

ENDARKENED DREAMS: A SPECULATIVE COUNTERSTORY OF BLACK GIRLS'

ORAL AND WRITTEN STORIES

by

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(Under the Direction of Jennifer M. Graff)

ABSTRACT

Stories are ubiquitous, and they are powerful elements in the transformation and empowerment of communities who are constantly resisting oppression and making space to heal. Black women have often told stories as a way to develop knowledge, ask critical questions, and offer different perspectives. They have also told counterstories that challenge dominant discourses that attempt to misrepresent or silence them. However, even though the storytelling histories of Black women have been extensively examined, there is a paucity of research that centers the stories Black girls tell.

Guided by Womanism and Muted Group Theory, this study uses the features of fictional storytelling to communicate findings gathered from the oral and written stories of six Black girls who participated in an Afrofuturist writing workshop. Findings suggest that Black girls used their oral stories to analyze social justice issues, rejoice in their weirdness, and define their identities. Findings also suggest that Black girls used their written stories to metaphorically construct a vision of their realities, engage in cultural critique, and imagine possibilities beyond their realities. In lieu of communicating these findings traditionally, however, this dissertation utilizes the research data to generate a storied text. That is, the author generates character

dialogue, creates the setting, and constructs a cohesive storied plot using data, and endnotes are given after each chapter to connect research and story.

In the Afrofuturistic story, set in the southern United States in the year 2085, people of color – the Endarkened – are restricted from dreaming. Their names, ancestry, and community practices are stripped from them, and they are forced to live a life of servitude under the oppressive regime of Girey Cuvieims, better known as GC. Those who fight back experience violence in the form of detainment, harassment, and murder. Still, in the midst of state-sanctioned violence and modern-day slavery, groups of activists have formed Harbors, underground spaces where Endarkened people teach each other how to access their dreams and fight back against GC. One day, after years of living in the imagination gap, a young woman chooses to defy GC and find the Harbors.

INDEX WORDS: Afrofuturism, Black Girl Literacies, Womanism, Muted Group Theory, Counterstorytelling, Speculative Counterstorytelling, Narrative Analysis, Thematic Analysis, Writers Workshop

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DEDICATION

To the Alfredas.

To Ashton.

To all the Endarkened children who dream.

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CHAPTER 1

My Name is Jane

The bluer the eyes, the more successful the programming. That's what they tell us at least. The Dreamers' eyes are brown, black, green, and soft blues. My eyes and the eyes of all the Endarkened are different shades of blue, some as piercing as the color of LED lights and others as bright as the sky on a sunny day. I sometimes wonder if the brightness of our eyes helps to stop us from dreaming. When I close my eyes, my mind is filled with blinding whiteness. Darkness is the space of dreams; it's the place where imagination can grow; it serves as the backdrop for the magical. I long for the days when I'll be able to close my eyes and see blackness. But, to dream is to imagine something better, to envision a reality that is different from this one. That's why we're not allowed to dream. The Dreamers haven't allowed us to do that for a long time.

In history, we learn that in the early 2000s - 2019 to be exact - the experiments started. Of course, they had been experimenting on us for centuries, but that was the first year they started the dream extractions. They used Black women first due to the procedure's scientific infancy. Black women were prime specimens, proud mules ready to bear the burden of scientific progress for the betterment of all society.¹ Well, better for the Dreamers, at least. Sadly, a lot of Black women died in childbirth. Too many. The extractors never took an accurate count because they didn't care how many of us died as long as they reached their scientific goals.

An old government entity, the CDC, said Black women died at higher rates, but at the time, they didn't know what was actually happening in the hospital's maternity wards.² Later,

some activists discovered that the deaths were due to procedure rejection, and they posted their findings for all to see. Many people thought that this new information would lead to revolution, but it didn't. In fact, it was easy for the PR teams to change the narrative and blame the deaths on divisiveness. They started spinning a story that Black women refusing or fighting against the extraction was a divisive tactic to tear America apart. Their rights weren't being infringed upon; they were infringing upon the world's right to scientific innovation. Now, if one of us dies, people just say that survival of the fittest is doing its magic, weeding out those who wish to lessen the greatness of this country. I sometimes wonder how many choose to die even though they know they will be defamed upon their deaths. How many choose to jump off the operation table to save themselves and their future children like the Igbo leapt from the shores into the ocean long ago?³

Girey Cuviems, INC, otherwise known as GC, funded the first procedures.⁴ They financed our deaths long before the other large industries followed suit. Because they controlled the experiments, a practice that many of the Dreamers supported, they gained power over time. Now, what was once known as a democracy for some, has turned into some form of twisted oligarchy. More than half of the country's population is a member of the Endarkened, so more than half of the country's population has had their dreams removed. GC controls the procedure, so GC controls the government and the majority of the nation's people. Now, we have a society filled with Black and Brown children who can't dream. We have a society filled with people like me.

My name is Jane-9675214. We all have similar names: Jane, Jill, John, or Jack followed by our birth number. I'm the 9,675,214th Jane in GC. It's an easy way to keep track of us, I guess. They were going to call the boys, Dick, to keep in line with some historic children's

books, but the meaning of the word changed over time, so I'm guessing they chose not to humiliate us further. The numbers started after the first successful extraction, June 2030. Now, fifty-five years later, there are so many of us that we all have long numbers after our names. Those with unique names have either died or had their names forcefully removed. I guess the good thing is that no one mispronounces our names anymore. They get it right within four tries.

I stare down at the floor as I sit at the reading table in the Robert E. Lee Central Library. Dreaming would be really helpful right now. Recounting the past bolsters my resolve, but I wish I had something else to occupy my thoughts. The library enforcers are always on high alert during the morning shift. When they log off, and the afternoon workers arrive, there's a little more freedom because the librarians are allowed to enter, taking away some of the enforcers' authority. Libraries were *technically* defunded over two decades ago, but GC thought that they should leave them open to alleviate political unrest. GC funds the enforcers, and the donations cover the librarians. I know they don't get paid much. Still, the librarians are fighters. They come in every day to sneak books to those of us who are brave enough to take them.

At one point, I'm sure people could checkout whatever they wanted as long as they brought the book back, but now, more than half of the library is "restricted." The sign doesn't say who is restricted from the section, but we know what's implied. Rumor has it that John-1 had his hand chopped off and one of his eyes gouged for reading a restricted book.⁵ They left one eye and one hand to remind him that they could take the other just as easily. Of course, that's all hearsay. Still, none of us want to test our luck. In this society, the loss of a hand, an eye, or both means you can't get a good job. If you can't work, you're nothing. So, it's best to keep your limbs attached.

The bell sounds. Here comes the afternoon group. Right on time. I look at the bookcases. Should I risk it? After all, a lot of people thought Jane-12 was mentally unfit when she started talking about reading restricted books. I mean, she started calling herself Harriet-2 and openly talking about deserting GC. No one understood why she would name herself when the government had already given us our names, told us who we were. No one understood why she would want to leave when there was nowhere for us to go. Nevertheless, there was something intriguing about her words. Something more hidden beneath her ramblings.

“Find the butler. Find the map. Find your dreams,” she said as GC took her away again. She was constantly being taken back to FirstHOME for an injection, and somehow, she kept passing their release tests and then saying some nonsense to get her sent back. I didn’t understand it. In fact, when she first said, “find the butler,” I was confused. Butler was no longer an occupation. They were often replaced by robotics. Once Amazon started shipping Alexa 10s through same-day delivery, it was only a matter of time before the job would become obsolete. I didn’t understand what she meant until I remembered a message from one of my SecondHOME observers, Ms. Jackson, before she was taken by GC for inciting thought.

Lori Jackson wasn’t like me. Of course she wasn’t. She had a real name. Lori was a short woman with dark auburn hair and milky white skin, and she was one of the nicest observers I had during my transition years in SecondHOME. She was one of the only ones who actually *saw* me if that makes any sense. She never said much outside of our class lessons, but once, before she was replaced by another, more loyal Dreamer, she tried to teach our class how to dream. It failed miserably, and I’m pretty sure she was almost fired for trying to incite dreaming on school grounds. They let her go because they couldn’t prove that she had done anything. We still couldn’t dream, so there was no proof. I do remember one thing she often said, though, because

it was the same string of words every time: Hopkinson, Lourde, Butler, Cottom, Hurston, Walker, Collins. I didn't know what any of those words meant, but those were the last words she said to us before she was taken, so those words are the ones I will never forget.

“Jane! Jane-9675214!”

I was lost in my historical musings for too long. It probably looked like I was daydreaming. Crap.

“Jane! Jane-9675214!” The enforcer says, a little too close to my ear.

