Easy Street, Unpaved

Book 1 of Hugh, Vampire

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"North to the Future… Where You Get Eaten."

Alaska Motto, 1967- updated in 200027

One

Hugh sat near the back of the theater, bored. He nibbled on his popcorn occasionally and -more often- flicked it towards random patrons of the theater. The show was annoying him greatly. Overwhelming curiosity had drawn him in. So far, the only thing keeping him there was the popcorn. Food was not a necessity by any means, but he could tolerate it just fine; he enjoyed a good steak as well as vegetables. They just didn't satisfy him. Lately, heavily buttered theater popcorn had become a favorite of his since he first tried it at a showing of Cleopatra. In 1912. 'Some morphine to make The Change go a little smoother', he thought as he flicked a piece of popcorn at a tween girl's head. Hard. That was not even an option in his case. As he had a hundred times before, he thought back…

It was a bitterly cold February evening a little over four hundred years ago when Hugh remembered waking up. Pain wracked his body. He was splayed out, on his back in an alleyway in a quiet town. Jamestown he was to discover later that week. *Overwhelming pain.* Unable to stand, Hugh looked down and saw his own innards spread out around his waist and legs. Absently, he was surprised by the

amount of intestines he had and how they all had once managed to fit neatly inside him. Another wave of pain took the thought from his mind and pulled a scream from his throat. Frantically he tried to put his intestines back in place, but between his awkward angle, and their slipperiness, he was only able to pile them up on his abdomen. This, he accomplished throughout his screaming.

Finally, a lantern approached, attached to a watchman's shaky hand. "God preserve you!" the watchman gasped as he looked at the fallen man desperately trying to put his insides back where they belonged. "What happened?" he asked over the panicked cries. He bent down and held the lantern near the bloodied man's face. "Oh, Hugh!" he said, panicked.

At that point Hugh mercifully blacked out. He awoke several days later in bed. His abdomen was wrapped with bandages that were stained red. A matching one was on his neck. Looking about, he did not recognize the room he was in. It could have been any room anywhere; small, with a low ceiling and sparsely furnished. A lone door was the exit, centered between two dark windows. Hugh sat up and a fresh wave of pain washed over him. He fell back in his bed and stared at the ceiling until it passed. *Hugh.* That was all he could remember and only because he had heard it before passing out. It had to be his name; why else would the old man have said it? He thought hard. No last name came to mind. No memories. Nothing. Straining, he tried to think of his past and nothing came to mind. Rudimentary things such as skinning a buck, making a canoe, even building a sturdy chair- he knew the required steps for those simple tasks and was sure he could accomplish them with proficiency and

ease. Running a two-mule plough was also very familiar to him. Counting and, if he could trust his own mind, reading were also within his grasp. Familial information however was a large grey fog occupying the forefront of his mind.

Steeling himself against the expected pain, Hugh took an alternative approach to his position: Scooting his legs off the bed and onto the floor, he slid himself into an upright position with as little bending at the waist as possible, using his arms to push himself up. The pain was still excruciating. Delicately he pulled back the top of the wrappings to peer at the damage. Large stitches crisscrossed his belly. It was puffy and in one place, distended, but overall, it seemed that his insides were back where they belonged. Carefully, he lowered the bandage back into place. Taking small shuffling steps, he slowly explored his room. After a small circuit which included testing the door, he decided that it was, in fact, his prison cell. A jangling of keys on the other side of the door caused him to scoot quickly to the lone chair in the room. Unable to sit, he stood behind it, using it as a shield against whoever was entering. Once they found the correct key, if the jangling was any indication. He smirked as yet another key was tried unsuccessfully. The feeling of amusement left him when he realized he had no memories of friends or foes, much less any way of telling them apart.

The door finally opened and an unfamiliar man walked in. Older and slightly stooped, the man appraised Hugh from the doorway. He turned and spoke over his shoulder to an unseen associate. As he entered, the door quickly closed behind him. More rattling followed. "I see you're up and about, lad. That's encouraging." The small man

smiled but it was not a warm smile, "Encouraging yet also disturbing. How do you feel?"

Hugh thought for a moment. The pain was bearable and seemed to be improving as he stood. "I don't quite know," Hugh replied, unsure of his current situation. "I'm alive, I suppose."

"You could suppose that," the man said. He still stood just inside the door. His back wasn't against it, but only barely. "Me, I'm not too sure."

Hugh leaned forward on the chair for support. "What is that supposed to mean?" Anger began to tickle the back of his mind. He was not sure where it came from; surely the old man was no threat to him.

The man smiled again- still without any sort of warmth. "You shouldn't be alive you know. I've never seen anyone injured the way you were that I could later have a conversation with."

Hugh did not respond but only stared at the man. The anger was building. Was it anger? Now he wasn't sure. It was more an empty, ravenous feeling. As if he had not eaten in a year. He was not sure where the feeling was coming from, but there was apparently a lot of it stored there - wherever 'there' was. The feeling was overwhelming. He knew the man was speaking again and he tried hard to concentrate on what he was saying.

"… and tended men after skirmishes with the Monacan and Siouan and I've never seen a gutted man make it through the day."

He paused and frowned, "Those savages will gut you the first chance they get."

"Thanks for saving me." Hugh said flatly. Unbelievably, the feeling continued to build in him. It seemed like it would fill the entire room.

"It wasn't me," replied the man. "All I did was stitch you back up after putting your innards back in. I was doing it to make it easier to carry you for burying. When I was done, you hadn't stopped breathing so they brought you here."

Hugh moved to the side of the chair and steadied himself with one hand. The other he let hang free. "Thank the Lord you were around to do that, then."

The old man shook his head. "I don't think the Almighty deserves thanks either, son." The old man pointed upward as he now leaned against the door. "I've never seen anything like that." He paused and stared at Hugh for a long moment. "We were curious," he began haltingly, "curious what attacked you."

Hugh thought hard for long moments. Nothing came to his mind- it was a grey fog like so many other memories he was sure he had. "I can't remember," he answered honestly. Absently he took a step towards the old man. He was not sure why he did.

"That will make it more difficult then. If we don't know what attacked you." The old man was now pressed against the door. "Why don't you lay back down?" he suggested nervously.

The ravenous feeling within Hugh had turned to rage. Why should he return to the bed? Even answering was difficult. "I think I'll stand for a bit," he said as he looked at the bed. Now the rage was accompanied by waves of pain through his stomach. Somehow he knew the pain wasn't from the recent meddling with his intestines; it was a pain of hunger. Overriding hunger. He turned and looked at the old man and in an instant knew what he must do.

The man's eyes got large and he turned quickly. His hand had reared back to knock on the door when Hugh reached him, surprised by his own speed. "No!" was all the old man was able to say before Hugh's hand clapped over his mouth.

Hugh wrenched the old man's head back, exposing a pale, wrinkled throat. Without thinking he sunk his teeth into the man's Adam's apple and bit it out. Blood streamed down the old man's neck as Hugh drank and chewed. Staggering back, Hugh lowered the old man to the floor. He continued to feast. It was several minutes later before he realized he still had the man's now lifeless mouth covered. Sitting back, he realized that his pain was subsiding. Again gingerly, he peeled back his bandages and looked at his wounds. They appeared to be the same as they were earlier yet they did not hurt.

Realization hit Hugh as he stood and saw the mauled old man and large pool of blood. He looked from the corpse to the door and back again. Thirst sated, thoughts of escape now were foremost in his head. Roughly he took the old man's vest and slipped it on. He ripped the sheet off the bed and used it to wipe his face. Steeling

himself, he walked to the door -painlessly now- and knocked loudly. "Ready." He said simply.

A clattering of keys finally led to the distinctive 'click' of a lock opening. The door opened outward. With strength he did not know he had, Hugh pushed hard on the door knocking the lower hinges out and the man behind it onto the ground. Rushing past the fallen man at a dead run, Hugh bolted into the darkness. Through winding streets, he ran turning one way then another, with no pattern or thought of where he was going. Not recognizing where he was, Hugh continued blindly through the town's streets and alleys. Finally, the town petered out and wilderness surrounded him. He looked behind him and heard no one following him. The town seemed still asleep. Unsure of the time of night, or where he was, Hugh turned and crept into the forest to hide from the invariable search party. He found a hollowed-out log and crawled deep in it and collapsed. Either the townsfolk did not find him or they never came. Either way, Hugh slept through the day and peered out of the trunk as the last rays of sun disappeared behind the forested hills. Disturbingly, he was hungry again.

… morphine indeed.

Two

The movie ended and the theater lights came on low. Hugh remained in his seat as the credits rolled. He was seated near the back, in the middle of a row since the show was nearly sold out. Patrons were having to crawl over him. One kid, maybe sixteen and emboldened by having a girl with him snickered, "It's over. You can go now, dude."

Hugh looked up at the boy. If the theater were emptier, he would have killed him right there in front of his date. "I'm waiting to see if Samuel J. gives them a hard pitch at the end," he replied casually. Hugh remained lounged back in his seat. The boy stared at him, incomprehension on his face. *Sarcasm is wasted on the youth*, he thought in annoyance. Then out loud: "Why don't you go try screwing that date of yours now that she's all lubed up. If you can figure out how. Or you want me to show her the ropes?" He flicked a piece of popcorn at the girl. She flinched. Hugh got a warm feeling inside. "Or I can show *you* the ropes." He flicked a piece at the boy as the young couple backed away, opting to exit the row in the other direction. Hugh stood and stretched. Although he enjoyed the popcorn, it did not 'hit the spot', as the saying went. It was time for something more substantial. More lethal.

Hugh stepped out of the theater onto the dark, rain-soaked street. It was late- he had gone to a midnight showing. He looked left then right, hoping that the young couple had unwisely chosen to walk into the city. He did not see them, but turned to make his way into the inner workings of the town anyway; he was in the mood for some exhilaration. The kind that could only be found in the darker parts of town. Long ago, Hugh had come to grips with his condition, realizing that he was afflicted with a constant blood lust, peculiar vulnerabilities, and at the same time, some extraordinary abilities. His unbelievably quick healing ability made him, for all intents and purposes impossible to kill with readily-available weaponry- even as it advanced through the centuries. In fact, until the end of the most recent World War, Hugh had spent a bit of his time on the battlefields without any real fear of true death. Events in Japan at the end of *that* particular war had convinced him that his days as a counterfeit soldier were over. He wasn't sure how he would deal with radiation sickness and didn't want to find out. That, and of course, identifications had become more exact. It was easy in the Revolutionary, Civil, or even either of the two World Wars, to don a uniform and move about the war-torn countryside at night. 'Allies' believed the separated-from-my-unit story, 'Enemies' didn't last long enough to ask questions more than once. Even so, his invulnerability gave him a bit of annoyance. He was a god with a small 'g' with no discernible way of capitalizing it. He took this frustration out on those around him, and given half a chance taunted them in the process. Just because he could.

Hugh turned up the emptying street and walked deeper into the city; the other patrons had parked close around the theater. Wisely so, since there were people like Hugh lurking about. He thrust his hands into his well-worn trench coat pockets as he walked. Early on in his existence, he used to keep his head down. Avoiding eye contact was not due to any fear of confrontation; it was more a survival instinct. He figured that the less people noticed him (in his hunting area), the less the chance he would be identified. Even though it wasn't all that necessary. In fact, he had actually been in many lineups, and was always passed over. Somehow he had inadvertently developed the ability to influence other's decisions. Not actual mind control, as portrayed (badly) in numerous movies, but more an ability to make suggestions. He was sure he could have done more with this ability but without any sort of mentorship (Hugh had never met anyone like himself) developing the ability was done literally, in the blind. It was like trying to figure out how to play the piano in one's head, without any sort of outside help, or even knowing what the notes should sound like, or ever having sat in front of a piano. Even so, he had been able to consistently make several fortunes as a gambler throughout the centuries. Lately however that avenue of money making had been taken away from him; modern casinos used florescent lighting which gave off ultraviolet light. While it was far less than what the sun produced, sitting under the lights for an extended period of time was uncomfortable to the point where it affected his concentration. Wearing gloves and a broad brimmed hat seemed to get the attention of casino security so he relied on other means to make money. Even without gambling, living on "Easy Street" was fairly easy. It was also, he had learned, just as easy to get

evicted from it as well. At the moment he was definitely enjoying life on Easy Street with a capital 'E'.

Earlier in the month -while still in Juneau- Hugh had followed an old man back to his apartment. There was something about the man that piqued his interest. It was nothing he could pin down, but through the centuries, Hugh had learned to trust his instincts. Once again, they had proven their worth. The old man lived in a dilapidated apartment, in the old part of town. His clothes were tattered and easily second-hand castoffs. Even so, Hugh followed him, and after the old man had gone inside, Hugh kicked in the door and quickly killed the septuagenarian. A quick search of the apartment led him to a large chest hidden under the bed. When he tried to yank the box from under the bed, the handle came off. He tilted the bed up against the wall and opened the box to reveal what turned out to be 640 Gold Krugerrand. Instantly, Hugh was a millionaire. Packing up his 40-pound fortune in a beaten and worn suitcase, he staged the old man's apartment so that the Daily News reported it the next day several pages back (below the fold even) with a short story about an old destitute man committing suicide in his dilapidated apartment: "Elderly Man Found Dead" the tagline murmured. That was much better than the alternative "Old Man Dies. Hundreds of Krugerrands Found Under His Bed! No Heirs Apparent!" screaming as a front-page banner. Especially for Hugh.

The recollection of the old man's surprise as he wrapped his own belt around his throat made Hugh smile. A couple approached

him walking the opposite way. They moved across the sidewalk to give him a wide berth; they thought he was smiling at them. Hugh noticed that the man placed himself between his woman and him. *Noble and brave*, mused Hugh. *Much like the absurd characters in the movie I just sat through.* "They don't get much right, do they?" He asked the man as they grew close, "Sparkly and rich. Rich and sparkly." The man met Hugh's eyes as he quickened his pace. There was not fear in his eyes, only preparedness. Hugh knew what that look meant. Noble and brave indeed. If he weren't so near the theater, Hugh would have had him begging for his (or at least his woman's) life in less than a minute. Martial Arts training be damned. Instead, Hugh just gave the man a wink, who to Hugh's pleasure, quickened his pace.

Three

As Hugh made his way to the middle of the city, he slowed to a casual pace. There's plenty of time tonight. Time to enjoy myself, he thought, when you're on Easy Street, you have to take the time to smell the roses. He laughed out loud, or the Hookers. This brought the smile back to his face. The occasional passersby gave the young, handsome, yet haggard looking man with the grin a wide birth. Hugh continued down the street and finally, after several blocks, turned down an alleyway. He had lived in Anchorage on and off for almost 80 years and knew it well. Those newly built streets in nice neighborhoods back then were now very much like the alley he was currently in; wide for horses and carriages, narrow for automobiles. Traveling the dark alleys did not worry Hugh; any altercations would end up with him having an early, unplanned dinner. If the character was exceedingly unappetizing -which was often the case- Hugh just killed them outright and continued with his business. It was a large city, and unlike centuries ago, people were often found dead; murdered, shot in a hunting accident, or merely found dead due to various wild creatures. It just so happened that Hugh was one of those wild creatures.

Soon he was back on another bustling street. This one was filled with garish neon lights and similarly dressed people. "Come in, see

the girls, pal." Beckoned a large man from the doorway of a club. Pounding music poured out of the door, "Only five bucks to get in. No drink minimum."

Hugh turned to look at the bouncer, "They clean?"

The bouncer smiled a broad smile, gold tooth prominently displayed front and center- or at least center right, " 'Course they are. What kind of place you think we're running here? Come in and have a look." The man eyed Hugh up and down. "Five bucks." He said flatly, deciding that Hugh would be no trouble either way.

Hugh seethed. He was, at one point, tall. Imposing with broad shoulders, lean, and muscular, he often imagined that he may have once been a blacksmith or carpenter. He had no way of knowing, since those professions were all pre-Change. Years ago, he had checked the records for Jamestown and discovered there were in fact, *three* men named Hugh in the records, however without descriptions or drawings, he was unsure which was him, so he had remained merely "Hugh". "Hugh" with extraordinarily strong muscles. Cut features and flowing brown hair also made him particularly attractive to the opposite sex. With changing times, even the not-so-opposite sex found him interesting. Hugh frowned at the bouncer, seeing his appraisal and change in attitude since he did not take Hugh as a threat. As a matter of fact, Hugh had not grown or shrunk but remained a constant five feet seven inches. It was the increasing average height of everyone around him that had made him go from above-average to below-average height for a man. Even his build had gone from strapping to merely fit. With the number of

witnesses around, Hugh shook his head and walked away from the bouncer. Two hundred years ago, he would have killed the man where he stood and not thought twice about it. In the current, 21st Century electronic age, the attack would be splattered all over the news and internet within minutes. *Short man attacks bouncer! Details at eight*. He bounced his rock-hard shoulder off a passerby who staggered to the side. "Watch where you're going!" Hugh snarled.

Hugh continued down the main drag. Nearer to the edge of the red-light district he would begin to look in earnest. He was pulled from his thoughts with the often heard (on this street anyway), "Looking for a party?"

Hugh looked at the girl. She was scantily dressed under an obviously fake fur coat, and young. Maybe twenty. Just what he was in the mood for. "Honey, I *am* the party."

The girl giggled; she had never heard the line before. She never would again either. "Wow, you're funny *and* cute. What are you in the mood for?"

"Most anything. Most everything." He smirked. "Mostly."

The girl's face scrunched up, "You're not a cop are you? You have to tell me if you are, or it's entrapment you know."

Very young, thought Hugh, to still believe one of the Great Lies pimps told. "No. I'm about as far from a cop as you can get. Do you have a place?" he asked more testily than he wanted to. "A quiet place?" he finished with a smile.

"Yeah, around the corner on the top floor" said the young girl. "What are you in the mood for?" she asked again, warily.

"Nothing weird." Hugh shrugged, "Straight stuff," he said reassuringly. There was no reason to spook the girl- there was time for that later. "I just want to blow off some steam, that's all", he said for what had to have been the five-hundredth time. "I'm Hugh, by the way."

"Gina," said the girl as she relaxed. "Hugh. Short for something?" As soon as she said it, the girl's eyes got wide at her unintentional double entendre.

Hugh frowned; he had assumed that was his name when he first heard it. After all, why *else* would the old man have said it? He wouldn't have said his *own* name. In any case, it was a good and proper name, but seemed to have just gone out of style lately which caused him no end of annoyance. He had thought of changing what he called himself, but since it was a link - the *only* link - to a past he would never recover, he kept it. Except for a long-dead panderer of smutty magazines and a couple of current actors, he did not often hear others introduce themselves as 'Hugh'. "That's my name. It's not short for anything." He looked the girl in the eyes, "And neither am I," he said testily.

"Sorry. I wasn't trying to get you upset," said Gina, worried she was losing her trick. She went back to business. "So regular straight stuff. That's going to cost you fifty bucks." She tensed again, worried there would be haggling.

"Sounds good," Hugh lied again. He took a large roll of twenties from his coat pocket. He flipped the edge of the roll to show that all the bills underneath were twenties as well; there was no twenty keeping a bunch of dollar bills warm in *his* pocket.

The hooker's eyes grew even larger at the amount of money he was carrying. "So are you from around here?" She asked.

"Not usually." High replied. "Let's get going, Gina. It's getting late."

Gina giggled, "It's still early, silly." She took Hugh's arm and led him around the corner and down the block. Stairs led up in regular intervals up to the entrances of apartment buildings, alternating stairs led to basement apartments much like the one Hugh lived in. Halfway down the block, she stopped and went up the short flight of stairs to an ornate double door with wrought iron worked over the glass. "In here, *Hugh*." She pulled a key from a hidden pocket in her miniskirt and unlocked the door. "It's five flights up. I hope you aren't tired when you get there." She giggled again.

Hugh followed her into the foyer.

The girl turned and smiled at Hugh, "Let's go then," she said.

Lunging for the girl, he slung her over his shoulder and turned to the stairs. Screams of terror erupted from the girl. As Hugh took the stairs two at a time, her screams turned to squeals and giggles. "Now you're *really* going to be tired!" she said as she bounced on his shoulder. In no time they were at the top of the fifth floor.

Hugh put her down gently. He didn't appear winded. "You're light Gina. I may just call you *Little Gina*." A fake smile spread across his face.

Gina blushed and playfully shoved Hugh. She ended up pushing herself back instead of him. "Let's go in, silly Hugh not from around here." She moved past him and unlocked the door. Stepping in she turned on the light. She smiled over her shoulder as she entered. "Come on in," she beckoned. Gina dropped her coat in a heap as she entered her apartment. It was fake, after all. "Make yourself at home."

Hugh stepped through the doorway, feeling nothing. He didn't *need* to be invited in, but it did, for some unknown reason, give him an uneasy feeling when he wasn't specifically invited in. As he had for a little more than 100 years, he wondered if Mister Brahms had had a similar condition to have gotten so many idiosyncrasies right. *Brams; another unusual name even if it was only short for Abraham,* thought Hugh as he entered the apartment. Had he learned of his works earlier, he would have visited the writer and found out in person. As it was, Hugh was feasting in Siberia in 1912 while working the Russian gold mines. The amount of workers dying because of horrible conditions allowed him to eat regularly without raising any eyebrows. His justified lack of concern for his safety allowed him to pocket most all the gold he could get near. After the Lena Massacre, he had taken his substantial (at the time) $25,000 worth of gold and left for the newly created state of Washington. As far as he could tell, he was the only vampire in the area- popular movies notwithstanding.

As they entered the apartment, Hugh smiled at the back of the young hooker. 'Make yourself at home', she had said.

"Don't mind if I do," came his reply.

A short hallway created by a small bath to the right led to a large room, bed on one side, couch on the other. Hugh followed her in, made his way to the bed and sat on it. He was accustomed to the routine and did not need small talk to get it started- either the routine she was expecting, *or* the one he was planning.

"Did you bring your own protection?" Gina asked as she sat on the couch and removed her thigh-high boots.

"Nope. Not a one" Hugh smiled at the girl. Through the centuries Hugh had learned that his condition not only provided perpetual youth, but also kept diseases at bay. He had been exposed to the entire alphabet of Hepatitis viruses, Small pox, Influenza, Dysentery, and Herpes. None had more than a few hours' effect on him, causing mild discomfort then disappearing completely. Whether he was a carrier or not did not even concern him; the people he came in contact with intimately never lived long enough to develop any symptoms of their own.

"Well, we're using something." said Gina flatly as he picked up an old wooden cigar box from the coffee table. "I'm not going to do this forever and when I stop, I don't want any reminders." She held it open, letting him pick from a variety of condoms.

"Of course you don't," agreed Hugh. *Another of the Great Lies of Hookers.* His stomach felt as if it had been empty for a decade. "Say, it's getting late so I want to get started." He said seriously.

"Where's the silly Hugh I know so well?" Giggled the young girl as she moved to the bed. As she went, she shrugged out of her short skirt and pulled her top over her head. In those two quick motions, she was completely naked. "Am, I going to work around those clothes?" she said, still smiling.

Hugh stood and quickly shed his clothes. In any case, it made cleaning up easier. He looked at her with smoldering eyes. "Ready?"

"Always," smirked the girl as she moved in front of Hugh and placed the rubber on him. "The question is, are you?" With that she pushed him back on the bed.

In one smooth motion as they fell back, Hugh grabbed her shoulders and spun around her so when they landed, he was on top. Flight was something he had been working on in earnest lately. He could currently glide a full twenty feet from a mere six feet high even though he had no idea how he actually did it- he always remained in Human form. Bats, wolves, and mists were only known to him in fiction. He often wondered if he should try jumping from a tall building to see how far he could fly. The prospect of people on the ground seeing him made him not try it; getting locked up in some secret government lab was something he absolutely did not want to deal with.

The girl looked at him with surprise in her eyes. “Wow, strong *and* fast.” She giggled again. “This will be fun.”

Four

There was no fear whatsoever in Gina's eyes as Hugh slid his hands down her shoulders and took her hands in his. Roughly he pulled them out to her sides. Even at his now slightly-below-average stature, he was still bigger than the girl. A glint of fear ran across her eyes. It made Hugh's blood boil. "Ready?" he asked roughly.

"Always," she replied, albeit shakily this time.

Hugh kissed her gently and felt her relax under him even though he had not let go of her hands. There was no need to have her screaming in terror; that brought the authorities around. He lifted his face mere inches- they locked eyes as their noses practically touched. "Well, here goes nothingness." It was a personal joke he had used innumerable times. With that Hugh moved to her throat. Thinking he was going to kiss her there the girl turned her head accommodatingly. Opening his mouth wide, showing off suddenly pointed teeth, he bit her through the front of the neck, crushing her vocal cords. The girl struggled as blood poured down her esophagus. Hugh raised his head and looked the girl in the eyes again. This time full blown terror was in them. "*Now* it's a party, Little Gina." He smiled wide and let her blood pour out the sides of her mouth. Her eyes grew wide with terror as her lungs began to fill with blood. Her mouth moved to form a scream but the requisite parts necessary to

make it happen were now terminally crushed. “Oh yeah; that’s what I like to see in a pretty girl’s eyes.”

Hugh drank the girl’s blood as she struggled under him. Finally, after only a minute, she had drowned on her own blood and lay still. When she stopped moving, he let go of her hands but continued to feed.

After fifteen minutes, Hugh stood beside the bed. It was drenched in blood- his was an inefficient way to eat, but most satisfying. Once, on a lark, he had raided a blood bank. Even though the blood was filling, sucking it from a plastic bag made him feel dirty and cheap. After that one time, he returned to live prey and never looked back. Even animals were a better alternative than plastic bags, although one of last resort.

Hugh used the girl’s bathroom to bathe. There was a razor in the tub and Hugh used it to shave. It had been weeks since he had shaved. That was something else the stories - at least the earlier ones - got right; he did not show up in mirrors. At least not properly anyway. He did have a form in them but they were very hazy and it was difficult to make out details.

Through the centuries, Hugh had picked up quite a bit of knowledge and understood that reflected light was what one saw in a mirror so if he didn’t show up there, then obviously, he should also appear that way to anyone looking directly at him. It was plain and simple refraction. That was however, not the case. There was absolutely NO reason for the effect, otherwise he’d be shadowy looking to everyone and yet he wasn’t. He could not explain it; it was

just one of the many mysteries of his condition that he accepted. Also, infuriatingly, motion sensors had trouble seeing him so when automatic doors made their appearance in the world, they caused Hugh such annoyance that a string of grocery store baggers across Nebraska had gone missing several years ago after one had made an unfortunate comment to him about being some sort of vampire when the store's doors wouldn't open for him. The sinks with motion sensors, he avoided completely.

Running water was also something he had difficulty with. That was why he took baths instead of showers; he could feel his strength drain from him as the water ran down him. Rainfall was distinctly unpleasant. A heavy one, almost to the point of being debilitating. A simple umbrella solved that problem. Curiously, crossing oceans was just a simple matter of stowing away on board a ship traveling in the correct direction. It was an extremely simple endeavor in fact; the only issue was that as ships had gotten bigger, he had to take a longer run from the dock to make it to the deck. Once on board, there were plenty of places in the bowels of a ship to spend the daytime. Lakes were the same way. Conversely, crossing a stream that he had to wade through required all of his strength. Anything wider than about 10 feet across and deeper than knee deep would probably be lethal. Hugh thought back as he sat in the steaming tub to a time when it almost had been fatal -soon after he had left the Jamestown Colony…

Five

Running at a full sprint, Hugh ducked under branches and hopped over fallen trees. He was trying to put as much distance between him and the Jamestown colony as he could. He was moving extraordinarily fast and no human would have been able to match his speed for more than a minute. He had been at it for forty-five. Unfortunately, his extremely-fast-for-a-human speed was not so unattainable for a horse, or more precisely, *horses*. Such as the several horses that were currently chasing him. If it were not for the broken terrain, they would have been on him long ago. Hugh made sure to keep to the trees and avoid the occasional field or meadow.

Thanks to the new snowfall, his barreling path through the white forest was plainly visible so the men had no trouble keeping on his trail. It was only a matter of time before he would have to slow down. The men chasing him were surprised it had not happened yet. Hugh knew it would happen soon. He could feel himself tiring ever so slightly. He knew if he slowed, he could keep at a fast run for four or five hours but a fast run would not keep him ahead of the horses. The forest was not *that* thick. Spying a stream to his left, he decided to use it to mask his trail and hopefully avoid the mounted men; he had not heard any dogs which was a good thing.

Hugh turned and sprinted headlong into the stream. The cold water immediately soaking him to mid-thigh as he turned and ran downstream. Almost immediately his pace slowed. Hugh thought it was the drag of running through nearly waist-deep water when the

cold began to creep up his legs to his torso as the water flowed past him. He began to slow rapidly as the cold reached his chest. Suddenly his limbs felt as if they were made of rubber. It was as if his strength were being washed out of him. As realization came to him, Hugh turned and frantically tried to make his way to the far side of the stream. He barely made it as he pulled himself up by his arms. Once out of the water, his strength did not return, but at least it had stopped fading. He rolled over a log and tried to make himself as small as possible behind it. He peered under it as the men came to the river and stopped.

"Up or down stream?" Said one as he looked from one direction to the other.

"With how deep it is, I'd say down. You'd run faster downstream than up. That's what I would do."

The other men in the search party nodded in agreement. "Dru, this fellow runs faster than you've ever run in your life all put together," said one man. The group chuckled at the unexpected levity.

"Well, I've never had the likes of *you* chasing me, Thomas," replied Dru.

"He's going to get away. Up or down?" said another man testily.

"Down." said Dru and Thomas at once.

"Agreed then," said the other, "just keep an eye on the banks. He may try to duck out on us."

Hugh waited for the splashes of the horses to recede and then he lifted himself on unsteady legs. He was chilled to the bone and was unsure if it was the weather or the effects of the stream- mysterious as it was. He staggered into the woods, angling away from the men in case they doubled back when he came to a draw. Using the low ground as cover, he followed the draw up to the overgrown entrance of a cave. He had to get on all fours to enter the opening, but once inside, he was able to walk stooped over.

The area around Jamestown was peppered with small caves and many settlers used them as larders. This particular cave was only about ten feet across with a ceiling only four feet high. As a larder it would have been perfect; high and dry, with only one entrance to close. As a hideout, it was, Hugh knew, less desirable. Being small, searching it would be easy, and having one entrance, it was a perfectly formed trap. Nevertheless, Hugh sat down in the far corner and huddled for warmth. He was unprepared for the wilderness; his unexpected identification in a tavern made him leave town with only a light jacket and pants. Hugh shivered uncontrollably- the cold permeated his entire wet body.

A rustling on the far side of the cave drew his attention. As his eyes accustomed to the dark, he realized the cave was actually larger than he had originally assessed; where he thought one corner of it ended was actually being occupied by a very large bear. He could see its side rise and fall with each slow breath of the nine-hundred-pound animal. It was mesmerizing and relaxing at the same time. Hugh watched the bear take long regular breaths for over an hour. Realizing he had escaped the search party, and skirted any issues with

the large bear which appeared to be hibernating blissfully unaware, he counted himself lucky. Hugh tried to move to the entrance of the cave to make sure the coast was clear when he realized his arms were not obeying him. Concentrating, he tried again with no success. Even looking down was impossible. Fear ran through Hugh as he realized he had frozen in place. His gaze returned to the sleeping bear. At least (for the moment) his eyes still moved. As far as he could tell, that was all that was still moving on his body; since The Change, Hugh was surprised -and more than slightly alarmed- by the fact that he only needed to breathe to speak and other bodily functions occurred only if he ate or drank something. Not that either were all that satisfying. It was the taste for blood that had drawn the attention of the authorities and the somewhere-outside search party. Four mangled bodies in three days had raised not only eyebrows, but also the funds to finance a search party.

