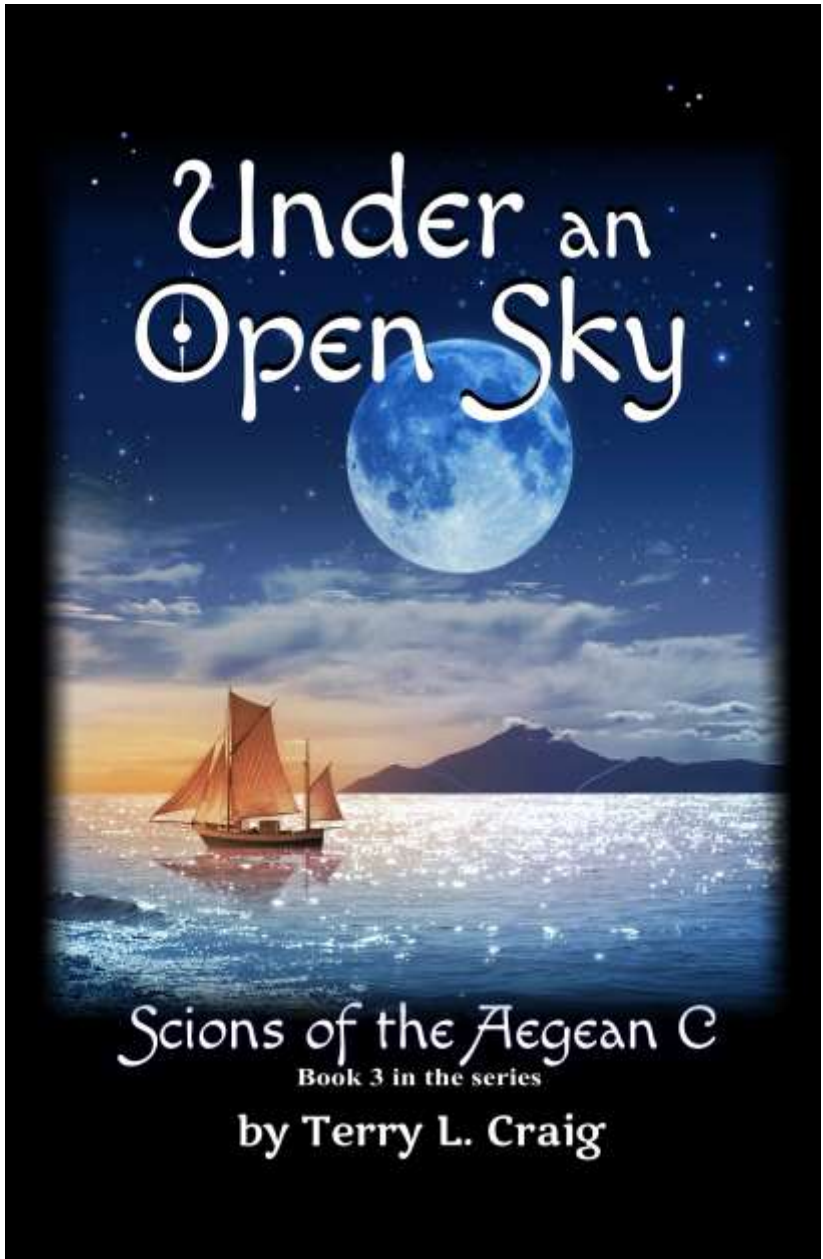


Front Cover



Under an Open Sky

Book 3 of the
Scions of the Aegean C series

A novel by

Terry L. Craig

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Under an Open Sky

Book 3 of the Scions of the Aegean C series

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DEDICATION

To my sister JoJo: my childhood enemy
who became my sister in the Lord
and my dear friend.
I still miss her.

To my beloved husband, William.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Thanks to Tonya Brown, my friend, fellow author, and
sister
in the Lord, who put on her editor's hat for me.

Backstory

The People

In 2044, people of the Genon race—a peaceful agricultural people with a specialized skill for turning inhospitable terrain into verdant gardens were tasked as terraformers to transform the off-world settlement of New Hope. They expected to carry out their mission with little, if any, input from the soldiers who were to deliver them, then depart. Others on the mission—technicians, biologists, doctors, and engineers—were to remain in the colony for several years to observe and document Genon procedures, then return to Earth and share the knowledge gained for use in future settlements.

