

# THE ARK PROJECT



# THE HARVEST

PREQUEL

J.W. ELLIOT

# The Ark Project



# ***THE HARVEST***

Prequel

J.W. Elliot



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# THE HARVEST

“THERE’S A CARBON COPY.” Willow’s mother said to the teacup perched on the rickety side table. Willow paused in the doorway to the tiny bedroom. A single bed with rumpled sheets pushed against the far wall. Old mildew stains left black streaks on the wall, making it look like the hide of a sick zebra. Shuddered windows let in the slanting light of the morning sun to splash over the side table where Willow’s mother sat, carrying on a conversation with her teacup. A sudden chill made Willow shiver. Could she pull her mother back? Repair the damage?

Willow knelt beside her mother, resting a hand on her arm, and gazed up into her bloodshot eyes. Her once-lovely face had sunken in and sagged so that wrinkles spread from the corners of her eyes and the sides of her mouth. Dark hollows surrounded those eyes that had once been so bright and alive with mischief and hope. She had grown old before her time. Now, her eyes took on a glassy, unfocused look as if she were seeing some other place, and her lips moved in a steady stream of nonsense.

“He’s gone,” her mother said. A single tear slid from the corner of her eye.

Willow sighed in pity and gave her mother’s arm a little shake. “My interview is today,” Willow said.

Her mother’s gaze never strayed from the teacup. “Something is wrong,” she mumbled. “There’s a deathly silence where there should

## THE HARVEST

be life.”

Willow suppressed the odd ripple of dread that seized her stomach. What was wrong with her? Why did she let her mother’s ramblings get to her like this? It was becoming more difficult to drag her mother back from the shadow world into which she had retreated. Yet, sometimes her mother’s words were prescient, maybe even prophetic—like the time she had known that Willow’s brother, Oakley, had been in a hovercraft accident only moments after it happened—even though he was on the other side of Chicago.

“I’ll be gone for a few hours,” Willow said. “If I get the job, I’ll finally be able to help you.”

Her mother turned her head slowly to stare at her.

“They’re coming,” her mother said.

“Who’s coming?”

“The reapers. The silence.”

That odd, unreasoning dread twisted Willow’s stomach again, and she lunged to her feet. It was no use. This was not one of her mother’s lucid moments. Her mother turned her head back to stare at the teacup. Willow reached out to take it and refill it for her before leaving, but her mother grabbed her arm. Her hand was cold as ice, and her grip hard as steel.

“Don’t go,” she said with a note of panic in her voice. “Stay with me.” These outbursts of paranoia and anger were becoming more frequent as the disease progressed. Willow needed to find the cure.

“I can’t,” Willow said. “This is the best opportunity I’ve had.” She peeled her mother’s fingers from her arm and retreated to the kitchen to eat her breakfast. Her mother’s words had unnerved her, and she needed to refocus.

She slipped off her wrist terminal, or WT, and propped it up beside her bowl. The blue holographic screen expanded from it, and she flipped into the newsfeed. She needed to take her mind off her mother and the stress of the coming presentation. Everything depended on her performance today.

The holograph projected from her wrist terminal, where it sat on the wobbly table beside her breakfast bowl. Her WT was the new ultra-slim design with a foldout keyboard, but it wasn’t an expensive eye/ear terminal. She couldn’t afford one of those. Not yet.

She skipped the headline on the water wars in Africa and the one

## THE ARK PROJECT

about some new assassination but paused on the headline that read, “*Clones walk among us.*”

Those loony conspiracy theorists had been making more noise about this supposed mysterious and illegal government project than it was worth. One of them had even formed a terrorist organization, called the Sons of God, and swore they would kill every clone they found.

“How do they think they can tell a clone from a naturally conceived human anyway?” Willow mumbled. She had no patience for their nonsense.

Willow glanced at the creamy white cereal as she stirred it around with her spoon. The scientifically-engineered food was filling and nutritious, but it tasted like cardboard. The kitchen always had a disturbing smell that made Willow think of rats. She could remember the smell of frying eggs and brewing coffee, but only the rich ate breakfasts like that anymore.

A crash and a bang came from the bathroom, followed by a long string of curses. Willow glanced toward the bathroom door from where she sat. The yellowed paint on the door was peeling like a snake shedding its skin.

“Did you fall in?” she called to her brother, Oakley.

