved to the last home the pouch had known, and his mind was made up.

He knew the perfect place to store his message.

POWER

1300 A.D.

Fifty years later

“**W**hat would you *do* with it, though?” Anna asked.

Anna, along with her sister, Sarah, had been instrumental in developing magnifying lenses, and their progress had been remarkable. While their lenses weren't yet powerful enough to see individual cells, they were able to look at the stars and observe the planets and come to the realization that there was far more to the universe than their home planet. Their observations over the past several decades led to conclusions relating to heliocentricity, viewpoints Copernicus wouldn't formally propose for another two centuries. The Aliomenti were, once again, ahead of their time.

Will's latest observation did not relate to magnifying lenses, however. He'd hypothesized that lightning must be made of something comparable to Energy, and that they could perhaps capture that energy for their own uses.

“I'm not sure, not yet,” Will replied. “Yet, I think we could find something incredible to do with it. Lightning can set fire to entire forests and destroy buildings. What could we get it to do if we could somehow channel it to our purposes?”

Sarah shook her head, as she watched a young man named William work on polishing the lenses the sisters made. They sold them in human cities as reflecting mirrors, but privately focused on their magnification capabilities. “Why would we want to destroy buildings or set fires in forests, though? Even if we had enemies, there are far more efficient ways to eliminate them.” She nodded at William. “He's become quite proficient at creating and throwing

knives, for instance. Why try to track and capture lightning when he can throw a knife and hit his target? Why not use our Energy to handle the problem?”

Will sighed. “I hope we don’t think of it in those terms. Many, many years ago, we looked at a raging river. The only thing a raging river could do was flood and destroy our homes, or perhaps drown us. But we looked at the power of the water and channeled it to do something no more exciting than turning a wheel on an axle. Yet that provided us with unending supplies of fresh water and eventually a means to turn gears that increased our productive capacity by many multiples, letting us develop the money we needed to expand to Watt and other outposts throughout so much of the world. Perhaps we could have used the waters and redirected them to flood our enemies, but we found more productive uses by thinking about the water in a different fashion. I see lightning, an incredible force of nature, and wonder what we might do with it.”

Anna looked thoughtful. “I hadn’t thought of it that way. Lightning isn’t so much a force, because it doesn’t push anything. It’s more like... fire. I guess that’s why it can start fires when it strikes in just the right place. But how can you control *fire*?”

She glanced toward William, and Will watched the young man as he pondered his response to her question. William seemed oblivious to his audience. He had put down the lens he’d been polishing, recognizing that it was time to change his focus. He moved to a large oven where the smiths heated metal. Will watched, stunned, as William reached into the oven and retrieved a container of molten iron and carried it toward forms he’d use to shape a new sword.

He’d touched the red-hot container with his bare hands, without any sign of pain or physical damage. Will stared at William, then back to the sisters, who both reacted as if this was nothing unusual.

Anna realized that Will was shocked at what he’d seen, and merely shrugged. “He’s always done that. I guess it’s just a gift he has.”

“But...” Will stammered, unsure why that particular skill raised so many alarms in his mind.

“We use the metal ducts to channel heat through buildings,” Sarah noted, resuming the previous conversation. Will found himself temporarily distracted from contemplating William’s unusual skill. “Could *that* be the way you channel lightning? With metal ducts?”

“Well...” Will focused himself on the conversation at hand. “With the fires in the furnaces we control where and when those fires *start*, so it’s much easier

to control where the heat *goes*. The problem with lightning is that we never know where it will strike, and even if we do, how would we move metal ducts to capture that lightning?”

Anna nodded. “That’s the thing with the water, though. Way back at the start, back when the Aliomenti started in that first village... the water wasn’t where you needed it to be. So you... moved it.”

Sarah frowned. “I don’t follow. How do you *move* lightning?”

“I don’t know,” Anna admitted. “But, to Will’s point, I don’t think we could move the *ducts*, at least not fast enough to catch lightning. So can we... I don’t know... *pull* the lightning to the ducts?”

Will smiled. She was figuring it out, changing her entire line of thinking to solve the problem he’d posed.

He excused himself as the two sisters continued to discuss the idea of capturing electricity, with a private apology to Benjamin Franklin. He suspected they weren’t far off from attempting to “pull” lightning to their chosen locations using the equivalent of a lightning rod, a mere four centuries before the venerable Franklin would consider and perfect the same concept. Then again, they had the advantage of the results of Franklin’s studies in the past due to Will’s knowledge of history.

Will stopped to watch William again. The young man had set aside the form with the molten metal to allow it to cool for a few moments. He then finished polishing a lens, and moved on to sharpening a knife, one Will sensed he’d made himself. He’d heard the story of William’s life prior to his rescue by Anna, after which he was restored to health by Sarah. He’d been abandoned on the streets of his hometown at only four years of age, and had survived on scraps of food and charity. It didn’t take much for even his four-year-old self to understand that others considered him subhuman; the occasional handout of food or money had been accompanied by a cruel word or a blow to reinforce society’s view of him as a lesser being.

At the age of twelve, when the handouts slowed to a crawl, he’d finally resorted to stealing food to survive, snagging the occasional loaf of bread or meat pie, unnoticed by the residents of his hometown. At least, he *thought* he’d been unnoticed... right up until the day he consumed a meat dish he’d seen sitting out, and realized as the pain wracked his body that the food had been intended for him, and had been poisoned.

They’d wanted him to die, slowly and painfully, for his crimes, for stealing the food he could not earn. He’d asked every craft master to train him in a trade,

asking only a meal per day in exchange for whatever labor he could perform. He was turned away with sneers and buffets. Life was a cruel torture for William, and his tormentors had decided to end his life with even greater pain than he'd lived it.

Anna had sensed that pain and felt his agony from several streets away, a pain that awakened her compassion as nothing had before. It was not the physical pain that so captured her attention; it was the emotional pain of a life never lived, of a human being never loved. She was at his side in an instant, and the jeering crowds suddenly felt an overwhelming need to be elsewhere. None of them noticed that the strange woman and William vanished from their midst. In fact, none of them remembered William at all.

Sarah, who had developed deep Energy-based healing skills, managed to purge the poison from his system before it proved fatal. The two then treated him with the food, medicine, and, most importantly, the compassion he needed to make a full recovery. In Sarah and Anna, the two sisters who saved his life, young William found the bonds to others he'd never known; in the boy, the two women found the child neither had ever borne, and never would.

William struggled with Energy development, but his work with the two sisters meant that he'd never be forced out of the Aliomenti, for even the two women did not possess his skill in shaping and polishing lenses. He'd also spent time with the metal workers, who found that the youngster had an innovative mind for their craft. The knife William now sharpened was of his own creation. Will watched the young man's face tense as he concentrated, and then the knife spun from his hand in a blur, embedding itself in a nearby wall with an audible thud. William smiled.

Will shook his head and continued walking. The youngster could be quite dangerous with a skill like that.

The difficulty with trying to get the women to think about harnessing the power of lightning, of trying to get them to think of it as Will thought of electricity, was that the concept of energy of that sort didn't exist in this era. It was not a case where they were familiar with steam power and he wanted to introduce an internal combustion engine; in that case, the concepts were comparable even if the technologies to enable the concept were vastly different.

How had history recorded electricity permeating the consciousness of humanity?

He snapped his fingers and turned to head back to visit with Anna and Sarah once more.

The sun was dipping below the horizon, and the outpost was beginning to turn dark as its source of light slowly disappeared. He found Anna and Sarah heading back to the residence building.

“Light!” Will shouted to them.

They paused, turning, and looked at Will, confusion on their faces. “What do you mean?” Anna asked.

“When a storm hits at night, when there’s a great deal of lightning... it makes the night as bright as day. What if... could we harness the lightning to make light wherever we might want it?”

“Why would we want to do that?” Sarah asked.

“Why *wouldn't* you?” Will asked. “In the winter months, we have just a few hours of daylight. If we could figure out how to use lightning to make *light*... well, we could continue working the same number of hours we work during the summer months. We could make light shine on our shops so that anyone could continue working as long into the night as they’d like, even on those winter evenings when the sunlight vanishes so quickly. We could put the light into our rooms, so that we could read or write well into the evening if that was our desire. We could—”

“We could put lights in the halls leading to the latrines!” Anna exclaimed, then blushed. “Well, sometimes, you just need to go, right?”

Will laughed. “You make a great point.” His face turned serious again. “That’s just an idea that I have. If we can somehow channel that lightning energy, that fire... who knows what all we might be able to do with it? When we learned of Energy, the only hope was that maybe we’d get some basic telepathy skills. Yet we can do so much more than that now.” He glanced back and forth between the sisters. “It’s just something to think about.”

He turned and headed back to his room.

Lighting wasn’t really a huge problem for him, or any other modestly powerful Aliomenti. He could display Energy as light, a skill he’d learned and used more than two centuries earlier, brightening the cave he used for training himself and Hope out of sight of men like Arthur Lowell. If he wanted to read at night, or visit the latrine, it wasn’t an issue.

Yet he’d always cautioned the Aliomenti about becoming *too* dependent on their Energy. If they teleported everywhere, they’d lose the ability to walk, ride a horse, or drive a carriage. If they used telekinesis to move objects they needed, they’d lose the ability to grasp objects and carry items from place to place, and would find their bodies weakening from lack of physical activity. If they relied

heavily on telepathy and empathy while dealing with others, they'd lose their instinctive ability to read people.

"Who cares?" Arthur had asked. "It's not as if Energy abilities can be lost."

Will, thinking of the Hunter Aramis and his Dampening ability, shook his head. "We don't know that, Arthur. For all we know, such abilities *can* be lost. Perhaps the loss would only be temporary. But you lose your humanity if you forget how to do things in the simplest fashion. And don't forget, what is the main promise everyone makes when they join? Don't reveal the secret of our abilities to anyone, right? What bigger risk to exposure could there be than someone who teleports everywhere, or moves everything through the air with telekinesis? If you develop the habit of doing both too often, you'll very much run that risk of exposing us to the world, because you won't *think* before using Energy in the wrong circumstance. Perhaps exposure wouldn't be a bad thing, but if you're going to do so, you don't want to do it accidentally."

"You don't want to do it at *all*," Arthur said, and his voice had turned surprisingly savage. "There is *never* a reason, not a permissible one, not a good one or a bad one, to expose *any* of what we are about or able to do to any *humans* who have not joined our group, who have not pledged to maintain our secrecy. In fact..."

Will winced. "In fact... what?"

Arthur cleared his voice. "I think we need to assign a penalty for doing so. To make sure that people realize the seriousness of the oath. It should be something painful, something that adds teeth to the promise."

Will laughed. "What, should we send them to bed without supper? Kick them out? Throw them in prison?"

Arthur's eyes narrowed and his look darkened. "You don't seem to take our secrecy and preservation seriously, Will. Do you have any idea what would happen if others found out about us?"

"They'd want to learn more? Perhaps, rather than hiding, we should head out into the world and teach people. There are many people out there ready to hear what we have to say and teach, Arthur."

"No, Will. They'll come after us. They won't want to learn. They'll want to *destroy* us."

"He's right." The new voice belonged to William, the young orphan brought into the group by Anna and Sarah.

"What are you talking about?" Will asked. "Each person is unique. True, some—*some*—might want to destroy us out of fear, or perhaps to claim that

power and dominance for themselves. Yet there are many others who would welcome this information, who would happily integrate our approaches into their lives. They'd be able to make the world a far better place than it is today. Why deny everyone what we've learned because a small minority would react poorly?"

"No," William said, his eyes full of hurt and anger. "The masses out there? They're evil, Will. I've seen it. They'll step on you and try to kill you just for being anything they don't think you should be. They tried to *kill* me, Will. Why? Because my parents were dead before I was able to walk, because I dared to try to survive, because I didn't meet their definition of someone whom they should help. I offered them hard work and perseverance, someone who'd work harder than they would to make their craft shop the best it could be, for the mere chance to learn and a few morsels of food. Yet I found the door slammed in my face. And then... then, because I had the nerve to not want to be poor, a penniless wretch stealing food each day to survive... they tried to poison me. If not for Anna and Sarah, I wouldn't be here. No, we should absolutely *not* run out telling everyone. Only after they've been completely screened, only after we've made them go through our processes for membership, should we *ever* consider trusting them. You risk our very lives in trusting too much. Far better to sentence all who expose us or learn of us to death first, than to risk them coming after us." His eyes turned cold. "The human will show us no mercy."

William turned and walked off, the anger and rage at his upbringing so powerful that even an Aliomenti neophyte could sense it, and perhaps even an untrained human.

Several newer Aliomenti looked at each other, clearly wondering if the young man was suggesting they weren't trustworthy. "I wouldn't do that," one whispered. "He's exaggerating things."

Arthur glanced around. "I'm suggesting nothing quite so drastic as William. Nor anything so... draconian as Will's suggestion of the loss of an evening meal." Laughter greeted this comment, which was delivered in a tone heavy with sarcasm. "But I do think some type of public shaming might be in order. We might call it a jail or a prison, for lack of a better word. A day inside, so all might see and know those who risk exposing us, who dare to take a chance that William might be right after all." Arthur paused. "Do we *want* to take that chance?"

The murmurs started. They'd all been mollified by William's powerful tale, by the passion and anger and hurt behind it all. To reject Arthur's "compromise"

was seen as tacit acceptance of what William had suffered, and seemed to suggest that his suffering was acceptable. No one wanted to go on record in opposition to Arthur's suggestion for those reasons, save for Will, who urged them to take the time to make a decision not based on emotion, and to find a lesser punishment that better fit a "crime" with an entirely subjective definition. He was ignored. Arthur's suggestion was adopted, and they built the "prison" a short time later.

