

The Purge: A Short Tale from the Story of *The Balance*

By Michael Selden

This Story Takes Place almost 18 years before the beginning of the story of *The Balance*. It is intended as an "extra" for those who've read *The Balance*.

Rebecca bit her lower lip, taking a deep breath and letting it out slowly before opening the door. Inside, the gathering looked like an ordinary reception at the Order's headquarters in Central City. But tension filled the room today, and she could sense nervousness from both Council and Order representatives.

Many of the usual people were there: His Grace, the Christian Primate, and two Council Elders who headed the government's functional organizations, the Curia of Law and the Curia of Economics. But she was a bit surprised to see Father James. He was the senior priest from New Bright Sea Harbor, where Rebecca lived. Father James was looking grim tonight—more so than she'd ever seen him. She didn't see the Elder Guardian for Islam, nor the Elder Kohein, who represented the Jewish faith, but she was sure they'd sent representatives.

Her longtime friend and colleague, Matthew, was standing in one corner of the room, fidgeting. He looked even more worried than the rest of the people in the

room. She saw that his eyes were out of focus. That meant his awareness was somewhere else—some other time or place—and she was especially careful not to connect with his thoughts. The minds of Prescients were chaotic, and painful to her, at least while they were staring through time.

Last week, the Order had received a letter from the Council, handwritten by the Supreme Elder himself. It warned that the Council had become aware of the Future Man project, and it gave formal notice that the Council was reviewing their position on The Balance, as required under the terms of the agreement.

The communiqué had sent an immediate chill through the Order's hierarchy, and Rebecca had been recalled from her vacation with Daniel. The Order had demanded a meeting with the Council. They had even sent a special high-speed transport to pick her up from Renew, the resort where she and Daniel had been staying, at the easternmost tip of Loyola, an island in the Southern Colonies. This was the first time Daniel had ridden on one of the Order's advanced aircraft. Together, just a week before, he and Rebecca had taken the regular commercial flight down to Loyola—an old-style jet aircraft, as permitted under The Balance.

Restrictions on aircraft were a part of the broader agreement that allowed the Order to offer only those conveniences that had been in wide use before the war, over one hundred and fifty years before. The Order's advanced technologies had to be hidden away from the people, just as detailed knowledge of even the older technologies was kept secret.

Rebecca crossed the room slowly, trying not to touch the people she passed. It was more difficult these days to navigate in close quarters, given her current condition, but touching people made it hard to block unwanted thoughts.

Father James turned from his discussion with one of the priests accompanying him to greet her, and half bowed. They'd been friends for years, despite being from competing organizations.

"Hello, Becky. I thought you were on vacation this month."

"That was the plan, but ..." She didn't need to finish.

"Of course. How is the baby doing?"

"It seems to be coming along," she said, placing one hand on her abdomen. "I'll be glad to get rid of the little monster," she added, grinning—and changing the subject, politely reading just his superficial thoughts, she asked, "How bad is the situation?"

"I'm not sure," the priest said.

She sensed an inner turmoil as he spoke, but it was clear he was telling the truth. "Do you know what triggered the letter?" she asked.

"Not really, at least not specifically. But as you know, even if I were privy to everything the Council knew, I couldn't speak about it."

"Of course."

"Whatever caused the letter must have been pretty serious," he added.

"Yeah. I get that."

Rebecca used her senses to sweep the room, the building, and well beyond, casting her awareness outward, searching for someone—anyone—who might know more. The Order needed information before the board could act. They had to know precisely what the Council had learned about the programs and what the Council planned to do. But the Elders in the room hadn't seen the original reports, nor had they been briefed. Rebecca wondered if that was why these particular individuals had been sent. *What does the Council know about Future Man?* she asked herself. Did they know specifics about the programs, and about her? *Is that why everyone here seems to be so out of the loop?* Rebecca could reach out and touch the entire city with her senses. If the Council knew about her abilities, and even understood her limitations, then they would have made sure no one was within range of her mental touch. The fact that no one in the Order complex, nor at the Council's headquarters knew anything specific was frightening.

A chill went through Rebecca, making her briefly closed her eyes to regain composure. She did not want to show how afraid she was. If the Council knew about her, then they also knew that the baby she carried, and that it would be a part of the program efforts, too. There was no telling how they might react. She glanced over her shoulder at Matthew. *What exactly does he see?*

The night before the meeting, Rebecca had tracked Matthew down and spent an hour questioning what he'd seen in the future. Matthew was a product of the Prescient program, one of three branches within the Future Man project. He'd described several potential threads—possible scenarios of future events. The most severe had contained witchcraft trials and public executions. *Could that really*

happen now? she wondered. Matthew seemed to think so, but the other Prescients advising the Order's board disagreed with him. They believed that everything would blow over within a few months—a year at the outside.

Rebecca smiled at Father James, excusing herself, and drifted over to the corner beside Matthew. She waited for his awareness to return, not wanting to interrupt him.

"I think they know what I am," she whispered, still gazing around the room to see if anyone was watching.

"Why do you say that?" he asked.

"Because no one here saw the report, and I don't sense any of the other Elders within range. They left the city."

"That's not a good sign. I told you something's coming—something really big and chaotic. I don't know what it is, but whatever it is, it's going to change all the timelines and everything that would have happened will be altered. Normal, linear projections won't work. This crisis isn't going away." He stared into her eyes for a moment, as though hesitant to say more. "Becky."

She blinked at the force of his mind.