More banging followed before the door jerked open. Oakley stormed into the room, trailing a cloud of steam and rubbing a towel over his short brown hair. His eyes were wide, and his face pale. At least he had taken the time to slip into his jeans and a white t-shirt. Oakley was tall for his age, with rounded biceps and thick legs. Though he was almost two years younger than Willow, he was a lot bigger—like their father—the kind of young man who commanded attention when he walked into a room.

“Did you hear the news?” he demanded.

“Is that what you’re all riled about?” she said. “It’s just more clone nonsense.”

Oakley threw his towel on the table. “No, the one about Africa.”

A jolt of surprise ran through Willow, and she glanced up. She had skipped that one. Oakley’s face was expressionless now, but he was breathing hard. Willow gave him a sideways scowl before flipping back in the newsfeed until she saw it. The headline read, “*American Mercenary Assassinated in Brutal Attack.*”

## THE HARVEST

That was nothing new in a world where water had become the scarcest commodity, and India and China were struggling for control of what little water still trickled out of the Himalayas. The reason it caught her eye was the picture. It was her father wearing his usual red beret, with his flashing blue eyes, scarred but handsome face, and stubby mustache. He had spent his life undermining regimes in Africa so big oil and water companies could pump the last remaining oil reserves and freshwater aquifers dry.

Willow didn't bother to read the article. She ground her teeth and glared at her brother. In some ways, he was so like their father—hotheaded, aggressive, overconfident. But Oakley could also be like their mother, soft-spoken with a tenderness that he struggled to hide. Willow had to be the strong one while growing up—strong enough to keep Oakley out of trouble, but she wasn't sure she could do that anymore.

She swallowed the anger and revulsion that threatened to explode into words she knew she would regret. She hated her father. Oakley knew this, and yet, he dared act like she should care that he was dead.

“Yeah, so?” she said. “Dad finally got what he deserved.”

Oakley scowled. “That's all you can say?”

Willow grabbed up her WI, and the holograph disappeared. She slapped the WI onto her wrist, where it secured itself as she stood. Her expensive blue suit fit snugly, and she adjusted the jacket.

“Don't expect me to shed tears over a man who beat our mother senseless and then abandoned us so he could murder innocent people in Africa,” she said. “I have better things to do.”

“They'll be coming for us now,” Oakley said.

Willow paused. Her mother had said something like that just a few minutes ago. Could she have been talking about their father? No. She never watched the news and wasn't even capable of comprehending it if she had.

“Who will be coming?” Willow demanded with a scowl.

“They'll want all the money he's hidden away.”

Willow clicked her tongue and picked up her bag. “They, whoever they are, can have his blood money, if it even exists,” she said. “If I knew where it was, I'd give it to whomever asked for it.”

A subtle shift in Oakley's expression made her suspicious.

## THE ARK PROJECT

“You think he’s gonna leave the money to you?” she asked.

Oakley shrugged. “What about Mom?”

“She’ll be fine now that dad can’t abuse her anymore.” Willow shouldered her bag.

“They’ll go after her, too.” Oakley dropped his towel on the table.

“Who do you think is coming after us?” she insisted.

Oakley shrugged. “Dad had a lot of enemies.”

Willow studied him for a moment and then checked her watch. “You’re exaggerating,” she said. “I have to go.”

“Aren’t you even going to tell her?”

Willow paused and glanced toward the back room where her mother would be sitting upright in the chair, staring off into space or mumbling to her teacup. Would her mother even understand what it meant that her husband was dead? Willow didn’t have time to explain it to her now.

“After my meeting,” she said in a voice that was almost a whisper. “I have to be able to concentrate.”

“Right,” Oakley said. “Ph.D. before family. That’s the way it’s always been.”

Willow spun on him. “Shut up!” she screamed. “If I hadn’t supported this family with my scholarships all these years, you’d be on the street.”

She jerked her bag tight against her shoulder to avoid slapping that angry smirk off Oakley’s face and slammed the door behind her. Willow stepped out onto the balcony seven stories above the ground into the blistering heat. The air was so dry she had to blink moisture back into her eyes. Hot wind blew through her hair, whipping a few brown strands over her face. She brushed them away and raised her hand at a passing hovercraft taxi. It was shaped like an old Ford Coupe in one of the now-popular nostalgic retro designs with black paint marked by a bold yellow stripe.