No one dared act in a way suggesting that they'd sought to share Aliomenti knowledge with outsiders, with *humans*, as no one wanted to be the first thrown into the jail. Fewer people traveled to outside cities and villages in the months immediately following, as none of them wanted to put themselves in a position to act in a suspicious manner.

Will walked by and looked at the small prison building with a sense of rising dread. This new rule and its penalty was the first incarnation of the Oaths that had led the Hunters to track him down outside his home, what had led the Assassin to target his wife and son for elimination. At this time, to those who'd lived through its implementation, it seemed modest, rather harmless, and no one could understand Will's unease over it.

"It's a joke, Will," Adam said, laughing, a few months after the new rule and William's speech. "If somebody makes a mistake, they get jeered at a bit, and then it's over. I highly doubt anyone will actually test the rule anyway. It's not as if we've had massive numbers of people out there trying to spread the word, and everyone's exceptionally careful now. Sure, we're spreading the word about our business stuff, our financial arrangements, and our top-quality goods for sale. But no one says, hey, buy this chair and I'll throw in a fruit that will enable you to fly at no extra cost. Right?" He laughed again.

Will sighed. "What happens when someone *does*, though, or is accused of doing so? We live a long time, Adam. Many don't see the thrill any more after eighty or ninety years. Who's to say that someone who wants to commit suicide wouldn't go for one last big hurrah, and show off in front of a crowd, so that they're executed for practicing witchcraft? What if that crowd figures out where they live, who they associate with, and what that might mean?" He shook his head. "I don't share William's pessimism about the entirety of humanity, but human beings, including Aliomenti, are often irrational for just long enough to make horrific errors in judgment. I think it's better to get the news out, on purpose, with intent, so that we are prepared for the possible problems."

"That's the point of the rule, though, right?" Adam replied. "You've said it

yourself before. If we tell enough people, they'll start to accept it, but it only takes one person, Will. One person who gets terrified, who thinks we're doing something awful here, and suddenly a mob attacks us."

"Like that village you visited?"

"What?" Adam looked confused.

"The village. The one where you found the morange berries, right before you came home and, ah, cleaned house."

Adam's baffled look slowly cleared. "Oh, right. I do remember that now." He smiled. "I *am* getting old, you know."

Will laughed. "Right. But I remember the story you told back then, and it sounds like what you just described as our possible future."

Adam nodded again, but it was clear that his memories of the experience weren't sharp. "I suppose so. Perhaps that's why I'm not opposed to this idea, Will. There are bad experiences in my past as well, just as there are in William's. Though, those experiences aren't quite so recent for me."

Will shook his head. He glanced up at the twilight settling in, watching the stars coming out, and wondered if the light he suspected Anna and Sarah were developing would ever illuminate every mystery of the Aliomenti.

VESSEL

1450 A.D.

One hundred fifty years later

Will checked the instrument panels, not daring to believe it was finally happening.

He'd spent decades working on the propulsion system, the material for the hull, the cabin design. He'd spent additional decades focusing just on creating a clear material able to withstand the pressure of the depths, just like the exterior hull. But even when he'd built the final, full-sized version of his submarine, he still struggled to accept that it was done.

It was the middle of the fifteenth century, a time when much of Europe was entering the Renaissance era, and a few decades before a man named Columbus would lead a trio of ships on a journey of discovery that would forever alter the European continent. Will had provided his own contribution to the advancement of human civilization, in secret lest he be "jailed" for violating an Aliamenti oath he'd never sworn. He'd traveled quietly to a portion of Germany and, while using Energy to simulate rays of light, nudged a man named Johannes toward a revolutionary idea. One of the original Gutenberg Bibles was stored in a metal safe he'd specially built on the island, a memento of the occasion, an act about which history would remain forever ignorant.

Will was now about to set sail on the maiden voyage of his submarine, a vessel complete with a salt-water based propulsion system, a craft able to dive a thousand feet below the surface of the water. He'd even created a map with sensors that could project his location and gauge his depth.

The map was visible thanks to the electric lighting system inside the cabin.

Truly, it was a marvel, a ship that would not see its equivalent in basic concept until the *Monitor* and the *Merrimack* in the American Civil War. The technology inside would not be met until after the Second World War in the twentieth century. It was only then that submarines would become a key part of naval strategy. It was only then, five centuries into the future, that the general population would have sufficient technology to match what Will had completed this day. It was an immense accomplishment, one that filled him with a deep sense of pride.

The only downside was the fact that Hope was not here with him.

With several centuries spent in private contemplation, Will knew she'd been right in her decision on many levels, painful though it might be for both of them. If Will had spent significant time in her presence, hiding her existence from his own thoughts would be an immense challenge in communities of powerful telepaths. While he didn't fear Arthur Lowell, he knew the man had survived until the twenty-third century, and he knew that Hope had survived as well. Time travel was a strange beast, though. It worked in a loop, and unless what had happened before happened again, in exactly the same fashion, there was no guarantee that he'd ever be born. The fact that he existed now was no guarantee that the future would unfold correctly. It was the reason he'd been asked to promise he'd harm no one, kill no one, for the repercussions over a millennium could be catastrophic.

Will had made his no-kill promise, but Arthur had not. It was best to keep Elizabeth's survival and transformation to Hope a secret to a man he wished was dead, a man he had to ensure remained alive. They'd keep him ignorant for as long as they possibly could, and the best means to do so was to stay apart.

Staying apart meant he'd need something creative and inspirational to stay productive, and for him, the design and creation of the submarine served that purpose.

The happenings of this time and beyond would be among the most intriguing and influential in human history. Will hoped the diary would alert him to key events, giving him the opportunity to travel into the vicinity and become an invisible eyewitness to history. He'd soon spend time in Italy, where he hoped to watch the Italian masters create the most famous artwork in history. The submarine would enable him to travel undetected to the nearest shore. From there, he could teleport, or fly invisibly to the proper location, then watch history unfold and be amazed. Perhaps, he mused, the amazement would come from the seeming normalcy of such historic endeavors. The famous paintings were not

slapped together, nor were the marble statues carved in a few minutes. The normalcy of the grind to create would, he felt, be the most powerful lesson he'd see at work.

But first, though, he needed to make sure his *own* creation worked.

To his surprise, he was incredibly nervous. He'd worked on every aspect of this craft, built every single piece and component himself, by hand, had worked on perfecting every single system for over a century. He'd built upon the new generators that Anna and Sarah had developed over the past few decades to aid the propulsion system and provide the interior lighting for the craft. He'd even created basic instruments, though the devices weren't as advanced as a digital watch back in the twenty-first century. Still, the entire craft was a technological marvel.

He wasn't worried about dying, though many who built machines of such advanced capability would literally give their lives before seeing their dreams become a reality. It wasn't a possibility in his case. He'd surrounded himself with his nanos, creating a protective exoskeleton to shield him from any type of structural malfunction that would injure him more quickly than he could react. Should the hull leak or the clear "window" material shatter during the maiden voyage, Will could teleport himself—and the entire craft—back to the surface and to the island. He also had plenty of provisions on board, including fresh water. He certainly wouldn't suffer any harm due to dehydration or poor nourishment.

No, he was primarily worried about failing.

Since traveling to the distant past, he'd done nothing new and innovative that had failed. From the Wheel, the duct system, from concrete to gears, from the heating systems they'd created, all of it had worked. His ideas on ways to use their money, not as loans, but as what amounted to shares of stock, enabled the Aliomenti to invest in hundreds of businesses, overcoming the powerful objections and concerns over money lending. That idea was now the core Aliomenti business, and it had accelerated the growth of their wealth to ever-greater heights. They'd also expanded into nearly thirty locations, primarily of his choosing, all of which were located in what would become major trading and economic powers, for Will knew where such future hives of activity would be found.

But he'd never tried to build something quite so complicated before. There was a very real chance the craft wouldn't move, wouldn't turn, or would simply rupture and sink to the ocean floor. And he wondered if that would shatter his

confidence more than Hope's continued absence.

He glanced to the painting on the wall of the craft. He could recite from memory the number of years, the tens of thousands of days, since he'd last seen her, but his memory of Hope hadn't faded. He'd taken to painting, and had created what he considered a reasonable effort at capturing both her appearance and her personality. The painting was the only ornamentation allowed aboard the ship. It was the one item he'd rescue if the craft went down.

He'd prefer to have the real Hope with him to run the sub through its maiden voyage, but it wasn't meant to be. Instead, he pretended that those occasions over the past several decades when he thought he was being watched meant she was secretly near him. It was a delusion preferable to the idea that his centuries-old brain was growing weary with age and fatigue.

Will glanced around. The cabin area was clean and simple. A small galley and food storage area had provisions sufficient for several weeks. He'd built a machine that could lower temperatures and used that to construct a basic icebox, where he could store meat and produce for a week or more without the risk of rotting or spoiling. Casks of fresh water stood near the galley.

The large panoramic window surrounding the main cabin was his proudest accomplishment. He'd managed to work a compound of metals over time until it became a strong, transparent alloy, and it retained that transparency regardless of thickness. Additional "mixing" increased the clarity, so he built a machine to stir the alloy continuously, until the alloy poured like liquid glass that he could shape much as they did concrete. He used his nanos to create the forms for both the hull and the window material, and used Energy to sear the mix into its final shape. The hull and window materials had, in testing, proved strong enough to withstand the pressures generated by hundreds of feet. The materials were, in many ways, like plastic, but they were formed of metal ores rather than petroleum byproducts.

The craft was sleek, without any rough edges, for it was poured and molded, not riveted together. It looked like a craft he'd see in the twenty-first century. He lacked modern electronic instrumentation and the autopilot capability he'd so desired, however. Though he could lock the "steering wheel" and fix his depth, he could not provide the craft with a destination and let it take care of plotting a course and navigating to his chosen destination. He'd moved that to the list of enhancements for the first major overhaul.

The concept of electricity had taken hold in many Aliomenti outposts, most notably in Watt where Anna and Sarah had continued their innovative streak, one

started with magnifying lenses. They'd built out systems of electric lighting throughout most of the outposts, careful to keep exterior lighting low enough to prevent visibility outside outpost walls. As constructed, passers-by would think the inside lighting came from fires. What had impressed him the most, however, was not the generators they'd created once they'd realized the futility of trying to "catch" lightning on a regular, predictable basis. Rather, he marveled that they'd realized they could use the electricity to track numbers, and many villages these electronic counters to keep track of inventories. They were crude, attempting to match the operations of an abacus rather than using the binary systems of modern computers, but the Aliomenti were still the inventors of an incredibly basic electronic "computer" centuries before Babbage and others hypothesized about the idea. They weren't sure what more could be done with electricity beyond basic inventory counting, and that wasn't anything that they had not, or could not, do by hand.

Will laughed at the grumbling. "Years ago, people thought having a large wheel turned by the water of a moving river was enough. Then we figured out how to use that moving wheel to transport fresh water to our village on a constant basis, and *that* became enough. We then figured out how to use that same technique to forever rid our villages of latrines dug into the ground, and *that* became enough. And then we figured out how to make and use gears, and *that* became enough. I'd say we cannot yet fathom just how important and valuable this electricity will be for our future."

He'd enjoyed the generator design Anna and Sarah had developed, and was able to study the plans and memorize them so that he could reconstruct it on his island. He then focused on changing the design from one using a turning wheel to generate electricity, to one that used salt water as a fuel. Once he was able to identify the correct adjustments, he had a combined generator and engine that ran cleanly and produced sufficient power to propel his craft through the water and power the interior. He hoped.

After painting the name *Nautilus* on the side, Will had teleported into the craft to begin the final preparations for the test run. Like the bunkers, it had been built for one with Aliomenti skills, and therefore there was no need to compromise the integrity of the hull by creating a hatch he didn't need. The view through the panoramic window showed nothing but the waters of the Eden island river leading out to the ocean, and he was struck by the silence, despite the clarity of the view of the outside. The silence would give him a sense of true isolation, turning the vessel into a place where he could be alone to think, to

enjoy the view as everything crawled by.

It was time. He stepped back to the rear of the craft. The engines burned the salt in the water of the ocean as fuel, and there was little salt here near his house. He powered up his Energy and used it to float the craft down the river toward the ocean, and eventually the water turned salty as the craft approached the mouth and entered the waters of the Atlantic Ocean. He pulled his Energy back in and used it to spark the engine, to prime it for its initial operation and movement.

The spark initiated the burning process, propelling the wheels and gears that suctioned salt water into the system. The flow of the water triggered the equivalent of a spark plug that would ignite with the fuel's entry into the engine chamber. The spark separated the salt from the water as if it was triggering a fission-style explosive reaction, propelling the liquid through the tubes leading out to the sides of the craft. His steering system was very basic. Turning the wheel altered the amount of water propelled out of the tubes, so that the amount expelled was greatest in the direction opposite the way he wished to move. The propulsion system was clean and simple, and at this point it was also slow. He had the backup system that could not fail, his own Energy and telekinetic abilities, but he had no interest in relying on them. If the craft couldn't move at high speeds at this point, it was an acceptable outcome.

The ballast system was next. Without taking on water for weight, the craft floated in the water as would a normal boat. Will had decided that he'd spend evenings afloat rather than below the water. Until he could develop more advanced computing systems that could handle the calculations, until he could develop sensors able to detect obstacles that might damage the craft, he could not risk sleeping below the surface.

