

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY

Afrofuturism and the Reclamation of Black Culture and History Within Science Fiction

by

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Artist Statement

I have a passion for creative fiction. From an early age, I have been enamored with fantastical stories, in particular those of the science fiction variety and more significantly those that feature characters who look like me. However, while there is no shortage of great published science fiction, fantasy, and horror stories to consume currently, the pool from which to select from becomes relatively slimmer when searching for works that center the perspectives of Black women in their thirties from New Orleans, or a former female Marine with a taste for travel and a love for Japan. I have consumed many, if not all of both the old and modern-day tentpole classics in my favorite category of literature – *Dune* by Frank Herbert, *American Gods* by Neil Gaiman, *The Three Body Problem* by Cixin Liu, plus many more – and watched with avid glee (and at times, mortified disappointment) when my favorite books were adapted for the small and silver screens. Stories authored by the incomparable Stephen King or Neil Gaiman have not unexpectedly captivated me, but there are no words for the unbridled joy and wonder I have experienced while losing myself in the stories by Octavia Butler or Nnedi Okorafor, where a plethora of characters that look, talk and act like me have been placed front and center.

Consuming these works has been a longtime hobby of mine, which naturally evolved into a longtime aspiration of one day creating such work myself. I fondly recall writing my first short story when I was in grade school. My fourth-grade teacher, Mrs. Flores, charged the class with writing a story containing a clear (and hopefully entertaining) beginning, middle, and end. I vividly remember my panic as I sat at my desk with a pencil in hand, intimidated by the ruled, white sheet of paper lying before me. How could I possibly fill this page with nothing but words, let alone words that formed a coherent story? I recall glancing up to see the other students

eagerly writing their stories, as I struggled with the simple act of writing my name. I did not yet know the term, but writer's block had already seized me, and we have been adversaries ever since. Mrs. Flores leaned over my desk, and even now I can still call to mind the scent of the unmistakably Avon-made Rose Water perfume she wore each day. I distinctly remember her peering down, tapping my page in three successive motions, and calmly explaining to me that "If it helps, your assignment can also be a true story. You can do this!" Ironically, I would find my first short story to be easier to produce as non-fiction, despite my future infatuation with fictional worlds. Still, I have since gleaned a valuable lesson from Mrs. Flores' assignment – to write what you know. Her assurance uplifted me and effectively kickstarted my courage to finally put pencil to paper that day. Before I knew it, words were dancing across the page, and I had formed my first story. I am forever grateful for her support that school year, and her words of encouragement still merrily propel me now, 30 years later, whenever writer's block rears its grisly head.

My favorite artistic medium is the long-form written word, and as alluded to above, I intend to write a science fiction story for my thesis project. My approach will include interweaving the fantastical elements of my story with real-world allegory, using my unique perspective and experiences as an African American woman to explore and pay homage to the celebrated Black science fiction that came before me from the likes of Ms. Octavia Butler, Ms. Nnedi Okorafor, Ms. Tananarive Due, Ms. N.K. Jemisin, Ms. Nalo Hopkinson and a host of other Black science fiction and fantasy authors. I am interested in exploring how looking to the future, imagining far-flung worlds, or envisioning alternate dimensions of our own history can act as a form of Black liberation, and investigating how telling stories through the lens of science fiction can be effective at showcasing hard truths and lessons in an otherwise easily digestible

format. In short, I will write what I know, while paying homage to the authors and genre that inspire me the most.

Artistic Philosophy

Beyond the recollection of writing my first short story in Mrs. Flores' fourth grade class, I recall the next most formative moments in my writing career taking place during high school, or more specifically during the summer breaks between my Freshman, Sophomore, Junior, and Senior years. With an older brother and twin sister, my teenage years were often spent squabbling for individual time with our family television during the summer months. While awaiting my turn to watch an hours-long block of cable television undisturbed, I would frequently sit in my room – nay, the corner of the room I shared with my twin – writing short stories that featured myself as the main character. At the time and to this day, I was quite fond of work by notable horror authors V.C. Andrews and R.L. Stine, as well as the occasional odd harlequin romance. As I read the descriptions of the characters in their stories though, it became increasingly clear that the primary characters, or at times all the characters in their novels, oft described with terms like “pink cheeks,” “stringy hair” or “blue eyes like the heavens,” were most assuredly not from a similar background as my own. In time I began to long for the inclusion of characters with descriptions that looked like me, to read of a young Black girl who could also find herself in a precarious, horror-filled story filled with action and intrigue like the protagonists in my favorite authors' books. It was then, during my high school summer breaks that I began taking matters into my own hands, by translating and transmogrifying the stories I read by re-writing the characters to bestow upon them “regal cheek bones and mahogany-hued skin” or “hair that intricately intertwined.” Without these subtle inclusionary details – although admittedly minute to some – stories were less likely to give me a sense of belonging within their

narrative. Shortly after graduation and determined to find a book that truly spoke to me, I stumbled across the book *Sister, Sister* by Eric Jerome Dickey at a spritely 17 years of age, shortly after joining the U.S. Marine Corps. I recall making short work of the book in my military barracks bedroom, utterly enchanted by a story filled with protagonists (and antagonists) that matched my own complexion and cultural background. At that moment, I realized what I had been subtly craving all along, and although I had been abundantly satiated by the wonderful stories I'd read beforehand by non-Black authors and filled with non-Black characters, reading a story equally as complex that I could wholeheartedly identify with was beyond gratifying, and a humbling revelation. From the perspective of someone who is amply represented in literature and other major media, I imagine it is relatively easy to overlook the influence that representation can have on a person who may not enjoy the same opportunity to see themselves in entertainment. The absence of something is perhaps imperceptible to those without a need for it. For me, seeing myself in a celebratory light -- or even simply in any light at all, was incredible.

My artistic philosophy is to chase the same feeling I had whilst reading *Sister, Sister* by Eric Jerome Dickey, and author my own stories that hopefully one day provide the same bewilderment to another young reader. The themes that drive me are those that include characters with similar backgrounds to my own, placed in astonishing situations far outside their comfort zone or presented with moral quandaries where right and wrong are obscured; stories befitting those written by Stephen King, Neil Gaiman, V.C. Andrews or R.L. Stine. Through my thesis project, I would like to convey the message that people like me are welcome and capable as protagonists in space, in horror, or in sci-fi stories involving technological marvels and cyberpunk aesthetics.

Creative Process

I have found that creating art, particularly with writing, can be a disjointed experience. At times it can be described as an eruption of creativity, and at others it can feel like a truly laborious task. In the pursuit of an education in writing, I have found that the creative process of writing fictional short stories invigorates me to no end, while non-fiction and more analytical work can quickly tire and disarm me. I often take stock of the themes I would like to explore in my writing during the day, then prod myself to dream at night of the fanciful stories that can make use of them. As a full-time graduate student, a partner to a loving husband and the mother of three children, I make use of my smartphone and a simple notes application often to jot down my thoughts, musings, and inspiration throughout my considerably busy day for both the work that I'm assigned as well as the stories I personally strive to write in the future. I prefer to produce my work with my personal computer, but also make use of a notebook scrawled with bullet points and outline summaries to capture my thoughts from time to time. The technique I find most fruitful to me is in creating an outline that sums up the primary "hook" and thesis of a story, a description of the protagonists and antagonists of my story, and a short, 1-2 page encapsulation of the "beats" I'd like to hit in my work prior to fleshing it out for its final form. If I can review this outline the next day and still feel excited about it, and subsequently if I can elicit interest and joy from my short synopsis of the project from those around me, then I will find myself motivated to continue with the process of transforming my short outline into a novella. In terms of preliminary research, I am re-reading seminal science fiction and Afrofuturist works that have inspired me, like *Parable of the Sower* and *Wild Seed* by Octavia Butler, *Lagoon* by Nnedi Okorafor, and *The Three Body Problem* by Cixin Liu. I will also scour the internet archives for related media to my thesis topic, to include reading the interviews

conducted in Mark Dery's *Black to the Future: Interviews with Samuel R. Delany, Greg Tate, and Tricia Rose* (where the term Afrofuturism was coined), and reading and viewing the plethora of content available on the *National Museum of African American History and Culture's* comprehensive online exhibit on Afrofuturism. My goal with research is to immerse myself in not only the works that inspire my thesis, but also the author interviews and analysis most closely related to my thesis topic as well, in order to deconstruct the key elements from the genre I intend to pay homage to.

Inspirations

The literature that inspires me the most are the Hugo and Nebula-award winning works of my favorite authors like Octavia Butler, Nnedi Okorafor, and N.K. Jemisin, of which there are many. *Kindred* (1979), which follows a young Black woman from the modern world as she's ripped through time to meet her ancestors during the United States' 19th century era of slavery, comes to mind as one of my most formative influences from a Black science fiction author. So too, does the *Broken Earth* trilogy of *The Fifth Season* (2015), *The Obelisk Gate* (2016), and *The Stone Sky* (2017) by N.K. Jemisin, which is set in a future world much like ours that is home to cyclical seasons of apocalyptic disasters that can only be stopped by a caste of indentured, but powered individuals known as the "Orogenes." What inspires me the most about these stories is how deftly they interlace real-world themes and important topics like climate change, the nature of systemic discrimination, or the effects of indentured servitude over time within the science fiction genre. Although reading about an alternative history and futures laced with sci-fi, I read through these novels identifying with the cultural and historical backgrounds of the protagonists and can see myself in them. The seasonal apocalyptic weather events occurring in the *Broken Earth* trilogy, for example, are oddly similar to the extreme weather events we encounter today,

with wildfires across the world that grow more frequent, and hurricanes that are now forming in regions long thought impervious to them – like with 2023’s Hurricane Hillary in southern California. The fear and challenge of what it could be like for me, a Black woman in the modern world, were I to be placed in the conditions that my ancestors experienced only a century or so ago, are ever more visceral to me as a reader as I read the story of *Kindred*. It is my hope that my thesis project can similarly capture the dance between exciting science-fiction storytelling and deeper themes close to the African American experience.

Body of Work

The specific body of work that I am currently focused on is a science fiction story that follows a young Black graduate student and company intern who slowly comes to realize that the genius tech-sector founder/inventor she idolizes may be using his world-changing technology for idealistic, yet nefarious purposes. A story of mystery, tech, and simmering revenge, it incorporates themes that inspect the long-term effects of generational trauma and the pervasiveness of technology in our daily lives. It is also a story that integrates the themes I am most excited to entertain within the framework of a genre I am most passionate about. As a graduate student and in my own personal work, I have produced short stories of this nature beforehand, but have never truly attempted to produce a work that could be considered a long-form narrative of more than a few pages. In this regard, my thesis project is unique in that I intend to build upon the characters more fully than I could in a short story format, and conduct more research in order to expand the world that the story is set in. Doing so requires developing lengthier character arcs for the people central in my story than what I’ve previously worked on, and constructing a world richer and more realized than what I have had to contend with in prior assignments.

Impact and Goals

It is my hope to use my art to impact readers in a similar fashion to my reaction to the fictional stories that inspired me above from the creatives that I admire. I see an exciting challenge in the prospect of developing a novel that can appeal to both people like me – with similar interests and backgrounds – as well as society as a whole to take stock of, enjoy, and learn from. For those with a similar perspective as my own, I'd like for my themes and messages to have them nod in understanding as they read through them, and for those that do not share my experiences, I would like to evoke in them a consideration for topics or messages they themselves may not have been cognizant of, or had not thought of deeply beforehand. My long-term goal is to continue writing long-form narratives in the science fiction, horror, and fantasy genres while embracing my unique viewpoint, and I aspire to produce works that I am proud of that can pay homage to and stand alongside the art that inspires me.

Conclusion of Artist Statement

My journey as a graduate student writer has been shaped by a deep passion for creative fiction and a desire to discover and include representation of my unique cultural background and viewpoint in the stories that I both consume and create. From my early days struggling with writer's block in Mrs. Flores' fourth grade class to my discovery of the profound impact of representation in literature, my goal is to commit to telling stories that can resonate with me and others like me, while remaining accessible to all via the genres of science fiction, horror, and fantasy. I truly believe that everyone deserves to see themselves as protagonists in stories that span genres and settings, including in spectacular worlds and situations that we can only dream of. Octavia Butler, Nnedi Okorafor, and N.K. Jemisin have inspired me to see the power of science fiction and fantasy in exploring real-world themes in a more penetrable and accessible

format than what stories purely rooted in reality can provide, and it is my intent to both bridge gaps and challenge perspectives to create worlds where everyone feels seen and heard, one narrative at a time.

Afrofuturism and the Reclamation of Black Culture and History Within Science Fiction

Beginning as a turn of phrase from the 1990's to describe a nascent genre of science fiction storytelling authored by African-American writers, Afrofuturism has grown into much more than its initial scope. Pioneering authors such as Octavia Butler, Charles Saunders, and Samuel R. Delany have played pivotal roles in shaping early examples of Afrofuturism with stories of Black liberation set in alternative histories, while contemporary writers like Nnedi Okorafor, Nalo Hopkinson, and N.K. Jemisin expanded the genre's horizons to also touch upon the cultural history, identities, and folk tales of those from within the wider African diaspora beyond America. In addition, the genre has become an aesthetic unto itself, bolstered by the now classic psychedelia of Jimi Hendrix's "Purple Haze" and "A Merman I Should Turn to Be" or by new media like Ryan Coogler and Marvel Studios' *Black Panther* series of films, and the accompanying comics they're based on. This paper aims to delve into the key aspects of Afrofuturism, and to trace its evolution from its origins to its current expansive form. By examining the works of its most influential authors and their contributions to the genre, we can gain a deeper understanding of Afrofuturism's legacy and its potential as a vehicle for Black liberation.

What is Afrofuturism?

The original definition of the term *Afrofuturism*, famously coined by American critic and author Mark Dery in 1993, was a revolutionary, if slightly myopic colloquialism intended to address what Mr. Dery saw as a dearth in literature from African-American novelists in the science fiction genre. At the time, he defined it as follows: "Speculative fiction that treats African-

American themes and addresses African-American concerns in the context of twentieth-century techno culture — and, more generally, African-American signification that appropriates images of technology and a prosthetically enhanced future — might, for want of a better term, be called Afrofuturism.” Indeed, his seminal 1993 essay, “*Black to the Future*”, (Dery, 1994) opens with two frustrating open questions: “Why do so few African-Americans write science fiction...?” and moreover, “Can a community whose past has been deliberately rubbed out, and whose energies have subsequently been consumed by the search for legible traces of its history, imagine possible futures?” As an American man of European descent, it becomes clear to both Dery — and by proxy, the reader — that as his research unspools throughout the essay, that what he is seeking through these questions both as an aesthetic and as a literary form was in fact alive and well, just in need of being, as he writes in *Black to the Future*: “...sought in unlikely places, constellated from far-flung points.” Dery soon comes to realize, through interviews with preeminent African-American authors and the inclusion of creative outlets that stretch past the conventional literary medium to include music such as Jimi Hendrix’s *Electric Ladyland*, movies like John Sayles’ *The Brother from Another Planet*, comics like *Icon* by Milestone media, and paintings by *Jean-Michel Basquiat*, that in truth, fantastical and technologically-inspired works by African-American creatives were indeed present, if not yet well-known or acknowledged in the American public consciousness. Analyzing their art now, it is hard not to see science fiction and Afrofuturist underpinnings in their work, such as with long-time science fiction reader Jimi Hendrix’s “A Merman I Should Turn to Be,” (1968) where he alludes to a post-apocalyptic undersea refuge, or in an earlier song “Third Stone from The Sun” (1967), referencing Earth’s place in our solar system.

Dery went on to describe that just as the general science fiction genre was itself relegated to a sense of sub-legitimacy in comparison to the wider world of literature, so too was the recognition of African-American creative works within the science fiction category itself. Afrofuturism then, was a term used to categorize and acknowledge creative works by African-American creatives that offered an alternative to the established, seemingly *de facto* perspectives of the future as laid out in Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*, Hugo Gernsback's *Amazing Stories*, or Walt Disney's *Tomorrowland*. The chrome-finished, retro-futuristic, capitalism-infused aesthetic of Hanna-Barbera Productions' *The Jetsons*, complete with zany and remarkable teardrop appliances, were in fact not the only game in town — they were simply the only *known* game in town, at least to him.

The Inclusion of the African Diaspora

In the time since the term's inception, Afrofuturism has come to evolve and expand into more comprehensive terms, like "Africanfuturism" or simply "Black speculative fiction", and even beyond its original definition — to include more than speculative fiction that treats only Black concerns and themes as they relate to America and/or the western gaze, and instead acknowledges and highlights the perspectives of all people within the wider Black diaspora: Africans, African-Americans, Afro-Caribbeans, while also recognizing a rich cultural history and aesthetics that are independent of America's 400-plus year period from 1619 to the present. As Nnedi Okorafor writes in the novel *Africanfuturism: An Anthology*, while referring to Marvel Studios' 2018 blockbuster film *Black Panther*, "Afrofuturism: Wakanda builds its first outposts in Oakland, CA, USA. Africanfuturism: Wakanda builds its first outpost in a neighboring African country." While

acknowledging the incisiveness of Okorafor's critique of the word, there is still a comfort, grace, and power in reclaiming, modifying, and expanding the original definition of the term Afrofuturism to refer to what it has grown into, rather than what it was originally conceived as. For the purpose of this paper, the term Afrofuturism shall consider the term in more updated, blanket terms. As defined by the likes of the *National Museum of African American History and Culture*, "Afrofuturism expresses notions of Black identity, agency and freedom through art, creative works and activism that envision liberated futures for Black life." Similarly, as quoted in *Wired's* "How Afrofuturism Can Help the World Mend", noted sociologist and professor Alondra Nelson defines Afrofuturism as "visions of the future – including science, technology and its cultures in the laboratory, in social theory, and in aesthetics – through the experience and perspective of African diasporic communities." This analysis seeks to address the entirety of what Afrofuturism began as and what it has become, and to deconstruct the critical aspects of the genre in an effort to authentically understand how to contribute to its legacy and future.