"I think you ought to find a way to disappear," he said. "At least for a while. Maybe I'm just being overly cautious, but I think the others have got it all wrong. I've decided. I'm not staying longer than a few weeks. If you get the sense that the Council is watching you—more than normal, that is—come see me right away. And

if something big and unexpected happens, take it as the signal to run, or it may be too late. Either way, they'll begin restricting travel soon."

The hair on Rebecca's head stood up, and just then she felt her daughter kick.

"Maybe I should leave," she said. "For the baby's sake, if not my own." She placed a hand on her abdomen again.

"Do you have someplace to go?"

"I think so. Daniel's family can hide me."

A bell rang, signaling the formal meeting was starting in the next room.

"Good," Matthew said. "But if something happens, like I said, and we don't link up, I'll be looking for you—later, after the peace really falls apart. Try to stay alive." He almost smiled, but it looked more like a grimace, and then he headed for the conference room. Rebecca took a few breaths to calm down before following him.

The meeting itself was even *more* tense than the reception had been. The Council representatives were unusually quiet throughout the afternoon, and Rebecca could sense an pent up anger from some of the Council members. Despite the Order negotiator's persistent questioning, nothing useful was learned. Several times during the meeting Rebecca saw the Council Elders frowning, as though they wanted to speak. She read frustration in their minds—frustration that they had been kept in the dark and frustration that the meeting was a clear waste of time—nothing could be decided here and so she let her own team members know the situation.

There was a debriefing held for the full board after the Council members had left. Rebecca expressed her concerns to the board—that it was clear the Council had more knowledge of the program than suspected, but the senior Prescient, a man by the name of Hawthorne, overruled her suspicions that the conflict might become violent, and even catastrophic.

“There is no basis for this conclusion. There may well be isolated instances of unrest and the Council will test our resolve, but the people need us—the Council needs us. Without the Order, society would collapse. This will all be resolved by the new year. That’s what we’ve seen.” Rebecca and Matthew looked at each other but neither said anything more.

As they were filing out, Matthew glanced at her once more, thinking her name and then a thought he knew she would hear. *Remember what I said. If . . . when things turn bad stay alive at all costs. I’ll eventually find you.*

That night she and Daniel returned to New Bright Sea Harbor. One of the frequently scheduled maglev trains whisked them home in less than half an hour, and they were in their apartment soon afterward. She’d been unusually quiet ever since the meeting and during their trip home. Daniel recognized the mood and knew better than to disturb her. He thought back to when they’d first met—in high school.

The Order developed and educated the products of their three genetics programs in relative isolation. This was especially true for Sensitives, since it was so hard for the young girls to shut out the flow of thoughts from other people. Still, they

had to learn to deal with their senses in public while still being able to function. At some point during a Sensitive's development—and it varied from person to person—the girls were sent out from the Order's compounds and forced to interact with regular people in an unsupervised environment. For Rebecca, this happened during her second year of high school.

Daniel and she had become friends because, as Rebecca often said, Daniel's thoughts—what he said, and the way he acted—were unusually consistent. People often said one thing and thought the opposite. It was unexpectedly refreshing from someone not in the program. They remained friends, and their friendship grew into a permanent, much closer relationship, although because of her obligation to the Order, Daniel and she could never formally marry, nor could they have children together.

Rebecca was still required to participate in the program's breeding efforts. She had no idea who the father of the infant she now carried was, but she did know that the pairing of her DNA with the father's was either intended to develop or strengthen an ability, or to correct a genetic flaw in the bloodline.

Rebecca thought about her baby and about what was happening. She'd recently learned something important about the pairing from one of the scientists and it scared her. Rebecca was one of only a handful of Sensitives at her stage of development. Each stage was the culmination of multiple generations of program effort. It had taken more than two hundred years to reach Rebecca's level—stage

three. If what she'd learned from secretly intruding on the geneticist's thoughts was true, then it was possible that in one generation her daughter would have the potential to reach stage four. Rebecca shuddered at the thought. What they'd done was risky. Dangerous.

Future Man had always been a secret. The most important single effort of the Order—a part of their core charter. The capabilities and identities of people involved in the three programs were closely guarded secrets, too, even within the Order. But somehow the Council knew all about it. Somehow it had gotten out.

The Council had always been suspicious of modern technology. They blamed the reckless dissemination of such knowledge for the war that had killed billions of people and nearly ended human life altogether. Future Man would certainly be viewed as heresy, and a violation of The Balance.

Twenty days had passed since the meeting in Central City, and Rebecca was as uncertain about the future as she'd been before the meeting. After returning home, she and Daniel had a long discussion about what might happen. She shared some of the scenarios Matthew had seen.

"I can't believe they'd resort to things like witch trials." Daniel was shaking his head. "That's like something from the Dark Ages."

"Believe it. Anything can happen when people are afraid."

"But the Supreme Elder ... he ... he isn't like that. He's a decent guy."

“You’re right, he isn’t a bad man, but he’s been sick for a long time. “The Council kept his illness hidden for almost six months, and now they won’t let our specialists see him. That’s new. But even if he were completely well, I don’t think he could stop whatever’s going to happen.”

As the days passed, demonstrations began assembling outside of Order offices throughout the Land, as well as in front of the sprawling gated Order compounds. Some of the protests turned violent and a number of Order members were injured. There’d been no deaths yet, but with the level of tension still rising in the Land, Rebecca knew it was just a matter of time.

The Order leadership suspected that the protests weren’t spontaneous but were being organized, perhaps by the Council itself. And the Council seemed to have withdrawn security protection for Order assets in places like New Bright Sea Harbor. Ever since the meeting in Central City, Rebecca sensed she was being followed.