The water moved in to fill the ballast tanks, the *Nautilus* gained mass, and gradually it began to sink below the surface of water. Will held his breath, listening for the telltale sounds of a leak, but nothing came. The craft was waterproof, or was so at the modest depths he currently occupied.

Will allowed the craft to find its level for the amount of ballast it had taken on, and it stabilized roughly three hundred feet below the surface. With his concerns about the security of the hull and windows cleared, he now turned his concern to the air purification system. The air system extracted oxygen from the water processed by the propulsion system, in which oxygen was released by the spark that expelled the desalinated water out the sides of the vessel. It was a simple and elegant solution, one that had taken him a century of design and testing to perfect.

The air remained clean and pure, and he felt no signs of light-headedness, no indication that problems with the air would slowly poison him.

He moved to the wheel, and pushed the lever to increase the inflow of water to the propulsion system. The act forced the system to widen the intakes, pulling water in more quickly and forcing the spark plug to fire with greater frequency. The flow of water spurting out the back increased, and the *Nautilus* picked up speed. Will tested the steering, veering first left, then right, and then moderately adjusted the depth up and down. The craft worked well and navigated smoothly. His first trials had not gone so well; he'd run prototypes that had not been able to return to the surface, one in which he'd not been able to move to the left, and another in which the propulsion system failed to cycle oxygen into the air purification system for breathing. Each lesson, each small failure, had gone into building this craft, and each system was refined and perfected until it was the best he knew he could build, failing another evolution in technology.

The approach had served him well in building this first operational craft. He propelled the *Nautilus* forward, deep enough that he'd remain unseen by any ships passing above, but shallow enough that he could still navigate by the light of the sun. He'd made a note on his list of enhancements to build lights on the outside of the craft in the event he'd need to travel at night or at greater depths. Mentally, he made a note to make the exterior lights upgrade a priority upon his return to Eden.

He headed south, using the compass he'd built as a guide, and the propulsion system moved him at a rate he judged at about fifteen miles per hour. He didn't need a speedometer, because he wasn't on a timetable. He wanted to enjoy the journey, not race through it. In the future, he'd upgrade the engines to provide greater speeds in the event he'd need them, and a speedometer to measure the speed of the craft, but he didn't consider those critical upgrades.

Will traveled through the depths of the ocean waters for an hour before resurfacing, an effect much like teleportation. He'd left his island and suddenly resurfaced in the middle of the ocean, with no land in sight. As the ballast water was released and the craft floated to the surface, he found himself letting go a breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding. As much as he'd tested, as long as he'd spent building the craft, he still feared the unknown and the potential failure.

The craft broke the surface and settled atop the water, the waves lapping gently against the side. Will could see both above and below the surface via the clear hull section, but he wanted to breathe the salty air. He teleported to the top

of the craft with a bit of food and a mug of water, sat down, and enjoyed a private picnic lunch, lulled into a sense of serenity by the gently rolling waves.

Feeling introspective, he reached into his pocket and withdrew the diary. He'd not checked it for a long time, and had lost interest in what the device had to say. It was clear that they wanted him to work it out on his own, living naturally, and he began to wonder if *he* had told them to do that. The diary hadn't built itself; the dates and messages were clearly chosen by someone with knowledge of what had happened. Who better than him? With a sigh, he realized the truth of the matter. *He'd* written the messages, chosen the times when the diary would provide guidance. A bemused smile formed on his face. Add another item to his list of things to do. Write down messages the diary should display, and the dates and times they should be available.

That raised another question. Even if he himself built the device in his hands, even if he crafted every message, he'd still need to get it to his children and Adam so they could plant it in the time machine for his journey. He realized that he'd need to give Adam the diary itself or the notes required to build it at some point before his birth. The trio had told him he'd not been seen in his current form after that time. Only Adam would be around both before his birth and at the time of Will's rescue from the Hunters. Only Adam could ensure the diary made it back into his younger hands.

Could he trust Adam with something so important?

Did he have a choice?

He sighed. He was nearly five hundred years old, and yet his journey to that future point in time was not yet half over. Could he make it that long? Would he ever see Hope again?

Was all of this worth it?

He tapped on the diary screen, and nearly dropped it into the waters of the ocean.

He did not see words this time, but a picture with a caption.

Hope, her face pale but joyous. Josh, at the age of seven. Both had jet-black hair. And with them was a tiny girl with hair of gold, wrapped into a papoose of blankets, held lovingly by her mother, her big brother beaming at the camera as he rested a hand upon her.

The caption was simple. *Evangeline ("Angel") Elizabeth Trask. Born September 1, 2030.*

He'd been through a great deal. He'd needed to restore from near death two women dear to him from the horrific acts of others. He was trying to sail a craft

that shouldn't exist across the ocean. He'd developed abilities that most considered the realm of fantasy. Yet this simple photograph was the most powerful image, and provoked the most powerful emotion he'd ever experienced. It was proof that what he was working toward for such an incredible amount of time was worth the incredible effort and agony. He was not living for today; he was surviving to make certain that the woman he saw in the image would become the wife and mother he'd known, and that those two precious children would come into the world at the appointed time.

That simple image helped him to realize the true advantage he held over the other Aliomenti. It wasn't the technological or Energy advantage he had because he'd come to them from the future. His advantage was that his life had a purpose beyond his own. Without that motivation, he might well succumb to the temptation to end it all, for he might sense he had nothing else to accomplish. That was the fate of so many of the Aliomenti. The reason they reached such an end, though, was because they lived for the day, for themselves, for no purpose other than their own well-being. Eventually, there was nothing else they could accomplish for themselves, and life lost meaning. When their lives lost purpose, when they could not acquire anything more that provided them with any joy, they ended those lives that no longer seemed worth living.

But *his* life had a purpose, one greater than himself. The picture had reminded him of his journey and his true mission in the most powerful way it could. He needed to refocus, and make sure that nothing happened to jeopardize the success of that mission.

Nothing.

ORPHAN

1600 A.D.

One hundred fifty years later

Will piloted the submarine into the dock he'd built on the shore of the Eden Island River. He'd made continuous refinements to the vessel over the decades, and had fine-tuned the craft to provide further amenities. In fact, it had become so comfortable for him that he thought of the submarine as his home, even more so than Eden, and far more than any of the Aliomenti outposts throughout the western half of the European continent.

His official residence at this time was Watt, the outpost on the southeastern coast of England, where he'd spent a good portion of his time over the past few centuries. Sarah and Anna had performed wonders with electricity, moving beyond the basic lighting and crude inventory tracking systems of yesteryear. They continued to improve the switches that controlled the flow of electricity, primarily due to the work of William. The former orphan had mastered the ability to create minute strings of metal capable of channeling electricity where it was needed, and the improved switches were of his design and creation. They'd improved the inventory systems, and the computing systems could now track their financial holdings, a far more complex set of operations. One resident had remarked that it seemed you could move *anything* through a duct, pipe, or wire, even images and sound.

Will smiled.

Their latest endeavor was wholly impractical, however. They had decided to create a light show, and spent nearly a year working on it. They created the glass tubes that glowed when electric current flowed through, and experiments

revealed the proper means to turn the light different colors. The true innovation was the ability to have the switches turn off and on in a given sequence, one which they could set ahead of time. In something as simple and impractical as a choreographed light show, Will could see the beginnings of programmable computing technology. The flashing lights would symbolize far more to him than the entertainment.

His own advances were well ahead of that. He'd created sufficient computing technology to accurately locate his submarine on a map, and developed sensors that could record—and display—all manner of useful information about conditions inside and outside the *Nautilus*.

The light display was impressive, and with the appropriate background music would have been a worthy competitor to the timed, orchestrated displays seen on video sharing sites near each twenty-first century holiday season. The women did not have access to digital music files that could be set to play repeatedly, but that didn't prevent them from creating an incredible display of moving art. Will wasn't the only Aliamenti in attendance in awe of what they'd put together. William received many accolades for his efforts in creating the wires and switches that served as the raw materials for the display.

Will, Sarah, Anna, and William traveled the following day to a village some five miles distant, where the bakers were exceptionally skilled. They'd determined that William's birthday was near the beginning of the year, and they wanted to purchase the flour, yeast, and other ingredients necessary to make the "young" man a fine cake. They also sought the recipe the cooks used to make their incredible baked goods, offering to pay a princely sum for the information.

"How is it that you have the ability to offer such a sum for something so simple as a cake recipe?" one woman asked. "I have not seen you trade, or working here at a craft, scrimping your coppers together over time. Yet you show up and offer to spend large amounts of money on trifles, and it is no false claim that you have the funds to do so. How do you come by your good fortune? Are you royalty, traveling in disguise?"

Anna shook her head. "We have had good fortune in our trading in years past, and others before us, and as such we have sufficient money set aside to enable this. It is also a special occasion, celebrating the birth of one very dear to us." She nodded at William, her face the pride of a mother seeing her son grow to adulthood. "He is a fine young man."

"How old is he?"

"Three... and twenty," Sarah replied, catching herself. William would in fact

be turning three hundred and fifteen years old, a fact Sarah had wisely avoided proclaiming in this town.

“Where are you from?” another asked.

“Several days’ journey away, in that direction.” Anna replied, waving a hand in the general direction of the Watt outpost.

“I see,” the second woman replied, frowning. “We saw strange lights coming from that direction the other night, and it wasn’t a storm. We didn’t hear any thunder or see any lightning. And the lights... they were all different colors. That’s not *normal*.” She narrowed her gaze at the two women. “Did you see those strange lights?”

“No,” Anna replied, a bit too quickly. “I’m afraid I don’t know what you mean.”

The second woman looked as if she wanted to challenge that statement, but she opted to keep silent. Will didn’t like the look on her face, and was quite concerned at the level of mistrust and fear emanating from her. It seemed to be a portent of trouble, and they had no interest in trouble or attention of any kind.

They walked home the next day, preferring that mode of travel to horses or teleportation given the pallor of suspicion that hung over the village. Anna and Sarah chatted amiably, still managing to find new and interesting topics of conversation after centuries around each other. William trailed behind, a blissful look on his face, his hand resting on the hilt of the new short sword he’d crafted for himself, the muted winter sun highlighting his thick, light brown hair.

Twilight came, and with the fading daylight came the opportunity to watch the light show in action once more. The crowds gathered, mesmerized at the patterns of light created by the display, and Will himself was impressed, knowing the level of dedication and commitment it had taken to create the display.

The shouts rose from the entrance to the outpost, a low gate that offered only cosmetic resistance. “See? I *told* you! They’re communing with evil spirits!”

The posse from the nearby village spilled over the gates, and leading their contingent were the two women suspicious of the money the sisters had available to them, who had asked about the strange lights in the sky from the direction of the Aliomenti outpost. Joining them were at least fifty others, all armed with swords, all with looks of righteous fury in their eyes. It was a look Will recognized, the same look he’d seen in the eyes of the first Aliomenti... just before they’d set upon the girl known as Elizabeth Lowell and beaten her to death.

He set off toward the mob, ignoring the confused looks on the faces of the Aliomenti. They knew the mob meant trouble, but they were unclear on just what form that trouble might take. Nor were they concerned; they were, after all, the Aliomenti, and the mob was composed of mere humans.

Will knew better, knew the power of numbers of people frightened by something they could not understand or explain. He had no interest in waiting for the Aliomenti here to find out their mistake in underestimating the invading force.

“Peace, friends,” he said, raising his voice. “You appear to be weary from traveling. May we offer you refreshment and lodging?”

The response was a mixture of muttering and feral glances at the light display still running a dozen yards away.

“Come,” Will said, holding his hands out in a welcoming gesture. “Let me get you something to eat.”

“No!” The voice came from the back of the crowd. “We’ve seen the lights. You people are clearly witches, worshiping evil spirits! Don’t trust them! They’ll poison us!”

The murmurs grew louder, the faces grew angrier, and Will saw William wince at the mention of poison, a memory still powerful three centuries after it had happened.

Will sensed in the newcomers a fear that the Aliomenti meant to destroy them, and a belief that it was best to take the fight to the dangerous light-wielders, to destroy them first. If they waited, the villagers believed, the “witches” would have a chance to work their spells and brew their potions and utterly destroy or enslave them. The fear was powerful and overwhelming.

Will projected a broadcast thought. *Don’t do anything nonhuman. Remain calm. Move quietly into your homes. Let’s not provoke them.*

“The lights are not the result of magic, nor are we practitioners of witchcraft. We do not wish any trouble or bear you any ill will, friends.”

“If the lights bother you, we can turn them off.” William walked out from the crowd.

“Show us!” a voice cried out from the crowd, even as Will projected a warning thought to William. *Leave the lights go! Do not turn them off!*

William nodded at the crowd. *Don’t be silly, Will.* He moved to their rudimentary generator, even as Will desperately pleaded with him to stop. William ignored the plea. With the eyes of the invaders upon him, William moved the lever that stopped the generator.

The lights went out instantly.

But the effect was the opposite of what he'd expected. Seeing a man move his hands and eliminate the evil lights reaffirmed their conviction. A power like that could only come from one engaged in witchcraft.

Witches needed to die.

With a roar, the townspeople drew swords and charged the Aliomenti, swinging blades and connecting with the flesh of their immortal foes. Screams rent the air and blood flowed, before the stunned Aliomenti could fathom that they were under attack by the very people they considered their inferiors.

And in their arrogance, they were dying at the hands of those inferior humans.

The Energy finally began flowing, and blades began to warp and melt in the hands of the townsfolk. If they hadn't been convinced that their allegations of sorcery were true before, they most assuredly were now. The more powerful Aliomenti telekinetically hurled their attackers out of the village, unconcerned at the sound of the screams mixed with the sounds of cracking bones and torn tendons. The humans were dying in bodies crushed and battered beyond recognition, ceasing to breathe as the horrific pain overwhelmed them.

