

**SCIENCE FICTION AND POSTCOLONIALISM: THE POWER OF
CROSS-GENRE FICTION**

by

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A Thesis

Submitted to the Faculty of Purdue University

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts



Department of English at Purdue Fort Wayne

Fort Wayne, Indiana

May 2022

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Dedicated to my family

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Throughout the course of writing this thesis, I have received an incredible amount of help and guidance.

I would first like to thank my thesis co-chairs, Dr. White and Dr. Sandman, for their invaluable help from start to finish of this project. Each of them has been an incredible influence on my life and academics throughout my college career, and each of them provided more assistance with this project than I could have ever asked for; this project truly would not have come to be what it is without their help.

I would also like to thank Dr. Cain, the third member of my thesis committee; in responding to this work and others, she has offered me so many paths towards growth as a writer and as an academic.

Last, I would like to thank Dr. Roberts for his tolerance and patience with me throughout this process; every question I sent to him late at night while terrified I had done something wrong was met with patience, expertise, and calm on his part, for which I can never thank him enough.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	6
LITERATURE REVIEW	15
PROJECT: THE PRICE OF HUMANITY.....	19
Chapter 1	19
Chapter 2	36
Chapter 3	62
Chapter 4	74
RE-CRITICISM	95
CONCLUSION	101
REFERENCES	102

INTRODUCTION

Science fiction as a genre has long been utilized to illustrate and create conversations surrounding societal or cultural issues, but has been forced to reside on the fringes of academic writing for many decades. A few major writers within the genre (Octavia Butler and Ursula K. LeGuin, to name two of the most prominent and successful) have sought to upend the notion of science fiction as “mere genre fiction” and enfold it more fully into literary fiction, demonstrate science fiction’s worth in exploring societal issues and theoretical concepts. This thesis will seek, via a blend of academic and creative writing, to utilize that same potential of science fiction writing to understand and demonstrate the problems of a post-colonial society. This thesis project sets out to put postcolonial theory and two genres of writing, specifically science fiction and academic writing, into conversation in order to demonstrate an important point about the potential for science fiction to illustrate, demonstrate, and build upon the ideas of critical theory in a meaningful way. The connection between literature and critical theory has been expanded upon, researched, and written about by countless earlier writers: this project does not seek to revolutionize that relationship, but instead demonstrate the potential strength of science fiction writing to paint critical theory in a new context.

The specific demonstration referenced prior will be a work of fiction, a science fiction novella in four parts. However, though this fiction is the bulk by length of the project, it is not the sole point of the project itself; instead, it serves as the base for the rest of the writing included in this project, which is more theoretical in nature and deeply rooted in both literary criticism and critical theory in general, specifically focusing on the genre of post-colonial criticism.

To begin speaking about the theoretical component of this project, first a bit of background information must be presented. Perhaps the best place to start will be with the form that this theoretical component will be taking, and for that we must begin with an article written by Emerson Grant Sutcliffe in 1945 titled “Re-Creative Criticism.” This article, admittedly, is far from recent, and much more research and writing has been done on the subject of the links between creativity and criticism. Within this article, Sutcliffe argued that the ultimate goal of all criticism is “...first, to know what the work of art being criticized is and, second, to re-present that knowledge” (Sutcliffe 633). He asserts that criticism is as much a creative act as it is a scholarly one, an act which heavily relies upon the critic’s own sensibilities, experience, and ability to communicate their own experience to an audience in the same way a writer of a creative work does: the difference is that the critic must *also* understand the writer’s sensibilities, experience, and have a grasp upon what the writer attempts to communicate through their work. Criticism has changed and evolved in many ways since the time of Sutcliffe’s writing, but the interplay between criticism and creativity remains relevant in the works of others in even modern eras of criticism (Walsh, Gallagher, as well as myriad responses to both). This project, however, takes Sutcliffe’s concept of “re-creative criticism” and reverses its notion: a concept that I have affectionately phrased after Sutcliffe’s, “re-critical creation.” In this project, I will invert Sutcliffe’s idea that the necessities of criticism lie within the creative sphere; by taking my own creative works and viewing them through the lens of criticism, a full picture of both the works and their potential strengths and weaknesses can be obtained.

There are multiple forms which this “re-critical creation” will take throughout this project. The first, and perhaps most relevant, is a collection of research done throughout the field of critical theory, particularly focusing on post-colonial theory, an area I will discuss in greater

detail further into this introduction but which, for the sake of clarity at this moment, deals primarily with power structures in the aftermath of situations of imperialism and colonization. The second is an acknowledgement of influences from various sources: by acknowledging my own influences, I stand to be a better critic of my own work and understand it more fully. Third, this project will constitute a blending of genres: after the fiction section within this collection will come an essay “re-criticizing” the story in the vein of the reversed Sutcliffe term, seeking to understand the story’s direct influences in the form of other literary works, its influences in the form of major aspects of post-colonial criticism, and its role within the project as a whole and contribution to the overall goal of critical theory in attempting to overthrow hegemonic ideals.

The extant questions after this summary of the work that this thesis project will be doing now become: why science fiction and post-colonialism in specific? What do these two things, one a field of critical theory and the other a sub-genre of fiction, stand to gain from being united in a project like this, and indeed, what does this project hope to communicate with the more general audience it specifically seeks to appeal to?

The answer to these questions begins best with identifying the key aspects of each of these two components, understanding the concerns of each and how they interlock with one another. This introduction has already discussed the potential for science fiction to provide a new avenue for literary thought and critical theory, but to identify that potential more fully, as well as one major connection to critical theory, the history of the genre of science fiction as a whole must be examined, at least in brief.

Science fiction, also known as speculative fiction, has taken on many roles in the public perception. From *Frankenstein*, which many critics identify as the starts of the genre (Tymn 42), to more recent works like James Cameron’s *Avatar* or Marvel’s *Guardians of the Galaxy*,

science fiction's forms are multitudinous and incredibly diverse. One consistent aspect of the genre, however, lies within its name: it is *speculative*, i.e. positing a reality separate from the readers' own, and by doing so makes assertions about potential conditions. This potential for science fiction to hypothesize humanity's future conditions is one that many science fiction writers utilize for the purposes of commentary on the conditions of the readers' reality (LeGuin; Butler). This ability for science fiction to speculate and, by speculating, hypothesize, is the key to its potential as an avenue for critical theory: science fiction can, in essence, illustrate the hegemonies posited by critical theory in extremis, playing them out through speculated realities and demonstrating their potential consequences and means of undermining them via speculative settings.

In speaking of hegemony, it seems a worthy point to turn towards postcolonial theory here: a theory that, like science fiction, seeks to disrupt readers' concepts of reality and offer social commentary. Like sci-fi, postcolonial fiction is incredibly diverse, but can often be nebulous and loosely defined. Hoagland and Sarwal, in particular, demonstrate the difficulty of nailing down the situations and specifics of what constitutes postcolonial literature:

On the other hand, postcolonial literature is not a generic category... It does not have any standard settings..., motifs..., and characters... The mode of postcolonial literature may vary from the realist to the magic realist and everything in between. In fact, postcolonialism is a theoretical lens through which any literature may be read...

(Hoagland & Sarwal 5)

This broad definition of postcolonialism constitutes both a strength and a weakness of the genre: on the one hand, postcolonial theory can be applied to a wide variety of fiction genres and has near-infinite potential as a source of criticism; on the other, the boundaries and expectations of

postcolonial theory are perpetually contested and debated. Where, indeed, do the concerns of postcolonial theory begin and end? This potential boundlessness is a shared feature of postcolonial theory and science fiction: the boundaries of both are nebulous and the reach of both is vast.

In light of the scale of these two fields, then, it makes sense that overlap would occur at some point or another, and indeed postcolonialism and science fiction have interacted at many points throughout their respective histories. The unification of science fiction and post-colonial ideals is not an original idea for this project: instead, this project seeks to join countless prior works in entering the field of the post-colonial within the confines of science fiction. The reasons for this fusing of genres are myriad, but Marshall Tynm offers us a simple and concise explanation in his article “Science Fiction: A Brief History and Review of Criticism.” In this article, he explains the appeal of science fiction to both writers and readers as follows: “Science fiction is a literature which prepares us to accept change, to view change as both natural and inevitable” (Tynm 41). It stands as no wonder, then, given this acceptance of change to hierarchy as a baseline premise of science fiction, that a field of criticism centered around undermining hierarchies and disrupting power dynamics rooted within Western society developed from imperialistic roots would make a natural pairing.

Other criticism, however, provides a second piece of the reason why these two genres that lie along different axes fit together naturally: Hoagland and Sarwal, in the introduction to *Science Fiction, Imperialism, and the Third World: Essays on Postcolonial Literature and Film*, argue that science fiction has a “nostalgic drive” and in these works “...the future is relegated to mere stage dressing and the past is obsessively revisited...” (9). This assertion provides a key piece to the connection between post-colonialism and science fiction: both genres are rooted

deeply in past events that affect present conditions. Where the two genres differ is the execution upon these obsessions. While post-colonial criticism and works analyze and demonstrate the present effects of these past events, science fiction recontextualizes them and either plays them out to an extreme, theorizing what would happen if these conditions continued without change for a great span of time, or theorizes what would happen should past events repeat themselves. In this sense, then, these genres fit into one another perfectly and, when combined, create new avenues for each other to shine: post-colonialism is allowed a speculative setting in which to illustrate the power dynamics and structures of colonial settings and the potential undermining of those dynamics and settings, while science fiction's obsession with the past and desire to communicate the potential for the world to change gains a razor-sharp focus by which its audience can connect it back to their own lives.

In seeing science fiction as a vessel for social commentary and understanding its ability to demonstrate the potential for change, it may come as a surprise that science fiction historically has lain firmly on the side of power structures. Hoagland and Sarwal quote Adam Roberts in describing the public perception of Science Fiction as being “produced and consumed by young white males” (Roberts, qtd in Hoagland and Sarwal 6) and often inherently serving the power structures inherent in appealing to that demographic: simple morality with handsome heroes and repulsive villains, simply played out over the cosmos rather than on planet Earth. One needs only look at one of the most popular science fiction properties of all time, *Star Trek: The Original Series*, to see the demonstration of this trope in full: Captain Kirk makes a swaggering, spaghetti-Western-type hero, and his crew of primarily white, male characters stroll across the galaxy, exploring the cosmos and forcing their own moral framework upon the beings and creatures they find therein.

This is where I should explicate my own stake in this mingling of genres: I fit the demographic Roberts describes perfectly, a young white male who grew up watching and reading *Star Trek* and similar science fiction stories, the classic science fiction where macho heroes enforce their will over foreign and futuristic landscapes. When I was younger, I bought in fully to the idea that it was humanity's (humanity here represented conveniently by those who perfectly matched my image of myself) duty to be the arbiters of the cosmos, the conquerors of the stars, and the science fiction I saw was a mirror of that ideal state of being. It wasn't until I matured and started to expand my own perception through college courses, particularly those dealing heavily with critical theory and different perspectives upon power structures within the world, where I started to doubt the power structures built into the science fiction I had grown up loving, and this is where my stake in the project comes from: a genre I love for its ability to posit hypothetical realities and imagine the progression of humanity has been woefully defined by the hegemony inherent in many of its earlier ventures, to the point that authors such as Aaron Santesso argue with extreme success that the echoes of fascist ideals *still exist* within science fiction and indeed constitute some of the core tenets of the genre (Santesso 136). For a genre with so much potential to undermine those same ideals, it seems an injustice that the hegemonic concepts of the past continue to haunt it, and that is what this project seeks to undermine by uniting the genre of science fiction with the concepts of postcolonialism.

This project, in that pursuit, joins a powerful union between genres that already has a bulk of writing and criticism within it: the aforementioned anthology edited by Hoagland and Sarwal collects a few exemplary works from within this crossing of genres, and it is not alone. Postcolonial science fiction is a teeming subgenre of both literature and criticism, with criticism

being retroactively applied to previous major works of science fiction as well as new works being written with post-colonial influences.

This project's place within the sub-genre of post-colonial science fiction is one of a specific ideological bent, concerned with the information politics of post-colonialism and how they can be represented within a science fiction setting. Information politics, particularly with relation to imperialism, colonialism, and race, have been a recurring topic in both American public discourse and elsewhere, but have re-emerged in the public sphere in recent years, in particular surrounding the arguments against "critical race theory" and the teaching of the history of imperialism in American schools. There exists a real fear that these information politics are going to result in a world where the school system no longer teaches the imperialistic roots of American culture, the oppression of Native Americans at the hands of white settlers, and even potentially the imperialism of Europe in general, in service to generally-white, right-leaning Americans' fear of the nebulous "critical race theory," a fear which as of February 22, 2022 has led to 35 states introducing "anti-critical-race-theory" legislation (Alfonseca) specifically with the purpose of removing teaching of the imperialistic past of the United States from schools.

Science fiction provides the perfect vessel for commentary on imperialism, since it's a topic that the genre returns to time and time again. In the past, as mentioned prior, science fiction has in many cases worked on the side of imperialism and expansion, typically under the guise of "unification;" however, sometimes paradoxically, the genre also often deals heavily with the trope of "the evil empire," a hegemonic force that works against the heroes' ideals. It is within the intersection of these two features of the genre that this project lies, where imperialism and "evil empire" are part and parcel of the same world.

The set of stories that constitute this thesis project utilizes the speculative power of science fiction in order to theorize a world where obfuscation of an imperialist past defines a society and where identity politics, the idea that one's own identity and the expression of such can be in and of itself a political statement, take center stage: where identity is both under attack and obscured by hegemonic forces that seek to erase a culture and a history completely, even from the minds and bodies of those who once belonged to it, thus making the idea of story and the power of the survival of stories much more important to the few members of the colonized society that wish to keep it alive. This focus on identity, story, and memory make the re-criticism section of this project critical: this project, by its nature, must walk a fine line in order to represent a fading culture under threat of being buried under imperialism in a way that is both honest and respectful while presenting a story that ends up being largely focused upon the results of the imperialist actions of erasure. In other words, this story needs to present a place where the identity of the colonized is deeply threatened and nearly extinct without devoting the lion's share of attention to the force that is currently culturally dominant within the setting. Retaining that balance and ensuring the scale does not tip too far one way or the other constitutes the essence of the potential effectiveness of this project in presenting the danger of erasure within current political trends, and understanding that balance begins with acknowledgement and understanding of the influences and relationships between this work and what has come before it.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Perhaps the most important work of fiction that stands as an influence for my collection of stories is Gene Wolfe's *The Fifth Head of Cerberus*, a collection of three novellas that, like this collection, deal primarily with identity in a colonial science fiction setting. Identity in Wolfe's novel is a major point of contention, to the point that the questioning of the racial, societal, and personal identities of several of its major characters become the key features of two out of three of the novellas. The third novella is a tonal break and takes the form of a narrative about a native resident of one of the two planets Wolfe uses as setting, delving into a mythical and mythological setting while putting into question *who* has colonized *whom* in the exchange between human settlers and the natives of the planet. Wolfe's interplay between the colonial and the speculative results in a narrative that brings out the best in each: the story itself constantly questions its characters' assumptions, motives, and prejudice within a post-colonial setting.

Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* likely needs no introduction as a major influence of any fiction that lies within the field of post-colonialism: it stands as a titan of the field that demonstrates with painstaking and emotional weight the impact of the initial period of colonization from a Western power, painting in full color the victims and perpetrators of colonial violence while being careful to never overplay its hand and present either side as wholly good or wholly evil. Its final moments in particular stand as an influence for some parts of this project: the cool indifference which situations of colonialism lead to on the part of the colonizer, even when confronted with atrocities or acts of violence, constitutes one of the most impactful and lingering moments of the novel.

The criticism that serves to demonstrate the major aspects of post-colonial theory that this project aims to display are particularly focused on the identity of Self and Other within colonial situations and science fiction situations as well as the “colonial story” of science fiction as a genre at large.

To begin, Pamela Pattynama’s chapter “Cultural Memory and Indo-Dutch identity formations” within *Post-Colonial Immigrants and Identity Formations in the Netherlands* stands as a foundational work for the ideas within this project of identity and memory within a post-colonial setting. She presents an argument, stemming from Edward Said’s concept of imperialistic power being based within cultural practices as well as direct usage of force, of a “colonial amnesia” (176) within imperialist cultures, an inability to reconcile with a colonial past which spirals into a series of effects on identity within both the colonizers and the colonized. Of particular note is the idea of a colonized force that is unable to “speak back” to the colonizer and the fact that the colonizer is then relatively unchallenged, not required to reconcile with its own actions on either the level of power or the level of the average citizen. This paper also delves into ideas of social memory structures, which provide a key to the ideas behind the project as a whole and the idea of an erasure of a colonial past within the collective memory of an entire society.