Early Authors and Works That Shaped the Genre

At the time of the term's inception, Afrofuturism was coined as a nod of recognition to the creative science fiction literature of noted African-American creatives such as Octavia Butler, Charles Saunders, Samuel R. Delany, and Steve Barnes, among others. In point of fact, Samuel R. Delany himself appeared in Mr. Dery's *Black to the Future*, helping to shape the inception of the term Afrofuturism. As the initial exemplars of the genre, a peering into these creatives' work and analysis of the themes present throughout their stories can inform what some of the most critical original aspects of the genre were and continue to be.

One of the most famous novels set in the genre is the novel *Kindred*, by Octavia Butler. Since its debut in 1997, *Kindred* has come to exemplify key elements of Afrofuturism with its core themes of Black history (in its case, the African-American leg of Black history), identity, and the potential for a liberated future as the result of actions taken in the past. Its juxtaposition of the past and future becomes an incredibly powerful tool for delving into the enduring impact of slavery on contemporary Black lives. While *Kindred* is not necessarily written within a traditional science fiction mold full of dazzling technological marvels or even set in a distant future beyond the present day, Octavia Butler's novel incorporates time travel as its central speculative element to explore its Black protagonists' personal history, unique identity, and the impact of technology on the story's central themes. The story follows a modern Black woman named Dana, who is unwillingly and mysteriously transported back in time, often violently, to a pre-Civil War plantation. Through time travel and from the viewpoint of Dana, Butler vividly portrays the abject horror of slavery through a modern lens, allowing the contemporary audience to more viscerally engage with unquestionably one of, if not the darkest periods of American history. In this regard, Ms. Butler attempts to – and largely succeeds in – addressing a distressing narrative she'd noted at the time, where a general lack of empathy and understanding of the plight of Black individuals in the past had taken hold, and where modern readers were beginning to lose – and arguably continue to lose to this day – a sense of how past ills could continue to inform the American experience even generations later. Her aim to foster empathy by making the past feel both immediate and personal to her audience was itself a form of activism, which has now become an oft-included element of the Afrofuturism genre.

Another author who was celebrated at the outset of the Afrofuturism genre's inception is Mr. Charles Robert Saunders, also known as the father – and inventor of the term – of the “Sword

and Soul” sub-genre of speculative fiction. As defined by fellow Black speculative fiction writer Milton Davis, “Sword and Soul is Sword and Sorcery and epic fantasy based on African history, culture and traditions.” Aptly, Sword and Soul’s first foray into the published world was via Charles Saunders’ *Imaro: the Epic Novel of a Jungle Hero* from 1979, which followed Black protagonist Imaro of the Ilyassia, a reconceived take on the archetypal Conan the Barbarian character popularized by Robert E. Howard. Through the *Imaro* series of books, which also included *Imaro II: The Quest for Cush* (1984) and *Imaro III: The Trail of Bohu* (1985), Saunders showcased what also became key aspects of Afrofuturism with the inclusion of African history, mythology and culture within the guise of speculative fiction. Here too, we can see that while Afrofuturism was initially coined to recognize the absence of African-American voices within science fiction, Saunders’ work helped to extend it beyond the original concept by incorporating both fantasy and a perspective wholly devoid of any relation to American life. However, similar key elements as Octavia Butler’s *Kindred* would shine through, such as his emphasis on cultural agency, identity, and empowerment in the stories that followed Imaro. His writing encouraged readers to explore their own identities and histories while engaging with fantastical narratives, at a time when the predominant fantasy stories available were almost entirely rooted in Greek, Scandinavian, and Celtic influences. By crafting rich and creative worlds that were instead rooted in African traditions, Saunders not only addressed African-American perspectives but also that of the diverse and multifaceted experiences of people from the larger African diaspora.

Mr. Samuel R. Delany’s work, also cited as an initial example within the Afrofuturist genre, includes such stories as his 1968 novel *Nova* and 1975 book *Dhalgren*. As written by Peter Bebergal for *The New Yorker*, “Some of Delany’s works have become essential to the history of science fiction...‘Nova’ describes people being plugged directly into computers, a staple of what

would become cyberpunk. ‘Dhalgren,’ published in 1975 – and one of the more difficult novels in any genre – describes the exploits of the Kid in a post-apocalyptic urban waste virtually devoid of any access to the outside world.” In these novels, Delany’s exploration of complex themes like identity, sexuality, race, and power dynamics are stirring and deeply intertwined within their narratives. In a literary genre that at the time seemed almost preoccupied with the notion of a future that had moved beyond any references to culture, race, or sexuality – that was above discussing such topics in favor of a more broad, sterilized depiction of our futures, Delaney wrote of futures that included socioeconomic classism, eroticism, and racial marginalization. This insistence on infusing speculative fiction with the culture of marginalized groups, with themes and images that were counter to the utopian vision often associated with the wider science fiction genre of the time, is how Delany’s work helped influence what constituted as Afrofuturism upon the genre’s inception.

Contemporary Authors and Works That Shaped the Genre

More recently-published works within the Afrofuturism genre abound from the likes of Nnedi Okorafor, Nalo Hopkinson, and N.K. Jemisin, to name a few. Nnedi Okorafor, a Nigerian-American *New York Times*’ bestselling writer of science fiction and fantasy, is as noted beforehand, the inventor of the Afrofuturism-adjacent term of Africanfuturism. Her storytelling often centers on African and/or African-diasporic stories, which reflect the diversity of Black identities and cultures and the expansiveness of the wider Afrofuturism genre as the category has grown. Her novel *Who Fears Death*, released in 2010, explores a post-apocalyptic Africa that blends spirituality, mysticism, technology, and social commentary, aligning with some of

Afrofuturism's core tenets of expressing Black liberation via technological advancement. In her novel *Binti*, published in 2015, Okorafor introduced readers to a young African protagonist who journeys to the stars to attend an interstellar university in space. The story challenged conventional science fiction tropes by offering a fresh perspective on space exploration and identity, by addressing themes like cultural preservation and the power of holding and recognizing historical knowledge within a Afrofuturist context. Further, it served as an evolving of the Afrofuturism genre by presenting the titular character Binti's journey into space as a harmonious fusion of African traditions and futuristic technology, celebrating Black culture on the same level as Black scientific progress as a countermeasure toward an erasure of Black history that is often the norm for more mainstream speculative fiction. *Binti* saw Okorafor acknowledging the wonder of scientific and technological progress while simultaneously advocating for holding on to the lessons of the past and imploring readers to not lose sight of who you are whilst looking to the future. In this way, Okorafor's work recognizes and uplifts the richness of African traditions and folklore, and acknowledges the significance of ancestral connections in shaping the future. The exploration of these themes highlights the importance of historical continuity and cultural heritage within Afrofuturism, and reframes the genre by enlarging its scope.

Another contemporary Afrofuturist author is Ms. Nalo Hopkinson, whose work is representative of the Afro-Caribbean contribution to the category of Afrofuturism. One of the key aspects of Hopkinson's work is her ability to center Black voices and experiences that draw from the cultural tapestry of the Caribbean, weaving together elements of the region's folklore, language and history into narratives that transcend time and space. Under this purview, magic and spiritualism are much more prominent than in other Afrofuturist texts, and much more specific to the Afro-Caribbean perspectives on magic and mysticism than other fantasy-based speculative

fiction within the genre. Nalo Hopkinson's inclusion of supernatural, spiritual, and metaphysical aspects of Afro-Caribbean lore serve to add to the depth and complexity of her worlds, and with her inclusion of international locales like Toronto, she sets herself apart by showcasing a city often overshadowed by more prototypical Black areas set in America or Africa alone. Set in a dystopian, futuristic version of Toronto, her critically-acclaimed novel *Brown Girl in the Ring* follows Ti-Jeanne, a young Afro-Caribbean woman who lives in an impoverished neighborhood downtown. A segregated city, the wealthy and powerful are afforded the privilege of living in fortified enclaves while the rest of society must struggle to survive in a now lawless and ravaged urban landscape. Shortly after the story begins, she comes to learn that she has inherited supernatural powers from her grandmother, herself a practicing Caribbean spiritualist. With her abilities, she becomes embroiled in a world of danger, crime, and magic while confronting and coming to terms with some of the darker aspects of her family's history. Similar to the work of Nnedi Okorafor, her craft contributes to the genre of Afrofuturism through its honoring of cultural and ancestral heritage within far-flung, futuristic settings.

The work of N.K. Jemisin offers yet another peak at the evolution of Afrofuturism since the seminal works of Octavia Butler, Charles Saunders, and Samuel R. Delany. While brimming with social commentary akin to the work of many other Afrofuturist creatives, N. K. Jemisin's work also stands as an exemplary standard-bearer for the inclusion of environmental issues within the pantheon of Afrofuturistic texts. N.K. Jemisin is also known for her clever use of multiple perspectives, such as her use of three distinct perspectives following her primary characters of Essun, Damaya and Syenite in her *The Fifth Season* series of novels, who are later surprisingly revealed to be merely the same person within different stages of her life. Through the use of this inventive narrative structure, Jemisin is able to present a story that acknowledges the wildly

differing viewpoints of not only all people as they journey through life, but uniquely that of the Black perspective as found in different generations over time. With her exploration of environmental issues, she smartly weaves real-world, present-day weather phenomenon into a narrative that informs the cataclysmic events that take place in her far-flung, future Earth. Nature and its creatures are also presented as intimately connected to the Earth, and the degrading treatment of its creatures and of the human-like race that are most attuned to nature are presented as the cause for much of the seismic disasters and calamity that ensues. Jemisin's work touches upon all of the critical elements that Afrofuturism is known for, including biting social commentary, racial segregation, spirituality and supernatural abilities, technological advancement, sexuality, and more. Her work reads as a homage to the genre of Afrofuturism, weaving many if not all of the most popular elements of the category into a complex series of Hugo and Nebula award-winning speculative fiction novels.

Critical Aspects of the Genre

Taken together, the work of these celebrated Black authors – Octavia Butler, Charles Saunders, Samuel R. Delany, Nnedi Okorafor, Nalo Hopkinson, N.K. Jemisin – and more, serve to illustrate an overarching pedagogy with which one can extrapolate just what, exactly, one can expect from a work set within the Afrofuturist genre. First and foremost, as with the genre of science fiction in general, all Afrofuturist texts begin their lives as speculative fiction, and all without fail must include and highlight the unique experiences, culture, and perspectives of people of African descent, including Africans, African-Americans, Afro-Caribbeans, and others within the larger African diaspora. Beyond these critical elements, the ingredients for an Afrofuturist

work becomes less staunchly required, but nonetheless expected in some form: cultural critique, technology and innovation, alternative histories and futures, aesthetic and cultural remixing of traditional science fiction tropes, cosmic and spiritual themes, social and political commentary, intersectionality, Afrocentric mythology, and resistance empowerment are all themes that either by themselves or in combination with one another helped to position such stories as definitively Afrofuturist. Through these elements, Afrofuturism becomes a potent form of Black liberation through speculative fiction, as it offers readers and authors alike an avenue through which to imagine “elseworlds” that can free Black voices and narratives from the constraints of historical oppression, or alternatively, to imagine stories where Black protagonists and society at large are capable of, or have already achieved social justice and political change that our present world has not, or may not ever achieve. They also serve as a blueprint of sorts, providing speculation on how readers may enact and advocate for change in our present world to either reach the heights of the utopias or avoid the dystopias of the Afrofuturist dimensions they imagine.

Conclusion

Afrofuturism, as initially coined by Mark Derry in the 1990s, has evolved into a multifaceted subgenre of speculative fiction that is more expansive than ever, from a definition limited in scope to the African-American experience from 1619 and beyond, to a category of work that encompasses the broad spectrum of science and fantasy fiction centering all perspectives from within the African diaspora (African, African-American, Afro-Caribbean, and other peoples across the Black diaspora). Its influence has also evolved into a cultural and artistic aesthetic, surfacing in atypical literary media such as music and film. It embraces the rich history and ancestral

heritages of those within Black culture alongside the technological progress of the future, platforming authors and perspectives that until its proliferation were considered sub-legitimate in the wider literary world, and even within the science fiction genre itself. Several key authors have played pivotal roles in shaping Afrofuturism and expanding its boundaries: Octavia Butler, with works like *Kindred*, explored the enduring impact of slavery on contemporary Black lives and challenged conventional historical narratives; Charles Saunders introduced the "Sword and Soul" sub-genre, infusing speculative fiction with African history, culture, and traditions; and Samuel R. Delany addressed complex themes like identity, sexuality, race, and power dynamics within futuristic settings. Now expanded by contemporary writers like Nnedi Okorafor, Nalo Hopkinson, and N.K. Jemisin, the term's humble origins as merely a cipher for 'science fiction stories written by and for African Americans' has since transformed into a powerful vehicle for imagining Black liberation, and for preserving ancestral folklore and experiences from across the African diaspora through modern, futuristic retellings. Through its evolution, it reminds us of the enduring power of speculative storytelling to shape our understanding of identity, history, and the possibilities of the human experience.

Creative Manuscript

Summary

For this thesis project, my intention is to present the reader with fictional stories highlighting multiple aspects of the Afrofuturist genre across various mixed media; including Short Stories, a Screenplay Excerpt, and Novel Excerpt. Key elements of Afrofuturist stories include those set within the science fiction and/or speculative fiction genres as well as prominent inclusion of Black and African-diasporic identity, history and culture. Other components often included in Afrofuturist works are the application of advanced technology, power and the legacy of oppression, and African-diasporic spirituality, to name a few.

Title: Live Linx**Category: Novelette**

Synopsis: In a world where technology reigns supreme, Zara creates a virtual avatar to interview for a coveted position at Linx, the powerful corporation that holds an iron grip over society. Little does she know that her simple act of applying has set in motion a series of events that will unravel the dark secrets lurking beneath Linx's gleaming facade. As Zara and Sean secure positions at Linx, they are filled with naive excitement, unaware of the ominous onboarding process that awaits them. They meet Viv, an enigmatic digital guide who leads them through the corporation's advanced technology. Despite some misgivings, they are captivated by the possibilities of this seemingly amazing world. Sean, driven by a deep-seated belief that his twin sisters are still alive, convinces Zara to help him find them. As they delve deeper into the virtual realm, they uncover a sinister scheme that extends far beyond their wildest imaginings. Hospice centers, where unsuspecting individuals are used as living memory cards, reveal the horrifying depths to which the corporation will sink to maintain its stranglehold on power. In a heart-wrenching revelation, Sean is forced to confront the devastating truth that his sisters are indeed gone, their lives claimed by the very technology he sought to master. But this discovery only fuels their determination to expose Linx's insidious practices and the man at the helm, the formidable Mr. Robert Williams.

Live Linx

Chapter 1

From her tiny bedroom desk, Zara flicked an extended pointer finger in the air, navigating through a myriad of options to build her avatar. Each swipe and tap brought her closer to manifesting her digital self. Her excitement bubbled as she scrolled through the possibilities.

Hair options flashed before her, ranging from short spikes to long sleek coils. Zara flicked her wrist, turning invisible pages as she scrolled to find locs that resembled her own.

Shoe selections appeared next, offering an eclectic mix of new edgy designs and timeless classics. Zara had never seen so many unlocked features. She encountered a plethora of outlandish items, from cybernetic enhancements to shimmering holographic accessories and pets. She continued to build her Linx avatar, impressed and awestruck with the options.

“Oh, nice one!” Zara exclaimed, her hands mimicking the act of plucking an item from a grocery shelf. After scrolling through clothing, she settled on a shiny red leather jacket adorned with matte black zippers and buttons for her avatar. With a tap, the jacket materialized, and her headset vibrated to confirm the transaction.

This was her shot, and she was not going to let it slip through her fingers.

With each keystroke, she molded her virtual avatar. The digital representation needed to be perfect; it was, after all, the first impression she would make on the eyes that mattered. She programmed the avatar with the latest algorithms she could access, ensuring smooth movements and a responsive interface.

"Identity is currency," she whispered to herself, a mantra to keep the jitters at bay. In this world, where tech and flesh intertwined, an avatar was more than just a digital puppet.

As the avatar came to life on her screen, Zara couldn't help but marvel at it all. Here she was, her entire essence compressed into bytes and pixels in hope that her creation would pass through the scrutinizing filters of Linx.

She paused for a moment, breathing deeply as she hovered over the 'Submit' button. It was more than a mere click; it was the opening of her future. Zara pushed aside her apprehension and let her finger fall.

"Here goes everything," she murmured, setting forth her avatar into the vast unknown of Linx's corporate inner works. Zara removed her clunky outdated VR headset and turned her focus to the Linx prompt on her computer screen.

"By signing this agreement, you agree to safeguard all confidential information disclosed during the interview process, including but not limited to proprietary technology, trade secrets, and corporate strategies. Any breach of this agreement will result in legal action to the fullest extent permitted by our law. Do you agree to these conditions?"

Zara raised an eyebrow as she clicked the 'Agree' button. Her breath caught as the screen before her dissolved into a shimmering cascade of pixilated light.

"Commencing integration," a voice announced, from her speakers. Zara's desktop interface blinked black and white until it was completely replaced by a sleek and surreal tableau of white.

"Please answer the following questions," the voice commanded. Zara's computer flashed with text.

Would you like to work for Linx Corps?

Click 'yes' to proceed.

Do you acknowledge Linx Corps as a tech-based company?

Click 'yes' to proceed.

Do you consent to utilizing Linx Corps technology for the interview process?

Click 'yes' to proceed.

Do you agree to install the Linx Corps application on this device?

Click 'yes' to proceed.

With each affirmative click, Zara felt a surge of anticipation.

Then it began—an automatic download, seamless and invasive, like ivy creeping through the cracks of an old wall.

"Hello, Zara Akande," a voice greeted her. "I am Vivianne, your guide through Linx's integration process. Please remain calm and do not disconnect."

"Umm, hello?" Zara responded tentatively leaning closer to the computer, her eyes fixated on the screen.

As if awaiting her acknowledgment, a black line materialized across her computer screen, twisting, and expanding until it formed a pair of eyes. The irises, a deep brown, were hexagonal in shape – blinked and fixed their gaze upon Zara.

Zara's heart raced, a beat skipped here and there, as Viv's ocular sensors scanned her. Behind those enigmatic eyes lay algorithms which could dissect her qualifications, analyze her potential, and strip down the layers of her ambition.