A week after the demonstrations began, Rebecca sat down with Daniel at their dining table. “I think I need to leave—to get away for a while. I can’t risk the baby being hurt.”

Daniel put his head in his hands and was quiet for several minutes. Rebecca followed his train of thought as he absorbed and adapted to the situation.

“Listen,” he said. “Dad’s taking out a new crew next week. Maybe you should go out with him. He’ll be to sea for a month, or more. I’d rather you stayed near one of us, anyway. That way we can watch over you.”

“Okay,” Rebecca said. “I’ll talk to him tomorrow, but it’s important that no one aboard knows who I am. I’m pretty sure the Council already knows what I am, and they may not want to let me go. There’s no escaping them completely—not in the Land.”

“Becky.” Daniel paused, as if to say something else, but must have decided not to express it. After another moment he continued. “Let’s see what happens. You go with Dad for now. Maybe this will all settle down. If it doesn’t, we’ll see what we have to do. We’ll get through this, somehow.”

Rebecca smiled. “I wish I had your optimism. Matthew warned that I should go with him. He seems to know a hiding place where I can be safe.”

“I don’t want anything to happen to you—ever. Maybe you *should* go with him.”

“If I went with Matthew, I wouldn’t be back. Let’s try it your way first. But, before I go, I want to give you something to keep here—just in case.”

“What is it?”

“After the meeting, I asked the Order to forge a set of documents for Phoebe. They create a new identity for her and make you her adopted father. Keep them for now. I hope we don’t have to use them, but if we do, the Order has an agent in the Council who will add her to the official records, too.”

That very week, the Council announced a ban on all travel by air, and they shut down the trains, too. Checkpoints sprang up along the routes out of town; Keepers checked everyone who left or entered. The Order's offices throughout the Land were closed down, and even hospitals were put under armed guard. Keepers were stationed along the main streets of town, presumably to maintain order. Despite these measures, several Order members were abducted and killed.

The Order provided technical support in virtually every area of life. They trained the physicians, maintained the technologies used in hospitals and by power-generating stations throughout the Land. All modern transportation and communications were built and maintained by the Order, as well. But after the killing of its members, the Order began to withdraw its support. The board had decided to wait for things to calm down, trusting the vision of most of the Prescients. By the end of the week, members of the Order had been put under curfew and were restricted to their homes.

Rebecca closed her eyes to scan the minds of those near her home. In addition to the uniformed Keepers, several others, wearing street clothing, were outside watching her building, ready to follow her should she leave the apartment. She waited until just one of the Council agents was focused on the building's doorway. It was easier to fully control what a single person saw than to fool many

people at once. She placed the image of a closed door and empty stairs into the agent's mind and slipped out to head toward the waterfront.

She crept quietly along the harbor, wearing a hat pulled low over her face, and strolled past the dock where Daniel's father kept his boat, the Molly. There were Keepers all along the docks, inspecting anyone who approached. She moved past the main checkpoint, across the street, and kept walking south before crossing the street.

About a hundred and fifty meters past the entrance to the wharf complex was an old abandoned wooden pier. Most of its decking was missing, but a few pylons marked where the old fishing docks had been. A decrepit but serviceable ladder dipped down toward the water just below the sea wall, and a rowboat had pulled up into the shadow of one pier. Carefully, Rebecca climbed down, stepping onto the boulders that made up the wall, one hand protectively over her abdomen. Daniel's father, Jacob, helped her into the small boat. She was about to ask him something when he placed a finger over his lips, warning her to be quiet.

Jacob rowed away from the shore and out into the harbor, using parts of the abandoned pier to screen them from the Keepers. As soon as they were out of earshot of the shore, he seemed to relax.

"How are you feeling?" he asked.

"Good. The baby's not due for over two months."

"Let's hope *he* knows that," Jacob said, smiling.

Rebecca didn't correct him about the baby's sex. He didn't know a lot about her, or Phoebe, and she didn't want to endanger him further.

"I gave the crew the night off," Jacob said. "We'll just slip up onto the starboard side of the Molly and climb up the ladder onto the deck. The Keepers don't usually come aboard to inspect, so we should be able to relax for a while, but—just in case—I created a hiding spot under one of the bunks in my cabin. I'm afraid you'll have to stay aboard from now on. We'll see how things are in the other ports we visit."

Rebecca nodded. "Jacob. Thank you for doing all this. I know I'm putting you in danger ..."

"Never mind that, Becky. You're family. I told the crew I would have a woman staying with me. We'll be cabin mates," he said, smiling. "Of course, you'll have your own bunk—and, uh, your name is Hanna."

Rebecca smiled. "Hanna. I like that."

The Molly had always been a dual-powered fishing vessel, able to run on its diesel engine or to use the wind with her two masts. Rebecca took to sailing right away, and by the end of the third week Jacob was trusting her at the wheel.

Rebecca—Hanna—had been aboard the Molly for almost four weeks when it happened. They had fished along the east coast of the Land as they made their way south, pulling in mostly whitefish and then either selling or trading their catch for other goods to sell in the Southern Colonies.

The Southern Colonies were actually a collection of islands about five hundred kilometers south of the mainland. There was another large land mass even farther south, but it wasn't inhabited yet. The Council had plans to form a separate colony there, one that could support different crops than grew in the Land, since the climate that far south was much more humid, and there were regular monsoon seasons. Some grains, like rice, required more water than reliably fell in the north.

Jacob was sailing among the dozen or so primary islands that made up the Colonies, trading spices and other goods not always available on every island. It had been a lucrative journey thus far. They had just rounded the big island, Loyola, and were sailing toward a village Jacob liked to visit on its west coast, when a series of blinding lights flashed across the sky, followed immediately by enormous explosions.