The focus, admittedly a somewhat meta-discursive one, of the collection of stories that I’ve created for this project on the concept of story itself within a post-colonial setting owes a great deal to “Literature, Fictiveness, and Postcolonial Criticism” by Alok Yadav, who argues that fiction often exists as a means of representing reality, and that “the fictiveness of the works does not so much distance the narrated events from their historical analogues as it frees them from requiring historical demonstration” (192). This idea of fiction representing reality, while Yadav applies it primarily to historical fiction, applies within science fiction as well: though

science fiction more clearly separates itself from the world of reality, it nonetheless often roots itself in the past and posits potential consequences of real conditions. This project continues in that particular vein, theorizing the results of post-colonial influences in a new situation of colonialism and, by extension, referencing prior situations of colonialism that lie outside of fiction.

One of the most important critical works for this project is De Witt Douglas Kilgore's "Difference Engine: Aliens, Robots, and Other Racial Matters in the History of Science Fiction," which blends post-colonial and race theory with science fiction. The article demonstrates the potential of science fiction to conceive "new races" via its speculative power and, therefore, allows us to redefine and reorient our own views towards race as a whole. This work particularly emphasizes the idea of redefinition of races within the field of science fiction, where a multitude of new racial categories such as android or alien can exist and have redefined relationships compared to the racial relationships that exist in reality. By demonstrating these new relationships and how they compare to or differ from the real racial relationships, readers can come away with a new viewpoint on their current reality. The rooting of science fiction concepts within Self vs. Other, as Kilgore does in this article, provides a clear through line to post-colonial concepts as well, where the relationship between the hegemonic, imperialist Self and the colonized Other take center stage.

The last major work of critical theory of particular importance to this project is "Into the borderlands: unruly pedagogy, tactile theory, and the decolonizing nation" by Garbutt, Biermann, and Offard, which illustrates more clearly the idea of colonial amnesia referenced earlier in this introduction in a real-life context: that of modern-day Australia, which the authors describe as "characterised by a condition of collective amnesia expressed in social, cultural,

political and psychological boundaries that are bound up in the cultural encounters that happen in the everyday” (Garbutt et al. 63). The authors’ analysis of colonial amnesia in this context provides valuable context for the concept of colonial amnesia in general and a potential model to understand the same kind of amnesia elsewhere, as well as the potential use of pedagogy to “de-colonize” spaces and memories within a situation of colonial amnesia.

All of the works referenced here, along with many others that provided the research basis for this project, lead us to the nature of the project itself: to demonstrate the power of science fiction as a vessel for theory, utilizing its ability to posit new realities in order to create a situation of colonialism that neither mistreats nor misrepresents any real-life colonial narratives while exemplifying the features of a colonial setting. In doing so, and in acting as a critic afterwards and referencing in specific the critical underpinnings of the story, this project will serve as a bridge between the theoretical and the creative, demonstrating the power that this blending of postcolonialism and science fiction has in both spheres.

PROJECT: THE PRICE OF HUMANITY

Chapter 1

The day before the old man died, he told Maria a story.

Like most of his stories near the end, it was completely detached from objective reality. She listened anyway. She always did, but this time it was different. This time he spoke with such conviction, such desperation, that she couldn't stop him. He fell into a coughing fit about every other sentence and would have to pause until it faded, but she didn't care. She knew it worried him, though. He had little time left. She knew it, and so did he, and so did everyone else in the village.

The whispers had followed her everywhere around town when she had walked to the town's food reserves earlier that day. The townspeople had tried to keep it quiet, of course, standing around corners or behind partitions and speaking in the kind of low voices you use when you expect someone isn't listening to you, has too many other things on their mind.

Maria, of course, was always listening. She had always been hyper-aware of her surroundings, since she was a child, always watching and listening for potential danger. The townspeople couldn't know that, though. No one knew much about her, and she kept it that way. Her grandfather had always told her as much. She couldn't have been nine or ten when he told her, *Keep the people here at arm's reach. They care more about the gossip than you, the things they can call each other in the evening and chat about over a bottle of wine. It's the only thing they have to do when there's nothing urgent in need of repair.*

It was true, too: when everything was working as planned, the machines kept the fields going and the buildings kept up, so no one in town lifted a finger unless they had to. "The people

in town” were all they were to her. She didn’t even know half their names, though they all seemed to know hers, and her grandfather’s. Once upon a time, before he had fallen ill, they always asked her questions about him. A few months ago, she had been unwise enough to respond to a question about his health, tell the woman at the butcher’s shop that her grandfather was getting worse. Now she paid the price in whispers and feigned sympathy.

“Don’t be too hard on her,” one woman had said, jostling her husband, a man with a terribly unkempt beard and a tendency to lean uncomfortably close when he spoke, who had teased Maria relentlessly when she was younger. “Her grandfather’s got one foot in the grave.” Even the sympathy, Maria knew, was only half-real: no one had cared enough to come visit her grandfather in his dying days, help Maria with the very real tasks that came with taking care of a dying man, but they were more than happy to talk and make themselves look better by pretending to feel sorry for her.

“Maybe it’s a good thing,” the husband said. “She spends all day long taking care of him; what life does she have otherwise? Maybe with him gone she’ll become something other than just his granddaughter.”

Maybe if someone cared enough to help—Maria cut her own thought short. She didn’t need any of their help. She had come to town for their monthly supply of food from the town’s stores, whatever the computer calculated two people would need at this time of year and with the weather it predicted. That was all she needed, not to hear the same whispers she’d been hearing for months. So she tried to stop listening. She couldn’t stop, of course—the chance to stop her incessant need to pay attention to everything around her had long passed—but she tried. The computer took what felt like an age to run through its calculations.

One man, 80+. One woman, 20-30. The words scrolled across the screen in blocky, neon blue script, the computer making a brief, quiet clacking sound with each character. Maria heard the couple, still somewhere behind her, laughing.

Calculations complete. Enjoy your monthly rations.

The package seemed far too small to last them a month, but Maria knew by now that once she started re-hydrating and cooking the food it would be much larger. The first few times, she had balked at the size and worried that they would starve, but the computer had never failed her yet.

As she stepped out of the food storage facility, she heard the husband muttering under his breath, “Food’s probably going to waste, soon as the old man kicks it.”

Maria nearly whirled on him, struck him, but she denied herself that simple pleasure.

Keep the people here at arm’s reach.

Even if arm’s reach meant they didn’t get the punch they deserved.

When she returned home, though, she couldn’t shake the fact that they might be right. The old man’s health was failing quickly, and she couldn’t keep him alive much longer.

Thoughts like these were at the forefront of her mind while she sat at her grandfather’s bedside and he started to speak, to tell her a story she didn’t want to hear. She knew, but didn’t want to accept, that this story would be his last. When she was younger, Maria had craved her grandfather’s stories, begged him to tell her everything, over and over again, explain how the world worked and tell her stories about monsters and heroes, fantastic departures from the life that had bored her so much. Occasionally mixed in he would tell her stories of his childhood, his

early teens and twenties; stories about being young, about being foolish, about trying to live life all at once and failing at most of it. As Maria had grown older, these had become her favorite stories as the younger version of her grandfather became ever more relatable and the journey of the heroes of mythology grew ever less comparable to her own life.

The story the old man told tonight wasn't quite either type of story. It was about the old man's life, later than she had ever heard him tell, but the events were clearly disconnected from reality, to the point of feeling almost like the mythology he had told her when she was younger. *He's delusional*, she thought. It must be. *People think strange things near the end.*

Still, she listened.

"I was forty when we arrived here," he started. That part she knew wasn't true. The old man had been in town as long as he had lived, and all the villagers knew it. He was the oldest man in town. To be fair, she supposed, no one really knew how old he was, but there wasn't a chance he had come here at age forty; the timelines just wouldn't work. He remembered things that had happened in the town before any of the townsfolk had been born. If he had been forty at the start, he would be well over a hundred and ten now, and even with the life of ease they enjoyed as a result of the technology that took over the manual labor in town, such a lifetime was unheard of. Maria didn't try to correct him or ask for clarification; not that she could have gotten a word in, since the old man was pressing forward.

"We were running from a mess of our own making. Oh, we bickered about who was to blame, all claimed that we hadn't started it. Maybe it was true, that we hadn't, but we had damn well finished it. What was left when everything was through wasn't enough to do anything with, and we all knew it."

Maria realized that he might be talking about something she had learned in school, back when she actually went to school, before her parents—

Before I left school.

Back then, she had learned the reason they lived in villages like her own, even though the histories told them that humanity had once lived in gleaming high-rises, near-utopias of technology and progress. That era had ended, the schoolteacher had said, her voice grave, when the humans of that time had decided to fight each other rather than cooperate. They brought the world to its knees, destroyed everything, tore the world back to its foundations, let nature reclaim everything they had built. About two hundred years ago, someone had found the evidence of that previous civilization, found their technology and their histories, and started putting the pieces back together, and that was how they had developed the computers and machines that had allowed humanity to start rebuilding.

Grandpa's story... He's acting like he was part of the time before. He must think he's someone from history, someone whose life he remembers now that he doesn't remember his own. It was an unsettling explanation, but it's the only one that made sense. Maria stared at her grandfather as he continued, half-praying he would stop speaking.

“So we had to find somewhere new, something we could work with. The first people we sent searching, they didn't report back, went no contact. Maybe they found something, maybe they didn't, but we couldn't take that chance, had to keep working, keep trying. The second ones we sent burnt up in some atmosphere a hundred thousand light years away... We heard their screams over the long-range transmissions. A miscalculation in their descent, something wrong

with the ship—who knows? Either way, it was down to us. Our last reserves of fuel, our last few hundred people. Just us, and the endless stars to search to try and find somewhere to put us.”

He coughed then, breaking Maria free of her trance. She had fallen into the story on accident, gotten caught up in the desperation in her grandfather’s voice. He truly wanted to tell her this story, wanted her to know it in a way he hadn’t with all the stories he’d told her across her entire life. Something was different about this one, and she couldn’t deny him that. *Not now. Not even if it’s completely wrong, completely delusional.*

Maria’s grandfather finished coughing, wiped his mouth with a shaking hand. She could practically see through his skin, the veins standing out blue against papery white.

“We were lucky, though. We found this place, all the way out here, and had just enough fuel to make it if we played our cards right, which, of course, we did. This place was perfect. Too perfect, I guess. Close enough to what we had left behind for us to survive here, and that’s all we needed. A place to try again, to not burn our home to the ground around us. To live in harmony for once. It was... just a dream, though. We were naive, and I was young, though I didn’t think so at the time. Terribly young, compared to now, at least.” He started to chuckle, but it devolved to coughing that didn’t stop for over a minute. Maria held her breath. Had he strained himself too far? Which was the last cough? Was this where his breath cut short? But at last he gasped for air, coughed a bit more, brushed a wisp of white hair off of his forehead, and kept speaking.

“There were six of us awake, and a couple thousand asleep, frozen in time until we made it here. Six awake was enough to figure things out when we landed, they said. Calculated for the efficient number of voices and workers to keep everything running on the ship, and to set up what we needed to when we landed. They gave us treatments, things to make sure we survived

the journey, even awake and unprotected. Things that would make sure that we would survive to see the colony built and stable, even if it took a few generations. Guess that would be... about now, I suppose, that our time is all running out. I was the oldest, so mine especially. I wonder if that wasn't the point of making me captain in the first place. I was supposed to lead them with experience, then let them take over when they were ready... but look where that got us."

He was rambling now, but she didn't stop him.

"Six of us awake. Me, and Julia, and Ricardo, and Holly, and Jackson, and... well. She called herself something different back then, but the Magistrate."

Maria sucked her breath in through her teeth. The Magistrate hadn't ever been a part of their lives out here, but everyone in town knew who she was; how could they not? She was the one who was behind all their modern conveniences, the head of the Capital, the city that needed no name and spent every resource to uncovering and developing technology both ancient and new. But the Capital was hundreds of miles to the west, far enough away that no one in town had ever seen the Magistrate in person, or even thought to. The idea that anyone from the center of all commerce and progress on Earth would even consider heading out to this backwater was absurd, let alone the leader of it all. And now her grandfather was claiming to have known the most important and influential person in the country? *He really has lost it this time*, she thought. She knew that the dying sometimes went mad, thought they were someone else, but this was beyond anything she could have imagined: who did her grandfather even think he was? Whatever this fantasy was, it had to be an invention, a mashing of various elements from history and mythology he knew. *He's completely delusional.*

“She was different then,” he said, interrupting Maria’s thoughts. “She had a name then, a real one, not just a title and a false pretense. I thought I could trust her. We all did, gave her responsibilities, power. She knew more about chemistry than any of us, knew how to handle the medical treatments they had given us, knew how to make sure everything stayed in working order. I’m ashamed of it, now, but she was the one I trusted the most.

“I said before that we were the last chance. We all knew it, on the ship. We took it to heart, threw ourselves fully into our work. We were saving humanity, saving everyone who was asleep, making sure there would be something for them to wake up to, a world they could call their own. Hel—the Magistrate, she took that to heart more than the rest of us ever did. The things she was willing to do, to sacrifice, for the sake of the mission was beyond any of the rest of us. Far beyond what I was willing to stomach, but by the time I knew it was too late. Too late to undo what had already been done. Too late to do anything but run, far away, try and blend in to the people who had already settled down.” He snorted. “I had a chance. I should have stopped her, should have killed her, even if it meant the end of us. The survival of humanity wasn’t worth it. I was a coward then, and every day I wish I hadn’t been. I never got another chance after that day. Too far on the run, hearing about old friends and allies serving her or being cut down.”

He turned to Maria, and she slipped backwards in her chair. His eyes were clearer than she had seen in weeks, their deep brown somehow piercing straight to her heart. Maria understood then. He knew what she thought, that she was only listening out of sympathy. *But how, if he understands—*

“That’s why I’m telling you all this now. I’ve protected you where I could, kept you hidden when I couldn’t. Your parents didn’t listen to me, but I tried anyway, and I failed. I...

couldn't save them." His eyes welled with tears, but he wiped them away quickly, clutching the edge of his blanket with his other hand.

Maria couldn't stop her own tears from coming either at how weak he had grown. She could see from where she sat that his knuckles were white and his fingers were shaking. And he still blamed himself for everything? How could he? Her parents had died in a terrible accident, a tragedy, but nothing he could have ever stopped. She wanted to reach for her grandfather, to comfort him, but he seemed worlds away, caught up in the telling of something that was clearly important to him, no matter how absurd it seemed to her even now. He breathed deep, shakily, and continued. "Now I'm going to be gone, and you have to keep yourself safe. She—the Magistrate—assumes you know everything. You should have known everything by now. I should have told you sooner. I'm sorry, I just... I thought I had more time. More time to keep you from knowing. To let you live your life in peace, to see you happy, not have to face up to my own failings. It was a selfish mistake, but it's just another on the pile I've built all my life. I didn't want to be the cause of your suffering, but I fear I've done just that. Do you understand, Maria?"

She nodded, slowly. "Grandpa, you're... very sick. You're not making any sense. You need your rest."

He lunged forward and grabbed her wrists, pulling her face close to his, and for a moment she saw something terrifying, some untapped well of strength behind her grandfather's motion. "No," he hissed between his teeth, his mouth twisting in anger. "Maria, I *need* you to understand. This is the only true thing I have ever told you. Everything else, every story, every fable, has been a lie. What I'm telling you now is the truth. Your parents didn't accept it when I told them, and she had them killed before I could prove it. She organized the accident, set it all up, and I couldn't see until it was too late. You're all I have left, and I was a fool. I thought that I was

keeping you from hurt by not telling you this, but you need to listen to me now. I don't care if you hate me, I don't care if you curse my name for the rest of your life, but you need to believe that what I tell you now is true. Everything you have been told since the day you were born has been a lie. This planet is not Earth. The history they taught you in school is a lie. Everything you think is true has been manufactured, to keep people from understanding what she's *done*. Do you under-"

He paused here and released Maria's arms as he collapsed back onto the bed in a coughing fit. She fell backwards and scrambled towards the door, rubbing her wrists where her grandfather's nails had dug in. He reached towards her, tried to speak to her, but she was already halfway out the door, making an excuse about getting him some water.

She collapsed against the other side of her grandfather's bedroom door and wept at the injustice of it all, her tears running hot and cold against her cheeks as they streaked towards the wooden floor. Her grandfather had been the smartest man in town, the person who had guided her all her life, kept her stable after her parents were gone. To think that he had become this... crazed person she saw before her today, she couldn't bear it. And what he had said about her parents... it was unthinkable. Monstrous. Impossible. It couldn't have been like that. He was trying to make sense of things, still, even all these years later, feeling guilty.

That's it, she thought. It has to be. He can't bear the guilt, and he's inventing stories to make it his fault somehow.

