

# Scions of the Aegean C



*Descent into  
the Wilds*

**TERRY L. CRAIG**

**Scions of the Aegean C**  
*Descent into the Wilds*

Book 1 of  
the Scions of the Aegean C series

by **Terry L. Craig**

## **Scions of the Aegean C**

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## Dedication

To sisters everywhere, but particularly to my sister, Jo Ann.  
To my beloved Bill  
To my precious Lord

## Acknowledgments

Many thanks to those who read this book prior to publication—  
including Bill Craig, Sarah Arnold, Jan Nance and Kim Craig.

## Have you ever felt truly ODD?

(A note from the author)

When I was a teen, adults would say to me, “These are the best years of your life!” and I would wonder (given the unhappiness of my daily existence) what horrors might await me in adulthood.

The good news is that my younger years were NOT the best years of my life (nor are they usually the best years of ANYbody’s life). But back then, I had no way of knowing this. I lacked the ability to see that most people my own age were as lonely and felt as out of place as I did, and that FEW teens and young adults have the gift of being truly comfortable in their own skin. Most of us tip-toe, blunder, blindly plunge, bully, or fake our way through the maze that takes us from childhood to maturity.

As a girl, I knew the daily pain of feeling like I didn’t belong anywhere . . . but lacked the desire to compromise my eccentric sense of “me” in order to fit in. I had little in the way of friendship or fellowship, no sense of community, and no long-term experience to draw upon, so I just crashed along in a continuing “now” with only my sense of “me” and the (limited) knowledge of what I wanted as guides. No life is without tragedies, but if I could have seen the road ahead from a higher vantage point, mine might have unfolded with fewer of them. Hence this series.

I will tell you that some of the more painful aspects of this series are reflections of situations in my own life—but so are some of the eventual triumphs. Although some of the plot lines weave around worldly deeds and hard realities, the ultimate themes of the series are unapologetically from God’s redemptive perspective.

So . . . if you are truly odd, or one who is called to seek and befriend odd people, I hope you will join me in the journey of this story and the series as it unfolds.

Terry L. Craig

## CHAPTER 1

“**H**umanity is sometimes like seeds, carried by the wind or in the belly of a bird to a faraway place. Yet God can still send the sun to shine upon them and waters to give them life, and some will survive to bear fruit.”—Joel of the family of Pel, a Firstlander and one of His people

### **August 19, 2044, 15:15 Eastern Daylight Time**

“Mayday mayday mayday! This is Bravo X-ray Nine declaring an emergency. We’ve been hit and we are about to re-enter the atmosphere. Mayday mayday mayday. Again I say this is Bravo X-ray Niner and we have catastrophic failures. We currently have pressurization and oxygen. Instruments are down and we have no power to engines. We did not achieve transfer—that is negative on transfer—and we are re-entering the atmosphere with 1,903 souls onboard.”

As co-pilot, Major John Dench, continues to send the distress call out on the radio, the pilot-in-command Major Nathan Rice struggles to maneuver the craft, using only its speed to control movement and descent. Other than looking out the small windows in the cockpit, they have no means of seeing anything else in the sky. Even now, whoever unleashed the slice of light that pulsed through the craft and disabled it might be closing in on them. They are defenseless.

“Mayday mayday mayday. This is Bravo X-ray Niner and we are attempting re-entry with no instruments and a dead stick. . . . Transponder squawk 7700 . . .”

Along with sirens and automated warnings sounding in the cabin, the voice of Major Rice can be heard in the background of the last transmission saying, “attempting to maintain forty degrees.” The craft’s engineer is saying, “. . . no other visual contact . . . attempting to adjust my point of orientation . . . [unintelligible words] . . . points of reference are gone. . . .”



**August 19, 2044, just before sunset, location unknown**

A soldier in uniform is standing near a group of boulders at the foot of a tall peak. These large rocks undoubtedly slid down the steep slope behind him at some point in time. Under other circumstances, he might think it unwise to consider them a refuge, but greater dangers than a possible landslide face all the survivors huddled nearby.

The soldier's eyes continually scan the sky overhead and the open ground between where he stands and a line of large trees several hundred yards away. Behind the hardwoods, a column of black smoke is rising in the diminishing light.

He places his index finger on a spot where his right ear and jaw come together and applies pressure so he can both record and broadcast his words to anyone with a radio on his designated frequency. "This is Captain Arthur Penway, an officer on the spacecraft Bravo X-ray nine, which is also called the Aegean C. We have no idea if anyone can hear our distress calls, and the battery on the emergency radio will die soon."