The screams woke the remaining townspeople from their fear, and they recognized that they could not defeat this foe. They turned and fled from the outpost.

With one exception.

William was engaged in a fierce sword fight with one of the townsfolk. Metal clanged against metal, as the two men fought with tremendous intensity and ferocity. Will, who'd seen William practice his sword craft for the past several decades, felt sympathy for the human man facing him. There was no chance that the man could win, even if William chose not to press his Energy skill advantages. William's centuries of experience and the speed he'd developed would win the day.

William seemed disinterested in simply winning the sword fight. He wanted to embarrass the man, wanted to make him, and the others, regret their incursion into Aliomenti territory. For William, this man represented those who'd chosen to poison him centuries earlier; stood as an example of the humans he believed needed extermination. His moves were not meant to win; they were meant to wear the man down, to injure him deliberately, to kill him slowly, to make the man suffer before he begged for the mercy of death.

In more practical terms, William was showing off for the Aliomenti, who

moved to ring the fighters and watch the lopsided contest, cheering on one of their own.

The skill level was high in the human man, but William's speed was too overwhelming. With each blow, the man broke down further, until a blow from the flat edge of William's sword knocked him to the ground. William raised his hands in triumph and sheathed his sword as the Aliomenti crowd roared, and he moved toward Anna and Sarah, the two women who had rescued him from his near-death so many years before.

In his move to embrace them, William did not notice his competitor rise from the ground in silence. He did not see the man's movements, did not hear him move forward with his weapon at the ready. William's weapon was sheathed, unavailable for defense.

He had no idea he was in mortal danger until Sarah screamed out a warning as the blade slashed through the air at William's neck.

In a panic, William reacted instinctively, teleporting a few feet away. It was enough to save his life.

But with William out of his shielding position, the two women he loved more than any others were suddenly at risk, exposed to a slashing sword moving in a blur through the spot William had once occupied.

The blade tore through the front of Sarah's throat, severing the jugular vein, and she fell, eyes wide, grasping at the mortal wound. The blade didn't stop, the upward arc catching the side of Anna's head, splitting her face open to the skull. She fell, dead before her lifeless body hit the dirt.

The entire village went silent.

The earlier deaths had caught them by surprise, and they'd had no time to process those. These deaths, though... these were the result of a cruel twist of fate. None of them seemed able to move due to their shock, and they merely watched as the blood poured from the wound in Sarah's throat, as her hands scabbled to close the wound in a futile effort to save her life. William finally recovered and moved to her, and he was there as her hands fell away from her neck, was there to watch as the life faded from her eyes.

William closed her eyes before shutting his own eyes, his grief palpable, the silence around him absolute.

Then he turned upon the man he'd toyed with earlier, to his eternal regret. The man had recognized he was against something beyond human when William vanished, had remained rooted to the spot as William watched the sisters die... and now realized that his life was very much at risk. He turned to run.

William appeared in front of him, his sword in hand, eyes blazing.

This time, he did not hold back or take his time. He did not care if the man suffered, just that he died. The point of the blade went straight through the man's throat, and William followed through until the man was pinned to the ground on his back, blood spouting from the mortal wound. Dislodging the blade, he swept it in a wide arc, sweeping the sword at such a high rate of speed that the man's head split ear to ear.

William stopped briefly, his eyes flicking to the bodies of the women he loved, and the body of the man who'd killed them both lay dead at his hands. He'd inflicted their injuries back upon their killer, a symbol of the vengeance he felt.

The man's death was sufficient for vengeance, but not sufficient to quench William's rage. The blade flew, again and again, until the body was no longer recognizable as human. The rage on his face was horrible, and when the blade stopped moving, he pointed at the pulpy mess and screamed. "*Burn in hell!*"

Fire leapt from his hands, and the remains at his feet burned to ash. The flame burned with such intensity that there was no smoke, no smell, just instant annihilation. William was stunned, and looked down at his hands, then looked at the crowd in confusion, as if pleading for help.

No one moved to him, stunned at the display of unbridled violence and the flames thrown from his hands. When no one moved to him, William looked back at the bodies of Anna and Sarah. Will could see him piecing it together, a story with an unhappy ending even greater than the deaths of the two women he loved. For William realized that he'd had every opportunity to save them, but his pride had been their downfall. Had he listened to Will, the crowds might have been calmed. Had he dispatched the man quickly, there would have been no chance for him to deal the double death blow. And if William had turned to defend himself with steel, rather than teleporting away in fear, the blade would not have had a clear path to end two lives.

"I will never let myself forget you or forgive myself for this failure," William whispered. He used the tip of the blade to gouge deep scars across both cheeks, refusing to wince in pain or stop the flow of blood. "And I will avenge your murders a million times over. I will decimate the human scourge."

Will felt a chill at his actions and words.

The days thereafter were a blur, a memory that the Aliomenti could not blot out. There were the funerals for their own dead, and the genuine grief shown by a scarred William as Anna and Sarah were laid to rest reverberated through the

community of telepaths. So great was his grief that his thick, brown hair had started to fall from his head. Arthur joined them as well, and seemed uncertain what to say, for once there simply to offer support to one of the many satellite communities the Aliomenti had founded.

Will led an expedition to the town with the bodies of their dead in sealed wooden coffins. The villagers looked fearful as the caravan approached, seeming to expect a retaliatory attack. But the Aliomenti came unarmed. Will explained that they'd learned how to make fire change colors using different types of wood, and that they enjoyed watching the fire burn in different colors. The survivors of the attack, for their part, looked remorseful, finally recognizing in the unarmed men and women before them a peaceful group that meant them no harm. They expressed their profound regret for launching the attack, their remorse clear and genuine even to one not Energy-enabled.

None seemed to remember the sight of their fallen comrades being hurled hundreds of feet through the air to their deaths.

Will and the others helped them unload the coffins and identify the deceased. They had nothing but ash left of the man executed and cremated by William, and explained that one of their number had lost control and burned one of the bodies after so many had fled. It was a somber return to the outpost for the travelers, full of downcast faces and incapable of finding anything positive to focus upon.

William vanished several days later, and only when he returned with his sword caked with dried blood did they learn where he'd been. He'd returned to the town and executed all those who'd survived the attack on the Aliomenti. William's only regret was that he'd not exterminated all in the village as a preventative measure.

"They're all animals," he hissed. His voice, once so full of joy, had been replaced by one laden with an icy chill. "They don't deserve to live. They fear us, and they attack us. We must never, *ever*, let them learn about us. We must punish those who risk our exposure and our lives to those vermin. They should *all* be exterminated."

Arthur, still visiting, nodded. "We've seen nothing good come from revealing ourselves, our abilities, or our technology to others, and enough heartache to last an eternity." He looked around, and saw the heads of the Aliomenti nodding. "I would like each of you here, right now, to swear an oath to each other. You will never tell others of our existence, intentionally or otherwise, and that you accept whatever *severe* penalties are deemed appropriate should you be in violation of this oath." His face darkened. "The penalty will be

more severe than a day in a mock prison, I assure you.”

The others nodded, their attention riveted on Arthur. Will wasn't looking at Arthur, though. He wasn't looking at those nodding their assent at Arthur's words, nor was he nodding in assent. He was looking at the once-handsome young man named William, whose hair had started to fall out in clumps in a physical manifestation of his all-consuming anger. But it wasn't even the hair loss that startled him and filled him with an icy chill.

It was the red streaks that had formed in his eyes.

FRACTURE

1700 A.D.

One hundred years later

It was not the first time their voices rose in anger.

Their anger transferred into the form of Energy raging like a whirlwind, swirling over the entire Aliomenti outpost. James and Elise, together since the days of the founding of Atlantis centuries earlier, resided in the Aliomenti outpost of Waterloo on the northern coast of Spain. Their relationship had soured over the centuries, a quiet decline at first, but in recent years their conflict had become quite public.

The outposts had begun to focus on areas of specialization over the past century. The coastal communities had specialized in maritime matters, building high-speed vessels used by pioneering travelers interested in journeying to the New World, where they'd seek their fortune among lands rumored to be flowing with rivers of gold and silver. Many demanded transportation across the Atlantic for a wide variety of reasons, and the Aliomenti were there as master shipbuilders in a world that demanded ships.

It was as if they'd known it was coming.

James and Elise had started as metalworkers, but had long since moved on to larger projects, including shipbuilding. They had come to believe in materially different approaches to the design and construction of ships. It was another in a long line of disagreements of the combative couple who lived in Waterloo at the dawn of the eighteenth century.

Will had spoken to them privately when their moods threatened the peace and stability of the outpost. Both were seven centuries old and had grown and

wielded Energy nearly their entire lives. At that level of development, the emotion of a simmering feud pushed out in massive swaths of Energy that influenced the moods of anyone in the vicinity. Will had asked them to consider spending some time apart as a means to allow their divisions to heal.

He hadn't wanted to make the suggestion, for the suggested separation reminded him too much of his own isolation. In the first few centuries, she'd sent gifts and communications to him, at least letting him know that she survived and thrived. In the past century or so, though, she'd been silent. At some level, he knew she still lived, which made the silence even more painful, and led to severe self-doubt. Had he failed her? Had she given up, since he'd not decoded the mystery of the ambrosia fruit? Had she decided she could do better in the future than a young, naive Will Stark? He took a deep breath, bringing himself back to the present.

James and Elise didn't appreciate the reminder that their relationship was a shambles, and they certainly didn't appreciate Will's unsolicited suggestion. Nothing was worse about recognizing a failure in your life than to have it so painfully communicated to you by another. James and Elise were both proud, and would tell anyone who would listen, and others who didn't want to hear, that there was nothing wrong with their relationship. They were simply engaging in "spirited discussions." Their claims fooled no one.

James was preparing to launch a new ship he'd built, dubbed the *Monitor*, and there were rumors he planned to be on that ship when it sailed. He'd been assuring everyone, including Will, that it had nothing to do with the shouting matches he and Elise held regularly. The departure date coincided with the return of a ship that had left several months earlier. The returning ship, the *Merrimack*, had been built by Elise and her team. Will considered the names of the ships an ominous sign. Though no one could see how this event could turn into a competition, few who had watched the simmering feud develop over the past centuries had any doubt that *something* would happen.

And whatever form the conflict took, it would not be pretty.

The early autumn morning of the *Monitor's* departure broke; the temperatures crisp and the sky overcast. The cloud cover was suggestive of storms, and the sounds of distant thunder proved that suspicion correct. The crew, primarily humans hired for the journey, hauled cargo aboard the *Monitor* and loaded it below-decks. Provisions for the trip would follow soon thereafter, for they expected to be at sea for at least a month.

James stood aboard the ship, barking instructions to the crew as they

prepared for the final inspections. Once those checks were completed, they'd raise the anchor, unfurl the sails, and set off into the nearby Atlantic. The seas were choppy and the winds were brisk as the storm moved in, and the wooden craft shifted in the rolling tides.

"There she is!"

They were just able to make out the faint outline of a ship along the distant horizon, but their schedules told them that it was the *Merrimack*, returning at long last from its journey abroad, laden with the fruits of their trading efforts. The craft made good time, and the dock crew began preparing for the ship's arrival near where the *Monitor* rested, awaiting departure.

Will stood on the dock, watching, searching, looking for any sign of trouble. He was the most senior and most powerful Aliomenti present at the docks this day, and thus the one most able to sense trouble. His experience told him that at least one party of the feuding couple would try to show the other up, try to make them look foolish. He simply didn't know what form that foolishness would take, and he was on full alert.

He watched the horizon as the *Merrimack* grew larger and larger, and scanned the docks to see who was waiting there. A few Aliomenti from the outpost were present, primarily those with friends who'd sailed on the *Merrimack*, or those expecting a specific bit of cargo.

James walked down the gangplank and headed toward Will. "Have you seen her?"

"Who?"

"Elise." James frowned. "I don't *feel* her at all. It's not like her to not be present at her ship's return. She's abnormally fond of the abominations she builds."

It was the type of barb the two had directed at or about each other for the past century. Nothing was just stated; each set of words was twisted into an emotional plea, a request to agree with their commentary, to somehow validate the anger and frustration at one formerly loved.

But Will wouldn't be part of the gamesmanship and posturing. "You're right, James, that she'd normally be here. I don't sense her nearby either. But I have to disagree with your description of Elise's ships as abominations. You both build excellent ships. I do wish the two of you could meld the best points of both plans into an even better ship, because I believe that collaboration would result in a ship better than any ever built before."

James shook his head. "She uses far too much metal, is much too obsessed

with it. Her boats are heavy, and lack speed and maneuverability as a result. I have no interest in adding any such *features* to my ships.”

Will shrugged. “There’s a lot to be said for both designs, James. Think about it.”

James’ face said that he’d already done all the thinking on the topic he cared to do.

As the ship drew nearer, and as the final loading steps completed aboard the *Monitor*, the combative man walked aboard his newest craft and spoke to the captain. The *Merrimack* continued its rapid approach toward the dock.

When the *Merrimack* moved to within a few hundred yards of the shore, Will began to detect Elise’s Energy, and it grew stronger as the ship drew nearer. There was only one conclusion he could make. Elise had teleported aboard the ship as it approached the shore, and he could only fathom the trouble she meant to cause from that vantage point.

One of the Aliomenti on the dock wandered over to Will. “Isn’t that ship going rather fast for being so near to the dock?”