Hugh continued to stare at the slumbering bear, unable to do anything else. He knew the end was near. Either he would freeze to death, or he would be found out and hanged, or the bear would awaken (since it was late February after all) and eat him as its first Spring-time snack. Hugh only hoped that he would somehow die before then; being eaten alive and fully awake was not a prospect he relished.

After two weeks, Hugh, still staring at the sleeping bear, awoke with a start. He had either been sleeping, or had blacked out. Now, he was completely awake. However, still frozen solid. Over the course of several days, he dozed off. Apparently when tired enough, one *could* sleep with their eyes open. The darkness of the cave

undoubtedly helped. He heard birds chirping; the weather was warming. 'Warm' being relative as it was still hovering around freezing. However, with the warmth exuded by the bear, the cave was finally just above freezing. Hugh had begun to thaw. First his fingers moved, then later in the day, his elbows. By early evening he was able to move both his arms even though it felt like they were being stabbed by a hundred needles. Unfortunately, as night approached and temperatures dropped those few degrees from above freezing to below it, he was once again immobilized. For days Hugh repeated this process; slowly thawing, using his arms first to push himself over, then on another day, drag himself closer to the bear. Finally, on the fourth day, he was beside the bear before nightfall and thanks to the closeness to the warm beast, remained in his partially unthawed state. By midday the next day, he was able to manage a kneeling position on still numb legs.

Hugh drew his knife and as quickly as his frozen arms would allow, thrust his blade into the sleeping bear's eye, deep into its brain. It shuddered and threw him off as it died. Frantically clawing his way back to the bear, he huddled underneath it. Making a slit in the bear, he drank its blood before it dried up. Thanks to the nourishment and the warmth of the bear, this time by nightfall, Hugh was almost completely recovered.

Moving quickly, he skinned the bear in two large sections; top and bottom. He left the fur from the top of its head and neck attached to the upper skin to be used as a hood. Turning the torso skin inside out, he donned the fur-lined coat. It was much too large and bloody, but it kept the cold marginally at bay as he worked on a

set of breeches from the lower half of the bear. As he worked, a shudder of cold ran through him.

Hugh started awake in the now cold tub. Angry at himself, he looked at his watch. *An hour lost!* Dawn was close and he was nowhere near ready to be going home. He stood and snatched a towel off a hook. Stepping out of the tub, he began to dry himself, an indistinct blur in front of the mirror. Still naked, he walked back into the main room of the efficiency apartment and surveyed the carnage. Hugh walked to the kitchen portion of the apartment and rifled through the drawers, finally finding a large kitchen knife. He returned to the bed and, still naked, plunged the knife a dozen times into Gina's chest and neck. Just in case. Hugh had come to understand that it was only due to the extremely cold night that he underwent The Change as opposed to a more final Death. He estimated he lost about half of his blood, which under normal circumstances, would have been lethal. According to the medical practices of the time, no one should have survived such a loss of blood. However, it had since been learned that dropping a person's body temperature could slow vital bodily functions to the point where death could be warded off- as evidenced by the invariable news reports of a child pulled from a freezing lake or pond after being under water for thirty or forty minutes and survive with no ill effects.

Hugh looked down at the dead woman, content his efforts to ensure Gina experienced death instead of The Change was successful. Hugh toweled off the newly acquired drops of blood

from his body then dropped the towel. With a long sigh, he retrieved his clothes and moved to the couch to dress. He was not worried about any forensic evidence he would leave behind- having never been actually arrested, there were no records of him anywhere. And thanks to the implementation of social security numbers, President Roosevelt ensured he had not had a regular job since 1928. Petty and not-so petty crime kept him financially secure. Rich and gallant indeed. Well, at least the 'rich' part was accurate. Off and on.

He looked down at the now-dead hooker. He had often thought of seeing if he had the ability to change someone as he had been Changed. The companionship could have been interesting. For a time anyway. Conventional long-term commitments by people with an expiration date were one thing; being practically immortal meant having someone around *forever*. The thought frightened Hugh. Should he make a mate who would, for all intents and purposes, be his equal physically? Women were, after all, a fickle creature. Or perhaps a brother, to wreak havoc with for all time. History was full of examples of powerful brothers who were unable to coexist. The results were bloody. Or worse, if the person he changed had a knack for the abilities, Hugh could suddenly find himself as the weaker one in the equation. What if they did not appreciate their new-found immortality with a requirement for constant murder? Or worse- they left and began creating their own group of followers? Then Hugh would need to have *his* own group to balance the power. The questions and ramifications went far beyond those portrayed in movies. It was easier to leave well enough alone. In any case, if the others like him thought it was wise to "procreate"

and associate with one another, he would have invariably been contacted by them by now. Hugh was sure there was no secretive Council working from the basement of some dark European castle somewhere, keeping an eye on things. His affliction seemed to require a solitary, uncomplicated-by-relationships existence.

Fully dressed, Hugh surveyed the room. It was mostly the way he had left it- except for the bed. After a quick check of the bathroom, he reached for the doorknob just as it turned on its own. A loud banging followed close behind.

"Open up, Gina!" came an angry voice from the hallway. The doorknob rattled furiously.

Six

Hugh frowned, angry at himself; his thoughts had kept him in the apartment longer than he should have stayed. Now he had a witness to deal with. More banging on the door threatened to jar it open. The situation was spiraling out of control. *Deal with this witness before they bring even more witnesses!* His inner voice commanded him. Several hundred years of diligently learned survival skills took over.

Hugh quietly unlocked the door and waited for another barrage of knocks. Just as they started, he yanked the door open and a large man almost tumbled in as his fist missed the now-open door. Hugh grabbed him by the arm and yanked him into the room. Behind him, an older woman was peeking around her doorjamb at the commotion. Another witness that would have to be dealt with. Hugh slammed the door shut behind the man as he easily muscled him down the hallway.

A roundhouse punch missed Hugh's head and slammed into the wall beside him. Hugh ducked under the man's shoulder and delivered a flurry of quick punches into the man's armpit. With a grunt, the man dropped to his knees as his Brachial Plexus nerve bundle was devastated. He looked up at Hugh in fury. "Wanna pick that chin up just a bit?" Hugh asked. The man blinked at him instead. Without waiting Hugh slammed his fist into the other man's face.

His neck snapped back and he saw bright spots as he sat back. "You've probably never seen that movie." He said with a head shake.

"Who?" Was all the man managed to say before Hugh stepped over and behind him and grabbed him around the neck in a choke hold. The bright spots gave way to bluish ones as the blood stopped flowing to his brain. Quickly, the blue spots gave way to blackness as the man felt as if he were being drained out a funnel. He struggled in vain as he felt himself getting smaller and smaller until there was nothingness.

Hugh released the limp man with disgust. He moved quickly to the door and relocked it. In a rage, he turned and grabbed the man by his arm and dragged him to the bed. With strength belying his size, he picked the man up and flung him on the bed. He examined the man to ensure he was dead- since he had not been bitten; it was to ensure he was not a possible witness, instead of a future compatriot. Hugh chuckled. *An immortal Pimp; that would be a nightmare.* He stopped for a moment to appraise the situation -as a grandfatherly fellow had once told him one evening in a sidewalk café in Paris, 'Haste makes waste, sonny'. After a moment, he turned and went to the kitchen. Once again he rummaged through the drawers and, once again, found what he was looking for.

He returned to the bed and climbed onto it. Taking the marker, he scrawled in big, thick letters

CLEAN UP THIS NEIGHBORHOOD
OR I WILL DO IT FOR YOU!

Shaking his head, he pocketed the marker and hopped off the bed. Not very gallant, but hopefully effective. He looked at his handiwork. *Maybe misspelling 'neighborhood' would have added a nice touch*, he thought. It was too late now. Once again, Hugh did a quick check of the room. When his eyes fell on the pimp, he paused. With a shrug he moved to the dead man and searched him.

The effort gained him several hundred dollars from his front pocket- the first he checked. Being on Easy Street didn't mean you stopped looking. There was probably more to be found with a better search, but Hugh still had another issue to deal with and the sun was going to come up whether he was prepared or not. He had learned early on that sunlight was something he had to avoid- it had taken all of fifty years for the last of the scars from an unavoidable quarter mile sprint through a midday sun in Arizona to go away; the mine he had been hiding in collapsed and he had to run to an outbuilding for shelter without a shirt. In small doses, he could tolerate sunlight – better in the evening than in the morning for some reason, and best on cloudy days. Hugh had spent nearly one hundred years in the limited sunlight of the Yukon from well before the gold rush until it started to die down. At that point, the well-established towns had full time law enforcement and his steady stream of killings had begun to draw attention. They were rough and tumble times, but not *that* rough and tumble.

Once again, Hugh moved to the door. As his hand neared the doorknob, he paused. Nothing happened; he unlatched it and turned the knob. Opening the door, he peered into the hallway- it was empty. Apparently, the residents were used to commotions coming from this particular apartment. Nevertheless, Hugh had an eyewitness that needed to be gone. He stepped into the hallway as he checked his newly acquired watch. It was 4:45 and since spring had begun, time was short. In another couple of months, it would be light most all the time. Within the week, he would have made his annual migration south to the pleasantly overcast, friendly counter-culture lifestyle that was Seattle, Washington. He would have stayed in Seattle year-round, but the draw of 'polar twilights' in Alaska nearer the Arctic Circle was hard to resist. There were also substantially fewer "lethal animal attacks" or "hunting accidents" in Seattle to cover his activities. Thanks to a hundred years of first-hand experience, Hugh was also fluent in Russian, Finnish, Swedish, Inuit, and Norwegian, allowing him to move throughout the entire region with no difficulty- always leaving a trail of corpses.

Frowning, he exited the apartment, pulled the door shut behind him and walked to the door where the offending woman lived. Hugh bent close and looked through the peephole. It was completely dark behind it. He considered the dark peephole. The old woman was probably asleep and might not even remember any details in the morning- much less take the time to call the police about the incident. When the authorities invariably knocked on her door to see if she saw anything, it would probably be once the smell of the two rotting bodies had forced someone to make a phone call. At that

point, any days-old details in the ancient woman's head would be fairly useless. It was not the thought of killing an elderly woman that gave Hugh pause; it was almost 5 AM and there wasn't a lot of time to deal with her. Even if she were 85, he had killed older people. Just as he was about to straighten and walk away, the peephole lit up. With a furious kick, he forced the door open, knocking the old lady to the ground. Quickly he closed the door behind him.

The woman was sprawled out on the floor of her mirror-image hallway of the now dead Gina. "Up early, are we?" he growled.

"You best get out of my house. I've already called the cops," the woman bluffed as she moved to a sitting position. "I saw you take that man into Gina's apartment and I'm sure he's not coming out."

Hugh just looked at the woman as she moved slowly to a crouching then a standing position. She was a full head shorter than him, bent over with age. "So what are you going to do? Kill an old woman too? What kind of man are you?"

Hugh looked at his watch. It was now ten minutes until five. "Listen lady," he began.

She moved to face him. They were practically chest to chest. "No, *you* listen," she cut him off, "I've lived in this city my whole life and I've seen thugs like you come and go. They are all gone and I'm still here!" She waved a bony finger in Hugh's face, "*So get out of my house.*"

Not being invited in *had* made his presence in the house uncomfortable, and being ordered out more so. It was another of the

idiosyncrasies of his condition that he could not fathom. Fortunately, breaking into a house with the owner unaware - neither invited nor uninvited - seemed to only marginally affect him. Without realizing it, he took a step back.

"That's what I thought, just some thug who's never had anyone stand up to them. What do you say to that?" She said as she poked him in the chest.

"Four hundred fifty-seven years," said Hugh flatly as he looked at his watch. The woman just stared at him. "Fifty-two weeks in a year," he continued, "Two, sometimes three people a week." He paused and smiled wryly, "Then there's the family discounts where three or four are dispatched at once. Those are always a treat."

The woman poked him in the chest again. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"That you'll just be another one of the over seventy thousand people I've killed. An entire *city's* worth of people dead because of me."

Now it was the woman who took a step back. "You're just a punk. Get out of my house."

Without a word Hugh punched the old woman in the throat. The old woman's head snapped back and to the side at an odd angle, throat visibly crushed. She fell in a heap on the floor. With the woman dead, the feeling of pressure on Hugh instantly lifted - as if an unseen weight had suddenly been removed from his chest. *Unfathomable.* Hugh went to the window of the apartment. A dark

blue, cloudless sky was aglow with the impending sunrise. A quick mental calculation and he realized he was too far from his basement apartment two flights down and a full fifteen blocks away to make it there in time- especially with a blazing morning sun with no clouds to affect its rays. Fury built in him as he turned and stalked to the front door. He locked it and, stepping over the old woman's body, moved back to the window. Every passing moment, the sky became a brighter shade of blue. Hugh's fury went up a notch as he realized the old woman only had lace curtains. He turned and gave the woman a glare that he hoped she could feel even now beyond this world.

Hugh went to the bed and pulled the heavy comforter off of it. Quickly he moved to one of the windows and tried to tuck it over the curtain rod. It was too high. He spun in a circle in a rage and spotted two chairs in the kitchen area. He moved to one and kicked it to the window. Righting it, he stood with the comforter in front of him as he tucked it carefully around the curtain rod. The room was suddenly darker. He returned to the bed and took both sheets off and as he went to the other window in the apartment, he kicked the chair along with him. He felt himself getting warmer. Again, using the sheets as a shield, he moved onto the chair and tucked them into place. The room was now practically dark. A quick check of his watch showed that it was 5:20 AM. Even though the room was now comfortably dark, Hugh's mood did not improve. He gave the woman a severe kick as he moved to the bed. He dropped to his hands and knees, rolled over and scooted under the bed, pushing not only several shoes but a large amount of dust to one side. An honest

chuckle erupted from him. "Under an old lady's bed. Over four hundred years and I am going to get caught under an old lady's bed." His only hope was if the woman was either a recluse or did not have any remaining family that checked on her.

Neither were the case.

Unknowingly however, Hugh had eliminated the only remaining family that checked in on the old woman; her Granddaughter Gina- the now-dead hooker.

He looked out from under the bed and surveyed the room. It was sparsely furnished so if someone *did* come in, he would have plenty of room to deal with them without any danger of the window coverings being removed. Suddenly a thought occurred to him. He scooted from under the bed and moved to the light switch, brushing dust off his back as he went. He turned on the lone dim bulb hanging from the ceiling. Now with the light on, anyone who entered would not need to uncover the windows if an altercation occurred. He gave the room another look and kicked the dead woman again as he returned to the bed, "That's for the dust." Hugh exhaled angrily as he got on all fours, flopped on his back, and slid himself under the bed once more. Even through the curtains he knew he would have been able to feel the sun bearing down on him, making any sort of fighting more difficult. At least by remaining under the bed, he would be fresh and ready for a fight- at least for the first few minutes. Just having the sun up sapped his strength. He had discovered that being deep underground mitigated this weakness but unfortunately, living underground was not practical. Or comfortable. Because of this,

Hugh had become a "night person". Even centuries ago, in more proper times, he had discovered that many people out after midnight were more to his liking; rambunctious, fun-loving folk. And often easily missed.

The day dragged by as Hugh watched a sliver of light crawl across the floor. At one point he moved from under the bed and searched for something to read while he waited. Finding only several old Reader's Digests (large print) he gave the woman yet another severe kick before moving back under the bed. Once there, he realized the large print actually made for easier reading in his impromptu lair. Another chuckle escaped his lips.

Finally, the sliver of light had made its way across the room and had begun to fade. Sleeping lightly, Hugh was awakened by a commotion in the hallway. Several people were speaking. Hugh listened intently from his hiding place. It seemed that two policemen were discussing entering the dead hooker's apartment.

"We don't have probable cause, Lou," said one.

"Sure we do," said Lou, "Dixie said she hadn't heard from Gina since early last night and it's practically dark again That's going on twenty-four hours. She said she thought her friend was in trouble."

"One hooker says another is in trouble and that's probable cause?" Said the first. "I think your freebies are getting to your head. Is that what we are going to tell the Captain?" He dropped his voice an octave, "I understand completely, Lou. You *had* to go check on that hooker because otherwise, you wouldn't get any action all week.

That works for me." His voice returned to his usual timber. "Sure, that's *exactly* what he's going to say."

"All I'm saying is that we had a concerned citizen say that she thought her friend was in trouble and she asked the police if we could check it out." Lou's voice took a plaintive tone, "Come on Denny, Dixie asked real nice like and I said I'd check it out."

"You understood all that while she had a full mouth? Amazing. You're pathetic, you know that?" Hugh heard loud knocking. When there was no response, there was more knocking. "No one's in." Said Denny. "Let's go get something to eat."

"Wait, did you hear that?" said Lou hopefully.

"You've been watching too much television. I'm getting something to eat. You go tell your hooker girlfriend that you did *your* best so she'll do *her* best. I'm not getting written up because you don't know what probable cause is."

Hugh heard the man's footsteps start down the hallway when he heard the squeak of a doorknob being tested. His stomach moved to his feet. In his anger to deal with the old woman, he was now unsure if he had locked Gina's door. He moved to the edge of the bed, ready to come out if need be. Hugh heard the door to the apartment open.

"DENNY! Get in here!" He heard Lou scream. Returning footsteps meant there were now two armed men to deal with. Hugh silently cursed. A quick check of his watch showed that it was now - finally- 7:30 PM. The sun was low enough on the horizon that he

could move down alleyways without much danger. At least north-south alleyways in any case.

Hugh heard the two officers calling for backup. He went and stealthily ensured the door was locked. It was. With a sigh of relief, he paused at the door to listen.

"This is Thompkins, we have a 187, a double 187 at… at…where the hell are we?"

"Three twenty-six on Fifty Seventh Street North," interjected Denny's partner, "apartment five twelve."

"Got that?" He asked on the edge of panic, "Double 187. 10-44." He said into his radio as he calmed from the initial shock. "Lou, we need to button down this place. See if anyone heard anything."

With that, Hugh quickly moved from the door to the window. He pulled the sheets to the side and looked down. It was a sheer drop five stories to the alleyway below. With a huff, he dropped the sheets and moved to the other window. Again, he pulled back the covering and looked down. And again, there was no fire escape- just a five story drop to the ground. He turned at looked at the corpse of the old woman, "I did you a favor, lady," he said flatly.

The drop would normally have been lethal to a normal human- or at the very least severely debilitating. During his extraordinarily long life, Hugh has had learned that he was stronger than a normal person, both in strength and in durability. Even so, the drop could cause some injury since dropping and gliding seemed to be different skills. During a bar fight, a hundred years ago, Hugh was surprised to

discover that his bones could actually break. He had punched a man in the front of the head so hard, he had broken his own arm as the other's head crushed in like a melon. Fortunately, it had healed within the hour. It was then that Hugh learned to either not hit as hard as he possibly could, or to hit in softer areas such as the chest (over the heart preferably) or the throat. Although, reflecting on the incident, it did effectively end the entire bar fight. Exhaling and inhaling deeply, Hugh opened the window and sat on the ledge. He looked down at the hard pavement below. With a running start, he could have easily jumped across the wide alley to the building on the other side, but the small window prevented that action. And thanks to the building across the way being so close, there was no way for him to try to glide to the ground. He still couldn't bank or turn- straight glides was all he could manage at the moment. Looking down, there was absolutely nothing in the alleyway to break his fall. He smirked at the thought; the old woman lived in a decrepit fire trap above the cleanest, neatest alley in the city. Location, location, location.

After another couple of deep breaths, Hugh started to push himself off the ledge just as he spotted a taxi approaching. Already moving forward, he twisted and frantically grabbed at the ledge of the window. Hugh scrambled back into the window as the taxi came to a stop about twenty feet farther down the alley. Now at least, there was something softer than thick pavement over permafrost to aim for. As a man opened the taxi door, Hugh quickly stood on the window sill and used the edge of the building for balance. He heard a knock on the apartment door as he flung himself in the direction of

the cab, thoughts of gliding in his head. Below, he saw the man shut the cab door and step away from it. A quick mental calculation and Hugh realized he was going to land on the hood of the cab- his glide was a little too energetic. Adrenalin was something that he still produced. He twisted into a sitting position to spread the impact just as the cab driver shifted into drive and began to roll forward. At that moment Hugh slammed into the windshield and roof of the cab.

Seven

The side and rear windows exploded out as the taxi cab screeched forward- panicked driver accidentally hitting the accelerator. The cab careened down the alley several yards, made a sharp right turn and slammed into the side of the building hurling Hugh off the cab.

Thanks to the collapsing of the roof and windshield – and especially safety glass – Hugh rolled mostly unharmed off the cab, bounced off the brick wall and onto the pavement. In a flash the cab driver exited the taxi and moved to Hugh. "You all right, Mister?" The man asked in heavily accented English. Hugh tried to stand and the helpful taxi driver shoved him back to the pavement. "Stay put Mister. I'll call the hospital!" The taxi driver turned to retrieve his cell phone from the cab as Hugh moved to a kneeling position.

"You should lie still," said the man who had gotten out of the cab. He too, trying to being helpful, shoved Hugh back to the pavement, "And wait for the paramedics. Moving around could get you killed, you know. If you knocked something loose."

Hugh collected himself and looked up at the man and then past his shoulder to the window five stories up- Hugh's former perch.

There was a police officer peering out it. "What's going on down there?" The Policeman called.

"That cab just hit this man, officer!" The bystander called up.

"*That, I did not do*!" Interjected the cab driver. "He hit *me*!"

"How could he have hit you? What, did he fall from the sky?" The bystander retorted.

"Do you need an ambulance?" The officer called down.

"That's exactly what he did!" Countered the cabbie. "He was not there, then he was!"

"Want me to call an ambulance?" The officer tried again.

"Yes!" The bystander and cabbie shouted together.

"No! I'm fine!" Countered Hugh. The situation was becoming infuriatingly absurd. Hugh tried to stand as the bystander grabbed him by the shoulder.

"You should really sit still, buddy. You might have stuff broken inside that you don't even know about." He turned and looked at the cab driver, "You should sue." Even as the man pushed down, Hugh stood easily under the downward pressure.

"He fell onto my cab! I should sue *him*!"

Hugh watched the officer in the window reach for his radio on his shoulder as he pulled his head back inside the apartment.

"Sit and wait for the ambulance," the bystander ordered as he once again tried to shove Hugh to the ground. This time unsuccessfully.

Hugh grabbed the man's arm and gave it a sharp twist. The crack was audible as a spiral fracture ran from the man's elbow to his shoulder. "*You* wait for the ambulance," Hugh growled as he moved close to the man. "If I didn't have other things to deal with at the moment, I'd kill you where you stand." He was still holding the man's arm above his wrist as he used it to steer the him back to the cab's crushed hood. "You have stuff broken inside, I think. Maybe you should lie still." With that, he gave the man's arm another twist. With a moan, the man passed out.

"You!" Interjected the cab driver, "let go of that man and wait for the police to come!"

Hugh took a step towards the cab driver who quickly got inside his cab. As he pulled the door shut he began to honk the horn.

"*What the hell is going on down there*?" Shouted the officer from the window. Hugh looked up at him. "You! Stay put. I have a car coming right now." The officer commanded.

Hugh looked at the unconscious man then the cab driver. The cab driver honked the horn again. He was on his cell phone but Hugh could not hear him over the din.

"Stay put!" Commanded the officer in vain as Hugh abruptly turned and jogged out of the alley.

Hugh turned down the street after exiting the alley. It was time for another 'change of venue' as he called his countless moves. *Somewhere cold and overcast*, he thought to himself as he slowed his pace to match the people around him, *Maybe some place new for a change. Moscow*? There would definitely be descriptions and composite drawings of him and unfortunately, they would be with him clean shaven. Having something to shave off would have been convenient. As he worked his way to his apartment, Hugh passed a barber shop. He ducked inside.

"We're closed," said the lone barber- a septuagenarian- who had been folding a smock, "You'll have to come back tomorrow, son."

"How about I pay you fifty bucks to just shave my head? Nice and quick."

"Why you want your head shaved?" asked the barber. He had stopped folding the smock but was still holding it. The quick and easy fifty dollars was enticing.

"Listen… I lost a bet and I have to get my head shaved before I can go back into the bar. How about it, Pops, help a guy out." Hugh smiled weakly at the man- or at least he hoped that was how the smile looked.

"That's some bet you lost," Replied the barber as he snapped the smock open. "You got some nice hair going on there. How about I hit you with a number two all over? So you can keep a little bit. Will your pals go for that?"

Hugh moved to the chair quickly, "Great. That works for me."

The barber held the smock in front of himself, unmoving. "You said fifty bucks."

Hugh nodded, "That I did." He reached into his pocket and took out the wad of bills he had just acquired. They were all twenties. "Here's sixty, you get a ten-dollar tip for talking me into keeping a little hair while it's still cold outside." Hugh handed the old man three twenties as he sat down.

"Don't get too comfortable. This won't take long." The old man smiled a broad, mostly toothless grin at Hugh as he moved the smock around onto Hugh's lap. He snapped the buttons behind Hugh's neck. "You don't even need to relax any with how fast be that long hair be coming off." The old man paused again. Hugh was worried he would make a comment about the mirror and his subdued form in it. "Block or fade?" he finally asked.

"Fade," answered Hugh. "Say, I hate to rush a barber- that's usually dangerous, but I got to get back to the bar quick like. There's a time limit too. Hell of a bet."

The old man moved past Hugh to the counter and pulled a battered electric razor from a hook. He opened a drawer and rifled through it, pulling a small black plastic attachment -a number 2 clipper from it. He snapped it on the razor and thumbed the switch. The razor buzzed to life. "A Fade's even quicker. Like I said, don't get too comfortable." The man smiled at Hugh again as he spun him around in the chair, putting himself between Hugh and the mirror.

With deft strokes, Hugh's hair began to drop to the floor in long bunches. "Another few months, and you could'a done that Locks for Love thing," Said the man as he worked around Hugh's head. "Shame for all this hair to go to waste."

Hugh nodded. "Yeah, well, when you lose a bet, you got to pay up."

"That's right honorable of you," said the Barber, "most young folks now a-days would have just welched. 'specially with hair like you got."

Hugh shrugged. "I'm old fashioned, I guess. I suppose it goes back to…" he began.

"Done," interrupted the Barber. "Don't want to rush you off, but like I said, I'm closed and I want to get home. Streets ain't safe at night nowadays."

Hugh stood and turned to the man. There was an impulse in the back of his mind to just kill him. It was his default way of wanting to deal with anyone. "Thanks." He said simply as he turned and walked of the shop and onto the street. To the old man's credit, the entire dealing had taken less than five minutes.

Hugh continued directly to his apartment. Taking the stairs down two at a time, he unlocked the door and entered. The apartment was dimly lit and sparsely decorated- a bed, table and one chair, a dresser, and an unplugged refrigerator were all that were in the apartment. Hugh moved to the bed and pulled a battered antique leather suitcase from under it. He had had it for over 100 years. It

was his only long-term material possession. He swung the suitcase around and flipped it open. Opening the drawers, he quickly emptied the entire contents of the dresser into the suitcase. Even if he had more time, Hugh would not have even considered folding. After a quick check of the room, Hugh moved to the bathroom. He grabbed a straight razor and his other toiletries and moved back to his suitcase. Unceremoniously he dumped those items onto his clothes. Moving to his bed, he pulled a second battered suitcase from under it. He carried it over and dumped 637 Krugerrands into his suitcase. Casually, he tossed the battered one to the side.

Hugh did a quick circuit of the room to ensure he had not left anything behind. On his way out, he reached under the small wooden table and peeled a battered leather, accordion-style envelope from the underside of it. He opened it and looked inside. It was full of money- twenties, tens and fives. Nearly a thousand dollars. As he moved to the door he stuffed it down the front of his pants. Hugh had made this fortune quickly and easily. Even so, there was no need to just leave any of it behind. *Stay on Easy Street as long as you can, Hugh*, he thought as he scanned the room again, *when there's nicely paved street under you, the walking's a lot easier*.

Hugh had moved innumerable times in the past four centuries. He had lived in this city on and off for almost eighty years. This time it was for five- not the longest he had ever been anywhere for one stretch, but lately he seemed to stay in the same location less and less time. *Progress,* he thought sourly, *used to be a guy could blend into town with no troubles. Now even in a city, pictures get plastered everywhere at the drop of a hat*. He *had* enjoyed not only the bustling city life for its easy marks

for petty crimes, but also the size of the city allowed him a certain level of anonymity. All without any interaction with law enforcement. He had, just to be on the safe side, spread out his eating habits to several of the surrounding towns and even camping areas- usually a month at a time- but he always returned to his apartment. Now thanks to the day's debacle, it was time to find a new home; a fresh start. *A change of venue.*

Hugh walked up the stairs to the street. He looked left and right. Left was the bus terminal, right would (eventually) lead out of town. Then it was a simple five-hour (stolen) car drive to the Ferry. Straight ahead was a small airport. Hugh had never flown in commercial airliners because it not only required identification, but the prospect of being trapped in a plane that could easily be delayed until after sunrise was not something he ever wanted to have to deal with. He had however learned how to fly in the late 1970's from Vietnam Era pilots who didn't have a problem making extra money giving lessons when they weren't flying supplies to various camps around the Yukon. Hugh was trained for aircraft up to twin engine amphibious planes as well as helicopters. There were usually several of each in the small airport. Without knowing if they were fueled made buses or ferries the way to go. Hugh looked left again. It would be easy to take a red-eye bus out of town and work his way south. Maybe give the Midwest a try. He had not been there since the times of the buffalo. San Francisco was always pleasantly foggy, and the abundance of homeless persons (thanks to the mild weather) provided readily available… sustenance. *Moscow?* As Hugh looked down the street towards the bus terminal he considered the ride. *It's already been a bad*

day, Hugh, why make it worse with a long bus ride with crying kids you can't even eat.? He thought. The ferry it was. The only downside was that he had to backtrack towards the barber shop and -fortunately- only slightly toward the apartment building of the now dead hooker, pimp, and world's most annoying elderly corpse.

He picked up a quick jog and started toward the edge of town. As he came to the barber shop he slowed and looked to the left down the street, in the direction of the old woman's apartment. Surely, no one had followed him. Screeching tires made him look right.

"FREEZE!" Commanded a voice. Hugh turned to look at two police officers, each standing behind their open car doors, guns in their hands trained on him.

"Step to the front of the car and keep your hands where we can see them!" Said one officer.

"We have the 10-66 in custody," Said the other into his radio. "In front of Floyd's Cuts on Franklin Street." The officer moved around the car door; gun still pointed at Hugh.

Hugh stood rock still, hands at his sides. He let the suitcase hang casually; there was no sense in drawing attention to it. From past experience, he knew the bullets would not kill him but they were painful and the scars took years to disappear. His antics at Gettysburg had taken until the turn of the century to finally fade from sight.

"Put your hands on your head and move to the front of the car," commanded the first officer. The second was at the fender now, still keeping the car between him and what was obviously a deranged vigilante.

