

A Darkling Plane

By

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Abstract

This thesis provides an interpretation of what it means for a text to be “science fiction,” and provides a definition made up of three key aspects: the imagination of a possible reality, the prediction of technological consequences, and the inclusion of a human moral. The text of the thesis then seeks to critique religious institutions as a technology. The story explores the complicated and painful process of losing one’s religion, and provides kinship to the faithless and a challenge to the faithful.

“Into My Own” - Robert Frost

One of my wishes is that those dark trees,
So old and firm they scarcely show the breeze,
Were not, as 'twere, the merest mask of gloom,
But stretched away unto the edge of doom.

I should not be withheld but that some day
Into their vastness I should steal away,
Fearless of ever finding open land,
Or highway where the slow wheel pours the sand.

I do not see why I should e'er turn back,
Or those should not set forth upon my track
To overtake me, who should miss me here
And long to know if still I held them dear.

They would not find me changed from him they knew—
Only more sure of all I thought was true.

Introduction

“Science Fiction” is one of the most ill-defined genres in all of literature. Whereas most genres can be defined by common characteristics, tropes, and cliches that set it apart from other literary works, science fiction resists such definition. Common sense would dictate that “science” or “technology” must be a defining characteristic of the genre, but these terms are so vacuous that they could apply to nearly any subject. Language is a technology, a sharpened stick is a technology, any new tool or process could be considered a technology as long as it enhances human survivability or reveals more of the world to human understanding. Martin Heidegger argues in his essay, “The Question Concerning Technology” that, “...the essence of technology must harbor in itself the growth of the saving power” (Heidegger, 11). This “saving power,” as I understand it, is the ability to prevent or overcome danger, and, in doing so, reveal something concealed by that danger to human understanding. The scientific method, from which “science fiction” borrows half of its name, is a systematized tool of overcoming the danger of the unknown.

The issue of science fiction arises when one considers that “revealing” is a core part of *every* narrative. From ancient epics to children’s fairy tales, the hero or heroine must *discover* the villain’s weakness, *find* the magic weapon, and finally overcome the danger to *reveal* a world beyond it. Even the process of reading itself is one of revealing by physically turning the page to make visible what happens next! What, then, is science fiction defined by? The Wikipedia page “Definitions of Science Fiction” contains 41 different definitions for the genre given by various SF authors over the course of the genre’s existence. One common theme among these definitions could be phrased as “the consequences of a technology.” This is closer to the definition of science fiction I seek, but it too is far too generalizable to be useful. Under this definition, *The*

Lord of the Rings could be considered science fiction, as it is about the consequences or effects of a technology, the One Ring.

If we return to the phrase itself, science fiction gives us two tools for defining it: science and fiction. “Fiction” is easy enough to define, generally meaning something made up, untrue, or invented. “Science” functions as a noun, defined by Merriam-Webster as, “knowledge or a system of knowledge covering general truths or the operation of general laws especially as obtained and tested through scientific method.” Putting these two things together, we get a definition like, “falsehoods(fiction) about the truth(science).” This mish-mash definition, as silly as it sounds, may be useful in helping create a more functional definition. The truth, as humanity often sees it, is something definite, knowable, and unchanging. To tell fictions about science is to imagine an alternate truth. Often the author uses the scientific method on reality as he-or-she sees it and hypothesizes about what *could be*. This is the first aspect of science fiction: imagining a *possible* reality; whether or not that reality is *probable* is another issue.

As mentioned earlier in this essay, technology reveals reality to human understanding. This is the second step in defining science fiction. Science fiction, as a created genre, acts as a technology in itself, exploring and revealing a possible future to readers. Here, I return to the common theme in the Wikipedia page, “consequences of technology.” The “saving power,” as Heidegger would put it, of science fiction is its ability to explore the consequences of a technology, thereby revealing a reality to humanity before it even has to experience the danger of it. Another aspect of science fiction, then, is its predictive power.

One term that keeps coming up throughout this essay is “human.” Science fiction, as the authors cited in the Wiki article believe, is a human genre of literature, meaning that it deals with

human stories, human problems, and human consequences. SF stories are meant to inform, to warn, and to entertain human audiences. They speak to what it means to be human.

These three defining characteristics: the imagination of a possible reality, the prediction of technological consequences, and the inclusion of a human moral are what make science fiction what it is. Any of these aspects individually could be applied to another genre, and often make science fiction cross-generic in nature, but when all three are present, the work in question is undoubtedly science fiction.

This novel meets all three defining criteria laid out above, making it a science fiction story. The reality I imagine in this novel is one that is highly improbable, but something similar could arise here in our own reality; It explores the consequences of a technology that is not often considered; and it tells a human story from the perspective of a man who needs to find himself before he can find his father.

A Darkling Plane started as *In the Shadow of God* back in the summer of 2024. I took my work laptop to a quiet corner of the Great River Regional Library and began putting fingers to keys. Those first sections of writing were based on a worldbuilding exercise I had led my senior creative writing course through that spring, and they were terrible. I wrote and rewrote, trying different styles, from more verbose to more stripped-down, all the while not realizing how little attention I paid to what was actually going to happen in the story. I envisioned an adventure akin to *The Hobbit* about a plucky young man who wanted to find his father. I had just watched HBO's *The Terror* and was fascinated (as I often am) by arctic explorations, so I wanted to set the story somewhere snowy. I wanted a world untouched by human hands, but one that spoke to ancient civilizations, like the game series *Halo*, so I created Farmur with its giant rotating sheet

and constructed the story of *The Burying*. All of these ideas came up in that first draft, but I had not met my main character yet.

I am the GM (Game Master) for my friends' Dungeons and Dragons group, so protagonists are typically something I leave to other people while I get to create monsters, obstacles, and a rich world for others to play around in. The first draft of Mark suffered greatly because of this. I had no idea who Mark was, what he looked like, or how he should feel about the world around him. He was a blank cutout on the page, begging to be filled with something, anything, to give him direction.

That draft sat dormant until spring of 2025 when I took my first literature course, "Seminar in American Literature of the Early Twentieth Century." The course focused on one author, Ernest Hemingway, and took us through his life and literary works, exploring how his voice evolved over the course of his career. Our discussions often prompted me to consider how much of the author was visible in his protagonists, and then it clicked: Mark is me. In the late spring, I sat down and thought about what story I wanted to tell, what issue I wanted to discuss, and how it all fit with who I was as a person. The biggest upheaval I've had in my life, at least the most abrupt and noteworthy, was my loss of religion in my teenage years. *That's Mark's story*, I thought, *his deconversion*.