The Crash

The spacecraft, a BX-9 christened the Aegean C, left Earth on the mission but suffered catastrophic damage shortly after leaving Earth's atmosphere. The flight deck officers were killed when the ship crash landed on a shelf in a mountain range, not far from the equator. Miraculously, most of the passengers survived, but in the first hours after the crash, something became a source of growing concern: There were no signs of other human life on the planet. There were no responding radio transmissions, no visible roads or trails, no lights in the distance, no satellites moving through the night sky. And the night sky was not the one they knew. This was neither the place they left nor where they intended to go—they'd catapulted through time or space into a place unknown to any of them. They were determined to make a life in this new world that was as wild and dangerous as it was bountiful.

The "Firstlanders," as the survivors came to be called in later generations, soon realized that they were extremely fortunate to have landed on a plateau where the land was suitable for growing crops and the climate was moderate year-round. Had they crashed into the icy slopes above the

plateau, many would have quickly succumbed to exposure. Had they landed in the vast jungle below the plateau, they would have died in the steaming tangle of toxic plants, poisonous insects, and huge predatory creatures. The plateau, which they named Aegea, could be transformed into an oasis where future generations could remain. In less than two generations the spacecraft was almost completely dismantled so the metals and other materials could be repurposed.

The Rebellion

After the crash, there was a need for protection from predatory creatures and an honest concern about the possibility of attacks from an unseen enemy whose weapon may have caused the crash of their spaceship. Even if they wanted to go back to the world they left, the soldiers, scientists, and technicians had no means to do so, and their hope of rescue faded. Within a generation, most of the threats originally faced by the Firstlanders were gone, but the military leadership found continuing reasons to "protect" all of the civilians. The Genon, despite the fact that their efforts made long-term survival possible, became a race of laborers.

During the Second Generation after the crash, a few of the Genon Firstlanders led a revolt, demanding equality in status, assets, and living conditions. All who participated in the rebellion were rounded up along with their immediate family members while a tribunal was held. After much debate and a divided vote, the General of all Aegea signed an order. Each of the rebels would be forever banished.

The Exiles

The guilty, some with their small children, were taken down the mountainside, deep into the endless jungle that the military called "the Poison Forest," and abandoned there with no weapons or tools. They were told that any of them who attempted to return to the plateau by any means would be killed on sight. The Exiles quickly vanished and no one was ever certain what happened to them, although

scattered stories of them, somehow living on in the jungle, became legends repeated among the Genon on the plateau.

Following Generations

By the third generation, the spaceship was nowhere in sight, and some began to claim an alternate history for Aegea. Leaders promoted the idea that the people had *always* been in Aegea and that the military had always been in charge. The eyewitness accounts of the Firstlanders were derided as the fantasies of aging minds. Families from each segment of society hoarded the knowledge of any useful skill in order to keep from slipping further down in a system increasingly skewed in favor of the military and the professionals. The ways and means of life for the people of Aegea became a mix of early industrial technology and secret recipes.

In Book 1—The fifth generation after the crash

The aging leader of Aegea dies after selecting Jubal McClaren as his replacement. On that same day, one of McClaren's servants, Shaye Penway tries to escape a cruel punishment. She climbs into a large wooden crate believing she will be taken across the plateau to town, in hopes she will find someone who can intervene.

Also on that day, McClaren's daughter, Jariel, is abducted. Sedated, she's thrown into the same crate where Shaye hid, and the box is secretly transported to the Poison Forest, far below the plateau. The men who carried the box to the forest are killed by a giant creature, leaving Shaye and Jariel to wake up deep in the forest with the creature still on the prowl nearby. Descendants of the original Exiles come upon the scene and, in the belief that they are *rescuing* the two Genon women from some terrible fate, they take them further into the forest, away from Aegea.

In Book 2—Two women lose all hope of returning to life as they knew it.

As an orphan girl growing up, Shaye fantasized an escape of her life as a servant to live as a free and "upright" woman of faith among her people (perhaps even among the legendary Exiles in a place her people call the Great Forest or "the land of cloud and leaf"). But in her fantasy, she hadn't done things she'd sworn to never do. In her dreams, she wasn't an unwed mother, running to escape criminal charges for striking her master's daughter. In her dream world, there was no need to concoct a lie to protect her enemy from being slain. Now, she's lost certainty in herself and in her faith, and she is staggered by the realization that her nemesis may become her permanent responsibility.