Will nodded. “I was just thinking the same thing.”

“She’s crazy, that one,” the man said, shaking his head. “Elise, that is. Probably hired an incompetent captain. She’ll probably lose the boat because of it.” He walked off.

As the man departed, his words hung in the air. Elise, lose a boat? No, she wouldn’t do that. Not intentionally. Not unless...

Suddenly, Will knew *exactly* what Elise was doing, and why she was on that ship. She had no intention of docking the *Merrimack*.

She meant to ram the *Monitor*, sinking James’ ship. And if the *Merrimack* went down as well, so be it.

Will, mindful of the humans aboard the ship, raced to the gangplank. “Get off the ship!” he screamed, racing aboard. “That boat’s going to ram you!”

James, who had been perusing a map with the captain, looked up. “What are you doing here, Will? What are you talking about?”

“Look!” Will shouted, pointing.

Both men looked. The path of the *Merrimack* was quite clear, and the speed suggested there was nothing accidental about the route the boat was taking. James uttered several choice words about Elise, and the captain raced around the boat, repeating Will’s warning.

Human sailors began climbing to the upper deck, spotted the gleaming metal of the ship headed directly toward them, and exited the *Monitor* in frantic

fashion, looking to reach the shore before the impending collision occurred. Will could see Elise standing at the wheel, centering the craft on its now-obvious target. The look on her face made it clear that this wasn't merely a fanciful idea for revenge against crimes real or imagined. She meant to destroy James by destroying his ship and anyone who stayed aboard.

Will looked more closely at Elise's boat, and realized that the crew was no longer aboard. Either Elise had been piloting the ship longer than they'd thought, or she'd managed to move all of the sailors off the boat before taking control. Then again, he couldn't recall seeing her the past few days. Perhaps she'd traveled to the ship's final stop, prevented the crew from boarding, and had sailed the craft solo to this point.

There were no humans present on the *Monitor* any longer, so Will took the chance and teleported to the *Merrimack*.

Her gaze was fiery and unrelenting in its focus upon her target. Her face was terrible, one that told of her anger and hurt at whatever wrongs James had committed, real or imagined he did not know. She'd go down with both ships, a move that would ensure that her boat would have completed its maiden voyage, while James' had never managed to leave port. Elise would, in her mind, therefore, win the debate over who had the best boat by eliminating her competition.

"Elise!" Will shouted. "It doesn't have to be like this! Change course!"

Elise shook her head once, the only indication that she'd noticed his presence.

"You must turn the boat!" Will shouted. "Innocent people will have their lives damaged. Don't hurt others because they happen to be near James; it's hardly a fair and equitable response. Don't let your anger do that, Elise!"

Elise didn't move, gave no indication that she'd heard what he said. She merely continued steering the ship, making minor adjustments to the path to ensure she'd impact the *Monitor* at the correct angle.

"I can stop you," Will whispered, and this time he got her attention.

"You wouldn't *dare*," Elise hissed. "This is between the two of us, and nobody else."

"Wrong," Will said. "You're both part of my family. And as for the others? Most everyone in Waterloo has something coming in on your boat, out on James' boat, or both. If you ram him and sink his boat—and yours—then you will very much involve everyone else. Stop this now!"

Elise's eyes flamed at him. "No."

Will shook his head. “Then you leave me no choice, Elise. I’ll have to stop you from doing this.”

Elise’s grin took on a deranged look. “Oh, I don’t think you will.”

Will felt a small hand touch the back of his neck, and then a second, as a sensation of having the wind knocked out of him crushed his Energy and spirit. He crumpled to the deck of the ship, his memory fighting to recall the best defense against this. The hands on his neck, the power that drained him of his Energy, could belong to only one person.

He tried to pull himself free, but the child climbed upon his back and tightened his grip, and Will found himself fighting to retain consciousness. It had been centuries since he’d felt the adult Aramis’ power. In their encounter in the twenty-third century, Will had had the impression that Aramis was going easy on him, perhaps suspecting that Will wasn’t much of a threat. The hands suggested Aramis was only a boy now, but his power was being unleashed in its entirety. And Will was losing this fight.

Just as his foggy mind remembered that he had an army of nanos he could use to extract himself from Aramis’ grip, the *Merrimack* collided with the *Monitor*. The collision knocked the boy from Will’s back, and he was able to roll farther away and snap a skeleton of nanos around himself, forming a layer that prevented the direct contact that allowed the boy’s power to have its full effect.

Will staggered up to his knees as his body began regenerating the Energy lost to Aramis’ touch, and he swiveled sluggishly to see the youngster. The boy stood, and Will saw the familiar white-blond hair. To his surprise, he saw no aggressive judgment on the young face, but rather a distant, vacant look that clouded the boy’s eyes.

The ship slumped, jarring Will’s thoughts and eyes away from Aramis, and he fell once more to the deck. With his Energy and energy both recovering rapidly, he regained his footing and fought to maintain his balance as he surveyed the situation.

The *Merrimack*’s front was reinforced with metal, a design decision she claimed helped the ship cut through the water and obtain a higher speed. James’ preferred a design comprised entirely of wood, claiming that the lighter weight increased the speed of his ships compared to Elise’s. Will wasn’t sure which craft was swifter, but Elise’s ship had proved itself to be the bully in this encounter. The metal edge had knifed through the side of the *Monitor*, splitting the craft nearly in half.

However, the *Merrimack* didn’t fare as well when it collided with the dock.

With its speed slashed after crashing through the *Monitor*, the damaged boat struck the very solid dock and crumpled. The metal sealing the prow had been loosened as it sawed its way through the water and the wood of the *Monitor*. The dock knocked the final bits of metal loose and free, and the weakened seams split, allowing water to rush into the craft. The boat began to sink below the surface. The only question was which of the two ships would sink entirely beneath the surface first, and Will knew that both James and Elise would make note of the outcome as somehow symbolic of the proper victor of their not-so-minor, not-so-private war.

Will wasn't concerned about their personal hatred. He simply wanted off the *Merrimack*. Finding his Energy sufficiently restored, he teleported the short distance to the mainland, away from the dock and the two sinking ships.

Elise followed soon after, and James, slightly dazed from the impact, raced down the gangplank, shouting obscenities at Elise, who responded in kind. The Aliomenti nearby were soon shouting at both of them, blaming one or the other for the damaged ships and for the lost cargo in both ships. It didn't take long for the shouts to turn to shoves, and then swords were drawn.

Will watched the escalating tension, and could only shake his head. If he was stronger right now, he could likely make all of them see the errors of their ways and cease the tension, but he'd been drained by Aramis and had had no chance to work on the argumentative couple and their supporters on shore. He could do nothing but watch the rising tension and the sinking ships.

He suddenly realized he'd forgotten about Aramis and, judging by Elise's lack of reaction, she'd forgotten about him as well.

Muttering under his breath about the foolishness of making promises with incomplete information, Will sprinted past the combatants and found himself aboard the *Monitor* once again. He was conserving his Energy by limiting the distance he'd need to teleport to the ship, saving it for moving himself and Aramis to the safety of the shore. He jumped over the rail and onto the deck of the *Merrimack* once more.

Aramis was there, sitting on the deck and watching the ship sink, seemingly oblivious to his own peril. Will raced to him, and still Aramis did not move. Will finally grabbed the boy's arm, and Aramis yanked his arm away.

"I'm trying to save your life!" Will shouted, exasperated. How could Aramis fight him *now*? There was no great division now, no Oaths to protect at Arthur's discretion. Will was trying to save the boy. He finally seized Aramis' arm and teleported both of them to the dock, and then pulled the boy onto the dry land.

Aramis pulled away, eyes wide in a look of clear shock. Apparently, Elise hadn't alerted the boy to the skills he'd see living in an Aliomenti outpost. Will, who thought of Aramis as his future Hunter self, had no concern about removing that particular ignorance from the boy's life.

Will's eyes fell to a chain around the boy's neck, and he focused on the small medallion at the end of the chain.

Tacitus.

So that was his true name? Tacitus? Will rather preferred that to Aramis, but then "Tacitus" hadn't tried to kill him.

Yet.

"Who are you?" Will asked the boy. "Where do you come from?"

Tacitus said nothing, his eyes vacant, but loosely focused in the general direction of Elise's fighting form off in the distance. He seemed unconcerned about his own safety near a man he'd recently tried to take out of commission, as if it didn't occur to him that Will might now be a threat. He made no effort to take a defensive posture, or to pay Will any mind at all.

Will frowned. Why *wouldn't* Aramis—or Tacitus, rather—try to protect himself from a potential attack by Will? He glanced at Elise. Had she figured out the boy's gift, and somehow tamed him to her will? If that was true, then it might well be the case that if she didn't direct him to act, he wouldn't act. That might explain the vacant expressions as well.

Will scowled, and then shook his head. She'd enslaved a child to enhance her own status in her community.

History was repeating itself.

BATTLE

1700 A.D.

The shouting on the shore grew louder, and Will ran toward the noise.

The outpost had splintered as quickly as the ships, with Aliomenti shouting in fury at other Aliomenti, aligning themselves in the raging battle between the warring couple as their swords were brought to bear. The act of destruction, and the subsequent loss of property, had escalated the underlying feud into an actual battle.

James and Elise were at the center, fighting in the only way that suited them. Their swords flashed, slashing through the air with an intense ferocity, each blow meant to inflict death. Their faces were terrible, a rage beyond imagining, and their Energy burst forth with each swing. Several blows had clearly struck flesh, for both fighters were bloodied.

Much as he wanted to halt their fighting, Will was forced to admit that there would be no reconciliation between the two. The misdeeds and crimes had alternated back and forth until they'd reached this point. Though no one could prove it, many suspected that James was behind a massive fire that had indefinitely postponed the launch of one of Elise's ships. The fire had destroyed a forge specifically built to produce the metal used to bind together the joints of Elise's ships, and no other buildings were damaged. The coincidence was far too great for James to avoid suspicion, though he'd proclaimed his innocence.

One day, he hoped, they'd learn why the two had grown apart, why the animosity was so great that they'd resort to such willful destruction of property, what had happened that would lead them to incite a civil war among their personal supporters. Will wondered what Arthur would make of such a battle. A

civil war meant two leaders vowing for supremacy, and neither of them would be Arthur. It certainly went against Arthur's vision of a single leader with ultimate authority.

The men and women of Waterloo fought in the fashion of the time, with lines of warriors facing off. But unlike their leaders, the fighters did not stay with the swords for long. After a few moments, they dropped their swords and switched to Energy. The bursts of Energy made the air around him crackle, and Will let himself phase into transparency to avoid being hit. It was unlikely he could be hit with an Energy burst sufficient to hurt him, but he didn't want to take any chances.

The men and women did begin to fall, though, each casualty blasted with sufficient Energy to injure the victim. He saw two people down on the ground, unmoving, and was able to sense that neither would rise again. He shook his invisible head in sorrow.

"This is all Will's fault!" one of the fighters shouted.

Will blinked, though no one could see him. *His* fault? What on earth were they talking about?

"He should have warned them more!" another shouted. "If they'd never gotten together, if he hadn't *encouraged* them to get together, then this wouldn't have happened!"

"Where is he? I don't see him."

"He was on the *Monitor* when Elise rammed it. Maybe he went down with the ship?"

"No, I swear I saw him around here."

"If he's teleported or gone invisible, you won't find him."

There were muttered curses shouted as the fighters, with nothing to unite them, began sizing each other up again.

And then a new voice sounded. "Oh, but *I* know *exactly* where he is."

Will froze. He knew that voice. And he knew the man pointing a finger at his invisible form.

"There's nothing there, Sebastian. You're imagining things."

"Are you sure?" Sebastian replied. "Let's check that theory out, shall we?" And he shot a blast of Energy directly at Will, who, caught by surprise, was unable to avoid it. He fell to the ground, and in his shock phased back to solid visibility.

Sebastian stood over him, scowling, and then turned to face the crowd, which stood in shock, staring at Will. At least they'd stopped fighting.

Then they moved in on him. “This is all your fault!” a woman shouted.

“How is that?” Will asked, as he rose and dusted himself off. “How do you figure that this is *my* fault? I’m not the one who rammed a ship... or provoked the attack.”

“She told me you encouraged them to get together, to commit themselves to each other. If you’d not done that, if you’d discouraged them or warned them away from each other, none of this would have happened!”

Will stared at her. “They asked my opinion on whether they were meant to be together, something they fully believed at the time. I had no reason to doubt them. And I certainly had no reason, seven *centuries* ago, to believe that it would lead to *this*.”

“But *nobody*’s able to fool you, Will.”

“Yeah, *nobody* can tell *you* a lie and get away with it.”

“I’m not infallible,” Will replied. “And you’re forgetting that people change over time. Perhaps, after so many centuries together, they’d simply grown apart.” The words stung as he spoke them; had he and Hope actually grown apart after only a few decades? Was that the real reason she’d left?

“You screwed up, Will. Your word could have prevented this. *You* should have realized that they’d change, that them staying together would cause such terrible repercussions. You should have *forced* them to move apart.”

“I do *not* force people to act against their will,” he snapped. “They wished to stay, and it is not my right or my duty to make them do otherwise.”

“Will’s the real enemy!” another man shouted. “He’s setting us all against each other! He’s getting people together to make their breakups so emotional that we fight among ourselves!”

“How on earth does that benefit me?” Will shouted. It might not benefit *him*, but he could think of someone who would do exactly what had been proposed. “How does it benefit *me* if people are arguing and fighting and destroying each other? I’m the one who puts down no roots in any outpost, who has no true home. In what way does it benefit me to try to set everyone to fighting among themselves, especially those who, like James and Elise, truly loved each other?”