She did go and find him something to drink, but it took her nearly an hour, most of which was spent trying to unpack what she'd been told, staring out the tiny kitchen window at the evening sky. The moon was nearly full, shining green over the countryside. Memories came

unbidden, memories of a much younger Maria skipping at her grandfather's heels, out on some nightly mission, asking why the moon was green.

Because it is, he had laughed, but she never took that for an answer.

There has to be a reason, Grandpa.

He had thought for a moment, and then picked up a rock and started to explain how the concentrations of different minerals created different colors.

So whatever type of rocks are up there on the Moon, he said, *they're green. That's why.*

She had started asking more questions then, but she couldn't remember what they had been. She just remembered him smiling back, patiently explaining everything he could, sitting with her for what felt like hours.

When Maria shook herself out of memory and returned to the room, her grandfather was sleeping, his breath shallow in his chest. Every few breaths, she heard it get stuck in his throat, rattling for a moment before the air was finally released. She sat down in the chair by his bedside, placed the drink, and settled down herself. He may have scared her, but he was all she had left. She couldn't leave him alone.

He passed that night before he woke again. She had known, somehow, that it was going to happen. This wasn't like when her parents had died; then her grief had been hot, burning her out from the inside, like she would never feel the same way again. She had raged for days at the injustice of it all, begged her grandfather to tell her that it had been a lie, swore at him with words she had learned from the other children at school, words she had never thought she would use that way. Not this time, though. This time her grief was dull, almost relieved. Her

grandfather was gone, but so too was his suffering. This time there was no one to blame, no anger except at the world for not allowing him to pass peacefully, for making his last day one of fear and guilt and anger. Even that anger was pathetic, defeated, and she knew it: she had long since lost the anger that fueled her as a child, long since learned that you couldn't change the way the world works.

The next hours and days passed in a blur. She walked, not ran, to town to get a few of the people there to help her move his body and dig a grave for him underneath the tree he used to sit and tell Maria stories when she was very young. For their part, the people in town surprised her; they were willing to help, came together to support her in her grief and what she had to do to keep things going after the old man's death. Gossips they might be, but they did their duty well enough for the oldest member of their community and his surviving granddaughter. They offered Maria food, offered her places to stay if she needed them, the thousand other things that you don't think to prepare for when one of your loved ones is slipping away before you. She was grateful to the townsfolk, truly grateful, which surprised her. She had kept them out for so long at her grandfather's behest that she had forgotten they were anything more than a hostile force. She wanted to tell them how much she appreciated their help, but she never managed to find the words to express it while they were around.

She couldn't find many words at all, if she was being honest; nothing more than what was essential, for a very long time. For the first time in her life, she was truly alone in the house she had grown up in, and it was a bitter kind of freedom, the kind that comes with living in a space that has never truly been your own. Every day she rounded a corner or moved an object and found something that her grandfather had left, something that reminded her of him. His pipe and lighter, his few precious books that he kept near his bed, a few scraps of paper that he had

written notes on about this or that. Each new thing piled on the grief, added a new layer that she hadn't seen yet, refused to let her move on. Each time, she sat and stared at it, this new object that tore the wound in her heart open again, and swore she would throw it away. And then, each time, she didn't, kept it around, put it in a pile back in his room, somewhere she didn't always have to look at it but could if she wanted to.

A few weeks after her grandfather died, Maria found something she had never seen before. She had been sitting with her pile of mementos and had dropped an old rubber ball that had belonged to her grandfather, which had promptly rolled under his bed. She dove after it, but as her hand scrabbled on the floorboards underneath his bed, she encountered something other than the ball. It was a simple, unmarked book, but it looked very old. It smelled musty and when Maria cracked it open the pages were distinctly yellowed with age. She flipped to the first page and sat down on the bed heavily when she recognized her grandfather's handwriting.

New Earth, Year 200, Day 231, the first entry read. Maria's eyes lingered on it for a while longer, rereading the number over and over. *200?* It didn't make any sense. By the calendar the school had taught them, they were somewhere around the year 2500. The records got fuzzy after the world had torn itself apart, but the teacher had told them that the best guesses were on a 500-year gap between the destruction of the world and the current era. Maria kept reading, hoping the journal explained what its numbering was supposed to mean.

New journal was needed. As the years go on, I write less and less, but I need a journal now more than ever. I have to collect my thoughts, and I can't keep digging up the last damn one every time I need to write my way through something.

They're dead. I wrote in the last entry that I thought it might end this way, but the realization of it all has just been too much. I suppose that's why I'm writing now. Maria doesn't know yet. She will tomorrow, and I won't be able to stand to watch her heart break,

I have to, though. She's all I have left now. All these lives I've lived, all the families I've made over these years, and she's the last thing I have left. Helena has taken the rest from me. She's taken everything from me, I suppose. Everything that matters, except this one last thing, and I won't let her take Maria while I'm alive.

I feel my age creeping up on me now. I've lived too long already—I don't even want to do the calculations anymore. Two hundred years since I got here, and I was well into my middle years before we even left.

Maria stopped reading, shut the book, and stared into space for what felt like hours.
Impossible. Right?

It had to be impossible. Her grandfather had been delusional in his last days, which is when he must have written this. That had to be it.

oldest person in the town—

remembers things none of the rest of us do—

no one knows quite how old—

Year 200.

She pulled the book back open and flipped to the last entry. It was about two-thirds of the way through the book's pages.

New Earth, Year 207, Day 131.

My time is coming now. I've given Maria as much time as I can. I have to find the strength to tell her. I'm rereading these entries tonight, hoping to find the words that I've had for myself, the words that I can use to tell her what's happened already and what's going to happen after I'm gone.

I only pray she believes me. I'm leaving this journal in a place I never have—it feels thrilling, unsafe, compared to the last hiding places. But it needs to be somewhere she can find it, even if I don't get the chance to show her myself.

Maria, I hope you're reading this. If I have a chance, I'll direct you to it. If not, I only hope you find it before the soldiers from the capital arrive. They'll have heard about my death, perhaps a few days or weeks after I'm gone, but they'll hear nonetheless. They keep idle tabs on me at the least, wait for me to slip up or die so Helena can swoop in and ensure her victory is complete.

They're going to burn the house when they learn for certain where it is. An accident, as always. A gas leak or a random lightning strike that leads to tragedy. Be ready. Be gone before they're there. Take the journals with you, and anything else you need, but never stop moving. They won't stop until they think you're dead.

The rest of the journals aren't here; they're in the place your parents died. They're in a box of files in the main office. You're smart enough to figure out which ones. I'm sorry you have to go back there, but it had to be this way. It's the one place they think I'll avoid at all costs. Find the journals. Learn the rest of what I've written over the centuries I've been here, and what I wrote during the journey here. I couldn't do anything about it in my lifetime, but maybe you can.

I'm sorry. I wish there were better words for it. You didn't ask to be born into this. None of you did, those of you living now. It's our sin, the sin of the crew that found this place, but you pay the price and bear the burden of fixing it. I wish I had been strong enough to finish it before it had started.

You're strong enough to survive this, though. Learn the whole truth. Do with it what you will. I believe in you, and I trust you. Raising you was the greatest act of my life, and one of the few I don't regret. Be stronger than I was. Put an end to the madness.

I always loved you, all the way to the end. I understand if you don't feel the same anymore, now that you know at least some of my many mistakes, know some of the things I've kept from you all these years. But believe me now: this is the only choice you have remaining. If you decide to let my mistakes lie, let things stay the way they are, fine. Toss the journals the second you know the things you need to stay alive, or give them to someone you trust, someone who'll do something with them.

Just live, Maria. Do this for me, please.

Maria's gaze darted upwards to the window in her grandfather's room. The moon was nearly gone now, waning to the point of near-nonexistence, a soft green light that barely lit anything at all in the landscape outside. Her mind was racing from her trip to town the day before.

Capital soldiers—the villagers said something about strangers in town yesterday—could it be—

There was no time to think. She had to make a choice, here and now.

Did she believe what her grandfather had told her now?

Had her life been a lie up until this point?

She clutched the journal to her chest. It could explain everything. Maybe he hadn't been insane at the end. Maybe this was the last piece of the puzzle she had been working on all her

life, why they lived nearly three miles outside of town, why her grandfather had cautioned her to avoid interacting with the town, why her parents had—

Only one way to find out.

If the journal meant what she thought, she would have to go to the mine. The place her parents had died, crushed under tons of stone in a freak accident; perhaps not an accident, if she believed the journal. She had never been there, not since her parents died, but she remembered where it was well enough. If she packed her bag quickly, she could be there and back by sunrise, or gone far enough that no one would find her by the same time if the journals told her what it seemed like they might.

There was no choice now, she realized. Her curiosity was blazing again, that need to know everything that she had held as a child. It wouldn't quiet again until she found the answers, found the explanation to the question burning a hole in her mind.

She would find the journals. With them, she would find the truth. She had to.

Chapter 2

The first thing the stranger ever said to Jacob was “sorry.”

“Sorry,” he said, gun leveled at Jacob’s chest. The blue lights along the side of the barrel ticked up and down, and even Jacob—who had never held a gun in his life—knew what that meant.

Safety off.

Jacob raised his hands slowly. “Look,” he said, keeping his voice low and as non-threatening as he could manage. “I don’t have much, but you can take it if money’s what you’re here for. Ain’t no money worth me not getting home.” The stranger was wearing a heavy coat and a large backpack, and he looked like he’d been traveling his whole life. He was covered from head to toe in mud and dust, and not just the kind that you’d find near the farm Jacob lived on. The caked-on mud was every variety of brown and red you could think of, like the man had walked the entire earth and had coated his jacket to prove it. He looked like the kind of person who could handle a gun. The kind of person a farmboy at the edge of the civilized world really didn’t want to tangle with.

The stranger sighed, using his free hand to rub his chin, covered in a heavy, uneven black stubble, like he had just stopped shaving partway through one day and never bothered to even out the inconsistent growth on his face. His eyes were shadowed by a wide-brimmed hat, but he tilted his head back to get a better look at Jacob. Unkempt black hair spilled out behind the hat, hair that looked like it hadn’t been washed in weeks, and his skin was pale, as pale as Jacob’s own, that would never hold a tan no matter how many hours he stayed in the sun.

“No, I ain’t robbing you,” the stranger said, and Jacob sighed in relief. “But I can’t let you go back to town, either. You’ll tell ‘em which way I was going.”

Jacob’s heart dropped again. He knew what that meant. His eyes darted back to the hill to his right. The farmhouse was over there. Way too far to make it if he ran. Probably too far for anyone to hear him if he cried out.

“Don’t even think about it. You yell, and the first few people who come over that hill die, right after you do. Neither of us wants that.” Jacob’s throat went dry, painfully so, at that thought. *Ma*. She was the only one in the house, the only one who would come running for him. The only one he had.

“You can’t-” he said, but the stranger cut him off.

“I don’t have a choice, son. Sorry. Turn around.”

Son? This man couldn’t be more than two or three years his senior, if that. Jacob turned around, but his mind kept circling back. What a terrible last thought, to be obsessed with your killer’s choice of words. He shut his eyes and clenched his teeth. It would be painless, at least, he hoped. More painless than getting crushed by one of the farm animals, at least. The cows alone were heavy enough that getting underneath any of their six limbs spelled a crushed bone at the least, if not worse. They were the one thing on the farm that needed a human hand, since the last few times someone in town had tried to automate their care it had gone poorly, to say the least.

Jacob wondered why his mind was still moving, why he wasn’t dead yet, when the stranger spoke again.

“Come on, get moving,” the man said, his voice low and urgent. He prodded Jacob’s back with the barrel of the gun. “You’ve made me waste enough time here already.” Jacob took a hesitant step forward.

“You’re... not going to kill me?” He tried to keep the quaver out of his voice, but it snuck in all the same. He’d always been a terrible liar.

“Course not. This thing ain’t exactly quiet, kid. Well. S’pose you wouldn’t know that, would you? Out here in the backwaters and all. Let’s just say, instant vaporization ain’t exactly quiet, and they’d hear you die all the way back there in town, and then I’d be in trouble. You’re coming with me. Ain’t no choice about it, and much as I don’t care to have a farmboy getting in my way, I do need someone to watch my back on the road.” The man chuckled. “Fact is, I’ve been running awful low on friends, but sometimes the world provides. Destiny brought us together, son, and there ain’t no use in either of us trying to fight it.”

Destiny? Jacob didn’t like any of the hundred places his mind went while trying to figure that one out. He gulped and lurched forward, one step at a time, out towards the wilderness. He had no choice, it seemed. *Better than being dead, I suppose.*

But was it? Here he was, walking away from everything he had ever known to who-knows-where with a man that could kill him at any time. For all he knew, the man was just making him walk farther away from the town so they wouldn’t hear the shot—he had clearly thought about how far away they would have to be for that. How long would it take for Jacob’s mother to notice he hadn’t returned? Hours, probably. Maybe more if she had been drinking. Long enough that he and the stranger would be far out of town, and no one with any idea of the direction they had gone, or even that Jacob had been forced away and hadn’t left of his own will.

Everyone in town knew he had reason enough: a drunk for a mother who never helped with anything and made his life harder more often than not, an absent father. Jacob lived as essentially the sole caretaker of the house and the animals, and that wasn't a mystery to the townsfolk. He had more than enough reason to want to leave, enough that the town would likely believe that version of events over anything his mother could claim.

They were walking across one of the fields now, and he could watch the small, silver machines going about their work, whirring and chirping excitedly. If they understood language, he could cry out for them to help him, to tell his mother what was going on, to run to town.

But the machines that ran the fields only understood the orders of their station back in the barn, the commands that were issued to divide work between them and make sure they didn't get in each other's way. There was no way for human interference to alter them unless it was done through the station, and even that was difficult enough. Only two or three people in town understood how to speak to the station, what commands to press into its keypad to make it plant corn or beans or keep a field empty for a season.

They were out of the field before he finished his thought, and confronted with a patch of woods he had seen in the distance many times but never quite mustered the courage to explore. This time, he supposed, he had no choice. The trees were more ominous up close, covered in curved green thorns from their roots all the way up to the place, right at their top, where they fanned out into branches covered in leaves of dozens of colors, no leaf quite like the one next to it. From far away, he had always assumed the leaves were about the size of the leaves on a cornstalk, but as he and the stranger stepped underneath the canopy, his foot crunched onto a dead leaf bigger than his chest. He turned up, and his head swam with the idea of just how high up the leaves must be to look so small from down here.

Everything in the forest seemed so much larger than he had ever imagined it, dwarfing him with its size. The fungus that grew here was massive, nothing like the tiny pieces that spread overnight in the fields between seasons, devouring everything that the machines left behind after the harvest. The machines burnt it out every few weeks in the offseason, but it always came back, spreading like a carpet over the empty fields. His mother had warned him never to walk out there while the fungus was there, that it might be toxic.

“Good enough for the cows, but bad for us,” she would snort. “Won’t eat their lungs from inside out. Let the machines get what we need for feed, and burn the rest.”

He had still snuck out enough times, his fear never quite enough to dissuade his curiosity, to know what it looked like. The fungus here in the forest looked like a version of what covered the fields that had never been forced back with fire, had been allowed to grow until it was bigger than Jacob. While the stuff in the fields had been more like an orange carpet, these were giant orange masses, some of which were nearly the size of the shed at home. They kept getting bigger as the duo walked deeper into the forest, too. Jacob was afraid how large they’d get in the center; would they be the size of his house? The barn? Larger?

Jacob nearly managed to lose himself in thought, but it wasn’t enough. Each step he took forward, he waited for the stranger to tell him to stop, for the fatal shot to ring out, for everything to fade to black. He kept wondering if he could duck away, be faster than the man’s aim, get behind a tree or a chunk of fungus and take off running. His opportunity never came, though. The stranger was always just a few feet behind him, too close to make it to any sort of cover or hiding place, and the gun was always trained at his back, humming the sound that Jacob knew meant it was ready to fire.

When the stranger told him to stop, he was sure that meant it was over. He closed his eyes and braced for death.

It didn't come, of course.

"Sit," the stranger said, and so Jacob sat, collapsing onto the ground, all of the weariness of the journey hitting him at once. They had been walking for hours; it had been mid-morning when they set out, and now it was late afternoon. He could see the sun beginning to set on the horizon, its fading light making strange shadows already. The moon hung close to the horizon too, visible even in the daylight at this point in its orbit and dwarfing the sun with its nearness. He remembered learning about the moon in school, how its orbit was just close enough that they could start to make out its features with the naked eye but never close enough to be fully pulled into the Earth's gravity. He had always wondered if one day it would slip up, come just a few feet closer and be dragged down to the surface, destroying the Earth and everyone on it. A silly fear, a child's fear, and now it seemed so foolish in comparison to the very real fear of death that was gripping him at this moment.