"Your compliance is appreciated," Viv continued, her tone unwavering, commanding yet somehow reassuring. "We will now proceed with the preliminary interview stages. Be advised that all interactions are recorded for quality and training purposes."

"Please log in with your headset to continue," Viv instructed.

Zara complied, donning her outdated headset with care, tightening the over stretched head straps. She pulled the straps tighter than usual to prevent the embarrassment of a shifting screen. With a deep breath that did little to steady her raising pulse, she secured the device over her eyes. Zara's heart hammered against her ribs in awe tinged with a whisper of fear. The screen before her welcomed her into the virtual realm, its darkness gradually yielding to a luminous display.

"Zara, from this point, I can assist and answer any questions you may have. Just call out my name and state your inquiry," Viv's voice resonated through the headset speakers.

"You can nod or speak your affirmation. Do you understand?" Viv queried.

Zara nodded in agreement.

"Good, we may proceed."

Zara materialized in a virtual office, a luxurious armchair cradled her with artificial comfort.

"Welcome, Ms. Akande," boomed a voice, clear and cold as if sculpted from ice.

The avatar of Linx's creator, Mr. Robert Williams, materialized before her, a rendition so flawless it bordered on eerie. He bore the likeness of his real-world counterpart with uncanny precision: the salt-and-pepper hair meticulously styled, the sharp brown eyes, every line and

wrinkle on his face was there. But there was something unsettling about the perfection etched into his features.

"Your résumé is impressive," he began, his gaze dissecting her virtual presence. "But why Linx, Ms. Akande? What do you seek in our confluence of technology and power?"

Zara took a moment to compose herself, trying to read past the artificiality, aware that beneath this pixel-perfect exterior lurked a mind that had navigated the treacherous waters of corporate warfare with ease.

"I want to matter," she replied, her voice steady, despite the butterflies performing acrobatics in her stomach. "I want to be at the forefront of technological evolution."

Mr. Williams' avatar nodded, the motion so fluid it seemed almost human. "And how do you intend to navigate the complexities of our operations? The challenges are many, and not all are... visible."

Zara sensed the layers within his question. Her answer would need to reflect not just her skill but her ability to perceive the unspoken, to decrypt the subtext of Linx's enigmatic culture.

"I am ready to face the invisible, every challenge is an opportunity." she said, her confidence flaring.

There was a pause, a momentary stillness in the virtual air as if the entire system held its breath. Then Mr. Williams smiled, an expression that seemed rehearsed yet held a trace of genuine intrigue.

"Very well, Ms. Akande." His avatar stepped back, the space around them humming with encrypted potential. "Let us see if you can indeed rise to meet the unseeable challenges of Linx."

She could feel Mr. Williams' piercing gaze through his too-perfect avatar, each pixel scrutinizing her every move in this virtual interrogation chamber.

"Ms. Akande," his voice was clinical, precise, "your records indicate a desire for independent projects. How do you align this with our collaborative ethos at Linx?"

Her mouth felt dry, like she had swallowed a biscuit. "Although collaboration is the motherboard of innovation," Zara began, her voice a shade less firm than she'd have liked.

"My solo endeavors are...a sandbox where I develop ideas."

"Interesting analogy," Williams commented, the corners of his mouth twitching upwards in a smile.

"Your passion is evident," he continued, shifting seamlessly to the next line of inquiry. "But how will your approach adapt to our proprietary systems? They are quite... unique."

"I thrive on learning and mastering new systems. I see them as puzzles, awaiting solutions." Zara replied, finding a bit more footing.

"Very well," Williams responded, his avatar's eyes narrowing slightly, calculating her potential within his empire.

"Ms. Akande, your answers have been illuminating," Williams said. "We at Linx believe you possess the innovative spark we value. Welcome aboard."

The words crashed over her like a wave of relief, washing away the tension that had held her rigid. Her avatar managed a graceful nod, but inside, Zara was a rush of elation. She was in; her dreams, now solidified and attainable.

"Thank you, Mr. Williams," she breathed, excitement sparking deep within her. "I won't disappoint."

"See that you don't," Williams' avatar replied, the edge in his voice slightly softening. "An orientation packet will be sent to you. Prepare yourself, Ms. Akande."

As the connection terminated, Zara peeled off the headset, the old leather straps chafed her skin quickly bringing her back to her world.

Zara's gaze fell upon the eyes on her computer screen, watching her intently.

"Welcome to Linx," Viv chimed in, her hexagonal pupils blinking.

"Viv, were you watching me the whole time?" Zara inquired; her curiosity piqued.

"Yes, I observed your interview. I am your guide through Linx's integration process." Viv confirmed.

"Right," Zara nodded, her mind awash with questions. "Are you done observing?"

"Your observation is complete for this phase," Viv replied, the eyes blinked slowly as if they were falling asleep until the black line receded into the screen. "Your journey begins now."

Chapter 2

The neon glow from the kitchen's smart panels flickered across Laura Akande's face. She sat at the table, her biotech leg stretched out, the intricate mesh of synthetic fibers and microprocessors visible beneath a translucent dermal sheath.

"Is it acting up again, Ma?" Zara asked, as she entered the room, catching the subtle twitch in her mother's brow.

"Ah, just the usual stiffness," Laura replied casually waving a dismissive hand as she spoke. Zara knew better—the biotech leg hadn't received a software update in months.

"Let me see." Zara knelt beside her mother, her fingers running along the contours of the artificial limb, feeling the minute vibrations of servos struggling to comply. Her mind raced through diagnostics, her innate understanding of technology kicking into overdrive.

"Remember when you first got this?" Zara murmured, a smile flitting across her lips as she tried to lighten the mood. "You danced around the living room like you were auditioning for a lunar ballet."

Laura chuckled softly, "I did, didn't I? Felt like I could conquer the world—or at least outrun your father."

"Too bad he wasn't much of a sprinter," Zara quipped, her hands still busy probing the interface ports. The leg hummed softly, responding to her touch with the faintest hint of compliance. Laura watched her daughter with a proud smile stamped on her face.

"Ze-Ze, you know..." Laura began, her voice trailing off as she grappled with the thought of her contributions the family's financial burden.

"Hey, it's okay," Zara reassured without looking up, her focus unyielding. "We're a team, right?"

"Always," Laura affirmed, her gaze lingering on Zara's slender frame. She marveled at how her daughter's braids cascaded down her back like intricately weaved ropes.

"Got it," Zara exclaimed suddenly, a grin erupting across her face as the biotech leg emitted a triumphant series of beeps. Laura felt a jolt of relief surge through the limb, its movements now fluid,—if only temporarily.

"Thank you, my leg whisperer," Laura said, reaching out to squeeze Zara's hand.

"I still need to update it Mom." Zara swiped the holographic interface, her eyes scanning lines of code that flickered like fireflies.

"Price hike... again?" she muttered under her breath. Her mind raced, if they didn't keep up with the updates, the leg would degrade into a clunky paperweight.

"Can you bypass it?" Laura's voice cut through Zara's concentration.

"Working on it," Zara assured her, but the frustration was a bitter taste on her tongue.

"Temporary fix," she declared with a mix of triumph and resignation. "But this isn't sustainable."

"I know." Laura's brow furrowed as she stood testing out the leg.

The door camera buzzed throughout their home announcing a visitor at the front door, cutting their conversation short.

"Expecting anyone?" Zara asked, arching an eyebrow as she peered through the window.

"Nothing on my schedule," Laura replied, sharing a puzzled glance with her daughter.

Zara approached the front door, opening it to reveal a courier, in his Linx-branded uniform, holding out a sleek, unmarked package.

"Delivery for Zara Akande," he stated blankly.

"From?" Zara pressed, eyeing the parcel with suspicion. It wasn't like Linx to make house calls unless...

"Direct from Linx Tech. Please confirm receipt." He extended a translucent pad toward her, awaiting her biometric authorization.

"Confirmed," she said, her thumbprint sealing the transaction. She watched the courier depart before turning the package over in her hands. Just moments after her interview, Linx had responded. What game were they playing?

With the package secure under her arm, Zara walked swiftly through the narrow hallway of her home. The walls, lined with screens, hummed as she moved. Reaching her room, Zara placed the mysterious parcel on her desk.

"Here goes nothing," she muttered. She peeled back the layers to reveal a luxurious velvet black box adorned with four interlocking white ovals. A Halo Virtual headset lay pristine on a velvet pillow, its black finished surface shimmered like a dark liquid. It was Linx's latest model, something she had only seen in high-resolution ads that promised an immersive experience like no other.

Zara cradled the halo, it's cool shell felt like ice in the warmth of her palms. "No way, this has to be a mistake," she whispered, her heart racing with both delight and unease. But there it was, addressed to her, no mistake about it.

"Activating now, Zara," a familiar voice resonated from the headset, causing Zara to almost drop it in surprise. Viv's digital avatar materialized before her.

"Viv?" Zara started. "What is this?"

"Observation logs indicated your previous headset was nearing obsolescence. Efficiency projections showed a significant enhancement in your performance with an upgrade. Thus, Linx has provided," Viv explained, her tone steady and calculated.

"I can't afford this," Zara's initial thrill dissipated, replaced by a prickling sensation on the back of her neck. "Wait, you've been monitoring my gear?" The thought of being watched disgusted her.

"Only to optimize your integration with our systems. A payment waiver has been approved. It is standard procedure for all potential Linx operatives," Viv responded, oblivious or indifferent to Zara's discomfort.

"Standard procedure," Zara echoed, her mind whirring. She ran her fingers along the sleek headset, its design suddenly feeling less like an advancement and more like a shackle. What else had they observed? What else did they know?

"Your concern is noted but unnecessary," Viv continued, her violet eyes pulsing gently. "Privacy parameters are strictly adhered to, within the scope of operational necessity."

"Of course," Zara replied rolling her eyes, her voice low with resignation. She'd play their game—for now. But she wouldn't forget the feeling of unseen eyes tracking her every move. Not for one second.

"Viv, power down," Zara commanded, her fingers hovering over the new headset with hesitation.

"Before I do, congratulations are in order, Zara," Viv intoned. "Your first day of integration begins tomorrow at 0800 hours. Please report to the Linx Tech Hub for biometric enrollment and orientation."

"Thanks," Zara murmured, not quite meeting the digital eyes that watched her from the monitor. Her heart hammered a quickening beat.

"Sleep well. You'll need your cognitive faculties at peak performance," Viv added, then, without further ceremony, the violet glow from Viv's eyes folded into a thin line splitting her screen in half slowly faded into the dull white light of the standby screen.

Zara exhaled slowly, letting the silence wash over her. She reached out and drew a heavy blanket from the back of her chair, draping it over the computer terminal.

"See you tomorrow." she whispered to the covered machine, her mind racing.

Chapter 3

Zara's eyes fluttered open to the soft hum of her smart curtains retracting. The savory scent of frying plantains wafted into her room.

"Good morning, Ze-Ze," chimed her mother's voice, infused with warmth. In the kitchen, her father stood at the interactive cooking station tasting a fried plantain.

"Morning," Zara replied.

"Your favorite, Ze-Ze." She gestured toward the plate of steaming plantains, its aroma enveloping her.

"Thanks, Ma," Zara said, wrapping her arms around her mother in a spontaneous embrace, feeling the reciprocal squeeze.

"Can't let you go hungry on your big day." Her father's grin was infectious as he joined the hug.

"Everything's going to change after today," Zara mused aloud.

"Change is good, as long as you remain true to yourself," her mother advised.

"Always," Zara affirmed while stuffing a hot plantain into her mouth.

Stepping out into the brisk morning, Zara's gaze fell upon the vehicle waiting curbside — a sleek black, autonomous car with tinted windows reflecting the rising sun. Its silent engine raised her suspicion. Had it been here all night?

Zara stepped toward the car, its door clicked and opened as she approached.

The autonomous car hummed as it glided through the city, its navigational algorithms maneuvering around the morning traffic. Zara's fingers danced across her smart bracelet, projecting augmented reality feeds before her eyes.

"Destination approaching," the vehicle intoned. Zara straightened her posture, smoothing down the fabric of her smart-fiber suit as she prepared to exit the car.

The car came to a halt outside Linx's induction center, a hub for new recruits. Zara stepped out, the door automatically closed behind her with a soft hiss. Linx headquarters loomed before her, she scanned the area, noting the other arrivals, catching snippets of hushed conversations.

"First day?" A voice cut through the din.

Zara turned to face the direction of the voice.

"Is it that obvious?" she answered, trying to match his calm.

"Only because it's my first day too," he said, a faint smile tugging at the corner of his lips.

"Zara," she offered her hand, which he shook firmly.

"Sean."

They stood amidst the throng of new recruits, each lost in their thoughts.

"Any idea what we're getting into?" Zara asked, her gaze drifting towards the front where executives prepared to indoctrinate them into Linx's world.

"I have no idea," Sean replied, his eyes narrowing slightly. "But I plan to learn quickly."

"Good strategy," Zara nodded.

"Let's hope it pays off," he murmured to himself.

"Ever think we're just cogs in their machine?" Sean's voice was low, barely audible over the hum of whispered conversations and shuffling feet.

Zara moved closer, the faint scent of new plastic freshly cut grass mingled in her nostrils. "I try not to," she admitted, watching as he constantly shifted his gaze.

"Ten years ago, my mother fell ill," Sean said, his words dropping like stones in a still pond. "She fought hard, but Linx's treatments..." His voice trailed off, his jaw tightening.

"Sorry, I can't even imagine," Zara replied, her own heart heavy with the thought of her mother's leg and how quickly illness could turn a family's world upside down.

Sean's gaze shifted looking around and, finally meeting hers. "My father and I, we took care of my twin sisters after that."

"Must've been tough." Zara shifted her body weight weary. She offered a small nod of understanding.

"But now, it's why I'm here." Sean swallowed hard.

Zara shivered as Linx's automatic doors whooshed open creating tornado of cold metallic air. The new hires eagerly walked into the building. She watched as the doors sealed shut behind them.

"Welcome, Zara Akande," an automated voice greeted everyone offering an individual salutation as they stood in the corridor.

"Ms. Akande? Mr. Thompson?" A voice pulled Zara from her thoughts.

Before her stood a receptionist, if one could call the entity that. A humanoid form with skin like liquid chrome and eyes with hexagonal pupils.

"Follow me, please," the receptionist gestured with a hand that morphed to point the way, its fingers momentarily elongating before resettling into a human-like shape.

Zara nodded, her senses tingling with every step. As she walked, her mind replayed Sean's words, the loss of his mother was a pain she did not want to know.

"Welcome to the new hire reception room," the receptionist announced, gesturing to a doorway that appeared within the wall.

"Thank you," Zara said, her voice steady despite the quickening beat of her heart.

Zara's breath caught as she stepped beyond the threshold, her eyes wide and eager. The new hire reception room unfurled before her, pulsing with life and light. Holographic displays hovered in midair. They showcased sleek prosthetics that moved with such fluidity they mocked the limitations of flesh and bone, interfaces that responded to mere thoughts.

Her gaze flitted from one marvel to the next, alighting on a wall-sized screen that rippled at her approach. Zara's heart thrummed with excitement.

"Can you believe this place?" she whispered, more to herself than to Sean. But when she glanced aside, she found him distant, his forehead creased not with wonder but with something akin to urgency. His eyes darted from corner to corner, scanning the expanse of the lobby as if seeking a sign only he could decipher.

"Everything alright?" she prodded gently, her enthusiasm dimming in the shadow of his palpable anxiety.

"Uh, yeah. Just taking it all in," Sean replied. He offered a taut smile, then seemed to shake himself, mustering focus. "You go ahead, I'll catch up."

Zara hesitated momentarily before continuing her venture through the lobby. Interactive modules invited her to engage her fingertips against smooth metallic surfaces that hummed with hidden currents, sending tingling current through her skin.

Chapter 4

"Welcome, Zara Akande and Sean Thompson," greeted a familiar voice. It belonged to Viv, materializing before them—a tall, slender figure with silver cascading hair and violet eyes with hexagonal pupils that seemed to pulse.

"Follow me, please," Viv said.

She led them deeper into the core, where walls pulsed, and the air thrummed with the energy.

"Is this real?" Zara breathed, reaching out to touch a floating console that released a soft chime in reaction her fingertips.

"Everything you see here is the pinnacle of our advancements," Viv replied, the pride in her voice almost human.

Sean, let loose a low whistle, his green eyes witnessing a world he never thought possible. "Incredible," he murmured, standing shoulder to shoulder with Zara as they toured their new place of employment.

Zara glanced at her bracelet. She jolted with surprise seeing that time had flown by. She didn't want the day to end. "Sean, my mom is probably making a huge dinner tonight, wanna join?"

Sean's eyes lit at the invite, his stomach instantly roared at the mention of food. "Sure, thanks for the invitation." He spoke softly to hide contain his excitement.

"We can ride home together," Zara gently encouraged Sean.

As they made their way out of Linx, Sean couldn't shake off a niggling feeling at the back of his mind.

Outside, the cityscape greeted them with a soft evening glow. Zara smile faded as she glanced over and caught the furrow in Sean's brow.

"Something on your mind?" she asked, concern coloring her voice.

Sean hesitated for a moment, weighing his words carefully. "Something feels off in there," Sean looked back to the doors of the Linx building. "There's more than what they're showing us in there." he confessed in a low tone, wary of eavesdroppers.

Zara glanced at the grass, a flicker of doubt crossing her features. "I think can be overwhelming," she admitted, her voice tinged with a hint of worry. "But, maybe it will just take some time to get used to."

Sean nodded, as he entered the car after Zara, they sat in the self-driving car their thoughts unraveling in the silence. The city's lamps flashed short bursts of light as they drove by.

As they approached Zara's home, Zara and Sean exchanged a glance before quickly averting eye contact.

Zara's room was a haven of organized chaos, her desk was scattered with circuit boards. The aroma of soldering flux lingered in the air. Her workstation buzzed softly.

"Zara, I need your help." His voice was a low thrum, carrying urgency that seemed to vibrate through the room. His secret had grown into a large lump in his throat, he swallowed hard.

Zara's posture straightened, her gaze sharpening with concern. "What is it?"

"It's...messages," Sean said, each word punctuated with a hesitant breath. "From them. I think they're trying to reach out."