I had my protagonist's arc, but I needed to weave it into this narrative of exploration of a forgotten planet. To fit the two together, I looked back to my original inspirations. In *Ringworld* by Larry Niven, the protagonists find an ancient ring-shaped planet orbiting a star. This planet has technologically regressed to the point of early civilization. They praise the creators of the ringworld as gods, and the protagonists, outsiders, find this very strange. Similar to and inspired by *Ringworld*, the *Halo* series of video games by Bungie Entertainment places humanity in the

far future after finding an array of ancient superweapons known as “Halo,” which were built by a race of beings known as “Forerunners.” These weapons are sought after by an Alien race known as “The Covenant” who wish to activate the weapons to complete a spiritual transcendence known as “The Great Journey.” Bringing these two stories together, I asked myself “who built the Sheet?” The answer built my plot.

Aglin, Agricultural Logistics Interstellar (the name actually took a while to come up with), is a food and building supply corporation that owns numerous planets around the galaxy. They created the Sheet and terraformed the planet Farmur, known to them as Farmer L2416. Aglin was to act as the Ringworld Architects or Forerunners in my story, the ancient god who created land, sky, and sea for those who follow and pray to Him. The main technology whose consequences I critique in this novel is religion.

For most people, faith and religion are synonymous. Faith is the most personal process that humans have, existing within a part of ourselves outside of our conscious recognition. Faith exists in the realm of belief, but it is deeper than that; faith exists in the same place that reality exists in our minds. It is something experienced, like touch or taste, and it ingrains itself in every aspect of one’s reality. Religion is not faith. Religion is a structure for labelling and rationalizing the sublime, the unexplainable, the magical. Religion demystifies the great question “why?” and gives believers stock answers for unknowable questions and simple reasons for complex phenomena. Simply put, religion is humanity’s attempt to categorize faith. Religion is also a weapon. Religion places bounds on God’s power and directs God’s ire and love in a way that benefits those who preach, and therefore lead, a religion. As an organization, Religion determines in-groups and out-groups, who is ostracized and who is heralded, who is killed and who is spared, who is doomed and who is saved. It determines what is moral and immoral, good

or bad, true or false. Religion is nearly as pervasive as faith itself in regard to its effect on one's worldview.

When creating Aglinism, I looked mostly to my own experience growing up in the Catholic church. I knew I was bisexual early on in middle school, and I have an aunt who is a lesbian. My family is Catholic and conservative, and what made me begin to question my faith was the way my family talked about my aunt. I remember one experience in particular when my aunts, uncles, and grandfather were sitting around talking about gay marriage. This was in summer of 2013, just before gay marriage was legalized in Minnesota. My grandfather, who I think of as the kindest, most loving and accepting man I know, told the family that he prayed every night that God would "fix" my lesbian aunt. Those words stuck with me, and I began to wonder why he would think such a thing, and what he would think of me if he knew who I was.

After that, I began to notice that the love and acceptance the priest would preach on Sundays was not shown by my family or members of my church. No love was shown to the less fortunate, the homeless, refugees, or the LGBT community by my family. In my school, a predominantly white and Christian community, I could not be honest about my bisexuality for fear of physical violence. It all added up to skepticism about why God would allow such cruelty to persist. My uncle passed away in 2015, and I was asked to speak at his funeral. I told my family about what a good man my uncle was, I shared stories about the time we spent together, I read some stories collected from our family members about the kind of man he was, and I ended by saying that I was unsure of what came after, but I knew that my uncle was somewhere good. It was a foolish thing to say.

My mention of being unsure of what happened after death set my family off. After the service, my other uncles sat me down and verbally berated me, calling me ungrateful, selfish,

and claiming that I was going to hell. That summer, my mother sent me to a bible camp, forced me along to christian movies, and tried to force me to go to church. I know my mother cares for me, but her lack of acceptance and the resentment, anger, and passive aggression I feel from my family every time that I visit is all I can see when I think of religion.

Aglinism follows many of the same tenets and motifs of Christianity: care for others, faith in the one true god, and community service; but it also has its own tenets, specifically I wanted to include a tenet about efficiency in labor, as efficiency is a common buzzword used by businesses that can mean anything for executives from cost-cutting measures, to longer work days, to layoffs, but for the common worker it means that you do more with less, you work hard, and you save time where you can. This idea for including efficiency came from the Dystopian novel *We* by Yevgeny Zamyatin, which focuses specifically on the concept of “Taylorism,” the modern basis of scientific management.

I think my novel could easily fall into the dystopian subcategory of science fiction, as it uses many of the same tropes used by such texts: a surveillance state, militaristic policing, a dictatorial or martial government, constant warfare, the threat of outsiders, and propagandizing to control people’s opinions. I find that this text is most like Suzanne Collins’ *The Hunger Games*. It was one of the defining texts of my childhood, and one that I drew inspiration from. While there are no districts on Farmur, there is a division of resource production based on direction from Capital. Most resources flow into Capital and down into the Home to fuel the governmental machine. Those further out are given fewer resources and have less technology than those in Capital. Where the texts differ is that there is little dissent against the Company from its citizens, as opposed to violent suppression of uprisings in *Hunger Games*. The propaganda machine of Farmur is closer to George Orwell’s *1984*. I took special inspiration from

Orwell's creation of Newspeak. In my text, I try to show how language has shifted to include more work-centric words. Because of the culture's basis in a corporate hierarchy, the word "person" and "people" has been phased out of language entirely, and is replaced by the word "worker." This reflects the culture's focus on a person as a unit of work-value. Job titles also reflect a more slave-master relationship. Soldiers in the Center and Outer Corps are referred to as "supervisors," with their superiors being "managers." In private business, a business owner is not simply a "boss," they are your "overseer" or the "owner."

Because of a focus on efficiency and time-saving, the word "love" has also phased out of the culture, being seen as messy, inefficient, and unpredictable. The term has been replaced with the concept of "giving time," since that is the most valuable thing one worker can give another. Workers often say that they "give their time to" their partner, or that they "owe them their hours." This is akin to saying you love somebody. When declaring one's feelings for another, the word "feelings" is still used (as in "I have feelings for you"), but there is shame attached to those feelings because you have stopped giving your time to Aglin alone and are now giving it to another worker.

What I think my text does differently from other dystopian science fiction that I have seen is that it challenges theocracy by questioning the very basis of what religion is. It points out that religion is a tool of social order and hierarchy like any other power structure and says, "this has only as much power as we give it." My hope with this text is that people who read it will separate their faith from their religion, at least a little. For readers who have already lost their faith, I hope this brings some sense of camaraderie, and a feeling of being seen. It is not an easy or painless process to lose one's faith, and it often comes at the cost of familial ostracization and social outcasting from one's church community. Becoming an atheist was difficult for me, but I

cannot imagine how hard it would be for someone from a more restrictive religion like Evangelism, Latter Day Saints, or Islam. This text, I hope, will give some perspective into what it feels like to lose one's faith.