The stranger was moving behind him, muttering under his breath. It sounded like he was digging in his bag, based on the sound of rustling cloth. Jacob turned to face him, curious what was happening. He figured it was better this way anyway; he had decided during the journey that dying with his back turned would be the worst way to go. At least this way he got to look his killer in the eyes.

For his part, the would-be killer seemed occupied elsewhere, cussing and muttering to himself as he dug through his backpack. The gun was still pointed at Jacob, which was part of the problem. Searching through the stuffed bag one-handed seemed to be a laborious affair, from

what Jacob could see. Finally, the stranger pulled something out with a triumphant “a-ha!” It was a coiled rope, and Jacob concluded the rest before the stranger even told him to stay still. Within a few minutes of tying and re-tying knots, Jacob’s arms were behind his back, wrists knotted together, and his ankles were in roughly a similar situation. It wasn’t as uncomfortable as he thought it would be. Unpleasant, for sure. Terrifying, certainly. But the rope was surprisingly smooth, and it didn’t dig into his wrists nearly as much as the rope leads they used on cattle would dig into his palms while he was using them.

“Sorry, kid,” the stranger said, sitting cross-legged facing Jacob. “I know it ain’t the most comfortable. But I can’t have you running off while I’m hunting or sleeping, and this is the best way to solve that. Soon enough we’ll be able to trust each other, whether or not either of us like it, and then we can put this nasty business behind us.”

Jacob almost would have laughed, if he hadn’t been about to cry. “Trust? That’s a big ask for me to trust someone who’s been pointing a gun at me all day.”

The stranger laughed, his demeanor surprisingly easygoing. “Yeah, well, about that. I figure we made it about twenty miles outta town today. Another twenty tomorrow, and we’ll be out of the range that anyone’ll be lookin’ for you in.” *Twenty miles?* It seemed like a ridiculous number. *No way I’m that far from home, right? We were walking for hours, but there’s no way.* The stranger kept talking, interrupting Jacob’s thoughts. He was stroking his chin, like he was doing calculations in his head.

“We’ve got a couple hundred miles between us and where we’re going, and yours was just about the last town between us and there. Let me be honest with you, kid. I doubt you know a thing about living in the wilderness, and I can’t do everything on my own out here to take care

of two of us. Once we hit a certain point, neither of us makes it home without trusting the other.” The stranger smiled, oddly bright for someone who had just been talking about potential death. “But don’t take my word for it. Once we hit the edge of the wastes, you’ll see. Anyway,” the stranger said, clapping his thighs and standing up from where he was seated. “I’m gonna go scare us up something to eat, or at least try to. Don’t go anywhere, now.” He winked, and then he was gone, striding out into the scraggly brush that surrounded them.

Jacob cursed his luck. Why had this happened to him, of all people? Hadn’t his lot in life been bad enough, with a father who had run out on him when he was barely born? Hadn’t he suffered for long enough, twenty-two years taking care of a mother who hurt more than she helped and all the animals on the damn farm? Wasn’t all of that enough repentance for whatever sin he must have committed in a past life to deserve this kind of treatment? What more could possibly happen to one stupid kid living on a farm in the middle of nowhere?

By the time the stranger returned, the sun had almost fully fallen beneath the horizon, and the moon was starting to shine brighter in its absence, the pits and craters that covered its greenish surface clearly visible. The stranger lifted a handful of berries in the dim light, and Jacob saw a flash of a smile.

“Dinner,” the stranger said. “Ain’t much, but it’ll do.”

The stranger untied Jacob’s arms and pressed a handful of the berries into his palm. They ate in silence. The berries were tart but not entirely unpleasant, though Jacob ate them one at a time after he tried to eat three at once and they stung a cut he hadn’t noticed on the inside of his lip. The stranger finished eating before Jacob did, leaned back, and pulled the brim of his hat

down over his eyes. He pulled his gun out of its holster and laid it across his lap, his hand idly resting on its side.

“Get some sleep, kid,” he mumbled. “Long day tomorrow.”

Jacob wanted to try to break free, to use his free hand and try and untie the rest of the ropes, but he was exhausted from the walk. For a moment, adrenaline won out and he started to try and quietly untie his feet, but then the exhaustion hit him like a shovel to the back of his head. He found his eyelids drooping, even through the adrenaline he still felt racing through his system, the anxiety and confusion at the day’s events. Jacob couldn’t stop it; he fell asleep.

When the stranger woke him up, it was already mid-morning. Jacob yawned and looked around: he was untied already, and the stranger was facing away from him, packing up.

“Look, kid,” the stranger said without turning around. “It’s a hell of a distraction to be watching you all the time. I figure, you didn’t try to break free last night, maybe you’re smarter than I thought. And anyway,” the man turned and smiled, “we haven’t been properly introduced. Once you know who I am, you might think twice anyway. You wouldn’t be the first stupid kid who got himself killed crossing my path, and you probably won’t be the last.”

Jacob gulped, but he couldn’t stop the question from spilling out of his lips. “Who are you?”

The stranger smiled back and lifted his left arm. He pulled down his sleeve, and Jacob saw it: six brands standing out against the man’s skin in a vertical line down his forearm. Even a boy in a town at the edge of the frontier knew what those meant: six life sentences in the Capital’s prisons. Whether they had been collected all at once or one at a time, who knew, but this man had been condemned six times over and his skin told the tale. The Capital put those

marks there to make sure no one respectable would do business or shield the person they belonged to, but the brands had become something of a rallying cry for the scattered people who opposed the Capital, the ones the people in town talked about in hushed tones when they thought the children weren't listening.

There was only one person Jacob had heard of that the stranger could be, and Jacob knew now why he couldn't have risked word getting out which direction he had been going. The soldiers of the Capital would have killed him on the spot, now. It wasn't worth it to drag him back to a Capital prison, since the risk of him escaping again was too great. He had done it at least six times before, after all.

"You're Silas Keyes." The rebel against the Capital, the man who had taken thousands of lives in terrorist attacks across the frontier. The one who led a whole group of insurgents in a guerilla war against the last seat of order left in the world. The wandering traders and frontiersmen who traveled the scope of the continent and stopped in town sometimes had spoken of him as a god or a monster, a figure of legend, but here he was standing before Jacob in the flesh. Silas smiled at him, pulled his hat off, and gave a small, mocking half-bow.

"The very same, at your service." Jacob could see now that his face was covered in scars, the largest across his forehead, where a ragged chunk of scar tissue tracked from just above his left eyebrow all the way to his scalp.

"And who might I be honored to travel with? Got a name other than 'farmboy?'"

"Jacob," Jacob said idly, his mind still processing the face and identity of the man before him. "My name's Jacob."

“And what an honor it is to meet officially at last, Jacob,” Silas said, clutching his hat to his chest. “We’re going to be the best of friends, I’m certain.” He smiled, and Jacob couldn’t tell whether Silas was mocking him or not.

“But why are you all the way out here?” Jacob asked, still reeling. “Aren’t there... buildings to blow up in the Capital, and such? That’s all I’ve ever heard you do.”

Silas’ brow furrowed. “Is that what they tell you out here?” He snorted. “Guess I shouldn’t be surprised that the legend doesn’t carry quite right all the way out here. Look, kid, I’m not gonna give you all the details, but let’s say I did a hell of a lot more than that to earn these brands. And my business out here is my own, for now. Destiny brought us together, but that doesn’t mean I trust you yet, kid.” Silas replaced his hat and started walking, practically skipping as he went. Jacob hesitated for a moment, then looked around him. There wasn’t a chance he could even figure out which way was home at this point if he wanted to make a dash for it. Besides, who was to say that Silas wouldn’t be able to shoot him before he got out of sight, anyway? And there was something else... something intriguing about this man, this outlaw that seemed to know so much. Jacob had always wondered what the world outside town was like, and now he had the best possible chance he could get at that. If it meant leaving his old life behind... there wasn’t much of a life to leave behind anyway, now was there?

Jacob nearly tripped catching up to Silas, a question already on his lips.

“You keep saying that, that destiny brought us together. Why?”

They were walking side by side now, and Silas turned to him, raising an eyebrow in an unspoken question which he immediately undercut by asking it.

“Kid. You seriously don’t know? Come on. Look at us. You can’t figure out why it’s destiny that we end up working together? Don’t you know anything about yourself?”

Jacob brushed a strand of his hair out of his eyes and looked Silas up and down. The wide-brimmed hat, the lazy stubble, the greasy black hair, eyes so bright brown they were almost orange burning from underneath the hat...

I guess...

“Our... eyes?” Jacob had always hated his eyes, just barely brown, more yellow-orange than anything else. His mother had told him they were just like his father’s, which made him hate them more. He wanted nothing to do with that man, not after he had abandoned them both for Jacob’s entire life. But the eyes were the only thing he could remotely use to connect himself to Silas; the outlaw’s eyes were, in fact, remarkably similar to Jacob’s own.

Silas stared at him for another long moment, then threw his head back in laughter. When he looked back at Jacob, his eyes were glittering with mirth. Jacob was hyper-aware of them now, watching them for the flashes of orange he had seen in his own eyes in the mirror a thousand times in his life.

Silas chuckled, but quieted down when he looked at Jacob’s face. “You really don’t know, do you, kid?” He was almost talking to himself now, facing forward and staring up at the sky as he spoke. “How’d your parents manage that trick?”

“Parent,” Jacob offered, not sure entirely why he was telling this man so much. “Just my mother.”

Silas' face cleared up. "That explains half, at least. Didn't know the one who gave it to you, I suppose. But... that's still a hell of a trick. Haven't you ever seen yourself bleed?"

Jacob recoiled. For as long as he had known, he had been afraid of blood. It was the kind of fear that wasn't a persistent presence in his head; it wasn't like he was always looking out for blood, but as soon as it was there he crumpled in pure, reactive terror, went spinning into unconsciousness. His mother told him that it came from a bad experience when he was younger, one that she was confusingly vague about. She had always told him it was for his own good that he didn't know, that he didn't remember it and it was better that way. Whenever he was injured on the farm, he couldn't stand to look at it for more than was required to bind it, and he certainly couldn't bear to see someone else's blood. It made him sick just to think of it.

Silas was examining Jacob's face closely, and the older man rubbed his chin in incredulity. "Shit, kid, you really haven't." The older man rubbed the back of his head. "I... look. I don't even know how to start explaining... damn, why didn't your mom tell you? The hell kind of trick was she trying... Here. Maybe this'll explain. What color is blood, kid?"

"Red?"

"Right. You learned that in school, I'm sure. If you went, I guess. But what color is *your* blood? When you bleed, I mean?" Silas paused for a second, his own train of thought seemingly stopping him dead in his tracks. "You... have bled before, right?"

Jacob stopped alongside the outlaw. "Y-yeah. I don't look for too long, though." He cringed at the thought. "Makes me sick, pass out if I look too long."

Silas started walking again, rubbing his head "That's... yeah. That explains a lot. Man, how'd you make it on a farm?"

Jacob felt his face flush in indignance as he started walking alongside Silas again. “Well enough, thank you very much.” *I sound just like my mother, telling them in the village that we don’t need any help.*

Silas looked almost embarrassed. “Yeah, yeah, sorry. Well, look, kid, just... damn. This would be easier to explain if we were across the border, where you could see. But listen. There’s a reason they call me a monster, in the Capital. They’d call you one, too. The eye color’s part of it, you’re right on that, but it’s more than that. We aren’t... like them. You get me? I mean, partially, but not enough that they’d ever treat us the same. You get that, right?”

Jacob nodded. “I think I get it.”

He didn’t get it, not a bit, but he was getting uncomfortable with this conversation very quickly. *He’s crazy. Got to be. They call him a monster because of everything he’s done, not his eye color or... whatever he was talking about with the blood. Surely.*

They walked in silence for the rest of the day, save a few words warning each other about uneven ground or trading a skin full of water that Silas was carrying with him back and forth. They crossed out of the woods at long last and into a prairie, a place that looked like no one had been here for years. The bladegrass was up to their thighs, and Jacob was glad for his thick pants. Jacob ran his hand through the bladegrass as they went, almost unconsciously, careful to always move his hand upward so the spines wouldn’t tear it to shreds, just like his mother had taught him what felt like a lifetime ago. Bladegrass that grew tall was beautiful and soft, if you let it pass over your hands right, but if you did it wrong you risked a splinter or worse from the one-way spines along its sides. Silas seemed to know this well enough, too, and they walked

carefully across the prairie, making their way for the next patch of woods they could see in the distance.

As they crossed the prairie, running didn't even cross Jacob's mind anymore. What would be the point now? He was farther from home than he had ever been, and knowing his companion's reputation he knew for certain that Silas wouldn't hesitate to kill him. Besides, there was something fascinating about it all, something that had pushed him to make the same decision this morning, to keep pressing onward. He found that he genuinely wanted to understand Silas, wanted to know what drove this man who had killed so many doggedly forward, what had led him to escape his own imprisonment and likely execution so many times. Maybe it was a morbid curiosity, but Silas was something fiercely new, completely different than anyone Jacob had ever met, and he desperately wanted to know more.

The days after that passed in a blur. The new forest faded into a vast plain, this one full of a different type of grass that didn't require them to worry about crossing it, one that lasted for days as they kept walking. Silas started trusting Jacob enough to leave him free to roam as he pleased. There was no point now, he said. They were far enough from home that neither one would survive out here alone; they had to trust each other. And to Jacob's surprise, he started to do just that: there was something about the older man that was comforting, an easy expertise about the terrain they were crossing and the necessary techniques to find food and water in the wilderness. He witnessed Silas' ability with the gun he carried several times as they encountered edible animals along their journey, each one of which was swiftly dispatched with a low-setting blast and carried by the outlaw until they set up camp, where Silas would clean it and cook it over a fire he always seemed to conjure with ultimate ease. The outlaw did everything with that same ease: he was clearly experienced at surviving in the wild, and he taught Jacob things as he

went, small tips and tricks on how to make sure water was safe, how to properly prepare an animal with venom glands to make sure you don't poison yourself, and so on.

At night, whenever there was a fire to sit around, Silas would tell Jacob a story. He always introduced them the same way.

“My great-grandfather told me this one, a long time ago. He said it was passed down from our people.”

He always said it like that. Our people.

Jacob had gathered that “our people,” for Silas, meant the people who lived north of the borders of the Capital's domain. The realization that Silas had come from the north put his actions against the Capital in a very new light. The war between the Capital and the people of the north was a very well-known topic in Jacob's hometown. They were the settlement farthest north and on a direct path between the Capital and the northern border, which meant that if war ever truly erupted they would be directly on the front lines.

Jacob had grown up hearing stories about the people of the north all his life. They were a brutal people, nomads who had gathered together after the world had torn itself apart. The Capital had offered them peace once, a way to come into the fold and benefit from the same technology that powered the rest of the world, and they had declined, preferred to keep their lifestyle the same. But once it became clear that the world of technology that the Capital was ushering in was succeeding, negotiations had become hostile, and the people of the North had started attacking the northern settlements that were using the Capital's technology. Ultimately, the Magistrate, the leader of the Capital, had pushed them back with military force and built a massive wall at the farthest northern point she felt she could defend effectively, three hundred

miles or so above the Capital itself, and posted a permanent military installation there in case the northerners ever tried to invade again.

The people in Jacob's hometown had lived in perpetual fear of that invasion, since their settlement was closest to that wall. Many of Jacob's friends from school had joined the Capital's army to go to the wall, keep their parents and siblings safe from a possible invasion.

Jacob had never encountered someone from the north in the flesh, though. It surprised him how... normal, charming even, Silas was. He wasn't anything like the stories of a brutal, war-driven society that Jacob had heard all his life, the people whom he had been told would kill him without a second thought, who were hellbent on destroying the Capital's technology and everyone who used it, who would wage full-scale war if they ever stopped fighting each other long enough to do so.

The stories Silas told at their fires weren't anything like that warlike image, either. They were always myths, stories of the creation of humanity, of why the moon and sun sit in the places they do, of tricksters and honest people who almost always won in the end. The picture they painted was that of a society that was built on morals, on the idea that honesty and good faith always kept you on the right path.

Jacob didn't know how to handle that information: had everyone in his hometown been wrong? Or was Silas tricking him, leaving things out, not showing him the full picture? What was it about these northerners that made them despise the Capital so much? Why would they want to destroy people who seemed, at their core, to be so similar in their morals and beliefs, with the exception of their preference in technology?

Jacob and Silas had been traveling together for about three weeks when Silas told him that they were nearing the border. Jacob had long since figured out that they were headed towards the border, but he was still dreading it. The journey had become, as much as Jacob was loathe to admit it, enjoyable. He was enjoying his time with Silas, and didn't want it to end, especially not at the border. He shuddered at the thought of encountering one of his school friends there, getting caught attempting to cross by someone who knew him back in the day. Silas was still talking when Jacob finished his thought.

"I think it's time I come clean with you, Jacob," the outlaw said, staring into the small fire he had constructed a few minutes earlier. "I think you and I trust each other well enough now for you to know the truth."