"Them?" Zara tilted her head, as she attempted to piece together his cryptic admission.

"My sisters," Sean clarified, his eyes flickering with a flame of hope and fear.

"Why would your sisters send you messages?" Zara spoke cautiously.

"They were sick," Sean voice trembled causing him to pause. "Linx tried to help but, they couldn't save them." Sean body grew hot as he spoke.

"Two months ago, we got a call. My sisters didn't make it" Hot tears flowed down Sean's cheek. "Now, I've been getting these messages, and I don't know if it's real or just my mind playing tricks."

"Show me," Zara demanded, already pushing her halo headset towards him, the sleek band glistened.

"Can I?" Sean hesitated, his fingers brushing against the cool metal and synthetic interface of the device.

"Use it. Let's see what you've got." Zara's voice was steady, but her hands trembled.

Sean fitted the halo over his head, the device coming alive with a gentle pulse around his temples. The room fell away, replaced first by cascade of data then darkness.

"Come on," he muttered under his breath "Where are you?"

Zara stood nearby watching for clues to help him.

Suddenly, a flicker of light and movement caught his attention—a character stood still, a child's avatar, her virtual eyes unsettlingly familiar. Sean's heart quickened.

"Amara?" His voice quivered.

The avatar tilted its head, the way his younger sister used to when she was pondering a particularly tricky question. She smiled softly but her eyes told a different story. They were widened and glossed over with unshed tears. The avatar's mouth opened slightly as a message popped up on his screen: "Find me, Sean."

"Who's controlling you?" Sean demanded, his hands balled into fist.

Sean momentarily pulled himself from the virtual encounter, turning to glance at Zara. "It's them, Zara. It has to be." His voice shook, pleading to be believed.

"Your sisters?" Zara's brow creased, skepticism and empathy battling within her.

"Every time I play, there's this... NPC. And every time, I get these messages." He picked up the halo again, but the avatar had vanished.

"Messages like what?" Zara approached, slowly placing a hand onto Sean's shoulder.

"Clues, riddles—it feels like they're trying to tell me something." Sean scrolled through his message log, displaying the cryptic texts.

"Could be a hacker messing with you," Zara offered, though her voice lacked certainty.

"Or it could be Linx. Maybe they know something we don't." Sean's grip tightened on the halo. "The last message came right before the interview. Right before Linx took over my computer."

"Look, Sean," Zara said, placing a hand on his shoulder, grounding him back to reality.

"We'll figure this out, okay? We're in this together now."

"Right." Sean exhaled slowly, nodding. "Together."

A silence settled between them as Sean paced the length of Zara's dimly lit room, the glow of the screens reflecting in his green eyes, casting blue and grey hues on his face. His loc'd hair seemed to absorb the light, creating an aura around him. He stopped occasionally to tap on the wall, where holographic schematics of Linx's headquarters flickered into existence.

"Look at this," he said, pointing at a section of the blueprint that pulsed with a soft blue light. "The main server room. It's the heart of their operations."

Zara leaned forward, her eyes tracing the lines and nodes of the digital layout. "You think they're holding information about your sisters there?"

"Exactly." Sean's voice was steady. "I've been doing my homework. Linx has archives, data vaults inaccessible from the outside. But if I can get in, physically get in..."

"Then you might find out what really happened to them," Zara completed his thought.

"Right. But I need to be careful. If I'm going to do this, I have to blend in." Sean turned away from the wall, his gaze meeting Zara's. "That's where my plan comes in."

"We already work for Linx..." Zara hesitated, biting her lip. "That's risky. They monitor everything we do now. You can't do this alone."

"Which is why I need someone on the inside. Someone smart, someone who can cover my tracks." His eyes held hers, silently pleading.

"Me?" she asked, though it wasn't really a question.

"Zara, you can navigate these systems." Sean's hand found hers, his touch firm yet gentle.

"I can't do this without you."

A shiver ran down Zara's spine as the weight of his request settled on her shoulders. She knew what it meant to go against Linx.

"Okay," she said, her voice barely above a whisper. "We'll do it together."

"Thank you," Sean breathed, relief washing over his features.

"First things first," Zara said, pulling up her own interface. "We need to secure our communications, make sure Linx can't listen in. I've been working on an encryption algorithm that should keep us under the radar."

"Brilliant," Sean remarked, watching as she typed across the virtual keyboard.

"Next, we play it cool," she continued. "Act normal, go to work, be the model employees. All while we dig for information. No need to rush in and go all Braveheart" It was an old movie reference, but it worked for Zara.

"Understood." Sean nodded, his mind already racing through the possibilities.

"Let's just hope your hunch about your sisters is right," Zara added, locking eyes with him.

"It has to be." The edges of Sean's solemn demeanor softened momentarily, revealing the vulnerable hope beneath. "It's all I have left of them."

"Then let's not waste any more time." Zara stood, extending her hand to him. "Let's start planning."

Chapter 5

"Your understanding of our network is impressive," Viv acknowledged, her eyes lingering on them both.

"Thanks," Zara said, her mind still racing with questions about Linx. "There's just so much to take in."

"Indeed, but you are not alone. You have each other," Viv stated..

As they absorbed the enormity of Linx's digital empire, Sean nudged Zara playfully with his elbow. "We'll figure this out," he promised..

"Sure we will," Zara agreed, her smile candid and bright.

Zara accessed the holographic interface, the images and data streams cascading around her like magic.

"Look at this," Sean whispered urgently as he pointed to an encrypted file that shimmered against the virtual backdrop. His green eyes locked onto the screen.

Zara leaned in, her braids brushing against Sean's shoulder, and squinted at the complexity before them. "It's like... it's hiding something," she murmured, her chest tightened as her mind raced to keep up with the encryption.

"Exactly," Sean breathed out, "My sisters, they weren't just lost to the system. Linx took them, and I'm going to get them back."

"No, Sean not now." she commanded in a rough whisper. She watched as Sean's hands hovered over the interface, plotting coordinates and drafting plans with a feverish intensity.

"We can use their tech against them," he said. "We infiltrate the central hub, find where they're holding my sisters, and we break them out."

Zara's heart hammered as she considered his words. His plan was high risk; the consequences of failure could result in both of them being terminated.

"Sean, this is dangerous, you're going all Braveheart now," Zara countered, her brown eyes meeting his. "You could be walking right into a trap. We need to think this through, report-"

"No!" Sean cut her off. "I can't wait any longer. It's been six months; every second could mean—"

Before he could finish, Zara had made her decision. She initiated the silent alarm on her user interface, signaling their location to Linx's security protocol. Betrayal laced the air as she watched Sean, oblivious to her actions, continue to strategize.

"Sorry, Sean," Zara thought. "But I can't let you destroy yourself over this. We need more time."

Chapter 6

Zara's fingers trembled as she keyed in the access code to Sean's modest apartment, her heart heavy with an unspoken dread. The door slid open with a quiet hiss, revealing the dimly lit interior.

"Sean?" Her voice echoed through the sparsely furnished space. "I know you probably don't want to see me but, I'm worried about you."

Zara's eyes darted around, searching for something—anything—that could serve as a breadcrumb leading to Sean. Her eyes landed on his desk, a nest of screens and gadgets.

She approached his computer and initiated a scan for recent activity. The scan completed, and a series of time-stamped files crowded the display.

A private server chat stood out from the list, the title "Family Matters." Zara hesitated, knowing that breaching this corner of Sean's personal life meant crossing a line.

She navigated through layers of encryption with ease as the chat window bloomed before her eyes. Text scrolled up the screen, messages exchanged between Sean and his sisters.

"Stay safe," one sister had typed, the timestamp indicating it was sent just days following their reported deaths. "Linx is getting closer."

"Always," Sean had replied, his message followed by a string of protective emojis.

As Zara pored over their exchange, each word sent jolts of guilt through her.

Zara logged out of the chat, carefully erasing her digital footprints. She slowly turned away from the workstation. It was time to follow Sean's trail wherever it may lead.

Her guilt remained, she knew she would have to find Sean, and together, they could save his sisters.

Zara's shadow flitted across the sleek corridors of Linx headquarters. She moved with grace, every soft step overly aware of sensors that could detect her presence, slowly avoiding the gaze of security cameras that swiveled like watchful predators.

Her braids were tucked under a stealth cap, she programmed encrypted code to run through its fabric— providing camouflage from the digital sensors. Her brown eyes flickered with an edge of adrenaline. Every sensor she bypassed, she allowed herself to exhale slowly, a celebration of her small victory.

She stood in front of a door marked "Restricted Access" — no signage could deter her. A keypad glowed with green lights highlighting each number, demanding credentials. She extracted a slim coin-like device from her pocket and attached it to the keypad. Sweat beaded at her forehead as it blinked rapidly, stuttered, and then obeyed, finally granting her entrance with a reluctant click.

Beyond the sentinel doors, monitors flickered with cryptic data, their glow echoing throughout the room. Zara's heart hammered, every corner looked identical to the space she previously occupied, leading her deeper into the core of Linx.

Zara's nostrils flared at the acrid battery like odor that enveloped the area she crept into. Metal cylindrical chambers vibrated with electricity. Their smooth surfaces only interrupted by a small serial number. Zara strained to read the digits, prying her brain for a pattern to decrypt. She slowly inspected each tube until one set of numbers partially reflected the day Sean went missing. Zara reached into her pocket for her decryption coin to release the seal of the chamber.

Sean's body lay before her, strapped to a vertical gurney, his wiry frame ensnared by cables that snaked across his body.

"Sean!" she whispered; her voice cracking and preventing her from saying more. She wanted to apologize and beg for his forgiveness. Zara's hands trembled as they reached for the tangle of wires, disconnecting them.

"Zara?" Sean's voice was groggy. "You came..." His barely opened eyes were reddened with forced slumber.

"Of course I did," she replied, her voice firm despite the tears that threatened to spill over. "We have to go. Now."

Sean's pulse thrummed in his temples, his legs shook, threatening to quit as he struggled to gain his balance. Zara's hand gripped his own as she tugged him into the direction of their exit. Sean planted his feet causing Zara to look back.

"Sean, we can't—" Zara began, her voice a hushed whisper against the sterile hum of the building.

"We're not leaving without them." His words were steel, cutting through any objection she might have had. His voice threatened their escape, Zara knew arguing was futile.

They ducked into a dimly lit alcove, pressing themselves against the cool metal wall as footsteps echoed nearby. Sean peered around the corner, when the coast was clear, they moved again, cautiously slipping past doorways.

The hum of the Linux server room was a ceaseless white noise, cloaking Zara and Sean as they navigated through aisles of blinking machinery.

"Over there," Sean whispered, pointing towards a terminal secluded in the far corner of the room. Its screen flickered irregularly, out of sync with its neighbors.

"Looks like our entry point," Zara murmured, her voice barely audible over the electronic symphony. She approached the terminal, stretching her hands above the keyboard before diving in.

"Keep watch," she instructed without looking back, trusting Sean's vigilance.

Sean's shadow loomed tall against the racks of servers and mother boards, his eyes scanning for any signs of intrusion.

"Got it," Zara announced abruptly. Data cascaded down the display.

"Anything about my sisters?" Sean leaned in closer, the green of his eyes darkened by the reflections on the screen.

"Wait, wait... this is strange," Zara frowned, her voice tinged with unease. "There's a file here—encrypted deeply. It's labeled with dates, not names."

"Dates? Can you open it?"

"Trying..." Her fingers resumed their dance at a frantic pace.

The document unfurled onscreen, revealing a ledger, cold and impersonal. Dates lined one side, with corresponding, cryptic annotations on the other.

"Here!" Sean's finger jabbed at the screen, where two consecutive dates bore a chilling resemblance to those carved into his memory—the days his sisters fell ill.

"Sean, I don't think you want to see this," Zara warned, the realization dawning in her voice.

"Show me." His words were ironclad, leaving no room for argument.

Zara hesitated but complied, expanding the entries. A transactional history emerged: biotech enhancements, experimental treatments, and then... cessation of services. The clinical language couldn't mask the finality of it all.

"Terminated?" Sean's voice cracked and broke, disbelief etched in every syllable. "What does that mean, Zara?"

"It means... they didn't make it, Sean. I'm so sorry." Her hand reached out, seeking his in solace.

"No... No, it can't be!" Sean recoiled; his gaze fixated on the damning evidence. "I talked to them!"

"Sean..."

"Don't—!" He slammed his fist against the metal frame, the clatter lost in the din of servers. "They lied to us! To everyone!"

"Look at this part," Zara pointed, her voice steady despite the turmoil. "It talks about 'asset liquidation.' They've been using patients, Sean—."

"What do you mean, using?" His body grew rigid with anger.

"Sean," Zara said gently, placing a hand on his shoulder. "Look."

She pointed to a screen embedded in the wall, its surface aglow with the last remnants of data. Together, they watched a looped feed—a timestamped goodbye. There were his sisters, serene smiles frozen in time.

Tears welled in Sean's eyes, he turned away, his body wracked with silent sobs.

"Come on," she finally said, her voice low and compassionate. "We need to understand why."

They delved deeper into the recesses of Linx until they reached a room pulsing with an eerie blue light.

"Memory banks," Zara breathed, her fingers eagerly typing to access the console.

Sean watched, numb, as the truth unfurled before them. Linx wasn't just storing data; they were harvesting it from the living—human memory cards in a twisted digital archive. Each person, a repository of experience, reduced to bytes and bits.

"Monsters," Sean muttered, his grief transmuting into fury. Zara nodded, her eyes hardening with purpose.

"Let's expose them," Zara was more than angry.

Zara and Sean approached an obsidian slab door etched with glowing sigils. This was it—the resting place of Robert Williams, the man whose twisted vision had stolen innocent lives. The man who would now answer for his sins.

"Almost there," Zara whispered.

Sean pressed his palm against the cold surface. The door slid open with a hiss, revealing the chamber within.

Mr. Robert Williams lay suspended in a cocoon of wires and tubes—a grotesque abomination of life support. His chest rose and fell with mechanical whirring and shushing.

It became clear to Zara and Sean they may have found him but —the virtual realm is where Mr. Williams truly resided.

"Linking now," Sean muttered, fitting a nearby neural-sync halo headset around his temples.

"Find him," Zara urged through the commlink. "Expose him. End this."

Chapter 7

Sean's reality flickered and dissolved, his childhood living room materialized before him. His heartbeat quickened at the scent of lemon polish on wooden floors.

Sean sharply turned his head toward the sound of laughter—a sound he hadn't heard in years. It drew him towards the kitchen, where the memory of his mother was alive once more.

"Sean," her voice called out, laced with joy.

She stood at the stove, her hands dusted with flour and an apron tied around her waist.

"Mom!" Sean squealed.

"Look, Sean, I'm making your favorite—pancakes. Want to help me flip them?" she asked, gesturing towards the sizzling pan on the cooker. He could smell the sweet, caramelized aroma of pancakes.

"Okay!" Sean walked to his mom, her body warming him as he took the spatula from her hands.

"Be careful, baby. It's all about timing and confidence," she instructed. She guided his hand, steadying the spatula as they slid it beneath the golden-brown pancake.

"Ready? One, two, three—flip!"

Together, they flipped it, the pancake landing perfectly back in the pan.

"See? You're a natural. Just like your dad," she said, pride evident in her voice.

"Will you teach me more, Momma?" Sean looked up at her with wide eyes.

"Every day, my love. Every single day."

The aroma of sizzling bacon and the soft hum of the refrigerator wrapped around Sean like a long-lost embrace.

"Look at you, son," his father said, turning towards him with that broad smile Sean had almost forgotten. "You're just in time for breakfast."

"Sit down, Sean," his mother beckoned, waving him over to the table set with steaming plates and mugs of hot cocoa. "You must be starving."

Sean slid into the chair, the one that used to squeak when he rocked back on two legs. He felt a surreal collision of past and present. The table was hard beneath his fingers, the food smelled authentic, and his parents' eyes twinkled with affection. This was what happiness felt like.

"Everything's perfect here," Sean murmured, more to himself than to the avatars of his parents.

"Of course, it is," his dad replied, clapping him on the shoulder. "We're together, aren't we?"

Sean nodded, battling the confusion that swirled within him..

"Maybe I can stay," he whispered.

"Stay as long as you like," his mother assured, reaching out to squeeze his hand. "We've missed you so much, Sean."

And for a heartbeat, or perhaps several, Sean let himself drown in the illusion.

Sean's heartbeat quickened; his home flickered as a cascade of messages infiltrated the sanctuary. Messages crossed his vision.

"Sean," they urged, "remember why you're here."

"Find Dr. Williams," the message pulsed, "End this."

Sean initiated a search sequence, his hands dancing across the air, manipulating his virtual interfaces.

"Coordinates locked," announced an internal system alert. Dr. Robert Williams was hidden in the penthouse suite at the Linx Headquarters.

"Trace complete," his sister's avatars confirmed, their forms merging into coherent shapes beside him.

"Let's end this reign," Sean commanded, his voice resolute.

Sean surged forward, bursting through the penthouse doors. The expansive suite sprawled before him.

There, at the heart of this technological sanctum, stood Dr. Robert Williams. He turned slowly; his cold brown eyes found Sean's.

"Welcome, Mr. Thompson," Williams intoned, his voice devoid of warmth. "I've been expecting you."

"You need to end Linx!" Sean glared intensely at Dr. Williams.

Williams chuckled. "Ah, but you see, my boy, you have no idea what you're stepping into."

Williams activated a holographic display, revealing a network of human silhouettes, each one glowing with a pulsating light. It was a garden of living power sources, their vital energy siphoned to feed his hunger for immortality.

"Behold, the future," Williams gestured grandly, "A world where death is but a choice—for those who can afford it."

"Using people as batteries? Enslaving them for your life?" Sean's lips turned upward in disgust.

"Survival of the fittest, Mr. Thompson." Williams' gaze was unyielding. "The Linx conglomerate demands sacrifice. I am merely ensuring its—and my own—perpetuity."

Sean's fists clenched tightly. Williams stood unflinching; his plan laid bare.

"Sit, Sean," Williams motioned toward a sleek chair that materialized from the shadows of the room. It hummed with energy, its surface shimmering.

Sean eyed the chair warily and continued to stand.