He sees more civilians running from the trees toward the rocks. Nearly everyone including Penway, momentarily drops to the ground when they hear a *pop* followed by a loud *boom* and he watches in horror as a ball of flame rolls upward through the column of smoke like a bulge working its way through a hose.

"We're still hearing explosions . . . and that was a loud one," he says between rapid breaths, "but it looks . . . like all the smoke is still coming from the same section of the craft that broke off."

He stops speaking and waves his arms until the people leaving the woods see him and correct their course toward him. Penway and two other soldiers run out across the expanse of grass, carrying weapons to protect the oncoming civilians from any potential threat. Two of them help a large man with an injured knee close the distance across the open terrain to where the others are waiting.

Two hours later, in the dark of night, his initial rush of adrenalin is slowing and he continues his message in a calmer voice. He moves a few feet from people who are sitting on the ground, wanting some privacy while he communicates his thoughts. “It looks like we will have to hole up here tonight. Hal Dobbin, one of the passengers, will attempt to return to the wreckage of the craft with some soldiers tomorrow in order to scavenge the parts for a solar array that we can use to operate some of our tech. Hopefully our emergency beacon is sending out a signal, but the section of the craft where it was located isn’t with the rest of the wreckage, so we don’t know for sure.”

### **August 20, 2044, midday**

“We lost more than two hundred in the crash, mostly passengers but soldiers including our pilots Majors Rice and Dench as well. At least a hundred more people are injured—many of them critically, so the death toll is going to rise. We have two doctors who survived, but little in the way of medicine to sustain the injured more than a day or so unless we can get back into the wreckage and locate the medical supplies. We can only hope we’ll be rescued soon.

“Our first hours after the crash were spent getting people and then livestock out of the wreckage along with any weapons we could carry and then finding places to take cover in case we were attacked . . . but so far, we’ve been lucky. Major Rice did a good job, I’ll give him that. He managed to get us down on a large shelf that sticks out from the side of a mountain. The shelf is much longer than it is wide and looks like it’s more than a couple of miles wide. Most of the wreckage skidded to a stop on the northeastern end. We think the craft was intact until the first impact and bounce . . . probably about a klick from here.

“It’s been nearly twenty hours now and although we’re grateful we’ve not seen any hostile forces . . . we’re not sure why we’ve had no contact with anyone and we’ve seen no signs of

rescue. Even though we're obviously in remote terrain it's weird that we haven't seen *any* signs of other human life. No signs of roads or trails. We saw no smoke where other craft similarly damaged might have crashed. . . . There are no contrails in the sky, and now as it's getting dark, we see no lights or fires in the distance to indicate habitation. We don't know what to make of all this but, like I said earlier, hopefully Hal and some of the others can scrounge up some tech so we can make better attempts to contact the outside world tomorrow and see what's happened.

"My buddy Pete says there is a jungle a mile or so below this plateau. He says it extends all along the base of the mountains and spreads out as far as the eye can see . . . but we won't send any recon down to look at it. We're trying to stay up here near the wreckage in case help comes. We have no idea what threats might be nearby.

"We had a full load. Our mission was to relocate that group of people—the Genon, the terraformers—along with their livestock and belongings. We also had the Second Jump Battalion onboard and a "scaffold crew" of a few hundred scientists and techs who would help the Genon with the initial setup at New Hope. Three of our translators were killed in the crash, so communicating with the Genon poses some difficulties since a good number of them don't speak Command Dialect . . . and it seems a lot of the way we think doesn't directly translate, either. They're kinda rough and primitive, like Special Forces, so they can survive anyplace where human life is possible . . . but they aren't savvy about tech at all and they don't operate with a chain-of-command structure, so we're having some difficulties with them.

"All I keep telling myself is that this will all make for a great series of entries on the ComNet newsfeed when we get home." The officer pauses for several moments before continuing. "Or, at least if someone hears this later, they'll know what happened."

**August 24, 2044**

“We had a memorial service today for all the people who have died so far. We buried them in a common grave before the bodies became a health hazard. Right now, there isn’t enough time, manpower, or equipment to bury them separately, or with the honor they deserve. The gravesite is east of the wreckage of Bravo X-ray Niner, near the eastern end of the plateau. A group of men dragged a chunk of the nose of the craft where the name, Aegean C, was painted to serve as a kind of memorial or headstone at one end of the gravesite.”

### **August 25, 2044**

“It’s been six days now . . . another forty-three people have died, among them five small children. It’s so weird how people were either VERY injured or had only scratches and bruises. We still don’t know exactly what it was that hit us, or why no one—neither friendlies nor hostiles—has found us. If extremists hit us with some sort of new weapon, maybe that one pulse was the only shot they had . . . but then why hasn’t any rescue been attempted? None of our satellite communicators or radios are picking up anything. *Nothing* on the com. Not in any language, not on any frequency, and . . . well, we’re really spooked about it.