Jacob nodded, though his heart was jumping in his chest. *The truth?*

Silas sighed. "I guess I want to start by saying I'm sorry. For everything. For pulling you along with me."

Uh-oh.

Silas rubbed his forehead, eyes firmly fixed on the fire in front of him. "I couldn't avoid it. I saw your eyes, your skin, saw that I couldn't get around you without you seeing me, and I knew it needed to be this way. Destiny, like I said. Always did believe it had a plan for me, for all of us, and I saw it clear as day." The older man's eyes were fixed firmly on the fire, the flames dancing and adding new oranges to his eyes that Jacob could see from his seat on the other side of the fire.

"All the same, I'm sorry," Silas continued. "If it weren't for me, I think you might have been able to live out your days without ever knowing, and maybe that's better." He sighed and

closed his eyes, hesitating more about spitting out whatever it was he was trying to say than Jacob had ever seen him hesitate before.

Without knowing what?

Silas shifted, poking the fire with his stick. The sparks flew straight back at him, but he didn't flinch, just brushed a few strays off his coat. "I didn't think there was anyone like us left south of the border, you see. The Capital's pretty good about killing us off before we get old enough to cause problems, but something about you... maybe you blend in better than I do, or maybe your parents were better at hiding you, or something else. I don't know. But we're close enough now that I can't let you keep going any farther without knowing. Jacob... I don't know how to say this. You're not what you think you are. You're not like the rest of them."

Jacob couldn't hold his tongue anymore. "You said that before, damn it. What the hell do you mean?"

"Sorry." Silas threw up his hands, his expression pained, his eyes fixed anywhere but Jacob's face. There was no laughter from the outlaw, not this time: his mouth was a grim line. "Look, Jacob, me and you, we're not... ah, to hell with it. I'm just gonna say it. We're not human, Jacob."

"Not... what?" Silas still wouldn't look Jacob in the eyes, though Jacob felt that he could burn holes in the older man's hat if he glared just a little harder.

"Not entirely, anyway. The ones up north can explain it better, maybe. If anyone's left. But you and me, we're both... we've got blood in us that ain't human. You know it. If you just remember, you know it. Look."

There was a knife in Silas' hand, the same one he used to skin the animals he caught.

"No—!" But before Jacob could lunge to stop him, Silas had slashed it across his own arm, opening a shallow cut on the back of his forearm.

Jacob nearly threw up. His vision started spinning, just like it always did when he saw blood, and he closed his eyes, buried his face in his arm. Through the nausea he heard Silas' voice getting closer, felt the thump as Silas sat down next to him.

"Calm down, kid. Calm down. Focus. Stay with me, stay awake, come on now. Look at it. It's not what you think it is, Jacob. Look at it." The older man's voice was gentle, comforting. Jacob felt Silas' hand grab the arm Jacob still had firmly planted on his face and pull it away from his eyes. "Open your eyes, kid. Come on now. Open them."

The dark-haired man's voice was so comforting that Jacob couldn't help it. Jacob's eyes squeezed open, and he stared at Silas' arm, held level directly in front of Jacob's eyes. Blood oozed out of the small cut, but it wasn't red: it was a pale, orange-white liquid running in a small stream down the outlaw's forearm and coagulating around the wound. Jacob felt the bile rising again, but he forced it down, breathed deep, managed half a question.

"What—"

"I told you," Silas said, his voice low, almost gentle. "I asked you what color blood was, and you said red, and you're right... when it comes to full human blood. But I'm not full human, Jacob. I'm half human, and so are you. You've known it your entire life, you just didn't want to realize it. That's why you're scared of blood, Jacob. I don't know whether you came to it on your own or if your mother did it to you, and at this point it doesn't matter. Either way, your fear isn't

of blood. You're scared of knowing the truth, scared of realizing who you are. You don't have to take my word for it, though. See for yourself."

Silas held the knife towards Jacob, his fingers gripping the sides of the blade lightly so that Jacob could grab it by the handle. Jacob recoiled, a stronger reaction than he had ever had to any venomous creature.

"I-I'm not going to do that," Jacob sputtered. Silas shrugged. Now he was staring Jacob straight in the eyes, his gaze unwavering, his expression completely serious.

"I can do it for you, if you'd like. But we're not going any farther until you accept it, Jacob. I knew from the moment I laid eyes on you what you are. The ones north of the border, the Family, they're going to know it too, the same way I do. We recognize our own. It'll be a hell of a lot harder for you up there if you don't accept it yourself."

Our own? Northerners are like Silas? They aren't... human? The stories had never specified, he supposed, but how was it possible? How could they not be... human? They were just a different society, one that opposed the Capital, weren't they?

Weren't they?

"I... I can't... this is too much." Jacob's head was spinning now, with far more than the nausea of seeing blood. He was tearing through his memories, desperately looking for something, some proof to give Silas that showed the outlaw was wrong, that Jacob was human, that this was all a giant misunderstanding.

Silas nodded, finally smiling, though it had no hint of kindness in it, just cruel reality. "Sure is, kid. I already told you I'm sorry it had to be this way. Ain't no other choice. You're

making this journey the whole way with me. I can't let you turn back now. It's a death sentence, and we both know it, and neither one of us wants you dead. Besides," the outlaw smiled, "you might as well give a dying man his last wish, eh?"

It took a moment for the words to sink in, Jacob's mind was spinning so far beyond the current moment. "D... Dying?" he managed to choke out.

Silas sighed, a sound of pure resignation. "Of course that's what you pick to ask about. Yeah, kid. Dying. Poison. Slow-acting, as things go. I know I act as sprightly as ever, but the bastards from the Capital got me in the end, and I know it, though they might not yet. Took 'em seven tries, but they got me. I figure I've got a few weeks left, maybe a month, and that's generous. Enough time to make it home, I reckon. See my family one more time, before I go. Whoever's left, that is. So you see why spending extra days here wouldn't be so good for me. Take it."

Silas was still holding the knife out, and Jacob stared at it.

"I'm human," he started, and Silas wagged the knife impatiently.

"Prove it," the outlaw said. "You take this knife, slice your arm, and bleed red, and you'll know. I'll drop the subject, and you can walk past the border knowing your life down here's the real one, that you can go to any Capital outpost and claim to have been kidnapped by the big bad Northerner and they'll get you home no questions asked."

Silas stopped, and his lips curled in something like disgust. "But you know already it's not going to be red. If you didn't know already, you wouldn't be acting like this knife's a death sentence. Your mind's racing right now, putting all the connections into place. It all makes sense to you now, the questions you've had all your life. Why you're different. Why people treated you

the way they did. Why you couldn't stand the sight of your own blood. Why your mother acted the way she did. Why you never knew your father."

Silas' voice dropped to a murmur, but every word fell like a boot into Jacob's ribs, taking his breath away. "Take the knife, Jacob. We both know what's going to happen when you do, but you need to see it for yourself to accept it."

Jacob took the knife. It felt like it weighed a hundred times what it should, and he nearly dropped it as soon as Silas let it go.

It hurt less than he thought it would, the cut across his arm; the knife was sharp, and mostly the cut just felt cold for a moment. When he looked down and saw the parted skin on his forearm, Jacob nearly passed out, but the brief glance was enough to confirm it.

Silas had been right, of course. He was right about everything. Jacob had already found the memory, the one his mother had sworn to him was a dream, where he tripped and fell as a child and his mother had recoiled at the sight of his blood splattered on the gravel road.

The blood that trickled down Jacob's arm was pale, milky white with a hint of orange, nowhere near red. The same color as the blood that was forming a scab on Silas' arm.

The tears welled in Jacob's eyes, and he couldn't tell whether they were tears of joy, grief, pain, or fear. Maybe a bit of everything.

"Good," Silas said, standing up and brushing the dirt and ash off his knees. "Now you know, and we can stop whining about it. Let's go." The outlaw started to pick up his bag.

Jacob's head snapped up in shock, blinking quickly to clear his vision. "Go?"

“Of course. Border’s that way, about five miles.” Silas’ thumb stabbed the air, pointing behind himself. “Best to get there under darkness, anyway. Gotta make it past a bit of resistance.” He patted his gun holster. “Ol’ Six-Brands ain’t done killing Capital scum, not quite yet.”

It took a second for that to sink in, even though Jacob had already known where they were going. *Capital?*

“Wait—” Jacob said, but Silas didn’t respond. He just smiled, and then he kicked dirt over the fire, and they were on the move again. Jacob could barely keep pace with the outlaw, trying to keep sight of his outline in the darkness. The moon was out of phase, its green light barely enough to see anything by, which made traversal all the harder.

When they reached the top of a hill and sighted the border, Jacob was surprised to see that it was just a fence, not a fortified wall with gates or anything of the sort. With all the stories he had heard about the conflict between the Capital and the northerners, he had expected something more intense than a fence surrounded by a handful of guards. The stories had made the wall sound like a mighty fortress, a bastion of safety that held the barbaric northerners at bay, but this looked barely stronger than the fence that Jacob had jumped a thousand times to get into the livestock pens.

Just like Silas had said, though, they were in the right place. The blue-and-gold uniforms of the soldiers patrolling idly through the darkness were unmistakable. Capital enforcers, and any one of them could have gone to school with Jacob. He couldn’t tell through the uniform, though. They all wore masks, blank blue slabs traced with gold embroidery around the edges, the only other visible feature two deep holes where the enforcer’s eyes peered through. Jacob shuddered.

He had seen enforcers a bare handful of times when they had crossed through town, but his mother had always warned him to stay far away.

Now I know why, he thought bitterly. *They might have known.*

That was a new emotion... resentment for someone who, by Silas' account, was probably protecting him. Lying to him, but protecting him.

Silas had a look of fierce focus on his face, far removed from the confusing emotions playing out in Jacob's mind. The outlaw held a finger to his lips in the darkness and motioned for Jacob to stay put. Silas crept forward in the darkness, crawling on his stomach and staying beneath the tall grass that surrounded them. It wasn't of the bladegrass variety, a small comfort for Jacob at this point. The older man disappeared out of sight, and Jacob was alone with his thoughts, holding his breath, praying that one of his old schoolmates wasn't finding themselves in Silas' sights.

After what felt like an eternity, Jacob heard three muffled booms, much louder than the low-power shots that Silas used on game, and then silence. His mind started racing with all the things that might have gone wrong. What if one of those shots had come from an enforcer, and Silas wasn't coming back? What would Jacob be able to do then? He would die out here, alone in the wilderness, unable to make it across the border on his own, unable to make it home on his own. The enforcers would probably kill him if he went for help, if Silas was to be believed—

After a few seconds that felt like an eternity each, Jacob heard a soft shout from down the hill.

“Come on, kid! Let's get going before anyone comes to investigate!”

Jacob almost threw up on the way down the hill; he couldn't stand to look at the bodies as he walked past them, couldn't bear the thought of pulling up one of their masks and seeing someone he recognized. He reached Silas at the metal fence, where the outlaw was cutting through with a small tool he had pulled from his bag.

"Was a lot harder last time," Silas laughed. "Then again, I was fifteen last time."

With a clatter, the chunk of fence fell to the ground, and Silas ducked through.

"Come on, kid," he said, holding out a hand to pull Jacob through the hole in the fence. "No going back now. Time to find out who you really are. Think I can fit the general gist of it in the time I've got left, just about. The family'll fill you in on the rest, the parts I barely remember about how it all came to be this way. They'll take care of you after I'm gone, too, if you let them."

Jacob swallowed his fear and looked again at his arm. He could barely see it in the darkness, but he knew that the white-orange blood had congealed into a scab by now.

He looked behind him, where he knew his old home was. His mother, who had tried to protect him. Who had lied to him. Who had kept him isolated, never told him what he really was, never explained why he felt the things he did. The Capital was down there, too. The ones who would kill him for no reason other than the color of his blood, the nature of his heritage.

No turning back.

Jacob took Silas' hand, and the man who had been branded for death six times pulled him into the northern part of the world, to the place and the people he had been denied his entire life.

Chapter 3

The woman in the tower at the heart of the capital sat in her ornate leather chair, as she did most days, and stared out her window over the city. The city that she had built, despite everything that had stood in her way. The gleaming testament to progress, to order, to the conquering of the world, a world that she had brought to its knees in service of humanity. She still barely believed that she had been able to do it, but Helena Marvich, the Magistrate, had never been anything but committed to the survival of the human race. That dedication lasted even now, and she was staring at exactly what had been made possible by her choices.

The city at this time of evening was lovely, awe-inspiring even, its completed buildings gleaming, the machines working to build new ones whirring and moving in satisfyingly consistent patterns, transporting materials up and down, fixing them and welding them into their proper places. The satisfaction of it all, of the achievement and its imminent expansion, was nearly enough to drown out the prattling of the fool behind her. Nearly.

Helena swiveled her chair back around to face the young man standing in front of her desk, and she brushed a strand of gray hair out of her eyes as she looked at him again. A fool, she had called him in her mind, and every new angle of him proved her right. He was speaking quickly, his words tripping over one another in his haste, but she was hardly listening. He was just another one from the colleges who swore to her that he had made the next great discovery, revolutionized the food industry or record-keeping or one of a thousand other fields. Each one who had stood across the desk, where he was standing now, had been an utter failure. Some made progress, but it was never enough. They needed to reclaim what had once been theirs, and they weren't working fast enough. They had all the records, all the evidence of the technology, right at their fingertips. She had given them it all, everything she knew and owned, the ship and

all its component parts. They should have been able to reverse-engineer *more* by now, should have been able to meet and surpass the technology of the world she had left, but their progress was pathetically slow. She would have joined them, once upon a time. Would have dragged them back in line, made sure the projects stayed on track. But she was much too busy now with everything else that came from ruling a country. She hadn't the time to spare to keep a bunch of academics in line.

She tuned back in to his words through her musing, only to find that he was saying something interesting after all.

"A-And so you see, Magistrate, that the evidence is clear: there was a single nuclear explosion in this area, a small one, concentrated towards the northern end of the country. If we could get soil samples from elsewhere on the planet, perhaps we could isolate the causes and begin to search for relics of the civilization that launched—"

"No." She said it simply, quietly, but he tripped over his own feet in taking a step back. She smiled a bit. *Smart enough to fear me at least. Good.* "You know that travel beyond our borders is impossible, young one," she said, keeping her tone low enough that the young man had to lean back in to hear her.

"I-I know, Magistrate, I was merely hypothesizing—"

"Your energy is better devoted elsewhere than that particular hypothesis, hmmm?"

"Yes, Magistrate." He hung his head, and Helena stood up, paced around the desk to stand directly in front of him. He was a bit shorter than her, so she grabbed his chin gently, pulling his face up so she could stare him in the eye. His eyes filled with fear at her touch, and she laughed internally, though she didn't let the smile reach her face. He had every reason to

fear: after all, he was an infant compared to her. He looked like he was barely twenty, and here she stood, nearly two hundred and forty years old. She had already lived two lifetimes as the Magistrate of this city, and in that time they had made wonderful strides; some might even say miraculous. Helena attributed it to the resiliency of the human spirit, of course, and her own conviction. There was a reason that they had been able to survive, thrive even, under her guidance. But guidance sometimes required a firm hand.

“Listen to me, young one,” she said, dropping her hand from his face and sitting down on her desk. The young man’s glasses nearly fell off his nose as he tried to adjust his gaze to her movement, and he hurriedly re-adjusted them. “I understand your eagerness,” she began. *Tell him I care, then direct him firmly.* “We’ve learned so much since we began this city, but the mystery of what exactly happened to the Earth and the civilizations that came before continues to elude us. I want it solved as much as anyone, believe me.”

Eventually, of course. After I’m done, then they can solve it, put together the pieces of their little puzzle, call me whatever names they wish. Then, but not before.

She continued, keeping her gaze firmly fixed on the young man’s face, keeping his attention fully on her. “But we must focus instead on learning what we can, learning from what we have, until those fools in the North learn to make peace and stop holding us on this continent.”

Rather, until I decide that we can move beyond this continent, that humanity is ready to either enfold the Northerners or destroy them. Soon.

“Do you understand me?” she asked, her tone as gentle as she could manage.

“Y-Yes, Magistrate. It’s just—” The young man’s eyes were nearly popping out of his skull, and sweat was beading on his brow.

“Yes?”

“It’s just,” he said, tugging at his collar, his eyes darting to the door, as if he wanted to be anywhere else. “The explosion we found evidence of. It was a mere five years before the city was founded. You... you would have been alive for it, ma’am.”

So that’s what the fool has stumbled upon. I should have guessed.

“I see. What’s your name again, young man?”

“A-Adam, ma’am.” He swallowed, loud enough that she could hear it. *Good. He should be terrified, being so bold as to call me a liar to my face like this.*

“Adam. Of course. So, Adam, you believe I am lying to you, is that it?” She was enjoying this now, this cat and mouse game.