"I think there has been some mistake, officer," said Hugh as he slowly raised one hand above his head. The one with the suitcase, he held out in front of himself. Feigning innocence and misdirection could help diffuse the situation. "Listen, I paid for my haircut and everything. You're probably looking for someone else skipping out on a haircut. It's a big city after all." Hugh managed a smile, "Ask the old man inside." He gestured with his thumb at the shop behind him. "He'll tell you I paid. Really."

Hugh appraised the two policemen. The older one was the one driving. Maybe training a rookie? That could be helpful. Both officers also had their trigger fingers along the slide of their guns. They were ready for action, but not *that* ready.

"I'll talk to the old man, you keep him covered," said the younger officer as he moved from behind the squad car's fender, "just to make sure he's OK." The officer crab-walked past Hugh, keeping him in his sights as we went.

"I'm not going to ask you again, Sir," said the first officer, "move to the front of the car and put your hands over your head."

Hugh glared at the officer. "My hands *are* above my head and I was waiting for that other officer to get past me before I moved so I

wouldn't get shot," and unable to control himself, he finished with: "Stupid."

The officer's hands visibly tightened on the pistol grip. "Fine, he's gone. Now get your ass to the front of the car." He leaned his head over to his radio microphone, "This is Mike Fifteen, Code 20 at our location."

"You don't need backup, Officer," offered Hugh as he took a step forward towards the front of the car. From past experience, he knew that getting the officer to completely change his course of action would be impossible- the adrenalin running through him would counteract any suggestion Hugh made. Even so, he could get him to hesitate and doubt what he was doing.

"FREEZE!" Shouted the policeman, the gun was shaking in his hands.

Hugh dropped his hands to his side, "OK, I've had about enough from you," he snarled, "first it's put your hands up, and I do but it's not good enough. Then it's walk to the car, then it's don't walk to the car. Freeze. Don't freeze. Freeze. You need to make up your damned mind before I make it up for you." He took another step forward towards the car, but it was a little to the side, toward the officer as well. "*Do what I tell you and no one gets hurt*." He was still mimicking the officer, but at the same time, it was a suggestion.

"Get your hands up!"

"What, and move to the car? Or you do want me to stand still? *You want me at the front of the car next to you."* He suggested again.

"MOVE TO THE FRONT OF THE CAR!" The officer shouted. His finger was now on the trigger. "Nice and slow!"

Hugh took another step towards the front of the vehicle as he raised his hands slowly to his sides. He was almost in line with the car's headlight and his hands were held out wide to the sides instead of overhead. In a way it seemed like he was complying with the Officer's commands, even though he wasn't. One more step and the only thing between him and the armed officer would be the door. Behind him, Hugh heard the jingle of the bell as the younger officer exited the shop.

"The old man says he's fine. And this guy paid for the haircut. Sixty bucks!"

Hugh took his last step forward. "See? I paid for the haircut, and I tipped that nice old man really well. I didn't do anything wrong. Now I just want to get going. *And everything will be just fine and you can be on your way to go find whoever you're looking for."*

The older officer stared at Hugh down the sights of his gun. "Keep your hands where I can see them," he commanded. "Then we'll be on our way," he added hesitantly.

"Carl, what's up?" Said the younger officer.

"I don't know. Maybe I don't have a good feeling about this guy, that's all. But I think that everything's going to…" Carl took his eyes off Hugh as he talked to his partner. In that moment, Hugh charged the officer and gave the door a vicious kick. The door snapped back onto the officer, knocking the wind out of him. As he

loosened his grip on his gun, Hugh grabbed it. With his shoulder he pressed the door against the man. The officer's body was pinned but his arms were free. He flailed frantically, "Shoot him!"

Hugh looked at the younger officer. He had holstered his pistol when he entered the barber shop. Now he was fumbling to draw it. Coolly, Hugh took careful aim and shot the young man in the head. The pinned officer flailed with more vigor as Hugh pressed even harder on the door. "Looks like your training is done for the day, *Carl,*" he growled in the man's face. Panicking, the man clawed at Hugh, drawing blood. "Now, now Carl. That's *my* job, drawing blood." Still pressing against the door, he put the pistol under the trapped police officer's chin, met his eyes, and pulled the trigger. Hugh was already moving away from the door to allow him to crumple to the ground.

Hugh pocketed the gun then reached down to the fallen police officer and removed the extra magazine from his belt. He did not even look back as he walked to the now-dead younger officer. As he took the man's gun and extra magazine, he looked into the Barber shop. The old man was watching from behind the door. He had seen the entire incident. Hugh took a step towards the shop as the sounds of sirens pealed through the city air. Hugh pointed the gun at the man then shook his head. Hopefully the message would convey to the old man- *Keep quiet or I'll come back for you*. It was an empty threat; he was not coming back to this city during the lifetimes of the officers pursuing him, much less the old man.

Hugh turned and began to run down the street away from the sirens, pistol in one hand, suitcase in the other. He knew that the police cars would stop where the other car was, giving him precious moments to decide on options for making his escape. Fresh snow began to fall. Hugh looked up at the silently falling flakes. Hiding outside this night was not the better option but with his coat, he would be okay.

He came to an intersection and stopped as he decided which way to go. Once again he could hear the sirens. They were getting closer. To the west was the center of town, to the east town became sparser, north was the wilderness. With the temperatures already in the single digits and more snow falling, town looked like the better, more comfortable solution. As he spun in a circle to decide which way to go, a passerby bumped into him. Without thinking twice, he emptied the pistol into the woman and then dropped it on the pavement beside her. Other people in the intersection ran in all directions from him and the now dead woman. Hugh grimaced at his unfortunate reaction. He gave the woman a swift kick as he moved west- into town. The sound of sirens still hung on the air and he knew that this particular intersection would be swarming with law enforcement officers trying to put him behind bars for what would end up being a very long time, then when he still looked the same decades later, invariably he would end up in a government research center of some sort.

Hugh picked up what he hoped was a casual jog, moving towards the center of town and the cover of more people, although at this time of night they would be few. As he went, the sirens

became louder. He slowed to a walk and fell in behind a group of teenagers or at least close enough to use them for cover but not enough to rouse their suspicions. Ahead he saw a police car stopped in the middle of the street, lights flashing rhythmically. Two officers were on either side of the street watching the sidewalks.

He had seen this tactic before: the net was being set.

As casually as he could, he turned and retraced is path. Since he had taken a couple of turns, he was not moving directly to the intersection where the dead woman lay, but it was still in the same general direction. He turned up the collar of his jacket and shoved his hands into his pocket, one holding the second pistol, the other the suitcase around his wrist. *Easy Street, you're coming with me*, he thought. He increased his pace in hopes of moving past the eastern edge of the apparent dragnet. Again, the sounds of sirens moved closer from in front of him. The death of the two in the apartment, the two officers, and the most recent pedestrian - all within the past hour - had attracted the attention of every police officer in the city. Suddenly a familiar loud squawk of a horn broke through the snow-filled evening. *Now the fire department was involved.* Hugh frowned and sped up to a jog once again. As he came to another intersection he looked right and saw the fire truck he had heard- blocking an intersection. Firemen were moving out in all directions from it. Heading south was now out of the question.

Hugh realized he was being channeled north and east where there was less cover. He was already near the edge of town and soon

he would be faced with pine forests and open, snow-covered fields. The authorities assumed that facing certain death in the wilds, their murderer would turn themselves in. Hugh planned on neither of those fates. He stopped jogging and moved against a storefront. The situation needed assessed and jogging through it was not the way to do it. While deciding his next course of action, a battered pickup truck rolled down the street in his direction. Its exhaust clattered and coughed as the truck moved along. Over that, the blaring radio could be heard. Hugh could see there were two young men in it, apparently unaware of the drama unfolding around them. Hugh stepped away from the building and into the street. He waved down the truck. Dutifully, the youth driving slowed. His copilot rolled down his window. "What's going on?" asked the youth closest to Hugh.

"We're looking for someone," lied Hugh, "there's been a shooting you know."

The boy behind the wheel leaned past his partner's head. "Really? Who's dead?" he asked.

"A few people," Hugh drew the pistol from his pocket but kept it below the window sill of the truck. To the boys it looked as if he merely had taken his hand from his pocket. "A hooker and her pimp, a meddling old woman," he paused. "Couple of cops then some lady on the street." With that Hugh raised the gun into the window, "And two boys too stupid to know what's going on around them." The youth behind the wheel stared wide-eyed at the pistol. He grabbed the stick shift, pulled it towards him and shoved it up into first gear just as Hugh shot him in the face. The other youth screamed and

pushed open the door, knocking Hugh back. The now dead driver's feet came off the clutch and gas at the same time and the truck lurched forward several feet before stalling. As the boy turned to run, Hugh shot him in the back twice. He quickly entered the truck from the still-open passenger door and slid across the bench seat. Putting the suitcase on the seat, he worked the handle on the driver's door and shoved the dead boy out onto the pavement. Hugh pushed the clutch in, started the truck and peeled away from the new crime scene. The stereo blasted in Hugh's ears. As he tried to turn at the next corner, he fumbled with the radio, finally getting it turned off. "We're not going to take it, indeed," he scowled.

Hugh let out a sigh of relief; now he had transportation and by the time the authorities realized he had a vehicle, he would be out of town and on his way to the ferry docks. He glanced down at the dashboard as he continued down the street- the fuel gage was all the way down hovering near empty. The needle was completely surrounded by red. He was half tempted to stop the truck and back over the two ill-prepared teens in the road. *It's winter time,* he thought, *what kind of people drive around on empty in the winter?* Involuntarily he took his foot off the accelerator. *Stupid teenagers!* He fought the urge and continued out of town, hoping to loop south. Within two blocks of the edge of town, he had attracted the attention of a police officer. The cruiser flashed its lights and warbled his siren at Hugh. Dutifully, Hugh pulled to the side of the road and stopped. He rolled down his window as the officer exited her vehicle. The snowfall had picked up and he could hear the officer's feet crunch in the newly fallen snow as she approached the truck. It began to drift into the cab of the

truck as the officer made her way slowly and carefully. Hugh kept one hand on the wheel, his other was down at his side, pistol at the ready.

"Excuse me, sir," began the police officer. Hugh turned and shot the woman. He dropped the gun on the seat next to him and sped off. It was two blocks to the edge of town and potential escape. Another siren warbled behind him as he cleared the welcome sign at the edge of town. Hugh fishtailed down the road as he picked up speed. The police car kept up with him as he went. Hugh knew that by now it had radioed for backup.

The falling snow made it difficult to determine where the road's edges were and several times, Hugh found himself bouncing along the frozen earth as opposed to the road. Finally, he wandered far enough off the road he was unable to tell where it was. Hugh floored the truck and angled it toward the forest that was a short distance from the road. The truck fishtailed again- between the empty bed and empty fuel tank, it had nothing to add traction to its rear end. For a moment, he felt as if he were back in Jamestown. He hoped *this* outcome would be as successful.

Suddenly, the truck hit a concealed log and left the ground with a bone jarring crunch, it crashed back to earth. Hugh fought to keep the wheel straight as the rear end flew out to one side. Barely in control of the truck, Hugh fought his way deeper into the forest and now going more and more uphill. Hugh had lived in the town for several years and knew that he was heading towards the quarry. *Plenty of places to hide up there*, he thought as he pressed the gas pedal to the

floorboard. Behind, the police car had fallen back but was not completely out of the chase. It was only a matter of time until four wheeled law enforcement vehicles -as well as snowmobiles- joined in. Hugh was looking in his rearview mirror as the front corner of the truck clipped a tree. Stopping his forward momentum on that leading edge of the truck, the rear end spun around viciously and the engine stalled. Without trying to restart it, Hugh grabbed the suitcase and pistol and continued on foot. There was an outcropping less than one hundred yards ahead of him, and beyond that the still-frozen-over quarry three hundred feet down. Still, it was the only way to go so Hugh plodded along. Interestingly, snow did not cause the same strength-sapping effect as rain. Hugh did not ponder the effect long as he popped out of the forest and was face to face with the gaping chasm. Below was a craggy bottom that extended well into the permafrost and ended at what was now a frozen lake farther down the way. Even in the summertime, there were parts of the deep lake that never thawed. *A bit farther down than a mere five-story leap*, Hugh thought as he stole a glance downward. He was fairly certain he could glide to the bottom safely- if he left the suitcase behind. In the wilderness the additional layer of clothes in it would be the difference between freezing solid and getting away. The untraceable fortune that the Krugerrands represented was also difficult to leave behind.

Hugh turned on the edge of the cliff and ran uphill away from the sound of the police car's siren. It was getting fainter and fainter as he went. Hugh smiled to himself as the night was filled with the angry hornet sound that meant that at least one snowmobile had arrived and joined in the chase. Contrary to the siren, *this* sound grew

in loudness quickly. Hugh continued his sprint as the din of the snowmobile was joined by the rapport of a hunting rifle. Suddenly, Hugh was spun to the side as a bullet slammed home into his shoulder. Strength and gliding notwithstanding, Hugh still had the same mass as a five-foot seven-inch man and as the 30.06 bullet struck his shoulder blade, it threw him around. Hugh lost his footing and careened over the edge. As he went, he released the pistol and bear-hugged the suitcase.

The officer who shot Hugh arrived to where Hugh's tracks ended at the edge of the cliff. He dismounted from the snowmobile as his partner arrived on a similar vehicle. "He went over?" shouted the officer over the sound of his engine.

The first officer nodded. "Yep, I clipped him and he went over, right here."

The second dismounted and joined his partner in looking over the edge. Almost three hundred feet down, the ground was cracked and jagged as the glacier below pushed against the mountainside. "So much for him. Bear food." The officer took a moment to spit over the side and watch the globule disappear from sight.

"Yup; bear food." The second confirmed. "You saved the taxpayers thousands, Bert. Good on you."

"All part of the service." Said Bert.

The two remounted their snowmobiles and left.

Eight

Hugh fell in open space, wind rushing past him as he gained speed. He tucked himself into a ball around his suitcase and braced for the inevitable impact. Any thoughts of spreading open and trying to glide were gone. He clutched his legs as tightly as he could. The only thing he could do to mitigate his injuries was to make sure that all his limbs were still attached when he landed. He had never lost a limb and was unsure if it would grow back or just heal over the wound. It was not something he wanted to ever put to the test. Hugh exhaled completely and shut his eyes tight as he fell. As he went, he rotated uncontrolled. Absently he wondered if landing on his shins would be better than landing on his back. Hugh's downward path took him between two massive walls of ice, falling an additional seventy-five feet into the craggy darkness below the permafrost. As he crashed into the frozen ground -shins down- blackness enveloped him. The last sounds he heard were hundreds of gold coins scattering about him.

* * * *

Nine

Hugh awoke with a start. It was daylight and the ice cave he was in was aglow with sunlight. Panicking, Hugh flailed his arms around; they moved easily. Strangely, nothing seemed to be broken. Hugh flexed his hands and examined them. They were pale and pink but fully functioning. His legs also passed the same examination. Hugh sat up in his small ice cave and discovered he was in a pool of water. He looked about and noticed that along with it being awash with light, he was, inexplicably, naked. Unable to determine the time of day, Hugh was forced to sit in his melting cave and hope that the sun set before the top of his cocoon of ice broke open and spilled lethal daylight in. In his boredom he explored his tiny prison. He found several Krugerrands- twenty in all. *More like an Easy Path than a Street now*, he thought sourly.

Even the light filtered through the thick sheet of ice was draining. Hugh lay back and covered his eyes with his arm, water dripped onto him almost constantly. Finally, the sun seemed to lose its strength and the blue-glow of the cave faded. Once it was dark, Hugh stood and pushed on the top of the cave. Only a foot thick, it gave way easily. If he had stayed unconscious another day, his savior-cave would have been his coffin.

Hugh gathered his meager stack of coins in his hands and clambered out of the cave and looked around. The landscape seemed

vaguely familiar; trees on one side and a mountain on the other. He looked up and decided that it was more a hill- less than fifty feet to the top. *Strange.* When he fell it was definitely longer than a fifty-foot drop. Hugh moved to the hill, which was grass covered and although steep, did not seem steep enough to have been the one he fell down. *Very strange.* The lake was there, but again, it did not look quite right. It seemed larger and less round. Less man-made. *I must have floated down river at some point.* There seemed to be a glacier missing from the scenery as well. *Damned Strange.*

When he reached the top of the hill, Hugh looked around. He was, as expected, surrounded by forest. The ground had patches of snow here and there; the spring thaws were in full force. That meant he had been in the ice cave for almost two months; plenty of time for any manhunt to have gone cold. Acquiring clothes as a hapless robbed tourist would be quick and easy. He just needed a place to hide his handful of gold coins in order to play the part better. Hugh moved to a nearby tree and quickly dug a hole under it. He placed the coins in the hole and covered them up carefully. He reached up and grabbed one of the lower branches of the tree and twisted it off. Missing the 2-inch-thick branch made the tree distinctive. "Welcome to the First Federal Bank of Hugh," Hugh said out loud. Hugh grabbed a handful of snow and washed the dirt off his hands then turned towards town and began walking. With any luck, a passerby would stop and pick up the severely underdressed Hugh- or at least toss him a blanket from a safe, quick roll. Hugh continued down the hill as the forest came alive- birds were chirping and several times he heard the rustling of ground creatures moving about.

Finally, to his relief, Hugh exited the forest. The road would be a mere hundred yards away and with the thaws going on, it would be well traveled. *Success.* Hugh looked around to ensure he could find his way back to his meager fortune. He was still able to spot the tree with the conspicuously missing branch. The moon peeked out from the horizon and Hugh's eyes began to take in more forested patches below him. He could not see the road. Undaunted, Hugh moved down the hill at a jog towards the road. As he reached the bottom of the hill, he was greeted by grass instead of asphalt. *Where the hell did I float to?*

Suddenly, a loud horn blast tore through the night air. *A truck horn?* Shrugging it off, Hugh continued towards the town- road or not, the town lay ahead of him. The horn blasted again- this time closer and from behind him, back up the hill. It was also slightly different from the first. Hugh turned and peered into the night. An annoying cloud had parked itself in front of the Moon, limiting his vision. A form approached. Or two forms. Possibly three. The ground shook as they approached. *Logging trucks?* Again, the horn sounded. *The road had to be nearby*. Hugh moved towards the shapes- help from a trucker was as good as help from anyone else. Better usually- the trucker would be glad to have an amusing story about a naked man in the wilderness to tell at the truck stop. The three shapes seemed to split twice over. The Moon finally peeked out from behind the cloud as the shapes were a mere fifty feet away. The moonlight splashed over the hulking beasts as they approached. *Kodiak*? Hugh prepared himself for their attack. *Too many legs.* One- the front most- turned its head to the side, Fifteen-foot tusks flashing

in the moonlight. Its trunk raised to the sky as it let out an ear shattering trumpet sound. Completely in awe, Hugh stood rock still as the hulking, fur covered elephants -fifteen in all- shuffled by. They paid him no mind as he had no smell and no weapons. They had never seen a human such as Hugh. Ever.

As the beasts passed, Hugh became aware of another sound; this time clanging. Still standing rock still from awe, he saw a group of people crest the hill. In the darkness he was unable to make out any distinctive characteristics but he could tell they were short- a full head shorter than he. *Excellent.* The four in front held spears and one had a longish pole- a rifle perhaps? Two in the rear of the group held pieces of flat metal that they constantly banged together. The noise was as jarring to him as it was to the fur-covered beasts. Hugh's stomach tightened and a wave of cramps ran through his middle. Hugh smiled wide; his escape been successful after all- but instead of months, it had been much, much longer to *this* particular spring time. He wasn't sure how long but it seemed like a time that was familiar to him.

Easy Street indeed, he thought, *I hope they're back on the gold standard.* Out loud, Hugh borrowed a line from a movie, thinking it was about than nine thousand years forgotten, from another unsuspecting time traveler in a somewhat similar situation, "If this is the best they've got around here, in six months, I'll be running the planet."

With a broad smile, pointed teeth prominent in the moonlight, Hugh approached the hunting party. Or rather, *hunted party.*

Ten

Hugh watched as the group of hunters approached him, driving the herd of giant beasts forward. He was crouched down in some bushes – they seemed intent on their herding and didn't notice him as they went by. He fell in behind them, watching as they corralled the animals toward the face of a small cliff- the same one he had fallen hundreds of feet down.

When the animals got there, they hesitated unsure of which way to run. The largest one turned to face the men. It let out a long angry trumpet then charged at them. The men, expecting this peeled off to the left and right, letting it run through the middle of them.

Hugh was caught off guard by the move and just dropped to the ground, trying to hide in the tall grass.

As the animals ran by, the man with the rifle raised it and shot the last mammoth in the side of the head. It took two more steps then collapsed in a six-ton heap. The men with spears immediately ran toward it and stuck it several times.

As they finished off the beast, Hugh crept forward and grabbed one of the noise-making men and dragged him off.

None of the others seemed to notice.

Hugh continued to drag the struggling man away while covering his mouth. "Quiet!" Hugh hissed. "Quiet down!" While the man did not make any noise, he continued to flail as he was pulled into the tree line.

Hugh flung the man to the ground. He was easily six inches taller than him and outweighed the thin man by fifty pounds. "Sit still. I just have some questions for you!" He said.

The man looked at Hugh- the fact that he was naked didn't seem to register. He kept looking past him toward his compatriots. "What is it you want, brother?" He said finally. "You need only ask and I shall try to help."

"I just want to ask you some questions." Hugh said, taken aback by the man's politeness after being accosted.

"Oh." The man looked Hugh up and down. "Where… where are your clothes?"

"I lost them." Hugh said, truthfully. "And I don't have any other clothes." He crouched down, still staying between the man and his friends. "I just want some answers."

"Answers to what?" The man said. He still looked nervous. "Who are you, brother?"

Hugh shrugged. He planned on killing the man anyway. "My name is Hugh."

"Hugh." The man repeated. The word seemed foreign to him. "I don't know that name."

"That's because we've never met." Hugh said. "What year is this?"

"It's springtime." The man replied with a smile. "I expected more difficult questions- ask me another one."

"No, not what time of year; I understand this is springtime. I mean what year is it? What is the date?"

"I don't understand." The man said. He squatted and let his hands rest on his knees. "Did you get hit in the head when they took your clothes? You don't make sense. Perhaps if you…"

"No." Hugh cut the man off. He frowned as he gathered his thoughts. Seeing the man relax, he sat down. "Okay, let's start again." He pointed at himself. "I'm Hugh." He pointed at the man. "What is your name?"

"Jacob. Jacob Chugach."

"Like the county?"

"What county?"

Hugh frowned again. "Okay, never mind Jacob. Where am I right now?"

"Here." Jacob pointed at the ground. "We are here speaking to one another, Hugh"

"What is this place called?" Hugh paused for a moment, then expecting a similarly unhelpful answer, he tried to elaborate. "What is this *land* called? We are in Alaska, right? Is this Kenal Peninsula,

Bristol, or Denali, or…?" He let his voice trail off hoping he had given enough hints to the obviously dimwitted man.

"Oh! I am sorry, Hugh. Yes; this is Yukon Forest, of course." The man said with a smile, finally understanding. His voice took a definitive tone. "We are right now in the western part of Yukon Forest, actually."

"Okay, now we are getting somewhere. So this is Yukon-Koyukuk. Good."

"Oh, I don't know Koyukuk. This is Yukon Forest." The man pointed. "To the north is the forever ice of Arctic. To the southwest is the Pacifican Ocean." He pointed east. "That way is the forever forest that is Canada. Other people live there but we don't deal with them."

"Inuit?" Hugh offered.

Jacob narrowed his eyes. "Is that where you come from? If you know about the Inuits, then you must be one of them. I am sorry to say they can't be trusted."

"Oh really, Jacob; is that how it works?" Hugh pointed at the man. "Well *you* know about the Inuit so you must be one too!"

"Of course I'm not Inuit; I'm a Forester." The man said. "You are easily agitated, Hugh. Perhaps it is the embarrassment of not having clothes. But I assure you I am not Inuit."

"Sure you say you are. But why should I believe you?"

"Why would I lie to a stranger? It is the Inuit that can't be trusted; they aren't even invited to the gathering." Jacob said. "Well, it would be rude to assume someone one just met was lying. So if you say you are not Inuit, then you are not one. All the better." He pointed southeast. "Do you come from the big land? The American?"

"The American?" Hugh asked. "That way is Canada, that way is the Arctic, but that way is the American."

"Yes. That land goes on forever. I've never been there because it is dangerous. Full of war tribes. Warriors. So you might be from there." He considered it for a moment. "Yes, you do seem easily agitated so you could be from there, I think."

"The big land goes on forever. Great." Hugh let out a long breath. "Okay, I think I'm talking to the wrong person."

"I'm a tracker so I know where things are." The man said defensively. He pointed at Hugh. "And I know that since it's early spring you need clothes because it still gets cold at night. Very cold." He shook his head. "Going around naked like a wild man. That's improper is what that is."

"I told you that I lost my clothes." Hugh said. The empty feeling in his stomach made him stand. "Fine then. Fine."

"Fine." The man pushed himself to his feet. "Yes; fine, Hugh." He shrugged. "Well, I am glad I was able to help even though you…"

Hugh lunged at the man, knocking him to the ground.

"Hey!" The man said. "Aaron! Stephen! Help!" He shouted.

Hugh pulled himself up onto the man's chest, legs straddling him.

"Aaron, help!"

Hugh punched Jacob in the face, dazing him. Not wanting to soil the man's clothes, Hugh wrestled the man's cloth shirt up over his head.

"Hey!" Jacob said again. "That's mine!"

Hugh bent down and bit him on the side of his throat, crushing his jugular vein. Blood spurted out in time with Jacob's heart as Hugh drank as quickly as he could. After a few moments, the blood stopped spurting and only just oozed out of the hole.

"Jacob!" A voice from the cliff called. "Where are you?"

Hugh looked over his shoulder in that direction. "Great." He hopped off Jacob's body and grabbed him by the arm. As he pulled him toward some bushes, he grabbed the shirt as well, making sure it stayed out of the blood. When he got him to the bushes, he shoved him under them then tugged off the man's pants- they were deerskin.

"Jacob!" A voice called again.

"Just a minute, Aaron!" Hugh shouted back, hoping he had guessed correctly.

Eleven

Hugh took a handful of snow from a nearby pile and cleaned up his face. He sat and tried to pull Jacob's pants on- they were too small. "Just great." Hugh said. He examined the pants- there wasn't any draw string or other way to make them bigger; they seemed to be tailored specifically for the dead man. "Damn it all." He cursed as he dropped the pants. He took the shirt and turning it upside down, put it on as pants, his legs going into the arm holes. The sleeves ended at his calves. Hugh couldn't help but laugh at his predicament. With a relegated sign, he held the shirt-cum-trousers up by grabbing a handful of it behind his back. He hoped in the darkness, the other men wouldn't notice he was wearing a shirt.

A man came into view. "What's…" He said. "Who are you?"

"I'm Hugh." Hugh smiled. His mouth was red from blood but in the darkness, the other man didn't notice. "Jacob went that way." He gestured over his shoulder with his free hand. He started toward the man then stopped when three other men stepped into view. Two had spears and one held the long rifle. "He said he would be right back. He had to go to the bathroom."

"He's taking a bath? Now?" Asked the man with the rifle.

"Here?" One of the men with a spear asked.

"Dig a hole?" Hugh tried again. "Take a crap?" He raised his eyebrows. "Shit?"

"Oh." The man said uncomfortably. "Your speech is odd; where are you from?"

"Oh, uhhh…." Hugh pointed, glad to have had at least some sort of conversation with Jacob before killing him. "I'm from the big land. Down past B-C." He said, automatically referring to British Columbia like a local would- or at least a local from his time. When none of the men seemed to react, he thought back to his Alaska geography. "South of Wrangle. Petersburg? Ketchikan?"

"South of Ketchikan?" The first man said.

"Yes. That's it. South of Ketchikan."

The man with the rifle brought it up to the ready. "Why are you here?"

"I'm traveling." Hugh said. "It's a free country, you know."

"Free? Why wouldn't the countryside be free, brother?"

"No; not the country, the Country." Hugh said. He frowned. "Forget I said it. I'm Hugh."

"Hugh?" The first man said. "That's an odd name."

"It's a common one where I am from." Hugh said defensively. "What's *your* name?"

"I'm Aaron." The first man said. He gestured at the man with the rifle. "Stephen." He pointed at the two with the spears. "Henry and Jonathan."

"And Hugh is odd, huh?" Hugh said with a smirk. "Oh, wait." He appraised the similarly dressed and bearded men who were all wearing flat brimmed hats. "Wait. Wait." He grinned wide as he pointed at them. "Mennonites? Amish? Quakers?"

Aaron nodded. "We are Amish, yes." He raised an eyebrow. "I have a feeling you are not."

"Oh." Hugh said, picking up his previous line of questioning. "Do you know the date Aaron? What year it is?" He frowned. "And I know it's spring time. I mean what day of the week is it and what month and what year?"

"The year?" Aaron said. He looked at the other men. "Oh, the year." He stroked his beard. "What is it again?"

"Twenty twenty-one." Stephen said. "They said so at the gathering last month; it's twenty twenty-one. Definitely."

"No, it can't be twenty twenty-one," Hugh said. "It was twenty twenty-six when I…" His voice trailed off. "Never mind; it just can't be twenty twenty-one. It was November then. What month is it now? April? May?"

The men stared at him for a long moment. Finally, Jonathan spoke up. "Jacob? Where are you?"

"January, February, March, April, May, June, July…"

"Jacob!" Henry called.

"August, September, October, November, December." Hugh finished. "The months of the year. What month is it now?"

"It is spring." Aaron said. He narrowed his eyes. "I am not sure how things work in the big land but here in the Yukon Forest it's May. I imagine it is May everywhere. The months are the months."

Jonathan chuckled.

"Jacob!" Stephen shouted again. He lowered his spear at Hugh. "What have you done with Jacob, Hugh?"

"Jacob!" Jonathan also shouted for his friend. "Something isn't right, brothers."

"Listen." Hugh said as he took another step forward. He wasn't worried about fighting the four men, even with a rifle in the mix. He just wanted to take care of these four before the other two arrived to increase the odds against him. Because then, it was possible one would get away and run to whatever town they were from and raise an alarm. "All I'm trying to do is just pass through the forest." He took two more steps; he was now within six feet of the men who had formed a semi-circle in front of him. "And I just wanted some directions. Jacob said he was a tracker and he was…"

"What are you wearing?" Jonathan asked. He gestured with the spear. "And why don't you have a shirt on? That's…"

Hugh lunged forward and grabbed the spear, He pulled it toward him then jabbed out with it, hitting Jonathan squarely in the face with the butt end of it. Jonathan fell to the ground dazed.

Henry raised his spear. "Stop!" He said. "Stop it!"

Hugh stepped to the side of the end of the spear as Stephen raised the rifle. He dropped the spear he had snatched from Jonathan then taking another step, he grabbed the rifle halfway down and wrenched it from Stephens' hands. He started to use it like a club then decided it would be a handy weapon later on so he dropped it and grabbed Stephen by the neck.

"Stick him!" Aaron said as he stepped back, giving Jonathan room to move. "Stick him quick Jonathan!"

Jonathan rolled to his feet, grabbing his dropped spear as he went.

Henry advanced as well.

Hugh wrenched Stephens' head to the side, breaking his neck. As he turned, Jonathan stuck his spear into his belly.