A Darkling Plane

1

My eyes flew open as I awoke in the darkened parlor. The fire was all but snuffed, and a copy of my father's memoir from his last expedition sat ruffled in my lap. Something was banging and scratching at the front door, and I had come-to just in time to notice it. My eyes scanned the shadowy room, adjusting to the dim orange light and searching for the source of the sound.

"Architect!" I whispered in a panic. A candle was burning in the hallway! I threw the book off of me and rushed over to the tiny flame, snuffing it with my breath. The sound at the door did not quiet, in fact, it grew from a scratching to a banging.

"Oh, fuck, Oh, Aglin!" I cursed to the Architect as the realization hit me. My worst nightmare was coming true. The thick wooden door began to crack and beams of scarlet light filtered in through the tiny holes. I looked up the stairs behind me, thinking of my sleeping family, and ran to the door to grab the wood ax. The hinges strained and buckled, before exploding inwards, sending a shower of dry wood across the floor. I covered my eyes for a moment as a pulsing red light filled the foyer with blood and fear. I had heard swarm described in detail by my father and grandfather, but no story could do justice to the monster that had just broken into my home. The thing towered over me on four long, armored, insect-like legs. It tumbled violently into the room, a mass of fur and chitin and teeth. Its bulging eyes stood out from its face like some flesh-eating insect, looking everywhere at once. Behind its eyes hung two glowing sacs which emanated an all-consuming red glow.

I stood stunned as the creature rose to its full height and noticed me. I raised the ax in my right hand, but just as quickly felt a quick stabbing pain in my arm. In the red glow, I made out

the tail stinger of the creature lodged in my shoulder. The limb went numb, and the ax slipped from my useless fingers.

Time seemed to slow. My heart pounded in my ears and all the swordsman training my father had given me as a child was activated by reflex. With my off hand, I ducked to grab the ax from the floor and brought the blade up through the creature's thin, ropey tail. The tension of the muscle snapped as meat and bone separated in two, sending a spatter of blood across the floor, freeing my arm.

The beast recoiled for a moment and growled like a landslide. Its light sacs pulsed in time to the rhythm of its growl, and the swarm lunged at me with enormous fangs bared. With my off-hand, I brought the ax down on its head. The tool connected with one of the light sacs and spilled its glowing fluid across the floor. The momentum of its attack carried the creature forward, and I was caught underneath its massive body. Hissing and screeching, the monster tore into me. Its hooked teeth ripped at my one good arm. I thrust the ax handle between its jaws and pushed with all my might, forcing the thing off of me momentarily. It lurched its head and tore the ax away from me, flinging it into the living room. I slammed my good fist against its neck and head, trying to keep it from getting to my throat. One hit connected with the injured light sac, and the beast pulled away, protecting its wound. I flung myself backwards along the ground and dove over the couch to hide, my numb arm flopping and bleeding the whole way.

The swarm was fast behind and it threw itself across the room, jaws wide, and slammed into the fireplace mantle with all of its weight. Decorations and plaques clattered to the ground, along with the family's prized heirloom: a pre-Burying relic in the form of a short, black metal rod. The creature rose to its feet in an instant and charged at me again. I raised my arm to defend

myself, but could do little else. The ax had disappeared somewhere in the darkness. I was pinned under the beast as its claws and teeth ripped and tore at my flesh.

Aglin, protect me! I don't want to die, I plead to the Architect. My hand reached out for something, anything, to swing at the creature. I felt the handle of the heirloom graze the back of my hand, and I grabbed it. Instantly, the room was filled with a soft blue glow, eclipsing the blood red of the swarm's light sac.

"Mark!" I heard my mother's voice shriek from the doorway.

The animal halted its assault long enough for me to raise the rod and swing. The soft blue glow became a blinding white light as the relic slammed into the side of the swarm's head, launching the monster across the room and sending the heirloom flying out of my hand in the opposite direction.

The growling and hissing fizzled from the beast's throat, and the red glow faded to a pale pink before disappearing completely. I laid there on the floor, my arms eviscerated and face bloodied.

"Mom, help!" I managed to squeak out with the last of my strength.

"Oh, Architect, Mark!" My mother ran to me from the doorway. She had a small knife in her hand, but threw it down as she approached, "Dear Aglin, protect him! We need to get a guard! Marie!" She called upstairs for my younger sister and another set of feet came running into the room.

"Marie, go get a guard, quickly. Head right to the main hall. Tell them to bring the doctor," Mom's voice was shaky. She looked me over as I lay there on the floor. Each breath brought her closer and closer to tears until she broke down sobbing over me. "Aglin, please, let

him be okay. Please!” She begged the Architect to save me, and we waited an eternity for Marie to return with the guards and doctor.

I could barely keep my eyes open as the men lifted me onto the kitchen table. I could hear the doctor and the guards speaking for a moment before I fell into dreamless oblivion.

Wow. I have to pee, I thought as my consciousness returned to me. I forced my craggy lips apart and felt them form the word “bathroom.” I lifted my gaze from my heavily bandaged arms and forced my weary muscles to turn my head. Before me was my entire family sitting around eating dinner at my bedside. My mother and sister talked quietly, and my two little brothers were absorbed in their bowls of stew.

“Mark!” My mother beamed as our eyes met, “Oh, thank the Architect! I thought you’d never wake up.”

She wrapped her strong arms around me and held me gently. My whole body ached horribly as I grew more aware of it. I looked down at myself and examined the lines of stitches and bandages down my arms and across my chest. The mirror beside my bed reflected my damaged face, scratched and stitched, but still there. Each of my brown eyes still opened and closed, and my long blond hair still needed to be cut.

“How long was I asleep for?” I asked, my voice struggling to croak out the words.

“Four shifts. The Doctor said he’d never seen someone survive something like that. It was a real miracle,” Mother explained.

“The miracle is that none of you were hurt, thank Aglin,” I said, accepting a sip of water my sister held out for me, “It wouldn’t have been worth much if you were injured too.”

“Don’t you worry about us one bit. We’re all fine because of you. You’re a hero, just like your father. If he were here he’d be prouder than proud.” Her voice beamed with pride, but I could hear the act behind her words. She was covering for something, and not just her usual mask to hide the pain of dad’s disappearance.

“You’re just like dad!” Haven, my littlest brother, echoed from the end of the bed.

“Tell us the story! How did you kill it?” My brother, Aurelius, chimed in, popping up on the other side of the bed.