Even though the forest where Jariel was abandoned by her kidnappers is filled with dangers, its vast beauty stirs her beyond anything she's ever known. In the middle of all these new experiences, she must come to terms with several facts: It was *soldiers*, not Genon people, who carried out her kidnapping and it was the *Exiles* who saved her from being killed by a jungle creature, and her very life now depends upon the servant she's tormented for years. As Jariel hears the Exile's version of Aegea's history, she's left to wonder which account is true.

The two young women are led through the perils of the jungle to the breathtaking beauty of homeplace, a settlement founded by the original Exiles on the shore of an ocean—something no one in Aegea has ever seen. They prepare to face a new life in the homeplace of the Exiles, certain that those they left behind will believe they are dead and life on the Aegean Plateau will continue without them.

The search for the missing women

After Shaye and Jariel vanish, an unprecedented reward for information is offered—but even the masterminds of the kidnapping have no idea where the young women are. As both sides search for clues, General McClaren's trackers find a gravely ill Exile in the jungle and

secretly transport him to Aegea. If the man survives, he *may* be the key to finding out what happened to Jariel and Shaye.

List of Main Characters

Basil—of the line of Tosh, grandson of Old Menoh

Ben—one of the Exiles who discovered Shaye and Jariel

Canaan—of the line of Imm, an Exile found in the Poison Forest and secretly brought to Aegea

Chessie—a gleaner (the lowest status) of Aegea

David—one of the Exiles who discovered Shaye and Jariel

Dell—assistant to the inventor, Sage Dooley

Duana McClaren—Jubal McClaren's wife

Fiona—Old Menoh's wife

Francis (Flint) Hunter—resident bad boy of homeplace

Garam Manash (Sgt. Shocky)—the first Genon soldier in Aegea

Gwen—the former general's oldest daughter

Jariel McClaren—the only daughter of Jubal and Duana McClaren

Jubal McClaren—the General (and leader) of Aegea

Kosh—Son of Old Menoh

Lemon—former houseman and servant for Jubal McClaren

Menoh—"Old Menoh," a patriarch from the line of Tosh and Elder of the Genon workers in Westland

Mosely—Colonel Grayson Mosely the chief rival of Jubal McClaren for rulership of Aegea

Mosha—a cook in the service of Jubal McClaren for thirty years, now working for former general's daughter.

Nathan—an elder of the Genon Exiles in homeplace

Pearl—of the Penway family, a Great Aunt to Shaye

Peony—Nathan's wife (homeplace)

Outpost Family: John and Lilly—the innkeepers have four sons and three daughters—all of them are distant cousins of Shaye (through the family of Zim)

Sage Dooley—Chief inventor of Aegea

Samuel—"Mule," a stonecutter and builder among the Exiles from the line of Hoste, one of the men who found Shaye and Jariel in the forest

Shaye—daughter of Cpt. Frank Penway and his wife, Elle (a Genon of the family of Zim)

Ty—Tyrone McClaren, the only son of Jubal and Duana McClaren

Willow—Nathan's sister in (homeplace)

Locations on the Aegean Plateau (Aegea)

Oldtown—the location of the first settlement, now falling into decay and mostly populated by Genon workers

Midtown—west of Oldtown with finer homes for officers and upper class citizens

Waypoint—a small military checkpoint between Midtown and the Outpost

The Outpost—a small settlement in the central part of the Aegean plateau that began as an equipment repair station and a stable for horses. Eventually, an Inn was built there for officers who were traveling out west.

Westland—a military post on the far western end of the plateau. The Great House of Westland (belonging to Jubal McClaren is here).

Outside Aegea

The Poison Forest—the name the military first gave to the jungle below the Aegean Plateau, but known to the Genon people as the **Great Forest** or the **Land of Cloud and Leaf**

Homeplace—the home village of the Exiles on the shore of a great ocean.



CHAPTER 1

The Evidence

The dark secrets we carry are like heavy stones. If we keep them, how can we hope to cross the deep water between here and eternity?—*A proverb of His own people*

Never in the whole of his life could he have imagined being as cold as he's been here. Goosebumps harden on his legs, arms, chest, and neck. Shivering, he leans upon his caretaker—as much for warmth as for support.

He looks at the surrounding mountaintops and wonders, *One would think being so high up on the side of a mountain it would be hotter, because it's closer to the sun, isn't it? This makes no sense. At home, people would be seeking relief from the heat by this time of the day.*

When they first found him far below in the Great Forest, he was delirious from a raging fever. Realizing he was one of the Exiles they sought and knowing he would perish without skilled care, they sent word to the general who had him covertly transported thousands of feet above the steaming jungle to a secret location on the Aegean Plateau. Never had the general violated Aegea's laws like this before, but these were desperate times.