Aaron pulled out a knife and charged Hugh as Jonathan tried to keep the spear in him. "I'll finish him off, hold him still!"

Hugh grabbed the spear with both hands and spun to the side, pulling it from Jonathan's hands. He hit Aaron with it as the man approached, knocking him off balance.

Henry jabbed his spear at Hugh, sticking him in the arm with it.

Hugh spun hard causing Henry's spear to pull out of him. Jonathan's was still stuck in his belly even though Jonathan had lost hold of it.

"Get your hands on that spear!" Aaron said as he righted himself.

Hugh grabbed Aaron by an arm and swung him in a circle, picking him up off the ground as he did. When he came back around, he let go, hitting Henry with Aaron, knocking both men to the ground one on top of the other. The spin caused the spear in his arm to drop off. He advanced as he pulled the spear from his belly. Flipping it over he stuck it through both men's chests and into the ground.

Jonathan charged Hugh, knife in his hand.

Hugh easily disarmed Jonathan and stabbed him in the heart with his own knife. As he let go of Jonathan, two men stepped into the clearing. "What is going on?" One asked.

Hugh turned to look at the pair. "Jacob went crazy and attacked them all." He hurried toward the pair. "He ran into the woods that way!" He said as he got beside them and pointed into the forest. "It was terrible!"

"Jacob? But why would he do that?" One asked.

"No, not Jacob." The other said.

"Look; there he is!" Hugh pointed. "Watch out, brothers!"

Both men looked where Hugh was pointing.

"Who are you?" One of them asked as Hugh took a step back then grabbed both men by the sides of their heads and hit them together as hard as he could. Both heads crushed in on one side. When Hugh let go, both men fell to the ground, dead.

Hugh reached down and felt his belly. There was a fairly neat hole in it; he was worried it had torn open when he pulled the spear out. The one in his arm was more jagged and bleeding freely. "Oh man." He said as the adrenalin ran through his system. He stopped and listened- there were no other sounds. He looked around, confirming that all seven of the men he had seen earlier were accounted for. He took several more deep breaths as he held his hand to his belly. He smiled. "The store is open, gentlemen." He crouched down and drank the blood of Henry and Aaron for several minutes. He knew that one large feeding would sustain him easily for four or five days, which gave him enough time to find a town and get answers to his questions. He now had even more questions after dealing with the Amish hunting party. Foremost was why there was an Amish hunting party in the Yukon instead of their typical North America, or now 'American'.

By the time he was done eating, his stomach no longer hurt and both wounds were beginning to close. Hugh looked at the men- while they were definitely shorter than him, three were about his same build. He decided to take all the clothes, even the ones that didn't fit, hoping to trade them for more useful items later on. Gunpowder and shot, especially.

Hugh stuffed all the extra clothes, six knives, two fire flints, and all the extra primitive shoes into two of the large satchels each of the men had- probably to hold smaller pieces meat or organs. The belt pouches each man had, he stuffed in another sack. When he was done he had reduced everything to two very overstuffed sacks. He kept a knife on his newfound belt as well as a belt pouch for the three crudely made bullets and enough powder to fire them. Thanks to his experience with muzzle loading firearms, that procedure was very familiar to him. He sighted down the rifle. The sights were fixed in place. Overall while the rifle seemed primitive, it was well made. Even the spears seemed to be hard wood with very sharp steel blades on the end. He had also noticed all of the knives were also quite sharp. He wrapped them together with some leather strapping and used them as a walking stick- with the three points on one end.

Hugh looked around checking to see if he had taken everything of value from the men. When he was sure he had, he started to drag them into the bushes but stopped himself. Instead, he spread them out around the clearing. He knew full well that they would most likely be found the following day but he hoped animals would drag them off before that or at least feed enough to hide any evidence of his attacks. With a relegated sigh, Hugh walked to where the Mastodon had been killed. The two men hadn't started butchering it yet. Deciding carrying any meat was a waste of his time, he just removed the beast's 10-foot-long tusks- something else that would definitely be tradable. Realizing he had too much to carry he put everything down and examined it.

"Don't throw away assets, Hugh." He said. After appraising everything for a few minutes, he cut one of the sacks into strips and used it to tie the two stuffed sacks together. Then using two more straps, he fashioned them into one large backpack. He stuck the two tusks through the straps and tied them down securely. Since he was only five foot seven, the horns curved over his head almost eight feet. It looked absurd, but the entire affair was fairly stable; he could easily walk with it. Running would require dropping the entire thing.

The entire process had taken him an hour.

"Now to find where these crazy Amish live." Hugh looked up at the sky- it was beginning to get a slight blue tinge to it. "Damn. Or maybe tomorrow night." With a scowl, he quickly retraced his steps to the tree where he had buried his precious Krugerrands and filled one of his belt pouches with them. By the time he was through with that, it was definitely getting close to sunrise so he walked back to the cliff, hoping to find a cave or shelter for him.

Twelve

Hugh walked from one end of the cliff to the other, finding several small holes and crevices but none big enough for him, much less him and his massive backpack and two tusks. He returned to the area where he had killed the men; there were several rocky outcroppings there. As he searched he found a hollowed-out rock under an outcropping that led about ten feet into a large pile of stones. While it was definitely deep enough to be safely dark, it was quite close to the men, making it likely that anyone searching for them would invariably find him as well. After another quick pass of the area, Hugh decided it was his only choice, hoping the men were on a multi-day hunting expedition. Using one of the knives, he cut several bushes and dragged them in front of the outcropping as he scooted to the back of it. Since he was only going to be there overnight, the bushes would stay green throughout the one day.

Hugh climbed into the small area then stood the large backpack/sacks at the front, blocking out most of the opening. Since they were also dark brown skin- from some other Mastodon probably- they helped conceal the cave better than just the cut bushes alone. Since there was no way they would fit in the cave, he had put the two tusks about thirty feet away under more bushes.

Finally done, he also took off the pouches he was wearing; if he was going to be involved in a fight in the confined space, he didn't want to be encumbered.

Satisfied he had done all he could under the circumstances, he sat in the cool darkness and thought back to what the men had told him. Obviously there was some sort of cataclysmic world-event that had thrown everything back into the 1600's, judging by the muzzle-loading rifle and the hand-made knives. Or at least far enough back that there wasn't any industry. Steel was readily available if the spears were any indication, but whether the people had the ability to forge iron into steel or it was being scavenged from the destroyed world was anyone's guess. Hugh decided he would find out the extent of the local technology tomorrow.

He smiled as he thought about the men being Amish. It was actually very logical; if there were a worldwide event that destroyed technology, the one group of people it would affect least would be the Amish. Agrarian to begin with, they would have plenty of crops and livestock to sustain themselves. The lack of electricity was something they lived with anyway; it made no difference to them. Hugh thought back to when he was traveling through the Lehigh Valley in Pennsylvania just after the civil war. The Amish had settled in Lancaster County in the 1720s and by 1865 were very well established there. He had interacted with many of them- while they were cautious of outsiders, they were overall friendly and welcoming. Something else the Amish were very good at was procreating. Six to eight children was typical. In fact, later in the twentieth and early in the twenty-first century when birth rates were dropping for middle

class whites, the Amish were experiencing a 700% population increase. It was not surprising at all that a decimated world would be populated by highly-independent-of-technology, baby-having Amish.

He chuckled. "What a friendly place it must be now." He frowned. "Except the Inuit aren't welcome at your gatherings. Not very Christian-like, Aaron. Not at all." He decided he really wanted to know more about whatever the gathering was and why even though it seemed important to the locals, not everyone was invited. If he was going to live in this world, he needed as much information as possible- even if that meant traveling south to what was apparently called 'the 'big land American'. With war tribes, no less.

Then a thought occurred to him. He hurried out of his hideout to a large bush. He cut off a long branch, cleaned the smaller branches and leaves off it then stuck it firmly in the ground a short distance from the entrance. He looked around, trying to remember where Jacob had pointed while giving directions, then tilted the stick over a few degrees toward north so that it would give him a fair approximation of the time.

He returned to his lair and waited for the sun to rise. While waiting, he was pleased that a pair of grizzly bears came along and dragged two of the bodies away.

After less than an hour, the sun finally peeked above the horizon enough to draw a thin shadow from the stick. Since it was springtime, he assumed it was close to seven AM. A look at his sundial confirmed this.

After making sure the two satchels were positioned well, Hugh leaned back on the cool wall and closed his eyes, fading off to sleep quickly.

Hugh startled awake to the sound of voices. He leaned over and looked at the stick- there was hardly any shadow to it indicating it was near noon. He could hear at least three different people talking- two men and a woman. He moved closer to the satchels to listen better.

"I don't see how they were killed. I mean Stephen had the rifle. There's not a way in the forest a bear would get them." The female said. "Not a way at all."

"And Jonathan and Henry are missing." One of the males said. "You think maybe they got away?"

"Then why didn't they come home?" The other male asked. "And who would take everyone's clothes and weapons? Jonathan wouldn't, neither would Henry. I'm sure of that. No, something isn't right."

Hugh shifted around in his hiding place, bringing the long rifle up beside him. He had already loaded a shot into it and inserted a neatly-made copper percussion cap obviously made by a talented gunsmith. He didn't cock it because it might draw attention to his hiding spot; it was a very distinct sound.

"I think it was those dangerous Inuits. They are always taking things." The woman said. "That's why they don't come to the gathering; they can't be trusted."

"I think they have their own gathering." A man said. "Why would we be the only ones?"

Hugh leaned forward to hear better- whatever the gathering was, it interested him. It was something he would have to investigate once he found where a town was.

"The Inuits wouldn't attack out in the open like this." The second man said. "Not seven men like this."

Hugh wanted to lean out and get a look at the trio but was afraid he would be spotted. He relegated himself to just listening in.

"But it was dark. And it was probably a bunch of them too." The woman said. "I say probably those Inuits. You remember what they did to Elam? It was terrible."

"Or one of the wild men." The second man said. "They are out here as well you know."

"Those aren't real." The woman said. "They're made up to scare children."

"No they're real." The first pointed out. "But they wouldn't take clothes. Why would they?"

"There is Benfleet."

"No." the man said flatly.

"Let's get them back." The woman said. "Maybe by the time we get them back, Jonathan and Henry will be home and he can tell us all about what happened. Let's get them in the wagon."

"Maybe," the second man said, sounding unconvinced. "Okay then, let's go then we can come back out and look for them."

"If they aren't home yet." The woman said.

"Right, right." The man replied. "Sure."

With that the trio moved off.

Satisfied that his hiding place was safe for the moment, Hugh went back to sleep. Even in a dark enclosed place, the rising sun sapped his strength when he was so close to the surface.

Thirteen

Hugh startled awake to the sound of the bushes being pulled away. He looked out toward his impromptu sundial- it was almost too dark to see it; it was close to ten PM.

He reached over and picked up the rifle. Cautiously he leaned around the satchels to see who was trying to get in. There was a massive Canadian Timberwolf staring back at him. His head was over a foot wide and two and a half feet long. He bared his fangs- all six inches of them.

"Easy fella." Hugh said. "If this is your den, then you can have it." While he never felt any fear when fighting a human, or even several humans at once in hand-to-hand combat, the 200-pound Timberwolf facing him would easily outmatch him. He took a calming breath then thought about the wolf, reaching out with his thoughts- which were calm and submissive.

As he climbed slowly out of the lair, Hugh cocked the rifle. The bullet was about the same size as the ones the civil war musket he used to own needed; just over a 50-caliber round. Even so, he hoped he didn't have to shoot the animal; if he didn't hit anything vital, the animal would tear him to shreds and he wouldn't be able to do anything about it. Wolves were the apex hunters in the Northwest. As he stood, the wolf came up past his waist. "Easy there." He said again as he slung the rifle over his shoulder. When he grasped the

lashed together satchels, the wolf growled a deep long growl at him. He lifted the bags off the ground and stepped back, clearing the entrance.

Slowly, Hugh backed away from the seven-foot-long beast, keeping an eye on it without actually looking at its face directly; that would have been an aggressive action. "You're a good little puppy. Yes you are." He said. "A nice *calm* puppy that's going to let me walk away." He backed up, angling toward the tusks, making sure he didn't make eye contact with the wolf.

The wolf watched him the entire time until he disappeared into the trees.

Hugh let out a long breath. The fact that he would have healed from the animal's attack was not a comfort because he knew how devastating the attack would have been. And his recovery would have to occur in the middle of a strange land with no long-term shelter.

"Alaska, north to the future… where you get eaten." He said, adding to the State's motto. He had at one point considered getting a dog for protection when he slept but the issue was that his was a nocturnal lifestyle and trying to get a dog onto that schedule seemed unlikely. Unlike popular literature, Hugh had not had any animal show an interest in his ailment, much less an outright aggressive behavior because of it.

With a relegated sigh, he slipped the tusks into the straps, hefted the sacks over his shoulder and went in search of whatever town the

wagon had gone to; he was able to see the ruts clearly on the forest floor.

Hugh followed the on-again off-again trail for close to four miles, never seeing any other people. Finally, torchlights peeked through the forest at him, letting him know he was close. He decided that walking into the unfamiliar town with bags and a rifle that might get recognized could be dangerous so he stashed them under some brush. To make sure he could find the tree he once again broke off a lower branch so that he would recognize it later on. "Welcome to the newest branch of the First Federal Bank of Hugh. We're expanding to serve you better."

Finally as he approached the town- which was really indeed town-sized with probably a thousand people in it, looking at how far in either direction the buildings went. It was exactly what he expected for an Amish settlement; the buildings were all evenly spaced apart with tended yards. A huge field extended from one edge of the town where the forest had been cleared off- ostensibly used to build the houses. All of which were two stories and similarly shaped. Surprisingly it did not have a defensive wall around it. Hugh stayed on the path he was on and entered town. He looked up, hoping to see street signs, but there weren't any. Or even a 'welcome to' sign.

As he walked into the town, several people gave him sidelong looks but no one said anything to him- with such a population, the odds were that everyone did not know everyone else, so he was at least afforded a little anonymity. High looked at the buildings as he went- they all were solidly built in a German fachwerk style with

exposed angled timbers with plaster in between them. “Just like the homeland, Ja?” He said to a passerby. They looked the other way. Since he had gorged himself the day before he wasn’t at all hungry so he let the person go on their way.

Hugh reached the center of town; there was a large open plaza with a roaring fire in the middle. Almost a dozen men and women were sitting around it on well made, comfortable looking benches. “You people.” He said with a headshake. With a half-dozen hours until daylight, he decided to try and get information on the world he was currently living in.

Fourteen

"Mind if I join you, brother?" Hugh asked as he sat at one end of the group. "Just for a little while." He gave a friendly smile. "Nice; everyone looks so plain." He added since everyone was dressed similarly.

"Sure, friend." A man looked up at him. He gave Hugh a second look. "You new around here?"

Hugh smirked; it had been quite a long time since anyone was surprised with his height. "Just passing through," Hugh said. "Heading south; back home."

"Are you wearing your little brother's pants?" A woman asked as she pointed. Hugh's pants stopped at his calves. "Run out of deer?"

"Abigail." The man said disparagingly.

The woman's voice seemed familiar to Hugh. He looked at her. "What's that?"

"I am sorry." She said as she fought to keep a smile from her face. "It's just that they are very short."

Hugh recognized the voice as one of the three outside of his hiding place earlier in the day. "They are, actually." He said, then because she was being rude. "We were attacked. Everything got stolen and when my brother fought back, they killed him." He shook his head and lowered his voice. "Inuit."

"Inuits?" Abigail said with a nod. "It is typical for them." Now she lowered her voice. "They are a Godless people; heathens."

Heathens? He thought. To further put her in her place, frowned at her. "You know that the plural is Inuit, and one of them is called an Inuk. There's no such thing as Inuits. It's like beaver or fox." He had spent a bit of time with them and while he had to admit they were for the most part, heathens, they were also a fun-loving and welcoming people prone to drinking and parties.

"What? Who ever heard of that?" The woman replied. "Where are you from?"

"Abigail, we have talked about…"

Deciding they had no idea about the name of any cities in what used to be in America, he said "Seattle." He pointed south. "That way about twelve hundred miles."

The woman stared at him.

"What now?" Hugh asked, self-consciously.

"No one can walk that far." She said flatly.

Hugh smiled. "Sure they can. It's just a matter of how much time they have to spend doing it. Hell, Buenos Aires is walking distance if you have the time."

"What is?" The man said.

"Your words are strange." The woman said. "Where did you say you were from?"

Hugh took a breath; being combative would not get him the answers he was looking for. "I'm sorry, I'm from a town on the Pacifican Ocean. It's called Seattle. It is a month's walk from here. My brother and I were exploring when we were attacked."

"What would you be looking for up here?"

"Abigail." The man said. "I am sorry…" The man's voice trailed off.

"Hugh." Hugh offered. "My name is Hugh." He smiled as he held out his hands. "Yes, yes; I know it's not a common name up here." He chuckled. "Truth be told, even back home, it's not a common name."

"Hugh." The man repeated. "I'm Eli. You'll have to excuse Abigail, she's suspicious of strangers." He raised an eyebrow at her. "And we have discussed her speaking to people like this on many occasions."

"I understand, Eli." Hugh said, thinking back to the Amish he had met long ago; they were very suspicious of strangers as well. He looked at her. "I apologize for snapping at you Sister Abigail; it's just

I'm still upset about losing my brother." He lied. "Even so, it was rude of me as a guest here at your fire to correct you. I am sorry."

"And I am as well." Abigail said. "Those… Inuit are demons. They'll kill you and disappear into the night. You're lucky to be alive."

"I'm sure they're Humans. Just because they…" Hugh began.

"Oh no; they're not Humans." Abigail interrupted him. "There is no way they are Humans." She looked up at the night sky as her voice trailed off.

Hugh got a strange feeling. "Oh, right." He said, unsure of why 'human' was no longer what people were called. "So." He was suddenly at a loss for words; his chain of thought was completely gone. "I…" He tried. "I was just heading back…home."

"Are you looking for a place to spend the night?" Eli asked.

Hugh looked out into the neat town. "I don't know. I might just keep moving through."

Abigail shook her head. "No, that's not a good idea. Dangerous things are out at night."

Hugh gave a genuine laugh. "Oh yeah, I saw that first hand. It seems I borrowed the den of this giant wolf. He did not seem pleased with me at all."

"You saw Neken?" A man two down said. "Up close?"

"Real close." Hugh held his hands out. "Head this wide. That wolf has a name? Does someone in town own that beast?"

"No; he is wild." Eli shook his head. "But he is well known around here. We avoid him when we can. But sometimes, he will take our kills from us."

"I can see why you let that giant beast have them." Hugh said. "Well, he's back that way." He pointed north. "In a little cave, so heading south should be safe, I think. Right?" He fished for other dangerous animals. Or people.

"There are other dangers." Abigail shook her head. "No; you shouldn't go out into the wilderness at night."

Hugh looked at her. "I'm sorry Abigail, I guess it's because I'm not from here. What other dangers?"

"Neken isn't the only wolf." Eli said. "There are others, just not as big."

"But they hunt in packs," A young man said to the nods of the ones around him. "They are just as dangerous. And…" His voice trailed off.

"And?" Hugh said. "I know there are Moose out here, but if you leave them alone, they leave you alone. Same with the bears. Fox too."

Eli looked at the fire. "There are other dangers."

"Benfleet." Abigail said. "Someone needs to tell him because he doesn't know."

Hugh looked at the young man who had spoken last. "Benfleet, what other dangers are there?"

The young man laughed. "That is a good joke, Hugh. No; I am Isaac."

Several others laughed.

"Benfleet? Is that another animal?" Hugh offered.

"No. Benfleet looks like a Forester; like us. But he is not like us." Isaac said.

Hugh kept himself from asking why a Forester wasn't a human. "So how is this Benfleet dangerous? Is he a thief?"

"He will steal your life, if that's what you mean." Abigail said. She lowered her voice to a conspiratorial tone. "He will *eat* you."

Hugh said, suddenly interested. "He eats people? Come on now. You're just trying to play a joke on a stranger, trying to scare him."

Several other people around the fire began talking and nodding their heads. "It's not safe at night, Hugh." Said one of the men farther down. "You would serve yourself best by waiting until morning light to go out."

"That is the truth; Benfleet doesn't come out in the daylight." Another said. "Wait till then. Besides, Neken sleeps during the day as well. So it's much safer all around."

"Unless it's raining, then he won't come out at all. Hates the rain." Said another.

"Neken?" Hugh asked.

"No, Benfleet." The man replied. "He avoids it."

"Not the Inuit." Abigail pointed out, accepting what the stranger had said about the plural for them, even though it sounded odd. "They definitely hunt during the day. Rain or shine."

Hugh considered what they had said. In his centuries of living, he had never met anyone like himself. Or at least he didn't realize he had. "So he… looks like you?" He hesitated. "Or me, perhaps?" The fact that this other did not like rain -as Hugh did not- also piqued his interest.

"He isn't tall like you," Isaac said. "He is more like me but hunched over like a bear. And much stronger too. He doesn't look so he should be as strong as he is. He does have dark hair like you. But dark eyes as well instead of blue like yours."

"Have you tried talking to him?"

"He doesn't talk. And he is an expert hunter," Eli said. "He will come upon you so quietly you do not know he is even there. Until it is too late."

"He can hide himself from others." Abigail said. "Trick their minds so they can't see him when he's standing right there with them." She looked around. "He could even be here right now listening and we would not know it."

"Abigail, don't say things like that." Isaac said. He reached down and tossed another branch onto the fire. "Even in jest."

"So where does this Benfleet live?" Hugh asked. He added quickly: "So I can make sure I avoid him."

"He lives to the south." Isaac pointed. "Someplace that way."

"Someplace?"

"We have tried to follow him to his home but we always lose him." Eli explained.

"Because he becomes a mist." Abigail said matter-of-factly.

"Abigail, stop talking nonsense." Eli said. He looked at Hugh. "He does *not* become a mist." He shrugged. "But he does seem to be able to hide very well."

"Because he is some sort of demon." Abigail said. "He might look like us, but he isn't like us. At all."

"Huh." Was all Hugh could say at this staggering piece of information. After what had been centuries, or apparently millennia, he now knew about another like himself. "I mean, very strange." He said finally. "And dangerous." The fact that this other was able to hide himself was interesting; Hugh also was able to do that as long as there were shadows he could blend into. However, turning into a mist like so many stories had said vampires could do was a very interesting and tempting piece of information. Where did his clothes go when he became a mist? What about the things he was carrying? Did they turn to mist as well, or fall to the ground? *Unfathomable.*

However, being able to become a mist along with his ability to glide, would make him become practically invulnerable. Now before he did head south, he needed to find this Benfleet character and speak to him. If he could speak. He considered that. It may have been that he spoke a different language than these Amish did. Hugh hoped Benfleet spoke one of the ones he spoke. The name 'Benfleet' didn't sound familiar, but he also never in his wildest dreams expected to find an Amish colony in Alaska.

"So you will spend the night in town." Eli said.

This brought Hugh out of his introspection. "What?"

"I have a bed in my cellar where you can stay. You are welcome to it."

"Oh." Hugh said wondering if the invitation from so far away from the cellar would be sufficient or if Eli would have to offer it again once they were there. Now he was interested in finding out. "I do not want to cause any trouble."

"No." Eli shook his head. "After we were rude to a stranger? No, no; it is what we should have done from the start."

"Well, you just can't skip over Hebrews chapter thirteen, verse two, now can you?" Hugh said. He had spent a lot of time being talked to by religious people throughout his years on dark city corners. He had eaten several 'street preachers' because of it.

"Be not forgetful to entertain strangers: for thereby some have entertained angels unawares." Abigail nodded as she quoted the verse. "Very true, brother."

Hugh smirked. "Oh, don't worry; I am no angel. Far from it, in fact."

"We all fall short." Eli pointed out.

Hugh held up his hands. "Listen Brother Eli, a lot has happened to me these past couple of days; I'm too tired for you and I to walk along that Roman road," he said referring to the path to salvation as described by the apostle Paul in the book of Romans in the Bible. The associated verses were called 'The Roman Road'. The first 'stop' was Romans chapter three, verse twenty-three; "…for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God…" Hugh had spent the first couple of decades of his existence furious with God for making him what he was; a killer. He then decided he had to be part of some 'master plan' and just lived the way he needed to in order to survive.

Eli pointed at him. "Nevertheless, it looks like you will need some supplies before you try to make your way home. You have nothing with you so you would never complete your journey and the blame would lie with us for being poor hosts."

"Oh, I have some gear." Hugh said, before realizing he had said earlier he had been robbed of everything.

"I thought the Inuit took everything from you." Abigail said. "Even your little brother."

"Abigail." Eli scolded.

"They did." Hugh said, working up a lie quickly. "They took all our clothes, supplies, and our weapons and were laughing at us as we stood there naked. Then my brother got really angry and tried to fight them. When I joined in, they dropped a bag and ran off after they shot him, that is. So I do have one bag." He said. "But it was my brother's bag which is why these pants don't fit." He was very pleased with his on-the-spot lie. "Jeremy was a good bit shorter than me." He said, deciding he would make the lie even more tragic; "he took after our mother that way."

"Where is it?" Abigail asked suspiciously. "This bag of yours, brother Hugh?"

"I left it in the woods before coming into town." Hugh said. "I thought that as a stranger, I might be attacked so I didn't want to have to try to carry a bag with me while I ran off. If I had to drop it to get away, I would lose my only bag and be stuck with nothing in the wilderness. So I hid it by a tree until I was sure that the town was safe for me." He smiled. "If only I had known that you were Amish, I would have brought it with me because I have met other Amish and they are a good and upstanding people." He looked at Abigail, "and they speak their mind so you know just where you stand with them."

"That was a wise move." Eli stood. "But as you now see, this town is safe for you." He looked at the other man. "Isaac, you will come with us while Hugh gathers his bag."

"Who me?" Isaac startled. "Wh-why me?" He looked out into the darkness. "Can't we just get the bag tomorrow in the daytime?"

"I will come too." Abigail stood. "So there are four of us." She smiled. "All you have to be able to do is run faster than me to be safe."

Hugh laughed as he stood as well. "You have no idea how old of a joke that is."

Abigail looked at him. "It isn't a joke; it's the truth."

"It is." Eli assured him. He gestured. "Let's go, Isaac."

Isaac still hadn't stood. "Well, I…" He rubbed his knee as if he were prepared to invent an injury to remain behind.

Hugh moved to him and extended a hand. "Come Brother Isaac, surely Psalm twenty-three four will give you comfort."

Isaac took Hugh's hand and allowed himself to be pulled to his feet. "You are right of course, Hugh." He said as he cocked his head to the side. "You aren't Amish, but you are a believer then?"

"I am aware." Hugh said with a headshake. "Let's just leave it at that. In the meantime, I just hope I'm not the slowest one here." Hugh thought he would enjoy his time among these Amish. He had before as well; they were skilled, hardworking and very, very straightforward. He was not joking when he said a person knew where they stood with them. They were also very gullible, believing a great many lies told to them by a bloodthirsty, murderous vampire

who was also able to be charming and witty and as an added bonus, could make strong furniture and water-tight canoes.

As Hugh and the other three walked to the edge of town, he was torn between just killing all three of them when they got out of town and just blaming the mysterious and deadly Benfleet for it after coming back alone, or just leaving and finding another town. Or even blaming the wolf. Still, there were questions he wanted answered and these people seemed interested in helping. He had indeed experience with other Amish people, having interacted with them several times in the past. The last time, he actually lived in an Amish colony for three months while hiding from the authorities in Pennsylvania. He had told the head of the colony he had photophobia from a case of meningitis and therefore only came out at night to avoid debilitating headaches. Since he was skilled at making furniture and canoes, he was welcomed into the community and treated kindly because of his terrible illness. After three months, once the winter set in and the nights became longer, he left, not killing anyone in the colony before he did. "What's this town called?" Hugh asked, deciding he would just use them for information and perhaps more gunpowder and shot. "Has it been here long? I didn't see a sign at the entrance."

"This is Anchorage." Eli said. "It has been here forever."

"Anchorage?" Hugh said. "No. We're that close to the water? Was that damned Global Warning, rising seas thing true after all?"

"The sea is a day's walk from here." Isaac said.

"Then how is it an Anchorage?" Hugh said. "That's why the town was named that you know." He knew because he was in town when it happened. "It's a pretty funny story, you know. It became officially Anchorage in 1915. Before that, in 1910, most folks called it Knik Anchorage or Ship Creek because it was the anchorage for the town of Knik across the water. There was a vote in 1914 to decide on the name but Anchorage came in third. The government mapping agency then decided to name it 'Ship Creek' but Congress thought it would be confused with 'Sheep Creek' in Juneau so they decided to call it Woodrow Creek after the President." He hesitated. "Woodrow Wilson, that is. So Congress voted and made it official; Woodrow Creek was the name."

The other three stopped to look at Hugh as he spoke.

Hugh stopped walking as well. Then he continued: "But back then communication was pretty spotty so no one in Alaska even knew that Congress had decided on the name way out in Washington D. C. so they kept calling it Knik Anchorage. Then about that same time, the railroad was building tracks up here and they didn't know that Washington had decided on a name for the town either so they called the town 'Ship Creek', which honestly was a stupid name for a town. Then when the railroad bypassed Knik that town died off so it was out of the picture. So since Knik was a ghost town, the Post Office decided they would just shorten Knik Anchorage to just Anchorage. And kind of like that whole 'who really is Santa Claus movie'…" Hugh did an impression of Jack Payne from Miracle on

34th Street, "Your Honor, every one of the letters delivered here are addressed to Anchorage. Therefore the Post Office, a branch of the federal government recognizes this town to be the one and only Anchorage!" He shook his fist in the air. "So, it must be called Anchorage!" He looked at the three; they were staring at him. "And that's how Anchorage got its name." He shook his head. "Those were crazy times out here."

No one said anything for a few moments.

"What are you talking about?" Isaac finally said.

"It's where the name Anchorage came from." Hugh replied. "Because. Never mind. Just never mind." He shook his head again.

"Why a sign at the entrance?" Abigail asked, not understanding any of the other things Hugh had said. "Why would there be a sign at the entrance of the town?"

Hugh shrugged. "It's what I have seen other places. There will be a sign that says 'Welcome to Vancouver', or 'Welcome to Calgary', my town's sign says 'Welcome to Seattle, the city of good will'. Then it will have whatever year it was founded in, and sometimes the current population."

"Why would they do that?" Abigail asked.

"To be hospitable, I suppose?" He considered it. There wasn't really any reason to put the current population of a town on a sign now that he thought about it. How would that serve anyone even if they had nefarious intentions? When the town was founded wasn't

really useful information either. "Now that you mention it, I suppose it is a little strange. But maybe travelers would like to know the name of the town and a little about it?"

"If they are coming to Anchorage, then they know the name of it, otherwise why would they be coming this way?" Isaac asked.

"Brother Isaac speaks the truth." Eli said as they all began walking again.

"I suppose I agree with you on that." Hugh said as they made it to the edge of town. "Of course, I didn't know the name of it because I was just passing through. I didn't even know there was a town here. Maybe you can make a sign that says 'Anchorage. The Amish welcome you'."

"Not the Inuit." Abigail said.

"No, of course not; not them." Hugh said. He looked into the forest. "But Anchorage was right on the water. A day's walk you say? That's damned peculiar."

"There are ruins right on the water." Isaac pointed west. "That way. But they are mostly big mounds of overgrown grass and dirt. There are some square stones that were probably part of strange looking buildings. Or what is left of them that is."