Instantly, I felt all of my wounds begin to burn. The fear and anxiety of the attack returned in a flash, and I saw the swarm before me. The red glow of its light sacs filled the room, and its smiling, bestial maw gaped and drooled over my family’s heads. I blinked, and it was gone.

“There was a candle,” I recalled, “I may have left it burning and accidentally fell asleep while reading. The swarm broke in, and I tried to kill it with the wood ax. It stabbed me with its stinger and threw the ax away. I tried to run but it chased me. It was biting and clawing at my face and my arms, but the heirloom, the relic, came to life and saved me. I hit the swarm over the head and it died.”

Aurelius and Haven stared at me, their little faces falling in disappointment with the flatness of my storytelling. Of course they were disappointed, They had been used to our father’s rambunctious and gallivanting stories about fighting off raiders and swarm with ease. I barely managed to survive, and that was solely by the grace of the Architect.

“I’m just glad you’re okay. We’re safe because of you,” my sister, Marie, added, placing a gentle hand on my shoulder.

The attack recurred in my mind, forcing me to relive the moment over and over. Something was wrong in my memory, the candle. Why had I left it burning? I focused on the tiny flame in my memory. It burnt into the back of my eyelids, and I saw it sitting on a table beside my bed, flickering away.

Yes, I had acted in the moment to protect my family, but I had also left that candle burning, which had caused the attack. Guilt welled up inside me for my inefficiency. I had broken a core tenet of Aglin's teachings by failing to observe the lights-out curfew and endangering my family through my negligence.

"No," I replied, suddenly disgusted by myself, "I'm sorry. You were all in danger because of me. I broke the Code of Conduct. I left the candle burning. I should be punished, not praised."

The Code of Conduct taught that all workers have a responsibility to protect the Company. We are strong because of our Loyalty to the Company, our Efficiency in our work, and our cultivation of Community. I made the Company weak by not protecting our Community and by acting irresponsibly and inefficiently. My actions hammered against my soul and I began to crumble.

"Why don't you three go eat in the dining room? I'll be down in a minute," Mom suggested. My siblings agreed and shuffled out of the room carrying their food.

"I'm so sorry, Mother," I apologized, "I should have been more careful. I should've triple checked, but I was just so tired after work that I forgot. I let everybody down."

"Mark, hush. We *all* forgot to put out that candle. You cannot blame yourself for everyone's inaction. You've done everything right on every darkening since your father left. It was simply chance that this would happen. Some things are just out of our control," My mother cooed, gently rubbing my back.

I was racked with regret at my inaction. Mother was just being her usual kind self to try and make me feel better, but she knew as well as I that I had done something unforgivable.

“What happened after I passed out?” I asked.

“After we had gotten you to bed, one of the supervisors stayed until lightening, then Manager Shetler came to collect evidence,” She explained, her voice growing tense, “Of course, now that you’re awake, Shetler will want you to come give a statement at the main hall.”

“That’s fine with me,” I responded, unsure of how to feel, then added, “Is that a bad thing?”

“It may be. But you’re not going to worry about that until you’re better. No one is going to mention that you’re awake around town, and you are going to stay home until you’re in good health,” Her business-like tone told me not to ask any further questions. She put on one of her *it’ll be fine* smiles and kissed me on the forehead.

My heart ached as my mother took her plate and left me alone in my room, waiting for the dark. The fatigue made falling asleep easy, but as the dark wore on, I found myself dreaming of flashing red lights. I felt the slashing and biting and stabbing all over my body. I dreamt of my right arm going numb, then my legs, and chest until I couldn’t feel anything, and I was trapped in darkness listening to that rumbling hiss rasping in my ear. I woke with a start, sending a jolt of pain through my body as I flung myself upright in bed. *A light. Please. Something.* The pitch black stillness of my room left me desperate for sight. I forced my tired legs over the side of the bed and crumpled to the floor, unsure of my footing from my weariness and the dark. *Where is it? The window! Go to the window!* My breath heaved, and I choked on the blackness of the room. Crawling along the floor, I willed myself in the direction of shutters. I found it, fumbled for the latch, and pulled open the shutter.

Outside, I could see the distant lights of other, safer towns reflected off of the clouds. The gentle orange glow relieved the pressure in my throat, and I could breathe again. The pain in my arms throbbed, but I knew I was alive. The door to my room burst open. Mom had heard me from next door and wondered what was going on. I could barely make her out in the near perfect blackness of the room, but she helped me back to bed, and I went back to sleep, once again plagued by fear.

The next shift, I tried again to walk. I was too anxious to remain in bed, having caused enough inefficiency already by getting injured; I would not burden my family any further. Using the crutches mother had set next to my bed, I was able to rise to my feet without much difficulty. As it turns out, being able to see is incredibly helpful when trying to balance. My shoulders ached as I lifted the crutches between each step. *This is what you deserve. You've earned this pain.* My fingers had no strength, and I could barely hold onto the crutches, but I pushed through until a bit of red had stained the wrappings on my arms. I could not stay upright for long, but I waddled once around my room and got acclimated to the assistive tools.

Shifts came and went quickly after that. My injuries healed well, and I pushed myself to begin working again as soon as I could. The harvest was coming soon, and with it our octly trip to Capital. I needed to finish my woodworking before then so I would have something to sell in the Margittime. In the middle of the shift while no one else was home, I would sneak out back to my wood shed and try and turn out a bowl or two on the lathe.

One shift, soon after I had started working again, there came a knock at the door. Everyone else was out at work or school, so I answered it. A supervisor was calling for me to come to the main hall. The supe ordered me to come along at spearpoint, stating that I needed to

see the manager urgently. I wanted to change out of my woodworking clothes and get cleaned up, but he insisted.

We made our way down the main thoroughfare of Corn toward the town square and main hall. As we walked, workers stopped to gawk. I suppose I must've looked a bit silly in my leather apron and covered in fresh scars after not being seen in town for just under five weeks. It had rained the shift before, so the dirt of the road stuck to my boots and made them heavy. I had gotten my legs back under me, but I was still a bit weary from bedrest. We passed through the nearly empty market square and approached the tallest building in town. The main hall's pointed dome was crested with the symbol of Aglin: an orange arrow pointing up to the sky.

The supervisor opened one of the heavy double doors and led me inside. The atrium was lined with pews for service on Fifshift lightening and weekly meetings. Up and down either side of the great hall were a number of doors at various levels of openness, and the golden light of the sun shone down through the dome's skylight onto the orange and white tile below, creating an atmosphere of warmth and softness. Aglin's Hall was a safe place.

I was led up along the rows of pews to the front-most office and told to wait while the supervisor told Shelter I was here. As I sat down in a pew and stared up at the symbol of Aglin, the ember of guilt for my inefficiency flared to life. My pulse quickened as I realized why I was brought here. I was being punished.