Two full moons have come and gone since the Exile's arrival. He still doesn't know when or if he will be able to escape and find his way back to the Great Forest.

He glances at the man helping him walk into the courtyard. Although the two of them are about the same height and would normally be about the same weight, his own feeble diet for the past year, coupled with disease, has made him thin and frail.

His dark, curly hair and baggy clothes flutter in the breeze and his teeth chatter as he lowers himself into a chair. His caretaker unfolds a wool blanket and covers him the way a mother might cover a child.

The blood of these people is surely different from mine—how else could they walk around in this cold air as if they were comfortable?

The other man hovers over him for a moment, then asks, "Do you need more blankets?"

After all this time, the only people he's met here are those who've watched over him throughout his illness and recovery: An old man by the name of Menoh, Basil (Menoh's grandson), and the man now watching over him. Menoh and his grandson are both Genon like him—but this man, Ty, has fair skin and strange, golden-red hair.

He shivers once more. "No. In a moment I will be fine."

"Then I will sit with you for a while."

It's still odd to hear Ty try to speak the Genon language. He has a stilted pronunciation and he's often at a loss to find the right words so he has to ask the old man or Basil for help.

Clearly, he won't give up. He will keep trying to get me to tell him. The Exile cautiously allows his focus to drift around the dark stone floor and walls of the courtyard. A stairway with an iron railing on the far side of the courtyard

leads to the top of the wall. *If I could get to the stairs and climb them, could I get beyond the walls? What's on the other side?*

His companion coughs and Canaan looks at him again. Since the night he first regained consciousness, the sights, smells, and sounds here have often jolted his senses. The color of Ty's hair and the bright blueness of his eyes were just the first of many things here that seemed completely surreal. The worst part is when Ty and the other two talk to each other in the nonsensical language of the Aegeans—Command Dialect. It almost makes him dizzy to listen to it. Nothing here feels right.

After so much time alone in the jungle, even common comforts like being indoors, sleeping on a bed, and sitting on a chair feel strange. He closes his eyes. *Growing up, I could be surrounded by people and not even notice their presence. Now, after all this time . . . when the three of them stand near me, it's as if I might suffocate! If only I could go back to the forest. At least it's warm there. . . .* A thought that is both startling and grim occurs to him: *Perhaps I AM in the Great Forest. Perhaps I'm in the phantom realms of the fever. Perhaps this is all imagined and I've actually fallen into the river . . . with its cool waters carrying me away. . . . If my body washes ashore at homeplace, would they at least bury me among my people? Or would they cast me adrift in death the way they have in life?*

He grasps the arms of his chair and squeezes with all his might, fighting to keep from thinking about his trial before the Elders. For one terrible moment, words start ringing through his head, *"Some in our midst will never recover from the deep wounds we've suffered . . ."*

He opens his eyes to reassure himself. *No. I'm here, and as Old Menoh says, I will find my strength and my footing again. Even in this strange place, the Maker still sees me. I haven't drifted out of His sight. I must take courage. I must, somehow, learn how to be here.* The voice of his caretaker interrupts his thoughts.

"It's a clear day," Ty says. "You can see for miles."

Canaan looks above the walls of the courtyard to the bright white of the peaks that rise along one side of the

Aegean plateau. For him, they have a surreal beauty—like one would find when seeing an unknown world for the first time. Menoh, told him the air on the peaks is many times colder and that the white substance on the mountain tops isn't salt or sand but "ice" and "snow," and that these things are frozen water. *What does "frozen" mean?*

The old man also told him that if a man walks upon the heights, it gets increasingly difficult to breathe, and when you exhale, small clouds will come out of your mouth. All his life, Canaan thought of himself as a man of the wilds, a fearless hunter and explorer but these ideas are too much to ponder. *Oh, Maker of my soul . . . help me find courage. . . .* He clears his throat and answers, "Yes. I can see all the mountains today."

His hosts still know next to nothing about him. So far, he's only revealed his name and his age: Canaan, twenty-six. His clothes, the weapons, and tools they found near him are all foreign, and he can only speak the ancient language of the Genon people, so pretending he isn't an Exile would be pointless. But he's offered no other information.