“Gus Tremont and six others—scientists and techs on the mission to New Hope—are starting to speculate about our circumstances here. Several think we may have somehow slipstreamed to another planet. Others say it may not be a case of *where* we are, but *when* we are. None of us recognizes the constellations in the sky . . . that could be due to spatial or temporal displacement. Whatever the case, the commander of the Jump Squadron, Major Roland is trying to keep energies focused on survival—both short and long term—as we wait for rescue. Although no one has attacked us here, he’s ordered everyone not on recon to stay near the crash site.

“We’ve had continuing problems with the Genon. They seem to operate more on instinct and they’re used to being autonomous .

. . . but we know our key to survival is in unified effort directed through the command of the senior officer, Major Roland.

“In the way of positive news, one of the Genon did find a ready supply of water nearby on the second day we were here. It’s a natural spring and it should supply all that we need. Much of the cargo, tools, agricultural equipment, and livestock the Genon would have used at New Hope was salvaged, too. And the climate is moderate so far. The soldiers that have traveled to the edge of the shelf, about a mile from here, see a dense jungle below, so we believe we’re in a tropical zone. We can also see snow and ice high up on the peaks behind us. Man, those peaks are jagged, and they look like they nearly extend out beyond the atmosphere. I’ve never seen mountains so tall before. . . . But we’re on this shelf, this plateau that’s maybe a mile above the jungle, and it’s like we’re suspended between eternal winter above and eternal summer below. It is probably about 50 degrees during the night, but it warms up during the day. I don’t know what we would have done if we hadn’t found water or if we were forced to contend with extreme cold or heat. . . . Wherever we are, we’re all just hoping to leave soon.

“Major Roland is in charge of all our efforts to survive until we’re rescued. A number of professionals among the civilian crew have been a big help. Hal and his daughter Janna helped us make a small power station using solar collectors we pulled out of the wreckage. It won’t run much but we’ll take what we can get. At least we’ll be able to use a few things like lights and signaling.

“We sent ten men out to recon more of the plateau today. They’re supposed to be back within a week.”

### **August 27th**

“We’ve heard some strange sounds the past two nights. We’re not sure if it’s human or some sort of nocturnal animal—but I’m telling you, it would make your blood turn to ice to hear the sound

this thing makes. It sounds like a woman's scream, only louder . . . and different somehow.

“Major Roland sent out four of our special ops guys today to see what it is and to find out if our recon unit is okay.”

## CHAPTER 2

“We chased them into the Poison Forest and did not let them return. We chased all of those who would strike down the order of our civilization—and therefore life itself. We chased them without pity, and their names will not be found in the record of the Second Generation.”—*Captain Martin Jared, a keeper of the history of Aegea in the Second Generation*

The mingled scent of spiced tubers and hot bread drifts beneath her door and the room fills with scents of the morning's meal. The young woman abruptly awakens when she realizes bread dough takes more than an hour to prepare and rise before baking. She should have been up long ago!

She sits up in bed, but before her feet are out from under her small blanket a piece of a dream floats through the back of her mind, like a single bright flower petal drifting away on a current of water. She closes her eyes and focuses all her will upon it.

Much of the dream has already slipped away to wherever it is that dreams go, but she intently lifts that one small piece back into view. A hint of a smile comes to her lips as she replays it. Yes. It's mother's melodious voice. And for a moment she can see the long, flowing hair, so black it shines blue in the sun. The words her mother speaks are in their ancient Genon, a language forbidden since the rebellion of His people in the second generation.

Mother's strong, slender hands unwrap a moist roll of cloth and she places the items side by side in front of her. “Here is the root . . . this is the bark, and these are the leaves, Shaye.” A pungent odor unlike anything on the plateau fills her sinuses. “Smell it?” Mother asks. “This is the scent of the forest. See the color of the wood within the root? The first generation of His people said these trees smelled like something called 'cedar'.” She lifts the small branch with a cluster of leaves. “We have gathered

these since the first generation—and now we do it in secret. We boil them or we crush them—not from the root or the bark—and we mix the juice with water, just a few drops at a time . . . so we are strong in the Great Forest—the land of cloud and leaf.” The voice of her mother fades and disappears with the rest of the dream.

At times, Shaye fears she might forget her mother’s voice. She thinks about the spot where the small bundle is hidden, but as tempting as it might be to retrieve it and unwind the coarse string wrapped around it, the escalating noise from the kitchen demands attention.