“You lost your wife,” one man said, his voice fraught with cruelty. “And now you want to make sure that no one else ever knows that joy. And so you sabotage their relationships, set them against each other, so that they destroy themselves and *their* relationship. It’s too painful to you to see others happy; it reminds you of what you’ve lost.”

Will stared at him, dumbfounded. “I don’t want *anyone* to feel what I felt

when I found out I'd lost them. But I *do* want them to know that joy, and for them to be able to take advantage of our long lifespans to make sure that feeling lasts far longer than I had with my wife. I've spent centuries—*centuries*—working here to help every one of you build incredible wealth. We've lived through wars and plagues that wiped out so many others, and yet here you are accusing *me* of trying to make your lives *worse*? That's the stupidest thing I think I've ever heard, and I've lived a *very* long time."

"It's the truth," a man replied. The voice chilled Will, for it was the voice of the third man from his own distant past that he'd met that very day. "I *know* it's the truth. You weep for your wife. You feel pain at the memory each time you see someone else happy. You long for true love again."

Will stared at the man he knew as Athos. "You are confusing facts with emotions, friend. Everything you said is true. I do weep for her loss. I do remember that love each time I see a happy couple, and my sorrow at my own loss is remembered and genuine. And I do long to experience all of that again. Those points are true. Where you err is the belief that the true pain you describe provokes me to act to inflict it upon others. That part is *not* true."

"We'll see about that," the man said. "We'll hold you captive, and I'll find out the full truth of your past, about what motivates you, about what it is you're trying to accomplish with people like James and Elise—"

"I'm not trying to *accomplish* anything with the two of them!" Will shouted. "I'd love for them to reconcile. I *want* them to reconcile. I wish that I knew why they started growing apart so long ago, what happened between them that's caused this rift. I don't. Why don't you seek the truth from the two of them? Wouldn't that be more useful than trying to blame *me* for the troubles they've had?"

"But I've already *done* that, Will," the man replied. "I have analyzed everyone, noted strengths and weaknesses, and have gathered information to help me form the correct conclusion. There is no doubt as to the fact that you've loved and lost. You claim that is not something that motivates you into action, action that would destroy the chance for others, yet those who've followed their hearts and love into those relationships—far too often with *your* encouragement—end up coming to a bad end."

He was right again; so many who had started into a marriage-style commitment had grown distant, and many partners had suicided as the relationships crumbled. James and Elise would never accept such an ending; both would stick it out to the end of their days, which, based upon the intensity

of their fighting, would likely be this very day.

Yet, it was hardly something Will had encouraged. “Again, you make claims as to my motivations, and how those could be twisted to be the cause of what’s happened today. Yet, you did not answer *my* question. *Why* did James and Elise start to grow apart? It was a sudden thing, not a gradual thing. The distance was instant all those centuries ago; it was only the hate which grew to such massive intensity, gradually, over time, and escalated to what we see today. If you have such a great ability to learn the truth, why not seek *that* truth?”

“I have sought it and know it, Will,” the man replied. “And yet again, it is *your* fault.”

Will raised his hands. “Enlighten me.”

“You told them, years ago, that having children would be a major decision in their lives, and that having children as a member of the Aliomenti would potentially produce offspring more powerful than their parents, and as such be a risk to both the secrecy and the safety of all of us.”

Will nodded. “That has been our approach since our founding. It is important to have that information when making such important decisions.”

“The young James and Elise, you see, had chosen to have a child together. And then you made the warning commentary. Children born to Aliomenti might well be born so powerful as to be uncontrollable by their parents. Did you fail to consider that your warning might split a previously united decision? That is what happened, Will. Suddenly aware of the risks, one of them became filled with doubt, and changed their mind on the issue. That statement you made had ripple effects. But for you, Will, they’d have made the same choice on this front, and possibly still be together. Instead they ate the ambrosia, the decision was irrevocably made, and the anger of the permanence of that decision has led to this day.”

Will was stunned. “The problem in your story isn’t me. The problem is the ambrosia. Why do we not let people have the choice of whether they want to take it, and *when*? Why have we had rules that require consumption of ambrosia within two years of joining, on penalty of losing Energy and memory of our group forever? If they’d been permitted to take more time, a decade or more, perhaps they might have come to an amicable decision and agreement, and avoided all of this. Yet you want to blame *me*? I provided them with information. I did not try to persuade, or coerce; I merely informed them of the potential risks. For that, you blame *me* for this war? That’s an insult to me.”

The man sneered. “Then be insulted. You’re a danger to this community. Let

the warriors fight it out in their fashion. We know the root cause of their conflict, and we'll make sure that you can't instill such anger in us ever again."

Will sighed. They never learned. "Look, whoever you are—"

"My name is Victor." The man straightened a bit as he spoke, his posture suggestive of a military background.

"Victor, I'm not going to sit in your little jail—"

And then he felt Tacitus' hands on him again, and collapsed to the ground. The hands and feet of the others started beating on him, started trying to punish him for a crime that he'd never committed. He was able, in his mental fog, to put the nano-based exoskeleton in place to limit the damage, but he couldn't seem to shake Tacitus' hands. His eyes felt heavy, and his vision blurred, as if he would soon lose consciousness.

And then, suddenly, all of them, including Tacitus, were thrown to the side, as if a massive burst of Energy had scattered them, and an invisible burst of wind came upon him. He felt the familiar displacement of teleportation, and suddenly he was gone from that place.

He reappeared on the island of Eden, a place only he knew about. He thought about the familiar stream, the house he'd built, full of submarine prototypes and sample propulsion systems. He thought of the unexplored caves he'd long wanted to visit, but which he'd neglected in order to focus on building his submarine. He thought about all of the memories this place held.

And he thought of the fact that he'd nearly been killed just moments earlier.

He was still lying down, his back on the soft grass of the island, the familiar breezes and salty scents a welcome relief from the open warfare he'd left behind. His rescuer was next to him, breathing heavily, exhausted from the effort of dispersing his attackers and teleporting them so far away.

It took time before his eyelids gradually lost the excessive weight they'd seemed to acquire, and he was finally able to open his eyes. He blinked, trying to regain his focus, trying to see the clear blue skies filled with fluffy white clouds, trying to clear his mind to process what had happened. But his primary need at that moment was to identify and thank his rescuer.

The person shifted and rolled away from him, moving into a crouching position nearby, and he felt a set of eyes upon him, staring at him as if he was the main attraction at a carnival.

He heard the sound of tears rolling down cheeks, a sound he'd developed the ability to hear after centuries of training his senses. It was a sound difficult to hear except in complete silence, a state to be found on this uninhabited island

paradise.

His eyes finally cleared... and then filled with tears of his own.

The blue eyes were upon him, eyes that did not look upon him with loathing or regret, but with love. They were not eyes belonging to someone who wished to be somewhere else, but instead wished to be nowhere but right here, with him. They were eyes that said so much with no more than a single tear's departure from their midst.

She leaned down and kissed him gently on the cheek. "It's good to see you again, Will."

He was unable to speak, but did manage a genuine smile in Hope's direction, before exhaustion finally overwhelmed him.

BONDS

1700 A.D.

When he finally woke, Will found himself in his bed, covered with blankets, and felt a sense of calm he'd not experienced in an eternity.

Hope was poring through the papers covering his desk, papers depicting his ideas and designs for the submarine he'd long since completed but continually improved. Her face, in that zone of concentration, was the one he liked best. It showed her beauty and her intelligence in a perfect combination. It was the same look that had entranced him, both seven centuries in the past and four centuries in the future.

She sensed that he'd finally awakened, and flashed a smile in his direction. "Hungry?"

He nodded, stretched, and climbed out from under the covers. "What do you think?"

"Hmm?" She glanced down at the papers and realized what he meant. "This? I don't know what to think, because I'm simply incredulous at the idea. This looks like a boat... with a top... that sails *under* the water?" She walked over and handed him a plate with fruit and a mug of water.

He nodded, quietly amazed at the conversation. It was as if the centuries of separation had never happened. "That's right. I've worked on it for a long time, made a lot of improvements, and it's quite the sight to behold. It's been something to keep me occupied, and keep my mind busy, since..." His voice trailed off.

Her eyes fell, and she dropped her head, looking toward the ground. "Look, I

know what I did hurt you, but... I had the best of reasons.”

He arched an eyebrow, a means of asking her to explain.

“Not long before I... ran off, we had one of those late night conversations the three of us often had. The two of us and Eva. Eva fell asleep, and then you did. I don’t remember what you said, but it kept me awake, thinking, after both of you had dozed off. While I was thinking, you shifted in your sleep, and something fell out of your pocket.

“It was fascinating, because it looked like a scroll, and at the time we didn’t make any kind of paper or papyrus. I unrolled it, and, well... you know what it was.”

He was surprised. She’d found his diary? “I’m guessing it had something written on it?”

She shook her head. “No, there was a very realistic painting of some sort. It showed me, with dark hair, holding a baby girl with a little boy standing near me. I realized it was a picture of me with our children.” Her eyes misted over. “I needed that, because the duration until they’d finally be with me seemed so overwhelming. Seeing what they’d look like... it really helped.”

Will nodded. He’d seen the picture, as well, and to the same effect.

“But that wasn’t all. While I was looking at that image, it... vanished. And words showed up. And those words... they were the reason I left, and they told me what I’d needed to do with that huge amount of time available until our future meeting, until our children would be born.”

“What was it? What did it say? And why didn’t you tell me?”

“It told me *not* to tell you, that we needed the time apart to better appreciate each other and our time together.” Will scoffed, and she shrugged, as if to indicate that she, too, didn’t quite agree with the statement. “And it told me that you’d have a difficult time performing the mission it set for me. The mission was too important to take that risk.”

Will scowled. “What on earth would *I* have a difficult time performing?”

She chuckled. “Easy, there.” Then she sighed. “Do you remember that first city we spent time in, after leaving the original village?”

“Abrecan? The military outpost? Of course.”

“Do you remember what happened your first day there?”

He did. “I saw that little girl nearly killed by a soldier. You and Eva healed her. Richard, the man that I’d encouraged to leave a life of crime, seemed to take a fancy to the girl and her mother.”

She nodded. “The words on that paper told me that, many years later, I could

finally know the truth of what had happened that day. You see, the girl's mother was not well when you brought the girl to us for healing. When Richard met the little girl, he loved her instantly, like she was the daughter he'd never had. When the mother died six months later, he took the little girl in and raised her as his own child. She eventually married, had children of her own, and over time they had children, and so on.

"About a century ago, one of her descendants moved to the new lands to the west that have been discovered, the place you showed me so long ago. Eventually, several generations from now, one of the young women will marry a man named Richard, and they will have two sons. One of them will be named Seth." She paused, took a deep breath, and fixed him with a pointed look. "And the other's name... *is* Will."

It took a moment for the reality to sink in. And then he stared at her. "That's... that's impossible."

She laughed. "We just teleported five hundred miles to a hidden island that hides a boat you built that travels underwater, an idea you probably got from the future you were born in before a machine dropped you a thousand years in the past to keep me from dying. Yes, Will, *that* stuff is plausible, but the fact that you saved a little girl who was a distant ancestor to you... *that's* impossible."

In spite of his shock, he had to laugh. "Well, if you put it *that* way..." His mirth turned to a mood of somber reflection. "I guess that's one reason why they had me promise not to kill anyone. When I met Richard, by the laws of the time... it wouldn't have been a stretch to end his life. Yet if I'd done that, I might not be here anymore." He shook his head, still letting the message sink in.

After a moment, he glanced up. "You said that story was why you left. Why you left Eva, why you left me. What was the mission it set for you?"

"You were sent back in time, Will, to protect me. I was stubborn, and I had no sense of self-worth, and if you hadn't shown up that combination would have killed me. It still almost did." She smiled mirthlessly. "I'm still stunned you didn't just teleport me out of there the first day, despite my protests." She shook her head. "But over the time we spent together, that changed. I developed that sense of worth and found I had the inner strength and perseverance that I needed for such a long life and journey. Those words... they told me that I was to act as a guardian angel to each descendant of that little girl, in the line that leads to you. Because of that, they've survived plagues, fires, robberies, and even a handful of attempts at poisoning. Had any of those incidents been successful, then everything we've tried to accomplish so far would be undone. I sent you

gifts to let you know I hadn't forgotten you, hoping the possibility that they'd come from far away would keep you from looking for me, because I was never far away. Then your ancestors moved to the New World a century ago, and... it became difficult." She looked at him, tears in her eyes. "I'm sorry."

He stared at her. He'd spent many years protecting her, and then many more pretending to do so, purely driven by the expectations of the day. And yet she'd spent centuries now protecting his ancestral line from mishaps, pulled by the same sense of duty that, in retrospect, he'd agreed to when he'd started the time machine. After all, he'd left two grown people he'd learned were his children, one of whom he'd never known existed, to accept the mission to save her life.

How much more difficult had it been for her? They both had long since developed such powerful Energy stores that teleportation for hundreds of miles was attainable. There was no reason they *had* to be apart. Yet she'd done so, not because she didn't want to be with him, but because she wanted to ensure that she *could*.

He looked up at her, and his face and eyes filled with awe. "You are truly amazing. Do you know that?"

She sniffed. "Well, I could certainly stand to hear that a bit more often." The smile returned.

He smiled back. "I'm available for compliments whenever needed."

"You're not angry at me? For leaving?" Her face filled with concern.