The door opened with a soft click and the supervisor stepped out, closing it behind him. He gestured for me to enter the office, so I rose from my seat and stepped up to the door. My eyes passed over the engraved lettering of the metal nameplate outside the office; Shetler, Manager of Outer Corps Security. The Outer Corps acted as a local defense and law enforcement body within the towns and cities outside the immediate area of Capital. Marin Shetler had been

Corn's manager for all of my remembered life and had a reputation for strictly enforcing Company Policy. Under her management, Corn, my home village, executed an average of four workers every schedule. *She's just collecting testimony*, I told myself and knocked on the door.

A gruff feminine voice from inside beckoned me to enter, so I opened the door and stepped meagerly into the office. Inside the floors were covered in dark blue carpet and the walls were lined with bookshelves filled with hardback books, awards, and pre-Burying technology. Shetler sat behind her meticulously organized desk in the center of the room waiting patiently.

"Mister Weeder," her tone was gentle despite her harsh voice. She gestured to the chair across from her, "Please, have a seat."

I followed her orders, hoping that if I did so perfectly I would get to leave. Meeting her gaze, I noticed three scars down one side of her head. Her ear was also badly damaged and stuck out through her short-cropped hair. She smiled at me and sat back in her chair.

"How are you feeling, Mark?" She asked, her eyes locked on mine.

"I'm alright. Better than I was, thank the Architect. I just got back into working shape a few shifts ago. I'm sorry I'm not in more proper attire. The guard said it was urgent," I explained, trying to feign confidence.

"Well, not so urgent you couldn't change clothes, but I suppose that's Supervisor Leland's fault. I'm glad you're doing well, though. I know your mother couldn't bear it if she lost two of her boys to such a senseless tragedy." Her smile dropped in pity at my mother's situation. I smiled silently, trying not to look offended that she had referred to my missing father as 'boy.'

"Mark, how well versed are you in the Code of Conduct?" She asked, her smile raising again.

“I had twelve schedules of formal education, which included classes in Company Policy. My mother and father wanted to make sure that I knew everything that Aglin had done for us, especially the rules that kept us alive during the Black Schedules,” I explained as though reciting a practiced speech.

“Good. Your parents got that right. I know your father was someone who cared about the Company very much. He gave his life for it. That’s commendable,” She opined, then added, “Now, let me ask: how old are you, Mark?”

“I’m twenty-one schedules old, ma'am." I answered, confused slightly by the question.

“Twenty one. You’ve been given an executive’s lot in life, Mark. You had a good childhood, were raised by two intelligent parents and gained skills to be an expert craftsman. You have a lot going for you,” Her expression turned hard and she looked past me, “My childhood wasn’t so blessed. I grew up here in Corn, just like you, but it was a very different town at that time. The Outer Corps was still in its infancy at that point, so Corn had only two guards to patrol the town and no one to enforce the lights-out rule. My parents were croppers, just like nearly everyone in town, and one shift near the end of an oct when I was seven schedules old, my father forgot to latch a shutter.” She looked at me and pointed to her scar. Any semblance of kindness had gone from her eyes and she stared at me with disdain as she spoke.

“A swarm broke through the window and killed my whole family in front of me. My father’s last act was to shove me under the bed and block it with his body. A single claw got under and caught me in the face. It was the two Outer Corps guardsmen that saved me that shift. They pulled me from that horrible scene and raised me. The workers in this town see me as someone who endorses violence, but I hate violence, Mark. Imagine watching your family

murdered and knowing it was perfectly preventable. *Perfectly preventable.*” She repeated the phrase with a deepened bitterness.

“I understand, ma'am," I replied, “I’m so sorry about your family. An inefficiency like that will not happen again.”

“I know it won’t. Not only am I charging you with public endangerment, I’m charging you with possession and use of illegal pre-Burying technology,” She accused, pulling out the heirloom from a drawer in her desk, “Your father should know better than to keep this. It belongs to Acquisitions and never should’ve left Capital.”

I stared incredulous for a moment before snapping back to reality.

“What?”

“You are under arrest for public endangerment and possession and use of pre-Burying technology,” She repeated.

My confusion turned to anger, and my emotions overcame my fear.

“Ma’am, this is ridiculous. How am I being charged with a crime for nearly dying? I’m the victim, just like you!”

Shetler silently looked over the heirloom, admiring its sleek shape.

“The crime you have committed is public endangerment. Your negligence brought the swarm plague into our town and put the lives of dozens of workers at risk. Beyond that, the possession charge is because you were the last to hold and use the tool before being confiscated by authorities. If your father were alive, he would be the one being charged with possession, and you with its use.” Her words cut into me. Her explanation of my supposed crimes passed into and out of my mind and the only thing that stuck was the supposition that my father had died.

My father had been late returning from expeditions before, and I refused to think about the possibility of his death. He was a skilled tracker, hunter, and survivalist. If anything, he had gotten lost and made camp. He was waiting for rescue. He couldn't have been dead.

Shetler silently rose from her chair and put me in manacles, grinning all the way.

It was a short walk from Shetler's office to the jail in the back of city hall. The jail was built of the same gray stone and housewood as the rest of the building, but it lacked the warmth of the orange and white paint. The darkness of the hall was disturbed only by beams of sunlight that sprayed across the room from small windows in each cell. As we passed row upon row of empty cells, I wondered what my mother was doing. She worked at City Hall as Corn's executive alderman, so she and Haven were likely in her office or a meeting, her writing away at some financial writ, and him playing with some small toy or sleeping in a chair.

"Will you tell my mother I'm here?" I asked as Shetler opened a cell for me.

"She'll figure it out when she gets home." She explained nonchalantly, closing the door and walking away.

My mother did appear later that shift. She had heard as soon as she got home, she said. She promised to get me out, and that Public Relations would understand. While the Outer Corps were the enforcers of Company Policy, it was Public Relations that handled any disputes with workers. Our local agent was good friends with my mother, and he would likely let me off lightly. Mom explained that she had to go, but she would return soon. Later that shift, she brought me a small loaf of cornbread from home with some grilled fluet to eat and a book to read.

For two shifts, I waited until Fifshift lightening when Shetler and a guard entered the jail and escorted me out of the cell and into the atrium where all Public Relations meetings were held. The Corps liked to make a show of publicly punishing inefficient and presenting a transparent justice system, something I had admired until I saw the faces of my fellow workers

staring at me in confusion and disdain as I was walked into the meeting. Aglin's Hall no longer felt like a safe place.