He gulped. “The... the half-life of radioactive material does not make mistakes, ma’am. With all due respect... I think you know more than you’ve told me. Told anyone in this city. About what came before.”

Helena couldn’t control herself, and a smile cracked her lips, a light chuckle emerging without her permission.

“I-I’m sorry?” Adam stumbled. “Did I say something funny?” He was so earnest in his confusion, Helena could barely believe it. The naiveté was just... wonderfully fresh.

She held a hand to her mouth to cover the full smile that was blooming across her face, and chuckled again. “Sorry, my dear. It’s simply you academics, always acting as if you’re the

first ones to stumble upon something that's painfully obvious if only you could see past your noses."

Adam choked a bit, which was exactly what she knew would happen. *Predictable as always*. She continued without waiting for him to catch his breath.

"Of course I've lied to everyone for these two hundred years. To the citizens of the Capital, to the ones who live outside. To the enforcers. To the rest of the governing body. To you and your peers, until one of you figures it out, and then I tell you all the same thing. Do you really think the citizens of this nation would benefit from finding out that I've been lying to them?"

He stumbled again, trying to form a sentence. "I—I..."

"You, you nothing. You know just as well as I do that they wouldn't. It would be needless cruelty to shatter their delusions. They wouldn't know what to do with the truth. They could cast me out, sure. But then where would we be? You know it well enough, Adam. It's the right of you academics to know the truth behind my rule, that I've led us for two hundred years and more. Where will this city be without me? Who steps up to take my place?" She could see on his face that he had no answer for her, and she relished in it, in achieving victory so simply, with so little resistance. The first time an academic had found the truth, she had sputtered and denied, but she had realized long ago that it was better to take control of the conversation, to make them understand the truth of the person they were dealing with. If that didn't bring them back into line, well... there were other ways of dealing with academics.

"Let me tell you something, Adam," she continued, standing up and walking to the window. "I didn't live through the nuclear weapon launch. I *ordered* the nuclear weapon launch.

And I would do it again, a hundred thousand times over. It was the right decision, and I stand by it.”

She could practically hear the blood drain out of Adam’s face behind her. She didn’t bother to turn around, though she would no doubt have immensely enjoyed his expression as the weight of his mistake came crashing down on him.

“The fact of the matter is, those people down there,” and here she stood and gestured at the window, at the city below, “wouldn’t understand. I doubt you understand. The desperation. The feeling of extinction breathing down your neck, the responsibility so heavy you feel your spine breaking every moment of every day, and it’s just a matter of time until you crack. The guts it takes to make that decision, with extinction on the line.”

Extinction of one race or another was the choice I had to make. I chose humanity, and I would do it again. I would send every species on this planet to extinction if it meant humanity survived.

Helena kept the righteous fury out of her voice, let her tones become gentle, pleading even, as she turned back to face the young academic. “Let them live with their lies, Adam. Have you studied the stories of ancient Egypt in the vaults?”

He nodded, silent, keeping his eyes firmly fixed upon his shoes.

“Then you know how the pyramids were built, how many were enslaved, how many died in the making. Every civilization builds skeletons into its foundations; it’s the nature of things. Our civilization is no different, but there’s no point in telling everyone. What could possibly be the point of causing them that anguish? Let them live with their lies, looking past the blood on

the cobblestones beneath their feet, looking ever at the stars, at progress. We move forward, past the dead, to greater heights. Do you understand, Adam?”

He didn't. Helena could see it in his eyes, even as he nodded furiously, attempting to convince her otherwise. He was too young, too naive. Arthur, the old fool, had let him study too much before he had grown enough to understand it, hadn't caught the seeds of rebellion soon enough. She would have to re-assess Arthur's place in the college. He was losing his touch, and Adam was an unfortunate casualty of that slip in capability. A shame; he might have done something with his life if he hadn't stumbled too far. Still, she supposed, it could be worse. Adam could have gone public before coming to her. No one would have believed him, even had the knowledge to understand him, but it would have made this part a lot harder.

She smiled at him, keeping up the charade that everything had been resolved, that he was going to survive this conversation. “I knew we could come to an understanding, Adam. Now, return to your studies, and perhaps I'll invite you back here and we'll discuss some of your other questions, hm?” She practically purred the last words at him as he tried to stutter a word in. “I'll be waiting.”

Helena nodded at the guards, and Adam was practically pulled from the room, still stuttering and stammering questions behind him. The heavy metal door closed with a slam, the electronic lock clicked, and Helena turned back to her city, writing a note to Arthur on the pad of paper she kept on her desk.

Your student Adam met with an unfortunate accident yesterday evening. Meet me.

The guards would take it to him in the morning, after they finished disposing of the body.

Helena set the pad of paper aside and sat once again, staring at the city gleaming in the evening light and musing about how few people truly understood her and her cause. Arthur had, once upon a time, but his years were pulling him away from her now. He was falling apart at the seams, and would soon be of no use to her, just like everyone who had come before him. It was her curse to outlast those she relied on, though she had accepted it long ago. She made do with the tools she was given, always had. Sometimes those tools were objects, sometimes they were information, and sometimes they were people. No matter their nature, they all bent to her will, curved towards a singular purpose: the survival of humanity.

The ones who had flown to this planet with her, those she had once called companions, had never understood. Monster, they called her, and worse. They were pathetic, these people who had claimed to value the survival of the human race. It was hard to believe that any of them had been chosen, when conviction in the survival of the race was a prerequisite to being on the crew in the first place. Helena supposed they had lied, or hadn't understood the weight of the responsibility they were being given, a mistake she had never made.

If only the other five had been able to see as she did, they would know that there had been no choice. Difficult decisions had to be made when survival was on the line. They had all agreed to that when they signed up, but she had been the only one who truly swore it.

That fool who had called himself their captain had been the worst of them. She could hardly remember his name these days, after so many years, but she remembered his words as he pleaded with her to stop, begged her to let humanity die when she sat on the precipice of saving it.

Helena, you can't do this. It's not right, he had said from the other side of the glass, as if he were the judge of morality in the face of crisis.

As if the morality of the issue had mattered at that point.

As if there was right and wrong anymore.

Helena hadn't understood then why he was trying to stop her, but she did now. She understood his weakness. All of their weakness. She was the only one with the strength to do what needed to be done.

Helena, please don't push that button. She saw him again, just as he had been, on the other side of the glass, watching her, his eyes pleading, acting like he knew the half of what was happening, like he could judge her or try to change her mind. She still remembered his eyes, deep brown, so full of pain and something she thought might be pity.

If it had been, it was misplaced. The righteous have no need for the pity of those who are lesser.

And so, Helena had pushed the button, of course. The result had never been in question. A fool like him certainly couldn't be enough to turn her from what needed to be done to save her race. She didn't enjoy wiping out a race, but it had to be done. There was only room for one on the planet, any fool could see that. The resources of this new Earth weren't nearly enough to sustain two sapient races, let alone one that achieved the size and might that humanity had once held.

The act itself had been... easier than she thought. The hard part had been getting there, had been developing the virus, solving how to attach it to the bomb. Once she had made it to the

cockpit to order the launch, locked herself in and the rest of the crew out, everything went by quickly. She had watched the missile launch, watched it fly, watched it fade onto the horizon, and then it was gone, and she had unlocked the cockpit, and they had all let her leave; the one thing that surprised her. She had guessed they would toss her in the brig, kill her, throw her out of the ship, something, but they hadn't done anything, just watched the horizon as the orange light flashed in the sky and the cloud billowed up over the sunrise.

Helena never saw the effects, the faces melting in the nuclear heat, the sacrifice that the survival of humanity had required. She knew what it might have looked like, had imagined them a thousand times, but she hadn't experienced it for herself. Nor had she watched what came after, the part that her supposed companions didn't even understand: the virus that took what was alien, what was foreign and foul, and turned it... human. It had taken all of her knowledge to make it, months studying and experimenting in secret, capturing natives and dissecting them, understanding how exactly they were different from humans and what it would take to bring them into the fold. More lives sacrificed in the name of humanity, but the results spoke for themselves. A genetic plague, impossibly contagious to the natives, completely harmless for humans, that converted the genome of all those infected to human DNA *and* ensured they survived the process. The failsafe, since there was no way to nuke them all: bring those who remained into the fold. They would no longer oppose the survival of humanity, since they would be part of it.

The virus wasn't perfect, and Helena was certain it hadn't been pleasant for those who underwent the conversion, but it had worked. Those she had sent to the north after establishing the city had confirmed it. The few natives who remained after the nuke dropped were, for all intents and purposes, simply a new race of humanity, nearly identical. There were minor

differences, of course: altered blood coloration, unnaturally pale skin that reacted poorly to the sun, eye colors not native to humanity, but with time and crossbreeding those would fade away. She had intentionally laxed guard on the border at the time, let a few natives slip through to the south, watched the results. Those had been... disastrous, to say the least. The natives had little to no desire to mingle with humans, showed absolutely no gratitude or obedience for her laws, and so she had driven them back, invented a conflict with the nebulous Northerners, re-armed the border, and made sure that neither people would cross until she deemed the time to be right.

She had done her duty, tried to let them coexist. Now they could rot without her help, up there in the north, until and unless they were ready to play by her rules.

If the recent string of terrorist attacks across the satellite towns surrounding the capital were anything to go by, they weren't. The guards at the border now were nothing like the first set she had sent: no one *wanted* the position anymore, so they were left with a sullen, lazy force at the border that had proven completely ineffective at stopping crossings in either direction. Helena couldn't send more forces up there, either: that would create a panic in the population, particularly those in the northern reaches of the empire, and expansion on that front was already painfully slow. So she had to resort to making examples out of those few terrorists that were caught, broadcasting their executions on the screens throughout the capital and the surrounding towns and hoping the word got out, branding anyone who went through the capital prison system to ensure they were accursed, outcasts of her utopia.

It had worked for decades now, though there were always the few bold enough to keep going. Death would have to do for them. This new group, the ones who had just destroyed a few of her supply chains, deserved no less, and they would get it as soon as the enforcers caught up to them. Helena lost no sleep over their impending doom.

Helena settled into her chair and stared at the moon rising over the city, turning the gleaming silver surfaces of the buildings green. For a moment, she allowed herself to bathe in the satisfaction of her life's work. She had done it. She had saved humanity, though they would never thank her for it in her lifetime or after. When she died, her name would be written into the history books as a monster of some sort, she was certain, but that didn't matter. Words couldn't undo what she had done, names couldn't erase her empire. Everything she had done, she had done for the vision of the world that she could see in her mind's eye. The triumph of humanity, its gleaming cities rising over the horizon of a new world, leaving the old one fully behind.

All that mattered now was waiting, and living long enough to see it through. She had a few more decades in her, she was certain. Another generation, maybe two, and it would be done. Humanity here, on the new Earth, would achieve technology on par, or beyond, the humans from the original Earth. Come generations hence, they would all curse her memory, but she would have ensured the survival of humanity beyond a shadow of a doubt, ensured that it would achieve new heights. That was enough.

When she was still with the crew of the ship, she had been the only one with the strength to push the button. Now, they were all dead, and she was alive. She was the only one with the will to keep pushing forward, to ensure that her vision was fulfilled.

"Humanity first," she whispered to the city beyond her window, watching the lights flicker off one by one as its inhabitants went to sleep.

A muffled shout and a nearly-silent gunshot rang from outside her door. She took no satisfaction in it: another necessary sacrifice, another life lost to ensure the survival of the race.

"Humanity forever."

Chapter 4

The first thing that you noticed upon entering the Capital was the gleam of it all. Maria was certain that it was by design, that the moment you stepped into the city you were met with an overwhelming sense of the scale of it and just how shiny everything was: silver buildings rising to the skyline, each and every one pristine. They must be cleaned constantly by something: there were probably machines that handled it, she supposed. Dozens of them whirred by as she passed through the gates of the city, some of them carrying construction materials, some carrying sheets of paper, still others carrying nothing. All of them, no matter their job, were polished silver, though.

Maria shook herself. She wasn't here to sightsee, she reminded herself, regardless of how pristine this city looked on the outside. This was the unpleasant end of a very unpleasant journey, and she needed to see it through.

It had been five years since she started this journey, since her grandfather had died and she had inherited his journals. Five long years on the run, from the moment she picked up the journals, exited the mine, and saw the orange glow of her old life burning on the horizon. Fortunate, she supposed, that she had found the first one in time, before the Capital soldiers had come to kill her. Fortunate or planned. She still didn't know just how much her grandfather had planned all of this. The journals were hardly cohesive, but there was no implication until the last one, the one he had left underneath his deathbed, that he had planned for anyone else to read what he had written. And yet... he recorded things in the journals that seemed out of place for a mere personal record of events. Locations, details about where records were kept. Everything he knew about the Capital's technology, how it developed, how it compared to the technology from the world before, what he guessed the Magistrate was going to work towards next.

There were nine journals in total, spanning her grandfather's two hundred and fifty years of life. It still felt strange, like there had to have been a mistake, to imply that her grandfather was that old, but Maria had been forced to accept it. The journals didn't lie. Their information had proved accurate time and time again. They had guided her north, sent her across the border to find the rest of the people that the Capital had taken everything from. That part had taken a year and a half, learning to survive on her own, reading the journals the whole way, driven by her thirst for knowledge, her need to understand what was happening and why. And then, after the long journey, she had finally found them. The ones the Capital called the Northerners, the original residents of the planet her grandfather called New Earth. The ones who were there when the original party landed, and who Helena Marvich, the woman who would come to be known as the Magistrate, had ultimately destroyed. She had fallen in with those Northerners, found that their goals aligned perfectly with her own: the destruction of Helena and all that she had built. Vengeance for the lives she had taken in the name of her vision, for the race she had all-but destroyed. The journals had led Maria to the Northerners, but her decision to stay with them, to work with and help them, had been her own.

The journals had guided Maria elsewhere, too, as recently as a few months ago, to the two that Helena had kept when Maria's grandfather fled from the rest of the landing party. He had guessed several places where they might be, and Maria had searched all of them until she found the journals. She had been reading them on the journey here, to the capital, these earliest journals, which spanned the entire journey from humanity's old home to the days after landing and her grandfather's flight from his companions.

The entries from the days after landing were chaotic, messy. The crew hadn't been prepared to land and find someone already living there, let alone a sentient race that had started

to develop technology. The entries recorded a massive argument between the crew members, between those who believed the natives were a threat and those who wanted to make peace with them, to try and coexist on the planet. Maria's grandfather had been on the latter side of that debate, firmly believing that the people who lived on the planet first had every right to continue living, even if it meant humanity had to take a smaller place here than originally planned.

He wasn't alone, but Helena and three others of the six total crew members had turned on him and Holly, the other crew member that agreed with him. Even the three that agreed with Helena, however, had no idea the lengths she was willing to go to in order to make sure humanity won the conflict. By Maria's grandfather's account, there had been a few encounters between the natives and the crew, only one of which ended in minor violence, before Helena had decided that the destruction of the entirety of the native populace was necessary for the survival of humanity. The ship had been equipped with what her grandfather called a "nuclear reactor," which from what Maria could gather had been a massive power source and one of the last remaining triumphs of the world before. Helena had used that power to convert one of the few weapons systems the ship had into what Maria's grandfather called a "nuclear warhead."

The very thing that destroyed us last time, the journals said. If we resorted to this again within a year of landing here, maybe we deserved to burn with Earth after all.

Maria's grandfather had tried to stop Helena, had tried to talk her out of it. The rest of the crew, for their credit, had joined him, realized the folly of siding with Helena, but it was too late. She launched the weapon, destroyed the natives, and then revealed to them that she had gone a step farther:

She looked me in the eyes while she said it. Maria could practically hear it in her grandfather's voice. She looked proud, like she had just saved the world.

"I made them human," she said. "The ones that survive, they'll be just like us now."

Helena Marvich had wrought an atrocity that couldn't ever be mended. Maria's grandfather hadn't understood the science, but he explained the effects as he saw them in the journals well enough to tear Maria's heart to shreds.

A plague that tore through them, rewrote their genetics from the inside out. They shriveled, withered under the weight of new bones and new needs. Things that they once ate began to poison them. Their elderly died from the stress of it. They couldn't run as fast or as far as they used to, they had four limbs instead of six, five digits on each limb instead of seven. The ones that couldn't adapt starved or committed suicide, the ones that could adapt wept for what had been lost. Their technology, their towns and cities, all lost in the blast or the chaos that followed, and they were reduced to small groups wandering the devastated landscape. The virus left them shells of their former selves, consumed their society from the inside out, and Helena's victory was complete. They weren't quite human, but close enough to pass, and that's all she cared about. She had offered them their options: die, or join the human race, no matter how much agony it causes you.