"And there are wild men that live there that are not hospitable at all." Eli added.

"That is true." Abigail said. "It is very dangerous. If you go alone, you would not survive."

"So there are people living there as well?" Hugh considered that. "I wonder if…"

"Yes, yes; you can talk about that once we are back in town. It is getting late you know." Isaac interrupted. "Where is your bag, Brother Hugh?"

Hugh looked into the forest again. Suddenly the bag presented another problem; it wasn't just one bag, it was two. Two very large bags. And two tusks. And a rifle. A rifle that might be recognized if there weren't a lot of them around town. If it wasn't recognized, it was still a rifle that had not been mentioned before as part of his extensive lie. "Wait here," Hugh said as he sprinted toward the tree with the broken branch. It was a good thirty yards away. He made it to it quickly, tore one bag free then sprinted back. He accomplished the entire circuit before any of the other three thought about following him.

"Well, we know who won't be last, don't we?" Isaac said with a smirk.

"Brother, how are you able to even travel the wilderness if you are that afraid of it?" Abigail laughed.

"I just didn't want to keep you. Like Brother Isaac said; it's getting late." Hugh lied. "And I'm tired; I'd like to get some rest."

"Let's go back to my home then," Eli suggested. "It is getting very late."

Fifteen

"I am sorry I don't have more to offer you," Eli said. "I have my family visiting at the moment so all the rooms upstairs are full."

"This is fine." Hugh said, looking down the steps at the dark basement with no windows. Thanks to his eyesight he could see in the dim basement perfectly. It was very neat with boxes and sacks stacked in straight rows. Jars ostensibly of preserved food lined two long shelves. In the far corner was a large hatch that led outside so wood and goods could be brought in and out without tracking through the house. It was a very Amish basement. "Very fine." He reached into his pouch and took out one of his Krugerrand. "In payment for the room."

"What is this?" Eli turned it over in his hands. It had a stag on one side and a man's profile on the other- Statesman Paul Kruger, who ironically happened to have a very long Amish-style beard. It also had the date '1993' on it.

"It's a Krugerrand. It's money. Gold from South Africa." Hugh explained. "But it's good everywhere."

"Money?"

"Sure. You know; something you use to pay for something else." Hugh explained. "You have never seen gold before?"

"Oh, I have seen gold before. We find it often. Gideon found some while down by the river. Pieces of it. He melted it down and made a simple ring from it."

"So how do you pay for things if you don't use money?" Hugh asked. "How do you get the food you don't grow yourself?"

"I bart for it, of course." Eli said.

"What?"

"When I need flour and it is milling time, I go to the mill and help grind the wheat. I get some of the flour for helping. If I need flour and it is not milling time, go to the mill and tell them I need flour for my house. Then I give them some of the bowls I make in exchange. Or I fix something that is broken. There is often something that needs mending at the mill with how much it runs."

"Barter, you mean." Hugh said.

"Of course. Barter is the noun; to bart is the verb because it is an action. Bartering is the gerund."

Hugh laughed. "Well, this is the last place I expected an English lesson."

"English?"

"Hell, forget it, Eli." Hugh said. He gestured at the coin. "Where I come from we have pieces of gold and silver that have value. We trade our goods and services for these pieces of gold and silver with other people for their goods and services."

"That seems complicated."

"It's easier to put a bunch of those in your pocket than a bunch of bowls."

Now Eli laughed. "That may be true." He looked at the coin again. "He is a fine-looking man. I appreciate and accept it, Hugh. It is a fair bartering for the use of the room until you move on."

He looked down the stairs again. "Well, Eli this is a fine room." He said, glad he was able to convince the people he had met that he wasn't a threat. It made it much easier to figure out his place in this new, primitive world.

"I am not sure about very fine," Eli said. "A small bed in a room with no windows."

Hugh turned and looked at Eli. "It's not going to rain on my head and I don't have to worry about someone stealing my things while I am asleep." He held off on using the lie about photophobia because he was unsure if people even knew about meningitis anymore.

Eli laughed. "I suppose that is true. There were quite a bit of clouds today. We may get rained on, yet."

"Not I." Hugh said with a smile of his own. There was no reason to not be friendly with his host- especially after inviting him into his home. "Well, I'm going to get some sleep. It's been a long day." He thought for a moment. "In the morning I might head out

before dawn to see if I can track down those men who stole from us."

"Men?" Eli said. "I thought they were Inuits. I mean Inuit."

"It's a figure of speech," Hugh said. "Where I come from, we lump everyone together if they have two legs, two arms, and a head." He decided that he needed to get to the bottom of the mystery about how the people he was interacting with did not consider themselves to be humans. "It's just easier that way."

"If you say so." Eli replied, sounding unconvinced. "Good night to you. I will see you tomorrow."

"I hope to be back by late tomorrow afternoon," Hugh said, setting up his alibi for sleeping all day. A thought occurred to him. "Is there a river nearby?" He asked. From what he remembered of Alaska geography, there should have been several that led to the Pacific Ocean and Anchorage.

"Yes there is. It leads from here to the Pacifican Ocean." Eli said.

"Wait." Another thought occurred to Hugh. "Does this river lead the other way to a huge mountain?"

"It does. The Susitna River leads toward Denali, a week away."

Hugh smiled wide. "Ahh, finally some names I know. Yes, the Susitna River. And it runs into Iliamna Lake, right? A big lake where two rivers join? Then it runs south into the Pacific… Pacifican Ocean?"

"Yes, that is right, Hugh. You have done a bit of exploring here."

Hugh nodded. He decided to stay in the town and use it as a base of operations as he explored the surrounding wilderness. "I would really much like to borrow a boat to go down to the ruins to look around."

"Oh, you can't do that now; the river is too wild from the thaws."

"Nonsense," Hugh said, "I've canoed in these rivers in the middle of the spring thaws lots of times. At night even."

"In a canoe?" Eli asked. "We use those in the summer when weather is good. In the spring thaws like now it is too dangerous for our rafts. Or our canoes."

"There is no way unless… wait, are your canoes dug out the middle of a log?"

"Of course." Eli said. "How else do you make a canoe?"

"Oh, Eli. Dugout canoes?" Hugh smiled again. "How about I show you how to make a twenty, twenty-four foot long, strong, water tight, light boat that takes six paddlers and will hold three thousand pounds of meat or furs or whatever else you want to carry. And it will run the rapids with ease."

"Brother Hugh," Eli said seriously. "What do you make something like that out of?"

"I will show you. But…" He hesitated, "I will need to do the work at night because the sunlight hurts my eyes." He decided to plant the seeds of his lie now.

"Oh. Like when it snows." Eli said. "I understand how that is." He thought about the specifications that Hugh had said- it was well worth a few sleepless nights. "How long would it take to build such a boat? And out of what?"

"With the woodworking you already do, four of us could build one from gathering the wood to putting it in the water in under two weeks. Easily." From past experience, Hugh knew that a ten-hour workday was a normal thing to the Amish.

"It is made of wood?" Eli shook his head. "Our dugout canoes are only as big as the tree we use and we can't use very large trees or it is too heavy to move."

"It is made of Birch Bark, Cedar, Spruce Root, and Spruce Gum." Hugh held his arms out wide. "Things you have plenty of right here in the forest. Oh, and rocks. Lots of rocks too."

"Rocks?"

"Oh right, and one bear."

"You are making fun of me with this." Eli said as he frowned.

"No, no!" Hugh assured him. "We need bear fat for the pitch. So we need a freshly killed bear. Really. You'll see. The rocks are to hold things in place as it's built. It's not complicated, just time consuming. And when it is done, it's not only very useful, it is

beautiful to look at. You will be amazed, Eli. Amazed." Hugh said, also amazed that the ability to build a birch bark canoe had been lost; the American Indians had been building them for centuries. Perhaps they were only known further south for some reason.

"If this is true, then God has sent us an angel indeed." Eli said. He took Hugh's hand and shook it. "In the morning I will let the woodworkers know. You said you need three?"

"Any more than four and we would be tripping over ourselves. Tell you what, with how you people work with wood, make it seven and we'll build two at the same time. Two teams of four. Two people is slow work, and five or six is too many." Hugh said. "Understand?"

"It is like building a cabinet." Eli said with a smile. "That I can understand."

"But we start tomorrow night, okay? That is something I can't bargain on."

"Then that is what we shall do, brother." Eli said. "We will work in Brother Benjamin's barn; it is the largest in town." He couldn't stop smiling as he turned and hurried out of the room, probably to wake the carpenters right then to tell them what was planned.

Hugh shook his head. "Riling up an entire town of Amish folk, Hugh you're out of control." He said to himself. "Changing the balance of power and trade in one fell swoop." He smirked. "Maybe this will start an industrial revolution and those damned dangerous Inuit will have to rethink their strategy." He shrugged as he walked down the stairs to a far corner where there was a bed and a table. It

was right next to a hatch that led outside. He put his sack beside the bed and his oil lamp on the table. He then stacked several bags of flour in front of the bed, making a small wall so that it couldn't be seen from the door at the top of the stairs.

Hugh carefully slid back the wooden bar on the hatch and climbed out as quietly as he could. After lowering it, he jogged toward the edge of town to where his other bag and rifle were. The last thing he needed was someone to see him running at an unnatural speed. However if he was going to encounter someone like himself, but more experienced, he definitely wanted to be armed before trying to talk to them. He decided he would abandon the Mastodon tusks; he was sure that showing the town how to build canoes would provide him with all the supplies he needed.

Sixteen

Hugh moved cautiously through the forest south of town listening intently to everything around him. Even so, he didn't expect to find anyone on his first attempt. The size of the forest made the odds of encountering this Benfleet person, or animal, or whatever he was that didn't include Human on his first attempt very unlikely. He had heard the sounds of something behind him several times but decided it was just animals moving around since nothing approached him.

After almost two hours of walking in the forest, he sat on a stump to gather his thoughts. He had been walking in a zig-zag pattern away from the town in a southern direction, hoping he would come across Benfleet's home, or lair or whatever he lived in. Once again, he thought he had heard a deer or other animal rustling in the forest behind him but since it did not sound large or approach him, he decided it was not the highly dangerous Benfleet.

Choosing to try for another hour or so before heading to his bed, he stood.

Hugh was tackled by someone running at a full sprint.

He never heard a thing.

As he tumbled on the ground with his attacker, he pushed off and floated to the ground just past the other then rolled to his feet, ready to fight.

The figure that tackled him stood in a crouch- arms splayed out. Hugh could see his sharp fangs in the moonlight.

"Benfleet!" Hugh said. "Just wait!"

Benfleet growled at him, drool running out of his mouth.

"Benfleet?" Hugh circled around him. "Listen I'm like you. I'm a vampire. I just want to talk." He tried the same sentence in Russian, Finnish, Swedish, Inuit, and finally Norwegian, all while keeping his distance. Benfleet didn't seem to react to any language. "Fine." Hugh reverted to English. "If you want to fight, let's go!" He bared his fangs. "We are the…" His voice trailed off as he noticed that Benfleet's face contorted and jerked as he drooled excessively. His arms also spasmed as he held them out. "Oh Hell." He said. "You poor bastard."

Benfleet growled as he lunged at Hugh, who stepped back to avoid being grabbed.

While the rabies virus had ravaged his body, his vampirism kept him alive. Between the spasms, vomiting, anxiety and confusion, it was easy to see how the townsfolk did not consider him to even be human. Being afraid of the rain -hydrophobia- was also a classic sign of the rabies virus. Vampirism notwithstanding. "Do you understand me?"

Benfleet let out a growl and charged Hugh again.

Hugh was now not interested in any sort of physical altercation with someone with full-blown rabies. He had often wondered how that disease, which was for the longest time a death sentence, would affect him. After a vaccine was developed by Louis Pasteur in 1885 he had worried less about his travels in the wilderness. Now it seemed that civilization had forgotten even basic medicine. And from how the disease affected Benfleet he was definitely planning on keeping his distance. Hugh brought the rifle around and struck Benfleet in the face with the butt of it, knocking him to the ground. "Stop! Just stop!"

He spun the rifle around again as he took a step over the fallen man. He pressed the muzzle against the man's forehead. "Listen to me, Benfleet!" As he looked for any sort of recognition from the man, he noticed that the man's feet were covered with a mist. "What?" As he watched, Benfleet's feet, shins, then knees seemed to cease to exist. "How are you doing that!" He shouted at the man. "How!"

"Think of nothingness." Benfleet rasped at him. "Soon I will make you nothing." His waist faded away, leaving just a low-lying mist.

Hugh pulled the trigger. Having Benfleet's head pressed hard against the ground kept the gore from splattering dangerously.

"Oh man Benfleet; that must have been horrible for you." He looked down. Benfleet's waist and feet were back- clothes and shoes

as well. *Unfathomable.* "How does that even work?" He shook his head as he returned to his sack.

"Look out!" Abigail shouted.

Hugh spun around to look. Benfleet was working himself to his knees. The entire back of his head was missing. But it didn't seem to matter.

"Kill you!" Benfleet rasped. "Heal me… Vampire blood."

"How is that possible!" Abigail screeched. "And you're… you're a monster like him!"

"Shut up and stay back!" Hugh said. He took two steps toward Benfleet and kicked him in the face, knocking him to the ground. He put his foot on his face to hold him there as the man thrashed about. "Get me a thick stick, Abigail!"

"Why?"

"Just get me a thick stick!" He snarled. "And make it fast or he'll doom us both to the same fate as his!" To his horror, Benfleet's legs were once again gone, replaced by a thick white mist. "Hurry up before he's gone!"

Within moments, Abigail scooted up to Hugh. She held a five-foot long branch as thick as her arm out to him, keeping her distance. "You're a monster too! I saw you!"

Hugh snatched the stick from her. "Stand back!" He said as he pressed Benfleet's head into the ground with his foot. As he stepped

back, he raised the stick high over his head then brought it down into the middle of Benfleet's chest, staking him to the ground. He was a mist from the waist down.

Hugh took several steps back and looked at the man- he was whole again. "Oh man." He took a step toward him. Benfleet didn't move.

"Is he dead?" Abigail stepped closer.

"He was already dead."

"What?"

"We need to start a fire. He needs to be burned just to be sure." He looked at Abigail. "Can you start a fire?"

"You're like him." She pointed at the still body. "I saw your face change like his!"

"Can you start a fire?" He said again. He snapped his fingers. "A fire. Abigail! A fire! Can you start one?"

Abigail regained her senses. "Yes, of course I can start a fire. What do you take me for?"

"Good. Start one while I get some wood. We'll pile it around him. We need a huge fire to make sure he burns completely up. Nothing can be left. Nothing."

Abigail looked at Benfleet. "What… what was he?" She looked at him. "What are you? What is a vampire?"

Hugh smirked. “I’ll tell you what, you start a fire, I’ll gather wood and I’ll tell you a story that you will never, ever believe, Sister.”

Abigail took a step back. She looked over her shoulder toward town.

“Oh trust me when I tell you, you’d never make it to town, Abigail. Never.” Hugh said. “And if I wanted you dead, it would happen right… now.”

Both stared at each other for a long moment.

“So,” Hugh said with a smile, “since that doesn’t seem to be happening, how about you start a fire while I gather some wood? We both have questions that need answers.”

“Oh.” Abigail looked from him to the dead man then back again. “Okay then.”

“Okay then.” Hugh repeated as he moved off to find dead fall wood.

Seventeen

Both Hugh and Abigail were sitting on one side of the roaring fire- up wind. When she had sat opposite him, he pointed out that with how infected Benfleet was, he wasn't sure if the smoke would carry the disease or not, so she ended up sitting just two feet from him.

They both stared at Benfleet's body as the fire consumed it.

"What was he? What are you?"

"Okay, I'm going to explain some things to you and I just want you to know that when I say 'I don't know', it means I really don't know. Got it? It will get really annoying if you keep asking the same question over and over."

"I don't understand."

"You'll see." Hugh said. He gestured at her. "Ladies first."

"What are you?"

Hugh had never discussed his ailment with anyone, even people he was getting ready to kill. Even after popular literature had made vampires 'cool'. "I am what is called a Vampire."

"I heard you say that. Him too. What is that?"

Hugh let out a long sigh. "Okay, here we go. I am a human that was attacked by another vampire a long, long, long time ago. That infected me with vampirism. Which means now I don't age." He looked at her. "I am very hard to injure, much less kill."

"He's dead, right?" She gestured at Benfleet.

"Yes. A stake through the heart will kill us, just like the books say. And fire is another way to kill us." Now he pointed at the fire. "I just wanted to be sure because of what happened to him."

She stared at Hugh.

"Next question?" Hugh coaxed.

"Who made you a Vampire?"

"I don't know."

"But how could you not know?"

"Did you hear when I said that if I said 'I don't know' you should just ask a different question?"

"Yes."

"It's because I don't know. I don't remember being attacked. I just remember waking up and being changed. But, the way I understand it, if you are bitten by a vampire, you contract vampirism if the attack doesn't kill you. I never saw the vampire that attacked me then or ever again, so ask a different question." Hugh said.

"There are books about you? Where?"

Hugh laughed. "That's your next question? That? Popular literature, going back a long time. There are many stories about Vampires. Some of them are horror stories, some of them love stories. Some of them are even comedies."

"I've never heard of any."

"Can you read?" Hugh asked. He brought his hands up defensively. "I'm not trying to be rude, but with how the world looks now, it's a valid question, trust me."

"Of course I can read." Abigail said.

"Do you have books? Again, I'm not trying to start an argument."

"Yes; there are books in the town library. Mainly how to build things or farming, or things like that. There are some that are for children but I don't see how this." She pointed at the burning corpse. "Could be something for children."

"You've obviously never read the Grimm brothers" Hugh said. "The next question is *not* about the Grimm brothers."

"What do you mean 'how the world looks now', and what did you mean by long, long, long time ago? How old are you if you don't age?"

"That's hard to say." Hugh said.

"You don't know how old you are?"

"Well, I knew exactly how old I was up until I fell into that huge ravine. Six hundred forty years old, plus whatever age I was when I was attacked, probably mid-twenties by how I look. So I believe I am six hundred sixty-seven years old. Or I was until I fell into that ravine."

"Well that will be easy to cypher. How long were you in the ravine? It couldn't have been that long." She eyed him. "Right?"

"When I said 'the world as it is' is because when I fell into the ravine, the Earth." Hugh gestured around. "This planet had nine billion people living on it. We had ships that were flying into space. Often. We had the beginning of a colony on the Moon. A dozen people were there. And there were plans for floating platforms on Venus with more people on them, and we had been to Mars twice. We had a space station orbiting the planet where a dozen people lived on and off all the time." He looked at Abigail; her eyes were huge. "We had vehicles that we could ride around in that weren't pulled by animals. On the land, on the water, and even in the air. When I said my home was a little over twelve hundred miles away, I didn't think that was a long way because I could travel that in just a four-hour flight in a huge air craft with three hundred other people. We had machines that could solve math problems, think, and even talk. We had been to the depths of the oceans. That's the world I knew when I fell into that ravine." He jerked a thumb in that direction. "Which when I fell into it was an impressive three hundred feet or so, not the twenty it is now."

"None of that could be true."

"And," Hugh considered it for a moment. "When I woke up after being frozen solid, there were giant hairy beasts. Mastodons they were called, that had been extinct for four thousand years, people don't fly anywhere, and the only way to get anywhere is to walk."

"We have wagons with horses." Abigail said defensively. "And we have boats." She looked up. "People lived on the Moon during your time? And Mars and Venus?"

"Well no. No one lived on Venus yet, but that was the plan. Floating villages, a hundred people or so on each one. Giant floating platforms high above the ground where it was safe to live. And on Mars they were going to live in giant metal containers on the ground. Containers they connected together into a village, then later a town or even a city. They were already doing it on the Moon. This rich guy had been sending containers into space for an entire year. When they got in space, he then sent them toward the moon. He had sent fifty of them there. Then they were connected together and filled with air. Thirty-five thousand square feet of living space and growing every month. Ten or fifteen a month was the pace he wanted to maintain. For an entire year. And it was the year twenty twenty-six." Hugh startled. "Hey, that's my next question; so how could it be twenty twenty-one when it's thousands of years later than when I was frozen and that was in twenty twenty-six? That man said that on the coast was the left-over ruins of a city. That was Anchorage in my world. Three hundred thousand people lived there. And I had lived there for over eighty years. So I figure thousands of years have passed by since I fell. Thousands."

"So you're a… Human?"

"What? That's what you got out of all of that?" Hugh looked at her. "We are all human beings. Two legs, two arms; humans. That's twice someone had made that distinction. How are we all not human all of a sudden?"

"You said you were a vampire."

"Well yes, I have an *affliction* that makes me a vampire, but I am still a human being." Hugh said. "I have dark hair; you have light hair. We are both still human. If you get sick, you don't become the flu; you become a human with the flu."

"So what does being a vampire mean? You can't get hurt easily, and you don't age. Anything else? Can you hide like he could?"

"I can't turn into a mist, if that's what you're asking. I didn't really think he could either; it's absurd." Hugh said. "There is no physical way, or law of physics that could explain how he was able to do that."

"You can't do that?" Abigail asked.

"No. I have no idea how. Since I never met the person who made me a vampire, I never got any sort of lesson on it. It has all been self-taught for me. Trial and error."

"I see." Abigail said.

"But I can influence other people so that they can't see me, or they will do what I want."

"People would do what you want?"

"Well, to a point." Hugh said. "I can't get someone to kill themselves. But I can get them to leave a door unlocked, not notice me, or to let me cheat at cards."

Abigail laughed out loud. "You use your powers to cheat at cards?"

"Well, it's a way of making money." He thought to his conversation with Eli. "Money that we used to bart with. You could win it gambling. You have gambling right?" Hugh said. "Well not the Amish, but I mean in general." He shook his head. "There used to be huge buildings called casinos where people would go to gamble. The people who ran the casino would have the games set up so they would win more often than anyone else."

"That sounds like cheating."

"It is." Hugh admitted. "Or was."

"And that's all? That's all being a Vampire is?"

He looked at her. "I have to drink blood to stay alive." He gestured at the fire. "That's what he was doing. He wasn't eating people; he was drinking blood to try and fight off the infection."

"No, he would cook and eat people. Others saw him do it."

"Well, that might have been because of the rabies."

"Rabies?"

"That's what he had. He was bitten at some point by a rabid animal. It could have been years, or centuries ago. Have you ever seen an animal that acted crazy, frothed at the mouth and was afraid of water."

"The madness." Abigail said. "It's lethal."

"Yes. And his vampirism kept it from killing him but the disease was destroying him anyway. But even with being a Vampire, he was still a human being." He tossed a stick on the fire. "And I pity him for what he had to endure."

"Except we aren't humans. We are just Inuit, Klondikes, Warriors, and people like me; Foresters."

"Because you live in the Yukon Forest."

"Yes."

Hugh considered that. "But you all look alike. I mean, mostly, right?"

"Two arms, two legs, like you said."

"Right. So you are all human. Down here on Earth." Now he looked upward. "And they were up there too. People. That's a hell of a thing." As Hugh had lived through the years, he had kept abreast of advancements in science and medicine. When night school came into being in 1921 to help fight illiteracy among the working class, he took dozens of college courses in mathematics, literature, and science- always just auditing them instead of actually enrolling in the

college. Hefty bribes to the professors allowed him to stay abreast of advancements throughout the decades.

When the space programs of various countries developed, he became keenly interested in them. The prospect of living on some far-off planet where the sun's rays were not dangerous was very alluring to him.

"That is not what they told us."

"Who?" Hugh asked.

"The ones that live up there." She pointed. "The Moon, Mars, other places too that I can't remember the names of. They told us we weren't humans. Humans don't live on the ground." She pointed upwards. "They live in the sky. They fly in the sky. And they live on those other planets. They have told us that at the gatherings."

"So there are people who live in space but visit Earth."

"Yes. The Humans visit us."

"Stop saying that. You are… we are all humans!" A thought occurred to Hugh. "So wait, these gatherings is when they come here?"

"Yes. They come once every two years."

"What for?"

"Gathering."

"Food and such?" Hugh nodded. "I can see how they would need to replenish their supplies. That makes sense."

"They take some of us."

"What?" Hugh looked at her. "Take you into space? Why?" He said, remembering that the Amish didn't use modern devices themselves. They would however accept car rides from neighbors and also put freezers in neighbors' property for them to use. And they would use public transportation as well. There seemed to be a very big grey area to the 'no technology' belief, however space flight would have to be off the table. "Why would you agree to go?"

"They say they are checking to see if we are better."

"Better? Better than what?"

"Better from the sickness." Abigail said.

"Sickness?" Hugh said. He looked at Abigail again. She did not look gaunt. Neither did the others in the town. She seemed very fit and was actually quite pretty. "So there was what; some sort of global war and nukes went off all over the place? Planet-wide plague? Millions dead, but the folks up in space were okay. Now they come down here to check on you. To see if they can return. But I guess they can't yet." He nodded. "That's got to be it; to see if they can return."

"They don't return." Abigail said.

"What? You said they come back every two years."

"No, the Hu… the people who live in space come back every two years to check on us, the ones they take with them don't return." Abigail looked down at the ground. "They never come back. Ever."

Hugh got a sinking feeling. "Wait. Why don't they just check you down here? A simple Geiger counter would tell them radiation levels. A quick physical and blood test to see if you're sick." He shook his head. "Oh, this sounds like some sort of…" He looked at her. "It sounds strange." He said, now planning to be at the next gathering so he could talk to one of these space-faring kidnappers one on one. That was where the real answers would come from. "How long have the gatherings been going on?"

Abigail shrugged. "Forever."

"How many do they take?" Hugh asked.

"Four. Two men and two women."

"That's it?"

"Yes. Only four." Abigail confirmed.

"Are they related? I mean do they take related people?"

"No. They make sure they aren't, in fact." Abigail answered as she looked at the ground. "If only they did."

Hugh didn't catch the change in her voice. "Yeah, that sounds right; plenty of genetic material stored up in two couples like that." He had taken several science classes that dealt with genetics. "So they're deepening their gene pool with you folks." He considered

that. "And some Inuit, and Warriors, and whoever else they visit. Oh man." He shook his head. "That's crazy."

The pair stared at the night sky for a few minutes in silence.

"Are you going to kill me now?" Abigail asked in a whisper. Her eyes shifted around to look at him without moving her head.

Hugh looked at her. "Yes." He said just as softly. When Abigail's eyes got large, he laughed. "I'm kidding. No I'm not going to kill you. We're sitting here trying to understand the universe and you think I'm just going to kill you?" He said with a chuckle. "Sister Abigail, you need to lighten up."

"Don't you need to drink blood?"

"Well sure but not all the time." Hugh said. "Do you have to drink water all the time to stay alive?"

"Well… No. But I do get thirsty." Her eyes swiveled back to him. "Sometimes."

"No." Hugh said. "And I can drink animal blood just fine." He shook his head. "You. You're the first person I have ever told about my condition in over centuries and you think I'm just going to kill you outright. Wow!"

"The thought occurred to me." Abigail said. "Now that I know your secret."

Hugh shoved her. "Lighten up, Abigail." He became serious, reconsidering his decision to kill the primitive yet remarkable woman.

"That is the right word though; secret. You can't tell anyone. It would get very ugly, very quickly."

"Why?"

"Because a person by themselves can be reasonable. They can sit here and listen to me talk about flying ships and visiting other planets, living for centuries, drinking blood and stay calm through the whole thing. A group of people? *A mob*? They'd be grabbing pitchforks and torches." He shook his head. "No, you can't tell anyone about what we've talked about. At least until after I've left. Otherwise it would be messy."

"Messy?"

"I really like myself so I'd kill every single person that tried to stop me from leaving town and they wouldn't be able to kill me." Hugh said.

"Oh. So once you left then."

"Except…" Hugh said.

"Except?"

"Except you need to be aware that telling them about me might make them begin to wonder about you."

"About me? Why?"

"Are you like me as well and hiding it from them? Will you become a vampire later because you sat with me? There will be doubts. A lot of doubts. And hushed conversations behind closed

doors. Pointing after you walk by. It would ruin your life, Abigail. It truly would. You've obviously never heard of Salem."

"I could come with you." She said.

"No. Absolutely not. That is *not* an option." He stood. "No. What we will do however, is go back to town and we will tell them that I was looking for my stolen items and you were following me. When Benfleet attacked, you warned me and I shot him in the head. Then we burned his body because he had The Madness. The best lies have a bit of truth to them."

"Okay." Abigail said as she also stood.

"Great. And on the way back, you can tell me where other towns are. I am trying to get home to Seattle and knowing where I can get supplies along the way would be useful information."

"Supplies?" Abigail said worriedly.

"Warm clothes. A tent so I don't get rained on when I sleep. Ammunition to shoot animals to eat." Hugh lied at the end. He slung the rifle across his shoulder. "Let's go. And you can tell me about how a gathering works and when the next one is."

Abigail fell in step beside Hugh and the pair returned to Anchorage. Everyone was asleep so that in true Amish fashion, they could be up right at dawn. The pair parted ways, deciding to tell their lie about Benfleet the next day.

Hugh spent the rest of the evening going through Eli's basement- it was full of dried food and clothes as well as stacks of bowls and wooden spoons and forks. There were two books about crop rotation and animal husbandry. He placed them against the door at the top of the stairs so if someone opened the door, they would be knocked ten feet to the ground. As the sun started to go up, he moved to the bed confident that if someone came in, by the time they got to the bottom of the stairs, he would have convinced them he wasn't actually in the room. Altering the perception of someone was still how he was going to hide himself. He was intrigued by Benfleet's ability to become a mist- there was no physical way it should happen. But it was obvious he was able to. *Think of nothingness.* He thought. *Sure, but what brings you back? Think of something?* The fear of being a mist forever frightened him so it would be something to think about before actually trying.

He fell asleep content in knowing that the next gathering was in three months; 'the first of August' Abigail has said. It was plenty of time for him to demonstrate how to build a canoe and set up a place of his own outside of town for him to drag one of the spacefaring humans to in order to interrogate them without the wholesome Amish watching… or hearing it happen.

Eighteen

Hugh stepped back beside Eli. The two groups of carpenters had been working for just one week and the two canoes were taking shape. The fact that they were all master carpenters made it so that once Hugh explained a process, they understood it completely the first time. Also, it helped that while building a canoe was a long process, it really wasn't a very technical one. There was quite a bit of repetition so once they understood how to lash a gunnel to the bark at the top of the side of the canoe, they could easily repeat it the dozens of times it required the entire length of it on both sides.

On a twenty-four-foot canoe like they were building, there was eight hundred feet of roots used as lashing; 'bore a hole through both gunnels and the skin of the canoe, run the root through and tightly lash it all together. Then repeat the entire length of the canoe' was the order of the day. At the moment, they had cut down the excess bark to the gunnels- the top inner and outer beams of the canoe that sandwiched the bark hull and were now lashing them tightly together. Once that was done, they would then install ninety-six to a hundred ribs along the inside of the hull, stiffening it considerably. Repetition, repetition, repetition.

Two carpenters were working either side at the front and two at the rear working towards them. At the pace they were going, they

would be finished with lashing the entire canoe by the end of the evening. The same was true on the other craft.

A seventh carpenter was taking notes and making sketches of the entire process. While another half dozen watched and commented on the process as the others worked. Everyone was amazed at the simplicity and beauty of the canoes that were materializing right in front of them.