A small balding man dressed in the long blue robes of a Public Relations agent stepped behind the tall pulpit in the center of the room and sat down. He had a serious demeanor and looked at me with an obvious air of pity. A pit formed in my stomach and I looked around for my family, who was sitting a few rows behind me. I made eye contact with my mother, silently asking her what was happening. Her face was downcast, and she shook her head.

The agent began the meeting by leading us in prayer to Aglin, and then asked for the head of the guard to provide the charges and evidence. Shetler rose from her seat, and a supervisor moved to the back of the room and opened a side door. Two more supes worked together to half-drag-half-carry a large sack into the room and dumped the contents before the agent. Pale Teeth and black chitin clattered out onto the floor, revealing the cleaned remains of the dead swarm.

“Manager Shetler, please explain to the meeting what the charges are against the accused?” The small man requested, staring down at the smiling skull of the swarm.

“Certainly. Before you lies the body of a swarm killed by one of our very own workers, Mister Marcus Weeder, who is now charged with public endangerment and possession and use of pre-Burying technology. Mister Weeder has invited the swarm plague down upon our town, and as such must be executed for his inefficiency and disloyalty.” Her voice was professional and carried well into the high rafters of the hall. The agent turned to me.

“Mister Weeder, is this true? Did you kill this swarm?” He wondered with a look of amazement on his face.

I confirmed that I had killed it and pulled up my sleeves to show the dozens of deep gash marks down my forearms.

“Let us hear the Corps’ explanation of events, and then I will hear your side of the story in detail.” He looked first to Shetler and then to me as he spoke.

“Sir, from what we gather, the accused left a fire burning in his home on the dark of the attack. The beast must have seen the fire while out hunting in the Northern Forest, as the Weeder home is on the northern side of town, and followed the light. The beast stalked through our streets up to the Weeder home and broke its way in through the front door, where it planned to kill the entire Weeder family. Likely, it would have attacked any other number of homes in the town after that. Mister Weeder was awake at the time and attacked the creature with an ax.” At the mention of the ax, she turned to a box next to her pew, opened it and took out the wood ax, still stained with blood, and showed it to the agent and the audience.

“When the ax failed to suffice, he used a contraband bre-burying relic to dispatch the beast. Nearby neighbors reported seeing a bright flash that shone through their shutters. This flash could have attracted more swarm to our city, but we were blessed with good fortune. We have not been able to replicate the flash and have sent word to Acquisitions to come and collect the relic.” At this, she pulled the staff out from the same box and showed it to the agent. He stared at the tool and then looked to my mother, sitting behind me.

“Mister Weeder, would you care to explain your understanding of that dark?” He asked.

I stood and turned to look at my family. Marie held mom’s hand, and Haven sat in mom’s lap. His head was nuzzled into her chest, dozing. My mother looked at me, and I could tell that she would take accountability in an instant if I only asked. I tried my best to smile for her, nodded, and turned to the agent.

“Manager Shetler has much of the story correct, sir. Due to a long shift of working in the woodshop, I had fallen asleep before snuffing a candle. The flame must have been bright enough for the swarm to see, so it broke in.” I explained. My voice shook as I spoke, and I tried not to focus too hard on the memory of the shift itself. The room flashed red for a moment and my breathing quickened.

“I used the ax on it and landed a blow in its right light sac. It stabbed me in the arm, giving me the scar on my shoulder,” I looked at my arm and felt it go numb for a moment, “I ran into the living room and the monster dove after me. It must’ve been hungry because it threw its whole weight at me so hard it broke our mantle, which dropped our family heirloom to the floor.”

“So, did you know it was a functioning relic?” The agent asked.

“No, sir. It was a gift to my father, collected on my grandfather’s final expedition to the Pox. My father never touched it and my grandfather assured him that the Center Corps had given him permission to keep it. My grandfather has a lot of pre-Burying scrap at his home in Capital,” I clarified.

My grandfather, like my father, was also an explorer. He was part of the first group to venture into the Pox and mapped the mountain range from the Shallow Sea to the Northern Forest. He was well known in Capital as a hero, and the Center Corps even commissioned a plaque for him in the Great Hall in the Home.

“What prompted you to try and use it as a weapon then?”

“Sir, I had lost my ax and my sword was up in my room. My family was going to die if I didn’t do something, so I grabbed the relic, figuring it may stun the creature long enough for me

to run upstairs.” I looked down and hallucinated the beast gripping my leg. I winced at the illusion, forcing myself back to reality.

“Well, it’s fortunate that it worked for you, then. Is there anything else you’d like to tell me before I make my decision?” The agent asked, his voice becoming very serious.

“No sir. I left the fire burning and killed the swarm. No one else got hurt, thank Aglin.” I tried to speak steadily and push the thoughts of that shift behind me. Whatever happened next, it was up to the agent to decide my fate. I just had to trust in Aglin’s Code and mom’s connections.

“Thank Aglin, indeed, Mister Weeder,” He turned from me to the audience,” Workers, I ask you all to consider the crime brought before us to shift. Consider the horrible swarm plague that has haunted us since the Resurrection. Consider Mister Weeder’s actions and what you would have done in that moment. Consider how you would have avoided his fate.

“Be Efficient. Be Connected. Be Loyal.”

The crowd echoed the Company’s credo, and the agent rose and stepped from the pulpit, shuffling his way to an office in the corner. The evidence box was closed and brought back to Shetler’s office, and I was returned to my cell. It was customary for Public Relations agents to reread the specifically infringed laws in the Company Code of Conduct before rendering a final decision. I had to wait before I would know my fate.

“Mark, I am so sorry. It’s not too late, I can tell the agent that it was me who left the fire burning, and it’s my father who gave us the heirloom. It’s my responsibility,” My mother begged outside my cell when the jailer had left earshot.

“Mom, it’s okay. I need you to be there for the others. I’m old enough to take responsibility for myself. You know the agent, so this will go fine. He knows I’m no inefficient, just someone who made a mistake, right?” I assured her, half trying to convince myself. My

mother leaned in close to the bars of the cell and stuck her hand through. I took it and held it in my own. Her eyes were filled with tears.

“I can’t lose you too. Not after your father, please,” She broke down as she spoke. I held her hand to my cheek, trying to stay strong for her.

“Dad is out there. He’s in a camp somewhere near the North Wall, just waiting for rescue. The Company will save him, Aglin will protect him. I’m going to be sentenced, but when I get out I’ll go and find him. I can handle a few octs of hard labor,” I held my composure and smiled for my mother. She looked at me with profound sadness.

“Maybe you’re right, but he’s not here,” She looked as though she was turning thoughts over in her head. Her lip quivered and her eyes told me she was hiding something, “Mark, they’re going to sentence you to death. I couldn’t convince him to let you off if the evidence was enough. I’m so sorry.”