"Imagine it," Williams coaxed, his voice smooth as silk, laced with temptation. "A world free from pain, where your deepest desires manifest. Your mother, alive and vibrant; your father, unburdened by sorrow. A life untouched by loss."

The image flickered in Sean's mind, vivid and enticing. His mother's laugh, bright and clear, his father's smile, untainted by the shadow of mourning, beckoned him to step into the illusion.

"Your sisters can join you too," Williams continued, his words a poison-laced lure. "All you need to do is sit down and let go."

Images of Zara raced through his mind. He couldn't leave her behind. Not for a fantasy. Not for a lie woven by the same hands that shackled souls to serve as fuel.

"Zara needs me," Sean whispered to himself.

"No," Sean stated firmly, stepping away from the chair. "You offer nothing but illusions, Williams. I want no part in your twisted eternity."

Williams' brow furrowed, the first crack in his façade of control. Sean's decision was made.

"Very well," Williams said, his voice cold as steel. "But remember, Sean, you are rejecting a world without end. Without pain."

"Maybe so," Sean replied, his voice steady, "but also a world without love. Without Zara. And that's not a world worth living in at all."

"Your reign is over, Williams," Sean declared.

Williams stood, statuesque, his cold brown eyes fixed on Sean. He had underestimated Sean. The walls of the penthouse suite darkened, illuminating lines of code.

"Broadcasting? Streaming?" Williams panicked, turning around in circles as the walls faded opening the area around him.

"Every last second, Williams. To every corner of the net." Sean smirked.

"Your virtual utopia," Sean spat out the words like poison, "is nothing but a graveyard of souls you've tried to bury."

The streams multiplied exponentially, data packets leaping from server to server. The world watched as the legacy of Linx dissolved into history.

"Consider this my resignation," Sean said, the words racing through the broadcast.

The final command was entered, a simple string of code that felt like liberation. Sean watched as the digital fortress dissipated around him. With a flick of his wrist, he closed the connection.

Title: Weeping Willow

Category: Novel Excerpt

Synopsis: Set in the distant future, a young girl named Laurel dreams of a day when she can travel beyond the borders of her small tribe. Her tribe, like many others in a divided world, utilizes fear and the manipulation of history to maintain control of its citizens. When a nomadic group of people – the Exorans – pass through her village, she befriends a girl named Aspen and she discovers can commune with nature, transform into trees, and manipulate plant life. Soon after, she begins to see visions of what appear to be the past, opening her eyes to the true history of her community and the danger of possessing knowledge in a world where it has been systematically stripped away. With no one to trust, Laurel turns to Aspen and the Exorans to help translate her visions and set off on a quest to find others like her.

Weeping Willows

Prologue

The air in the Academy's library was thick with the musty scent of old paper and ink. Books of all sizes and shapes lined the shelves, their leather bindings worn and faded with time. Laurel sat quietly during her independent study hour, her fingers trembling as they traced the text in her old textbook.

"Look at this," Laurel whispered, her voice was barely audible above the murmur of communal learning. She tapped her finger over the dingy yellow page at an illustration of a lush, green world.

"Careful," Mara, her study partner, chided. Her eyes scanned the room glancing toward the overseeing matron. "Those are relics of a time long gone." Mara cut her eyes to Laurel's page briefly viewing the plants before returning to her studies.

The Grier Academy imbued the students with more than just survival skills, each student was trusted with the knowledge needed to rebuild society from the ashes of the old world. They were expected to emerge as the matriarchs of their own corners of the fractured planet, balancing the responsibilities of leadership with the traditional roles that kept their homes running efficiently.

"Laurel," called Matron Solis, her voice stern yet tinged with concern, "you know we need you focused on practical skills for the homestead."

Matron Solis walked to Laurel's side, eyeing the page in front of Laurel.

"Please, just a little longer," Laurel pleaded without looking up, her eyes scanning the lines of a text describing the great forests that once covered the land. She could almost hear the rustle of leaves in the library, feel the sunlight on her skin through words alone.

"History has its place, but it is not in the hands of those meant to lead," Matron Solis replied, softening slightly as she observed the girl's intense concentration.

Laurel looked up; her eyes widened with soft pleas to continue. "But the past holds lessons, Matron Solis. How can I lead if I do not understand what came before us?" Laurel placed her hand on the book gently. "These were people's lives, their mistakes, and triumphs. We can't ignore them."

"That is a task for Historians, Pupil Laurel," Matron Solis declared with a steely tone, her hand firmly grasping Laurel's shoulder. "You have been chosen as homestead pupil. It is a great privilege and honor."

Matron Solis turned and strode away, leaving Laurel alone to grapple with her thoughts before they could escape her lips. A sharp pain shot through her chest at the reminder of her position - now a homestead pupil - despite her burning passion for history.

She clenched her fists in frustration and anger, determined to prove herself worthy of more than just menial tasks on the homestead. She would become a historian, no matter what it took.

Laurel slowly stood to return the book to its rightful place on the shelf. Her hands lingered on the spine as her fingers brushed across the embossed title.

The day Laurel submitted her application to become a Historian pupil her heart raced with anxiety. With every fiber of her being, she believed it was her destiny to join their ranks and preserve the knowledge of her people. But as she stood at the vocational ceremony before the council of matriarchs, Laurel's dreams shattered into a million pieces when she heard her classification: Homestead. The sound of her own heartbeat echoed in her ears, drowning out the excited chatter of her peers who had eagerly gathered around their mentor matrons. Laurel remained frozen in disbelief, tears threatening to spill from her glassy eyes.

"Pupil Laurel," The head matriarch, Elder Rhea, spoke, noticing Laurel "You may group with your peers in the Homestead task."

"But, I - I wish to be a Historian," Laurel announced, her voice steady despite the fluttering in her chest and the pulsing in her ears.

A murmur rippled through the room, Elder Rhea, exchanged a disapproving glance with her peers before readdressing Laurel.

"Child, your desire to look back is admirable, but our society must look forward," Elder Rhea said. "Your application was denied. We have greater needs, and your talents will serve better elsewhere."

The town's annual adoption day had finally arrived. As the sun rose over the Grier Academy, families from all around gathered in the community square, adorned in their best clothes and carrying colorful fabrics to offer the new graduates. Laurel stood among them, her heart pounding with nervousness. She couldn't shake the feeling of dread as she looked at the stage where names would be called, and fates determined. Her eyes darted around in search for an escape. Each year, this ceremony seemed to grow more grandiose, with speeches and musical

performances added to the already emotional event. But for Laurel, it was becoming a tedious tradition that she despised.

Every year, without fail, she prayed to not be chosen by a family. The thought of leaving her studies behind and taking on the responsibility of leading a home at the young age of twenty filled her with fear. Dread rose up from her belly, threatening to spew out of her mouth. She knew her time at the academy was nearing its end.

As Laurel stood, a couple approached her with warm smiles. The Homestead Matron was easy to recognize, with her signature white and sun-bleached hair, inspected each girl before nodding towards Laurel. The other girls all bowed deeply in respect as they passed by. Laurel couldn't help but notice the Matron's strong presence and the male's smooth and uncracked masque. Laurel had studied the ways of the old world and the ruling patriarchy that pushed to world into chaos leading the Matron revolution.

While the hardened masques of other males cracked with each facial expression, this uncracked masque showed utmost reverence for the Matron symbolizing his contentment with his governing Matron. Laurel noticed his painted bright yellow lips were also flawless, a clear indicator that he rarely spoke. Her eyes roamed to his calloused, bootless feet beneath his robes, signifying his humble service to his Matron. As they stood in front of Laurel, she dutifully bowed her head, but unlike her peers, she kept her eyes open, taking in all that she could.

"I'm Matron Tallwood, I hope my hair doesn't bother you," the Matron spoke softly as she reached for her hood.

Before Laurel could even think, she lifted her arms and stopped the Matron. "No, please don't cover your hair. It's beautiful," she stuttered out.

Matron Tallwood smiled gratefully. "I used to wear a hood to block the sun, but it can get quite hot sometimes."

Laurel nodded in understanding before gesturing towards their stall. "What kind of fruits do you sell?"

The couple's eyes sparkled with pride as they enthusiastically shared their business plan and desire to grow both their family and produce. Laurel couldn't help but feel a twinge of excitement at the thought of joining a family who valued healthy, sustainable living. As she listened, her mind wandered back to the lush greenery she had read about in her textbooks. Despite her initial hesitation, Laurel's heart began to swell with anticipation at the idea of becoming a part of this Homesteading family. She could already imagine herself tending to bountiful gardens and learning new skills alongside them. This was an opportunity she couldn't pass up.

"Welcome to our family, Laurel," said Matron Tallwood, clasping her hands in theirs.

"Thank you," she replied, casting one last glance over her shoulder at the Academy.

Chapter 1

Laurel Tallwood moved through the predawn quiet, her bare feet whispering against the cool earth as she filled bucket after bucket from the town's communal well. She hauled the water to the Tallwood homestead, where several large barrels sat waiting to be heated by the sun.

Laurel glanced back toward the modest house that stood at the heart of their homestead. It had been four months since the adoption ceremony. Laurel had adapted to the role of Matron in her homestead, handling chores that included the training and obedience of the males within the homestead. She now had four brothers who had welcomed her, an adopted sister brought in to share in governance.

The air, still cool and refreshing, caressed her face as she finished her task. The fruit trees stood in neat rows; their branches heavy with ripe fruit. She moved amongst them, her fingers swiftly plucking apples, peaches, and cherries from their perches. Dropping them into the baskets that hung from her arms.

Dawn was approaching, and with it, the slow awakening of the town. Laurel knew the rhythm of this place. Today, like every day, she would rise before the sun, gather the water, pick fruit, and await the comforting warmth that would come with evening.

Laurel sat to eat some fruit in the cool morning air. Laurel selected a peach, pushing her thumb into its delicate skin to check for ripeness. The morning dew clung to its blushing surface as she bit into it, sending its juices down her arm.

The sun was just beginning to peek over the horizon as Laurel rushed to gather her harvest. Laurel began her two-mile trek to the Market Square just as the sun's full face peered over her shoulder. She smiled knowing she had bested the sun.

"Tsk, you almost won sun, try again tomorrow!" Laurel tilted her head and winked as she teased her wordless friend.

Laurel arrived at her shop and began to open the store for the morning sales. She had come to predict the wants of her customers. Today she came stocked with ripe peaches. When the sun rises fast, she knows that the juice of the peach would sell the fastest.

"Good morning, Matron Laurel," called Mr. Holloway, the baker, as he passed by with his cart full of fresh bread. His shuffling gait and punctual greeting were as certain as the dawn.

"Morning, Mr. Holloway," Laurel replied with a smile that didn't quite reach her eyes.

She recognized every face that strolled by; their routines were etched into her mind. By now, she could almost set her watch by the arrival of her first customer Matron Newtree, who'd come at precisely eight o'clock, or young Eli, who always begged his mother for one of Laurel's sweet fruits during their walk to the learning centers.

Each day blended into the next, a monotonous cycle of harvesting, selling, and smiling at customers whose tastes and conversations rarely changed.

"Another hot one, isn't it?" remarked Matron Newtree as she picked through a basket of nectarines.

"Sure is," Laurel responded, the words automatic. "Would you like a peach today?" asked Laurel.

Laurel began to prepare the peach before Mrs. Newtree could say no. She cut four slits into the skin and smoothly peeled each quarter back like a banana. The flesh sparkled in the sunlight and a pearl of peach juice dripped onto the ground. Mrs. Newtree reached for the fruit with one hand, not wanting to see another drop of the sweet nectar go to waste and left a silver coin on the countertop with the other.

She glanced briefly at the leather-bound journal she kept hidden under the counter as a small act of rebellion against the path chosen for her. Laurel turned her attention to the array of fruit, arranging them with a care that felt increasingly hollow. The shop was her responsibility, her contribution to the homestead that had taken her in, but it could not replace her desire for knowledge that lingered beneath the surface of her daily duties. How could it compare to holding the truths of the old world?

"Matron Laurel, dear, you seem miles away today," observed Matron Newtree, snapping Laurel back to the present.

"Sorry, just thinking about... the heat," she lied smoothly, forcing a laugh.

"Stay hydrated," advised the older matron sagely before wandering off with her peach.

Laurel shuffled figs into neat pyramids only looking up as she heard soft footsteps approach her fruit shop. Laurel's eyes were drawn upwards along the lines of the stranger's form, tracing the curve of her neck to where her hair sprang forth in braids. Each twist spiraled away from its sisters in a dance. They remind Laurel of stories she read in the Academy's library—of sentient vines that could weave themselves and support an entire ecosystem.

"Good afternoon," Laurel greeted, her voice steady despite the stir of interest. "I'm Matron Laurel Tallwood. What can I get for you?"

"Hello, Laurel, I'm Aspen," she replied, her gaze lingering on the fruit. "Everything looks so fresh."

"Thank you," Laurel managed, still captivated. "I pick them at dawn." Her hands, acting on their own accord, reached out to adjust a bowl of cherries.

"Try the cherries," Laurel suggests, offering a bowl of the deep red fruit.

"Cherries," Aspen repeated softly, with a smile, Laurel couldn't help but return the gesture.

"Is something the matter?" Aspen asked gently, noticing Laurel's gaze.

"Ah, no, it's just..." Laurel hesitated, not wanting to offend. "Your hair, it's quite unique."

"Ah, this," she chuckled, lightly touching one of the braids. "It's a tradition where I come from."

"Where is that, if you don't mind me asking?" Laurel inquired.

"Farther than most here travel." She responded while selecting a handful of cherries.

"Would you like to try a peach?" Laurel offered, eager to extend the encounter.

"Thank you, I'd love to," Aspen accepted graciously, "Actually may I purchase an apple?" Aspen's voice was deep and earthy.

"Of course," Laurel replied, her movements careful as she selected the best of the harvest for this unusual patron. "These are our sweetest." She couldn't help but notice how long and slender Aspen's fingers were.

"Such care you give to your craft," Aspen observed. "It reminds me of the way we tend to the saplings in my homeland."

"Your homeland must be a nice place," Laurel said, caught in the timbre of Aspen's speech.

Laurel wrapped the purchased apple in a piece of cloth before passing the fruit to Aspen.

"Would you like a tour of the town?" Laurel asked before she could second-guess herself. "After I close up here, I mean." Laurel offered, brushing a stray lock of hair behind her ear. She felt embarrassed at the proposal, but she was excited to interrupt her predictable patterns.

"I would be delighted," Aspen responded.

Laurel wiped her hands on her apron and began to carefully stack the remaining produce into their wooden crates.

Together, they walked past the rows of merchants, each one boasting a colorful array of produce and items. Laurel pointed out the bakery, its windows fogged from the warmth within, and the aroma of freshly baked bread wafting out onto the street.

"Every morning, Mr. Halloway bakes enough loaves to feed an army," Laurel said with a chuckle, "though it's really just for the hungry mouths of our townsfolk."

"Such abundance," Aspen remarked, admiring the woven baskets filled with pastries on display. "In my travels, I've seen many places where food is scarce."

Laurel nodded, taking in Aspen's words. "We're fortunate here," she admitted. They continued, passing a group of children playing a game of tag, their laughter ringing through the air like chimes.

They walked toward the outskirts of the town, where the homes grew sparse, and the open fields stretched wide under the vast sky. The sun hovered on the horizon, painting everything with strokes of orange and red.

"Beautiful, isn't it?" Laurel sighed, leaning against an aged fence post as she took in the view.

"Very much so," Aspen agreed. "It's different from the lands my people roam, but there's beauty in this stillness."

"Most families live close to their shops," Laurel explained, pointing to a dwelling with a wind chime made from old cutlery tinkling in the breeze. "It's easier for trading, and it keeps us all connected."

Aspen's gaze wandered over the rustic charm of the homesteads. She thought of the tales of her Exoran people who roamed far beyond these streets. The Exorans were a nomadic tribe, their lives woven with the rhythms of the earth. To them, magic was not just a concept but an ever-present force.

"Your people don't stay in one place for long," Laurel observed, noting the glint of a distant memory in Aspen's eyes.

"True," Aspen replied, "We follow the seasons, the wildlife, we let the earth guide us."

Laurel watched as Aspen knelt beside a patch of green where wildflowers stubbornly pushed through cracks in the stone. Aspen traced her fingers along the petals and stems, murmuring ancient words.

"I think the earth speaks to you in a way it doesn't for the rest of us." Laurel mused aloud.

"Perhaps," Aspen said, rising to her feet, "but everyone has the capacity to listen. It's just that some have forgotten how to hear."

"Long ago," Laurel began, her steps slowing, "our ancestors clashed with the Exorans. There were years of strife over land and resources." She hesitated, the words tasting bitter on her tongue. "We wanted to return to the ways of the old world."

"Your people have always been traders, haven't they?" Aspen asked, her voice gentle.

"Since the town was founded," Laurel replied, pride swelling in her chest. "But it wasn't always just goods we exchanged."

Aspen glanced at her, an eyebrow arching inquisitively. The silence hung between them, heavy as the velvet night sky above. Aspen's hand brushed against a wall, trailing vines that seemed to lean towards her touch. Aspen stopped before a narrow path that led out into the open lands beyond the town.

"I'm Exoran," she admitted, her gaze steady upon Laurel's face.

Laurel's breath caught. All the stories, all the warnings she had been steeped in since childhood, paled in the face of the woman before her.

"Yet here you are," Laurel said softly, "walking beside me."

"Here I am," Aspen echoed.

"Would you... would you show me your 'town'?" Laurel asked, the words spilling out, half in wonder, half in defiance of every taboo she had ever known.

"Nothing would please me more," Aspen replied, a smile blooming like the wildflowers they had admired. "But it is no town of stone."

"Then I want to see it," Laurel affirmed, the knot of boredom and dissatisfaction that had gripped her for so long beginning to unravel.

Chapter 2

Laurel debated her matronly duties, she needed to assign a brother to take over her shift at the fruit stand so that she could visit Aspen.

Bother Marcus could no longer stand duties as he prepared for his selection to a new homestead and the twins, Tsuga and Tilia, were too young and too inseparable. Even if one of them wanted to help her, it only took a no from one of them to make them both turn away.