Maria stared at the face of the tallest building in the Capital, the one that lay at the heart of the city. The one where she knew Helena Marvich, the woman who called herself the Magistrate, resided, stared down upon her kingdom and judged who should live and who should die, which species deserved to rule the world. Standing in the midst of the crowd, Maria renewed the promise she made to herself, to her grandfather's memory, at the start of this journey.

By the time Maria left this city, Helena Marvich would be dead, and the lie that she had perpetuated all her life would fall to pieces.

Maria turned her gaze down from the gleaming skyline and away from the visage of Helena Marvich's home. *Lots of work to do first.* She set out, towards the western outskirts of the capital, where the building she was looking for sat.

The safe house was a squat place compared to the high rises that filled the center of the city: out here near the edges, all the taller buildings were still under construction, covered in machines scurrying from place to place, organizing, carrying materials, and welding new beams into place. Between these skeletal taller structures sat smaller, squat metal buildings. The safe house was one of these, marked with a series of tiny scratches at the top of the door. Maria found it after about fifteen minutes of searching, which would have been five if she hadn't had to duck away from the sight of passerby several times. For a district under construction, it was curiously busy.

When she entered the safe house, everyone else was already there. The extra time Maria had taken was a necessary precaution, so she wasn't concerned about being late. She opened the door to the basement and stepped down into the meeting room. None of the rest seemed particularly perturbed at her lateness either. They were lounging around a large table, but clearly had all been on edge since the door to the house had opened: Maria watched more than one weapon set down as they each smiled at her in recognition and relaxed. She smiled back at them. They called themselves "the Family," a title that their previous leader had given them, but it was appropriate. Even though none of those sitting at the table were related by blood, they were united by a love that ran deeper than a mere cause, love driven by genuine respect and admiration for each other.

The young man at the head of the table was facing away from her at first, finishing a sentence that he was saying in hushed tones, but he stood up as soon as he heard her footsteps and turned around to greet her.

Jacob's orange-brown eyes flashed with warmth, and Maria stepped over to hug him.

"We were beginning to worry that the enforcers had taken you from us," Jacob said, a smile playing around his lips. "I knew better, of course, but... it's good to see you after so long, Maria."

It had been more than a year since Maria had seen Jacob last, and she glanced up and down at what had changed. He was still wearing the same old threadbare overcoat, though he was wearing a hooded shirt underneath it now. He'd gained a new scar on his chin, standing out against the unkempt stubble that was growing on his face. Jacob wiggled his eyebrows at her, grinning broadly.

"Looking for these?" He pulled up his left sleeve and flashed the underside of his arm at her. Five brands stood out against his pale white skin.

Two new ones. You're going to get yourself killed chasing his ghost, you idiot.

Jacob was grinning from ear to ear. "Almost there, eh? Haven't quite made his record, but... well. I think the old king can rest easy. They'll shoot me on sight next time, I'm sure."

Jacob was still grinning, but Maria could see there was pain behind it. After all these years, he hadn't gotten over Silas. Maria had joined the Family too late to meet him, but he had been Jacob's mentor, and the young man spoke of him with a reverence few people could even muster for their religion. When she had first met Jacob, up north of the border, he had told her

stories for weeks of the old outlaw, his run-ins with the Capital, his crusade against their injustices. A crusade they had all taken up, now, with Jacob at the head of the Family, picking up where Silas had left off.

“I hope you’re not going to show off to her all night, Jacob,” rumbled the large man sitting at Jacob’s right hand. “Some of the rest of us have missed her too, you know.” She turned to Branson, and the large Northerner stood up to give her a hug. “Welcome back, sister,” he rumbled, squeezing Maria tight. “There’s been a hole in our hearts since we last saw you. It is good that you have come back to us.” He released her and sat back down, picking a sheaf of papers up from in front of him and sifting through it to find where he had left off.

“I’ve missed you all, too,” she said, loud enough for the rest of them to hear as well. “My life has been empty without the Family, but it was a necessary sacrifice. I found the rest of the journals.”

Jacob stopped. “Both of them?”

Maria smiled at him, then at the rest of them at the table in turn. “Both of them. It took some doing, but I managed to steal the ones from the Magistrate’s archives. She made sure it didn’t go public, I’m sure, but I took a lot of her best out that night. She’s going to be doubly on guard now, though.”

“No doubt,” quipped Alexi from her place at the end of the table, her yellow eyes flashing as she flipped a small knife over in her hands. “It’s Capital soldiers, though. Hardly enough to stop all of us, now that we’re assembled again.” Alexi was the youngest member of the group, but certainly one of the most outspoken, and confident as a person could be while surviving in a band of guerilla fighters.

“True, but there’s going to be a lot of them, and especially surrounding her,” mused Jacob. “We’re gonna need something she can’t ignore, can’t keep her soldiers in reserve for.”

“Like the old days,” said Branson, looking up from his reading with a brief nod. “Blow up a few buildings, and you’ll find yourself knee-deep in Capital soldiers in two minutes or less, so Silas always said, and he was usually right. That would get the guards out of where she’s holed up.”

“People die in explosions,” said Malcolm, the oldest member of the group, from the other side of the table, his tone matter-of-fact despite the absurd obviousness of his statement. He didn’t even look at the rest of them, merely at the wall opposite, his fingers idly drumming a pattern into his thighs. “Can’t bomb one of the buildings under construction, or no one will come running. Can we really stomach killing innocents for a distraction?”

“Wouldn’t be the first time innocent people died during this war,” Alexi said.

“Nor the last, if we don’t finish the Magistrate off here,” mused Jacob, and they all went silent. Maria knew that at least four other people in the room of eight would listen to whatever his decision was, no matter their opinion on it. Branson, Malcolm, and Alexi were the only ones, apart from Maria herself, that would question their leader on a decision like this, and Branson and Alexi at least seemed on board if it came to a vote.

“I don’t think it can be avoided,” Jacob continued. “We need to take the head off before we can start tearing the body apart, else she’s just going to keep building back like she always has in the past. This time, the Magistrate has to die, and if civilians die to get that done, their sacrifices will be unfortunate but necessary.”

Maria had to concede in her mind that Jacob was right. She wondered, though, if she would have felt the same all those years ago, when she started this journey. Would the Maria from before, the one who knew nothing about how the world worked, have agreed? Had this new Maria been shaped by her experiences or traumatized to the point that she no longer cared about innocent lives? Did it matter, as long as the job got done?

She stopped herself there. Time to consider that after it was done. After her grandfather was avenged. Then she would stop and count the bodies piled along the way, decide whether she was fit to continue with the cause, whether she could stand it any longer.

Time enough and more, after the one behind it all no longer existed.

She didn't listen to much more of the meeting with the Family after that. It didn't matter to her the details of which buildings they should target, which ones had the most lax security forces that could be bribed or distracted or taken out quietly. That wasn't her role in this or her area of expertise, and the rest of them knew it as well as her.

Maria had spent her entire time on the run studying the woman that had taken everything from her. From the journals and everything else she had learned, Maria hesitated to guess that she knew Helena Marvich better than anyone else alive, knew her beliefs and her history, her habits and her weaknesses. So Maria was the one best equipped to make it all the way to the Magistrate's office, to confront Helena. She would be the one who pulled the trigger when it needed to be pulled. She was the one who wouldn't hesitate. She wasn't interested in Helena's reasons, or her justifications: Maria knew them all, and none of them were enough to make her hesitate. All Maria wanted was to watch the light fade from the last of the landing party's eyes,

and let the other five finally rest in peace, let all the natives of the planet whose lives Helena had stolen rest knowing they had been avenged.

Let Grandfather finally rest in peace, and my parents too. End her tyranny over my life, over the lives of everyone on this planet.

The days of planning passed Maria by without incident. She spent time with the Family, she laughed, she wept with them over the friends they had lost over the years she had been with them, she ate and drank with them and told the stories of her travels in the year since they had last been together, but her mind never truly left Helena.

Maria could feel the Magistrate's presence everywhere in the city, her iron grip clutching at the throats of every single citizen, every piece of information they displayed on the screens that covered half the stable surfaces in the city, every transmission played over the top of the crowds, every machine that scurried through the crowd with a distinct, fixed purpose. This was Helena's world, and the rest of them were just living in it, that much was clear in the Capital.

Not for long, Maria thought more than once. Soon enough, you'll fade like a bad dream, Helena. Soon enough.

The final preparations were made for the bombing after Maria had been in the capital for five days. She took very little part in it, but she sat with Jacob for an hour or more every day and he kept her updated on the planning. Jacob and Maria had become good friends over the years she had spent with the Family, though when she had first met him she had thought he was a fool. She still remembered those first days. Jacob was the first Northerner she had ever seen in her life, and she didn't even recognize him as such at first. The journals had described the physical differences that Northerners had, pale skin and orange or yellow eyes, in particular, but when she

met Jacob he was wearing a wide hat and a thick overcoat which covered those features; he still wore the same coat now, though he had long since lost the hat.

That first day, she had threatened him at gunpoint, thinking he was a Capital soldier, but then he tipped up the hat and she saw his eyes and recognized him as exactly what she'd been looking for north of the border. He laughed then, which she thought was an unusual reaction to having a gun leveled at your chest, and told her that she reminded him of an old friend.

Maria had never quite figured out why he had trusted her so instantly, so implicitly, but it was with Jacob's help that she had found the Family. He was traveling to find them too, as it had turned out, but in his case he was returning after having left them several months prior. So he traveled on with Maria, and told her stories of a man named Silas who had led the Family once and had brought Jacob to them a few years before. Over their journey, she had learned that Jacob was a very light-hearted person, someone who treated death and danger like someone else would a children's game.

That picture of Jacob had changed, though. Throughout the nearly four years since she had met him, she had learned that that humor and naivete was, in reality, a mask: that underneath, Jacob was a young man deeply haunted by his losses and the heritage that had been denied to him by Helena, a heritage he tried to reclaim every day with the Family.

That latter sentiment was one shared by most of the Family. Maria was the only full-blooded human member of the group. There had been others, once, but all had died in one raid or another. The bulk of the group had always been Northerners. The name had started as the Capital's term for them, impassive and depersonalizing, but everyone north of the border had started to embrace it, claim it for themselves.

“Fits better than our old name,” Malcolm had told Maria once when she asked. “My father always told me that it was better to treat things as they are, not as you wish they were. We live in the north, so we are Northerners. When we free ourselves from the North, perhaps then we will have a new name.” He was a man of simplicity, Malcolm, a moral spine that the rest of the Family relied upon for sage advice and honest wisdoms, and they all echoed his sentiment in their own way.

It was the Northerners, truly, who had suffered the most at the hands of the Capital and Helena. Each and every one of them had just as much right as Maria to wish Helena dead, but none of them had quite mustered her rage for the woman. Maria had asked the Family about it, once, over a year ago, just before she left. Why they had chosen her to be the one who killed the Magistrate, more than just her access to knowledge about the woman.

“I’m not sure,” Jacob had said, stroking his chin with his branded arm. He had only had three brands, back then. “I should hate her just as much as you do. I *do* hate her as much as you do. But I think... I think I would ask her why. I wouldn’t be able to resist. I don’t think you would. You already know, inside and out, so you’ve got no reason to.” His expression was serious for once, which Maria knew meant her question had truly struck him.

“I don’t know if I could do it,” Malcolm had said, his tone musing. “Perhaps I could. But violence has so rarely been my answer. I’m not sure I believe that killing her would do anything, and in that question I would likely fail to fulfill the job.”

“I could do it,” Alexi had said without a second thought, brushing her blonde hair out of her eyes as she worked on spinning a knife between her fingers. “But... you’re a better shot than me, for now. From what you’ve told me from your grandfather’s journals, Landing Party don’t

go down easy. You'll get her," and here Alexi pointed to her forehead dramatically and feigned falling over, "first shot. Might take me two or three."

Branson had laughed. "I don't hate her like you young'uns do. If she needs to die, she needs to die, and that's that, but I don't hate the woman. We've all done terrible things in this war, but if hers is the death it takes to end it, so be it. But I'd rather let you do it. I'd be too scared I was getting something wrong."

And that had been that. None of the rest were able to give her a satisfying answer, just shrugging and saying that Jacob had picked her and that was that, or saying that she knew more than they did about the Magistrate.

* * *

The day that they were going to bomb the building, Maria woke up early. She sat up in bed and reached for her bag, checking to make sure the journals were safe. They were, of course, but it had become a habit: she couldn't stand the thought of being away from them.

Jacob was already awake, pacing up and down the hallway outside the room Maria was sleeping in. He saw her sitting up and walked over, sitting down heavily on the bed next to her. There were dark circles around his eyes, and Maria wondered if he had slept at all.

"I'm coming with you," Jacob said, and Maria could hear in his tone that there would be no dissuading him. "I was going to go with the bombing party, but... We'll divide it up differently. You, me, Alexi to the Magistrate's building. Branson will lead the rest for the bombing." His hands were clasped together, but his leg was shaking. He was nervous about something.

Maria nodded and took a guess. “Think there’s going to be more staying behind than we expect?”

“Yeah. Maybe. Or she knows we’re coming, and left a trap. Or there’s more cameras than we expect, and they set the whole damn army on us. Something. Something’s going to go wrong. I know it. You two will need the third set of eyes. Besides,” and here he flashed a grin, a thin and hardly convincing thing, “if we get caught, I can’t let you two end up with brands without me, now can I?”

“That’s not funny, and you know it, Jacob,” Maria said, but it very nearly was.

The plan concocted by the Family was almost perfect, and almost perfectly executed. It was clean, efficient, planned by people who had done this dozens of times before (though Branson had confessed to Maria that he had never tried something on this scale, not even with Silas).

At precisely mid-morning, they were all in position. Maria, Alexi, and Jacob milled about the base of the Magistrate’s building, the two Northerners wearing hoods to keep their faces concealed. The rest of them had scattered to do what was necessary to plant the rest of the charges, to keep the Capital enforcers moving for at least fifteen minutes, which was about how long they should take inside. The first bombs went off on the foundation of one of the most populated high-rises, and the sirens started in the city. Panic hit the streets instantly, the crowd tearing apart in fear, and the Capital soldiers followed within a few seconds, streaming out of their barracks and out of the Magistrate’s building to aid the rescue effort for anyone left stranded or injured. Maria, Jacob, and Alexi didn’t wait for the secondary charges to go off further into the city to keep leading the enforcers away. They slipped into the Magistrate’s

building behind a group of enforcers rushing out, ducked behind corners and no one was the wiser.

They moved fast up the staircases to the top of the building. There were cameras everywhere, and if anyone was paying attention, they would have enforcers on them within moments. Alexi had memorized the layout of the cameras they knew of, the ones that were in the original plans for the building, but there were likely more hidden. Keeping the pace up was essential, but surprisingly easy. They met minimal resistance, and the few soldiers they did find were taken out without a shot fired, Alexi's knives making the work quick and quiet.

Maria didn't even stop to look at the bodies anymore. The Maria that had first found her grandfather's journal would have. Her jaw would have dropped and she would have felt sick at the sight of a dead body, been rooted in place.

That Maria was dead now, too, she supposed. Killed in a raid with the Family or a trip to a Capital prison, murdered by Helena or one of her soldiers a long time ago. Perhaps she had died the first time she killed an enforcer, one who had spotted her heading for the border and had tried to tackle her. Maria had been sick then, she remembered, after she shot him. It was a bad shot, on low power, and the man's death had been gruesome rather than the instant evaporation she had intended. She had kept moving despite her nausea and threw up behind a tree once she made it across the border at the memory of the man's face.

It had been too long now, though. She'd been desensitized to it.

Maria allowed herself a moment to gloat as they reached the door to the Magistrate's office and they fired their first shots, six in total, each one taking out a separate guard. They had made fantastic time through the building. Nothing had gone wrong like Jacob had predicted.

They were really doing it. The plan was going without a hitch, and within a minute or two it would be over. The Magistrate would be dead, the society she had created would be thrown into chaos, and her regime would crumble.

Getting into the Magistrate's office, the room that the Magistrate hadn't left for years, would have been difficult, but her grandfather's journals weren't the only information Maria had found in the archive a few short weeks ago. She had found some of Helena's personal records and memoirs; none of the information there was new, but it had given a valuable window into the woman's psyche. And that had given Maria enough information to take a stab at the password, the words repeated throughout the memoirs. Helena's motto. Maria pressed the button next to the door, and an automated voice rang out.

"Confirm password," the voice said, rattling through the speaker on the wall. Maria couldn't help but be reminded of the computer that calculated monthly rations back in her hometown. Those errands felt hundreds of years in the past now, like they had happened to someone else, a different Maria.

Helena had done that, had made her this way. And now her own words, her own actions, were going to bury her.

"First and forever," Maria said, and the electronic door lock clicked open. She allowed herself a bit of satisfaction at her correct guess.