Since Order offices and labs had been shut down, no one had been monitoring the Sky Watch system—so no one saw the object coming. It was an asteroid, although later it would always be referred to as 'the comet'. It passed close by the moon—close enough for the moon's gravity to have calved it into many large boulders. These pieces scattered and fell inward toward the Earth, falling as a thousand meteors that hurtled toward the planet's surface. The hill-sized boulders screamed through the atmosphere, creating blinding lights and shockwaves that shattered windows and knocked down weaker structures before impacting.

Some of the rocks hit land, releasing devastating energy and igniting fires wherever there was fuel to burn. The rocks spread out and rained down

everywhere. Importantly, several struck the Central Plains—farmlands, and towns and villages—the breadbasket of the Land. They hit like pellets from a shotgun, and whole communities simply vanished overnight. By chance Central City was spared a direct impact. But no province within the Land was spared completely.

Several dozen of the larger pieces hit offshore in the ocean, creating massive waves that swept inland and flooded the coastal regions. The impacts killed fish and stirred up muck from the bottom of the seabed, turning the clean ocean water into an opaque soup that suffocated millions upon millions of sea creatures.

Unlucky boats and their crews, those not in sheltered locations, were swamped or destroyed outright. Fortunately, the Molly was on the west side of the main southern island—the sheltered side—and in a harbor. Jacob’s boat was spared, but all across the Land and along the eastern seaboard the destruction touched everyone.

Aboard the Molly, shock triggered premature labor. It looked as though Phoebe would be coming early.

Rebecca hoped this was just a false labor and that it would pass, but it didn’t stop. Her labor dragged on hour after hour, never seeming to progress. Had they been in a hospital she might have been given something to push the labor along, or a physician might have considered an alternative birth method. But there was no such option available. Her labor went on, first for a whole day, and then two. When she entered her third day of labor, Rebecca began to fear that she wouldn’t have the strength to survive the birth.

Jacob had hoped to find a midwife or physician to help them should Rebecca's labor start early, but to be on the safe side he'd studied what was needed and was prepared for a normal delivery. After almost sixty hours her body moved into the active stage of delivery, and it looked to him like the baby was finally coming.

"Okay, Becky—I mean Hanna—you need to push some more, and then keep on pushing. I can see his head."

Rebecca was expending energy she'd never dreamed she had, but the compulsion to keep pushing gave her what she needed to keep going. At last, the baby emerged.

"It's a girl," Jacob said, surprise in his voice.

He lifted the infant and put her on the bunk beside Rebecca while she completed the final stage of the birthing process. Later, with Phoebe resting on her chest, Rebecca was able to rest. She woke up and looked over at Jacob's bunk. He was unconscious. The long labor had been almost as tiring for him as it had been for her.

They needed to go home. Communications were out completely and both Jacob and Rebecca needed to know what had happened to Daniel, and to their homes and friends, and they needed to let Daniel know that they were still alive. But terrible windstorms and smoke from fires onshore were creating havoc with the weather, even after the initial shockwaves and strong ocean tides had subsided.

Jacob was afraid to put to sea too soon. They waited several more days and still the weather was unpredictable. The fires had spread and no one was sure how long they might continue to burn, even with the rains brought on by 'the comet'. After a full week of waiting, Jacob decided to risk the crossing. He left the harbor but didn't dare use sail. The winds were too strong and their direction unpredictable. Although they used the motor, they still had a rough trip to the mainland. Jacob was forced to use most of his cargo and all of his money trading for fuel along the way up the coast. Everything cost so much more now. Three weeks after the baby was born, they limped back into port at New Bright Sea Harbor with just enough fuel to safely dock.

The Keepers were gone—busy protecting the town from the fires and the chaos in the streets. Stores and shops were all empty, looted by people unsure of how long the food would hold out, and the value of the Council's currency had dropped to less than a quarter of what it had been worth before they left. Most people preferred to use a barter system. Rebecca took her new baby to Jacob's house while he saw to the Molly's needs, and she found Daniel waiting for them there.

That week Daniel and Becky had together was like being in the eye of a storm. All around them the world suffered. Death and destruction had visited the Land just like the final plague had visited Egypt, thousands of years before.

The Central Plains region was the Land's main food producer. Its towns were often populated by the descendants of people who had shared a common origin.

They had all moved to the Land just before or after the war. There were villages where French was spoken, or Arabic, or Farsi. People of similar backgrounds were often drawn together, to be near others with similar cultural ties. Rebecca read about a town where the people still spoke German—none of the people from that town had survived.

Daniel and Rebecca did their best to ignore the outside world that week, as much as possible. Both wondered how long it would be before they'd be together again. In her heart Rebecca suspected there was a chance they might never see each other again.

The topic of the outside world intruded into cocoon of happiness. Daniel described the events that had been occurring on the mainland while Rebecca had been away in the south.

"After the comet struck, things between the Council and the Order got a lot worse," he said.

"How could they get much worse?"

"The Order was formally outlawed. The Council has declared that all 'creatures' created by the programs are demons, and in league with the Devil."

Rebecca's face turned pale. "What are they going to do with us?"

"Public executions—burning people alive, just like the church did back during the Dark Ages. And they've reinstated the Inquisition."

“I should have gone away with Matthew,” Rebecca said, her knees giving way as she collapsed into a chair. “This is exactly what he said might happen, but I didn’t really believe it. What about the agreement? What about The Balance?”