He's keenly aware of the fact that he hasn't seen a woman since his arrival. Nor has he seen any children. Menoh mentioned his wife . . . but that's the only reference to a female he's heard. *Is there a shortage of women here, too? If so, it might explain their desperation to know what I know about the women we found.*

Thus far, no one has restricted his movements but is that because he's free to move about or because they know he is too weak to escape their custody? Now that he's able to walk more than three or four steps at a time, they've let him come out into this courtyard . . . but it has high walls.

"We've had so much rain here lately," Ty offers. "It feels good to see the sun again."

"Just so," he answers. "It would be the rainy season in . . . in the forest now." He closes his eyes and leans his head back with the pretense of soaking in the sun's warmth. *They have been kind . . . but it's a ruse. Everyone in homeplace knows of the cruelty of Ageans.*

The silence becomes uncomfortable and he runs his fingers over the arms of the chair, polished smooth by the

touch of countless hands over the years. He opens his eyes and asks, "Where do you go when you leave here? I haven't seen you for more than a week."

"I have work I must attend to. I oversee things for my father."

They both watch as Menoh, enters the courtyard carrying a pair of garden shears in his left hand. Despite his age, his short, wiry frame is still upright. His gait is a little stiff, and he doesn't swing the shears at the end of his arm the way a young man would, but he's still able to grip them in a gnarled hand that can do daily tasks. Seeing him at a distance like this, it dawns on Canaan that Menoh has been *allowed* to grow a beard. It's white, and very long—in fact, the wind is blowing the end of it over his shoulder as he walks. *How odd. We were always told the soldiers of Aegea forbade the traditional beards of Genon men and forced them to live with the shame of faces that were as hairless as that of a little boy. He has his beard, but his grandson is clean shaven . . . what does that mean?*

The old man makes his way to a leafy vine clinging to a nearby wall and begins trimming back all the loose branches that dangle more than a few inches from the surface. Canaan and Ty silently watch him until he's cut all the branches he can reach and placed them in a wooden bucket. Once he's finished, he turns and walks toward them, white beard still billowing in the breeze, but this time the whiskers blow like a windsock pointing the way ahead of him.

Canaan frowns with the weight of a growing list of mysteries as he watches Ty hop up and drag another chair into the grouping, then wait for Menoh to sit before seating himself again.

The Genon are supposed to be the slaves here and the others think they are the masters. Is this all a game to fool me?

Menoh sets the shears on the courtyard floor.

The people here have so much metal. And the blades on this instrument are sharp. Could I reach it? A hint of a bleak smile briefly lights his face. I haven't got the strength to escape this courtyard, much less fight off the two of them. The old man alone could knock me down.

Now that someone can help with any needed translation, he asks Ty, "You mention your father. What does your father do?"

"He is a soldier."

This is no surprise, but he did wonder if Ty would say it. "So . . . that means you are a soldier as well, does it not?"

"Yes."

"Is your mother still alive?"

Ty looks at Menoh as if he misunderstood the question. The old man looks a bit puzzled as well, but he nods.

"Yes, my mother is alive. But she mostly stays to herself these days. She is . . ." he says the last word as if it is a sentence in and of itself, "mourning."

"Who died?"

There is a brief exchange in the other language before Menoh spreads his hands, shrugs, and says in Genon, "Wisdom says, 'Today is always a good day to speak truth.'"

A gust of wind swirls Ty's hair around and he pushes it away from his eyes before responding, "She is mourning the loss of my sister."

"Did your sister die of a fever? Or in childbirth?"

"No. She may be dead or she may be alive. We don't know where she is or what happened to her. She was stolen from our home months ago."

Canaan grips his chair and stares into the distance. "Why would someone do such a thing?"

"To gain an advantage over my father." Ty glances at the old man before he continues. "I'm not certain if I should tell you this . . . but I have the hope that if I speak the truth, you will speak truth as well. The day my sister was taken was the day my father became the ruler of Aegea."

Canaan's mind flies back to the forest that day. *Jariel. She looked so fragile. I knew she wasn't Genon.* His thoughts begin to form around possible responses while Ty is talking.

"She isn't the only woman who disappeared that day. We believe the men who took the women fled to the forest, because they thought no one would look there. Perhaps they meant to bring the women back but something happened. We think a creature you call a *k'mosh* killed the men." He pauses, perhaps waiting for some sort of response, but there is none.

If Shaye hadn't spoken for her, Benjamin surely would have killed her or left her where she was. That girl was so sick.

"We believe you have seen them. We believe you might know what happened to the women . . . and we *hope* that you will tell us where they are."