“Yes?” I reply.

“Jane, you have been occupying this seat for 37 minutes. You have the King James version of the history text in front of you. You have not been reading this book. You appear to be engaging in daydreams. Shall I inject you now?”

“No, sir.” I say. “I work for Altered Truth, and I was trying to use our history to figure out the best way to tell the truth about what happened earlier today with Har.. Jane-12. The history guides us to the truth. Without it, we know nothing.” I know that I put it on a little too thick at the end, but I couldn't take any chances. One injection, and I'll be reset, not forgetting my task, but losing my will to do anything but what I'm told to do. It's GC's way of making sure that we are consistently compliant. They can't perform dream extraction surgeries too often because they are expensive and the surgeons found that repeated operations destroyed a person's mental functions to the point where they were no longer able to work for GC and its brother corporations. They couldn't afford to lose all of their unpaid labor, so they came up with the injections to assist in blocking Endarkened dreams.

“Very well,” he says unpleasantly. I know that tone. My job in GC's Altered Truth division means that I'm a “good one,” uppity and privy to government secrets that even he

doesn't have clearance for. He hates me for the knowledge I hold. I hate him for the dreams he's probably wasted on hating people like me. Inherited power and unencumbered imaginations grant him privileges that I will never have. It grants him the ability to have eyes that are brown. How I wish I had brown eyes.

I hear him walk to the next victim. "John! John-47563! You have been occupying this seat for 34 minutes..." I wonder how many times he's going to say that same line today. In all honesty, he can say it as much as he likes as long as he moves away from me while he says it. Enforcers are consistently monitoring our every move, waiting for us to do anything out of the ordinary so they can exert their power over us. I can't get the book I need if he keeps hanging around.

I wait.

And wait.

And wait.

The enforcer is out of earshot, and that's when I notice John 762940 walk in. He's like Harriet-2 because he changed his name to Elonnie-2, but instead of outwardly going against GC, he's been helping us from the inside.⁶ He's the one who helped me to figure out that the words Ms. Lori told me were names. He's the one that told me to listen to Harriet. He's the one that is going to help me find the butler and the map.

"Jane, I noticed that you are finished with this book. Shall I put it back for you?" Elonnie asks.

I know that my response to this question is my last chance to go back to my sedated life. I could say no. I could back out right now and continue looking through the history book. If I say yes, though, I am telling him that I am ready. I am ready to find the map and learn to dream – or

at least to try and dream. When I walked to the library this afternoon, I already knew what my answer would be even if I was scared. I'm not turning back now.

"Sure, John. Thanks for your help." I say.

"Of course. There's a book that fell over there by the restricted section. Can you grab it for me, so I can put it away later?" he asks.

"I can do that for you." I look at the book lying on the ground in the spot where Elonnie's finger pointed. The cover had been removed and rebound with a shiny, black hardcover casing. I couldn't figure out what it was, and that was a good thing because if I didn't know, I doubt the enforcers could figure it out at first glance. I walked over to the spot and picked up the book, then, I flipped through the pages, careful not to linger on any page for more than a second, lest the cameras pick up on any words or phrases.

"John, I think I can use this in my most recent PR case." I say a little too loudly and a little too quickly. "Can I check this out for a while?"

"Hard black binding means that it's on its way to the incinerator, so I don't see why not. Just make sure you bring it back before the incineration date stamped on the cover" He replied with a slight smirk on his face. He knows that once it's stamped for incineration, no one is going to check if it's brought back.

Elonnie is clever. I have no idea how he was able to sneak this book out of the restricted section and get new binding since I first told him about the Harriet incident a week ago, but he did it. He's somehow been doing things like this for years without getting caught, giving restricted books to Endarkened people right under GC's surveillance cameras. I guess they never think to question him because he's one of the "good" ones, too.

I stare down at this book, black and shiny and mysterious. I don't know what's in it, but I know it must be important for it to be classified as restricted, for Harriet to go through so much to get this book in someone's hands, and for Elonnie to risk his livelihood. It's important enough for me to risk possible disfigurement at the hands of GC. I put the book in my bag, thank him, and walk toward the door, just as I hear the library's alarm sound.

¹ "Honey, de white man is de ruler of everything as fur as Ah been able tuh find out. Maybe it's some place way off in de ocean where de black man is in power, but we don't know nothin' but what we see...De nigger woman is de mule uh de world so fur as Ah can see" (Hurston, 1965, p. 14).

² The CDC (2019) has reported that Black women are "3 times as likely to die from a pregnancy-related cause as White women."

³ The myth details that a group of enslaved Igbo people were sold near Savannah, GA and reloaded onto another vessel. The captives revolted against the crew, drowning them in the water. When the ship neared land, they walked into the marshy waters and committed suicide (Snyder, 2010).

⁴ Girey Cuvier is a portmanteau. It is a combination of George Gey, Julien-Joseph Virey, Georges Cuvier, and J. Marion Sims, white male scientists who gained fame by mutilating or taking from Black women's bodies. These women include Henrietta Lacks and Saartjie Baartman (Jones, 2016; Rothman, 2017).

⁵ According to the Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections (2002), enslaved people who dared to read and write "often suffered severe punishment for the crime of literacy, from savage beatings to the amputation of fingers and toes" (par. 1).

⁶ Elonnie Junius Josey was the founder of the Black Caucus of the American Library Association and the ALA's second Black president (American Libraries, 2009).

CHAPTER 2

Finding the Butler

I made it back to my apartment quickly, but during the walk home, I couldn't help but to continuously look behind me to see if an enforcer was on my trail. I outranked the enforcers in terms of occupation, but my credentials didn't mean much when they were looking for someone to make an example out of. Enforcers were not friendly neighborhood police, charged with upholding the law. They were there to enforce the will of GC by any means necessary. "By any means" often meant that one of us was killed in order to "preserve the peace." Enforcers were never charged for murder, never held accountable for the deaths of so many of my people. But then again, why would they be? Most of the Dreamers don't see us as people anyway. It's almost as if they don't consider us to be human, like we're zombies walking amongst the living, always hungry for dreams and humanity.

I put down my bag and stare at it. I know it only has one book inside, but my back is killing me. As I walked home, the bag seemed to increase in weight with each step, and my muscles were relieved when the heavy burden was lifted. I know it's all in my mind, that an ordinary book can't miraculously gain weight, but I felt it. I felt the heavy load of stress, of fear, of a dream deferred. I know that once I open the book, life could change for me, but I don't know if I'm ready. I don't know if I want to learn more about the unknown.

My current life isn't so bad. I have a pretty decent home, consistent access to food, and a well-paying job. I may not be able to dream, but I am able to mold the truth in ways that allow me some creativity. Last week, I was able to construct a campaign that explains why the Georgia

Annex is getting smaller. Of course, the real answer is climate change and how GC refuses to implement laws that would protect the Earth. The true answer is that GC ignored aid requests when natural disasters struck the former state of Florida and the smaller island territories below it. Due to their negligence, an influx of Category 5 hurricanes and rising tides forced most of the state underwater. Now, there's not enough left of Florida to call it a state, so GC renamed it. Now, it's the Georgia Annex. My job was to twist the story and ensure that GC was never implicated.

The Florida Weight Campaign is probably what I'm best known for at work. In it, I showed how the Annexer's reliance on straws and their refusal to recycle and compost added increased weight to the state, thereby causing Florida to sink. For good measure, I added that there was no empirical evidence that humans have any influence on climate, so blaming GC and large corporations for the failures of individual people is scapegoating, at best, and discrimination against corporations, at worst. It's ridiculous, I know, but if you say something nonsensical loud and long enough, people start to believe it, and it was my job to twist the narratives so they couldn't help but believe.

Although I'm allowed access to climate campaigns and some involving the education given at FirstHOME, I am not involved in acquittal campaigns involving the enforcers and the Endarkened. Those spots are often reserved for Dreamers, although some Endarkened are allowed to sit in for photo ops. It's always great to have a photo that makes people assume everyone is on board with a campaign, no matter how discriminatory it is.

The most successful campaign to ever arise from that division are the "fear codes," a list of statements now posted in the enforcer handbook that allows them to be acquitted for murder:

"I was scared to death."

“I thought I was going to die.”

“I had no other choice.”

“I perceived a threat.”

“I feared for my life.”

These five statements, taught to enforcers throughout the country during their year of training, sign multiple death warrants on Endarkened bodies.¹ They also sign multiple freedom papers for enforcement officers. They can't be murderers if they fear for their life. It doesn't matter if they charge into our houses and kill us while we're sleeping. We apparently look menacing in our sleep. Each officer is only allowed to use their “get out of jail free” card once per year, but that's enough. I guess, the only good thing about the extraction is that we don't have nightmares anymore. We're no longer able to dream ourselves into the positions of our murdered family every time we go to sleep.