He sighed. "At first? I was, absolutely. But I realized that it did neatly solve the concerns about our relationship progressing beyond a mutual comfort level before its time. And I also realized that you needed space. You'd never really learned to be independent, never had a chance to live through a true adolescence. You needed it for that reason. And it wasn't something that had to be forever. With the length of time we've both lived and will still live, spending years apart for important reasons is not a huge cause for concern." He smiled at her. "But I *did* wonder why you didn't come back after a few decades. Now I know you had a mission of your own."

She nodded. "I must admit that it's getting a bit boring, though, being by myself for so long."

He looked up. "You haven't seen Eva?"

She shook her head. "No. Not since that day. I don't know what happened to her, and I feel at fault for that. I knew you had a mission that would keep you going, no matter what, but Eva has no such message or guidepost. When we both left... I don't know, Will. I don't know if she's still around anywhere, if she's

even still alive.”

It was a sobering thought. Eva had been one of the few friendly faces for Hope in the original Aliomenti village, and the thought that Hope’s sudden departure might have ended Eva’s life prematurely was clearly a traumatic one. “But she took the ambrosia when we did. How could she be... not here?”

Hope looked at him, her eyes moist. “Many have still died, Will.”

And that was the worst part. She could only die if killed... even if the killing hand was her own. “We can only hope that she’s not one of them. Perhaps she has her own grand adventure that she’s leading now, once she got me out of her hair.” He smiled.

She smiled back, faintly, trying to appreciate the humor in the joke, but struggling.

Looking for a change of subject, he nodded his head toward the river. “Would you like to see the submarine?”

“The what?”

“The underwater boat.”

Her eyes regained their usual spark. “Very much so.”

They walked to the river, and Will showed her the exterior of the craft, explaining the process he’d gone through to build the ship, the trial and error to create the material used for the hull, the many prototypes he’d used to create the propulsion and air filtration and sewage systems, how he’d rigged up a generator for electricity.

“Want to go for a ride?” he asked.

She looked at the boat. “How do we get inside?”

“In true Aliomenti fashion,” he said, as he held out his hand.

She took it, and he teleported both of them inside. Hope looked around, shaking her head in wonder. “This is amazing, Will. This has to be centuries ahead of its time. I can only wonder at what you’ll be able to do with this as we make further advances.”

“We?” he asked bitterly, arching an eyebrow, and then he wished he’d said nothing. “Sorry.”

She winced briefly. “No, that was fair. But yes, I do want to sail with you, and dream up new adaptations for this. But... I need to ride in it first.” She smiled, a look that told him his jibe was forgiven and forgotten.

“I can certainly arrange that,” he replied.

He’d made massive modifications in the decades since he’d first piloted the submarine. The propulsion system had been significantly enhanced, and it was

capable of moving the vessel at speeds approaching forty miles per hour. The capacity of the generator had quadrupled, and he'd increased the number of lights and other devices capable of using the electricity.

"I love the little fires you have in here, providing light like that," Hope commented. "But... what is *that*?"

He grinned. "*That* is something I borrowed from the distant future."

Will had been a child of the computer and digital age, and since the time two centuries earlier that he'd encouraged the development of the electrical generator by Anna and Sarah, he'd been trying to create his own computer chips. It had taken a great deal of effort and time outside the effort he'd put into building the submarine itself, but he'd had a payoff. His computer chips were slow and inefficient by twenty-first century standards, but for the dawn of the eighteenth century, they were light years ahead of their time.

The video screens had been a challenge, but, as he'd reminded himself, it wasn't as if he'd had much else to do. And over the course of two centuries, a man with a plan and determination could accomplish an immense amount.

"That's a screen, and I have built little machines that... well, that can think." Explaining computers to someone who'd never heard of them before was difficult. "The machines can figure out where we are, how fast we're moving, how deep we are in the water. And they can actually pilot this ship. I... we... can tell it where we want to go and read or sleep or eat and not worry about it. The submarine will get us there. Sort of like very slow teleportation."

She stared at him. "That's impossible."

He arched an eyebrow. "We teleported inside this vessel, after you teleported me here from hundreds of miles away. We're approaching seven centuries in age. Those are plausible, but machines that can think are not?"

She chuckled. "Touché. But machines that can *think*, Will? I'm still amazed at the gears and water wheels, and yet we're in a boat that goes under the water and doesn't need a pilot. That's a big leap."

He sighed. "It's just the way our minds work. Gradual changes seem inconsequential, but over time they can be revolutionary. I've been working on this for *centuries*, and I come from an era where such machines are commonplace. If you see those centuries of gradual progress as one massive change, it will seem an impossibility." He paused. "Think of that day so long ago when I teleported us out of that village to the cave. That was a shock, was it not?"

"Yes, but not as much as this," Hope admitted. At his look of surprise, she

explained. “Father had told us tales of people doing what we are all now able to do; the *concept* of what you’d done wasn’t a shock, even if the actual act was. This?” She shook her head. “This is beyond anything I could even think of. I could not even consider the idea of a boat that travels under water, of machines that can... can think. A boat that steers itself. This is not... this is... this is... impossible.”

“And yet it is not only possible, but here, right before your eyes,” Will replied, though he frowned. “In the future, when I spent time with the people I eventually discovered were our children, they had talked about an organization I’m supposed to start, a breakaway group from the Aliomenti. Angel, our daughter, said that our belief is that the advances we make, presumably because of the advantages we have from living so long, are to be shared, not hoarded. But she also said that it was very important not to introduce change too quickly, for it would be so shocking that it would be feared and rejected.” He paused. “I know what she means now.”

Hope turned on him. “Are you making fun of me?”

He shook his head. “Of course not. I went through the same thing before I was sent back in time. What we do with regularity today was mocked, relegated to myth and legend, called magic. I don’t believe in magic and did not believe people could do at all what I now do with ease. They showed me machines that were as shocking to my mind as this self-piloting underwater boat is to yours. And then I was told that they had used a time machine to rescue me. That, to me, was impossible, and yet for the past seven *centuries* I’ve been living in a different time. No, Hope, I know *exactly* what she meant, and I know *exactly* how you feel.”

“It’s just... just so *strange*,” Hope said, looking around. She tilted her head, a mischievous look forming on her face. “Are you going to stand there talking about this mysterious boat, or are you going to take me for a ride?”

He grinned. “Where should we go?”

“For now? I think we need to get you back to where you were, to make sure those people haven’t killed themselves off. After that? We have an entire world to explore.”

He nodded, somber. His return to that outpost, to the scene of that civil war, was one he wouldn’t enjoy. He identified the location on a map as Hope watched, and then indicated a button marked “autopilot” to Hope. “The ship is yours, my lady. If you’ll press that, we’ll be underway.”

Hope, her movements tentative, pushed the button, and the engines roared to

life, sending the *Nautilus* out to sea. As the submarine slid beneath the waves, Hope screamed, the exhilarating scream of one riding a roller coaster, a scream of the thrill of the moment, of riding into the unknown.

SCHISM

1700 A.D.

Will parked the submarine off the coast. He'd switched the craft back to manual piloting mode for the final few miles, during which Hope had spent a few minutes piloting the craft. She'd adapted to the idea of an underwater boat quite well, and was soon spending more time enthralled at the beauty of the undersea world.

They needed that beauty, for their first trip had detoured into another. Will had piloted the ship to the north, to the coast of England, rather than off the coast of Spain. He suggested that, since they were back together, they should return to the Ambrosia forest, seek out Ambrose himself, and persuade him to reveal the secrets to reversing the effects.

When they'd arrived there after a handful of teleportation hops, though, the forest was gone, burned to ash, as if a massive forest fire had eliminated it from existence. They looked for survivors, but found no one still living.

Including Ambrose. Hope had found his lifeless body among the others. His secret to reversing the effects of the ambrosia had died with him.

They returned to the submarine and set course for Waterloo, and docked there in a somber mood.

"You can take the sub anywhere you want, you know," he told her.

"Not until you're safely back inside." He'd known she wouldn't leave, just as she'd known he'd make the offer. "And you do realize that I'm coming as well, don't you?"

Will sighed. "There are two problems with that. First, Arthur and Adam might both be there. If either of them sees you... we have a problem. Secondly,

they've found a young man with an ability to trace Energy paths. If you use any Energy at all, he can find you."

"Really?" She looked impressed. "Then I won't use any Energy. You can teleport me ashore."

"We still have the issue... of..." Will broke off his protest as her image changed before his eyes. Her face narrowed, her hair darkened to a lustrous shade of black, and her eyes changed to a deeper shade of blue.

It was the look she'd had in the photograph from the future.

"I don't think they'll recognize a human woman they've never seen before." She smiled, and then glanced around. "I assume you have weapons on board?"

He nodded, gesturing toward a small storage closet. "I have a few here, more as keepsakes than anything. I've never gotten into using weapons."

"I have." She marched to the closet, opened the door, and selected two swords. She strapped the sheaths to her sides, and threw a dark cloak over herself, with the hood up. She glanced back at him. "How do I look?"

He nodded in approval. "Like somebody I wouldn't want angry at me." He looked at her, a pleading look on his face. "Promise me you won't go looking for trouble?"

She snorted. "I'm walking into an outpost of people who erupted into a civil war over a marital dispute and who were nearly able to kill *you*. I don't think there's much chance that I can avoid it. Don't worry. I can take care of myself. And they'll underestimate a mere *human* woman." She flashed a smile, deadly on many levels.

He nodded. "Ready?"

She gave a crisp nod and held out her hand. He took it and teleported both of them to the land, where they separated. He walked directly toward the outpost, while she moved to the side, into the shadows of a nearby forest.

Though it should not have been a surprise, he was still startled when, moments later, the young man known as Sebastian appeared in front of him. "Will! So good to see you! Won't you come with me?"

"I've come to help restore the peace, Sebastian." It felt strange to say the name.

Sebastian gave a bow with a dramatic flourish. "Then by all means, lead the way."

Will walked through the gates and found, again to no surprise, that both Arthur and Adam were present. Arthur was addressing the crowds.

"...deaths of James and Elise have settled their *personal* conflict, but at what

cost? It is clear that they felt trapped in their relationship, trapped by the conflict driven by their disagreement about having a child so many years ago, about losing that child before birth, upon taking the ambrosia.”

He spotted Will in the crowd, and a brief flicker of emotion crossed his face. Fear? Uncertainty? Triumph? It was impossible to tell; the man had become a master at hiding his emotions and thoughts from Will and the other telepaths and empaths that lived near him. Will was startled by the news in Arthur’s statement. Elise had been pregnant at the time she and James had taken the ambrosia... and the fruit had ended her pregnancy?

“We have instituted our jails for those who violate the first oaths ever instituted for Aliomenti. We must not allow ourselves to be discovered, lest the tragedy that befell the inventors of electricity happen to others.” He nodded at William, the man “adopted” by the two sisters, and Will took a step back. Will had noticed the red flecks in the man’s eyes at their last meeting, so many years ago. But now William’s appearance had altered further. The eyes were a deep red now, his hair had thinned to the point of being nearly gone, and a handful of scars marked the front and back of his head.

“Let us remember this, though. It was not evidence of our *abilities* that triggered that attack. No, it was evidence of our *technology*, of the tools we use to attain our position of physical, mental, and material superiority in this world. Our advances were feared and deemed a crime worthy of our deaths and annihilation by those *humans*. They overwhelmed us with both their numbers and savagery. We cannot permit that to happen again. We must not share our advances with such vermin.”

There were murmurs of agreement, and Arthur continued. “To that end, I have dispatched several Aliomenti to ensure that our greatest treasures—the zirple, morange, and ambrosia—cannot be possessed or known by any others.”

Arthur glanced once more at William, who shot flames into the air. Will suddenly knew, with certainty, that it was no random lightning strike that had destroyed the Ambrosia forest and decimated its population.

He opened his mouth to protest the destruction, but felt hands seize both arms. He turned to find himself held in place by Sebastian and Victor. He scowled at both, prepared to teleport away or blast them with Energy so that he could speak... but he once more felt the hands of Tacitus on his neck.

He sagged to the ground as Arthur resumed. “No previous tragedy, though, approached the ferocity and violence of what was just experienced here, and we must—*must*—ensure that this does not and cannot happen again. It is tragic

enough when non-Aliomenti—mere *humans*—attack us out of fear and ignorance. It is unconscionable for us to attack *each other*. And therefore we must understand the reasons why James’ and Elise’s anger was so great, what it was that engulfed this community in open warfare, a civil war that claimed a dozen lives beyond the two who started this conflict.”

Even in his drug-like state, Will was stunned. They’d lost that many to death in the battle? And what had Arthur said earlier about their child? It did not mesh with what he remembered being told before. She’d been pregnant when they took the ambrosia, and that had ended the child’s life?

“The relationship became a trap for them. They’d committed themselves to each other publicly, forever, until death. For the Aliomenti, though, forever is eternity. We must recognize the impracticality of such commitments in our circumstances, and we must avoid them. And given the risks inherent in any children who might survive, the risk that they might destroy us all with a finality that would shame the effort of any *humans*, we must no longer simply warn our membership about those dangers. We must vow to each other, swear to each other, that we’ll not bring children into the world.”

Will tried to shout out, to argue against this, but Victor elbowed the side of his head while Sebastian elbowed him in the stomach. He saw stars, felt lightheaded, and was unable to protest Arthur’s words. And he was highly concerned. Why would no one else speak out against what Arthur was saying? Did no one else understand that it was wrong?

Why had no one but Will *ever* argued against Arthur’s words?