Although there is no window here, the narrow shaft of light coming beneath the door illuminates the compact space where she has slept for the past four years. Still wearing the slip she slept in, Shaye rises and quickly realizes she’s standing on salt granules scattered about the floor. She’d brushed them out of her bed last night.

“Ohhhhh, *lah*,” she says in an exasperated sigh. “That stupid girl.”

It was so late when she crept into her room last night, she’d forgotten to check her bed before getting into it. As soon as she fully reclined beneath the cover, however, she noted with disgust that her bed had been sprinkled with salt. She’d picked up the mattress cover and sent the salt cascading onto the stone floor, too tired to clean it up.

There’s no time to sweep it up now, either.

She grabs one of two dresses hanging on pegs near her bed, steps into it, pulls it up over her tall, slender frame, then buttons it. With several swift movements, she gathers her long, black hair at the back of her head, winds it into a large knot, then weaves two slender wooden rods through the knot to pin it in place. She opens the door and rubs the bottom of each foot against the top of the other to remove the salt, then steps through the door. Padding down the hall in her bare feet, she passes by the doorway to a small



room where soap, water and basins for personal hygiene are kept. Next, she passes a storage room for supplies and utensils.

By the time Shaye reaches the arched entrance to the kitchen, loud noises are no longer reverberating through the downstairs rooms of the house. She scrunches her whole face into a squint and comes to a complete halt. The tall shutters along two walls of the kitchen, facing east and north, are flung wide open and full daylight is pouring through them. Despite a cool morning breeze just outside, she feels warmth radiating from the brick oven where Mosha has already cooked the day's bread and a morning meal.

Once her eyes adjust, she focuses on the figure of a woman on the other side of the room. It is Mosha, and she is energetically tending to a dish in the basin located in front of the center window. Watching the old woman's silver bun bobbling about with the cleaning effort, Shaye wonders, Is she ever still?

Mosha and Shaye are the only servants who sleep in the great house. Mosha has served in Colonel Jubal McClaren's family her whole life. The colonel was wise to take Mosha in and give her the honor of a room in this house when his father died. Over the years, as her reputation for producing the most extraordinarily delectable cuisine grew, she could have had any number of opportunities to work elsewhere. The fact that she is treated nearly like family (with her own room in the great house helps) ensure her continued service here. When Mosha insisted, Shaye was allowed to move from the servant's quarters into a small storage room next to Mosha's room when the girl was orphaned at the age of ten.

Shaye watches the old woman and her expression softens.

Mosha creates a nearly constant flow of food and dirty dishes. As a testament to her life in the kitchen, her clothes carry the permanent scent of spices and freshly ground banji beans. Her weathered face and hands are evidence she's worked with great intensity for many seasons. The ample proportions on her short frame (and the deep laugh lines around her eyes and mouth) show that she enjoys her work.

This morning, however, even the air around Mosha bristles. Sensing Shaye's presence, she stops scrubbing for a moment and speaks without turning around.

"Oh. Did I *wake* you? . . ."

Shaye knows better than to respond. It will be over much sooner if she lets Mosha express her dismay. The old woman's anger is like a bubble in a boiling pot: Once it pops, it's gone. So Shaye quietly waits while the old woman airs her grievances. Openness is now a rarity among the Genon, who have learned that transparency with emotions means vulnerability. Shaye assumes Mosha's willingness to be frank is the result of her long tenure in the house. The lecture is building to its peak.

". . . and I would thank you to *not* spend all hours of the night on the roof, staring at the stars. I don't know why I let you do this to me." She lowers her voice and mutters to herself in Genon while zealously scraping the dish. She need not mutter—it's not as if anyone from the grand house above them would visit the kitchen at this hour and overhear snippets of taboo language. Although the Colonel's wife, "the ishi" keeps a firm command of all the domestic doings in the house, the kitchen has been exclusively Mosha's domain for more than two decades.

But the lowered volume sends a signal. Shaye crosses the space between them, and the old woman stops talking. Has the bubble popped yet? Mosha keeps scrubbing, so Shaye slides her arms around the old woman's generous waistline and leans down to rest her chin on the shoulder where she's received so much comfort in the years since her mother died. It was Mosha who emptied out a storage room and said it was "Shaye's room."

The old woman's posture relaxes somewhat, and the fury of the cleaning in the basin slows before she says, "Well girl, you'd better eat something quick and get moving. It will be a long day for us."

Shaye gives her a squeeze and speaks with a softness that acknowledges the bond between them. “I’m only *a* girl and not *your* girl? I am sorry I slept late.”