“It’s too early Matron Laurel, no one wants to wake up before the sun.” Tsuga chuckled and walked away. Tilia chortled like a minion not far behind his brother.

Laurel held her breath as she knocked gently on her brother Ruban’s door and waited briefly before turning the knob. Ruban’s body was outlined in an iridescent glow as he sat glaring at his tablet, one of the few items from the old ways that were resurrected.

“Ruban? I want to visit a friend tomorrow and I need you to take my shift.” Laurel spoke with authority and waited for his response.

Ruban turned around in his chair in the same manner that evil scientists often reveal themselves.

“Ok,” Ruban shrugged. Ruban was short and stocky. He made up for his small stature by being the biggest con artist Laurel knew. He was a troll on the internet and in real life. “but I will keep your daily proceeds.”

Laurel didn’t object. She had already assumed he would want her money, and it would be a fair trade. “Thanks, Brother Ruben, be up early to tend the shop.” She nodded and prepared to leave his room.

“Matron Laurel wait, there’s more,” Ruban gave his slickest smile and licked his lips like the pest she knew he was.

Laurel took a deep breath and closed her eyes before turning to face him again.

“Huh, letting you keep the proceeds is fair enough, what more is there?” Laurel responded.

“I want to meet your new friend.” Ruban winked.

“No.” Laurel said as she walked out. She masked her excitement with an annoyed scowl.

Laurel woke earlier than usual to begin her walk to meet Aspen at the market. The cool morning air stung her nose and shocked her lungs as she walked. The sun began its ascent just as she arrived, brightening the scenery around her. She gazed out at the trees and was surprised to see Aspen standing motionless.

“Hey! You’re early!” Laurel walked toward Aspen, grinning.

"Ready?" Aspen's voice floated through the cool morning air.

"Of course," Laurel replied, her feet already stepping over an exposed root.

The trees surrounded them as they walked deeper into the woods. Laurel watched as Aspen navigated the forest with ease. Laurel avoided the soft earth puddles, the effort only tiring her. She gave up and allowed the mud to wrap around her ankles. Her eyes diligently focused on the ground as she maneuvered around stones and roots, occasionally glancing upwards to keep Aspen within her sight.

"Are we close?" Laurel asked, grateful for the shade of the trees that scattered the rays of sun.

Laurel's gaze followed the nimble steps of Aspen as they trekked deeper into the forest. She couldn't help but notice a soft, rhythmic hum emanating from her friend. It was an odd melody that seemed familiar, yet Laurel could not place its origin or purpose. Aspen's lips remained still, and her pace was unchanging.

"Your song," Laurel whispered, curiosity threading her words, "it's beautiful. What is it?"

Aspen's smile was slight, her eyes on the path ahead. "It's not mine to claim," she said, her voice barely rising above the hum. "It's the song of the land. We all learn it when we're young."

Laurel nodded. The concept of a land singing was new to her, yet it felt right in this place where every step seemed to pulse with life.

As they moved onward, Laurel's senses sharpened, every detail of the forest stood out in its own way. The furry green moss clung to clusters of rocks, forming a velvety cover that glimmered with dew. Her eyes darted to the roots that snaked across the earth, gnarled and swirling. Leaves rustling with a gentle roar in the breeze, casting shadows on the ground that danced with their movement. Laurel breathe in deeply as the wind brushed her face and watched the beauty of the swirling leaves.

"Watch your step," Aspen cautioned, pointing to a particularly deceitful root camouflaged by fallen leaves.

"Thanks," Laurel replied, gracefully sidestepping the obstacle.

Laurel listened to the hum emanating from Aspen growing clearer as they ventured deeper into the woods. It was a curious sound, almost mechanical in its consistency—the rhythmic whirring of gears.

"Is that...?" Laurel began, her words trailing off as she sought to understand the source of the sound.

Aspen glanced back at her companion with a knowing smile. "The heartbeat of my village," she said.

It wasn't long before the dense foliage parted. High above towering trees were structures of wood and vine. Organic bridges arched gracefully between platforms.

"Welcome to our refuge," Aspen announced, her voice imbued with pride.

Laurel gazed upward, her eyes wide with wonder. Homes carved from tree trunks spiraled up towards the canopy, their windows aglow with the soft light of bioluminescent plants. Walkways encircled the trunks, allowing the villagers to traverse with ease.

"Exorans built all this?" Laurel asked, her admiration evident in her tone.

"Built and grown," Aspen corrected gently. "We shape our homes just as much as they shape us."

Laurel marveled at the sight before her, realizing that this was more than a village. The hum—Aspen's hum—was the sound of life here.

"Come," Aspen beckoned, gesturing towards a pathway. "Let me show you how we live amongst the trees."

Laurel followed Aspen along a footpath that wound into the heart of the village. This was no haphazard scattering of dwellings but an intricate spiral, etched into the clearing like a secret waiting to be discovered. The path was lined with stalls and booths, each attended by merchants whose wares spilled over in a cascade of colors and scents. They formed the vibrant border of this unique town.

In the periphery of her vision, Laurel caught glimpses of fabric fluttering in the breeze, pottery stacked in precarious towers, and fruits glistening with an intriguing iridescence. Her heart swelled with a warmth that spread through her limbs. She smiled, unable to contain the joy that bubbled up at the sight of such communal vitality.

"Wait here for a moment," Aspen said, detouring toward a stall draped with vines bearing flowers that pulsed with light. She spoke animatedly with the vendor, an exchange too soft for Laurel to catch over the hum of the forest. When Aspen returned, she held out a cup woven from leaves, its contents emitting a fragrant aroma that teased Laurel's senses.

"Try this," Aspen urged, her own smile reflecting Laurel's delight. "It's nectar from the Core Blossom. It's sweet and refreshing."

Laurel accepted the drink, the cup cool against her fingers. She sipped tentatively, and the liquid cascaded down her throat, effervescent and bursting with the essence of the jungle. Its sweetness seemed to linger on her tongue.

"Thank you," Laurel spoke graciously.

Laurel and Aspen continued to follow the spiral as it drew them closer to the center. Around them, the homes emerged like natural extensions of the trees themselves, balconies

adorned with hanging gardens that swayed gently to the rhythm of the ever-present hum. Laurel's curiosity burgeoned with each step.

Laurel stepped into the clearing, the heart of Aspen's village where the spiral unfurled its final coil.

The ground shone with shimmering stones that paved the entire area, and in the direct center was a tree. The tree's roots sprawled out in every direction, and its branches did the same. She gazed upwards as sunlight bathed her face; it streamed through a natural skylight created by an opening in the forest canopy above. The areas that the sun couldn't reach were illuminated by the glowing elongated cluster fruit it bore. The arms of the tree spanned so far and wide that smaller trees near it helped to support its weight. Laurel began to walk towards the tree and noticed the hum of Aspen's tribe grow stronger every step she took closer.

"Why am I feeling the hum?" Laurel stopped standing near an exposed root.

"The hum is the Coretree. You can say it's like the sound of her breathing" Aspen explained.

"Isn't it something?" Aspen remarked.

"Something indeed," Laurel replied, her eyes tracing the spiraling layout. She admired how the houses seemed to rise organically from the ground, their wooden facades weathered into soft hues.

As the evening began, villagers gathered in the open space. They shared meals from communal pots that simmered with fragrant stews, drawing Laurel in with their inviting aromas. The wooden bowl fit perfectly in the palm of her hand. Laurel didn't know what the browned

food was, but she quickly recognized the rice that lay under the stew. The aroma rose to her nose and made her mouth fill with saliva. Both her stomach and her nose agreed that the food would be delicious. She accepted a bowl graciously, savoring each spoonful as flavors new and comforting danced on her palate.

Soon, the rhythm of drums pulsed through the air, beckoning the villagers to stand. Aspen took Laurel's hand, leading her to join a circle of dancers. With each step and turn, Laurel felt herself easing into the flow of movement, her own rhythm syncing with those around her. She closed her eyes briefly, allowing the beat to guide her, feeling more connected to this place than she could have imagined.

As the moon climbed higher, Laurel lost track of time. She had danced until her lungs filled with the cool night air and her body hummed with joyful exhaustion.

Laurel drifted away from the dwindling circle of dancers, finding herself a suitable area to rest at the edge of the communal area. Laurel gasped softly as a figure detached itself from the darkness, an elder who moved with a grace that belied her years. The woman's features, bathed in silver light, bore an uncanny resemblance to Laurel's own reflection - the same high cheekbones, the same almond-shaped eyes.

"Child," the elder said, "you dance with the heart of one who has seen many moons."

Laurel felt a tingle of unease.

"Your people shy from yesterday's tales," the elder continued, her gaze piercing Laurel's reticence.

Laurel's stomach knotted with tension. To speak of history was taboo, but her soul thirsted for the knowledge that had been denied to her. "I... I've always wanted to learn, to gather the past and keep it safe," she admitted, her voice barely above a whisper.

"Then follow that path." the elder urged, her hand briefly touching Laurel's shoulder.

The advice hung in the air. Laurel's heart raced, for a moment she allowed herself to forget the pain of her desire to become a historian and the traditions she had been raised to honor, leaving her adrift between duty and destiny.

"Thank you," Laurel managed to say despite the turmoil that churned within her. The elder simply nodded, her presence receding back into the forest's embrace, leaving Laurel alone.

Laurel's heart pounded in sync with the beat of a ceremonial drums as she glanced up at the sky through the canopy of leaves. The sun's position, lost to the moon, sent a surge of panic through her veins. She had lost track of time, immersed in the strange, beautiful world of Aspen's village and the elder's cryptic counsel.

The realization struck Laurel with the force of a thunderclap. She was supposed to be home before dusk; that was the rule, an unspoken agreement between the villagers and the encroaching night.

"Oh, no." the words escaped Laurel's lips.

Aspen walked to Laurel seeing the distress on her face. "Is something wrong?"

"We need to go back," Laurel said, urgency lacing her words as she gathered her belongings with trembling hands.

Chapter 3

Aspen nodded, her expression serene, unfazed by the encroaching twilight. Together, they navigated the now shadowy path, leaves crunching underfoot. Laurel's mind raced with each step, images of her community's worried faces and the lectures that would surely follow flashing before her eyes.

Breaking through the final curtain of foliage, Laurel's breath hitched at the sight that greeted her. The clearing before her village was alive with movement—her community's peacekeepers, recognizable by their uniform tunics, were assembled in a formidable line at the edge of the woods, weapons at the ready.

"No, wait!" she cried out, dashing forward with outstretched arms. Fear gripped her, a fear for Aspen, for the misunderstanding that was about to unfold.

"Matron Laurel!" one of the peacekeepers called out, surprise etching his features as he recognized her sprinting figure.

She skidded to a halt just before them, panting heavily. "Don't go in there," she pleaded, her gaze darting between the armed men and women. "There's no threat from the forest."

The peacekeepers exchanged glances, their postures still tense, their grips on their weapons unrelenting. Laurel's plea hung in the air, a fragile hope that seemed to disintegrate with each passing second.

"Matron Laurel," one of them said, his voice low and filled with an authority that brooked no argument, "you need to step aside."

There were few authoritative positions in the community for males. Those who joined peacekeeper often sought to control within the limited powers they had. As the peacekeepers began their march into the woods, Laurel's heart sank, she knew she could not command the peacekeepers to cease.

Aspen's fingers barely grazed the bark of a nearby tree before rough hands seized her, jerking her away from its protective trunk. She was thrown to the ground with such force that a sharp gasp escaped her lips, the breath driven from her lungs in an instant. Pain radiated through her body as the earth beneath her pressed into her flesh.

"Stop!" Laurel's voice broke through the chaos, shrill with desperation, but it was a whisper against a storm.

A low moan began deep within Aspen's chest—a sound so mournful and resonant it seemed to be amplified by the forest itself. The vibration carried through the underbrush, undulating like the pulse of the earth. Leaves trembled on their branches, and the air shuddered.

Moments stretched out like eons, the clearing teemed with life as figures emerged in response to Aspen's call. They rose from the dirt where no previous sign of life had been. Others dropped nimbly from the trees, landing with soft thumps, their presence sudden and silent save for the faint rustle of leaves.

Laurel watched, heart pounding, as Aspen's community gathered around her, their faces etched with solidarity.

"Easy, easy," whispered a voice from among the newcomers, reaching down to help Aspen rise. Hands as gentle as the breeze cradled her, easing her back onto her feet. The pain that

had contorted Aspen's features eased ever so slightly, the lines of distress softening as she leaned on those who had come to her aid.

The tranquility of the forest clearing was shattered as the peacekeepers, their faces fraught with panic, fumbled with their weapons. Then a harsh, staccato pop of gunfire echoed through the trees. An Exoran, halted, stumbled backward, a pained cry escaping his lips as he clutched at his side.

Laurel's breath caught in her throat, her eyes wide with horror at the sight of the injured Exoran. His face, moments ago calm and collected, now contorted in agony. Blood seeped through his fingers, staining the vibrant greens of his garments with a warm red.

Exoran moved to his aid forming around him. They began to hum a deep, almost mechanical whirring that vibrated through the air, enveloping the clearing in a protective cocoon of sound.

One by one, they spread their arms wide, faces tilted upwards towards the moonlight. Laurel watched, mouth agape, as their feet began to change, skin darkening and roughening into bark. The transformation crept upward, their bodies elongating and twisting into the shapes of majestic trees.

Roots burrowed into the soil where toes once wiggled, anchoring them firmly to the ground. Limbs branched out, leaves sprouting from fingertips, until each Exoran was indistinguishable from the ancient guardians of the forest that surrounded them.

The peacekeepers lowered their weapons, their expressions morphing from aggression to awe. In the space where the Exorans had stood, there now remained only a grove of newly birthed trees, standing sentinel over the injured Exoran.

With the last Exoran taking root, a hush fell over the clearing. Then, a rustle like a whisper swept through the underbrush, and the jungle itself seemed to awaken. The trees at the forest's edge stirred, their mighty trunks groaning as they shifted, inching forward with a grace defying their colossal forms.

Laurel's eyes widened as the great arboreal sentinels moved, their vast canopies intertwining to form an impenetrable wall of greenery. They advanced until they stood as a barrier between the peacekeepers and the spot where the Exorans had transformed. Twisted roots emerged before the steel-toed boots of the peacekeepers, halting their advance as effectively as any fortress wall.

"Back!" one of the peacekeepers shouted, his voice trembling with more than just authority. They retreated, their guns hanging useless in their grips.

For two days following the surreal encounter, Laurel saw no sign of Aspen. The absence of her friend's gentle hum left a void in her world. She tried to carry on, to perform her daily tasks with the diligence expected of her, but her thoughts strayed to the forest and the Exorans' village.

On the morning of the third day, Laurel made her decision. Slipping away from her duties with care, she donned a cloak the color of the rich earth to blend into the forest shadows and a canteen.

"Wait for me, Aspen," she whispered to the wind, hoping her words would find their way to her friend's ears. The underbrush grasped at Laurel's boots as the foliage closed around her.

A rustling to her left caused her to freeze, heart hammering against her ribs. Eyes wide, she scanned the foliage and spotted the amber eyes of a predator, its sleek body coiled with intent

among the ferns. A prickle of fear ran down her spine. She backed away slowly, but the animal mirrored her movements its hairs stood perched readying itself for the chase it hungered for.

With a burst of adrenaline, Laurel turned and fled, the sound of pursuit crashing through the undergrowth behind her. Her breath came in ragged gasps as she pushed her legs to move faster, to carry her beyond reach. Twigs scratched at her legs as she leapt over roots and dodged fallen stumps.

And there—just ahead—a salvation in the form of a wide tree, its hollow trunk gaping like an open mouth.

She dove inside, pressing her back against the rough inner bark, willing her body to become part of the tree, invisible and safe. Outside, the animal scratched at the bark, growling intensely. Fear pounded in her ears as the beast circled the tree, snarling as it searched for a way to get to Laurel. Laurel's ear perked, following it until the animal eventually lost interest and moved on. Laurel let out a shuddering breath, the close encounter leaving her trembling.

For two days, she remained within the relative safety of the tree's embrace, sipping sparingly from her canteen and trying to piece together the path back to familiarity. Hunger gnawed at her belly. She could no longer ignore it; survival demanded action.

"Okay, Laurel," she muttered to herself. "You've read about this, seen it done. Time to put knowledge to the test."

Laurel surveyed the area with new eyes, ones that sought not landmarks, but life. Small creatures skittered amongst the leaves, and birds flitted from branch to branch.

Laurel found a sturdy branch and sharpened one end into a makeshift spear with a stone she found by her shelter.

A small rustling nearby drew her attention—a chubby rabbit, its coat brown and thick. Laurel crouched, her eyes fixed on the creature, aware of the irony that she, too, was once prey here. Laurel exhaled and sprang forward, thrusting the spear toward the rabbit. The animal obviously leaped away, the weapon only grazing its fur. Laurel's momentum continued to carry her forward as she tripped over a hidden root and tumbled to the ground with a sharp cry.

Pain seared through her ankle, white-hot and insistent. She grasped at it, fingers probing until they found the unnatural angle her left foot now rested in.

"No," she whispered, panic rising like bile. A twisted ankle, possibly broken—this was not part of the plan.

Laurel crawled slowly back to her tree refuge, each movement was agony, each breath a gasp.

"Help!" she called out, though she knew the futility. The jungle swallowed sound as it did light, leaving her alone and scared.

As night fell, Laurel's skin burned, her wound growing angrier and more swollen.

"Please," she murmured into the darkness, her voice barely more than a wisp of sound. "I need help." But the only response was the hum of the jungle. Laurel closed her eyes allowing herself to give into the momentary reprieve of pain.

Laurel's eyes fluttered open, a fever swelling within her. She lay there, disoriented, only aware of the tree trunk that cradled her weakened body.

And then she heard it—the hum. It was Aspen's hum, unmistakable and close. The song hummed throughout her body. Her ankle throbbed with its rhythm.

"Help," Laurel tried to call out, but her voice was nothing more than a parched whisper before white hot searing pain offered her no other option than to sleep.

Laurel's eyelids peeled back, her gaze grappling with the blur of dim colors that swathed the hollow of the immense tree. With each labored breath, the fog in her mind lifted, allowing the world to sharpen into focus. The mechanical hum, Aspen's unique melody, beckoned her from the haze of her fevered state.