"Wow, Brother Hugh." Was all Eli could say when he walked in. The dark spotted Birch bark contrasted with the light Cedar and Spruce Root lashing; the canoe was indeed a thing of symmetry and beauty. "That is indeed beautiful. And the size is just incredible."

"And watch this." Hugh said. He moved to the front of one of the canoes. "Jonas. Get on that end for a moment." When the man obliged, Hugh and Jonas picked up the entire twenty-four foot long, four-foot-wide canoe. "Two men to carry it. That leaves four to carry their supplies and six oars." The pair hefted the canoe several times then lowered it back down. Jonas went back to work on the lashing. "Nice, huh?"

Eli walked over and looked into the canoe. "It is not very deep on the inside."

"Once it is lashed together all the way around and we drive in the ribs, the floor will move down another two feet." Hugh explained. "That's tomorrow night." He pointed at a large table with various holes drilled in it and a pile of pegs that were used to keep the heated ribs in shape until they dried. There was a huge stack of

them there; each canoe would take between ninety-five and a hundred of them. There were four carpenters bending the thin cedar ribs they had carved the night before with gloved hands while two women tended the long boiling pots they were soaking them in. "By the time we're done with this, they'll be done with them. So they will be dry and ready to go in tomorrow night." Hugh put his hands on his hips. "This sure goes a lot faster with a bunch of folks working on it. A bunch of folks who know what they're doing and have clamps so we're not using rocks to hold stuff in place, to be more precise."

Eli patted Hugh's shoulder. "There is no way we can repay you for this." He looked at the man taking notes. "Amos, you have taken notes on all of this?"

Amos shook his head. "It is, as Hugh said very simple, just time consuming. I cannot believe we did not think of this ourselves."

"Well now you have it Amos. And you can teach the other Amish communities how to build them. Hold a class or something." Hugh said.

Amos grinned wide. "Their jaws will drop to the ground when they see us paddle up in these. Truly they will."

"Envy is a sin, Amos." Eli reminded him. "And so is vanity. Before we go, we will make one more to bring with us as a gift. Then we will teach them how to make them on their own with a completed one to look at as an example."

"That is the right way, Eli." Amos said with a nod. "Yes."

"And just cut all your measurements in half and you can make a nice small version that one or two people can take out fishing all on their own." Hugh said.

"I had thought of that already," Amos said. "Yes, it is definitely scalable. Like a cabinet or a house."

"You are truly professionals." Hugh said. He had forgotten how much he enjoyed doing woodwork. After The Change, he had lived as a recluse in the wilderness for many years. He built himself a cabin, all the furniture to go in it as well as a twelve-foot canoe. Once families started moving into the area, he decided he needed to live elsewhere so he abandoned his homestead and moved to a large city and the city lifestyle he had become accustomed to. He flexed his hands; they were sore from pulling the thin roots over and over again.

"Your cabin is finished." Eli said. "That is why I came here. There is a bed, table, and two chairs in it as well. And also invite you to join us on a hunt."

It was decided that while Hugh spent his time teaching the carpenters to build the canoes, several others would build him a place outside of town like he requested. It seemed a fair barter.

"The cabin is done? Excellent." Hugh looked at the man. "It's not that I don't like your basement; it is fine you know." He smirked. "Wait, a hunt? What are you hunting at night?"

"We hunt the Mastodon at night; their poor eyesight makes it easy to corral them into a dead end. Then when they turn to leave,

we are able to kill the last one in the line ensuring that the others do not stand and fight."

Hugh thought back to the previous Mastodon hunt that he had interrupted. While he had not met any of the family of those men, he suddenly felt a pang of guilt in killing them. It was an unusual feeling- he normally didn't feel anything for the people he killed. Now that he had started living with the Amish, he felt that him killing those seven men was a terrible betrayal. "Oh man." He said.

"If you are not comfortable with the hunt, you don't need to go." Eli said. "It is fine." He patted him on the shoulder. It made Hugh feel even worse.

"I think I just need to go to my place for a little bit." Hugh said. He looked at the man. "Take a small break. Thanks for building me a house, it really wasn't necessary." He finished. *Or what I deserve* he thought.

"As you have told me. But I understand you need your own place, Hugh." Eli said. "We could have just as easily built it in town you know." He reminded.

"Yes. But I value my privacy." Hugh said.

"Your condition. Sleeping throughout the day."

"That's it." Hugh said, leaving it at that. He had come to like the man and did not want to have to deal with the repercussions because he slipped and revealed what he really was. He was sure there was no way a God-fearing Amish man would ever allow a murderous beast

like Hugh to live within city limits, or even just outside it for that matter. Especially if he knew he had killed seven of them in cold blood. Even though he was enjoying his time living in the town, he was planning on leaving soon; his condition wasn't compatible with close friends even though that's what some of the townspeople had become. Conversely during his time in town, he had developed an out-and-out hatred for the humans that were going to swoop in with their fancy space ships and kidnap four of Anchorage's citizens. He looked at the canoes. While he had been speaking with Eli, another carpenter had taken his place and was happily continuing the work. He shook his head. "You people."

"I hear we are professionals." Eli said with a smirk.

"That you are, brother." Hugh wanted to kill every single person not living on Earth so none of them ever came to visit. "I just need some quiet time to think. I'll come back in a little to check on the progress here, okay?"

"That is fine with me, Brother."

Nineteen

Hugh sat in his one-room house and appraised it- it had been three days since the canoes were finished. He couldn't help but laugh; the men had built him a twenty by twenty-five-foot cabin, with a central fireplace and a well apportioned kitchen. The floor was hard packed and had several nice rugs placed on it. The walls were shiplap and the roof was double framed so it would be warmer in the winter. Of course, if he had admitted to them he was going to leave after the gathering, they would still not have been able to do less detailed work thanks to how the canoes turned out. As it was, the canoes had amazed the entire town.

The obligatory three days for the boats to dry after they were completed tested the patience of every person in the town. It was amusing for Hugh to watch the typically stalwart Amish fidget and fuss as they waited for the waiting period to end. Finally on the morning of the third day -exactly at nightfall- they had carried the two canoes down to the river. Since they only weighed a hundred pounds each, the men took turns carrying them in pairs- not because they got tired but because everyone wanted a chance to carry such a large and unbelievably light canoe. Once they were put in the water, floating high because they were empty, the men and many of the women took turns paddling them up and down along the river bank. Hugh had warned them about getting out in the middle of the fast-flowing river until they were at least a little more experienced

handling the large crafts. Even so, four paddlers could move the boat along at a very fast pace both up and down stream. Hugh also took the time to show them the all-important skill of how to right a canoe if it tipped over in a small inlet. He did it safely from the bank, shouting instructions to the soaked townsfolk. After a couple of tries, they had managed to right the boat, bail it out and reenter it. They had spent half the night down on the water as they all tested their skill paddling and righting the canoes, only bringing them back to the town when Eli emphatically reminded them that there were tasks that needed to be tended to so they needed to get some sleep. Important tasks. Begrudgingly, everyone returned to their homes and slept a handful of hours before the dawn came. They all planned on spending their Sabbath practicing with the two canoes while plans for building four more individually were put in motion.

He was feeling hungry but wanted to wait another couple of hours to make sure his 'early to bed, early to rise' Amish neighbors were indoors. Since arriving in the Amish Anchorage as he called it, he had not killed a single person. He had been hunting moose and bear. Unlike in his pre-ravine time in Alaska, there seemed to be an abundance of them now.

Hugh also had to admit that it was exhilarating to track down, chase, and then kill a huge beast barehanded. Thinking back, none of the humans he killed were any sort of challenge. He would wait until late in the night to hunt because he would leave his clothes behind; trying to explain torn, blood-soaked clothes would have been difficult. Probably as difficult to explain why he was running around in the forest at night naked but between the two, if he wasn't caught

he at least had clothes he could put back on. Even though the blood wasn't human it tasted similarly, perhaps a little gamey but overall, it satisfied him. It was a small price to pay to live in what was probably the most welcoming town in a thousand miles.

He moved to the bucket in the kitchen to get a drink of water when someone knocked on the door. He padded over to it barefoot; he had already removed his shoes. Not worried about who was on the other side, he opened it completely. Abigail was standing there.

"Sister Abigail." Hugh said, surprised. "What are you doing here?"

"May we speak Brother Hugh?" She asked.

"Of course." Hugh gestured into his home. "You are welcome in my home, Sister." He appreciated the irony of him inviting her in.

Abigail moved to a chair and sat. "Thank you." She seemed nervous.

"What is wrong?" He asked as he sat in a chair on the opposite end of the small rectangular table from her. His previous experience with the Amish had been slightly different than this time; children were more outspoken with a stranger like Hugh, and even the women would engage him in conversation. Something that would never happen in an Amish community in 1856 or even 2026 was a single Amish woman coming to the home of a single non-Amish man late in the night. It was surprising it was even happening with these more progressive Amish. "Is there a problem?"

"I saw you." She said as she wrung her hands.

"You see me every evening." Hugh said. "What do you mean?"

"I was returning from dinner at Brother Moses and Sister Rachel's home two nights ago, and I saw you." She wouldn't look him in the eyes. "In the forest."

Hugh thought back- she had actually not spoken to him for two days he now realized. "Oh." He said simply. He wasn't sure how late the dinner or conversation went at the Yoder household but if it was very late, then she would have seen him returning naked and blood soaked. If it was an early dinner, he was merely naked. Even with the unusual forwardness of children and women, this group was definitely traditionally Amish when it came to modesty. So either instance of her seeing Hugh naked was a huge breach of etiquette and definitely a sin.

"I thought we had an understanding, Brother Hugh." Abigail said. "We… understood each other."

"I think we did. Do, even." Hugh said. "I think we are friends, you and I, Sister Abigail." He let out a long sigh. "And if I offended you, then I am sorry. It was not my intention." Hugh realized how much the town had come to mean to him; not a month (in his experience of time) earlier, he would have reveled in the fact that he had embarrassed a woman by being caught naked. "I was just…"

"Why are you still killing people? I thought you were a different person than you were that first night at the fire." Abigail said. She still wouldn't look at him.

Hugh was relieved. "Oh, that's it." He smiled. "You had me worried, Abby." He said using her familiar nickname. Naming conventions with the Amish resulted in many people having the same name even within one community so nicknames were often used. There were, as far as Hugh had seen so far, seven men named 'Abraham' and ten women named 'Abigail' in town. He leaned back in his chair. "Whew!"

"Do not make light of this Hugh." Abigail said. "It was not even midnight yet and you were out prowling like some animal, some mindless wolf."

The fact that she left off 'brother' hit Hugh like a ton of bricks. "Sister Abigail," he said returning to addressing her formally. Then he realized she had seen him on his way out into the forest; at midnight, not returning closer to four AM. "I have not killed anyone since I came to this town. That is the truth." Because it was.

"Then why were you outside." She hesitated. "In such a state?"

Hugh chuckled. "That must have been a shock. Going home after a nice meal…" He raised his voice an octave. "My, what a nice meal that was that you cooked, Sister Rachael. I will surely sleep soundly tonight. Oh look; there is Brother Hugh acting like Adam in the garden. My word!"

Abigail let out a chuckle as well. "It is not funny." She finally looked at him. "You can't kill people."

"Moose and bear, Sister Abigail." Hugh said. "That is what I have been hunting since I arrived in Anchorage. That is all."

Her eyes got wide. "Moose and bear? That is very dangerous."

Hugh shrugged. "It is a challenging and thrilling hunt." He leaned forward. "Of animals. And it's not for sport."

"So why are you…?" Her voice trailed off. "You know."

"Because, Sister Abigail, hunting Moose and Bear barehanded is a very physical activity. Very physical. I would come home with torn and bloody clothes. It is much easier to leave them behind so they are safe and sound." He gestured to a finely made wardrobe in the corner. "I have but three outfits to wear and two pairs of shoes. Hunting twice a week, I would be begging for clothes every week."

"You have done so much for us; you would not have to beg for anything." Abigail pointed out.

"Still, it would feel like charity to me. And it would be wasteful of well-made clothes." He replied. Waste was something that the Amish could not abide.

Abigail smirked. "Well, we can't have you running around the forest in that state. I believe I will make you two… hunting outfits tomorrow."

"Hunting outfits?" Hugh said.

"Nice leather jerkins. No sleeves but they will be long. Not so long as to hamper your movement, but still… long enough."

Hugh smiled. "That sounds like a great idea, Sister Abigail. I wish I had thought of it. I would hate to offend anyone else in town

by accident. You are bad enough. Again, I'm truly sorry." Hugh was surprised that he actually was.

Abigail relaxed. "Fine. I accept your apology. I suppose you have to do what you have to do to survive. And I appreciate you hunting for game in the forest."

"It's actually very satisfying," Hugh admitted. "I might just stick with that from now on." He added, even though he wasn't sure if that were true. It would have prevented a lot of his close calls with the law in previous times. Now it would probably keep hunting parties from coming after him.

"That would be good." Abigail started to stand.

"Abby," Hugh said. "Since I have you here, alone…"

Abigail's eyebrows went up.

"I have something I want to ask you that I have not been brave enough to do until now." Hugh said.

"Until now?" She looked at the door, then at Hugh. "Why until now?"

"Once you see someone naked, there really shouldn't be anything else between them, I think."

Abigail opened her mouth to speak, then closed it.

"I'm sorry, that was rude." He shrugged. "Old ways are hard to break." He put his hands on the table. "You are a very smart and hardworking woman. And please don't take offense, you are good

looking as well. Even when you try to make yourself plain. Why aren't you married?" He asked. It seemed to be a glaring situation in the town; all the younger women were married or being courted by men. Abigail was around twenty-five years old; an old maid by Amish standards.

Abigail's eyes welled up. "Oh." She said. "It's…"

Hugh picked up his chair and scooted around the table beside her. "Abby, I'm sorry. Have… have you been shunned?" He asked- it was the practice where a person was cast out from an Amish community for some sinful act. It would be strange that they would still be allowed to stay in town, but these progressive Amish tended to surprise him.

"Shunned? No." She wiped her eyes. "No, not that."

"Then what?" He knew that even if she were widowed, she would have still been able to remarry. Since divorce was unheard of in the Amish community, losing a husband would be the only reason he could think of that an attractive hardworking woman wouldn't be married.

"I'm married, Hugh." She said softly.

"Where is your husband?" Hugh asked. He could not believe that an Amish man would just abandon a spouse and wander into the wilderness. "What happened?"

"My Gideon was taken at the last gathering." She said. "I tried to go with him, but he was the last one picked." Tears ran down his

cheek. “And since no one knows what has happened to him, then I am still married to him.”

“Oh.” Hugh sat back in his chair. “I never thought of that.” He scowled. “Oh, I have some questions for these people when they get here. Serious questions. Up close and personal questions.”

“Hugh, you can’t get involved.” Abigail said. “We can’t do anything against them.”

“Why?” Hugh asked, then he realized the answer. “Because it would be a sin? Violence, that is?” The Amish were, above all else pacifists.

“Yes, of course.”

“Abby dear, if there’s one thing I’m not, it’s Amish.” Hugh said. He bared his fangs. “And those people haven’t seen the likes of me but they will sure know I’m not part of your town.”

Abby’s eyes got large at the sudden appearance of Hugh’s fangs and the change in his face. “Oh! Oh my! Hugh! Control yourself!” She slapped his mouth, albeit gently. “Stop that! Stop that this instant!”

Hugh returned to normal as he laughed out loud. “Oh! That’s the first time that has ever happened. Ever!” He rocked his chair back on two legs. “Oh Abby! You are truly something else! Never in all my time has anyone done what you just did. Stopped in my tracks by the indomitable Amish Warrior Abigail Fisher.”

"I'm sorry I hit you." Abigail said as she blushed. "That was alarming." She took a deep breath. "Those poor moose and bear."

Hugh stood and offered his hand to Abigail. "I shall walk you to your door, Sister Abigail controller of Vampires."

"That would be polite." Abigail allowed Hugh to pull her to his feet.

"Your husband must truly have been some man to have been able to woo you, Sister." Hugh maneuvered her toward the door.

"He was." She said sadly. "He… is a wonderful man. And if you can find out what has happened to him. One way or another, I would appreciate it, Hugh. Because I am trapped in Purgatory right now."

Hugh opened the door. "I will do my best." Hugh was glad they had put his cabin as far from town as they did. Not only were these interlopers harvesting people from Anchorage, they had taken Abigail's husband. It would be a very in-depth interrogation and answers were going to be provided before it was over.

Hugh led Abigail to the door of her home, then walked back to his, deciding on an interrogation plan. He decided on using sheer terror and physical pain; it was what had worked in the past on battlefields. And because they had ruined Abigail's life.

Twenty

"Where are these people?" Hugh said as he stalked back and forth in Eli's house. "Are they usually late?"

"Well, it will either be today or tomorrow," Eli said. "Patience is a virtue you know."

"Virtue." Hugh scowled. "Who has time for that?"

"Maybe you should make time for patience." Eli said with a smile. "If you just wait around, maybe it will catch up with you."

"Amish humor." Hugh said.

"It will be today or tomorrow, I am sure."

"That's what you said *yesterday*, Brother Eli." Hugh looked out the window- the sky was developing its daily blueish tint. As he had done for the past two weeks, he had come to Eli's home for breakfast before dawn. The two would speak about the previous day's events, carpentry, the weather, game hunting, and whatever else came to mind. Then Eli would leave to tend the animals and fields while Hugh would go hide from the deadly sun. "Abigail said the first of August. That was yesterday you know."

"Well, when someone says the first of the month, they might mean the first day, or the first part of the month, Brother Hugh. The

fact of the matter is that Abigail was correct; they always arrive within the first week of August."

"That's not what that woman said." Hugh replied. "And it technically is the first of the month right now, either way."

"Yes, that is true. I don't have any explanation." Eli gestured at the door. "After I tend the animals, I will make a pass around the outskirts of town. They usually land outside town and walk in. So we don't know they are here until they go to the fire pit to announce the gathering."

"Good idea." Hugh opened the door. "Take a stroll, see what there is to see."

"They may come during the day." Eli said. "They did that last time, two years ago."

"When they took Abby's husband." Hugh said.

"Yes. That was during the day. The other times it has been at night."

Hugh scowled. "So they will be in and out before I can even talk to them."

"What do you mean?"

"Abigail said they were only here two hours. You just said they could come during the daytime. So they would be gone while I couldn't come outside."

"They are in town for only a short time, Brother Hugh. But they are here for three or four days."

"Three or four days?"

"Yes but never longer. They come to the fire pit, announce that the gathering will be the next day at midday, then leave until then."

"And you only interact with them while they are in town?"

"They do not like to be disturbed while they are here." Eli said. "They land their ship and go into the wilderness. They sometimes hunt and bring the animals back to their ship. They always take plants and such as well."

"And they are gone in four days?" Hugh asked.

"Yes. I have had the impression that being here makes them tired. They move slowly and rest often. That is why they are only in town for two hours; they seem spent after that."

Hugh smirked. "Gravity."

"Who is that?"

"It's not a who; it's a what. It's a force." Hugh jumped. "It's what pulls us back to the ground. It's why trees fall over. It's the pull of the Earth."

Eli looked down. "I don't understand. We stand because we stand."

"If these people live in space." Hugh pointed upwards. "Or on a planet that is smaller than Earth like the Moon or Mars, or even one of the moons of another planet, then they would be used to the gravity of that place which would be less than here."

"I don't understand, I am sorry." Eli said.

"Here they feel heavier than they do at home." Hugh thought for a moment. "It would be like they were always carrying a huge pack on their back. When they lay down to sleep, it is on their chest. Gravity. The force of gravity tires them out."

"I see." Eli said, even though he didn't sound convinced.

"It's okay. It is kind of a strange thing that was even hard to explain by very smart people. Scientists." Hugh considered this new information. "Are these people taller than you?"

"They are taller than you, Hugh." Eli said. "By a bit in fact." He held his hand over his head at about seven feet

"But thin?"

"They are." Eli nodded. "Yes. You seem to have some understanding of them."

"I do indeed." Hugh said. "I wish I could explain more, but…" He considered telling Eli his secret. He had already told one person in town, if he told someone else, soon it wouldn't be a secret at all. He decided his friendship with Eli wasn't worth ruining. "It's complicated." He said. "But rest assured, I will be having a talk with

these people when they get here. In the evening of their first night, in fact."

"They do not like to be disturbed, Brother Hugh." Eli said.

"And I do not like my friends being harvested like corn." Hugh said. He scowled. "And I especially do not like the fact that they have ruined Abigail's life."

"What?"

"Abigail. Her husband was taken two years ago. So now she is stuck because she isn't sure if her husband is actually dead or just living elsewhere against his will. Is she a widow who can remarry or a wife whose husband just is away?" Hugh explained.

Eli smiled. "Yes, I understand that dilemma. It is indeed a terrible one. I was just surprised that you were expressing interest in Sister Abigail." He tilted his head. "If she were indeed available."

"No, no." Hugh held out his hands. "It's nothing like that. She is just a friend." He paused as he thought about it. "She's not *just* a friend; she is a true friend. A sister. Something I have never had, actually. So I get really, really angry thinking about what these people have done to her." He nodded at Eli. "And you're my friend too, Brother Eli. I have more friends in this town than I have ever had in total. And thinking about what these interlopers are doing to my friends makes me…" He fought to keep control of his anger; changing in front of Eli would definitely be the end of his secret. He took several breaths. "Furious. I want to deal with them."

"Wrath is a sin, Brother Hugh." Eli pointed a finger at him. "A deadly sin, in fact."

"Yes." Hugh nodded. "Deadly is a good word to use." He turned to look at Eli. "Brother Eli… Brother. You don't know that when I say that word, or sister, it holds extra weight for me. I have no family. No one. No family, no friends, *no one*. Until now." He spread his hands out wide. "This place. This absurd Amish community of Anchorage that is plopped down in the middle of the Yukon where it absolutely does not belong, has all of a sudden become a home for me. Not just a place to stay, of which I have had many, but a home. Because a home has family in it. People like you. And Abigail and Jacob and Isaac, and everyone else here. *Family*."

"Hugh." Eli said as he stepped closer to his friend. "And we care about you as well. But we just can't…"

"You can't. That's right Brother, you can't. And I respect you for that." Hugh fumed. "Well, these people coming here are expecting to see kowtowed, complacent Amish people, but they have a surprise coming this time. This time the Devil will be here to meet them." He stormed out of the house planning to accost every person in the landing party to get the answers he needed. And to get whoever was piloting the craft to give him a crash course in space flight. If it didn't have more than two engines, all the better.

"Lord, give that man some patience and peace." Eli prayed yet again. "All of those centuries is a very long time to hold onto hate."

Twenty-One

Hugh paced around his cabin as the sun came up. He was still angry. The fact that there was nothing he could do until the sun went down kept him that way. And the thought that the visitors would arrive while he was cowering in his cabin instead of protecting his friends didn't help his mood. Of course, as the sun rose, he became weaker and weaker. While the cabin was definitely built well, it wasn't a cave under hundreds of feet of rock. By the time the sun cleared the horizon, Hugh moved to his bed and lay down. He put the pillow over his head and thought back to his many flight lessons. He had become very good at flying over the course of the four years of his sporadic lessons. He had even soloed when he stole a massive Grumman Albatross that had been converted for civilian use from a municipal airport one night and flew it until it was almost empty of fuel, landing in Norton Sound, off the coast of Nome 78 miles from the police in Teller to the northwest who were chasing him. They wanted to question him about a triple homicide he had most assuredly been involved in. He had taxied to the beach and run off, very satisfied with himself, never to return to Teller or Nome.

Hugh wondered how different this space craft would be from the ones he had seen in videos as the US had sent astronauts to space, the Moon, then to Mars. While all those spacecrafts were all similarly shaped; large cones, they had changed over time. They started out with more buttons and toggles than devices like a yoke

and pedals. The videos he saw of the Mars expedition showed an interior that was sleek and clean, with large touchscreens. There was a joystick and a throttle control as well. Overall however, it was far less complicated than the earlier ones. Or at least more sleek.

He thought back to the vehicles he had driven throughout the years as well. The first and the last were ironically both Lincolns he had acquired by killing the occupant. The first was in 1921- a Lincoln Mark L roadster. It required frequent adjustments of the valves and timing on its massive 357 cubic inch engine. It was a beast of an automobile to drive because the driver had to not only steer and shift gears, but also had to manually adjust the spark advance as he accelerated. There was indeed 'a lot to do'. His last vehicle; a 2026 Lincoln Nautilus drove itself while he played with the stereo system. He hoped that as space travel evolved, it had become even simpler. Or at least 'point and click'. He drifted off to a troubled sleep to escape the relentless pounding of the sun.

Hugh was startled awake by a pounding on his door. He pivoted out of bed, putting his feet on the hard pan floor. From the feeling in his head, he was sure the sun was still up. Where it was, he had no idea. He stood and walked to a side window. He slid open a shaded peek hole he had installed so he could see the large wooden sundial he had built near his house. It was close to nine PM; another hour until nightfall. "I'm coming, I'm coming." He said as he walked to the front door. Whoever was there hadn't stopped knocking. "I'm coming!" He said loudly. Finally the person stopped.

He pulled the door open. Isaac was standing there looking worried. "Isaac. Hello." Hugh stepped back, keeping behind the door as he opened it. Unlike popular literature, he would not burst into flames in a spectacular fashion if sunlight hit him, or worse, sparkle. It caused burns very much like a sunburn but not as slowly. It was also not instantaneous. Seconds instead of hours was more the speed, and it would blister badly if he was in the sun too long. "Good evening to you." He said as Isaac rushed in.

"I am sorry to bother you, Brother," Isaac said. "I truly am."

Hugh smirked. Isaac was definitely un-Amish in his ability to become worked up about simple things. He shut the door, returning the room to almost darkness. "It's okay, Isaac. What is the matter?"

"They're here!" He pointed. "They're in town and…"

"That's fine, Isaac. Brother Eli explained to me they will be here for several days before they leave. I have plenty of…"

"No, that's not it!" Isaac said. "It's Abigail. She said she will volunteer to go with them tomorrow when they return to gather."

"What?" Hugh looked at the door. "Why?"

"She said it was the only way to be sure what happened to Gideon; by having it happen to her as well." He shrugged. "She thinks she will end up meeting him." He lowered his voice as he pointed upward. "Up there."

Hugh patted the young man on the shoulder. He was almost certain that since they only took four people, they weren't being

taken for slavery. It was either for some medical experiment or for breeding purposes. If it were medical experiments, they would probably not still be alive two years later. If it were for breeding purposes they would definitely not require them to be kept alive once they arrived either. Even in his time of 2026, cryogenic technology was able to store female eggs and male sperm indefinitely. There was no reason to deal with feeding, housing, and guarding a human being. Much less four of them. "We'll see about that." Hugh said. "Do you know where they landed?"

"No." Isaac looked at the door as well. "No, I don't."

"Okay, but someone might. Go back to town and see if you can find out where they landed. Once it's dark and I can see out there, I want to be able to go directly to where they are."

"Oh, I don't know about that." Isaac said. "That isn't a good idea at all."

"Why not?"

"Brother Eli said he didn't want you to have any contact with them. He thinks…"

"I know what he thinks." Hugh interrupted. "And he's probably underestimating what I am planning on doing. But the fact of the matter is that these space people show up here and kidnap four of your citizens every two years. How many years have they been doing this?"

"Always." Isaac shrugged.

"Destroying families. Destroying people. People like Abigail. What if it's you this time? What would your parents think? How would they feel?"

Isaac nodded. "Well yes, I can see how they would be upset."

"Upset at the loss of their youngest son? They would be devastated, Isaac. *Devastated*." Hugh pointed at the door. "Go find where their ship landed and I will speak with them about ending this practice."

"You're… you're going to speak to them?"

Hugh nodded. It was actually the truth; he would indeed start by speaking to them. The physical part of his questioning would come later. "I tell you the truth that I am going there to first talk to them."

"Oh. Okay then." Isaac said. "Then I guess I can find out where they are for you." He frowned. "I would really miss Sister Abigail if she left."

"So would I." Hugh said truthfully. "So I will do everything in my power to keep her from leaving."

"Okay then." Isaac said again. "I'll meet you at the fire pit?"

"Yes." Hugh said as he opened the door, standing behind it again. The amount of light that came in was minimal. "I will be there shortly."

"Right." Isaac marched out.

Hugh turned and fetched his shoes. He half considered putting on one of the very useful and easy to clean 'hunting tunics' Abigail had made for him but wanted to at least appear Amish to the interlopers to catch them unawares. If he lost a set of clothes dealing with them, it was a small price to pay. He wasn't sure how fast new space craft could take off and he didn't want to find out prematurely by walking up to their camp wearing just a leather tunic, looking like a savage. They would just have to wait until later to find out what kind of person Hugh was.

Twenty-Two

At ten PM, Hugh marched toward the fire pit in the center of town. He got about halfway there before Eli stopped him.

"I know what you are goin to tell me, Brother Eli." Hugh put his hands on his hips and mimicked Eli's voice. "Strive for peace with everyone, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord." He scowled. "Yuck."

Eli smiled wide. "How do you know Hebrews twelve-fourteen?" He waggled a finger at Hugh. "You know, for a man who claims to be as far away from God as you claim to be, you surely know His words quite well."

"I've spent a lot of time in seedy motels. Those Gideons even go there."

"Gideon Lapp?"

"Not our Gideon," Hugh said, referring to another one of his friends in town. "The Gideons were a group that would leave bibles for people to read."

"In seedy motels? What are those?"

"They are places where lost souls stay." Hugh explained.

Eli slapped Hugh's shoulder. "Then that is the perfect place for a bible, don't you think?"

"We're getting off subject, Eli." Hugh said. "I believe you are trying to delay me in my task."

"Your task?" Eli asked innocently.

"I have to go speak to some people."

"You are going to speak with them?"

"It's what I told Isaac."

"Only speak? Are you telling lies to our young brother?"

"I said I would begin by speaking to them; that is indeed the truth." Hugh said. "What comes next depends on them."

"Hugh." Eli said. "I cannot condone violence. I just can't."

"I understand completely." Hugh patted Eli's shoulder. "So I'll see you later, my friend." He stepped around the man and continued to the fire pit.

He found Isaac pacing nervously.

"Isaac, are you alright? You look like you're about to come out of your skin." Hugh said.

"Oh, Brother Hugh," Isaac rubbed his hands together.

"Yes, it's me. Did you find where our visitors are camping for the evening?"

"Well, yes. But no."

"I don't think it can be both. Do you…" A thought occurred to him. "Are you worried that by telling me where they are, you will be committing a sin? Guilt by assistance?"

Isaac didn't say anything for a long moment. "Yes." He finally said.

"I will find them anyway, Isaac. I truly will. But if it makes you feel better, how about you tell me where they aren't."

"What?"

"Where are they not camped right now?" Hugh gestured with his hand. "They are not at the fire pit right now."

"Oh." Isaac said. "They… are not camped to the north of town. Definitely not."

"Fine then. Are they also not to the east?"

Isaac looked at the ground. "Oh dear."

Hugh nodded. "I am sorry to have gotten you upset, brother. Tell you what; we will just stop talking right now and I'll let you get to sleep. It is late and I did not sleep well so I'm not even sure I will remember what we just spoke about. Because it's late, you know."

"It is late." Isaac said. "And I do need to get to sleep." He looked eastward with a worried look on his face.