There used to be protests, outrage-filled people marching up and down the streets to bring awareness to the injustice, but that was long ago. They happened before the Change Rooms were created and before the dream extractions were fully tested. The Change Rooms destroy people, alter their brains in ways that I will never understand. The dream extractions make sure that once the people are broken, their future generations will never fight back again. There aren't any declassified documents left from that time in history, but I've heard stories from elders who have had the stories passed down to them. A lot of what we know has been passed down orally, especially since GC began editing the history books. To write it down would be to preserve a historical account that differs from the altered truth, to honor a more accurate history told by those GC has tried to silence. To write it down and have that writing discovered could result in death.

I think that's why I'm so afraid to open this book. Bound in thick black leather, the lightweight text seems so unobtrusive, as ordinary as any number of the required books that must be included in each apartment unit. But, it's also a restricted book, a book that I am not supposed to read. What happens if there are security traps in the book? What will I do if the enforcers decide to engage in random inspections of all library patrons after the alarm went off today? What happens if I figure out what made the book so blasphemous that it landed in the restricted section? What happens if my fingerprints cannot be erased from the pages, and I am taken back to FirstHOME for reprogramming? Or worse, what if I'm taken to the Change Room? All these thoughts bombard and overwhelm me, but I have to know.

I open my bag and feel the cold book in my hands, less heavy than it had felt only moments ago. I turn to the title page. It says: Octavia E. Butler. Parable of the Sower.² I drop the book. In FirstHOME, we learn about this parable. The King Trence version of the Bible tells the story of a farmer who sowed seeds indiscriminately. Some seeds drifted to places with no soil at all, some fell on rocky ground with very little soil, and some fell on soil that was filled with thorns. These seeds yielded no crops. However, some seeds fell into good soil, producing crops that could feed multitudes. Our observers taught us that most of us were one of the first three, which is why they could not trust us with dreams or knowledge because, just like the crops, we did not have enough fertile soil. We were destined to misuse the knowledge, and they were protecting the world from our knowledge abuses. That is why we were sent to FirstHOME, an educational system that best suited our intellectual levels. Dreamers, however, were more capable of producing good crops. This is why they would never even enter a FirstHOME unless they were given a teaching job.

I turn the page. The number at the top says 2024. That was sixty-one years ago. I move to the next page, and I see a date: Saturday, July 20, 2024. I skim some more, and I see that the last entry is Sunday, October 10, 2027. This must be a history book, one of those epistolary accounts of the times. But I've never heard of Octavia E. Butler, nor have I talked to anyone who has read her books. I do know that this was written before the first successful dream extraction, and I know that it's possible she is Endarkened like me since most books written by or about Endarkened people are placed in the restricted section of the libraries. Still, I'm intrigued. There's something about this book, this historical document, that has my mind spinning. There's something more here. There's a reason why this book was placed in the restricted section. I just have to figure out what it is.

I decide that I need to read the book critically in order to figure out what parts of the book challenge GC's power and/or speaks out against Endarkened oppression, so I know I'll need to deconstruct the text in some way, searching for the social issues that are reflected in the pages of the book.³ I want to read it once, just to enjoy Butler's words.⁴ I'm sure I've never read anything like this before, so I have to make sure I'm able to immerse myself in this text before I attempt to figure out why this book is classified. Once I'm done, I'll read it again. The second time, though, I'll make some notes. I'll have to hide them or create some sort of code just in case they do inspections, but this will help me to mark sections that catch my attention. Hopefully, with two readings under my belt, I'll be able to figure out not only why this book is confidential, but also why Ms. Jackson included Butler in her list of names.

I have so many questions. Much more than I did when I left my apartment this morning. I'm just hoping that this book provides some answers. I don't think I can stand the pressure of

stealing another library book just to find answers to my questions. It's too dangerous. It was too dangerous for me to take this one.

I open the book and read the first several lines:

All that you touch

You Change.

All that you Change

Changes you.

The only lasting truth

Is Change.

God

Is Change.

Earthseed: The Books of the Living.

Saturday, July 20, 2024.⁵

¹ Pipkins (2017) uses critical discourse analysis to discuss the discursive strategies used by police officers to justify the murder of unarmed citizens who are predominately Black. The statements used by the enforcers mirror the statements used by current law enforcement in murder trials.

² References are from Octavia Butler's 1993 edition.

³ Short (2017) states that a critical content analysis of text is focused "on critique, on a critical examination of the issues of stereotyping and misrepresentation in literature, a deconstruction of books and the societal issues that are reflected in representations of particular groups of people" (p. 6).

⁴ Ibid. "The first step of analysis is immersion as a reader, rather than as a researcher" (p.8).

⁵ Butler, 1993, p. 3

CHAPTER 3

Accessing the Map

July 21, 2085

“I have to write. I don’t know what else to do.”¹

This is going to sound ridiculous, but I think Butler’s book is a map, a history book, and a forewarning. It took me a while to get to this idea, but after reading the book a few times, I noticed several things kept coming up. Once I saw them, I had to read the book again, just to see if the threads were prevalent throughout the book, and they were. I guess, the easiest way to build up my reasoning is to start with the historical record, outlining events in history that Butler’s book discussed. I think that writing this down will help me outline my thoughts, help me to find my truth in Butler’s words. I hope writing down my thoughts will help me keep my own historical record, just like Butler did.

In the book, Butler talks about the exorbitant cost of new space trips. She showed frustration at the idea that there was all this “money wasted on another crazy space trip when so many people here on earth can’t afford water, food, or shelter.”² In the years before GC came to power, space trips happened every so often, as astronauts explored the great unknown, but the National Aeronautics and Space Administration was eventually disbanded in 2063 to divert more funds to the Space Force, a military organization who was charged with organizing, training, and equipping forces to be ready for possible space attacks.³ No one really knew what the Space Force was supposed to do, but many people wondered why new government branches dedicated

to protecting interests in space were being formed when money was not being allocated to ensure that people on Earth were protected. Then again, Butler says that “Secretaries of Astronautics don’t have to know much about science. They have to know about politics.”⁴ That was true then, just as much as it’s true now. Our newest Space Force commander used to be the favorite cook of GC CEO, Donny Cuiems. I’m not sure what a cook knows about commanding a space force, but as long as you have a friend in the government, you have a job whether you’re qualified for it or not.

In fact, there was so much the former government could have done to protect every person on Earth, but I guess that certain people were always safe, so they didn’t bother to look at those whose existences were always in danger. Butler shows a good example of this when she said that “There are too many poor people – illiterate, jobless, homeless, without decent sanitation or clean water. They have plenty of water down there, but a lot of it is polluted.”⁵ I’m not sure if she was talking about the former city of Flint, Michigan, but it definitely sounds like she was. We’re not allowed to talk about it. It’s considered taboo in the PR department. Still, those of us who create altered truth campaigns for environmental changes get to know a little bit of background information just in case we need to cover it up again.⁶

What I do know is that Flint used to be a thriving city, home to a major plant, although I don’t remember what they were manufacturing there. Then, a pipeline was built that outsourced water from the local river to the homes of the residents. Dangerous levels of lead polluted those waters, and people complained, filed lawsuits, and protested. Still, after years of activism, nothing changed. In fact, after five years of fighting, prosecutors dropped all pending criminal charges because they wanted to start their investigation from scratch. The cycle just kept happening – prosecutors would file charges, drop them, and start over.

Fifty years passed, and Flint's water was still as dirty as ever. They couldn't boil the harmful elements from the water, and many of the residents were dying because they couldn't afford the exorbitant doctor's fees. They tried to show the world what they were going through, but Altered Truth had more reach. By the time the PR department was through with the situation, Flint's residents were being sued for poisoning the water and faking illness. Eventually, the people became jobless and homeless, and they lived without decent, unpolluted water. Now, Flint is the state landfill, and sometimes, I think that's what they thought it should be in the first place.

Although her comments on Space Force and water pollution resembled some historical events, her focus on the pre-GC enforcers was what led me to believe that this text was historical. Before GC took over, there was a different group of enforcers. Most people called them police officers, although there were various other names that people used. Butler describes them by saying that these officers "liked to solve cases by "discovering" evidence against whomever they decided must be guilty... They never helped when people called for help. They came later, and more often than not, made a bad situation worse."⁷

I once heard Harriet talking about this with some of the other Janes and Jills. She talked about the many times that police planted evidence, resulting in undeserved prison time for many Endarkened people. I don't remember every instance of official misconduct she mentioned, but I do remember she talked about an officer named Wester who pulled people over for minor traffic violations, planted drugs in their vehicles, and arrested them. Over 100 people had to be exonerated in cases that were tied to his efforts to "clean up the streets."⁸⁹ He was caught, but I'm sure there were many others who planted items and turned off body cameras. They've mostly transitioned from the police of history to the enforcers of contemporary times.