The Exile musters the strength to lean forward and consider his two companions for a moment. "Missing women in the forest? Why would I know about them? When your trackers found me I was far away from the paths to Aegea and I was alone, was I not?"

"Neither of us," Menoh interjects, "thinks you *took* the women. We think perhaps you are a witness to what happened."

His face hardens into a scowl before he shrugs. "It all sounds very sad, but the forest is much bigger than you can imagine and it can swallow even the most experienced person. If the soldiers who did this crime were no match for the *k'mosh* why would you dare to hope the women survived? Neither a *k'mosh* nor the Great Forest would take pity on a couple of women." He looks at Ty before he says, "Your mother is right to mourn."

The response is swift. "I said 'women,' I never said there were *two* women. I never said soldiers took them. How do you know these things?"

The shock of his blunder sends Canaan's head back against his chair. He finally manages, "I just assumed it was soldiers. Who else would do such a thing?"

Ty gets up and walks out of the courtyard. *Is the conversation over?* Soon, however, he's back, holding a leather satchel in his hands. He sits down and pulls out an object out of the bag, then holds it out: an arrowhead with a small bit of a broken arrow shaft still attached.

Canaan tries to grasp the artifact but it slips through his fingers and plops onto the blanket in his lap. He stares at it. *How heavy it feels to me! How feeble I have become. Will I ever be strong again?*

Ty asks Menoh to translate his words then says, "We found it stuck high in a tree in the same place where some of the bones of the soldiers were found. It's where the *k'mosh*

was, where all traces of the women disappear. The soldiers weren't killed by arrows, but other people were shooting arrows. What were they shooting at? The only logical conclusion is the *k'mosh*. I doubt they were fighting to rescue the soldiers . . . but they may have been trying to save a couple of women—one of whom was obviously Genon."

When the translation is finished, he grudgingly responds. "I'm not part of any 'others.' I was found alone. I have been alone for years. That is the truth."

The old man points to the artifact in his lap. "That arrowhead didn't come from Aegea. Neither did the wood of the shaft it was on. It didn't match the arrows we found with you but, somehow, you know details you shouldn't know unless you were there . . . or someone that *was* there told you."

His heart feels as if it's wobbling around in his rib cage as he slowly picks up the evidence and turns it over. He sees a small mark on the shaft and fights the urge to smirk. *Benjamin's father made this. If it was an arrow made by my father or my brother it would have found the k'mosh. Wouldn't you know that it would be Benjamin who gets me caught up in this?* He slowly hands it back to Ty before he says, "So?"

Ty pulls a piece of cloth from the bag. "This is a piece of the dress my sister was wearing the day they took her. My mother fainted when she saw it." Next, he unbuttons the top button of his shirt and pulls out a leather necklace with a small pouch tied to it. He carefully opens the bundle and extracts long, black hairs tied together with a string. "And these belonged to the other woman. A Genon woman."

Canaan doesn't touch either of the items. "Why would you keep hair from a Genon woman? Surely she was just a servant."

"She grew up as a servant in my father's house—but she is more than that to me. I would do anything to see her safe return, and that of my sister."

The Exile closes his eyes and shivers. "It's too cold out here for me and my strength is spent. I need to go back to my room."

###

Once the patient is back in his room, Ty and Menoh sit in the courtyard again and talk.

"I hope you are encouraged," the old Genon says. "I know he seems determined, but I think his mistakes today are a revelation of his heart. He *wants* to tell us. Give him time."

"Perhaps. It's just that every single day seems an eternity to me."

"Soon, Ty, soon."

"I must leave now. Tomorrow the trial will end and I must be there with my parents. I should be back in a few days."

###

The patient remains in his bed, but his eyes search the room as he tries to avoid thinking about his predicament. Despite the fact that he can hear a nearby waterfall, he has yet to look upon it. His windows and the patio where he sat earlier face away from the mountain, but the sound of the cascading water constantly echoes around the large room. The light gray walls are mostly mortar and stone, the high ceiling is made of wood slats held up with large wooden beams. In several places, the walls and ceiling are nearly black with soot from the fireplace and from the golden oil that continuously burns in lamps on two large tables. His bed and another for a continual caretaker are new additions to the décor, no doubt hastily brought in upon his arrival. A soft woven rug, under his bed helps keep out the cold of the stone floor. *What did they use this room for before I came? Did they gather here and eat? It's larger than some of the houses that people live in at home. Why can't I see any other dwellings from here? Why is this building so large?*

When the old man returns to the room he asks, "What is this place?"