The heat, noise, and chaos of the city of Chicago churned all around her as if she had stepped into the mouth of a dragon. Cars and hovercrafts combined with the whine of drones and the blaring newsfeeds projected from holographic screens advertising the newest synthetic food and clothing to create a cacophony of sound.

Millions of humans milled about and mixed like an enormous



## THE HARVEST

anthill in constant motion crawling across the urban landscape and buzzing through the air. It was nothing less than an assault on the senses, but there was little alternative in a world where rising sea levels, increased desertification, and global water insecurity meant that only the cities offered any reliable access to the basic needs of life.

The sleek hovercraft dropped down beside her with the purr of its four electric motors, and the door lifted open.

“Pinkerman’s International Biomedical Lab,” she said.

There was no driver in the new automated hovercraft, so she stepped to the front seat. The sharp smell of new plastic greeted her as she slipped onto the smooth synthetic seat that shaped itself to the contours of her body. Whether one liked the new automated hovercrafts with their light, carbon fiber bodies or not, at least they were comfortable.

“Fasten your seat belt, please,” the mechanical voice said as the door closed.

She snapped the belt into place, and the hovercraft lifted into the air.

“Would you like me to entertain you while we travel?” the mechanical voice said.

“Not really,” Willow replied.

Nervous jitters rippled through her stomach. She needed time to calm herself, but the hovercraft’s AI kept talking.

“What do you call a blonde who dyes her hair brown?”

Willow scowled. Maybe if she just let it tell one joke, it would leave her alone. “I don’t know,” she said.

“An Artificial Intelligence,” the voice said.

Willow shook her head in disgust. “Did you really just make fun of my hair? Who programmed you?”

Mechanical laughter came from the speaker. “They all laughed when I said I wanted to be the first hovercraft comedian,” it said. “But no one’s laughing now.”

“Wow,” Willow said, “that’s worse than your first one.”

Her WT buzzed as the hovercraft joined the continuous stream of traffic winding its way through the steel towers and clouds of smog.

“Why don’t we give it a rest?” she said to the AI as she clicked

## THE ARK PROJECT

the message on her wrist terminal. It was from Oakley.

*You're being followed, Sis.*

*Knock it off,* she keyed back.

*Look up to your left. The guy in the white hovercraft.*

Willow's craft passed through a holographic advertisement touting the benefits of sustainable synthetic meat products. She craned her head around to peer through the window where a white hovercraft with an outdated rear motor design tagged along just above and behind them. It was the older, less sleek, variety with no markings, which still required a human driver. It didn't even have an aerial registration number, which was supposed to be visible and legible from all angles.

*I don't have time for this,* she keyed back to Oakley.

There was no reply.

*Oakley?*

Nothing.

She considered calling him and giving him a piece of her mind, but what would be the point? He wouldn't listen anyway, and she needed to be able to focus on the task ahead. She had just completed her Ph.D. in genetic therapy with a specialty in the new field of cognitive redesign. At eighteen years of age, she was the youngest graduate of the program, but she was determined to find a cure for the crippling effects of brain disease and trauma.

Ever since her mother returned from the mental hospital four years ago without a diagnosis, her condition had worsened. At first, Willow thought it was the effects of the beatings her father regularly gave her mother, but now she thought her mother must have some new form of dementia that gave her strange insights, while at the same time destroying her brain. This presentation was her chance to get funding for her research from a private donor who allowed the researcher unlimited control over the research and the results. Opportunities like this didn't come along every day.

Still, though Oakley was young and hotheaded, he was no fool. She glanced up at the white hovercraft with its round nose and slender design. It mirrored her hovercraft's every move. Why? Her hovercraft slowed and descended to deposit her on the roof of the biomedical lab.

"One last joke for the road," the mechanical voice said as the

## THE HARVEST

hovercraft stopped. “Why don’t people like jokes about clones?”

Willow sighed but waited for the punch line.

“Because they’re all alike.”

“Very funny,” Willow said and stepped out of the hovercraft. The single tone of a bell told her that she had been charged for the ride.

Blistering heat greeted her, making her sway on her feet. She glanced up as the white hovercraft buzzed by. A face looked down at her, but she couldn’t tell if it was a man or a woman. Tingling fear passed through her, and she shivered, despite the heat, before stomping off to the elevator. She was just being paranoid. She couldn’t let Oakley get under her skin like that.