“That’s all gone. Erased. The Council has been rounding up known members of the Order and sympathizers for questioning and potentially for imprisonment. Members have been told that they can escape prison if they formally denounce the Order and surrender everything they know or have about the Order.

“Becky,” Daniel said. “I think all this was planned, beforehand—it had to be. Everything has been too organized—too systematic. It’s as if they were waiting for an excuse.”

“But why?”

“I don’t know, but there are groups—rogue thugs causing trouble. They seem to be particularly well organized, too. It all happened so fast.”

“What groups? What do you mean?”

“The Penitents, for one. Large mobs of fanatics from the north. They appeared right after the chaos started. It looks as though they come from Chooser territory. The groups are descending on communities all across the Land, forcing whole villages to confess their sins and to repent their sinful ways.

“They act as though they’re working from a script. First the leaders send a few representatives into a town, normally small communities with no Keeper presence, and they give the village an ultimatum: submit voluntarily, or you’ll be burned to the ground.

“A few villages resisted. They’re gone now. When people do submit, they’re forced into a mass prayer meeting, and the Penitents beat anyone who doesn’t show the proper respect or degree of faith. The Council has done almost nothing to stop them. A Keeper contingent arrives, eventually, armed and bringing food, and as they approach, the Penitents withdraw. But the Keepers don’t bother pursuing the mob, and the villagers are so relieved to see the Penitents leave that they never associate the Council with what happened. To them, the Council saved them. I’m pretty sure they arranged the whole thing.”

“But the Supreme Elder would never allow this kind of thing to happen ...,”
Rebecca began.

“He’s gone. Dead. Either illness, or ... or maybe someone killed him. Who knows? The new Supreme Elder is different. He won’t tolerate dissent. I don’t know what to say, Becky. It’s as though the Land we all knew simply vanished. I don’t recognize it anymore—and there’s more.”

“More?”

“I hear they’re planning to issue a lot of new decrees—restrictions on the use of modern conveniences, and of course they’ll provide a lot of new rules on how to behave, too.”

“Will people tolerate it—in the long run, I mean?”

“Yeah. I think they will. They’re afraid for now, and fear is a great motivator. Without the Council, the fires would be spreading faster, consuming even more towns and farms and villages. Plus the Council is the only way people can get food.

Everyone's afraid they'll starve this year, or next. And the Council is telling everyone that they are at fault somehow—that the comet was a message sent by God.”

“Where did the food come from?”

“The Council began stockpiling food years ago—just like they did before the war. They say now that God told them to do it—to prepare for a calamity. My dad heard rumors that most of this year's crops were completely wiped out, and with the heavy cloud cover we might not have a harvest next year, either. Winter might very well last a long time, and people still need to eat. Then, people are afraid of the Penitents. And they're afraid of the fires. I think the people will obey. Remember how loyal everyone was right after the war? They saved the whole population from starving back then, and it's happening again. Only this time there'll be no Order as a counterbalance, and the Council will control and approve the news.”

Rebecca took a deep breath. “Okay. Where do I go now? I obviously can't stay here. Sooner or later they'll search Jacob's home.”

“I don't know, Becky, but I'll come with you—I don't want to lose you.”

“No,” Rebecca said, shaking her head. There was a look of iron in her eyes, a look Daniel recognized. “Phoebe isn't ready for that kind of life yet. You need to look after her, and take care of her here. I can't keep her with me while I'm on the run.”

“But—how will you live?”

Rebecca looked at him and put a finger on his nose. “You forget what I am. I told you I can take care of myself. I'll try to find my own people, once things settle down a bit. But for now, I'll use the skills I have to survive. I can make people see

what I want them to see and remember what I want them to remember. I'll convince them I'm harmless, and a friend. They may think I'm dead. If so, I want to keep it that way. Sooner or later I'll find Matthew, and then I'll come back to get you and Phoebe.

"But I *will* need to see you," she said. "And I'll need to see Phoebe, too."

Rebecca could feel a tear making its way down her cheek; she turned her head to hide it from Daniel. "I think ... no, I'm sure Phoebe's going to need me. I told you, her abilities kick in by the time she's two years old. By then I hope to have a place for us. If not, we'll find a way to be together whenever we can."

"How?"

"I don't know yet." Rebecca threw her arms up in frustration.

"Use the papers I gave you before I left," she said after she'd calmed down.

"The fake identity will keep Phoebe hidden, and the adoption papers make you her guardian. In some ways, the comet made all this possible. No one will have time to check out every story with so many families destroyed. There must be thousands of broken homes."

"But ... but I'm worried about you. I want to *stay* with you."

"Phoebe's too young for that. She wouldn't survive the wilderness, especially now. You need to give her a stable environment. Trust me, I'll come back when I can. But before I leave, I need to tell you more about the Order, and about us, Phoebe and me. If something happens ..." Rebecca had to stop speaking for a moment. "If something happens to me, there are things about her you'll need to know—things *she'll* need to know someday."

“Nothing’s going to happen to you,” Daniel said, shaking his head.

“Maybe. But humor me. No matter what happens, I can’t be the only one who knows these things. She won’t be a normal girl—she’ll be different.”

“You mean she’ll be telepathic, like you?”

“Yes. But there’s more to it than just sensing thoughts—a lot more. And you know about the program.”

“Uh-huh, but you never really told me what that meant, except that the baby was conceived in a lab, of course.”

“That’s a big part of it, but the Order does more than just selective breeding these days.”

Daniel frowned. “You mean they artificially altered your genes, too?”