"It is called a mill. The water flowing down the mountain turns a giant wheel," he says, holding out his hands and then allowing them to chase each other in a circle, "that wheel then turns other large wheels that grind grain. It can also turn

wheels and belts that aid in cutting logs. Perhaps your people don't have such machinery, but it was something the Genon knew when they first came to Aegea. It has helped to feed many people and to build new homes. When you are stronger, would you like to see how it works?"

"Am I your prisoner? Could I leave if my body were able? Would the soldiers kill me if I tried?"

Menoh slowly sits on the bed nearby and rubs his hand around on an aching elbow. "When they found you, the fever had nearly finished you. You needed medicine and help beyond what they could give, so they carried you through the Great Forest and brought you up the mountain. Ty's father had you brought here, where you would be safe and we could care for you. For now you are hidden—as much for your own safety as anything else."

"So I am in danger here? Ty said his father was the leader, didn't he?"

His caretaker shrugs. "Well . . . technically, you're not one of the Exiles from the second generation, but the laws written back then did include 'family members'. Someone could claim you were a 'family member' of an Exile and kill you. The law will be set aside soon, but until then . . ."

The young man scratches the scalp under his short but wild mane of hair and Menoh watches his brows come together in a frown.

"If you are wondering," he says, "I'm the one who shaved off your hair when you first arrived because it was so full of insects and filth . . . but your beard wasn't as bad so I cleaned it and left it alone. I think the Exile men keep their beards, don't they?"

He gets no response, so he continues with a different line of reasoning. "As strange as this place must seem to you, at least you always knew there was a place in the mountains called Aegea and that there were people living there. But to most of those who live here, any story of the Exiles is a legend. Since they first arrived, Aegeans have been told that the Great Forest below us is a place so deadly that no one can live there for long. Believing that, soldiers in the Second Generation abandoned those they considered rebels in the forest thinking the jungle would perform the executions for them. Although

there are soldiers—such as Ty's father—who've known it was *possible* to survive in the forest, it would be alarming to most people here to realize that the descendants of Exiles really *are* roaming around down there. It might be an easy leap for them to think that any Exile alive today must have harmful intentions against Aegea."

"That was an evil thing. They banished people who only wanted freedom from oppression. It's the soldiers' own consciences that would haunt them and make them afraid of us."

The old man leans forward and rests his forearms on his knees. "The time of the exile was a *terrible* time for all the people here, too—Genon and soldier alike. I was but a small boy during those days of passion, when all of our people were forced to choose whether they were willing to die . . . or live on and protect their families here. It was an agonizing decision for every Genon who was of age. My oldest brother was among those taken into the forest. Some of my cousins, an aunt, and an uncle were exiled as well.

"My father had friends among the soldiers and they kept my second oldest brother, Sol, from going with the Exiles because our father said he was too young to make the decision to stand with my brother. Sol saw this as a compromise of our faith and never forgave our father. It created a divide in our family that never healed."

Canaan sniffs. "Just so. Should our people have yielded to those who were faithless? And for what? To live as slaves? Our people were the ones who came to this place with the promise of the land and freedom. We were the ones who were supposed to stay. The soldiers and the others were supposed to go back on that ship to their own place."

"Yes. What you say is *true*. And I can't imagine the fear and the suffering of those who found themselves deep in the forest with nothing . . . but we can't judge those who actually faced the choice back then. I *can* tell you of the great sorrows and the hard times for our people who remained here in Aegea. Several years of scarcity and disease came, and if the Maker hadn't been merciful, *everyone* on this plateau could have perished. Of a truth, my own father never smiled again and only lived for three years after the exile. My mother went

home to the Maker just a year after that. But you and I *cannot* go back in time to make a stand for your family or mine. We cannot go back in time to punish those who did this wicked thing. What we *can* do is live out what we know to be right. Here and now. Things are being made right, but it is a process."

"All I know, is that soldiers are devils who wear matching clothes."

"Ah." He strokes his long, white beard. "And you can tell me that the Exiles are all righteous people? All of them live according to the ways of the Maker? They all live in harmony? They all keep the faith, all care for one another . . . all help one another, all forgive one another?"

The color drains from Canaan's face.

"Are you feeling ill?"

"I am fine. Just cold." He shivers. "Just cold."