“My recommendation is this: we must each swear oaths, by acclamation today, and individually for all new members, against each of these four activities. We may not reveal the Energy and immortality secrets of the Aliomenti to humans. We may not share our technological advancements. We may not form permanent and committed relationships. And, above all, we may not bring children into this world after our Energy is unleashed and before our ambrosia is consumed. I recommend, given our lifespans, a prison penalty of ten years for a first violation, and a further ten years for each additional offense. Should anyone violate that last vow, that last Oath? Such children would be our end. A steeper penalty is required for breaking that vow.”

Arthur took a deep breath. “I’d therefore propose that, should anyone be found to be in violation of that final Oath, that Oath against having children, that they be sentenced to death.” He looked around. “What do you say, my friends? Do you agree to this?”

The roar of acclamation was universal, save for Will. Will said nothing, and not because he couldn't speak. Why hadn't the others argued, presented counterpoints? It wasn't like the original village, where the greatest warriors allied themselves with Arthur, intimidating the rest into silence. Arthur's Energy skills were not impressive, especially in light of the advantage in age he had over those present. After all, he'd recruited all of them and introduced them to Energy. Surely, that meant his Energy should be far greater than all of theirs.

Yet they all still accepted everything he said, followed every recommendation, without fail. Why?

And then it hit Will, slamming into him with greater devastation than Tacitus' Dampening ability.

As the cacophony of the acclamation subsided, Arthur nodded. "I take that as *universal* acceptance by *all* those here. We have created special pieces of fabric, symbols of those who have accepted and agreed to our Oaths. They may be explained in the human community as our business image, a sign that you are part of the Aliomenti Company that helps get money to new businesses. Each of you may come forward to collect that patch of fabric." As he spoke, Arthur's eyes flicked in Will's direction. He knew Will well enough to know Will would never agree to such rules, and thus the acclamation and forced silence worked in Arthur's favor. Will would be seen as one of many to agree to the abominable Oaths. Will knew he needed to say something, and say it now.

He closed his eyes, summoning his nanos, and used them to form the familiar exoskeleton directly around his body. The tiny machines were able to slip under the grips of the three holding him. With a burst outward, the nanos broke all contact between them, and knocked each of the three away from Will. With a deep breath, one that started his Energy recovery, Will scrambled back to his feet and started stumbling toward Arthur.

"This is wrong, Arthur!"

Arthur, who had been talking to the red-eyed man near him, slowly turned to face Will, his eyes flicking with disappointment toward the three captors now sprawled on the ground. "You've made your Oaths, Will, like everyone else. Your time to protest has passed. Are you in violation of your word already?"

"You're well aware that your minions there prevented me from speaking. I gave no agreement to those Oaths, and I never will."

Arthur snorted. "You expect everyone to believe that anyone here could restrain *you*, Will? You are widely known as our most powerful member, a man no one here could defeat. Yet there was no sign of struggle or protest. If those

Oaths were something you didn't want to participate in, why wait to protest until now? Are you *that* desperate for attention?"

"The boy, Tacitus, has the ability to destroy a person's Energy, Arthur, and I can tell you from personal experience that the sensation is much like getting the wind knocked out of you. The effect lasts at least several minutes, long enough to silence even me so that you could *attempt* to implicate me in your stupid Oaths. I am telling you, and everyone assembled here, that I do *not* agree and *did* not agree. I will not abide by your Oaths."

"Yet they are Oaths we've all agreed to now, Will, and those Oaths are now an integral part of our group." Adam stepped forward. "They are Oaths that have been agreed to by many other Aliomenti communities already, and the recent tragedy here reinforces the need. You cannot be part of a community if you do not abide by the *rules* of that community."

"We cannot let tragedy be an excuse to strike down our freedom and ability to live life as we choose," Will replied. "How do you propose finding violators of those rules? How do you know that an advancement by humans is not a natural development, rather than an Aliomenti influencing them? What if a relationship commitment is made privately? And how, if I may ask, do you expect to keep people who can teleport in prison for a decade or more?"

"We will train people specifically to root out those who violate their sworn Oaths, to track them down, to get their confessions, and to limit their ability to escape their rightful punishment," Arthur replied. "You claim we have one so gifted here already. Surely we can find or train others? And you forget that we live in communities of telepaths and empaths. Guilt at breaking an Oath will be detected and reported, Will. Assuming guilt is *felt* by the perpetrator, that is."

"Guilt?" Will roared. "You have, since our founding, insisted upon recruiting each new member, and talking to them before each major advancement. Now I know why, Arthur. And I know that no one else here will remember what I say, because you'll ensure they don't. But you know, and now I know, the truth. The truth, Arthur, is that you used push-Empathy skills to embed in their minds the idea that you are their leader, that they are to agree with your suggestions and follow your orders, without argument and without exception. I wondered why nobody ever disagreed with you, Arthur, why I was the only one who ever did. Now I know. Now I know why everyone agreed to your stupid Oaths today. They weren't capable of doing otherwise."

Arthur's eyes flicked in triumph briefly, then resumed their usual narrowed gaze. "You're wrong, Will. I chose men and women of high character to join our

organization, and they did and do act of their own free will. That high character enables them to recognize and follow the wisdom of the Oaths and penalties that you have suggested. I'm surprised that you now want to absolve yourself of what you proposed."

Will stared at him. The murmurs and angry glares confirmed his accusation; the crowds that had listened to Arthur spell out the oaths and penalties now wondered why *Will* didn't think he had to live by rules that he himself had proposed.

He turned to Adam. If he was going down, he'd make sure everyone got his best. "And you, Adam. I've no idea how Arthur ensnared you. But I do know this. Your actions in the original Aliomenti village that night? When you suppressed our very first members in slumber while you lit their homes on fire and let them burn to death?" He pointed at Arthur. "*That* man provided the idea of your actions to *that* man." He pointed to William. "And now the forest where the ambrosia fruit first grew is ash, and the only man who knew how to reverse the effects is *dead*. All because of *you!*"

Adam stared at Will, then shrugged. "So what? Why would anyone want to *reverse* the effects?"

"Why?" Will stared at him. "James and Elise clearly wanted a child at some point, and yet the fruit denied them that chance. If we'd known how to reverse the effects, they would have had the chance to change their minds, and we'd all be strong enough to deal with the ramifications. Instead? That man is dead, and now..."

"Now it doesn't matter, Will, because everyone has sworn an oath to never have a child." Adam folded his arms, his face stern.

"No," Will said, his voice trembling. "Not everyone." *I didn't. Hope didn't. My dream, and hers, died with that man.*

Adam looked as if he'd had the wind knocked out of him, a look of pain so intense and so great that it seemed it might split him in two. Yet he recovered himself with one sharp intake of breath. "Those who have not made the oath may not be part of this community any more, Will. That includes you. Make the oath. Please."

"Listen to him, Will," Arthur said, his eyes glinting. "It's for your own good."

"No. I won't be part of this, Arthur," Will replied, shaking his head. "I cannot be part of this. It goes against everything I believe in."

"Then you are in violation of your Oaths already, Will *Stark*, and you will

thus be the first to test our new jail.” The crowd tensed. The Aliomenti did not, as a rule, use anyone’s surname, and few even knew the surnames of others. Arthur’s use of Will’s surname was a way of further alienating Will to the crowd.

Will could sense the circle being formed, as Victor, Sebastian, and Tacitus closed in on him. His Energy stores would not permit teleportation yet; he needed a few more minutes.

“I dare say that Will *Stark* might prove a challenge to contain, my friends,” Arthur said. “Perhaps he needs to spend his Energy on recovery, rather than teleportation?”

Will heard the swords being drawn. “Swords, Arthur? So you’ll resort to killing me? Even if your contention of my assent to your Oaths were true, and it is most assuredly *not*, I have not fathered any children in the past ten minutes. What gives you the authority to order my death?”

“Who said anything about *death*, Will? It is difficult to serve out your punishment if you are no longer alive to do so. You will live.”

The dark shape dropped down from the nearest building. Hope had covered her face with the hood of the cloak, but there was no hiding her feminine form... or the two swords she’d drawn. She kicked Tacitus in the ribs, knocking the unarmed boy a dozen feet away, where he crumpled to the ground. She then turned toward Victor and Sebastian, weapons at the ready.

“A *woman*, Stark?” Sebastian cackled. “You bring one *woman* to protect you?” He inhaled a deep breath. “And a *human* woman, no less? Are you truly that desperate in your search for anyone to agree with you and help you? I can’t believe you would stoop so low.” He glanced at Victor and motioned with his sword. “Shall we, you old sluggard?”

Victor scowled at Sebastian, but advanced upon Hope with his sword drawn, his condescension obvious.

Hope’s twin blades flashed, impossibly fast, and before they could raise their swords in defense, Victor and Sebastian were unarmed. Both men looked shocked, spying their weapons lying on the ground a dozen yards away, and they moved to retrieve them.

“You must be desperate for help, Arthur, if you hire as your goons two men who cannot defeat a single human woman in a sword fight.” Will couldn’t resist needling the man. “And your ability to recruit people with... how did you put it? High character? Perhaps that is true, but if you’ve brought these two aboard to enforce your stupid rules, you’d think you’d find two who could win a battle with a two-to-one advantage... against a mere *human*.” He snorted, and glanced

at the man with the dark hair. “You strike me as one who served in the military, Victor.” Will shook his head in mock sadness. “I suspect your armies weren’t very successful.”

Victor, racing to retrieve his sword, winced. Sebastian, running with him, glanced over his shoulder at the woman who’d disarmed them. “I have *got* to get a cloak like that!”

“Taking fashion advice from a human woman, Sebastian?” Victor snapped.

“No,” Sebastian replied. “I’m taking fashion advice from the person who disarmed you in two seconds, army boy.”

Will walked toward Hope, who stood with her swords ready, her stance defying anyone to try to attack. No one dared.

Will turned to face the crowd. “I am no longer one of you, but *you* are not my enemies. If you come to me in peace, you will be accepted as a friend, without question. We will consider the reasoned violation of every one of those Oaths you were forced to assent to today as our goal and our purpose.”

He turned to face Adam, who stood staring at Will from twenty feet away. “Will you join me, Adam?” Adam was, after all, the man who’d joined Will’s own children on a dangerous mission, a man who had once exterminated an entire village before the residents had a chance to carry out plans to kill Will.

Adam stared at him, a deep sadness in his eyes, and after a glance at the shrouded warrior defending Will, he shook his head. “No, Will. My place is here. You need to reconsider this move. You’ll spend your entire life running from your past, Will. Don’t do this.”

Will stared back. Even Adam had rejected him, had rejected his idea and his principles. He glanced at the shrouded figure next to him, and realized that hers was the only opinion that mattered to him. “When you change your mind, Adam—and you *will* change your mind—I will find you, and my door will be open.”

Adam said nothing.

Will took one last glance around him, feeling his Energy stores sufficiently recharged to move the distance he needed to cover. As Tacitus approached, he made his final farewell. “Goodbye, everyone. I look forward to our future reconciliation. Until we meet again... I wish you well.” He took Hope’s hand and teleported them to the shore.

“Why not directly into the ship, Will?” she asked. There would be other questions, but she focused on the most critical for the moment.

“They’d be able to follow my Energy to the submarine, and we don’t want that. We’ll travel into and through the water, and only teleport the last couple of

feet to get inside. That should buy us time, and...”

“But—”

“Take a deep breath,” he said, forming an invisible, nano-based exoskeleton around both of them.

She looked surprised, but did as he requested. He took a deep breath himself, and the exoskeleton pulled them through the air, into and below the waves, traveling at a high rate of speed until they reached the outside of the ship, leaving no trail the Aliomenti could follow. He teleported them inside, and they both took deep breaths.

“So, Hope... where would you like to travel? I don’t seem to have a home anymore.”

She smiled. “*This* is our home, Will.”

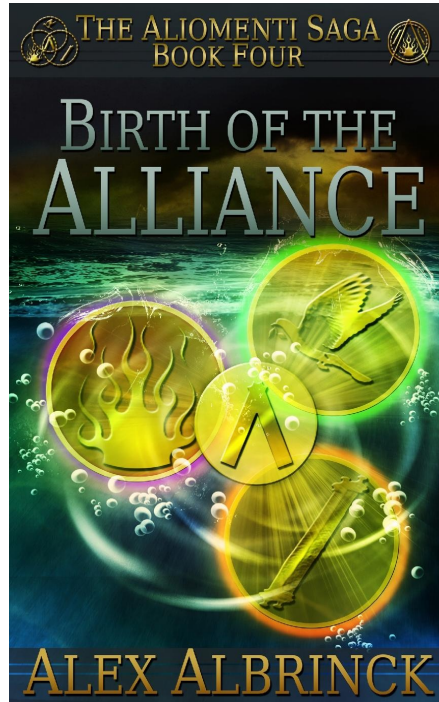
He smiled at the sound of that.

“Years ago, you showed me where we’d live one day, where we’d... meet. I think it would be a good time to travel there now. I doubt that they’ll think to look for us there.” She smiled. “Besides, I have my mission to complete, and my charges live on the new continent.”

Will nodded, and set a path for North America. He’d long been fascinated by the founding of the United States. They were traveling there now, before the most critical events in the country’s history would occur. He’d be able to do more than merely study that history now.

Now he’d live through it, with Hope at his side.

THE STORY CONTINUES IN



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Alex Albrinck is the author of thirteen novels spanning The Aliomenti Saga and The Ravagers series, and a contributor to short story anthologies The A.I. Chronicles and The Dragon Chronicles. He lives in Ohio with his wife and three children, who continually prove to him that real life is stranger than fiction.

He is presently working on a new trilogy, The Disruption Saga.

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