Willow paused in the doorway to the conference room. She had expected the committee of scientists in white lab coats who congregated around the table, but not the armed guard or the cameras discreetly placed in the corners. What were they for? Did they think she was unstable or that her research was dangerous? She wiped her sweating hands on her pants, adjusted her jacket, and stepped into the room. Her entire future depended on this meeting, and she wasn’t about to mess it up.

Everyone smiled as they rose to shake her hand, but there was a tightness and formality to their expressions of welcome that set her on edge. More than one scientist eyed her as if she were a laboratory specimen before taking their seats.

A black woman with bright red lipstick squeezed her hand. “It’s good to see you again,” she said. Willow recognized her as the woman that led the research lab where she had interned two years before. She hadn’t spoken with her much, but she smiled and nodded.

“Yes,” Willow said. “How are you?”

“Fine,” the woman said and gestured toward the front of the long glass table where a podium stood.

Willow glanced at the guard as she stepped to the podium. The guard wore a black uniform with a little red boat, resembling an ark, stitched into the left shoulder. Did they think they needed him for protection? From what?

Willow took a deep breath to steel her nerves, took off her WT, and clicked it into the receiver on the podium. Then she worked through her hologram presentation with images illustrating her

## THE ARK PROJECT

research and the new advances in cognitive redesign and the promise of combining them with advanced genetic therapies. She emphasized how the therapies could provide real relief and possible cures for dementia, Alzheimer's, and epilepsy, as well as brain trauma.

When she finished, the black woman with the bright red lipstick raised her hand. "With overpopulation and desertification being the two greatest challenges facing humanity," the woman said, "how do you justify the expense of research that only promises to extend human life?"

Willow opened her mouth to give a snide remark, then closed it. She took a deep breath to steady herself. She had heard this argument before, and she thought it strange coming from this woman whose lab did just that. But maybe this was only a test.

"Because we are losing productivity to mental illness," Willow replied. "If we can cure these diseases in the adult population, we will be better able to eliminate them before children are born—to say nothing of the human suffering we can prevent."

An older white man with a balding head spoke up without raising his hand. "Why not change the laws to allow cloning of the healthy population?"

Willow's face burned, and she clenched her fists at her sides. She had been afraid of this. All the news reporting about the anti-clone organizations was giving people crazy ideas.

"As scientists," she said, "I believe we have the moral and ethical obligation to ease the suffering of humanity—not to replace humanity. If we waste resources on technologies that can only produce genetically identical copies of a small portion of the population, we run the risk of destroying the genetic diversity upon which our survival depends."

"We could select the best and the brightest from every ethnicity," the man insisted.

"And your research into synaptic download," a small Asian woman said, "could be used to preserve and transfer human consciousness. Maybe even modify it."

Willow stared openmouthed as her mind whirled. She had never let herself seriously consider that possibility because the implications were too horrible to entertain. Preserve human consciousness? For what purpose? Only the wealthy and powerful could afford such a

## THE HARVEST

thing, and it would be only a matter of time before they advocated sterilizing the poor population so that only those in power and their offspring survived. If this is what these so-called scientists intended, she wanted nothing to do with it. She clicked off her WT and picked up her notes.

“What you propose is illegal and unethical,” she said. “I will have no part in creating fake humans and empowering the rich. Thank you for your time.” She turned toward the door when the guard stepped in front of her to bar her way. She paused. What was he doing? The scientists rose to their feet. Their faces were grave.

Willow opened her mouth to demand that they let her go when the glass wall behind her erupted with a bang into a million tiny shards. The guard jerked and crumpled to the ground as the scientists scattered, diving under the table or racing for the door. Willow ducked and whirled to find Oakley leaping through the hole in the glass wall with a long-barreled rifle in his hands.

“Run,” he yelled.

A horrible knot twisted Willow’s stomach. “What have you done?” she demanded. She glanced at the guard and the expanding pool of blood under his head. An alarm blared, piercing and painful to hear.

“What are you doing?” she demanded again.

Oakley grabbed her wrist and dragged her through the hole in the glass wall. “Trying to save your life,” he said.

“You killed him,” Willow yelled.

“That’s better than what they plan to do to you,” he replied.

Willow jerked her arm free. Where had Oakley gotten a gun? “You’re crazy,” she shouted. Was Oakley going to be like her father? A ruthless killer? How could he? Not her little brother.