"Your conscious is clear, brother. Honestly, you have not helped me in my task at all." Hugh smiled at the young man. "Go get some sleep."

Isaac nodded, then hurried off.

"Full circle, Hugh. You've come full circle." Hugh had said before he headed east- where he awoke just over three months ago.

Twenty-Three

Hugh stood in the trees, watching. There were four of them, as far as he could tell. Before leaving town, he had visited another friend- a leather maker, and gotten a dozen thick leather straps to tie up the visitors. He was hoping there wasn't a large group of them that remained with the ship while two came to town. It turned out that there were three males and a female. He had been hoping that one of the visitors was a female because that would make it easier to get answers out of the males- while she was tortured in front of them. All were over six feet tall. They were not as tall as Eli had described but still taller than anyone in town. And even Hugh by several inches- perhaps six foot five or six foot sit. Even so, none could not have weighed more than a hundred twenty pounds; they were pencil thin. *I wonder what sitting on your chest will make you tell me, skinny lady*. He thought as he watched them set up several computer stations- one seemed to be a weather station if the wind vane was any indication. Another seemed to be a transmitter of some kind. He hoped it wasn't some sort of futuristic force field.

Wanting to catch them before they returned to the safety of their ship for the night, Hugh stepped out of the forest. He reached out to them, willing them to ignore him as he approached; their tasks were the most important thing in their minds.

"Get that station set up." One of the men said to the woman who was setting up the transmitter looking piece of equipment. "It needs to be set up."

"What do you think I'm doing?" She said back. "Setting it up should be your answer, Felix. Say that; you're setting that up."

He scowled at her instead then returned to unfolding a large tan cloth.

Hugh walked quietly right in between the four of them and just watched them to try to figure out who was in charge and perhaps what jobs they had on the ship. Above all else, he wanted to make sure he didn't accidentally kill the pilot. That would ruin his plan entirely.

"Are you going to get that pool set up tonight?" The female snapped at Felix. "I need to decompress before I try to sleep on this giant rock."

"What do you think I'm doing?" The man repeated sarcastically. "Setting it up should be your answer, Cy. Say that; you're setting that up."

"You two need to just shut up." The third said. "I'm tired of hearing both of your voices." He shook his head. "Why you are even here…"

"Because I am paying for the expedition," Cy interrupted him. "That's why. So you just make sure the ship is ready when we need it, Baxter." She seethed. "Because that's what you're paid to do."

Hugh was taken aback. He was hoping for a tight-knit team of scientists coming to kidnap hapless primitives for nefarious, unified reasons. Making them talk before any of their beloved fellow crewmen were injured severely would have been an easy affair. He was apparently dealing with four people who didn't seem to like each other. Now he half expected not only cheering but suggestions for more extreme torture methods when he finally got down to business. He decided the best way to handle the combative people was to subdue them first so he quietly walked to the ship's hatch where the fourth was working. Keeping everyone outside the ship was also key to his plan.

"Dinner will be ready in about thirty minutes," that man said. "Are we eating inside or outside?"

"*We* don't care where *you* eat, Carl." Cy snapped at him. "We paying members of this expedition will be eating out here. Personally, I hope you eat elsewhere." She gestured at Baxter. "With the rest of the help, out of sight hopefully so I don't have to watch you chew your food with an open mouth."

Hugh decided that if he were going to use anyone to get answers, it would have to be Baxter and Carl- the hired hands who probably owned the ship. That meant one of the pair had to be the pilot. If he tried torturing Cy, it would probably be to cheers from Baxter and Felix. Of course, killing the female would send a message to the others that no one was safe. Felix seemed to be an outlier; he wasn't sure who he would align with, or perhaps he would answer any and all questions to keep himself free from harm.

"Hey, you!" Cy said. "Hey!"

The three men turned to look at her.

Hugh looked at her as well. She was looking directly at him. "Who me?" He said with a smile.

Twenty-Four

"How did you get there?" Carl startled with surprise. It seemed to him as if Hugh had just appeared out of thin air right beside him.

"Yes, you, you stupid animal!" Cy stood. "What are you doing here?"

"Everyone on the ground." Hugh said.

"What do you think you're doing?" Cy put her hands on her hips.

Hugh grabbed Carl with both hands and threw him into Felix ten feet away. The pair tumbled to the ground. Now there was no one near the entrance to the ship. In two quick steps, Hugh was on top of Cy. She was still standing with her hands on her hips.

"I asked you a…" She began.

Hugh slapped her on the side of the head right over her ear with a cupped hand, bursting her ear drum. She collapsed into a heap. He drew his knife. "Everyone on the ground." He said again.

Carl and Felix were still on the ground, so they just stayed there. Baxter got on his knees slowly, keeping his eyes on Hugh. He seemed to be getting ready to leap at him.

Hugh immediately recognized that Baxter was the threat among the group. So he rushed him, knocking him to the ground. He easily flipped him onto his stomach and hog tied him with one of the long strips hanging from his belt. After he was done, he shoved him over onto his side. "Stay put, Baxter."

"What are you doing?" Cy said, hand up to her ear trying to stop the ringing. "Who do you think you are?"

Hugh turned, took three steps and kicked her in the chest, knocking her onto her back.

Cy gasped for air as she clutched her chest.

"Stop that. Stop it now!" Felix said. "Leave her alone!"

So it's Carl and Baxter, and Felix and Cy. Hugh thought. *And the battle lines are drawn.* "On your belly, Felix." Hugh said. He pointed his knife at Baxter. "I don't want to kill you. I want you to know that so you don't do anything stupid. You. You can survive this."

Baxter's eyes got large at the implication that the other three would not. He nodded then rested his head on the ground. His own survival was paramount. He could replace his partner Carl easily, as well as his ship; he only had one life. Of course, if Carl was eliminated he would own the ship outright.

"You too, Carl. On your belly." Hugh said as he tied up Felix.

When he turned to Carl, the man already had his hands behind his back and his feet up, hoping compliance would spare him as well.

"You won't get any trouble from me." Hoping he would have the same fate as Baxter; survival.

Once Hugh tied Carl, he dragged him onto the unfolded tan fabric- it seemed to be a two-foot-deep pool and propped him up on his shins. *Floating in a pool of water to get some relaxation from the gravity here.* "Stay there, Carl." He said as he went to retrieve Baxter and Felix. He grabbed each with one hand and dragged them over, positioning them like the first. "Now that I have everyone's attention." He said, putting his knife back into its sheath. "Let's get started, shall we?"

"I demand you release us!" Cy screeched from behind him. "You stupid animal!"

"Shut up, Cy." Hugh said. "That's your one warning."

"Cynthia, increase lights to one hundred percent!" Cy said.

All of the lights on the outside of the ship immediately came to life, bathing the entire area with bright light.

The command seemed familiar to Hugh.

"If you do not let us go, I will have our friend in the ship shoot you! She has you covered right now."

"Oh really?" Hugh said as he stepped over to Cy. He picked her up easily, holding her up so they were face to face. He smiled, remembering why that command seemed familiar to him.

"Yes!" Cy said. "That is *your* one warning." She narrowed her eyes at him. "Before you die!"

Hugh turned to face the three men. "You're the pilot, right Baxter?"

"Yes." Baxter said.

"Cool. And you're First Mate, Felix?"

The man nodded.

"Are you a scientist or are you married to this thing?" He shook Cy.

"I'm a scientist." Felix said. "I just work for her. She hired me…. for this expedition."

"So the financier is you Cy."

"This is your last warning!" Cy said angrily. "You are going…"

"Hugh. The name is Hugh. Go ahead and add it into the threat. It's rude for me to know your names but you not know mine, I think. Okay, go again."

"Hugh, this is your last warning." Cy said.

Hugh's eyes got large. "Oh, well you leave me no choice then." He dropped Cy to the ground.

"That's better. Now untie us you stupid primitive!"

For a moment, no one said anything. Finally Hugh spoke: "Cynthia, play the most popular song this week and have the lights accompany it."

A shrill song started blaring as the lights of the ship pulsed along with the beat.

"What?" Cy said, now her eyes were wide.

"Cynthia, stop." Hugh said. "Cynthia tell me what the time is in the ocean."

"I do not understand the question." Cynthia responded. "Where do you want to know what time it is?"

"Cynthia, reduce lights to twenty five percent." Hugh commanded.

Cynthia obliged.

Hugh tapped the side of his head with a finger. "You'll notice I even know the difference between reduce *by* twenty-five percent and reduce *to* twenty-five percent." He crossed his arms. "You're in deep trouble, Cy. Deep trouble. Do you want to know why?"

Cy just stared at him.

"I'll tell you for the benefit of these gentlemen." Hugh picked her up again and held her at arm's length. "I'm your worst kind of primitive." He narrowed his eyes at her. "I'm a primitive from the twenty first century that understands that technology very well so I think I'll understand your century's technology just fine." He brought

Cy closer to himself. "I am not in any way Amish." He brought Cy even closer and whispered. "I'm a vampire."

"Sure you are." Cy said. "And I'm…"

Hugh opened his mouth wide, fangs lowering from his gums as his face elongated. He was prepared to kill Cy when something made him stop. He was being watched.

"What! What are you!" Cy screamed. She thrashed fruitlessly in Hugh's iron grip.

Twenty-Five

Abigail ran to the fire pit in the center of town. She had heard that the visitors had arrived so she had run to Hugh's home to try and stop him from confronting them. Since he wasn't there, she decided to find Eli. Several people had told her that they had seen Hugh speaking with Eli so she hoped to catch them together. Before Hugh did anything rash.

As she entered the large open area in the center of town, she saw that Eli was there with Isaac. But not Hugh. "Eli!" She shouted as she entered the large open area.

Eli and Isaac were sitting on a bench very close to each other, speaking. When Eli heard his name, he turned to look. He gave a wave to beckon her over.

Out of breath, Abigail got to the bench and sat. "I was trying to catch Hugh before he did anything rash." She looked at Eli. "Is he going to do something rash?"

Eli sighed. "I believe that Brother Eli is going to behave quite rashly with our visitors. And he won't listen to me about it."

"Well, these visitors, they are super smart." Isaac said. "They have flying machines, and all sorts of wondrous things. I don't see how Hugh could do anything to them."

Eli and Abigail exchanged glances. After Hugh had told his secret to her, she had told Eli the next day. She felt that it was important that the leader of the town was kept informed. Something like Hugh's secret was too big to not tell him.

Eli shook his head as he tilted it toward Isaac.

Abigail nodded. Telling Isaac would accomplish nothing but have everyone in the town know within two days. "I think I need to go find him." She said.

"That is a good idea." Eli responded. "He will listen to you, I think."

"Do you know where he might be?" Abigail asked.

"They landed by the cliff to the east." Isaac pointed. "Do you want me to come with you?"

"No!" Abigail and Eli said at the same time.

"Oh. I just thought." Isaac's voice trailed off. "I thought I could help."

"No." Eli said softer. "I believe that Abigail will be able to get through to Brother Hugh." He said, even though he didn't really believe she would be able to. Even so, it was worth the effort for nothing else than to be able to say that they tried. "He left a little while ago so you should go now."

"Right." Abigail said as she stood. She took several deep breaths. "Oh dear, this is a lot of running."

"I suggest you go slowly and quietly," Isaac said. "Otherwise he might know you're following him."

"What? Why?" Abigail said.

"Or if you move quickly, you might be able to reach him before anything happens." Eli said. "And if he hears you it might make him… behave more appropriately?" He added.

"Yes." Abigail said. She took another deep breath then marched of purposefully toward the cliff. "I will let you know what happened as soon as I get back."

"Thank you." Eli said with a wave. He gestured at the young man. "We will both go to sleep so we are fit to tend the animals in the morning. I will see you at the paddock, Isaac." He called after Abigail: "Keep me abreast of the situation!"

"Right!" She said as she moved off at a jog.

Abigail jogged toward the edge of town, and the cliff- it was about two miles away. She was torn; if she caught Hugh and prevented him from questioning the visitors, she would not learn about the fate of her husband. On the other hand, if he arrived there before her then he could easily become violent. If they were all killed, she would also not be able to find anything out. She wasn't sure if Hugh was capable of restraint when it came to matters like this. She had grown very fond of him and knew that he was also fond of her- in a brotherly kind of way. Just a week before, he had caught her on the roof of her house pulling off a large limb that had fallen there. He clambered up, and scolded her for being on her roof at night

until she got down and let him muscle the six-foot-long branch down. He then climbed the tree and cut off three other branches that looked like they could potentially fall onto her roof. But along with being very protective, she was well aware that he not only had a temper, he had no issue with violence. 'Old Habits' he called it. So when she did not find him in his cabin, she took a moment to look in his wardrobe. She was relieved to see he had not changed into his hunting attire. That meant that there was at least a chance he was going to talk to them first, giving her more time to get there.

As Abigail ran, she removed her bonnet. The evening was quite warm -almost seventy degrees- since it was the beginning of August and sweat ran down her face and back as she jogged as quickly as she could to the cliff. Since she was alone, she did not feel any shame about uncovering her head. She used the cloth to wipe the sweat from her face as she went.

When she finally reached the cliff, she saw the large white craft the visitors had come in. She could not even comprehend how something that large -the size of her house- could get off the ground, much less fly to other planets. She moved to the edge of the clearing and watched. Hugh had tied up three of the visitors and propped them on their shins; the men.. He was currently holding the female by the shoulders. She was taller than him but the way he had tied her, her feet did not touch the ground. He shook her back and forth as he spoke to the men. She decided he was using her as a bargaining chip to get them to answer his questions.

Abigail was relieved that they were all still alive and Hugh was indeed just talking to them. The woman being shaken while tied up notwithstanding.

Suddenly Hugh's face changed and his mouth opened wider than it should have been able to. She could clearly see his long teeth. He was going to bite the woman on the neck, killing her. *Don't do it, Hugh, please don't do it.* She thought frantically. *Lord, please send Hugh a calming spirit.* She prayed. *Don't let him kill that woman. Please!*

Hugh froze.

Abigail took a step back farther into the shadows. She was sure she had not prayed out loud. Even so, Hugh turned and looked directly at her.

Hugh, don't do it! Don't kill her! She thought.

Hugh punched the woman in the face then dropped her. She crumpled unconscious to the ground. Hugh flipped her over onto her belly, probably because it was more comfortable with her hands tied, Abigail reasoned.

Abigail shook her head. *Well, I suppose that is the lesser of two evils, Lord.* Hugh's face changed back. He charged at one of the men and began to argue with him. *Just talk to them Hugh.*

She continued to watch, relieved that Hugh seemed to be having a conversation with the three men. They were still tied up, but at least they were just talking. She took a step forward to try and hear what they were saying but she was too far away. Still she watched as the

men spoke back and forth. Suddenly, Hugh stood and his face changed again. She was sure he was going to kill them, so she rushed out of the bushes to stop him.

"Hugh!" She shouted as she ran toward him. "Hugh, stop it!"

Twenty-Six

Hugh punched Cy in the face, knocking her out. He let her crumple to the ground then flipped her onto her belly; she was hog tied with her hands behind her back. He knew that in this position, a normal healthy person could die of positional asphyxia; the weight of the body on the ribcage made breathing difficult. As the person's diaphragm tired, breathing would slow. Since the diaphragm was only just a muscle, when it finally became exhausted, it would stop working all together. He was sure it would happen fairly quickly to Cy thanks to her not being accustomed to the gravity on Earth. He might as well have been sitting on her back. It did remove her from the equation without a bloody mess that would be witnessed by Abigail; he was sure she was the one in the forest watching. He fully expected her to come storming out at any moment.

Only Baxter was in a position to see the change in Hugh. He fell back and tried to crawl towards the ship. "No, no NO!!" He said. "Cynthia, start take off procedure!" Baxter said as he kicked with his feet to try and get to the open hatch. "Start take off procedure!"

"All right. I will start take off…"

Hugh turned to look at Baxter. "Cynthia cancel take off procedures." He growled.

"Okay. Take off procedures cancelled."

Hugh rushed forward and crowded the man. "Baxter, I know I told you that you could make it out of this. Are you trying to make me a liar?"

"No." Baxter said. "No, sir. No Mister Hugh, I am not. I'm sorry. No. I was just…" His eyes were trained on Cy. Her nose was bleeding profusely. "No." He said softly.

Hugh leaned over him. "Because I might just lose my temper if someone made me a liar right about now." His eyes flashed red. "And that would be a bad thing for everyone."

"Baxter, just stop." Felix said. "We're sorry, Hugh. We… what is it that you want?"

"Ahhh." Hugh smiled. "A man of action. Excellent. Well Felix, I'm after some answers at the moment." He gestured at the unconscious woman. "And I'm hoping that will let you know that *not* answering my questions is a good way to end up in that condition. Or dead. Or worse." He said as he drew his knife again. "I'm sure you're all now wondering how there is something worse than death." He squatted in front of them. "But let me assure you, there is indeed." He paused for a moment. "Are you folks familiar with vampires? Is popular literature still a thing with you?" He asked casually. He winked. "It's not with the Amish, if I have to be honest."

"I've read some books about them." Felix said confused by the strange direction the questioning had taken. "Why?"

"There was that movie." Carl said as he nodded his head. "It was really popular." He wasn't sure why this interloper was interested in books or movies, but if it kept him non-violent he was going to talk about anything and everything if necessary.

Baxter had seen the change in Hugh and just kept silent.

"Horror?" Hugh asked. "Was it a horror movie?"

"No. No, it wasn't." Carl said nervously, worried he had given the wrong answer.

"A damned comedy?" Hugh scowled. "It was a comedy wasn't it." Hugh waved his hand dismissively. "Never mind. The important thing is that you know that if you're bitten by a vampire, you become one. A tortured soul forever."

"Yes." Carl said. "I saw the movie. He bit Fiona Webster…" He hesitated. "That's the actresses' name, not the character. I don't remember what the character was called. Oh! Charlese maybe? No; Charlene, I think it was." He was prepared to discuss every movie he had ever seen. "I saw one about an ice pirate that was really good too." He nodded toward the ship. "You can watch that on the ship if you like. We are linked in so you can watch every movie…"

"No Carl. I am not interested in movies. I just wanted to make sure you knew what a vampire was." Hugh explained. "Because that's what I am."

"Come on now," Felix said. "Vampires aren't real." His eyes got large. "I don't mean to argue with you but… they're not real."

"I helped found the Jamestown colony in sixteen ten. The year sixteen hundred ten. We're in what, the twenties, early thirties right now?"

"What?" Carl asked.

"What year is this?" Hugh asked, hoping to get a more accurate number than what the Amish people were using. "The date. Today's date."

"Twenty twenty-seven." Felix said. "It's August. Uhm… August the fifth." He looked at Carl who nodded a confirmation. "Yes, August the fifth, twenty twenty-seven."

"Damn it all, it can't be twenty twenty-seven; it was twenty twenty-six when I fell in that glacier."

"It's the year twenty thousand twenty-seven." Baxter said. "Twenty, oh, twenty-seven. People usually drop the middle zeros."

"Oh!" Hugh made a quick calculation. "So I'm roughly seventeen thousand three hundred thirty years old." He smirked. "I look great for a man that age, right?"

"No you're not." Felix said. "Listen, I understand you're strong, but that's just the gravity here. You've tied us up to tell us fiction? Are you trying to sell a movie idea or something?" He shook his head. "He's not one of the Amish even though he dresses that way. He's an Inuit or something. But he's still a stupid primitive. Trying to sell a movie idea."

"Oh Felix. I think I'll kill you next since you are both unimportant and annoying. Not like my newest best friend Baxter. Right Baxter?" Hugh stood and bared his teeth at Felix. His face elongated and his eyes swirled to red. "I wonder what a spaceman's blood tastes like." He ran a long tongue across inch long fangs. "Delicious I imagine." He growled. He pointed a clawed hand at Felix. "You were right Carl; dinner is served. And it's Felix."

Felix and Carl both fell backwards and tried to push away from him. Baxter had closed his eyes, not wanting to see what was happening so he remained sitting upright on his shins.

"Hugh!" Abigail shouted as she approached. "Hugh, stop it!"

Hugh smiled. "Right on time. I knew you were out there Abby." He still didn't change back. "Somehow I knew; weird, right?"

Abigail stopped to look at Cy as she approached. Satisfied she was alive, she moved to the men and Hugh. "Hugh, please."

He turned to look at her.

"Oh, stop that." She said. "Stop that this instant!" She pointed a finger at him. "Stop that this instant, I say!"

"Abigail!" Hugh laughed as he changed back. "She's something, huh?"

"You know what he is?" Carl said. "And… you're okay with that?"

"Hugh is a friend. A good friend." Abigail said. "And he has promised me he has stopped killing people."

"*Stopped* killing people?" Felix said. "How… how many people have you killed?"

Hugh leaned in close to Baxter even though he wasn't the one who asked the question. "It's over seventy thousand… so far." He whispered. "In case you're curious."

Baxter jerked back at Hugh's hot breath on his ear. His eyes were still closed tight.

"What did he say, Baxter?" Felix said as he began to panic. "What did he say!"

"Nothing." Baxter lied, hoping for the best. For himself, anyway.

"Okay. Baxter and I will be having some one-on-one time here shortly." Hugh said. His face returned to normal. "So you two need to just keep quiet." He looked at Abigail. "Now that you're here, do you want to ask, or should I?"

"I…" Abigail's eyes watered. "I want to ask."

Hugh took her hand for support. "Go ahead."

Felix and Carl both stared wide-eyed at them. They were well aware of the Amish's beliefs and took advantage of them. The fact that this young Amish woman not only didn't have an issue with the

man being a vampire but she would also interact with him on such a personal level was disturbing.

"Go ahead." Hugh coaxed again.

"You were here two years ago." Abigail said. "You two at least." She pointed at Baxter and Felix. "I remember you both."

"Oh, well it could have been anyone." Felix said. "How can you remember someone from two years ago?"

"Felix, you are on borrowed time if you keep lying to her." Hugh said.

"Yes. We were here." Felix said.

Baxter finally opened his eyes. "Yes. That was us."

"Do you remember me?" Abigail asked, anger tinting her tone.

"No, I don't. I honestly don't." Baxter said. "Who are you?"

"Who am I?" Abigail said getting angrier. "I was the one that begged…"

"Abigail, stay on task." Hugh interrupted her.

Abigail took a deep breath. Then a second. "You took four people." She looked at Hugh. "Four *humans* from my town. One of them was my husband."

"Oh no." Baxter said. "No, no, no. This is a nightmare."

"Oh yes, yes, yes." Hugh said. "Ask, Abigail. Ask him."

"What happened to the male?"

Baxter's heart sank. "Which male?"

"The one with the blond hair. Gideon was his name."

Hugh pointed between all three of them. "We are prepared for any answer, gentlemen. It's just that she deserves some answer. I hope you understand that. Is he alive or dead?"

For a long moment, no one said anything.

"Yes." Felix said finally. "He is alive still."

Abigail's knees gave out. Hugh quickly grabbed her in her arms. "Abby, it's okay." He said as he lowered her to a seated position. "That's good news, right? It's good news." He looked at Felix. "Where is he?" He raised a finger. "I'm not interested in…" His eyes swiveled to Abigail then back. "Specific laboratory specimen details right now. Just generalities. Do you understand me?"

"Laboratory?" Felix shook his head. "No. But he is alive and well." He said, glad that he had good news about that one. The other male was dead; he died falling off a gangway as he tried to escape once he was on Venus. He fell the thirty miles to the planet's surface. Technically it took several minutes of falling for him to die from the sulfuric gasses, temperature, and pressures present in the planet's lower atmosphere long before he reached the planet's surface. "He's on display…"

"We will discuss that in a moment." Hugh cut him off. He glared at him. "You understand me?"

"Yes." Felix looked at Abigail. "Your husband is alive and doing well. You heard that, right?"

"I heard you." Abigail said.

"Okay, Abigail. You go tell Eli the good news while I negotiate his return."

"Negotiate?" Abigail said.

Hugh nodded. "Yes. We are going to work out how to get Gideon back here to you. Okay?" He helped her to her feet.

"Okay." She smiled. "Okay."

"I'll take care of it from here." Hugh said. He smiled as well. "Right?"

"Right." Abigail said. With another smile she hurried off toward town.

Hugh turned to look at the three men. "It's funny you should mention a nightmare, Baxter."

Twenty-Seven

Abigail ran all the way back to town. She was a sweaty mess when she got there. It was almost midnight by then but she still ran straight to Eli's home. When she got there, she hesitated. She looked back the way she had come. She was not sure if she should have stayed with Hugh during the negotiations to make sure they remained nonviolent.

"Deciding whether to knock or not?" Eli said from a chair in the shadow of the porch.

Abigail jumped. "Eli! You scared me!"

"You have God on your side in Heaven and a vampire as a friend and a protector here on Earth. How could you be afraid of anything?"

"I suppose that is true. Why are you up?"

"I was waiting to hear some news. Do you have any?"

Abigail ran to Eli and knelt beside him. "Brother Eli, he's alive! Gideon is alive!" She took his hands in hers. "What do you think of that?"

Eli sat up. "What? Are you sure?"

"The men said so. Brother Eli, it was the same two as were here before."

"Only two?"

"No; there were four of them. A man and a woman but two of them were the two that were here last time. Hugh talked to them and…"

"Just talked to them?" Eli interrupted.

"Yes." She hesitated. "He did punch the woman in the face, knocking her out."

"Oh dear."

"But he didn't kill her." Abigail pointed out. "She was tied up but okay when I checked her."

"That is an improvement, I suppose." Eli said. "We must take our victories where we can when it comes to Hugh."

"Yes." Abigail's legs felt weak. She moved to another chair and collapsed into it. "Oh Brother Eli. Gideon is alive. Alive and well, the man said."

"But can you trust these men to be telling the truth?"

"Hugh can be pretty persuasive." Abigail said. "When he changes, he is…" She was at a loss for words.

"Changes?"

"His face changes. His face and teeth get longer."

"Like a horse?"

Abigail laughed. "No, not all his teeth. Just his two front ones. They become like a dog's teeth; long and sharp. And his mouth is bigger as well. His skin changes too and he gets claws on his hands. It's very disturbing if you aren't used to it."

"He has changed in front of you more than once?"

"Three times now. Including the time just now with the visitors." Abigail said. "But I know in my heart it is still Hugh so I'm not afraid. But he definitely looks like a wild animal. When he threatened the men while looking like that, I can't imagine they would lie." She thought back. "He even told them we were prepared to accept that he was dead, so they really had no reason to lie."

"So what happens now?"

"Hugh said he was going to negotiate Gideon's return."

"How will he do that?"

Abigail considered that. "I don't know. Perhaps he will go with them to get Gideon. Or he might keep the man and woman here as collateral until they return with Gideon. I do not know how many it takes to manage their craft. Perhaps only one will remain as collateral. Either way, Hugh seemed confident he could negotiate Gideon's return."

"I don't know if there is better news than that." Eli said.

Twenty-Eight

Hugh crossed his arms. "So, Baxter, Felix, and Carl." He looked over his shoulder. Cy was still breathing but it had definitely slowed. "And Cy for the time being, of course."

"You said you were going to negotiate for the return of that primitive." Baxter said.

"He's a person. If I hear the word 'primitive' out of anyone's mouth again, I will break their arms. Both of them. And I won't even set them afterwards." Hugh said. "Got it?"

None of the men said anything.

"Got it?" Hugh asked again, louder.

"Yes. We got it, Hugh." Baxter said.

"So you fly the ship, Baxter? I recall the flights to Mars. Touch screens mainly." He gestured at the ship. "Is that what you're dealing with now? Between that and your friendly AI helper, Cynthia, it can't be all that difficult."

"It's complicated flying a space ship." Baxter said. "It would take you years to learn how to do it safely."

"I'm rated on twin engine aircraft. I even did my solo flight." Hugh smirked. "In twenty twenty-five." He raised his eyebrows. "Do you know what an aircraft is?"

"Of course." Baxter said. "We have them on Venus."

"Fly them between the floating cities, right?" Hugh thought for a moment. "Havoc. It was the Havoc program if I remember correctly. High Altitude Venus Operational Concept, right?" Hugh was very interested in a planet with a thick cloud cover that was considered for colonization.

"Okay, I have a question." Felix said.

"Feel free. Just toss it out there, Felix." Hugh said. "We're having a friendly conversation here."

"While we're tied up." Carl said.

"You know, I'm not too sure what you bring to the table, Carl." Hugh said. "Baxter here is a pilot so he's got some worth. Felix says he knows where Gideon is, so that's going to make getting him back possible. What do you bring to the table? Hot chow?"

No one said anything.

"I'm being serious, Carl. What is it that you do, exactly? Why should I keep you around?"

"I'm the first mate and owner of the *Giselle*." Carl said. "I handle repairs if they come up. I am in charge of communications. I tend to the requirements of the passengers." He frowned. "And yes, I cook."

He really had no other function besides providing money and tending to passengers. His grandfather had managed to slow and capture a rogue comet, gaining possession of three hundred million tons of ice; a valuable resource in the solar system. Ice and therefore water was practically its own currency. Grandfather Nunis decided that to ensure that future generations of his would not become destitute when the ice ran out, he stated in his will that no family member would receive any profits from the ice business if they were not gainfully employed on their own. So Carl ran a charter service with one ship; the *Giselle*.

"None of those seem all that important to me, Carl." Hugh said. "So what's your question, Felix?"

"I don't understand how you remember things from seventeen thousand years ago. I don't remember that… woman and that was just two years ago." Felix said.

"That's a good question." Hugh said. "Two reasons. First off, you don't remember her because she's just some stupid native to you; unimportant background noise. Why would you remember her? And second, as far as I'm concerned, twenty twenty-six was just three months ago." Hugh squatted down. "I fell into a glacial ravine just over there." He pointed at the small cliff. "It was over three hundred feet down back then. I fell a good hundred feet deeper down into the glacier. Then I froze solid. When I woke up it was now. Or really, now three months ago. So I have very vivid memories of the twenty-first century because they are all very fresh in my mind."

"You know," Felix said. "Since we're just talking all friendly like. I could set you up with a speaking tour. People all over would line up to hear you give first-hand accounts of the twenty-first century." He smiled. "Oh, you could do quite well, I'm sure. You'd be famous, Hugh. Famous."

"Felix, you slimy bastard." Hugh said. "Slimy and bold. You're tied up, ready to be the main course and you're pitching job offers to me. You know, I really respect that; these Amish are really pretty straight and narrow." A thought occurred to him. "Hey, do you people use money?"

"Of course we use money." Baxter said.

"Gold?"

"Only because it's plentiful and easy to cast. And it looks nice." Baxter said. "It's not valuable like it was in ancient times. By weight, I mean. It's basically a symbol of a credit; legal tender."

"What about Krugerrands from the twentieth century?" Hugh asked. "Gold coins, that is."

"You have actual money? Coins from the twentieth century?" Felix asked excitedly.

"Felix, you slime, *shut up*. The adults are talking." Hugh snapped at him.

"Those would be worth quite a bit." Baxter said. "I mean, if you had seventeen-thousand-year-old coins in twenty twenty-six, they would be worth a lot, right?"

"I suppose so." Hugh said. He pushed himself to his feet and turned. "Cy. Finally."

"Is she…" Felix asked.

"Oh yes. Cy is no more, Felix. You can see I'm really broken up about it." He looked at Baxter. "I don't keep an actual count so it's still seventy thousand or so."