My heart dropped and I felt myself falling. *No. no no. I’m not an inefficient.* I slumped to my knees, my legs having given out under the weight of the realization. Panic seized me, and I grabbed my mother’s hands through the bars and pulled her close

“Mother, please. You need to get me out of here. I know you have a key to this place. You stay late most darks anyway; no one would think anything of it,” I begged.

She looked at me for a long while, then up at the window of the cell and the free blue sky beyond.

“How? Where would you go?” Some composure returned to her. She was considering it.

“Grandfather’s house in Capital. He has some authority; he can get me another meeting. I just need another *chance*, a lighter sentence. You know that. Bring my tools and I can make it

look like I got out on my own. You have Marie to vouch for you, and they'll have no evidence to charge you."

"Mark, I... This isn't right. We can't go against the Company like this. And even if you did get out, how would you get to grandpa's?"

"The forest; I'll go through the forest. I know how to navigate and hunt. Father taught me everything I needed. Just get me some supplies and I'll make it."

"Okay. I'll put together a bag of supplies and you'll run through the forest until you reach some logging town. Then you follow the road to Capital and hide there until they forget about you. Okay... If the sentence doesn't look good, that's what we'll do," She recited the plan to herself, determination returning to her voice.

"If the sentence doesn't look good," I repeated.

"This... All of this isn't right, Mark. You don't deserve this. You're a good, efficient boy." Her usual composure returned as she spoke, and this idea, as ludicrous as it was, gave me some hope too. There were so many hazards outside of villages that neither the Outer nor Center Corps would dare to search for a missing fugitive more than a few kilometers from the nearest town.

We quietly put together a list of things I'd need, and she promised that she'd return with the bag that dark and keep it in her office until after the sentencing meeting. We were both able to breathe easier as she left, confident that, no matter the agent's decision, we'd be able to handle it.

The next lightning, I was awoken by a guard and brought back to the main hall. Shetler and a number of workers who had come to see the meeting were already seated throughout the pews. As I walked, I met the gaze of a number of workers, many of whom were my neighbors.

They wore looks of confusion and anger, thinking me nothing more than an inefficient. The guard sat me down and stood next to my pew, facing toward the audience. *He must be here more to protect me than the other workers.* The news of a swarm being killed in town would likely have scared many of the other workers into thinking that I would bring down hordes of the monsters onto the town, like what had happened in Collector.

Corn laid maybe two shifts west of the Pox, the mountain range left after the Sheet lifted from Farmur's surface. The mountains were littered with the crushed remains of pre-Burying architecture and within them were billions of tons of useful resources that the Heads in the Home desperately wanted to build defenses and structures after the Resurrection. Collector was a town set up early after the Resurrection to collect scrap and return it to Capital. They did well for a while, according to my grandfather, until they found a swarm nest. The employees thought that if they stole some eggs from the nest, they could bring them to Capital for study. A horde of the beasts descended from the mountains and destroyed the town. The story of Collector lived on in the minds of every worker in the shadow of the Pox, which made them wary of things as small as swarm sightings, let alone swarm *killings*.

The bald head of the agent appeared from his office, draped in his bright blue robes, and mounted the pulpit. All stood at attention until he called the meeting together and led the workers in prayer. As he spoke, I stared at the symbol of Aglin. The teachings of the Architect always preached collective responsibility for the welfare of the Company, but made it clear that punishments were to be individual and based on the crime.

In the past, watching public executions of a murderer or thief left me feeling assured that Aglin's will was just. He was punishing only those who needed to be punished for harming the Company. Now, as I stood waiting to be on the receiving end of Aglin's divine justice, I

wondered whether the punishment for my crime was just, and what my reward would be in the afterlife? Would I be relegated to the eternal darkness of oblivion, or spend eternity with Aglin on Earth? My heart raced in my chest as the prayer drew to a close.

With the final words of his prayer, the agent asked everyone to be seated and then called me forward to receive my sentence. Again, I turned to my mother, my confidence in her plan faltering.

“Marcus Weeder, you have been charged with the crime of public endangerment and the possession and use of pre-Burying technology, and have pled guilty to the charges above. After reviewing the Company Code of Conduct, and, based on the testimony from Marin Shetler, Manager of the Outer Corps Guard, and your own testimony yestershift, I have come to find you guilty on all three counts.” The agent read the charge swiftly from a sheet of paper before him.

“As you have been found guilty on all counts, the right and just punishment for such a crime is execution by hanging in the town square, which will take place next Firshift, when a licensed Center Corps executioner can be made available. Your body will be offered to the swarm hive as a show of good faith and a ward against future attack. Even in your inefficiency, you may save us all yet.”

He turned to address the crowd once more.

“Loyal workers, look upon your fellow and weep for his inefficiency. Look how easily he has fallen from the grace of Aglin, and how quickly we, the arbiters of His will, have acted to correct this mistake. I ask you to be diligent in your labors and careful in your leisure. Aglin’s eyes see all. His ears hear everything. And we, your protectors, act as his hands here on Farmur. May you have a profitable shift.

“Be efficient. Be connected. Be loyal.”

3

“It’s going to be alright,” I promised my crying siblings as they fell into the cell after me, making their final visit.

“How can you say that? You’re going to be killed in front of everybody!” Aurelius sobbed at me through fogged glasses.

“Just trust me. You won’t have to watch me die. I swear it.” I smiled for them and looked at mom. Her eyes were downcast, and I figured she must have been planning how to get me out.

After much coaxing and many hugs, my siblings agreed to return home for the darkening. They crept out of the cell, not taking their eyes off of me lest I drop dead without someone watching. My mother pulled me into a hug.

“Mark, I am so sorry.” She whispered, holding me tighter than she had ever done before.

“It’s alright, mom. You won’t lose me,” I swore, putting my arms around her short frame. She had always seemed so confident and capable, but for the first time I was seeing her truly scared.

“I give my time to you, mom. It’s going to be okay,” I mustered as much confidence as I could, but my voice cracked as I looked her in the eyes.

“I give you all my hours, Mark. I know. You’re such a good boy, and so much like your father. I trust you. I just never thought I’d have to do anything like this. The Company should know that you’re better than this.” She wiped the tears from her cheeks and turned to leave. At the door to the cell she turned again to me and gave a stern nod, her facade safely replaced. I returned the gesture and smiled at her. She called for the guard to come let her out.