“That, too. But there’s even more.” Rebecca hesitated, still not sure how much she should tell him. Daniel was not a member of the Order, and certainly not from one of the programs, but she *knew him*, probably more than any woman had ever known her mate. Rebecca knew she could trust Daniel, and she also knew that there might come a time when he would have to raise Phoebe all by himself. She shuddered at the thought. Raising a Sensitive was no easy task. Daniel wouldn’t have access to the drugs and he wouldn’t be able to reach into the young girl’s mind. Plus, Phoebe would likely be more than just another Sensitive. “I hope he never needs to find out the hard way,” she mumbled.

“What?”

“I was just thinking out loud.”

Daniel frowned, but didn't say anything.

“You need to know about the programs,” she said, pulling him from the dining table into their small living room.

They were up most of that night, as she explained how the programs worked and what had been done to her—and what she thought had been done to Phoebe. Even Rebecca had to admit that she didn't know everything, but the explanation left Daniel speechless.

The next morning, well before dawn, Rebecca stood her backpack by the front door. She stopped by Phoebe's makeshift crib to hug her and then kissed Daniel goodbye one last time. He started to leave the house with her but she put both hands on his chest to stop him.

“It'll be easier if you don't come with me now. This is hard enough.” She set her mouth into a hard line and fought to hide the tears as she turned to leave. Once outside, she turned north, resisting the urge to look back, and quietly slipped out of town.

Rebecca's first objective was the pass in the saddle between the twin peaks known as the Sisters, but she knew that path would be difficult. Fires were everywhere, and they would continue to burn for many more months, as long as they found fuel. The temperatures were far below normal and would only get worse

as the year progressed. Rebecca wondered if it was such a good idea to use the pass, but the other paths out of the ringed valley were all being watched.

By this time, the Keepers had given up on extinguishing the fires and were simply trying to create firebreaks to keep them away from population centers. Had the Order's facilities been available, they might have found a way to stop the destruction, but that wasn't possible now.

Rebecca had been right. The pass was freezing, and in places there was hip-deep snow to block her path, but she knew there was no other way out. She found an empty cabin, about two thirds of the way up, where she was able to rest. The Order's symbol—the Philosopher's Stone—had been subtly carved into the wood in a spot where members were trained to look. Seeing this symbol gave her hope, and she found food and warm clothing, as well as a portable heater inside that would help her finish the crossing. It took her two more days in the frost before she was back at sea level. She left the heater behind. It would identify her as a member of the Order.

Her first stop outside the valley was the fishing village of Bardon, just to the north of New Bright Sea Harbor along the coast. Bardon was beyond the first arc of the Ring Mountains. Once there, she convinced a farmer and his wife to take her in for a few nights, so she could recover from the crossing.

After Rebecca had gone away, the couple continued to think of her as a long-lost relative, someone who'd lost her home. But when they described Rebecca to

their real family and friends, everyone wondered if the couple had gone crazy, but after a few days they seemed normal.

It was the same everywhere she went. Rebecca could reach into the deepest memories of people she met and place herself in their pasts. This worked for a while, until other villagers began to question them. Doing this, Rebecca made her way west and then down through the Land and into the Southern Province, staying with people in the scattered farming communities of the Central Plains that had survived.

As Daniel had described, most of the Land had been burned or was burning. People hadn't seen the sun for almost two months now. The Land was constantly under a thick cloud cover, and hazy with smoke. It was always difficult to breathe, so most people had begun wearing the masks distributed by the Council. This actually made it easier for Rebecca at checkpoints. More than once, she'd seen her own photo plastered on posters with an urgent message to avoid and report her. She was a demon, after all, one of those who were being blamed for the comet.

By the time she'd reached the Southern Sea, Rebecca was tired—tired of the constant lying and tired of always having to be on the move. By chance, she managed to secure a job on a trading vessel in exchange for passage to one of the islands, where she hoped to stay for a while.

Months now, and the smoke was still everywhere Rebecca looked, but people were resilient, and they went on with their lives. It was amazing what a person could get used to, she thought. The fires had been burning now for four months—and these four months had seen vast changes in the way the people lived.

Even here, on Loyola, the main Christian island and a part of the chain of islands that made up most of the inhabited Southern Colonies, the world had been turned upside down. Gone was travel by air and rail. Ship owners had been given notice that they would be required to cease using machinery to propel their vessels over the next year—special dispensation being given to continue their use during the emergency, since reliable transport of material was needed to ensure that the people didn't starve, and to allow time for planning.

Once again, the Council had opened its granaries and other stores of food and water, since most of the annual crop had been destroyed. People had yet to see the return of the sun, and most feared that the Earth might see winter-like conditions for years to come.

Ash covered the streets every morning, waiting to be swept up by those people pressed into service under Emergency Decree Number Three. This decree granted virtually unlimited power to the Council to decide how people would live, and numerous new rules were being attached to it. Among them, rules governing religious behavior.

Christians were required to attend church at least once per week, and more frequent attendance was strongly recommended. On a quiet night, Rebecca could hear the call to prayers from the nearby island of Khalid, a major Islamic center.

Rebecca was Hanna Schmidt now, and she worked in a food distribution center. Shortly after arriving on the island, more than a month ago now, she was detained by a young priest and his Keeper retinue. The priest had found her sleeping in the open and questioned how she'd come to be here on Loyola. Remembering the German-speaking village that was wiped out, Rebecca told him that she'd been on holiday, away from her home village in the Central Plains. According to her story, Rebecca had run out of money and had no place to live. After checking to see if her name appeared on a list of those being sought, the priest had assigned her to the job she now had. Rebecca didn't mind. During times of crisis, people needed to band together to help each other. The job provided her a place to stay, and it also gave her something useful to do.