"What's seventy thousand?" Felix asked. "Is… is that how many people you've killed?"

Hugh thought back to what he had said to the old woman. "Four hundred fifty-seven years, fifty-two weeks in a year with two or three people a week. And the occasional families of three or four at a time. It equals out to over seventy thousand."

Felix let out a long breath. "Oh man."

Hugh grabbed Cy by the arm and dragged her over to the three men. "This is just for curiosity's sake, really." He said as he picked her up in his arms. He changed as he bit into Cy's throat and drank some of her blood. He let her drop to the ground. "Tastes the same, in case you're curious." He said as he licked his lips. "Oh, and you can be my witnesses; Cy was killed by gravity not by me, so if Abigail asks, you can honestly tell her that I didn't kill her. Right?"

"Right." Baxter said. He was elated that it seemed like he would be allowed to live- otherwise how would he be able to talk to the woman later on. "Absolutely we will back you on that."

"Does that mean she's going to…" Felix's voice trailed off.

Hugh laughed. "What? You think I want to spend eternity with her? Not likely." He drew his knife and cut her bonds. "Not likely." He squatted down beside her and plunged his knife into her neck. He rocked it back and forth to get it between her vertebrae then pushed it through. With a twist of his wrist, he cut her head off. "There we go. Problem solved." He stood and threw the head as far as he could into the forest. It landed forty yards away. He leaned over the men- he hadn't changed back yet. "And if you try to escape be aware you won't make it farther than Cy's head. Be right back, gentlemen." He said as he dragged Cy's body behind the space craft.

Within moments he returned. "Have you decided while I was away?" He still hadn't changed back.

"Decided what?" Baxter asked. He wouldn't look at Hugh.

"Who was going to try and trick me into untying them so they could make a rush for the ship while I wasn't looking? Once it's locked up, I would be out of luck." He smirked. "Right?"

"What?" Felix said. "Why would we try that?"

Hugh tapped his now elongated ears. "There's lots of perks that come with this. Good hearing is one of them, *Felix*." Hugh changed back to normal. "So. Here's how it's going to work. Baxter, you're going to show me how to fly this thing." He pointed at the ship. "Right?"

"Right." Baxter said. He was still looking at the ground.

"And Felix here is going to go with me to help me get Gideon out of wherever he is." Hugh squatted down again. A thought occurred to him. "Okay, now I have a question."

"Feel free. Just toss it out there, Hugh." Felix said. "We're having a friendly conversation here."

"Just so you know Felix, being a smart-ass moves you up in my book. So well done." Hugh said. "Okay: explain to me what you're doing here." He held out his hands. "I get that you're kidnapping natives. But you're not taking enough to be used as slave labor, which because of Earth's gravity they'd be pretty strong on other planets, I'd think. I suspect you're taking them to increase your genetic diversity. You take two females and two males, after all. Non-related ones that that. So genetic diversity, am I right?"

"Increasing our genetic diversity?" Felix said. "With these…" He hesitated. "Earthlings?"

"Nicely done." Hugh said. "Yes. That's what I think."

"You're wrong." Felix said. Then he looked at the ground. "Oh, what I meant was…"

"No, if I'm wrong tell me what they are for. You're taking from other tribes and towns as well right?"

"Yes." Baxter said. "We take from groups all over the world."

"Another question; how many people are actually on Earth right now? There were nine billion of us before."

"Five hundred thousand." Baxter said. "Different races scattered around. But about a half million total. The population has been steadily increasing over the past thousand years."

"A half million." Hugh whistled. "Wow. Where'd everyone go?" He pointed upward. "Up there?"

"It was a plague. A Bioengineered plague." Baxter said.

"Why would someone do that? Was it part of a worldwide war or something?"

"No, nothing like that." Baxter shrugged. "You can't make any money selling drugs if no one is sick."

"Insane." Hugh said. "Alright then; why do you want Earthlings?" He remembered what Felix had said; on display. "They are on display? Like in a zoo? Fighting games? Sports?"

"Competition? It's nothing like that. And not a big as a zoo as you remember it." Felix said. "I'm not sure I should elaborate."

"I'm pretty sure you should." Hugh said. "Since we're all friendly right now."

"They're on display… like art."

"Art?" Hugh asked. "Like hanging on a wall or statues?"

"More like a living display. Performance art. They get a transparent room and their owners get to watch them do whatever they do, when they want to."

"That's barbaric." Hugh said. "You take people living out in the wilds, out in nature and stick them in a cell for people to gawk at them?"

"They aren't considered people." Felix said. "They have no rights at all. They're property."

"People would go insane in those conditions." Hugh said. A terrible thought occurred to him. "That's what they want, isn't it; a raving primitive behind glass they can look at and say 'good thing we've advanced past that', right?"

None of the men responded.

Rage filled Hugh, thinking of the thousands of humans over the centuries that were put in solitary confinement until they went mad and even then, they couldn't escape. And how one of those humans was Abigail's husband.

"So where is Gideon then? In some rich person's house?" Hugh stood. "Well?"

"He's in Cy's house." Felix said. "We were here to get his mate. The male is a disappointment; he won't go mad. He just sits. Sits and sulks. They aren't pleased with him at all. So it was either a refund, or we get his mate. We figured it would make him more… entertaining at least for a while. Couples usually end up killing each other."

"I thought you didn't remember Abigail." Hugh said, barely keeping his anger in control.

"We don't." Felix said. "The… Gideon speaks of her often, asking for her. He won't stop."

Hugh clenched his fist. "You know the one thing this whole conversation hasn't had?" His eyes flashed red. "Do you?"

"No?" Baxter said. "What?"

"Any sort of input from Carl." Hugh wheeled around on him. "You have nothing to add to *anything*, do you Carl!"

"What?" Carl tried to scoot back but his legs had gone numb sitting on them.

Hugh grabbed Carl and picked him up. Without even changing, he ripped out a good portion of his throat with his hand. He threw it on the ground in front of Felix then dropped Carl in front of Baxter.

The two men watched as Carl gasped and tried to breathe from his destroyed trachea as his blood spurted out onto the grey cloth. After only a short minute, Carl lay still.

"And then there were two." Hugh said. He reached down and tore part of Carl's tunic off and wiped his hands with it. "You people. You want the truth of this whole thing? You're the primitives, the savages. Putting living thinking people into cages to gawk at them!" He took a step toward Baxter.

"Hugh, you need me! YOU need me to teach you to fly this ship!"

Hugh took several deep breaths, calming himself. He pointed to where Cy's body used to be. "What was her name?"

"Cy." Baxter said. "Cy Rollins."

"What did she do?"

"She was a bioengineer. She…" Felix said, making sure he remained part of the conversation. A helpful part of it. "She was working on hyper oxygenating plants to help with the terraforming of Venus. It's been going really well."

"But the gravity of Venus is about the same as Earth's how is it that you don't look like Earthlings and have problems with its gravity like you do here?"

"She lives on Mars. On one of its moons; Deimos. We are Martians. We're taller and thinner than Venusians. They look more like you. But they are taller." Baxter said.

"Asters from the belt and the Jupiterians look like us as well. Same with Saturnians." Felix added.

Hugh was taken aback. He expected there to be only a few hundred, possibly a thousand people in space, which is why he expected the gathering to be for genetic material. "How many humans live in the solar system? In total?"

"About two million," Baxter said. "Spread out from Mercury to Saturn."

"And Uranus' moons." Felix added. Hopefully helpfully.

"Nothing outside the solar system?" Hugh asked. "Still too far, huh?"

"Oh, we have Near Light Propulsion. Point nine nine Cee. There is a new colony on Proxima Centauri." Baxter said. "A few hundred people are there. More leave every year.

"Wow, almost the speed of light? Does this thing have that?" Hugh pointed at the ship.

"All ships do. It makes travel in the Solar System a matter of hours. Uranus is the farthest and it takes about ten hours because of the time needed to get to speed then to slow down. Mars is an hour and a half. So is Venus." Baxter said. "It's a quarter inch sphere of hyper compressed Oganesson, the heaviest of all elements. A ten-foot sphere's worth compressed to a quarter inch which is where it reaches a singularity. The ships run on what is essentially a miniature black hole. It creates a gravity vortex to create thrust."

"And that's a safe and stable way to travel?" Hugh asked, getting more and more of his questions answered.

"It's thousands of years old technology. It's as reliable as a wheel." Baxter said.

"So why is it ten hours to Uranus but still an hour to Mars?" Hugh shrugged. "It should be a few minutes."

"You can't get up to full speed going short distances between the inners; Mercury, Venus, Earth, Mars. The farther you go the

faster you can go." Felix said, desperately trying to stay in the conversation.

"Very interesting." Hugh said. He smiled at Felix. "And friendly, right?"

"Right, right!" Felix said. "We will be glad to help you get that man, whatever his name was back here to Earth. Right, Baxter?"

"Until I need to go to sleep, then I'd find a stake in my heart, right?"

"What no, no!" Felix said. "We wouldn't do that? Right Baxter?"

Baxter just stared at the ground, realizing what had just happened.

"Baxter?" Felix said again.

"Cynthia," Hugh said. "Do you know where the biologist Cy Rollins lives, on Deimos?"

"Yes, I have that information. Do you want to open a transmission there?"

"No." Hugh said. "I want to go there."

"You want to go there? Okay. I have the coordinates." Cynthia said.

Baxter let out a long breath.

"Cynthia, can you pilot the ship there for me?" Hugh asked.

"No. I can't pilot the ship there for you." Cynthia replied. "I am not authorized to fly ships so the controls are on a separate circuit."

"There's no autopilot so you can take a nap flying between planets?" Hugh asked.

"Yes, there is an autopilot," Cynthia replied. "But it is simply an autopilot; it will only continue to do what you have programmed it to do."

"So you can't fly a ship, Cynthia?" Hugh confirmed.

"No. I can't fly a ship."

Hugh looked at Baxter. Baxter's eyebrows went up.

"But I can teach you how to do it," Cynthia added. "A standard flight program takes thirteen months."

A smile played across Baxter's face.

"How long is the training program if I am already certified for twin engine aircraft and rotary wing aircraft? And I have completed my solo flight as well."

Baxter looked toward the ship, smile fading. He was dreading the answer.

"Okay. Do you need certification?"

"No. I just need to know how to do it." Hugh realized where Cynthia was going with her line of questioning; she wasn't allowed to do anything illegal. "It's for personal curiosity."

"Okay. The training program from that point is two weeks if you are a good student. Do you want to start the program now?"

"No Cynthia. I have some things I need to take care of first." Hugh said. "In the meanwhile, just for fun, play the least popular song on the charts this week."

"Okay. Here is Danny M. Stiles' song, 'Dancing to the Entrance of Your Heart'." A peppy love song started playing.

Baxter frowned. He hated that song, like everything else Danny had written; it was a terrible song to die to. He looked at Hugh. "Hell. Let's get this over with then."

"Not that you deserve it, but quick and clean." Hugh drew his knife.

"What?" Felix said. "Wait, wait. Let's talk this through. You need me to get you into Cy's house. You need me for something, I'm sure! Let's talk about this!"

Within minutes, Baxter and Felix's bodies had been dragged to where Cy and Carl's bodies were. Hugh folded up the bloodied grey cloth and put it behind the ship as well. As an afterthought he added Cy's head to the pile lest Abigail find it. He was very pleased with how things had worked out. Because he thought it was catchy, he even had Cynthia repeat 'Dancing to the Entrance of Your Heart' twice for him while he cleaned up.

After another talk with Cynthia, he closed up the ship and returned to his home, very satisfied with his progress.

Twenty-Nine

Abigail walked tentatively to the door of the massive white ship. She knocked on the door. When no one answered, she knocked louder.

"Maybe he's not here." Isaac called from the bushes. He refused to get close to the ship. "We should have checked his house first."

"It's still dark for another hour; why would he be home?" Abigail knocked again. "I assumed he would still be here talking with the visitors but inside." She gave a sigh. "Fine, let's go to his house. But why would he be there?"

"Maybe they resolved what they needed to and everyone went to bed. It is very early still." Isaac stifled a yawn. "Let's go check his house. We should have checked it first." He said again.

"Fine, fine, Isaac." Abigail said. "We should have checked it first, you are right."

The pair walked through the early morning darkness back toward town, veering off to Hugh's cabin when they reached that path.

When they got there, Abigail knocked on the door. "Hugh?" She called.

Within moments, Hugh opened the door. "Abigail? Why are you up so early?"

"See? I told…" Isaac started. The look from Abigail made him not finish. "Well, I am going to get another hour's sleep, I think. Are you okay here Sister Abigail?" He asked.

"I will walk her home, Isaac." Hugh said with a smirk. "Go get some more sleep."

With a wave, Isaac jogged off, hoping to get an entire hour and a half of sleep before he had to tend the animals.

"You are welcome in my home." Hugh said.

"Why do you say that every time?" Abigail asked as she entered.

"Because, for some reason that I don't understand if I am not invited into someone's home, I feel uncomfortable."

"From the lack of hospitality?"

"No, it's not that." Hugh gestured at a chair as he lit a lamp. "I don't feel like I'm at full strength, if that makes any sense." He tended to not bother with any lighting when he was home alone because he could see in the dark just fine. "I can't explain it."

Abigail sat. "So?"

"So I think it's amusing that I make a point of inviting people into my house so that they are at full strength while they are here."

"No, not that so." She shook her head. "I meant, so what did you find out talking to the visitors?"

"Oh. Yes." Hugh decided he would not mention the fact that every one of them was dead and dismembered behind their ship unless he was very specifically asked about them. And even then, he would probably make up some sort of lie. "We talked about why they do what they do. And it's terrible, Sister Abigail."

Abigail tried to think what they would use people for. "Slave labor? I know that the Inuit used to capture people and use them for slaves, but they don't do that anymore."

Hugh shook his head. "It's worse than that; they just put them on display. Like art. Living art."

"Doing what?"

Hugh shrugged. "Whatever they do day to day living in a cage. These people like to have someone to look at to make themselves feel superior." Hugh realized that while the Amish had animals they used for labor and food, they also had animals as pets. There were at least two dozen dogs and probably twice as many cats as that in the town. Of course, the cats kept the mice in check, so they served a dual purpose. But they didn't have any animals that did tricks or put on shows. They did write music and poems and of course made art, but none of it was performance art. Except for a concert at the fire pit every so often.

"Like a dog?" Abigail asked. It was the only frame of reference she had.

Hugh nodded, expecting that. "Yes, very much like that except they aren't for companionship." He sighed. "They put them in large glass boxes and just look at them."

"Oh." Abigail said. "I would go mad." She wrung her hands together. "Oh, Gideon! That must be horrible!"

"It is. That's why it's going to stop."

"You talked them into stopping what they do?"

"Not yet." Hugh said. "The first order of business is getting Gideon back. Then I will see what I can do about freeing the other… prisoners." He said, because really that's what they were.

"Oh, Hugh, how can you do that?"

"I am going to take their ship and fly it to where they are holding him. It's the house of the woman you saw already." He narrowed his eyes at her. "It seems Gideon keeps asking about you so they were here to capture you to bring to him."

"So I could be with him?" Abigail smiled. "Oh, that would be wonderful."

"No!" Hugh said, louder than he wanted to. It made Abigail jump. "No." He said again softer. "You don't want to be trapped in a glass cage for the rest of your life. No. I will bring Gideon here, back to his own people, back to this open country. Yukon Forest. Back to you."

"How? Are they willing to take you there? I don't see why they would be." She said.

"I know how to fly an airplane." He said. "That's a machine that flies in the sky. I learned how before I fell in the ravine." He decided to skip the part where he learned how to fly because in Alaska small planes were easily available, hard to track, and an excellent way to get away from a police chase. "So flying that will be just a small step up." A thought occurred to him. "It's like if you first learn to ride a donkey, you can ride a stallion because it's pretty much the same thing; just bigger."

"That makes sense." Abigail said. The town had an extensive school system, teaching reading, writing, arithmetic, as well as animal husbandry, carpentry, and other life skills required in the Alaskan wilderness. "You learn to read letters before you learn to read words."

"You are truly an extraordinary woman, Abigail." Hugh said. "That's it exactly. Now, it will take me about a week to learn to fly that machine, then I will go to where Gideon is."

"Where is that?"

"He is on a moon of Mars."

"Phobos or Deimos?"

Hugh smiled again. "It's Deimos. It seems there are just a hundred people living on that tiny moon. It's very exclusive. They've turned it into a Dyson Sphere by using…" His voice trailed off.

Trying to explain self-replicating nano carbon tube building robots turning the small asteroid moon into a hollowed-out biosphere over the course of three hundred years was just not going to work. They had even attached rockets to it to stop it from flying off from Mars, which is what it was destined to do because it kept getting farther away. Ironically, Phobos was getting closer to Mars at a rate of six feet every hundred years so rockets had been installed on that tiny moon to keep it from crashing into the surface of Mars. So instead he said: "The Rollins family is one of the families living there. They have a large place of their own, according to Cynthia, so it will be easy to find."

"Who is Cynthia? There was only one woman I saw." Abigail leaned toward Hugh. "Was she hiding inside?"

"Sort of." Hugh thought for a moment the best way to explain an artificial intelligence to someone who didn't even know about computers. "Cynthia is a machine that runs the ship. It isn't a real person but it can talk and give information. It has access to a lot of information, all the libraries in all the towns of all the people living in space. So it can seem like Cynthia is a real person when she talks, but she isn't. It's difficult to explain."

He thought back to his three- hour-long discussion with Cynthia. Learning how to turn off the tracking features of the ship, how to set up an automated message in Baxter's voice for anyone who contacted the ship saying they were delayed two weeks waiting for the woman they wanted to capture. In the message, Baxter said she was on a hunting expedition and wouldn't return for two weeks

so they would just wait for her return, just in case she came back early. Hugh had hoped that would convince whoever contacted the ship to just be patient and wait instead of coming to investigate. The danger was it really wasn't a far commute from Earth to Mars any more. He also got a quick history lesson on the 'non-Earthlings' as he decided to call them. They had no real military but instead locally run police forces. They used small ballistic weapons so there was no chance of punching a hole in the side of a building, letting out a bunch of oxygen. Regular citizens did not own weapons of any kind but they could be checked out for expeditions like when they came to Earth. Hugh expected his trip to Deimos to be uneventful for him and lethal for anyone he encountered.

He smiled at her. "It will be fine, really." He said. "You'll see."

Thirty

Hugh had spent every evening of the past week in the *Giselle* learning from Cynthia. The last four days, he even spent his days there, executing countless flight simulations. The ship was laid out like a twentieth century recreational vehicle; it only had one level. The very front was where the ship was piloted from with a navigation and communication station behind the pilot and copilot seats. One person could easily sit in the pilot's chair and swivel around to operate the entire ship. The copilot chair had duplicate controls and navigation but they would have to get up and move to a third chair to man the communication station. Or, a third person could just sit there. A bulkhead separated the flight portion of the ship from a large table for eating and such. Directly behind in the same open area was a well-stocked galley. Then there were four cabins, two on each side; a large and a smaller one; ostensibly for parents in the large bed and then two children in bunk beds. Eight people could easily travel in the seventy-foot ship comfortably. It was a far cry from the thirty-five-foot Winnebago he had lived in for a year in the outback- after removing its anti-social hermit owner. The engine and other operating systems for the ship were at the very end of the ship. He felt very confident by the time two weeks were done, he would have no problems handling the ship; between Cynthia and the fact that a great deal of it was indeed 'point and click' flying an

interplanetary space ship was as straightforward as a traditional twin-engine airplane. Especially out in space where there was a lot less to run into. He only had one problem; it would be dangerous to go alone. At some point he had to sleep.

He had thought long and hard on who to bring. Abigail would have had the greatest interest in going because she wanted to see her husband as soon as possible, but her emotions would make her a liability. He also considered Eli but trying to get him in a spacecraft was unlikely; he didn't even like riding fast in a wagon. As Hugh had hysterically learned one evening.

Hugh sat by the fire pit, waiting for Isaac to arrive. The young man was usually up early and he would meet his friends at the center of town before going to the animal stockade. Out of the townsfolk he had befriended, his choices were down to Jonas, Jacob, and Isaac. Jonas and Jacob were both married with several children each that they would leave behind. Isaac was still single at eighteen. Jonas was thirty, Jacob a little older which made them more mature which meant they would be easier to reason with. He frowned. Or they would reason with him since in outwardly appearance they were older than him; it was a hard and fast rule with the Amish that with age came authority. With Isaac, he wouldn't have that problem. He would also be able to convince him to do things that were perhaps in a 'grey zone' according to the Amish faith.

Of course, tricking Isaac to betray his faith wasn't something a friend -or elder- did. He scowled. "Caring about people is damned inconvenient," he said aloud.

"What's that?" Jonas said as he approached. "Good morning, Brother Hugh. You're up late." He smiled. "For you, that is."

"I was waiting for Eli or Isaac."

"That's two ends of a very long pole." Jonas said.

Hugh laughed. Jonas' sense of humor was one of the things that had drawn him into friendship with him. "Maybe you can help me decide. Since you are out of the running."

"Running for what?" Jonas sat beside Hugh. "In a race I'd pick Isaac." He elbowed Hugh. "Eli does not like moving quickly at all, eh?" He had been in town as Hugh and Eli had come barreling back into town in a wagon. Eli gave Hugh an earful when they had stopped. Jonas was crying he was laughing so hard at the spectacle.

"Yes, that is true." Hugh said. "But, this competition involved who will ride with me in the ship."

"Oh, Brother. Brother, tell me you aren't thinking of taking Isaac with you into that tiny thing. How long will you be in there with him?" He smiled wide. "That sounds like a great trial of patience."

"Isaac isn't that bad." Hugh said. He considered it; he was quite excitable. "Mostly."

"See?" Jonas became serious. "But, I do not believe anyone would be more willing to make sure you made it home with Gideon than Isaac. He cares about you a great deal, and he cares about Abigail as well."

"Yes. It's just that." Hugh thought for a moment. "You do not know about my past. I have done terrible things. I do terrible things."

"We all fall short." Jonas said.

"Yes, I know, I know." Hugh replied. "But… it's hard to explain how I am."

Jonas leaned in close. Very close to Hugh and whispered into his ear. "We know you are a vampire." He whispered.

"What?" Hugh sat up straight? "What?" He said again. "Who told you that?"

"A half-dozen people know, brother." Jonas said with a shrug.

"A half-dozen? Six people know?" Hugh said. "What about the rest of the town?"

Jonas smiled wide. "Hugh, my brother you know that I love you. But they don't know you well enough to care. They have their families, crops, and animals. You just aren't important to them."

"Well, that kind of hurts." Hugh said.

"That you are not the center of everyone's attention?" Jonas said. "I was born in this town, Brother, and I only know the names of perhaps thirty of forty people."

"That's all?"

"There are over a thousand people in this town. Most I will never even speak to." Jonas shrugged. "It doesn't mean that I don't

care about them or the town. It's just how things are. Did you know the names of everyone in your town?"

"I didn't even know the name of the person living next door to me." Hugh admitted.

"And they probably didn't know yours." Jonas slapped Hugh on the back. "Look at that improvement; you now have at least twenty people who know your name. Twenty!"

Hugh shook his head. "Yeah, I suppose so. But out of those select twenty, who do I take with me on my rescue mission?" He had purposefully been vague about his plan because it boiled down to killing anyone who got in his way, snatching Gideon, then making a mad dash to the ship while Isaac made sure the door stayed shut until he got back.

"So what is your plan?" Jonas asked.

"My plan?" Hugh said. "Sneak into the house, snatch Gideon, then make a mad dash for the ship while Isaac makes sure the door stays shut until we get there."

Jonas laughed. "What a horrible plan. Now I wish you were taking me with you."

"Really?"

"No. Not at all. Joanna would beat me with a broom handle when she found out I volunteered to go with you."

"So you're saying I should take Isaac."

"There is no one to beat him." Jonas grinned. "Not counting you when he won't stop talking to you the entire way there."

"You're not helping, Jonas." Hugh said. "It could be dangerous you know."

"Don't let him leave the ship." Jonas said. "He will be safe in there, I'm sure. It looks solid."

"It is." Hugh said. "And now I'm wondering how much I should show him about the ship. I know I told you I had met some Amish people before."

"Yes, I remember. Why?"

"Well, it was a modern world with electronics, moving machines, ships in the skies and in space. But the Amish did not want any part of it. It was one of their basic tenants; shun the modern world, modern inventions." He smiled. "That problem seems to have solved itself."

"Well, I can understand that a simple life is closer to a Godly life, so too many distractors takes your eyes off Him." Jonas elbowed Hugh. "But the ribbed canoe, that is okay, I think."

"Well, it's old technology so it's okay." Hugh nodded. "But that is a good way to put it; the simpler life. And accurate, I have to say. So I will only show him what he needs to know, when he needs to know."

"That is probably best, because once this is over, remember he will go back to his life here in town. And…" He leaned back and appraised Hugh. "Will you?"

"I do have a fine house." Hugh sat silent for a long while- it wasn't something he had considered. But he would have an interplanetary vehicle at his disposal. "I'm not sure where I would go."

"You would go where there is trouble, Brother Hugh. There is none of that here. It's a quiet simple life. I can see why those other Amish Brothers strove to achieve that."

Looking for trouble. Thought Hugh. It is what I would do. At least until I get those trapped people returned to their homes. If I could do that.

"Are you thinking of all the ways you could get in trouble?" Jonas said.

"Actually, yes. But you see the problem is that it's not just Gideon that's trapped up there." He pointed. "There are a lot more people there. And they deserve to be free. All of them. And if I can help them do that, then I think I should."

Jonas slapped Hugh on the back then stood. "My Brother, you have surely come a long way. In your old ways, you'd have not cared about any of those people you have never met. Not a one. And I dare say, no one in this town."

"That is true." Hugh said. "Oh man! Why didn't you sleep in? Now you're filling my head with all sorts of thoughts." He scowled. "Go tend your flock, you crazy man." He shoo'ed him away. "Be gone."

"I will leave you to your… Oh no, I won't it seems." Jonas pointed. "Here comes Isaac to fill your ears." He waved and walked off.

"Isaac, good morning to you." Hugh said. "I have a problem that I think you can help me with…"

Thirty-One

Hugh looked at the view screens in front of him- the ship didn't have any actual view ports; even the large windows in the living areas of the ship were merely screens displaying what cameras outside the ship recorded. Over to the side he saw that Abigail waved as the white ship took off. She had taken several steps back as the ship took off shakily. "A few days and we will be back, Abigail." He said.

"You think this will take a couple of days?" Isaac asked. He was sitting in the copilot seat.

"It might."

"My we are high off the ground!"

"Soon there won't even be a ground under us." Hugh said as he looked over at him. "I understand that this is very strange for you, Isaac. But I really appreciate you coming with me to help."

"If it helps Gideon to get home, I am glad to help." Isaac leaned forward as he looked into the monitor, as if it were a window and by leaning up he could look farther in that direction.

"If you put your finger on the window and move it around, you can see in other directions." Hugh said. "Like this." He reached over to the screen between them. It was a rear-facing camera. He put his finger on the middle of the screen then dragged it down. The camera

panned down to show Abigail and Eli still waving. "And if you use two fingers and move them apart, it gets bigger." He opened up two fingers and the camera zoomed in on the pair. "See? And if you tap it twice, it goes back to its original place." He double tapped the screen and it returned to a rear-view; a large panoramic view of the forest. The Pacific Ocean was just coming into view on the edge of it as they climbed.

"That's amazing." Isaac moved the camera around. "So why is this going to take a few days? You said we were close to where Gideon was being held. Hours away, right?"

"We are close. Just a couple of hours, but we are going into a strange land. So we are going to be cautious. Before we fly to the little…" He hesitated. "village where Gideon is being held we might stop in the larger one to see what kind of information we can gather."

"You mean Mars."

Hugh smiled. "Yes. I keep forgetting what they teach you in school. We need to go to Mars first, I think. And after that we will go to Deimos to get Gideon."

"I would think that going to Deimos first would be better. We get Gideon, then stop by the other... Mars, that is… on our way home."

"Well, if we raise alarms on Deimos, then Mars will be alerted as well because Deimos is a little village that falls under the control of Mars." Hugh tried to explain the relationship between colonies in a

way that he hoped Isaac would understand. It's not like there was a Governor of Alaska anymore who had oversight over all the cities like Anchorage. "But," he continued, "if we go to Mars first and run into any sort of trouble, or the people become aware of us, they wouldn't think we were going to Deimos because they don't know why we are even there." He shrugged. "They would probably think we are from some other village. Plus, I want to land in the village at night when most people are asleep; it will make sneaking around easier."

"That sounds like a good plan." Isaac said. "But, isn't the time the same everywhere?"

"No, actually." Hugh said. "You know that the Earth is round, right?"

"Sure; everyone knows that."

"Good. So since the Earth is round, the sun appears to come up over the horizon one section at a time. The people who live far to the west don't see the sun come up when you do in Anchorage because of the Earth's curve."

"That makes sense."

"So even on Earth, the time is different because sunrise happens at different times. And because Mars and its moons are in a different place all together, they would be on their own time. Here let me show you." He hesitated for a second. "Cynthia, what is the local time in the largest city on Mars?"

"It is ten thirty-seven AM right now." Cynthia answered.

"See?" Hugh said. "And back in Anchorage it was close to Midnight. So we need to travel slowly so that when we get to Mars, it is close to Midnight there. That's fourteen hours away and we are only a two-hour trip away."

He looked over his shoulder. "So, we will definitely eat at least two meals before we get to Mars?"

Hugh nodded. "Yes. Once we get up into space, we can go get something to eat. And get some sleep as well."

"Excellent." Isaac rubbed his flat stomach. "It is important not to skip meals."

Hugh smiled. "That is true." Which was why he had gone on a hunt the night before in case the mission took several days. "And while we are eating, we will practice some of the things I told you about that you will be responsible for on the ship."

Isacc nodded. He was back to moving the camera around as they gained altitude.

Hugh just shook his head and concentrated on keeping the ship on course until they were past the Moon. From there he would engage the autopilot. "Man, this whole caring about people is turning out to be a lot of trouble."

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The End

About the Author

Since he still has not been eaten by a shark (or sharks, probably) Robert continues to write books. The pace of his writing has increased slightly as he has finished most of the large projects around his home. Except for installing new flooring throughout, converting a guest bath to a walk-in shower, and painting the entire house inside and out, that is.

While he isn't writing, Robert spends times on various Jeep trails with his trusty companion Bucky the Rescue Dog. While he is writing, he seems to be all over the Genre Map with stories of science fiction, adventure, and alternative history. He still is planning on his eighth "Tales from a Second Hand Wand Shop" book, *Close Encounters of a Grim Kind* (a 'choose your adventure' story) but that is on the back burner while he works on several other stories that are partially done.

As you can see in the photo- his beard tends to come and go. At the time of the photo, it had come. Now it is gone.



Yes- Bucky's foot is in Robert's coffee in this photo.

There is no "About the Cover Artist" for this book as all the illustrations were done using an online artificial intelligence program – StarryAI. While messing around trying to figure out how key words worked, I managed to create three images that were strikingly similar and also what Hugh looked like in my head. Then, I accidentally created a landscape image with Hugh as well. The three images were exactly what I was looking for and they all happened accidentally. So that's what I used. If you are interested in messing around with AI, StarryAI is a good place to start because they give you five free credits a day, so if you log on every day, you can build up a good pile of "Lumens" as they call their credits.