Once I saw that Butler was trying to embed historical content into her book, I also start to see that she was anticipating our current predicament. She saw GC coming. In her story, a president Donner planned to produce more jobs by suspending minimum wage requirements as well as environmental and worker protection laws. He believed that by doing so, companies would be willing to “take on homeless employees and provide them with training and adequate room and board.”¹⁰ Reducing labor laws enabled several companies to build what Butler called Company Towns. She talks about “a company called Kagimoto, Stamm, Frampton, and Company – KSF” that had taken over a small coastal city.¹¹ The town was bought out and privatized, and the people who lived there worked to earn their place in the city. However, new hires had a hard time living on the offered salary and were in insurmountable debt to the company. Butler anticipated that eventually, the country would be “parceled out as a source of cheap labor and cheap land” because when people “beg to sell themselves, our surviving cities are bound to wind up the economic colonies of whoever can afford to buy them.”¹²

I’m not sure how Butler saw this coming, but she was right, more or less. The only difference is that instead of various companies buying towns, GC bought the country, then divided states and communities amongst the organization’s brother corporations. Amazon, Facebook, Microsoft, Apple, Berkshire Hathaway, Oracle– they all own at least four states each. GC kept the rest to use as a way to build alliances with other countries. It’s kind of like GC owns America but allows its friends to manage other states so their load is reduced. The Endarkened work the grunt jobs for the organizations, earning our room and board. It’s also what warrants our nationality. We live in a precarious state of citizenship that can be revoked at any time, but as long as we continue to be productive, we are allowed to remain on U.S. soil.

To earn a spot, the people in Butler's novel had to apply. We, on the other hand, take entrance exams. The tests occur sometime before graduation from FirstHOME. It doesn't make sense to test us for our future occupations at this graduation because we leave FirstHOME when we're thirteen, but I guess GC figures that it's best to use our SecondHOME years, our high school years, as trainees. Basically, they use FirstHOME to teach us the basics, like how to read, write, and comply. Then, they use SecondHOME to make sure that as soon as we leave, we are ready to be productive members of society, working in places like Altered Truth, operating the various machines in the factories, or joining one of the branches of the military.

The entrance exams are a series of grueling processes that consist of fourteen hours of physical testing and eight hours of knowledge testing. The physical part is easy, but traumatic all the same. They test our will and see how long it takes to break us. The longer we can withstand their attacks, the higher our placement. This is not a physical attack in the general sense. Instead, they test our mental capacity. For hours, they show us videos of violence against Endarkened people. We see lynching demonstrations, whippings of Enslaved people, the forced removal of Endarkened from their native lands, and concentration camps filled with Endarkened children. We are allowed to blink, but we are not allowed to look away for longer than four seconds. If we can withstand the physical test, our chance of obtaining a GC position is almost guaranteed. The test is easy because FirstHOME prepares us for this task throughout our schooling, and GC offers movie events to help us become desensitized. So, by the time we get to the physical test, most of us are more than capable of passing. Sometimes, we just choose not to.

The knowledge test is more arbitrary because they have already decided what our scores will be before we enter the exam room. Every Endarkened child is born and taken directly to a FirstHOME, the educational institution that Helps the Omnipotent Manufacture Efficiency.

Clever name. Anyway, after four years of being in the nursery away, we enter the school building at the age of five. During that first year, multiple observers watch carefully, analyzing our future occupational prospects. At the end of the year, the observers meet and classify each child. We are labeled gifted, honors, general, or skills. Once tracked, it's hard to move up from one category to another. Our knowledge scores are essentially decided based on whatever level we occupy before the transition, at least that's what they tell those of us who were accepted into the gifted and honors levels. I'm not sure what they told the kids in the general and skills sections. All I know is that they always seemed less prepared, as if the observers assumed that the level decided upon years ago was all they could ever be.

I also know that those who were tracked into the lower levels often got the worst jobs, and they were less likely to obtain jobs where they could live debt free. This is mainly because the companies who would hire them chose to use company dollars rather than money that could be used anywhere. This meant that once they were hired, they couldn't move to a different place. They were stuck. Sadly, most of their children were stuck, too. Once they were taken from their parents, they were sent to a HOME in another state owned by their company and placed on the same track. Basically, once someone is labeled in the general or skill levels, their children are often categorized similarly, creating an intergenerational class of lower-level workers. Every once in a while, they find a "good one" and allow them to be in the higher classes, but that doesn't happen too often, and it usually only happens so GC can say they don't discriminate.

The idea of workers paid in company dollars was also something that Butler talked about, and interestingly, this is the part that let me know she knew what was going to happen even if she didn't know that it would just happen to Endarkened people. She wrote:

Wages were paid, but in company scrip, not in cash. Rent was charged for the workers' shacks. Workers had to pay for food, for clothing – new or used – for everything they needed, and, of course, they could only spend their company notes at the company store. Wages – surprise! – were never quite enough to pay the bills. According to new laws that might or might not exist, people were not permitted to leave an employer to whom they owed money. They were obligated to work off the debt either as quasi-indentured people or as convicts. That is, if they refused to work, they could be arrested, jailed, and in the end, handed over to their employers.¹³

Just like the general and skilled tracks, the people Butler mentions are paid in company scrip, not in cash. They can only spend their money in stores owned by the companies they work for, ensuring that the little money they make always goes back to the company itself. Because they are paid little, they can never afford to leave. If they refuse, they are often jailed for some arbitrary reason, and the employer has to bail them out. It's interesting how the pipeline works, forcing the Endarkened into jail-like schools, then asking them to work in jail-like conditions, and then putting them in an actual jail when they ask for an acknowledgement of their humanity. I don't know how Butler knew so much.

July 22, 2085

Yesterday, I was so caught up in how the history in Butler's novel connects to what's happening now that I forgot the most important aspect of the work. I think Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower* is a map.¹⁴ It's a map to a sacred place in which Endarkened people can thrive. In the book, Lauren, the main character, takes a journey to seek this place called Acorn, a place where Earthseed, her community, can thrive. The story takes place in California somewhere, and the characters all journey north to find their new home, a place the oppressive

world can't infiltrate. Living in the Georgia Annex, I know that I'm far from California and the actual Acorn that Lauren found, but I think it's a metaphor. I think it's a way to find liberatory spaces created and nurtured by Endarkened women like Lauren, a place to challenge the racialized policing of GC's United States.¹⁵ The reader just needs to figure out the location using clues within the text. That has to be the map Harriet was talking about.

Lauren says that "people are always moving north" and that her plan was to start walking north in hopes that she would "wind up in a good place."¹⁶¹⁷ She also says that even though she planned on going up toward Canada, she knew that she may not be able to get that far¹⁸. To me, this means that Acorn is north. I'm not sure how far north, but I'm thinking that because she remained in the same state throughout the book, Acorn can be in any state, but it probably won't be in the southern-most parts of the state. She also talked about being on the coast within sight of the ocean. I'm pretty sure this means that Acorn will need access to a water source. I know of a few cities on the eastern coast that have been abandoned by GC and its friends, so I'm sure that Earthseed could hide in one of those places. Based on this, I'm thinking that Savannah or Tybee Island might be where Earthseed is thriving in Georgia Proper. It's on the eastern coast, and although it's not completely north, it is located at a point where Georgia meets the ocean right before turning into the North Carolina Annex, the former South Carolina.

If I try to go there, I know there's a possibility that I'll find nothing, but I have to try, especially since Butler's descriptions of this community are so inviting. Lauren says that the world is falling apart and that she wants to build something constructive with the help of her community, a community of survivors. She says that in order to survive, the community works together in various ways. They fight together against enemies and help if any one of them is in need; they educate their family, community, and self; they contribute to the fulfillment of their

destinies; and they defend themselves and their children. Basically, they learn to live outside of the system, fending for themselves rather than relying on the oppressors to save them.

I want to be a part of something like that, but I'm scared. I'm not like Harriet. I can't keep getting sent back to FirstHOME, and I don't want to lose my life in the Change Room. Still, something is drawing me to this place. I've felt it ever since Lori Jackson tried to teach us to dream so many years ago. I've needed it ever since I first saw Harriet get taken away for spreading lies against GC. I've sensed it from the moment I opened Octavia E. Butler's book.