Through the bars of the cell window, I watched the Sheet's path through the sky. Soon, it would cover Farmur from the light of the sun and plunge the planet into inky darkness. The Company Handbook stated that Aglin had built the Sheet a hundred schedules before the first Workers appeared. He pinned it to the North and South poles and set it spinning around the planet, creating the shifts. According to my father, the Sheet was what made Farmur habitable for workers because the planet moved around the sun at the same rate that it spun, meaning the same side was always in direct sunlight. The Sheet allowed the planet to cool its light face during the dark and then warm the dark face by reflecting the sun's rays onto it during the light.

As the tip of the Sheet touched the sun's outer edge, the door to the jail opened and the Shetler marched in. I sat on the wooden bench in the back of the cell and stared at her. Although this woman had charged me with a crime for which I was to be put to death, I did not hate her. Her anger toward lack of responsibility kept the town safe, and in her eyes I was just an inefficient endangering everyone in Corn. She stood, waiting for a guard to bring her a chair, and examined my cell.

"How did you get it to work?" She asked.

"How did I get what to work?" I turned from the window to reply. She furrowed her brow in frustration.

"The relic. How did you make it glow?" she asked once again.

"I don't know," I answered honestly. I hadn't even thought about the relic until now. Her face told me that my answer wasn't sufficient. I added, "I just swung and it worked."

"We've tried that. It just sits there like a dead piece of metal. What compelled you to pick it up?" She looked desperate for answers.

“I honestly wasn’t even thinking. The swarm was on top of me and I had no other options, so I grabbed it off the floor and swung.” I tried to recall the details of grabbing the staff off the floor and swinging it, but all I could focus on was the thought of the red light flashing through the room. I felt my pulse pump in my neck and pushed the thoughts away.

“Was it doing anything? Reacting in any way? The reports said there was a blue flash of light from the house. There must have been something.” The frustration in her voice was palpable.

I racked my brain for details from the shift, trying to find an answer that would satisfy her and whoever she was answering to. A question came to me.

“Why do you want to know?” I asked.

She considered for me a moment before answering.

“The Center Corps will want to know for their report when I hand the relic over.” Her answer was generic, but made sense. If the device worked, acquisitions would likely want to study it. I had seen relics before, but none like the heirloom.

I thought about the staff again. It had sat on our shelf for schedules but had never glowed with energy before. Father had even taken it out of the case a couple of times to clean it, but it did not react to his touch either.

My mind returned to the shift of the attack and the relic in my hand. The black metal was dull on the floor until I grabbed it. It must have been something to do with my touch.

“When you handled the relic, was it barehanded?” I wondered, not expecting an answer.

“We did. We tried it both gloved and bare, with a civilian and a guard, against an object and an animal. Nothing worked. Why do you ask?” The frustration in her voice turned to curiosity.

“Do you have it with you? I could try holding it again.” I offered. There was no way that she would allow me to touch it, but I figured I would try to be helpful.

“The Center Corps will figure it out when they collect it. I just figured I would make their job easier with my report.” She stood to leave. “I’m sorry, Markus. You seem a fine worker. It’s a shame you’ve disappointed us all so much.”

With her last statement, she departed and I was left alone in the jail once more. The shadow of the Sheet had just passed the window of the jail, leaving the room in darkness. The sky grew darker, and I waited.

The last traces of the sun had been entirely extinguished when my mother entered the jail. In the near perfect blackness, I heard the door creak open and a familiar hurried gait draw near.

“It must be near middark,” I whispered, “This is late, even for you. Are you sure no one is here?”

My mother did not speak as she pulled the jingling keyring out of her pocket and unlocked the cell. She placed a sack by the door and then pulled out some of my woodworking tools, a hammer, saw, and some chisels.

“The overdark supe stayed late, too,” She finally replied, organizing the bags of supplies by the cell door.

I took up the chisels and set to work on the window as quietly as I could. My intention was to make it look as though I had broken out through the window by pulling the bars from their sockets. I messily chiseled away at the wood and discarded the bars on the ground outside. The housewood of the walls was thick and sturdy, and it took quite a bit of effort to saw through.

My arms ached by the time I had removed two bars, which was just enough space to fit my torso through sideways. I wrapped the tools back up and returned them to mom.

“Okay, I’ve got two bags. The first one here is food. I baked a few loaves of cornbread and added some jerkied fluet. This should last you long enough to get to Capital,” She held up the first sack to show me, “The second bag has some supplies. Your father had an extra shell, a hatchet and knife, some rope, and a medical bag. Let’s go over the plan again one more time. Where are you going from here?”

“From here, I’m heading straight into the Northern Forest. I’ll then head west until I find a logging town. From there I’ll continue along the roads until I reach Old Timber where I’ll head south toward Capital. Then I’ll go to grandpa’s house and wait for you all.” I recited the plan as I picked up each of the bags and fastened my sword to my belt.

“Good, and if you run into any swarm or any animals, you need to hide, okay? There’s no doctor out in the woods to help you. This is a big crime we’re about to commit. What should I do with your tools?” She asked.

“Put them back exactly where you found them. There’s no way to prove it was my own tools that got me out of here, so they’ll have no evidence that you helped me. Plus, one lost worker from a small town won’t arouse much suspicion from the Center Corps.” I reassured her, but it was strange that there was no supervisor on duty. Normally, one or two guards remained posted the entire dark. With a prisoner in the jail, it would make sense to keep a supervisor posted. “Why aren’t there any guards right now?”

“It’s a shift change. One has left and the other is on their way. We don’t have a lot of time. We need to hurry.”

With my things secured, I followed mom out of the cell into the main hall. We crept past the pews and toward the door. In the dark of the room, my eyes caught on a nameplate on a door: *Shetler*. The relic was still locked up in Shetler's office, and it didn't belong to her. I tapped mom on the shoulder and gestured for the key to the office. She looked at me for a moment before opening the door.

"Quickly," She whispered.

Inside, I fumbled around the desk looking for the box. It sat on a small table near the back windows. I peered out into the darkness of the town around me, looking for any signs of life before continuing. I lifted the lid and found the box unlocked. Inside was the shattered ax and the relic. I grabbed the smooth metal rod out of the box and it immediately lit up in my hands. The soft blue glow ran up and down the thing like veins of lightning, turning at hard right angles and spiraling around the handle up to the tip. *The light! Shit!* I quickly stuffed the relic into one of the bags, and the light faded once again. I turned to leave the office, but realized that it would likely look suspicious if the relic disappeared with no sign of entry. I felt along the window for any seams and found a latch that opened out into the cool dark air.

We stepped out of the main hall and looked at each other. In the dim light of the stars on the horizon, I saw her face taut in focus, trying not to cry. I pulled her into a hug and felt the pressure release from her as she wrapped her arms around me one final time.

"I need to go," I whispered, releasing her, and ran up the road headed to the fields north of town. When I turned back, my mother was gone.