Mosha turns and gazes into Shaye’s golden eyes—once a distinct characteristic of the Genon people, now a feature fewer of them possess. She has known Shaye since the girl was hardly more than a toddler holding onto her mother’s skirts but those eyes still give her a bit of a jolt every time she looks into them. Shaye may be an inch or two taller than most Genon women, but there is no doubt of her heritage.

“Of all mornings to be lazing about in your bed!” the old woman scolds. “The colonel arrived late last night to help make the final plans for Jariel’s day. It’s less than two weeks away and there is much to do!”

A hint of something momentarily smolders in Shaye’s eyes before Mosha tilts her head to one side and declares, “And don’t think old Mosha’s head has gone all stupid. I know there’s some kind of skirmish going on between you and Miss Jariel lately. I might not know who threw the first clout, but I know the signs of a struggle when I see one. You and that girl have been in the business of getting even on and off since you were six. I don’t know what broke the truce again, but one day the ishi is going to decide to take notice of it and I can tell you—the only thing Jariel stands to lose is pride points for caring about what you think or do. On the other hand, Miss Shaye,” she stops and lowers her voice, “you stand to lose a good deal more.”

Mosha sees she’s not making much progress, so she tries a different line of reasoning. “You know the colonel is in the middle of preparations for the games and the draft, yet he came back to help the ishi settle all the final details of his only daughter’s planning day. Tomorrow, all manner of soldiers and service people will be here getting their assignments and schedules for the big day and *everything* will be in a skitter. Belina will be coming across the road tomorrow to help plan menus, we still need to

make out the list of supplies we'll need, and I just know she'll take every opportunity to snoop in my spice jars!" Mosha stops talking and takes a deep breath before she throws herself into a tizzy. "Do you want to make me look bad? *All* of us will suffer if the colonel and the ishi feel the slightest embarrassment! Should we all have to drink a bitter cup for *you*?"

Shaye looks directly at her. "No, Mum," she says, hoping that the endearment of the word "Mum" will further soothe Mosha's ire. "I'm sorry I didn't wake up sooner."

With fingers still dripping from the basin, Mosha reaches out and grasps Shaye's hands. "You need to stop stretching for things beyond your grasp. It will only bring you sorrow. You're seventeen now and there is no more time for imagining. There are some things—like those stars above—that will never be yours."

Because she prides herself in her ability to hide her innermost thoughts, it annoys Shaye that Mosha can see right through her sometimes. She ignores the remark and slips out of Mosha's wet grasp. After patting her hands on her dress she pulls a warm roll from a basket on a large wooden tray. She bites into the bread and pushes the soft morsel into her cheek with her tongue before saying. "I'll get to washing the rest of the dishes then. It's probably time to serve breakfast upstairs, isn't it?"

With a scolding look, the old woman dries her own hands on her apron before plucking another roll from a bin, and placing it in the basket. "Don't think this conversation is over, my girl," she says while stacking more food on the tray. "Let me tell you—"

A sound emanating from the rooms above them interrupts the conversation.

Mosha makes the Genon sign for a vow by touching two straightened fingers to her lips, then pointing upward. "We will speak of this—at great length—the next time you're late," she says in a stern voice, then hefts the tray up to her shoulder.

Shaye darts forward and puts a hand on the rim of the wooden tray. “Where is Lem?” She asks. “Here, let me carry that for you.”

“Lemon found an excuse to run off with some of the field workers for the day. I’m sure they’ll be at the *meechi* again,” the old woman says before muttering, “That man is a jot in want of a good shaking! He’ll probably appear long after our work is done and skulk off to his bed. His head is a *corsha*. I hope it pounds for a week!” She turns toward the stairs and composes herself before adding, “And, no, I don’t need your help. I’ve been carrying trays up stairs since . . .”

Shaye makes a conscious effort to keep from mouthing the next words along with Mosha as she says them.

“. . . before you were born. Since this house was built.”

The old woman makes her way up the stairway before Shaye hurriedly eats the roll in her hand, then one more from the bin, smearing it with the paste made of sweet and spicy mashed tubers. While she chews, her mind wanders and the fingers of her left hand glide back and forth along the smooth stone top of the counter next to her. Carved from the mountain, the dark blue-gray slab is worn to a soft shine by the preparation of meals by four generations of servants in Colonel McClaren’s family. These counters were carefully installed the first year that Shaye and her mother came to live here—just after the colonel's uncle died. A family member of lesser rank moved into the shell of the uncle's house after all the valuable furnishings and these stones were removed. Although a nice home in its day, the uncle's house in the best section of Oldtown wouldn't compare with this one. Even a new home in Midtown wouldn't compare to this.