Of course, I can ignore it and choose to live out my life happily. I am one of the "good ones" after all. I can live the rest of my life without agitating the balance, without risking everything I have ever known. But what kind of life would that be, choosing to be docile just because I don't experience the same hardship as other members of the Endarkened? Choosing silence means choosing the life I have now, a life of servitude, lies, and isolation. Choosing silence means ignoring the suffering of my Endarkened siblings. I don't want this life anymore. I want something different. I want to find Acorn and join Earthseed. I'm leaving tomorrow

¹ Butler, 1993, p. 158

² Ibid., p. 17.

³ Space Force officially became the sixth branch of the military in December of 2019. Information about Space Force was gathered from Erwin (2019).

⁴ Butler, 1993, p. 20

⁵ Ibid., p. 53

⁶ Information retrieved from CNN Library, 2019.

⁷ Butler, 1993, p.114

⁸ Information retrieved from Burlew, 2019.

⁹ Since 2014, The Marshall Project (2019), a nonpartisan and nonprofit news organization, keeps track of news articles showcasing police officers planting evidence on civilians.

¹⁰ Butler, 1993, p. 27

¹¹ Ibid., p. 118.

¹² Ibid., p. 129.

¹³ Ibid., p. 288.

¹⁴ Tamara Butler (2018) argued that Black women and girls engage at the intersections of race, place, and gender. She contends that although it is important to examine themes in literature, it is also important to note how books can "signal as to where Black girls are most prevalent or at least can thrive in the literary imaginations of writers and readers" (p. 39). Here, Butler's novel is used as a map to locate a space where Endarkened women can thrive.

¹⁵ Kynard (2010) discusses Black women's use and creation of hush harbors, where the "current work of maintaining, rescripting, and reauthorizing African American challenges to white hegemony" are centered instead of "merely providing utopian safe havens or survival strategies" (p. 35).

¹⁶ Butler, 1993, p. 82.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 141.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 169.

CHAPTER 4

A Way Out

July 26, 2085

Leaving was harder than I thought it would be. I went to work, committed and ready to get out and make my way to Savannah, ready to leave the Annex and finding Acorn. But, after I thought about my plan, I realized that I don't have an excuse to leave. Under heavy surveillance, we're always required to discuss our whereabouts. They haven't started to use trackers or anything, but the street security cameras are usually enough. Any Endarkened person who inhabits unauthorized zones are quickly and efficiently arrested by the enforcers. That's probably the only time the enforcers come quickly. With someone always watching me for wrongdoing, though, I need to figure out some way to get out of GC without causing suspicion. I just wish that these anxious feelings weren't getting in the way of my escape planning.

The book gave me motivation to find Acorn, but it also made me hyper-aware of how I'm now considered a criminal in the eyes of GC. Most Dreamers see us as criminals anyway even if we don't consider ourselves to be one. Still, the general consensus is that we are nothing but trouble, and most believe that Endarkened women are the worst of all. That's one of the reasons they say dream extractions were instituted. Before the extraction and the formation of the FirstHOMEs, the Endarkened were sent to public schools. I would have been called Black back then. Black girls like me were less likely to graduate on time or earn a college degree.¹ We were more likely to be suspended than any other racial group². When we did achieve a bit of success, our accomplishments were belittled, as the educators focused more on how we acted in class,

rather than acknowledging our academic success.³ Our very existence positioned our bodies as sites of struggle. FirstHOME was created to help us, to teach us how to adopt standards of racelessness so we could blend and be a part of the melting pot.⁴ In some ways, they succeeded.

We used to be Black, Latinx, Indigenous, Asian, Middle Eastern, and combinations of these. That's what Ms. Jackson had told us, at least. Now, we are Endarkened; we don't have racial identities anymore. We also graduate on time since they use the schools as job training sites and there's no need for college degrees. We're all out in four years, ready to work for the rest of our lives. It's not like we need degrees or trade certifications anyway. Our jobs are determined by our tracks, not our increased levels of knowledge. They wouldn't want us in their colleges anyway. Colleges want innovators, thinkers, and scholars. They want people who can look at the works of the past and imagine a new way of looking at or doing various tasks in the present and future. According to GC, those words and skills don't apply to us. According to GC, they never have.

Maybe that's why it's so hard for me to think of a way out of all of this. I can reminisce on the past and try to think of ways my Endarkened ancestors searched for freedom, but the world has changed so much, and the written words we have access to don't really help. The elders who have knowledge passed down to them are always taken. Look at Harriet. Once taken, my division alters their stories and erases the history of their words. That's actually how the term, Dreamers, came to be. Harriet told me all about it.

There was once an Endarkened man, a Black man, named Martin Luther King Jr. He had this speech where he talked about dreams. He talked about wanting a world filled with equality. He said that he wanted his children to live in a world "where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character," a world where people could work together to

“transform the jangling discords of our nation into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood.”⁵ At the end, he shouts, “Free at last! Free at last! Thank God Almighty, we are free at last!”⁶ I think he meant for Endarkened people to actually be free to make our own decisions, to be released from the wake of slavery and Jim Crow. Dreamers took it to mean that cultures needed to just melt together, to erase race entirely since that was the reason for the discord. They took up the mantle for this altered form of equality and called themselves the Dreamers. It’s funny how the only race that didn’t deserve erasure was their own.

July 27, 2085

Harriet is dead. She died of pneumonia while waiting to be released from her latest bout of reprogramming.⁷ They decided to have a party at my job to celebrate. People even made speeches. Some were ecstatic because they won’t be forced to alter her stories anymore. The senior manager of the Altered Truth division even gave a speech about her death. He wanted to congratulate us on all of our hard work, on all the lies we’ve created to hide parts of Harriet’s story. He said that during questioning, all she kept saying was, “I go to prepare a place for you.”⁸ He thought that was hilarious. He can’t imagine that Harriet is now free, preparing a place for someone else. He doesn’t think Endarkened people are capable of doing anything but taking orders. The cake had her state name on it, Jane 12. She would’ve hated that. I hate it, too.

August 6, 2085

I’m sure Harriet’s final words weren’t meant for me, but something about those words helped me figure out how to escape the Dreamers’ grasp without bringing too much attention to myself. I’m going to use Harriet’s history as a reason to spy. I mean, the Dreamers, generally, and the Altered Truth division, specifically, have had to deal with her antics for decades. She would pass the tests required to show that she had been reprogrammed, then she would disappear

for a while, staying out of sight until her presence was forgotten. Then, once GC believed she had finally changed her ways, she'd be found telling stories to any Endarkened who would listen. She would talk about dreams, ancestors, our collective history. She'd be taken away, and the cycle would occur all over again. Each time she was taken back to FirstHome or the Change Room, though, a small group of Endarkened would also disappear.

There are rumors in the department that Harriet convinced the Endarkened to leave their homes to find a better life elsewhere, but there was never any proof. She was always interrogated, and she would never say a word. With no new information, they'd complete the dream extraction and send her on her way. Too many people knew about her existence to execute her. Better to appease the masses by letting her live. Still, no one in GC could understand how she kept resisting the extractions. She had undergone the procedure numerous times, more than any other Endarkened I knew. But she always found a way to fight back, and GC wanted to understand how she was able to continuously break the hold of the serum. I'm hoping that their ignorance and drive to quell any rebellion will be my freedom.

My plan is to convince them to let me work undercover. I can tell them that as an ambitious Altered Truth employee, I would like the opportunity to bring down Harriet and her ilk once and for all. I can promise to bring back information, detailing the whereabouts of the Endarkened who have deserted. I can guarantee that I will find their leader, helping GC to silence all resistance. I think they'll go for it. After all, Dreamers have a history of destroying the joy and successes of the Endarkened. For example, over one hundred years ago, an Endarkened enclave in the city of Tulsa, Oklahoma was destroyed.⁹ The alleged circumstances that resulted in the riot mirrored numerous other conflicts between Dreamer women and Endarkened men, but

that was mostly an excuse. They would have used any reason to promote the destruction of a self-sufficient community of Endarkened people.

In the end, thousands of Endarkened lost their homes and their lives, and even though fighting happened between both Dreamers and Endarkened, enforcers ignored due process, and only the Endarkened were imprisoned.¹⁰ In fact, even though numerous accounts show that most Endarkened people were victims of the event, local media reframed the narrative to portray the riot as an uprising lead by Endarkened people armed with weaponry. They stated that the push for equality had festered in the Endarkened community, causing us to collect guns and ammunition and prepare for a fight. We were the issue. Demanding equality was the problem. We were responsible for our own demise, and Dreamers had nothing to do with it.