Pushing against the rough inner bark of her arboreal refuge, Laurel mustered every ounce of strength to crawl towards the opening. Her limbs were weak, trembling under the strain, she emerged into the dappled light filtering through the jungle canopy, her senses immediately assaulted by the vivid life around her.

The Exorans stood scattered before her, their figures statuesque and a part of the forest itself. Laurel blinked, her sight adjusting to the exterior world, taking in the sight of beings who shared an ancient bond with the earth beneath their feet.

"Laurel," a voice called softly, pulling her eyes to where Aspen stood, a silhouette framed by sunlight and leaves. The young woman approached with a simple earthen cup, steam wafting from its contents like wisps of mist in her hands.

"Drink," Aspen urged, extending the vessel towards Laurel's quivering hands. The nectar within was the color of amber, sweet and thick. It was the same drink that had welcomed Laurel into the spiral settlement.

With trembling fingers, Laurel accepted the offering, bringing the cup to her lips. The liquid flowed over her tongue, a balm to her parched throat.

"Thank you," she murmured, her voice gaining strength as the nectar worked its subtle magic.

The Exorans hummed as they guided Laurel through the dense foliage, their figures blurring into the backdrop. Laurel could feel the hum through her bones as it coursed through her. She realized that this sound was more than mere vibration; it was the magic that sustained the nomadic people.

"Your people," Laurel said, her voice barely above a whisper, "they're here, aren't they? In the forest."

"Always," Aspen replied, her smile serene.

"Watch closely," Aspen whispered, guiding Laurel's attention to an elder Exoran at the lead of group.

They gathered in a circle around a clearing in the earth. One by one, they stepped forward, their feet bare against the soil. Laurel observed in silence as the elder's skin took on the texture of bark, dark and ridged. From the soles of their feet, roots pushed into the earth, anchoring them firmly. Limbs elongated, fingers sprouting twigs and leaves until the elder stood not as flesh and blood but as a towering tree. They began to chant, a low, melodious incantation that Laurel felt rather than heard. Their formation grew to resemble the spiraling town Laurel had visited and enjoyed.

"This is our bond with the earth," Aspen murmured, her breath warm against Laurel's ear.

"When we choose, we can join them, becoming guardians of the land."

"Is it permanent?" Laurel asked, her voice tinged with wonder.

"No," Aspen replied, her hand seeking Laurel's. "It is a choice—to stand vigil or walk among the living. But the connection remains unbroken, life to life, root to root."

Laurel watched, her eyes wide with a mixture of awe and disbelief, as the Exoran healers tended to her ankle. Days or perhaps weeks passed—Laurel couldn't be sure—in a healing haze of herbal remedies of her new community.

When she was strong enough, Aspen led her back to the edge of the forest near her old home. They moved quietly, blending with the shadows and sounds of the wild.

Peering through the dense foliage, Laurel's heart clenched at the sight of peacekeepers canvassing the area. She overheard their somber tones, speaking of a search concluded, of her canteen and blood found on tree bark, and of Matron Laurel's presumed demise in the jungle.

"Matron Laurel," one peacekeeper sighed, his voice heavy with regret, "poor child didn't stand a chance."

Laurel wanted to step forward, to shout that she was alive, that the jungle had not devoured her. But Aspen's hand on her arm held her back, a silent plea for caution.

"Let them believe what they will," Aspen whispered softly. "You are part of something greater now. To reveal yourself would only bring more strife."

Tears brimmed in Laurel's eyes as she briefly listened to her own eulogy before turning to return to the Exorans.

Title: Already Here

Category: Short Story

Synopsis: In the not-so-distant future, a small town is seemingly immune to the poverty and havoc that has engulfed the world around it. On a mission to uncover the town's secrets, Karly stumbles upon an ancient radio. Utilizing the radio, Karley unearths forgotten knowledge and the dark secrets that protect the town.

Already Here

The atmosphere at the Earthling Protection Agency hung heavy, the usual hustle and bustle replaced by an eerie stillness that seemed to seep into every corner. Karley sat at her desk, idly tapping her pen against the surface as she stared at the towering stack of case files. Each file waiting to be investigated, but today, they felt more like weights pressing down on her shoulders. Karley lifted half the stack and removed a file from the middle. Karley feigned interest as she read the title. "*Raid discovers stash of radio-like devices. Source unknown.*" Karley expelled a long string of air. Finding a source meant watching, eavesdropping on citizens.

Her eyes narrowed as Captain Ortega approached, his heavy footfalls echoing through the silent room long before he came into view. Karley stood up as he drew near.

Captain Ortega approached with a thick envelope in his wrinkled hands, the weight of it evident even from a distance. "This one is for you," he said, his voice tinged with a hint of reluctance as he handed her the package.

Karley accepted the file with a cautious glance, the golden embossed tape catching the light and flashing into her eyes like a warning. "You could have called me," she remarked, her tone laced with a hint of suspicion. "I would have come to your office."

"Nah, I need the steps," Captain Ortega replied with a dismissive wave of his hand. "This one came in from headquarters."

"Headquarters?" Karley's curiosity was piqued, her mind already racing with possibilities. She knew that assignments from headquarters were never ordinary, that they often involved matters of national security and clandestine operations.

Captain Ortega moved in closer to Karley as she broke the golden seal, his presence looming like a shadow. Despite his kind demeanor, Karley knew him to be a lazy and nosey captain, more inclined to delegate tasks than to do it himself.

"Any details on this one, Captain?" she inquired, her tone laced with a subtle hint of skepticism.

Captain Ortega scratched his grizzled chin, his expression clouded with uncertainty. "Not much to go on, I'm afraid," he admitted. "Just a small town called Chesterfield. Supposedly intercepted a possible radio signal."

"So, this is a mission?" Karley perked up at the thought of not being at a desk.

Captain Ortega chuckled, his wrinkles shifting to his eyes. "I suppose so, but don't get too excited," His cheeks lowered into a frown and his eyes bore into hers. "You're not the first agent on this mission."

"How long is the mission?" Karley spoke slowly, choosing her words wisely.

"The rest of the information is in your brief," he nodded to the envelope in her hands.

The envelope suddenly felt as if it were a bowling ball as she slid the thick file from its casing. Her eyes widened as she read the word "Indef" stamped in bright red across the first page.

She knew what that meant—it meant that this case was her new assignment, one that couldn't be closed until it was solved, one that would keep her away from home indefinitely.

She sank back into her chair, the weight of the assignment settling over her like a heavy blanket. Karley watched as Captain Ortega disappeared behind her tower of files listening to his slow heavy footsteps recede.

Karley's eyes struggled to focus on the crimson hue staining her trembling hands, the metallic taste of blood coated her tongue. A throbbing ache pulsed through her skull, as she fought through the disorientation.

Karley's shivering hands roamed her body in a desperate search for the source of her bleeding. A jolt of pain shot through her as her fingertips brushed against a warm, sticky puddle pooling around her injured thigh. With a sharp intake of breath, Karley recoiled, the searing pain causing her to grit her teeth and cry out in anguish.

"No, not now," she whispered to herself, her voice barely audible over the pounding of her heart.

The pulsating ache in her leg intensified with each passing moment, sending waves of agony coursing through her body.

Drawing upon her Marine Corps field medical training, Karley focused on halting the flow of blood, her survival instincts kicking into overdrive. Panic surged within her as she frantically searched for something, anything, to staunch the bleeding. She grabbed a nearby sweatshirt and tightly wrapped it around her wounded thigh, the fabric quickly becoming saturated with the red liquid of her life force.

As the bleeding subsided, Karley's strength began to return, fueled by the rush of adrenaline coursing through her veins like a surge of electricity. Despite the searing pain and bone-deep fear gnawing at her, she knew she had to keep moving if she wanted to live. She forced herself to push through the haze of pain that threatened to engulf her.

Karley clawed at her seatbelt, her hands slipping against the sticky residue of blood pooling around her. Each movement sent a jolt of pain racing through her body, but she refused to yield to the darkness creeping at the edges of her vision. Finally, with a strained click, the seatbelt released, her body colliding with the steering wheel before she could catch herself. Gasping for air, she pushed open the mangled car door, the screech of twisted metal echoing through the bare landscape. Stepping out onto the deserted road, Karley winced as a wave of agony shot through her leg, the pain searing like a brand against her skin.

Karley hobbled towards the road, her eyes tracing the path of destruction left in the wake of the crash. Parts of her vehicle lay strewn across the roadside like discarded toys, twisted metal glinting in the moonlight. The front of her car bore the unmistakable imprint of a collision with a tree, the impact having crumpled the hood and shattered the windshield into a spiderweb of fractured glass. Yet, perplexingly, the tree itself stood unscathed, its bark untouched by the violence that had unfolded beneath its branches.

The skid marks etched into the asphalt resembled scars on a battlefield, and yet, she didn't remember applying the brakes. Karley's mind churned with questions, she couldn't remember the cause of the collision. She scanned the darkened landscape for any sign of danger as she limped back to her car.

"Chesterfield," Karley murmured under her breath, her gaze flicking to the file that lay scattered on the passenger side floor. She reached for her tousled purse, her fingers scraping against shattered glass and debris. The cold seeped into her bones as she stepped onto the empty road, sending shivers racing down her spine as she began the trek toward Chesterfield.

Karley walked three kilometers before stumbling to the first building she saw. Cathedral-like doors loomed before her, and with a trembling hand, she reached out to knock, the sound threatening the stillness of the dark. Karley listened intently to the scuffling footstep from her side of the door as they approached the door.

The doors creaked open spilling light into the darkness as a tall man stepped out. He wore a robe adorned with small patches of frayed cloth and tiny beads. His eyebrow lifted at the sight of her.

"Are you okay?" the man asked, his voice boomed with concern as he took in Karley's disheveled appearance. Without hesitation, she recited the lines she had rehearsed in her head, desperate for help after her ordeal on the road.

The man opened his arms, cradling Karley with a soft hand onto her shoulder, the sleeves of his robe expanding like peacock feathers as he ushered Karley into the building.

"Where am I?" Karley inquired, her voice rough with disuse.

"You are in Chesterfield," He reached to touch Karley's shoulder. "My name is Paul."

As Paul spoke, Karley sought comfort in his familiar and gentle tone. It was the same way her father spoke to her. Paul even looked like him. Karley studied the wrinkles on his

forehead as he towered over her. Paul's right eye was tinged with cloudiness that washed away with his blinks. An uneasiness flushed through her as she watched the clouds return to his eye.

Paul stepped back, sensing Karley's discomfort. "Oh, sorry. I forget that my eye can spook some people."

Karley's stomach tightened with embarrassment. She wished she hadn't stared at him for so long.

"Do you have a phone?" she asked, her voice strained with pain. She winced as she shifted, the reminder of her injured leg sending waves of discomfort through her body.

"I have a landline in my room upstairs" Paul apologized, explaining the town's peculiar lack of cellular signal.

Karley swallowed hard as she looked around. "You live here?" The thought of her going into his bedroom disturbed her.

"It used to be an observatory before the ban." Paul glanced at her leg. "I can call for help. I'll be right back." His robe dragged the floor as he walked away despite his exceptional height.

"Thank you." Karley called out behind him. Her leg began to throb with flashing pangs of heat, pulling her attention back to her wound.

Karley leaned against the wall as she limped to the bench on the side of the room. The room was a small display area. The walls around it held enlarged photos of its history. Karley's eyes danced around the room. A photo of a telephone operator smiling in front of a circuit board routing phone calls. A war photo of a soldier covered in dust calling for aid as a wounded

comrade laid outstretched next to him. A satellite in the middle of the desert with nothing but a starlit sky above it. Below it read “Chesterfield 2040.”

Paul reentered the room with blankets and a folded cot under his arms. He had no problem carrying the bulky items.

“I made a quick call, someone should be here shortly for you.” Paul began to make the bed.

“Why are you making a bed?” Karley raised her brows.

“You’ll need to elevate your leg for now.” Paul smiled as he walked backed to the doorway.

Before she could protest, Paul turned off the lights and exited. Karley sat in the empty exhibit room, her heart pounding in her chest as she struggled to make sense of the darkness that surrounded her. The crack under the door served as the only source of light, casting long, distorted shadows.

A faint whirring sound broke through the stillness, causing Karley to sharply turn her head towards the source. Her eyes widened in apprehension as she stared into the dark corner of the room, her breath catching in her throat. The sound grew louder, filling the room with an eerie, electrical sensation that sent shivers racing down her spine.

“Mr. Paul?” she yelled out, her voice trembling with uncertainty. She paused, her ears straining for any sign of a response.

She breathed a sigh of relief as she heard footsteps nearing the door. Click. The latch rattled as the door locked from the other side. Karley listened, her eyes bulging in the dark as the footsteps quickly moved away from the door.

Amid the darkness, a sudden static buzz erupted from the center of the room, cutting through the silence like a knife. Karley's eyes snapped towards the source of the sound, her heart racing with fear as a small red light pierced the darkness, casting an insidious glow on the locked door before her.

"Karley." The voice crackled through the room, emanating from an old radio set in the corner.

Karley's heart leaped into her throat, her eyes widening with fear as she froze in place, her breath coming in rapid, shallow gasps. She scanned the dimly lit room, her mind frantic with thoughts of horrible possibilities.

"Who's there?" Karley's voice trembled, barely audible over the static-filled air.

"Don't be afraid, Karley," the voice responded, its tone soothing yet strangely unnerving. "Join us."

Karley's head spun, darkness encroaching on the edges of her vision as she stumbled backward, her body collapsing onto the hard tile floor. The sound of her sweat slicked skin slapped the tile reverberated through the room.

A flood of blinding light washed over Karley, piercing through the darkness and illuminating her disoriented form. She blinked against the harsh glare, squinting as she tried to make out the silhouette of a figure standing over her.

"Congratulations," the figure spoke, his voice tinged with amusement as he extended a hand to help Karley to her feet.

Karley recoiled at the touch, her head throbbing with pain as she struggled to process the surreal turn of events. "What?" she stammered, her voice barely above a whisper.

"They don't let many people join, but I think they like you," the figure continued, his smirk visible even in the dim light of the room.

"They?" Karley's brow furrowed in confusion, her mind reeling with disbelief.

Paul's expression softened, a hint of sadness flickering in his eyes as he regarded Karley with a mixture of pity and understanding. "Well, you called them Aliens. We call them Caretakers."

"No, there can't be Aliens here," she protested, her voice growing more adamant with each word.

Karley's blood ran cold as the implications of his words sank in. She remembered the Earthling Act, the strict regulations imposed by the government to prevent contact with extraterrestrial beings. The ban on radios, surveillance cameras on every corner, phone monitoring—all designed to keep humanity safe from the unknown.

"They were already here," she whispered.

Title: Self-Portrait

Category: Screenplay

Synopsis: When her elderly grandmother moves in with her and her father after a recent dementia diagnosis, Jerica discovers magical paintbrushes and canvasses within her grandmother's belongings. Enabling her to travel through art and time, Jerica realizes that there are limitations to this fantastic new discovery – namely, that she can only travel through her own family's artworks. Using her new ability, Jerica comes to find that a painterly version of her grandmother, who is vibrant and full of life, is trapped within the art world yet still possesses all her physical body's memories and wisdom. With her grandmother's guidance, she embarks on a journey to unravel her family's history and abilities while evading a menacing blob of ink following her throughout the art world.

SELF-PORTRAIT

ACT I

FADE IN:

EXT. JERICA'S HOME - MORNING

JERICA (16) walks towards her grandmother who is sitting on the front porch. Jerica hands GRAMMO (80) a cup of sweet tea with a straw.

Grammo takes the cups and sips as she watches the movers unload boxes and move them into her son in law's house. Jerica sits in the chair next to Grammo and breathes in deeply.

JERICA

Hey Grammo, how are you feeling?

GRAMMO

I'm fine child. Just old. You draw anything lately?

JERICA

No, I've been busy with exams this week.

GRAMMO

Shame they make yall work so hard. Yall just kids.

DAD (44) stands in front of the doorway and directs a mover to bring boxes to the attic as he walks toward Grammo and Jerica. Exhausted from helping to move boxes, he wipes sweat off of his forehead as he approaches.

DAD

Whew!

It sure is hot out here.

Yall alright?

JERICA

Grammo wants to see my art. Can we go inside now?

DAD

Not yet kiddo. We gotta stay out of the way
for now. But it shouldn't be much longer.

Jerica sulks back into her chair and pulls out her smartphone.

GRAMMO

Your mom used to draw just like you. If she
didn't have paper, she didn't mind using the
walls.

Grammo sits back and chuckles at the memory. Jerica sets her phone to
the side and stares at her Grandmother.

JERICA

I'm kinda hungry, you want something to eat?

GRAMMO

Yeah, I suppose I need to take my mind off
some things.

Jerica holds Grammo's forearm and assists her to stand. They walk
into the house together.

INT. KITCHEN - AFTERNOON

Dad is already in the kitchen preparing sandwiches and searching
something.

JERICA

Dad, are you okay?

DAD

Im looking for your Grammo's wooden plate.

The doctor said she
shouldn't use glass or breakable
utensils.

Jerice begins searching in the upper cabinets and finds a plastic
plate.

JERICA

Will this be okay?

Grammo watches as Dad and Jerica prepare her lunch.

GRAMMO

(Smacks her lips with
disgust)

I'm no child. I can eat off any plate you
give me.

DAD

Grammo, I'm just trying to do what the
doctor says so that you can be safe.

Dad kisses her forehead comforting her and gently rubs her back.

DAD

Jerica, please walk with Grammo to the
living room. I'll bring lunch when I finish.

JERICA

Okay, Dad.

Jerica gently sits Grammo on the couch and joins her to sit in the
chair facing her.

JERICA

You wanna watch something?

GRAMMO

(nods her head
affirmatively)

Yeah, put on 'Bonanza'

Jerica looks at Grammo confused by the request. She has never heard
of Bonanza.

JERICA

Bonanza?

Grammo I don't know what that is.

GRAMMO

(becomes irate and speaks louder)

Bonanza!

Channel 2! Bonanza!

The yelling scares Jerica and she stands to retrieve Dad.