Shaye stops moving her fingers, closes her eyes, and allows her hand to rest on the surface of the cool stone for a moment. It represents more than wealth or beauty. It is a tangible connection with generations gone that will exist in future generations. No words or symbols are carved here but it represents a history of

lives none-the-less, and the spices, oils, and labor of Mosha and others are worked into the very surface of the rock.

She gives one final pat to the counter before she swallows the last bite of her breakfast and finds one of Mosha's old aprons to wear. It's threadbare in several spots but softer than anything Shaye has ever owned. It wraps all the way around her—and the tie goes around her twice before she makes a loose bow in it. She leans across the counter to open the lid of a wooden bin containing coarse-ground grain and puts a small spoonful in her pocket, then moves about the large kitchen gathering the last of the dishes. The butcher will arrive soon and the kitchen should be ready to begin the preparations for a fine dinner tomorrow night.

As the dishes are scraped, rinsed and dried, each one is carefully stacked with others of its kind—gourd, wood, stone, or clay. The serving and eating utensils, some of which are real metal, will be used tomorrow and then counted before they are put away.

After blocking open the servant's door at the back of the house with a wedge of wood, Shaye lifts the large basin off the flat wooden ring on which it normally rests. She steadies it between her arms, and exits, being careful not to slosh any water on the floor. Just outside the back of the house is a stone courtyard surrounded by a short wall and a gate that is always open. Beyond the courtyard is a large, rectangular open space. The left side of the rectangle is closed in by the single-story servant's quarters where most of her peers, two dozen men and women and four children, all servants of the colonel, sleep. Although nicer than the quarters of many servants on the plateau, it is unpainted, utilitarian, and sometimes cold at night.

On the far side of the rectangle, facing the back of the house, stands a covered kitchen and dining area where servant's meals are cooked and served. At this time of the day no one is there except Palma, a round little woman with brown hair, who is cleaning off the tables.

To the right of the open space are clothes lines where laundry is hung, and beyond them is a large herb and vegetable garden. Keya, a dark-haired woman in her thirties, is hanging clothes and sheets on a line.

Shaye declares a swift “Good morning!” to Keya as she glides toward the garden with the bowl of water.

“Good morning,” Keya calls back. The woman’s two-year-old-daughter pushes by a sheet wafting in the morning sun to grab her mother’s leg.

Once she’s out of the home’s shadow, Shaye relishes every step of sun-warmed soil between her toes. At the farthest end of the garden she pours the water from the basin on several plants. For the rest of the day, each time dishes are cleaned, she will water plants closer and closer to the house. By the end of the day, all of the plants in this row will have been watered. Fresh water from springs has been bountiful elsewhere on the plateau, but here in Westland water had to be stored in cisterns or pumped by hand from wells and carried where it was needed. Now, through the newly completed aqueduct supplying the area, the house has access to a constant supply of fresh water, but old habits still rule its use. Not a drop is wasted—at least not by servants.

Shading her eyes, Shaye turns to gaze at the main house. Freshly plastered and stained a golden yellow hue from top to bottom only a month ago, the large, stone structure rises from the ground like a fortress made of sunlight itself.

She walks past a tall row of plants and sees a man, Old Menoh, at the far end, harvesting some of the *corsha* gourds off the vines. He’ll carefully cut the round gourds of different sizes in half and scoop out the slimy substance inside them onto a pile. While the hard outer shell of the *corsha* can be dried and used for a variety of purposes (such as spoons, ladles, cups, bowls, and the basin she now holds) the goop inside the *corsha*, occasionally used as a source of seeds for more vines, is pretty much useless.

Old Menoh is the only Genon working for the colonel who is allowed to keep his beard (which is long and white). He and his wife live in a small hut over by one of the ponds nearby—not because the colonel makes them live there, but because Menoh wanted to live there. Everyone knows the colonel respects Menoh. Didn't he take heed last year when the old man warned of a terrible storm on the way? Indeed the colonel's household, his livestock, and much of his crop were saved because of it.

It would be disrespectful not to greet an elder so she calls to him. "Good morning!"

A man of few words, Menoh looks up and nods in response before turning back to his work.

Shaye pauses again when she reaches the edge of the garden. Retrieving the grain in her pocket, she places most of it on a flat rock. Within seconds, a several tiny finches flit onto the rock and start pecking at the grain. They have dark wings and black throats, but their beaks and bellies are the color of fresh cream.

She gets one last pinch of grain out of her pocket and places it in the palm of her left hand. One of the birds flits up to her hand and lights on her thumb.

"I know I shouldn't let you be so tame . . . but you will be my only exception. We are friends, are we not?"