I plan to use this to my advantage. If thriving Endarkened communities scare them so much, then it makes sense to suggest the razing of whatever community brought about the existence of Harriet. If Endarkened resistance against the hold of the dream extraction is a major GC concern, then it makes sense to use someone with knowledge of GC to infiltrate the enemy camp and provide the information necessary to remove the obstacle. In fact, having an Altered Truth employee work as a spy makes it easier for GC to alter the story of the community's downfall. An Endarkened woman working against her own people would give them the tools they need to suggest that there are some Endarkened who understand the benefits of the melting pot, the benefits of racelessness. It would provide them with a story of acceptance, a token that proves equality has been reached.

I'll let them believe these things. It's what they want to believe anyway, so it won't require much effort on my part. It sucks to have my intelligence consistently undermined because they think less of me, but sometimes I make it work to my advantage. All I have to do is

set the idea in motion by making it seem like it's their idea. It won't be hard. It happens in meetings all the time. I'll say something. They'll ignore me. Then, a male Dreamer will say the exact same thing, claim it as his own innovative idea, and the whole room will applaud. I'll do the same thing this time, and once he is celebrated for his idea, the group will beg me to be their spy. They'll ask me to leave, and they might even tell me to take as long as I need to bring them the information they seek. I'll use that to my advantage. I'll take the time I need. I'll find Acorn, and I'll never come back.

¹ See Baxley & Boston, 2010; George, 2015; Smith-Evans & George, 2014

² See George, 2015; Joseph, Viesca, & Bianco, 2016; Onyeka-Crawford, Patrick, & Chaudhry, 2017

³ See Carter, 2006; Fordham, 1993; Morris, 2007

⁴ See Evans-Winters, 2005; Fordham, 1988; Ricks, 2014

⁵ King, 1963

⁶ King, 1963

⁷ Harriet Tubman died of pneumonia (Biography.com, 2019).

⁸ According to the Public Broadcasting System (2019), upon Harriet Tubman's death, she told friends and family, "I go to prepare a place for you" (par. 11).

⁹ The Tulsa race riot occurred in 1921, and it was initiated by an alleged assault upon a White woman by a Black man. The riot resulted in major losses for Black families, and reparations were never given. Messer and Bell (2010) contend that the media's framing prevented Black survivors from receiving justice.

¹⁰ "The police disregarded due process, arresting blacks and interning them in detention camps; meanwhile, no whites were arrested during the riot" (Fain, 2017, par. 9).

CHAPTER 5

The Meeting

August 10, 2085

We always have a Friday meeting to discuss pertinent weekly events and provide updates on the progress of our current projects. I haven't gotten a new assignment since Harriet died, so my job has been to assist others in completing their projects. There hasn't been much to alter in the last few weeks other than acquittal cases, so that means less work for me and my Endarkened coworkers. On one hand, it seems like a good thing because we finally get a break from creating GC truths. On the other hand, we're getting a break because the number of acquittals is so high that the department isn't really concerned with anything else. In other words, the number of Endarkened murders carried out by enforcers is steadily increasing, and the number of GC truths to cover those murders is also rising. I think the enforcers are getting bolder, especially since the PR teams are getting better at altering the stories.

The Friday morning meeting started off in the usual way. The director praised the Dreamers for their hard work at keeping America great. She commended their strong efforts despite the various ways in which the Endarkened attempt to spread lies and half-truths to the masses. She recounted the various Altered Truth projects that were completed within the last week, celebrating the hard labor of Dreamer workers who surpassed all odds to complete their tasks. She didn't mention our work. She never does. We're invisible to all who work there, and we're not allowed to talk to each other. It makes for a very lonely work environment, a very lonely life.

After singing the praises of her staff, the director went over the agenda for the meeting: the discussion of new projects; the planning of a celebration for another record month of acquittal cases; and the reading of an update from the head of GC. As far as meetings go, this one was standard. There's always a new truth to be told in order to hide the facts. There's always a celebration when enforcers are acquitted for murdering Endarkened people. There's always an update from GC which usually lets us know how much more land GC has colonized.

"Charles, great work last week," the director said. "I don't know if you all know about the work that Charles has done, but it was a masterclass in truth telling. Of course, we all know that Enforcer Shelbi was acquitted of all charges because she feared for her life. She was a first-time fear code user, so she was going to get off anyway, but the Endarkened were furious. Charles, here, knew they would be upset. They're always upset about something. So, he goes and works with the judge to get it expunged from her record and works with the other state leaders to remove all history of the incident from the internet.¹ Now, if any Endarkened things have something to say, there's no record of the event. Gone. Poof! A master... class!" she shouted.

Applause came from all sides of the room, except for the two back corners where the six Endarkened employees sit. We don't clap for anything. They don't expect us to. In fact, I think they make us come to these meetings to prove to us that they see us as the diversity hires, subhuman entities that exist only to prove that GC is benevolent enough to hire Endarkened workers. The director's use of the phrase, Endarkened things, solidifies my point. Things. The word leapt from her lips without the slightest hesitation, as if she was using the word to describe a lamp or a pencil. No, inanimate objects would be granted much more dignity.

"I bring up Charles and his amazing accomplishments because we have a slew of new cases coming in," the director continued. "Enforcers Yanez, Salamoni, Lake, Loehmann, Wilson,

Pantaleo, Dean, Atkins, Brelo, James, Daniels, Campbell, Dupra, and Servin have all invoked the fear codes, and their cases need to be handled.² Charles provided the model that we should all aspire to, but I know we can't all be as efficient in our work as he is. Still, we can work to get these good folks acquitted, transfer them to a new enforcement unit, and alter the story to fit the narrative. Dodge and deflect."

She listed a few more names, but I tuned her out. There are always at least five names each week, but this week the number has risen greatly. I know the fear codes can only be used by the enforcers sparingly, but what happens when multiple enforcers use the codes at the same time? What happens when every week, hundreds of enforcers enact the codes to cover their murders? I mean, if every enforcer uses the codes sparingly, then the number is no longer small. It's a system-wide get-out-of-jail free card that transforms the murder of the Endarkened into a normalized business practice. It's the state-sanctioned violence and murder of my people. I guess they rejoice so they can have more desensitization material to use in FirstHOME.

If the listing of the names wasn't bad enough, the next item on the agenda was for a celebration of the acquittals. The director believes that a party will add to company morale. Once again, I sat silently as my Dreamer coworkers decide on a party theme, determine who is bringing which foods, and agree on an appropriate time for the event to begin. I wanted to yell, scream out at them for planning a celebration right after reading an obituary column. I wanted to throw something, make a scene, and curse out loud because they, once again, ignore the increased levels of trauma that occur each time we are forced to sit in a room while they celebrate our deaths. I wanted to do a lot of things, but I knew I couldn't. If I want to do more than just survive in this world, I have to get out and find Acorn. I couldn't do that if I didn't sit back and wait for the right moment to speak.

With the planning complete, the director moved to the last element of business, an update from the head of GC. We don't get messages directly from the top too often, but I'm always wary of the information they hold. It's never anything good. Charles, due to his "amazing" job last week, got to read the letter to the rest of the room.

Greetings Altered Truth Division,

First, let me commend you on a job well done. I have heard great things about your skill, dedication, and loyalty, and I want to ensure you that your efforts have not gone unnoticed. In fact, your success in the last few months is the reason why this letter has been sent to your division, rather than to the director of enforcement. As Altered Truth employees, it is your job to spread truth throughout the land, squelching the numerous lies continuously spread by the Endarkened. It is your job to uphold the King James version of history and ensure that its truths are unquestioned. Recently, however, there was an Endarkened who, somehow, continuously undermined these truths. Even with multiple attempts at reprogramming and frequent dream extractions, this thing continued to resist. It called itself Harriet 2, but its name was Jane 12.

Now, don't be alarmed. It's true that it is dead and can no longer spread its lies. Still, we fear that it has started something, given information to other Endarkened across the country, although we have not been able to figure out how. More and more of them are disappearing, leaving their jobs in the middle of the night. We have sent our best enforcers to track them, but their efforts are always thwarted. For instance, we chased an Endarkened all the way to the Canadian border, but as we were about to close in, all we saw was a barren wasteland. The Endarkened deserter seemed to literally disappear. Another time, we chased an Endarkened to the coast, close to the burned city of

Savannah, GA. The enforcers followed it through the debris of the forgotten city all the way to the water's edge, but when they reached the shore, the Endarkened was gone.

Once again, these unintelligent things eluded our grasp.

Based on these failed attempts, we realize that the enforcers are never going to catch the deserters. We also recognize that someone is helping them to escape. At first, we believed Jane 12 to be the only one, but now we know there are more, and they are everywhere. There are deserters in several states, and the oddest part is that most never cross state lines. At least, we don't think they do because they never reach the state borders. Still, we cannot find them. Thus, we have decided to use mental over physical strength, and our best and brightest minds work for this division.