JERICA

Dad!

Dad runs into the living room and sees Grammo.

GRAMMO
(Yelling)
The Duke!

DAD
(Turns to Jerica)
What happened?

JERICA
(Crying)
She wanted to watch something called
Bonanza. I don't know what it is Dad.

Dad reaches and grabs his phone out of his pocket and quickly searches for 'Bonanza.' His search results find videos of the an old western television show 'Bonanza.' He air plays the show to the television and the theme some comes on.

GRAMMO
(Singing and watching
Bonanza)
Day by day, work or play, ready side by
side.

Jerica sniffles and walks to the kitchen. Dad follows and looks back at Grammo.

INT. KITCHEN - AFTERNOON

JERICA
(Wipes her tears and grabs
a plate of food)
I'm fine Dad, I know we talked about her
condition.

DAD
(Steps in front of Jerica)
It will be hard at times. I keep thinking of
how hard it is to be trapped in your own
brain. Our job is to make sure she's safe.

JERICA
(Steps around her dad)
I get it Dad, safe. And fed. I'll bring her
food to her.

DAD

(Turns to the side to
allow Jerica to pass)
After she eats, I think we should take
Grammo to her room and let her rest.

JERICA

(Nods understandingly)
Okay. I'll see you in the living room Dad. I
guess we are watching Bonanza.

Jerica walks away to the living room.

JERICA

Grammo, you want some mustard on your
sandwich?

Grammo tilts her head in confusion and looks at Jerica softly. In the
way she would look at a small child.

GRAMMO

You made this for me baby?

Grammo gingerly walks over to Jerica and takes the plate from her
hands.

GRAMMO

You should let me make you a plate Jerri.

Grammo touches Jerica's face and softly stares into her eyes. Jerica
turns her head to look away while a tear drops from her eyes.

JERICA

Grammo, you should sit down and eat. Can you
hear the TV alright?

Jerica grabs the remote and turns up the volume. She kisses

Grammo forehead and pauses to stare at her before walking back to the
kitchen.

INT. KITCHEN - AFTERNOON

Dad is sitting at the kitchen table eating a sandwich and looking
through unopened mail. He looks up as Jerica enters the kitchen.

DAD

How'd it go in there?

JERICA

She called me Jerri again, does that mean she's going to have another episode?

DAD

Baby, I honestly don't know.

Jerica shifts in her chair and her legs bounces up and down. Dad looks at the ripples of water in his cup caused by Jerica's shaky leg.

DAD

It has nothing to do with you. Her episode aren't caused by you. You have to know and understand this Jerica.

Dad puts his hand on Jerica's shaky leg and leans toward her.

JERICA

Dad, I know, but I-I can't help but come to that conclusion when every time she calls me by the nickname Mom gave me, she -

DAD

(Interrupts Jerica)

Sweetie, I see where you're going with this. I don't want you connecting dots that don't exist.

Dad stands and walks to the living room door. He stops at the door before opening it and turns back to Jerica.

DAD

Grammo loves you so much. We all do. Come help me bring Grammo to the room for a nap.

JERICA

Yes, sir.

Jerica and Dad walk into the living room and see Grammo sleeping on the couch. Dad walks in and grabs the plate from the table. He frowns at the barely eaten sandwich. Jerica walks over to Grammo.

JERICA

(in a soft whisper)

Grammo, lets get you to the room.

GRAMMO

(sits up and groans)

Alright, these old bones can't do couch naps like they used ta'.

JERICA

I think you're going to like your room.

Dad let me paint the walls
and I did something special for
you.

GRAMMO

Is that right child!? Your daddy used to complain about you drawing all on the walls and now he jus' let you do it huh?

JERICA

He almost said no Grammo.

GRAMMO

Hmmph, that reminds me. I have some paintbrushes I want to give you but no telling where the movers done put my things.

JERICA

I'm sure its all in the attic.

GRAMMO

Alright, Grammo gonna have to look for 'em after my nap.

Jerica and Grammo open the door to Grammo's room. Jerica helps Grammo sit on the bed and removes her slippers. Grammo lays back in the bed and sees Jerica's surprise art work.

INT. GRAMMO'S ROOM - AFTERNOON

GRAMMO

(Looking at the ceiling)
That's beautiful chile'

JERICA

Daddy told me you liked watched Star Trek. I painted you a universe. If you want I can add more.

GRAMMO

(nods her head and a small

tear falls)
Nah, baby, it's perfect the way it is. I
sho' did like Star Trek. I sho' did.

JERICA
Have a good nap Grammo.

Jerica gently shuts the door behind her and smiles. As she walks back to the living room she passes the stairs to the attic and pauses. She considers going up to get Grammo's boxes but is interrupted by the sound of phone chiming.

Jerica looks down at her phone and sees a reminder notification. "Portfolio Submission For Art School Due In Two Weeks." She returns her phone back to her pocket, sighs, and walks up the stairs to the attic.

INT. ATTIC - AFTERNOON

Jerica sees Grammo's boxes stacked all around the attic. She walks around reading the labels and stops at a box labeled 'Art supplies.'

JERICA
(speaking to herself)
This is a big box Grammo, what have you been
up to?

Jerica opens the box and sees so many art supplies. She smiles with excitement. After shifting supplies around, Jerica finds a wooden box with beautiful carvings.

JERICA
What's this?

She opens the box and sees paintbrushes with wooden handles and golden bands holding the bristles together.

JERICA
Grammo, are these the brushes you wanted to
give to me? These are amazing.

Jerica closes the box and hugs it against her chest. As she prepares to leave the attic, she notices an art canvas covered in heavy sheets. She lifts the sheet to peek and sees a beautiful collage of dancing bodies. One of the dancers catches her eye and she notices that she looks a lot like her Grammo. Jerica lowers the sheets to cover the canvas and exits the attic.

INT. LIVING ROOM - AFTERNOON

JERICA

Dad!

You won't believe what I saw
in the attic. I mean - I knew Grammo was an artist, but I've
never seen the painting upstairs
before.

She hasn't shown it to me. And look -

Jerica opens the wooden box and shows Dad the paintbrushes.

JERICA

Aren't they beautiful!

DAD

Jerica!

We need to make sure

Grammo feels like she has some

normalcy and that includes privacy.

JERICA

It's fine Dad, she told me she wanted to
give me some paintbrushes. Besides, I have
to submit my portfolio in two weeks and
these brushes inspire me.

DAD

Okay, what painting did you see?

JERICA

Oh my gosh Dad, it's breathtaking. Do you
know if Grammo ever danced?

DAD

Not your Grammo, but your Mom sure did. She
had a dancer's body too. She was very
flexible.

JERICA

Dad!

Eww!

Stop!

So that's my mom
in the picture then.

DAD
(Chuckling)
Alright, alright. It must be your mom.

We can ask Grammo when she
wakes.

JERICA
I think I'm going to surprise her with a
painting for when she wakes up.

DAD
Okay, I understand. Go on upstairs and you
know what we say. When the art itch comes,

DAD AND JERICA
(together)
You gotta scratch it!

JERICA
See you later Dad!

Jerica hugs the wooden box once more and her dad before turning
excitedly go upstairs. Dad smiles as she leaves then grabs the remote
and lays on the couch.

INT. JERICA'S ROOM - AFTERNOON

Jerica sets the brushes on her bed and begins to prepare a canvas.
She selects paint colors and sits at her easel. As she stares at the
blank canvas, she begins to notice the volume of the noises around
her increase and she grows anxious. She stands and paces the room
before sitting at the easel again. She focuses on her breathing,
reaches for a brush, and closes her eyes. Jerica opens her eyes and
sees a work of art in front of her.

JERICA
What? Did I make this?

Jerica stands and steps away from the canvas. Confused, she looks
around for anyone else in the room. Scared, Jerica leaves her room

and is suddenly stopped in the hallway when she sees her Grammo standing outside her room.

INT. HALLWAY - NIGHT

GRAMMO
(whispering)
What did you paint?

JERICA
How did you know I was painting?

GRAMMO
Girl, hush and tell me what you painted.

JERICA
Grammo, I used the brushes -

GRAMMO
(Interrupting Jerica)
I know, what did you paint Jerica?

JERICA
I don't even remember painting it. But it's
a place. A field, I think.

GRAMMO
Is there a person in the painting?

JERICA
Grammo, what's going on. Are you okay?

GRAMMO
I'm fine now tell me, was there a person in
the painting?

JERICA
No, I don't think so.

GRAMMO
Good.

Bring me back the brushes. I gotta keep them safe.

Jerica hurriedly walks back to her room. She grabs the brushes and looks at the painting once more. Unsure of a small detail, she touches the canvas and realizes it's the figure of a shadowy person. Jerica jumps back in fear. Her grip on the box tightens as she walks out of the room, leaving one paintbrush behind.

INT. GRAMMO'S ROOM - NIGHT

Jerica enters Grammo's room while she sleeps and places the paint brushes on the dresser and quietly walks out.

ACT TWO

INT. JERICA'S ROOM - NIGHT

Jerica prepares for bed and notices that there is a paint brush still in her room. She picks up the brush and examines it. She notices the carvings on the handle and she touches the bristles. She sets it on her art easel and lays in her bed. That night Jerica has a nightmare. She dreams that she is suddenly in the work of art that she saw in the attic.

There are so many people dancing around her and she begins to fight her way through the crowd until she sees a familiar face.

DREAM JERICA

Grammo?

The dancer turns her head and stares at Jerica for a moment and continues dancing until she is blended into the crowd.

DREAM JERICA

Grammo?

Jerica searches for the dancer and moves deeper into the crowd. She turns around sharply when she feels a presence behind her. The Dream Dancer is no more than a foot behind her.

DREAM DANCER

(whispering)

You shouldn't be here. You need to come with me.

DREAM JERICA

Huh?

Wait, I don't understand.

DREAM DANCER

(continuing whisper)

Dance or he will know you're here. There's no time to explain.

Jerica watches as the Dream Dancer rises onto the tip of her toes and began to rhythmically sway while her head created a visual beat.

Jerica follows her lead and begins to dance. Their feet gracefully move them through the crowd until they are the only ones in the painting.

DREAM DANCER

(looking around)

There's not much time. How did you get here?

DREAM JERICA

What? Is this a dream? I remember giving the brushes back to Grammo, and I went back to my room for bed. I don't understand.

DREAM DANCER

(gasps)

The brushes! No, no no!

The Dream Dancer continues to dance again but she loses control and there is no rhythm to her dance. Her spasmodic movements scare Jerica and she begins to back away. The Dream Dancers close in on Jerica, too afraid to look away, she feels a hand on her shoulder from behind. Jerica turns and sees a huge shadow behind her. Jerica screams herself awake.

DAD

Jerica! It's alright. It's just a dream.

JERICA

(breathing heavily)

Dad, It felt so real!

DAD

(gently shushing)

I know. Do you want to tell me about it?

Jerica looks up from her dad's embrace and searches for the paintbrush. She spots it on her easel in the exact position she left it in. Her shoulders drop and she sighs a deep sigh of relief.

JERICA

No Daddy. I forgot most of it already.

DAD

That's fine. It's 7am.

You want

to join me for a quick breakfast?

I have to go into the office for a few hours today. It'll just be you and Grammo, do you think you can handle it?

JERICA

Yeah Dad, I can handle it. I'll just have to wear my airpods when she watching Bonanza.

DAD

Ok, meet me downstairs. I'm leaving at 9am.

JERICA

Kay Dad, I'll be down soon.

Dad leaves Jerica's room and softly closes the door behind him. Jerica walks over to the paintbrush and reaches to grab it. She hovers her hand over the brush before deciding not to touch it again.

JERICA

(Speaking to herself)

I wonder if Grammo may know anything about my dream.

INT. KITCHEN - MORNING

Dad and Jerica sit at the table in the kitchen silently. Jerica pushes her scrambled eggs from one side of her plate to the other. Dad doesn't notice her behavior as he scrolls through his phone and text his office. He stuffs a piece of toast into his mouth as he stands and walks over to the sink to rinse off his plate.

DAD

(speaking with his mouth full)

Sorry, baby. I gotta go.

JERICA

'kay Dad. How long will you be at the office?

DAD

Just a few hours. I should be back by three o'clock.

Jerica stands and empties her plate of food into the garbage.

JERICA

See you soon dad. Don't be late.

Dad gives Jerica a tight hug and kisses her on the forehead.

DAD

Bye, sweetie.

Dad and Jerica walk to the front door. She takes a glimpse down the hallway towards Grammo's room as she passes. Dad walks out and Jerica closes the door behind him. Jerica walks back to the hallway and stares at Grammo's door.

She stands quietly at the door hesitant to wake her Grammo. Jerica draws in a deep breath and raises her hand to knock when the door is suddenly opened from the other side. Grammo is standing in the doorway staring back at Jerica. Jerica is startled and steps back.

JERICA

You're awake.

Grammo steps into the doorway and peeks her head out to look in both directions before grabbing Jerica's hand and pulling her into her room.

GRAMMO

(whispering)

Come inside child.

Confused, Jerica steps into Grammo's room and looks behind her to perhaps see whatever it was that Grammo was looking at.

INT. GRAMMO'S ROOM - MORNING

JERICA

Grammo, what did you mean last night when you said 'keep the brushes safe?'

GRAMMO

(exhales deeply)

Sit down. I'll tell you everything I know.

Jerica sits on the floor and hugs her knees in front of Grammo's bed. Grammo walks to the dresser and gently touches the box of paintbrushes. She grabs a hair brush and comb and moves to sit on the bed straddling Jerica's position on the floor. Grammo begins to softly brush Jerica's hair and parts it into sections to braid.

GRAMMO

(deep heavy sigh)

These brushes are older than you could ever imagine baby. I was just about your age when my mom told me about them. They belonged to my by Great Grandfather. He was a prominent artist. People like to think that just because our skin is brown, we were all slaves. But my Granddaddy was free. He was French and travelled to America to pursue his art. He was good at drawing people. Like you.

Jerica smiles, happy for the compliment and turns her head to look at her Grammo. Grammo's grip tightens and Jerica flinches from the pull.

GRAMMO

(Tsking her lips)

Sit still girl. I'm trying to braid.

JERICA

Yes, ma'am.

GRAMMO

Anyways, your Great Great Granddaddy, got himself caught up in some white folks' business. At first, they paid him to paint but then they started getting greedy and they stole his art. They would tell him that it wasn't good and take the art and threaten him when he insisted, they pay.

Grammo stops braiding and looks at Jerica.

GRAMMO

That made my Granddaddy some kind of mad. His anger grew but so did his passion for making art. He sat and carved those brushes until his fingers bled.

Grammo looks at her own fingers and then glances at the box of paintbrushes.

GRAMMO

Somehow, them brushes produced the best work he had ever done. But Granddaddy stopped charging money for his work. Instead he only required them to give their hair for the bristles of his brushes. Them folks laughed and happily gave up them strands. They

thought he was foolish until they all suffered mysterious incidents. The story is that my granddaddy would paint the people who had wronged him into places that would drive them insane. They would have nightmares. Then folks came and took him and beat him. Granddaddy knew this would happen so he painted himself in all of his art so that he would stay alive and he hid the brushes.

Grammo finishes braiding Jerica's hair as Jerica listens intently to her story.

JERICA

Is this why I dreamt of the painting from the attic?

GRAMMO

That was one of my first paintings that I made with those brushes.

Grammo stares at a clock in front of her. The seconds seem to slow.

GRAMMO

Your mom, she loved to dance but I wanted her to paint. We have always painted. After I did that painting, your mom had dreams too.

Jerica's body tenses as she waits to hear the next words from Grammo.

GRAMMO

She said she saw an old man and he would tell her things she couldn't have known. I didn't listen to her. I should've.

JERICA

What happened to her Grammo?

GRAMMO

(Beginning to breathe faster)

I should have listened to her. She said we all could have been together.

JERICA

(swallows)

Grammo?

Jerica tries to turn to see Grammo, but Grammo is still holding her hair tightly.

GRAMMO
(hyperventilating)
I should have listened. Now she's stuck. I
can't get her out. I tried.

JERICA
(groaning in pain)
Grammo, my hair! Ouch! You gotta let go
Grammo!

Jerica reaches up and places her hands over Grammo's hand and begins to softly rub them until Grammo's grips loosens.

GRAMMO
(whimpering)
I'm sorry baby. I should've listened to you.

Jerica stands and turns to face Grammo. Grammo sits at the edge of the bed unmoving and full of sorrow.

JERICA
It's okay Grammo. You want to watch some tv?

Jerica watches with concern as Grammo stares into the distance. She gingerly touches Grammo's shoulder and encourages her to stand. They walk together to the living room.

INT. LIVING ROOM - DAY

Jerica and Grammo enter the living room. Jerica assists

Grammo and helps her to sit on the recliner in front of the television. Jerica turns on the television and sits the couch opposite of Grammo. She restlessly waits for Grammo's episode to calm.

JERICA
(speaks hesitantly and
slowly)
Grammo? Is my mom in the painting?

GRAMMO
(groans softly)
I tried to get her out. I tried. If you
paint yourself, a self portrait, you can

come back only if he lets you. Don't use the brushes. Don't paint.

Grammo's voice begins to taper off as she begins to fall asleep. Jerica stands and walks pass Grammo. Grammo suddenly grabs her arm as she passes.

GRAMMO
(voice trembling)
Don't go!

JERICA
(Gasps in suprise)
I'll be back Grammo. Don't wo-

Grammo falls back to sleep before she can finish her sentence. She briefly considers the warning from her unconscious Grammo. She peers into the hallway. The paintbrushes sit on the dresser in Grammo's room. Jerica shakes her head 'no' walks towards her room. As she passes Grammo's room, she hears a clatter and stops. She slowly turns around and walks back to Grammo's room and enters. Jerica sees the brushes sprawled out over the floor. While kneeling to collect the brushes, she examines the carvings, and the bristles then jumps to her feet and takes the brushes to her room.

INT. JERICA'S ROOM - DAY

Jerica lays out the brushes on her bed and begins to take photos of them with her phone. She uploads them to her computer and works at modifying the images and submits the images to an online art forum. Jerica types "Does anyone know what this means?"

Jerica leans back and sighs. She closes her eyes and falls asleep.

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