The little bird gets the last speck of grain before he flits back down to the rock where his kin are feeding.

"Enjoy your breakfast," she says softly to them all, then resumes her journey back toward the house, dangling the empty basin from a handhold carved into the rim.

The shrill call of a large bird echoes through the air and it's an irresistible invitation to take a quick detour around the side of the home. Moving past the clothes lines and turning left as she reaches the back corner of the house, she strides through the cool air under the wide brim of a shade tree. When she reaches the thick hedge guarding the garden at the front of the house, Shaye sets down the basin and pushes her hands and arms through the



wall of green as if she were diving into a sea of foliage—parting it just enough to make a small window into what lies beyond—a garden, being prepared for a grand event the likes of which the Westland has never seen before. Elegant birds from the Great Forest are preening and squawking in sheltered cages stationed near giant ferns and thorn prickled trees. At the garden's center is a deep pool where rare plants hover in the dark water. The large, floating leaves of these plants are as round and flat as the trays used to carry food upstairs, and between these giant green platters, a host of spikey white, blue, and lavender blossoms stretch toward the morning sky. Flying insects hover over the pool, taking turns landing on the leaves and drinking from drops of water that sparkle in the morning sun.

Three workers tend to the birds, plants, and water in the garden on a continuing basis . . . and Shaye can't imagine that any home in all of Aegea could have a garden that would rival the beauty of this one.

She cannot see it from her vantage point, but beyond the garden, another, thicker hedge six spans in height marks the southern boundary of the colonel's compound, sheltering his grounds from the eyes of those passing by on a road that leads through the main gate for the post and all the way to the original settlement of Oldtown. By now, the road is busy with men in the military, workers on their way to a day in the fields, and tradesmen carrying their tools or their wares. Across the road are barracks and a mess hall for young soldiers and individual homes for officers stationed here in the Westland.

Beyond the barracks, Shaye envisions the fence that surrounds the post, and—as if she were a bird flying free—she imagines what lies on the other side of the fence: the last miles of the plateau stretching out with farmlands and orchards, filled with the most valuable foods in Aegea, tended by Genon workers. Beyond all that, at the farthest end of the cultivated land is a towering stone wall—the last rampart between the Aegean Plateau and the rest of

the world. Still considered “new,” this final wall was finished when Shaye’s grandfather was a gatherer in the Great Forest, and her mother was a young woman learning all he knew. All of this comprises Westland of Aegea and all of it is under the colonel’s command. On the other side of the wall is the edge of a steep six thousand foot drop down to the misty tropical forest, *the land of cloud and leaf*, below.

The scrape of a man raking a bed of pebbles near the pond brings Shaye back to the here and now, and she realizes she has no more time for idling about. She reluctantly heads back to the kitchen, picking up the corsha basin and drying it with the corner of her apron. When she is mere steps from the courtyard at the rear of the home, she hears a tradesman calling from the direction of the back gate.

“Meat here! Meat here!”

The voice is different from the one she expects, so she stands on her toes to see who it is. Instead of the butcher or one of his helpers, it’s the butcher’s son, Korel, striding up the walk with an arched wooden yoke slung over his left shoulder. His muscular arm is stretched forward and his hand is resting upon the yoke to steady the load. At the front end, more than a dozen headless sooshi hens sway, bound together by a thick string. At the other end, a sizable portion of red meat wrapped in an oilcloth and tied with another cord swings back and forth in rhythm with his stride.

As soon as she recognizes the young man, Shaye lets out a disgusted moan and hurries to the kitchen, leaving the back entrance of the house open. She gathers a stack of large wooden trays and places them on the counter at the center of the kitchen. Within moments Korel arrives and the sweat rag on his head is as fully drenched as his clothing. He slows then stops just outside the doorway, flexing his arm to steady the load on his shoulder.

Without a word, Shaye motions for him to enter and Korel squeezes through the doorway before stepping to the counter. He grabs the string holding the hens and hefts the large mound onto

the counter before sliding the string off the yoke. Shaye slides several of the trays closer so she can divide the large pile of birds between them. While she is doing so, Korel swivels around and sets the wrapped meat on another tray before resting the yoke at the end of the counter.

Although Korel hoped to see Shaye this morning, being alone with her in the kitchen is an unexpected opportunity. Pulling the rag off his head, he mops his face with it and then frowns while he pauses to formulate some sort of statement.

Shaye notes that his usual smirk is gone and, hoping he'll simply leave, she moves away from the counter in the center of the kitchen. Not daring to turn her back on him completely, she leans her hip against the cabinet near the wash basin and gazes out the window while keeping him in her peripheral vision. He doesn't depart. After a few moments of silence, she begins tapping a fingernail on the stone countertop, the peck peck peck of it signaling her desire to get to her work.