People came to the food center every week rather than search the many empty shops. The food provided was basic but nourishing, and people were grateful to receive it. This was how it had been after the Great War, back when nuclear winter had caused crop failure after crop failure. At the time, people had worried about radiation, too. It had taken a long time to get farms working again. After the war, the Council had to certify each plot of land as safe before it could be used to grow food, and it was years before the Land was completely self-sustaining.

Tonight, after work, Rebecca returned to the dormitory. It helped that people still wore masks these days; it was harder to compare her face with the images on the posters—posters of renegaded Order members being sought by the Council. She kept an eye out for her own picture, but thus far she hadn't seen one posted on the island. Maybe they thought she was dead. Still, she kept her mask on as much as possible and only removed it when she would have looked out of place wearing it. This happened when the wind shifted and brought cleaner air in from the sea to the east. Of course Rebecca could disguise herself simply by placing whatever face she wanted into the minds of the people she met, but she couldn't keep that up continuously, and it was hard for her to fool more than just a few people at a time. No. It was better to blend in and stay hidden.

Some of the initial restrictions on technology helped her now. Electronic communications had been shut down for all but the Council, and it was sporadic. The Council planned to phase even this partial use out as the emergency passed. The lack of updated information and slow collation of records made it difficult for the Council to determine if she was even alive. And it was also hard for local Council officials to receive updated lists and certainly recent images of her face. There was talk that the use of electricity itself would be forbidden at some point, but this might have been just another rumor.

She wondered what Daniel was doing, and what Phoebe looked like now. Her time with her new daughter had been all too short. Leaving her behind was more painful than she'd ever imagined. She had horrible dreams about abandoning her child almost every night.

Sitting alone in the dormitory wasn't helping matters. It was too quiet, and sitting still made her think about all the things she couldn't change. She needed to get out tonight, for her own sanity.

The smoke wasn't so bad this evening, but enough people were wearing masks that Rebecca didn't feel she would stand out. There were no vehicles in the streets, and it was safe to walk right down the middle of the road without fear of being hit, and anyway, it was too late even for the hand-drawn carts people used these days. The one thing that was changing fast, and which made walking rather interesting, was the widespread use of horses. As with the ash that settled every night, the horse manure built up through the day and needed to be removed in the mornings.

Rebecca walked along the waterfront, passing boats where she'd tried to get work. But they were all shut down and moored for the year. So many fish had been killed by the comet that fishing was banned, too. And every freighter carrying foods and other necessities sailed with a contingent of Keepers.

She passed a pub, still open despite the shortage of drink. The sound of people laughing came through the open doorway and she quickly scanned the minds, sampling the bar's patrons. Nothing unusual. Somehow people always found some reason to be happy.

She had walked almost three kilometers to the edge of town when she sensed urgent panic in the thoughts of an older woman nearby. The woman was trying to

pull away from a group of men but was being pressed against a wall, just behind one of the empty shops to her left.

Rebecca didn't hesitate, but hurried around the building, yelling at the men to stop. When they turned to see who was intruding, they didn't see Rebecca but rather a huge shadow radiating anger and fear into their minds. The men quickly released the woman and fled in the other direction.

At first the woman looked confused, obviously wondering what had happened, and then her legs gave out. She started shaking.

"Thank you," she said. "Whoever you are."

"Are you all right?" Rebecca asked, crouching beside her.

"I think so. I just ..." She didn't finish.

"Is there somewhere I can take you?"

The woman was feeling her head. "Give me a minute."

"Of course."

"I can't remember how I got back here—in this alley." And after a moment, "Ouch!"

"What is it?"

"My head feels sore—right here."

"They must have hit you," Rebecca said. "My name is Hanna."

"I'm Jane. Jane Fuller."

“Do you live nearby?”

“Yes. I live with my brother now.” The qualification of that final word was a story in itself.

“I’ll walk you home.”

The woman nodded. “That’s a good idea.” She looked around, as though searching for something. “My bag! Where’s my bag?”

“I don’t see a bag. What color is it?” Rebecca used a small hand lamp, scanning the ground.

“It’s gray—oh, no. I had our week’s rations in it.”

“Don’t worry. Food can be replaced. The same thing happened to a man last week. I’m afraid the rations aren’t quite enough for everyone.”

“Really? Where are the Keepers?”

Rebecca shrugged. “You’ll have to fill out a report about what happened, but the food bank will provide new rations.”

“What’s the world coming to?”

Rebecca took a deep breath and let it out. “Bad times, I’m afraid. Let’s hope they pass quickly.”

“It’s lucky for me you came back here. Why did you?”

“I, eh ... I heard something. One of the men, I think.”

“They might have killed you. I wonder why they ran.”

“Who knows? People like them are really cowards.”

“But you certainly aren’t.”

“Oh, I was afraid, too.”

“I’d like you to meet my brother. He’s younger than me ... and single.”

Rebecca smiled. It would be good to have a few friends for a while.

Her stay on the island had given Rebecca a temporary respite from the constant moving, but she began having a gnawing feeling in her gut that she was forgetting something. She felt bad about abandoning Phoebe and worried that she might be needed to soothe the young girl’s thoughts back at home. She missed Daniel, and desperately wanted to see her daughter again. Then, too, new posters were finally arriving and being put up every day. The Council was catching up on their lists and sooner or later they would catch up to her here. Too many people already knew her face.

The vessel she’d served aboard during the trip from the mainland was no longer in service. There simply wasn’t enough trade to pay for the ship’s operation, but the captain remembered her and helped her find another berth on a passenger ship sailing to the far north—bound for Chooser territory.