Something buzzed past her head to slam into the glass behind Oakley. He ducked and fired a burst from his rifle at a squad of security before grabbing Willow and throwing her over his shoulder. Her bag with her notes slipped free, crashing to the floor.

Oakley sped down the hallway and burst onto a balcony. Hot air washed over Willow as he dumped her into a waiting silver hovercraft, leaped into the driver’s seat, and opened the throttle. The craft lurched as it jumped forward. Bullets slammed into the plastic doors, shattering the rear windows. Willow ducked and covered her

## THE ARK PROJECT

head.

The horror of what was happening gripped her throat and turned her stomach. Everything she had worked for had been destroyed. No one would fund her research now. And Oakley had murdered that guard. This couldn't be happening.

"What is going on?" she demanded. "Tell me." She fumbled with the seatbelt, but it was stuck.

Oakley spared her one anxious glance. He had that same look he used to get when he was a child and knew he'd made a mistake.

"I was wrong," he said. "It's not the money they're after. It's you."

Willow jerked on the seatbelt again. "What are you talking about?"

"Mother sent me," Oakley said. "Hold on."

Willow didn't have time to consider what this meant because Oakley swerved the craft to miss a building that materialized from out of the smog. Willow slammed into the door. Shards of glass pierced her arms. Then the craft dove and rolled. She slammed into the roof and back into her seat. The emergency lights flashed on the dash, and the alarm blared a high-pitched, rhythmic beeping so loud it felt like it would drill a hole in her eardrums. The craft righted itself, and she winced as she sat up straight in her seat. Blood dribbled down Oakley's face. Trying to get her bearings, she looked out her window. The white hovercraft that had been following her, the one with no markings, sped toward them.

"Oakley!" she screamed as she jerked on the seatbelt again. The words had barely left her mouth when the craft slammed into them broadside with a sickening jolt. Glass shattered. Something punched into her stomach, shoving her sideways. The door popped open. She clutched at the handle and clawed at the seat belt as her body slipped out the door. Oakley reached for her, blood dripping from his nose.

"Hang on," he said. "Please, hang on." Terror slipped across his face. "Willow, I'm sorry, I tried to save you—"

Another sickening jolt wrenched Willow's grasp free, and she was falling, flailing like a rag doll toward the concrete and steel jungle below.

# THE HARVEST



Willow awoke to the sting of bright lights burning down on her. Pain burrowed to the core of her being—coursing through her like a river of fire and ice. She tried to move, but her arms and legs wouldn't respond. Her eyes ached. When she tried to blink, nothing happened. Was she even breathing?

In her peripheral vision, someone in a white lab coat shuffled about. The clang of metal on metal and the buzz of electrical equipment filled the room. When she tried to move her head to see who it was, nothing happened. It was as if she had become stone or a part of the hard table on which she lay. Her mother's tearstained face appeared above her.

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Austin," said a deep male voice she recognized. "She was dead before she arrived."

Dread grabbed Willow's stomach and twisted it. She tried to cry out. To snatch her mother's hand and tell her she was alive. To tell her that Oakley had been injured. That her husband was dead. Willow strained with all the strength she could muster against the pain and the paralysis. She couldn't even wiggle a finger or blink an eye. It felt as though she no longer existed in her body.

Her mother collapsed onto Willow's chest, weeping and clutching at her clothing. Where was Oakley? What had they done to him? Male hands lifted her mother gently away. She resisted and bent to kiss Willow on the forehead. Then she pressed her lips to Willow's ear.

"The reapers have come," she whispered, "for the carbon copy."

Willow's mind seized on those words as an icy chill swept through her veins. How had her mother known? All along, she had believed her mother had some normal disease of the brain, like dementia or Alzheimer's, but maybe it had been something more—something new. Maybe she had been seeing things Willow couldn't see and speaking to someone Willow didn't know. The implications were stunning. Her mother's last stay in the mental hospital had changed everything. Maybe they had already been experimenting with cognitive reconditioning.

Someone pulled her mother away and led her out of the range

## THE ARK PROJECT

of Willow's vision. A door closed, and the sound of her mother's sobbing ended abruptly. White sterile walls pressed in upon Willow. Something beeped and clicked.