"We killed all this for colonel just this morning so it's fresh," he says. His tone is polite, but he's still frowning. "And I made sure to bring it first thing."

He's waiting.

Rather than look at him, Shaye moves back to where the trays of sooshi hens are stationed and occupies herself untying the string from their feet.

He's rocking from one foot to the other, impatient for some sort of response. As he waits, his breathing speeds up.

When she can't stand his intensity any longer, she says, "I'm sure the ishi and colonel will appreciate it."

He makes another effort at wiping up trickles of sweat off his face and arms with the rag before he blurts out, "I was hoping to see you."

She keeps working at the string. The call of a bird out in the garden only amplifies the complete silence in the kitchen.

The son of a tradesman who provides his skilled labor to households of high rank, Korel is accustomed to courteous treatment from servants who are beneath his station in life. He places both hands on the counter and slowly leans toward her. “There was a misunderstanding last week. I saw you under the trees watching the festival and I just wanted to talk to you. That’s all. You misunderstood me. I didn’t mean to startle you and I only took hold of you because I feared you would run away and say I tried to harm you.”

Without wanting to, she recalls the delighted look on his face while she struggled to free herself. His crushing grasp bruised her arms before she managed to wrench herself free and run away. There is no doubt in her mind that, without an ounce of remorse, he would have gladly stolen her virtue and left her bruised and shamed in a clump of bushes. He knows she has no father or brothers who could exact revenge.

“Well?” he finally asks. “Do you understand?”

She slowly blinks, then turns her full gaze upon him, making no attempt to hide her complete contempt. She doesn’t care if it makes him angry—or so she thinks until he slaps his large hands further onto the counter and moves as if he might leap across it. She recoils to stay out of reach.

“You’re nothing to me!” he nearly shouts. Then, becoming mindful of their location, he leans a little farther across the counter, lowers his voice, and speaks with all the venom he can muster. “Why would I want someone like you? Certainly, no one else would. You may sleep in this house, but don’t think you can act so high above—”

At the sound of Mosha descending the stairs, he stops talking and straightens to his full height.

The old woman enters the kitchen with an empty tray, her clear eyes taking in the whole scene. “Good morning, Korel. I expected your father today. Is he well?”

His hands fall to his sides and he takes a step back before addressing Mosha. “Yes. He is in good health but he is busy. I’m doing the deliveries this morning—and these are fresh.”

“You honor the colonel,” Mosha responds.

Korel nods before he says, “Please excuse me. I must be leaving.” He slides the yoke and the oilcloth off the counter before giving one last look at Shaye. “You can have the string. . . . I have more.”

Without waiting for Shaye to respond, Mosha smiles politely at the young man and says, “Why thank you. Please take the ishi’s thanks and my greetings to your father.”

Once the kitchen door closes behind him, Mosha turns her attention to Shaye. “At the market the other day Ruby told me he beat up her son. Has he bothered you? Do you want me to complain to the colonel?”

Shaye rubs the memory of the hurt on her left forearm. “I’m fine,” she answers, not sure Mosha would actually do such a thing. . . . or what might happen if she did. “Hopefully, his father will keep him busy and we won’t see him that often.”

The old woman nods and then changes the subject. “The colonel is the only one who has eaten breakfast. Help me get this meat into cold storage and then you’ll need to go upstairs. Beth is already up there with Jariel, but the ishi says she needs extra help this morning. Be back as soon as you can, though. I need you down here, too. Like I said, Belina, the new cook from the officer’s mess, will be here tomorrow with a couple of helpers.”

In the second generation of Aegea, the Genon learned that the only way to be necessary to society was to have some craft or skill that wasn’t common knowledge. A family with a specialized craft fared much better than a family of common laborers.

Mosha gives Shaye a knowing wink. “I’ll not be giving her any of *my* secrets. We’ll be combining the spices and mixes for the meal today.”

## About the Author



**Terry L. Craig**

Born in the Southwest, Terry has lived all over the US and spent many years living in the Caribbean. She is a people-watcher and a comparative thinker who is fascinated with words, art, and ideas. She has a passion to share spiritual life in a way that allows the reader to weigh the values of different ideologies from a non-threatening perspective.

Terry is a follower of Jesus, a wife, mom, and grandma who currently resides in North Carolina with her professional pilot husband (her lifetime love) Bill. The development of true friendships and healthy community life are high on her list of life's essentials.

Her current favorite authors are Wendell Berry and Timothy Keller.

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