We are tasking the division with infiltrating the Endarkened deserter strongholds. You will have freedom in how you choose to do this, mainly because you are our last hope in crushing this resistance before it becomes too great. Historically, the Endarkened peacefully and sometimes violently protested, but there weren't as many of them, and they did not always work together. This new resistance has started with a small group but branched out to other Endarkened communities across the land. If their strength keeps growing, there is no telling what the outcomes could be.

We have faith that you will infiltrate the resistance, spread the truth, and kill their lies in the name of GC. This must be done to ensure that this country continues to reign in its infinite glory. We are Dreamers, tasked with fulfilling the American Dream of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. We can't let the Endarkened take that away from us. Without our dreams, the world falls to divisiveness. You can't let that happen.

Thank you for all you do to make this country great.

Girey Cuvieims, INC.

After hearing the letter, I thought everything was playing out much too easily, and yet, I somehow believed this was part of the place that Harriet was preparing. She had been in and out of FirstHOME and the Change Room numerous times, and she and the deserters were never caught. Their information was never leaked. But now, less than two weeks after her death, GC had a wealth of information about the resistance, much more knowledge than they've ever had before. They even knew there were multiple locations. More importantly, they knew that one of those locations was in Savannah. I don't have proof yet, but this had to have been orchestrated. It's too coincidental.

"Thank you, Charles." The director said. "Now, everyone, we have been tasked with a great mission, one that could uplift this department exponentially. Yes, we already curry great favor with the heads of GC, but if we achieve success in this assignment, we will ensure that all of us gain prominence. We might even be moved from this division to a state or country-level position!" The gleam in her eyes betrayed her motives. She could care less if the people in the room were rewarded for their efforts. She wants to be moved from the director of Altered Truth to some higher position. She wants to be in a place of dominance that surpasses the privileged place she has now. I'm pretty sure she's had a conversation about space before, so maybe GC will make her the secretary of Space Force. Who knows?

"Charles, since you are our star employee, what do you think about taking the lead on this?" the director asked.

“It would be my honor, director, though I believe a team would be better than one person. If the enforcers couldn’t catch the deserters, I know that one man can’t do it by himself.” Charles responded.

“Agreed. How many people do you need?”

“I’m thinking that five should work. I’ll take the best Dreamers we’ve got.”

“I think we can do that. The acquittal cases can be handled by our second-tier workers. We surely have enough of them to go around.”

I knew that if I let them finish their conversation without speaking up, I’d be stuck, missing out on an important opportunity. So, I whispered to Jack-67402762, but I made sure that the whisper was loud enough for Charles to hear. I knew he’d notice because we’re not allowed to talk to one another, and I hardly ever say anything in these meetings. “It would probably be easier to infiltrate the Endarkened groups by using an Endarkened spy. Why would the resistance trust a random Dreamer?” I murmured. I know Charles heard my comment because his eyes widened, and a sly smile crossed his pinched red face. He waited a moment, looking as if he was deep in thought. He put his finger up, and then he put it back down, shaking his head vigorously. Next, he opened his mouth and made a small sound, and then he shut it just as quickly. His acting skills are superb. I almost believed that he was really thinking of some extraordinary plan.

“Is something wrong, Charles?” the director asked.

“Director,” Charles said, “This idea might sound far-fetched, but I had to share just in case you think it might work. Hear me out first before you say no.” The director eyed him warily, but Charles continues, “What if we add an Endarkened to the team? I mean, if the goal is to infiltrate and spread truths within the Endarkened resistance, what better way to do so than to have one of their own betray them? They will never see it coming, and we may be able to have

an inside member that we can use in the future if all goes well. Why would the resistance trust a random Dreamer anyway? Plus, we've had an Endarkened helping in the Jane 12 case, so she would know more about Jane 12 than others would."

The director was deep in thought. I could tell that she didn't want to do it because she doesn't trust Endarkened people. She doesn't even consider us to be people, so why would she trust us to handle a job that could elevate her career? Still, she couldn't deny that Charles plan was appealing. She wanted to be in the good graces of GC, and what better way to do that than to succeed in this mission? Additionally, if they send one of us and the plan works, the Altered Truth division and GC will have another Endarkened posterchild to tokenize as the face of GC support. The director had to say yes. It was her best option.

"What a brilliant plan!" the director exclaimed. "This type of quick thinking is why you are our number one employee. Now, I believe Jane 9675214 was the Endarkened on this case. Jane has been with us for about five years, but do you trust her to carry out this mission? I mean, this mission has been handed down directly from GC, so we want to make sure that all goes well. Any errors could mean the loss of our current positions within GC hierarchy."

"Trust?" Charles began. "With all due respect, director, I would never trust an Endarkened. Still, I believe that she is capable of completing the task. We'll just have to map everything out for her, so she doesn't have to think too hard. You know they lack some of the intelligence necessary to carry out tasks that require more than rote memorization. We'll also need to send her in for an enhanced dream extraction to make sure that she doesn't get any ideas of her own. We wouldn't want her to desert herself. You know how easily influenced they are."

Charles glared at me as he said this. He doesn't trust me, but he had to know that it was a better idea than anything he could come up with. Every time he's gotten praise from the director

or GC, it was on the backs of others. I'm not sure he's ever come up with a good idea on his own. He finds ways to take credit for other's ideas because he wants to be the director of Altered Truth someday. The current director won't be here forever. I've heard her say so numerous times. If the director gets what she wants, then Charles is next in line for the director position. It's not official, but we all know it. He's been eyeing the job for years, sucking up at every chance he gets. Plus, he's a male Dreamer. That automatically pushes his application to the top. It's weird how much I know about company business. You learn a lot when you're invisible to those around you.³ It's kind of like I only appear when they need something.

It's also funny how much he belittled my intelligence. They all do it, though. They know we are intelligent and capable of doing things they never dreamed of doing, but because of the color of our skin, they refuse to acknowledge us, choosing to pass off our ideas as their own and then telling everyone how unintelligent we are. They colonize our ideas in the same way that GC colonizes land. I don't get the logic behind it. I mean, I know the goal is to make themselves appear more intelligent than we are, but there's no point in sneering at us when we know where their ideas come from. I guess it's just to make them feel better about themselves.

"That works for me," the director responded, interrupting my thoughts once again. "I'll need to speak with her before she begins to work with your team, however. There are some things we need to discuss. Jane, head to my office now. Endarkened, you are dismissed. Dreamers, stay a moment so Charles can select his team. I'm sure..." I left before she finished her sentence.

I sat in her office for what seemed like hours, although I knew only ten minutes had passed. I had no idea what the director wanted to tell me, and the randomness of the meeting scared me. Maybe she heard my suggestion, and she was suspicious of my timing and interest in

the case, especially since I was in close contact with Harriet when we were altering her stories. Maybe she wanted to see if I'd been influenced in any way. Or, maybe she was agreeing to my inclusion on the committee as a way to promote a semblance of diversity on the team, and this meeting was to remind me of my place. Maybe she knew about my indiscretion, about the book that's hidden underneath the laundry basket at the back of my closet. Maybe she knew about my journal and my ideas of escape, of finding Acorn. Maybe this was how they would quietly send me back to FirstHOME for reprogramming.

After eighteen minutes of waiting, the director walked in. She was calm, almost stoic as she sauntered to her oversized mahogany desk. She sat, but she ignored me at first. I waited, looking up at her. I'm pretty sure she had the visitor chairs lowered, so she can tower over whoever dares to enter her business sanctuary. After checking her perfectly curled blonde hair and fixing the flawless makeup that covered her blotched red skin, she turned to me with a smirk on her face. She relished in my anxiety, as I waited for her to acknowledge me.

"So, Jane... I see that you are looking to increase your... station?" She spoke slowly, choosing each word carefully. I sat quietly and waited for her to continue. I couldn't agree with her because I wasn't trying to increase my "station." An Endarkened person increasing their place in GC hierarchy is only superficial at best. Accolades, awards, and friendships only provide the impression of high status. If you're Endarkened, you are safe only until a Dreamer finds you or your confidence threatening.⁴ Once that happens, your honors and friends seem to disappear. I also couldn't disagree with her because she already seemed to suspect that I was up to something. I noticed her skeptical stare when Charles made his statement.

She continued, "I've known a few Endarkened who were ambitious, self-centered, conspirators. I don't think you're like that, though. You don't seem to have the same...drive.