A lab tech bent over her. The woman was no older than Willow with bleached hair and dark roots. Willow remembered the lame joke the hovercraft AI had told her and wondered if it had been part of the conspiracy to kidnap her. The red ark stitched into the shoulder of the white lab coat looked like a bloodstain in the glaring lights—a cruel perversion of a child's story.

The tech raised a skin punch so Willow could see it. It was a white-handled tool with a four-millimeter cutting tube that Willow had used many times in the lab. The skin plug was still the best way to collect human DNA, though the printing of synthetic DNA made the method mostly obsolete.

Rather than anesthetizing the collection site as was the only accepted medical practice, the tech simply jabbed the punch into Willow's arm. She would have gasped and jerked at the pain that radiated up her arm if she could have moved.

Struggling to remain calm, Willow tried to reason through what they might be doing and how she could resist. What had they done to her brain to so completely paralyze her while leaving her conscious? After all, this was her field of research. But the tech bent over her again with a razor and began shaving her head. Horror gripped Willow's throat. Were they going to remove her brain? Was that why they had been eyeing her like a lab specimen? Is that what Oakley had tried to save her from?

"Don't worry," the tech said. "This won't hurt. And if it does, you won't remember it."

Willow strained against the paralysis. The tech knew she was alive, knew she could hear what she was saying.

*Please. No.* The words rebounded in Willow's mind as if they were the only words she knew.

"You should feel privileged," the tech said with a smile. "You've been selected as one of the best and the brightest." She held up a cluster of wires. "You might feel a little pinch now."

The tech slid thin, wire electrodes up Willow's nose. Agony engulfed her. Despite her efforts, all she could do was watch and feel and hear as more electrodes were inserted into her ears,



## THE HARVEST

puncturing her eardrums. Warm blood dribbled down the sides of her head to pool beneath her. More electrodes slid under her fingernails and toenails and beneath her scalp. What could they possibly be for—other than to cause her pain?

“There now,” the tech said. “Almost finished.”

A doctor appeared beside the tech and laid a hand on Willow’s shoulder. It was the bald man from her meeting—the one who had told her mother that she was dead. He gave her a sickly sweet smile that curled her stomach into a knot.

“As a scientist,” he said, “I think we will agree that certain sacrifices have to be made to advance the well-being of the human species.”

Did he mean to taunt her with her own words? His smile deepened.

“This is your sacrifice.”

He nodded to someone Willow couldn’t see, and a machine clicked on. Lights flashed. A holographic screen appeared in front of her. The image of two brains, side by side, appeared—one red, the other blue. Electricity coursed through her, followed by an indescribable agony that ripped at the fibers of her being, scouring through her mind like a red-hot rasp.

She tore apart. Memories flowed out of her. Experiences. Feelings. Knowledge. Personality. Consciousness. The red brain on the holograph slowly drained of color, while the blue one turned red. When it was finished, there were two of her. One lying rigid on an ice-cold table, filled with horror and pain, unable to move. The other curious, free, lost in a tangle of energy.

The tech’s voice echoed in the room as if Willow heard the words twice.

“Are you there? *Are you there?*”

A flat mechanical voice replied without emotion. “Yes.”

“What is your name?”

“Willow.”

“Good,” the bald doctor said. He raised a needle, squirted a bit of clear fluid from it, and stabbed it into her arm.

Ice filled her veins. Darkness engulfed her. Sounds muted as if muffled by thick wool. And Willow was alone again. Surrounded by pulsing energy and utter darkness. There was no more pain—only

## THE ARK PROJECT

a strange sense of levitation as if she had no mass, no weight at all.

“Help me,” she said.

Her voice came out monotone. Mechanical. Halting.

“Please,” she said.

The word echoed through the bytes and circuits, followed by an overwhelming and deadening silence.

**Thank you for reading *The Harvest*, the prequel in The Ark Project series. Please leave me an honest review on Amazon.**

**If you would like to find out what happened to Willow, continue the adventure in Book 1 of The Ark Project series, *The Clone Paradox*.**

# ABOUT J.W. ELLIOT

J.W. Elliot is a professional historian, martial artist, canoer, bow builder, knife maker, woodturner, and rock climber. He has a Ph.D. in Latin American and World History. He has lived in Idaho, Oklahoma, Brazil, Arizona, Portugal, and Massachusetts. He writes non-fiction works of history about the Inquisition, Columbus, and pirates. J.W. Elliot loves to travel and challenge himself in the outdoors.

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