After the war, a number of the Council’s clergy and several thousand of the most faithful people rejected the truce drawn up between the Council and the Order.

They rejected all but the most basic conveniences of life. The Council granted these people a degree of autonomy within the Northern Province, just south of the banks of the Great River, near the coast. These people called themselves “Choosers” because they chose a simple life and were deeply religious. They adhered to the original call of the Council to reject almost all modern technologies. They were farmers and ranchers and fishermen for the most part. Since their founding, the Choosers had mostly kept to themselves, although many traded for foods not grown in their own lands.

With some trepidation, Rebecca accepted the berth—again as Hanna. Going into Chooser territory was, for her, like a lamb walking into the lion’s den. The ship she worked on followed the current all the way up the east coast to a town situated where the river dumped into the ocean. Once there, she used the little money she had to buy food and, once again, took to the wilderness, making her way past Chooser villages and towns while camping out wherever it was safe from the fires. She dared not try to blend in with Choosers for any length of time. They were notoriously suspicious and too closely knit. The differences in lifestyle there were stark, and Rebecca hoped the Chooser life wasn’t a sign of things to come.

Choosers lived a very basic lifestyle, and always seemed close to the edge of surviving. Most refused medical treatments, and even vaccines were not allowed. From her work on the Order board of directors, Rebecca knew that the infant mortality rate was much higher here in Chooser territory than in the rest of the

Land. Those who survived to middle age here were often crippled by chronic pain from things that could easily have been treated or prevented.

There was no such thing as electricity or motorized power there. Everything was done by hand, or with the aid of farm animals. It was like stepping back in time, but without the romantic notions of how much better the simple life was.

There were churches everywhere—churches and synagogues and mosques. Rebecca, a Christian, always believed herself to be a faithful member of the church, but she also adhered to the philosophy expressed in the statement “God helps those who help themselves.”

After making her way south, toward New Bright Sea Harbor, Rebecca finally approached the Ring Mountains, and home. Her goal was to make her way through the pass between the Sisters again. Surprisingly, the fires were still burning here, too, and it was often hard to sleep. The constant smoke and the often bitter-cold north winds slowed her progress, especially as she began climbing the mountain.

From the pass, she was almost able to see New Bright Sea Harbor, although it was wreathed in smoke and covered by a canopy of clouds turned a deep red-orange by the light of the ever-present fires.

Tired and longing to sleep in a real bed again, Rebecca descended the slopes from the Sisters and veered east, to enter the town from the north, along the water.

The wind had shifted tonight and was blowing in from the sea. Gratefully, she removed her mask and took in the first smoke-free air in almost a week. The ocean breeze carried the odor of the millions or billions of dead fish still accumulating along the shoreline, and the smell assailed her, but almost anything was better than the smoke.

Rebecca shifted her backpack as she crested a small hill overlooking a kind of recess, a dell where hundreds of people were gathered. The area was ringed with torches, and everywhere the people knelt as hooded men lashed out at selected individuals, people apparently not deemed faithful enough. These bullies circled the crowd, occasionally lashing out at this man or that woman with the whips they carried. It was a shocking scene—here, so near to home.

Suddenly the man speaking in the center of the circle paused. He squinted in her direction and seemed to recognize her. She knew him. Michael Johnson. They'd worked together at the Order when she was a young Sensitive, years ago. The man pointed at her and urged the crowd to get her—he actually used the word 'kill'.

Rebecca dropped her pack and started running, thinking she might lose them in the wilderness. She wasn't sure exactly where she was going, but she had to get away. There were too many people to fool, and it was too late.

She followed whatever path she could find in the darkness, and eventually began climbing again, dizzy and coughing as she ran.

Tracking dogs joined the mob from somewhere. She could hear the people's thoughts and feel their fears and hatred. They were intent on killing the 'demon'

before 'it' got away. Her path took her along the peninsula, a shoulder of the mountain that reached out into the sea.

The chase seemed to last for hours. Both Rebecca and the mob sometimes walked and sometimes ran, but never quite stopped. She didn't know it, but the trail she was taking once led to a wooden watchtower, built centuries before—back when the people of the Land maintained a watch over the sea, always looking for the enemies who regularly raided coastal towns. The watchers would beat their enormous drums to sound the alarm to defenders in the harbor. This was not a path built to scale the mountain. It was made for one purpose only, and ended at the high cliffs overlooking the sea.

A half-delirious Rebecca finally reached that dead end and stared down through the darkness at waves breaking on sharp rocks far below. Everything was dimly lit by the reflected glow of fires in the clouds above. She turned back, looking for a way to escape, but the mob was close behind her and she had no place to go.

She knew what they would do when they caught her. Her death would not be quick or painless, but that wasn't her biggest fear. She was terrified she might reveal something about Daniel and Phoebe under torture.

All too soon, they caught up with her. Rebecca stared at the leader, her onetime colleague, knowing what she had to do. She leaned out over the cliff and let herself fall into the darkness below. As she tumbled toward the rocks, staring back up at the man she'd known, Rebecca felt relief. At least Phoebe and Daniel would be safe now.

The story in The Balance picks up eighteen years after the events of “The Purge,” and is planned to span three volumes.

Part 1 (published in 2015) begins in New Bright Sea Harbor, when Phoebe—Rebecca’s daughter—is seventeen years old and a junior in high school.

An excerpt from the book is available at michaelselden.com.

Part 2 (planned for 2018), subtitled “The Wastelands and the Wilderness,” will continue to the story of The Balance, and the struggle of the Order to regain their place in the Land.

Part 3 (planned for 2019) will conclude the story of The Balance.