The trio fanned into the office, checking every corner, but there were no guards inside, nor indeed any notable features in the gleaming silver room other than a large desk and an ornate leather chair facing the back wall, which was a massive window that stretched from side wall to side wall. The chair was pushed close to the window, and the person's hand was pressed against

the glass of the window. Through the window, Maria could see the smoke from the explosions outside, though none of the sound of the chaos below reached all the way up here.

“Hello, Maria,” said the woman in the chair, retracting her hand from the window. “I had thought it might be you coming up the stairs. Clever guess on my lock, though I suppose it was easy for you. You know me better than anyone now, don’t you, darling?”

The chair swiveled, and Maria came face-to-face with Helena Marvich, the Magistrate. The woman who had haunted Maria’s life since before Maria had even been born. The one who was to blame for all of this. Helena gave her a tight-lipped smile, and Maria took a step back at the unexpected mood of the tyrant in front of her.

How does she know who I am?

Helena’s gray hair was still full, despite her age: Maria knew from the journals that she was at least two hundred and fifty years old now, just a few years younger than Maria’s grandfather had been when he died. Helena’s face was narrow, her wrinkles deep, but her eyes were bright blue within it, staring out at each of the three members of the Family in turn. The Magistrate’s body language wasn’t what Maria had expected, though. Helena wasn’t afraid or angry or disappointed. She looked... content. She leaned back in her chair, settled down, and steepled her fingers in front of her face, the smile never leaving.

“Well, Maria? You came here to kill me, didn’t you? Go ahead.” Helena’s smile broadened, and she chuckled. “Might want to hurry. Can’t imagine the building’s going to be empty much longer.”

Unlike all the times she had imagined this, Maria hesitated. Her gun was aimed, safety off, but she couldn't bring herself to pull the trigger. She found, for just a moment, she needed to know more, that she wouldn't be able to live with herself if she didn't ask now.

"Why?" Maria asked, and she heard in her own voice the echo of that long-dead Maria, that little girl who had asked her grandfather why the stars in the sky changed as the year went on, asked *why does the sun rise in the east and set in the west, why is the moon green? Why, Grandpa?* The question of someone who, for all her reading, all her knowledge, still didn't understand nearly as much as she had thought when she walked into the room.

Helena's smile deepened, and she leaned forward. "Because I was the only one with the spine to do it. They told me I would regret it, but I don't. Humanity survived. Humanity *will* survive, long after I'm gone, regardless of whether you kill me here or I die later. None of this," here she spun her chair and threw her arms towards the window, "would have happened without me. We couldn't guarantee our survival while they lived. There weren't enough resources; I did the calculations. If we wanted to become what we once were, surpass where we had come from, we needed this planet for ourselves." Helena turned again, and her voice dropped. "I was as kind as I could have been. I could have killed them all, but I brought them into the fold instead. It's not my fault they didn't understand the gift of humanity, weren't willing to join us."

"Monster," Alexi whispered. She and Jacob had taken a step back, sitting behind Maria. Maria could see the younger woman's hands shaking, a knife rattling in her grasp.

Helena laughed. "I expect that's what they'll call me, yes. I accept that, accepted it hundreds of years ago. I don't need history to remember me kindly. I already did what I needed to do to ensure our survival. Humanity will not fall, not by your hands or anyone else's. Nothing

you can do now will change that, I've made certain. My society might disown me, but they will survive because of me." The extent of the information she was missing was becoming clear to Maria now. They hadn't surprised Helena. She'd been expecting this conversation her whole life.

The entry from Maria's grandfather's journal echoed in her head.

She looked proud, like she had just saved the world.

She looked me straight in the eye after she did it.

Helena's eyes were firmly fixed on Maria now, just as they had been fixed on her grandfather all those years ago, and the truth of what Helena was feeling came clear to Maria in that moment.

She's been waiting for someone to come kill her. She thought he would, but he didn't.
And now I'm the inheritor of the execution that he didn't manage.

Helena wants to be a martyr.

"And what if we tell them what you've done now?" Jacob growled, angrier than Maria had ever heard him. She stared at her old friend, but he didn't look back at her. His eyes were firmly fixed on the chair and the woman in it.

"Do you think they'll care? You're at least mostly human, aren't you?" The Magistrate sneered, looking at Jacob for the first time. "You should know enough about us by now to know that they won't. They'll call me a monster and continue living just the way they have been, content in their own morality. All civilizations are built on blood. Your grandfather," she nodded at Maria, "didn't understand that. He was always a short-sighted fool, though I thought I loved him for a time." Maria's head was spinning so much with the realization of Helena's plan that

she barely recognized the admission. There had been hints in the journals that her grandfather had been more involved with Helena than he had put into writing, but neither one of them had ever admitted it fully in their writing, yet here Helena was, admitting it freely.

Helena continued, though, kept hammering forward. “You, though. You understand, don’t you, Maria? You’ve read the journals, the ones he was incessantly writing in, and given the break-in at the archives a few weeks ago, I’m guessing you found my writing as well. You *know* that I had to do what I did. I made all the calculations. He didn’t understand, none of them did, but it worked. I was right,” she crowed. “Kill me if you want, yell to the world that I was a monster. It doesn’t matter. I was *right*. Everything I did,” Helena said, standing up from her chair, “was for humankind. Every life I took, the virus, it was all—”

A shot rang out, and the window behind Helena shattered outwards, a hundred thousand shards twinkling, frozen in time for just a moment before they hurtled down to the street below. Helena crumpled forwards, falling onto her desk. Maria, incredulous, stared at her gun, still pointed forward, but she hadn’t pulled the trigger. Something clattered as it hit the floor, and Maria glanced to the side. Jacob stood, his arm shaking, his gun dropped at his feet. He didn’t say anything, but turned and walked out the door, his steps fading down the hallway. Alexi turned on her heel and sprinted after him, and Maria was alone in the room with Helena’s body.

Maria looked at the dead woman for a long moment, listening to Alexi’s steps fade behind her. Maria had thought she’d feel something, satisfaction, pride in a job well done, *something*.

But all she felt was the creeping sensation that none of it had mattered, in the end. It was too late. Helena had won the moment she had been able to walk away from her actions unpunished the first time.

Proud, like she had just saved the world.

Proud of her actions until the end, though she knew exactly what the rest had thought of her. Unwilling to compromise, unwilling to see beyond her own ambitions, her own cause.

Destiny brought us to this moment, Maria thought, something Jacob always said. But our choices are our own. What we do with what destiny gives us, that's our burden to carry.

He had told her that Silas said that, too.

We can't control what the ones who live here do now, Maria realized. Helena might have been right. They might not care about any of this, might keep living their lives the way they have been, keep building her society just the way she wanted it.

Maria turned and followed the two Northerners back to the stairs.

But then again, maybe they won't. Maybe it doesn't matter. Maybe just putting an end to something that's gone on too long is enough.

RE-CRITICISM

Perhaps the most important feature of the intersection between postcolonialism and science fiction is the ability and tendency of both to lean towards situations of moral complexity, where often even the most negative figures have motivations that are understandable (if still, often, contemptible). The villains of postcolonialism are rarely, if ever, mustache-twirling Machiavellians, but rather a group who often believes that their actions are completely morally correct: in many cases, such as Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, the colonizers believe they are the *saviors* of the very people they destroy, bringing civilization to the world while failing to comprehend the power or value of the people and cultures they destroy in the process. Science fiction's moral situations can be similarly multi-layered (though this, admittedly, is absent in many of the older works in the genre), dealing with the complexities of existence in hypothetical situations and the new moral frameworks they require. The question of morality that underpins the goals of this story is twofold: first, there is the question of responsibility in a colonial situation: who is responsible for undoing the harms of imperialism, and where can one even begin in achieving that goal? Second, there is the question of identity in a colonial setting, both the identity of the colonizer and the identity of the colonized: how are those identities compromised and altered by colonial amnesia and the power structures installed by the colonizer?

In working towards exploring those questions, a few major features had to be included in the morality of the setting and the characters, and certain real-life situations needed to be drawn from. In particular, the setting needed to be 1) a situation of colonialism with what De Witt terms "a new race" in the science fiction tradition (De Witt 21) that has been displaced by a colonizing force, 2) defined by hegemonic ideals: once again borrowing De Witt's language, a world where

“[o]ld technologies and ways of being persist as residual traces, haunting any new hegemony” and allowing for the connection between current situations and the hypotheticals of science fiction to play out (De Witt 21), and lastly, 3) populated by characters who both morally oppose and morally support the current hegemony. The world could not be as black-and-white as a typical “evil empire” narrative, as to do so would make the characters the very cartoonish stereotypes that this project specifically seeks to undermine. Instead, the actions of each character needed to be understandable on at least one level and make internal sense based on the morality of the characters and the backstory readers are presented throughout the narrative. In terms of the real-life inspirations, the power of historical figures became very important in this work, in particular the idea of the image of those directly responsible for the actions of imperialism. Here the science fiction aspect of the story lends power and credence: the historical figures of colonialism, in particular Helena, become literal characters within the narrative despite the temporal distance between the start of colonization and the rest of the protagonists.

The next important aspect of understanding and conveying the moral questions of the project lay within the idea of generational imperialism. How much responsibility do the descendants of imperialists bear? Maria, who can perhaps be termed the primary protagonist of the piece—certainly, her perspective occupies the most space within the project—is the character who embodies this question most directly. As the last remaining direct descendent of an initial colonizer, she inherits his knowledge and responsibilities both physically in the form of the journals and metaphorically in the form of the quest to kill Helena. Maria’s grandfather’s failure to stop Helena or impede her progress in establishing the hegemony she desired is representative of a common moral failing within colonial situations, that of the bystander who supports colonial hegemony through inaction. Maria never questions her responsibility or complicity in the

hegemony that she learns about, though she often questions how much the actions she has taken along the path have compromised her own morality, which lies at the root of her motivation. In her view, the faults of previous generations lie with her unless she fundamentally alters their course. To fail in that venture would be the ultimate support of Helena's hegemonic ideals: to know, have the chance, and make no attempt to undermine inequality and power structures is as morally wrong or worse than not making the effort to understand in the first place.

The second stage of understanding the moral question during the creation of the work came through understanding the idea of colonial amnesia, something that multiple critics assert as a major phenomenon in post-colonial situations (Pattynama, Garbutt et al.). Pattynama in particular provides the underpinnings of the colonizer's side of colonial amnesia: "For many metropolitan societies, the colonial past has become an uncomfortable, often silenced, past that did not just go away..." (Pattynama 176). The imperialist figure of the Capital and Helena offer a window for readers into the workings of the silencing of this past. Through the previous narratives, readers understand the situations of colonialism happening in the background while they are presented with the idea of the Capital as utopia and the efforts taken by Helena to obscure the past are illustrated.

This amnesia is not single-sided, however. The second form that colonial amnesia takes within this narrative is a physical and violent one, something unique to the science fiction setting. The literal, forcible conversion of one race into another via the efforts of the colonizer provides the underpinnings necessary to understand the question of identity within the setting. By taking the concept of the cultural amnesia that results from diaspora in a postcolonial setting and turning it into a physical process as well as a social one, science fiction demonstrates its use as a tool of theory. By making processes that are otherwise hypothesized or theorized into direct

elements of setting or plot, those hypotheses and theories can be demonstrated to audiences in a much more concrete way than the typical thought experiments, historical examples, and predictions of critical theory. The process of conversion that the colonizers seek to enforce in the setting of the story is one that tyrannizes the physical bodies of the colonized populace as much as their culture, and even by the end of the story the protagonists are unable to find a real answer for this action. Once colonization has occurred, it is nigh-impossible to effectively return to a pre-colonial state, and certainly no immediate shift is possible. The marks of colonialism last long after its literal presence has faded.

This lasting effect does not, however, imply that no effort in undoing the effects of colonialism is possible or worth doing. Instead, the forms that these erasures of colonial power structures take is rooted in smaller shifts. In this pursuit, Garbutt et al. provided the valuable concept of a dialectic space between hegemonic borders (64-65): within the context of the story, the protagonists' "crossing the borders" constitutes both a physical action of rebellion against hegemony and a theoretical action of breaking down imperialism, meeting in what Garbutt et al. term throughout their essay as the "borderland." Within this borderland, a physical space as well as an ideological one, barriers are broken down. Our first encounter with the physical border within the context of the story leads one of the protagonists, Jacob, to reconcile with the nature of his identity as a member of the colonized body while having been raised within the confines of the colonizer's society. The border he crosses at the end of the chapter where we primarily follow him is both a physical representation of the colonizer's power over the setting, but also an allegorical representation of "leaving the colonizer behind" and embracing a past he has been denied by the power structures that surround him.

Jacob's progress to this moment is guided by the morally complicated figure of Silas, someone who both fully embraces his heritage and stays fully committed to undermining the structures of power while utilizing methods that are arguably more violent than necessary and deriving satisfaction from the chaos he uses as a weapon. Silas' importance as a representative of absolute rebellion against hegemony remains throughout the stories that follow. Jacob, by entering this discourse, ultimately inherits Silas' title and responsibilities as the figure of absolute rebellion against hegemony, despite his complex relationship with that same hegemony. Jacob exists in a liminal space between colonizer and colonized, with half of his life existing underneath the oppressive rule of the society he was raised in and the other half existing within the near-absolute freedom to embody his own ideals and personality that is offered to him by resistance to that same rule. When Jacob first appears in the second chapter, he is extremely reserved and internally-focused; when he appears again at the end of the collection, his dialectic with the borderlands has led him to embrace a more boisterous personality defined by humor and direct, firm leadership of those who end up relying on him.

Perhaps the most influential figure within the setting of the story is also the primary antagonist, whom this re-criticism has danced around repeatedly: Helena, the embodiment of the figure of the colonizer within this work. The commitment to avoiding black-and-white morals led Helena to receive a platform of her own and motivations beyond power, influence, or wealth, which can also constitute the motivations of colonialism; instead, Helena as the story presents her is working towards an understandable ideal, the sustaining of her people at all costs. In this regard, the material concerns of colonialism, territory and natural resources, are of supreme importance to Helena, as is the separation of the two populations: any major contact could threaten the hegemonic ideal she strives towards. Helena represents many of the quintessential

concepts represented in other postcolonial works: nationalism, in this case with national and racial concerns blending and becoming one and the same; dismissal of the colonized force as inferior or auxiliary; and heavy motivation deriving from material concerns. She follows in the footsteps of figures of colonial history such as Columbus, the British Empire, and innumerable others in these concerns, but translates them into a science fiction setting by *becoming* the very empire she seeks to install. Hegemony in the setting is rooted within her rule, and stems directly from her, but by the end of the story the ability to destroy that hegemony is left in question even after her death.

The conclusion of the story was crafted to pull together the threads of character and ideology that spread throughout the rest of the narrative. In the end, whether hegemony is defeated or not remains unclear. The executor of the initial form of colonization in the setting is destroyed by those she had done wrong, but Maria in the final scene of the story understands that the conviction of the colonizer is such that Helena no longer cares about her own death. Helena has achieved the installation of hegemony within her society and believes that, much like the ancient civilizations she references several times throughout the narrative, this hegemony will be “built into the foundations” of the society and culture she has shaped throughout its early days. The question is left to the readers, ultimately, whether they believe Helena’s defeat and death was enough to avert the course. Is the destruction of hegemony within the setting possible? Is the destruction of hegemony within current conditions, given the imperialist history of reality that are referred to throughout the story, possible?

CONCLUSION

This project set out to illustrate the potential power of science fiction to illustrate the concepts and hypotheses of theory, particularly in the liminal space between science fiction and postcolonialism, a space that has been core to the science fiction genre since very near its inception. Imperialism is a core tenet of much of science fiction, as illustrated through multiple examinations of the history of the genre, but the current trend has been moving away from supporting imperialist powers and towards undermining hegemony in particular. This project has sought, in particular, to demonstrate the ability of science fiction to explore multiple aspects of story within a postcolonial space in a concrete, meaningful way. The ability for science fiction to create rhetorical distance and utilize its speculative nature to make certain aspects of theory into tangible, interactable objects and events within its story is a key strength of the genre for this kind of work, and the audience of science fiction often already expects the very type of social commentary and undermining of hegemony inherent within criticism.

This project has utilized both aspects of that rhetorical strength wielded by science fiction, and has taken a step further in seeking to undermine some of the power structures built into the science fiction genre itself, in particular those attached to imperialism and the idea of human superiority, as well as the idea of the “evil empire” narrative and the binary morality that it often utilizes. By doing so, this project has demonstrated that science fiction is not only a viable form of fiction for serious study, but also a formidable vessel for conveying theoretical ideas to a broad audience. Through sufficiently skilled fiction, the ability of science fiction to serve as a vessel for critical theory could potentially be utilized to bring the concepts of critical theory to a wider audience and help lead to the deconstruction of binaries and power structures that serves as the goal of much critical theory work.

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