Aging eyes squint to study him for a moment. "It is said in the Sacred Tell of our people, 'Whenever we attempt to marry faith to tradition or race, it is a match that will not result in virtue. The substance of faith isn't in our collective habits or our common flesh, it exists in our shared *hope*.' If the inward man doesn't choose faith, there is no real advantage to being born into a family of Genon." He sighs. "I cannot speak for the Genon people who are in Exile, but here, we fall short. There are some of us who are devout, and some who have fallen from the Way. Most of us are somewhere in between, so we must remind each other of our hope and press on together. Similarly, there are soldiers who are good men and some who are scoundrels, and many in between who are just trying to find their way. Believe it or not, some of them *have* found the Way."

"These are not my concerns."

Menoh slowly shakes his head. "Have you ever come to a place where something terrible has happened . . . but, alone, you cannot make it right? Have you been to a place in your life when—even if you could throw yourself down into the breach—you couldn't make it right?"

Canaan's eyelids flutter as the words spoken two years ago stalk him once more.

"Some in our midst will *never* recover from the deep wounds we've suffered," Jared says to the council. "It says in the Sacred Tell that 'justice allows a community to heal, to live on, after a great tragedy.' It also says, 'Where there is no justice, evil things will grow.' The Maker knows our heavy hearts—and His provision is *justice*. Canaan may feel deep regret for what happened, but our community will not feel any sort of resolution unless he suffers in some way proportionate to *our* suffering. I don't demand that his life be taken, but I cannot forgive him. I say that Canaan, too, should know the unending sorrow of never seeing his family again. . . ."

A hand placed on his chest jolts him back to the present. "Listen to me, son."

His eyes focus on the man who has tenderly cared for him.

"Bad things have happened here and *terrible* things could flourish again. No one person can overturn them, but each of us must do what we can. The men who took Ty's sister blamed the Genon girl who disappeared the same day—they said it was a Genon plot. Although these men will soon stand for judgement—they've also managed to raise suspicions in the minds of others. If it became known that Exiles were there in the forest that day, those suspicions would grow."

"So I could be used as proof of their worst fears," he concludes. "Perhaps you should just take me back to the Great Forest and leave me there." He exhales heavily, as if the idea is a relief to him.

"No. We both know the heat and damp of the forest are where the fever thrives. You are so weak right now, it would swallow you up."

The young man looks away. "Perhaps you should just let it."

The old man's eyes glisten with sorrow. "This I cannot do. Too much has been lost already. For the sake of the people of

Aegea *and* the Exiles I am holding onto hope that the women are yet alive, that they will be able to return to our people."

"Do not hold onto hope because of me. Even if I knew something, it would be a betrayal to tell it."

"I don't think you've fully considered this. Think of it. As you heard today, Ty and his father have already pieced together much of what happened. They already *know* the Exiles are living somewhere on the other side of the forest. They already *know* that Exiles were right there in the forest the day the *k'mosh* killed the kidnappers. *And* they have found an old map that will lead soldiers to where they believe the Exiles went: down a river that empties into the great water—the ocean."

A look of surprise momentary flashes across Canaan's face.

Encouraged, the old man continues to press his case. "Yes, the general has learned about the ocean. Even if you don't care about the people here in Aegea, you must care what happens to the rest of your people. Soon, the general *will* send men across the forest. Eventually, they *will* find your people—with or without your help. You cannot prevent the encounter. All you can do is teach the Aegeans how to approach the Exiles so there is the best chance of a peaceful meeting. Otherwise, what will happen when men from Aegea suddenly appear where the Exiles live? What if both sides are fearful and ready to fight? I'm certain your people are skilled with spears and arrows in the forest . . . but the soldiers have weapons your people have never dreamed of. False assumptions could lead to bloodshed. The fate of the Exiles may very well rest in your hands."

A sarcastic laugh shoots out of Canaan's mouth before he can quench it. "It seems I cannot escape being a villain."

It's a riddle he can't unravel, so Menoh becomes quiet.

The young man suddenly turns toward the wall and shivers. "Please, do not ask this of me, Nathan."

Gnarled hands unfold another blanket and pull it over him. "Who is Nathan?"

End of First Chapter

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Back Cover

Terry L. Craig is a follower of Jesus Christ, a wife, mom, and grandma who has traveled through or lived in much of the US, Caribbean, and Mexico. Although she writes articles, studies, and Apologetics, her favorite form of writing is fiction. She currently resides in North Carolina with her professional pilot husband (her lifetime love) Bill.



Book 3 In the SCIONS series

As full moons come and go as attempts to find the missing daughter of Aegea's new ruler and her servant covertly continue but only those in possession of the scant clues persist in the hope the women are still alive.



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