You've been here for about five years, came straight from job training at SecondHOME to this division, a good Endarkened who showed limited signs of intelligence that just aren't found in most of your kind. Still, I can't be too cautious. Sending you out on a mission of this magnitude requires a level of astuteness that I'm not sure you possess, no matter what your test scores may imply. So, I brought you here because I think it's important for you to know a few things."

I wasn't sure I wanted to know what she had to say, but she kept talking anyway. "Harriet is one of many," she began. "We've known about an underground movement for quite some time, but we have not been able to catch their leaders, their spies. They range in age, location, and gender, so it has been difficult to provide a description. We also have reason to believe that there are Dreamers who assist them, although I can't figure out why they would betray their own interests." I thought about Ms. Jackson as she said this, wondering if she had ties to the underground movement, wondering whether she knew Harriet.

"We've always altered their stories, making sure that those who have challenged their station through social action are effectively muted. We hide their efforts, dodge and deflect any event that could thwart GC's efforts to create a true melting pot and erase the Endarkened's focus on race and difference. We distorted their stories to quell their need to promote divisiveness. For example, we learned that Endarkened writers were attempting to reshape societal discourse. Using pseudonyms, like Octavia, Toni, Alice, Nalo, Cherie, Gloria, etc., they wrote stories that challenged the life GC created for them.⁵ They tried to write of dreams, hopes, and experiences. They tried to spread lies about GC oppression. They tried to promote a conversation about equity and justice for the Endarkened without realizing how good they already have it. The Dreamers carry the burden of dreaming, so the Endarkened don't need to worry about such things. Still, they fought, and they continued writing. This is why we have the

restricted section in the libraries. We are protecting good Endarkened things like you from yearning for something that will only bring you sadness.”

“This disease was not just present in the adults, however. There was a fifteen-year-old girl named Jill 7801 who called herself Claudette. She tried to challenge the transportation laws, so we hid her protest.⁶ For a while, no one knew she existed. Then, there was sixteen-year-old Jane 89447, a well-known traitor who joined an Endarkened movement called the Black Panther Party. Calling herself Tarika, she tried to lure Endarkened workers away with her lies disguised as goodwill programs and safety measures, but we were eventually able to erase her efforts from the historical records.⁷ The youngest one I remember was eleven-year-old Jane 191350, who attempted to speak out against gun violence. She was... compelling, amassing a lot of attention. In fact, people started using her altered name, Naomi. So, we created a media intervention that focused on her age as the reason why she could never speak about such things. What do children know anyway?”⁸

She paused as she let her words sink in, and she waited for a reaction. I gave her nothing. I just looked at her and waited. Still, my mind was racing. I didn’t know why she was telling me this information. Yes, I knew there were more leaders throughout the country. Harriet couldn’t do everything on her own. I also knew that our division was responsible for hiding the truth. Her speech, however, let me know how little I knew about my own history, how much knowledge the Altered Truth division and GC had hidden from the Endarkened. The King James version of history leaves out Endarkened protests. I’ve heard of several rebellions through whispers, but if someone doesn’t know where to find the hidden information, they’ll think we were all docile and waiting for equality to miraculously happen. The King James version also erases any mention of Endarkened people dreaming, unless it is talking about events before the dream extractions came

to be. It never discusses why there are so many books in the restricted section of the library. So much of our history is edited out of our books.

“I tell you this information for two reasons,” she continued. “First, I need you to know that the Altered Truth division is one of the best. I have no doubt that I have shared information that you were unaware of. Your ignorance is a result of our alterations and our well-constructed schooling system. If you cross us, your existence can be erased just as easily as we have erased the efforts of so many others. Second, I need you to understand the burden of dreaming when no good can come of it. If you have read any available fiction about the future, you will see that Endarkened people are not present. There is a reason for this: the future belongs to the Dreamers. Your job is to minimize yourself and become part of our dream. If you refuse, you are more than welcome to go to the Change Room. I’m sure you’ll agree once they’re through with you.”

She smiled wide, a menacing grin that shows a set of yellowing teeth. I shuddered. The director didn’t know about my book or my journal, but I could tell she suspected that I’m up to something even if that truth contradicted her belief that we are incapable of sustained thought. Why else would she issue this threat? They already send Endarkened people to the Change Room for disobedience. It’s mostly used for extreme cases, but it’s a consistent threat that hangs over my head. I’ve never been there, but I’ve heard stories. I hear that they torture us into confession, using inhumane tactics that used to be outlawed in the United States. Once we give them the information they seek, they continue to torture and maim until they have broken us. Once broken, they provide the serum that alters the chemicals in our brains. We become automatons, completely different beings who only wish to serve GC. We lose all sense of identity. I don’t wish to learn if those rumors are true.

The director turned to leave her office without saying another word to me. I guessed she was done with her speech, believing me to be effectively cowed. Then, she turned back around and looked at me. “I do hope that you consider our conversation as you begin this mission. You are one of the good ones, one of the best Endarkened workers we’ve had in a while. I would hate to lose such productivity over something so... trivial. Still, I think it would be best to have you undergo a bit of reprogramming before you go. I’ll fill out the paperwork today, and you are to report to the hospital for an updated dream extraction surgery in the morning. How long has it been since your last update?”

“It’s been five years,” I replied, “Right after my release from SecondHOME.”

“Yes. I think it would be best if you were to have it done before you go. It hasn’t been too long, but your eyes are looking a little less blue these days. We wouldn’t want the serum to wear off when you’re in the middle of such an important task.”

With that, she turned to leave, heels clicking across the floor as she walked down the hallway. I was expecting this, but I also know how the surgeries make me feel. I lose my drive, my will to think about the future or to imagine something better. I lose my desire to accomplish goals for myself. Even with the surgery looming over me, though, all I could think about was my eyes. I haven’t looked at myself in the mirror in days. There was no need to. They always tell us that the bluer the eyes, the more successful the programming. The last time I checked, my eyes were still an electric shade of blue. But, if the director says that my eyes were losing their sharp hue, then that meant the effects of the dream extraction were wearing off. As I walked out of the director’s office, I wondered if the book or my writing caused this change. I wonder when the change began. I wonder how the change can be sustained.

August 20, 2085

I had the dream extraction surgery more than a week ago, and I'm still a little woozy from the side effects. I've only had the surgery twice – once before birth and once at my graduation from SecondHOME. I don't remember how I felt the first time, of course, but I do know how I felt the second time, and I definitely know how I feel now. It's a feeling of emptiness, an impression that my imagination is being blocked by some unknown, outside force. It's there, but I can't access it. It's been sealed within some impenetrable stronghold, and a haze comes over my mind each time I try to break through the fortress. Eventually, I just stopped trying, accepting that my imagination will be irrevocably detained by GC's procedure.

I'm not exactly sure how it works, but I know a little bit about it. I know they inject something into the thalamus, amygdala, and hippocampus sections of the brain because they control human memories. I know that it's an injection and not a removal because taking out parts of the brain would result in fewer workers, and that would not serve their purposes. I'm also pretty sure they target certain areas because I still remembered everything I learned at FirstHOME, at SecondHOME, and at the Altered Truth Division.

After my surgery, I spent the first few days in the testing area. I was hooked up to multiple machines as they monitored my brain activity. Before they release us, they make sure the surgery is successful, and they observe us for several days to make sure we don't dream or daydream. Once they are satisfied with the results, we are allowed to go home. I progressed through their tests quickly, and they sent me home on Wednesday, stating that I could go back to work on Friday if my dizziness subsides. The signed bill of health from GC Healthcare Center baffled me. They said I was fine, but I can feel that something is wrong. I felt devoid of something I couldn't name. I felt like a part of me was deleted.

It took a full week for me to remember my plan, and if it weren't for my journal, I'm not sure I would have ever remembered what I had set out to do before the surgery. When I was released from the hospital, I went home and walked around aimlessly. I knew there was something I needed to do, but I couldn't remember any task I'd been given other than the new spy assignment. I hadn't received my direct orders yet, so I couldn't figure out why I felt like I was supposed to be doing something. Whenever I feel lost, though, I busy myself with menial tasks – washing dishes, vacuuming the living room, making my bed, and doing laundry. It is my desire to remain active that helped me find Butler's book and my journal again, tucked away in the darkest recesses of my closet underneath a full laundry basket. I feel like I placed it there knowing this would happen, knowing I would want to remember everything I learned in the past several weeks.

Once found, I read Butler's novel for a third time, and I reread my journal entries, too. I read about using the novel as a map, connecting the fictional story to a possible realistic safe haven. I relearned the connections between the story, history, and my contemporary world. The combination of the book, my thoughts on the current world, and the historical record gave me a clearer vision as to where I wanted to go and how I planned to get there. Still, I wonder what would've happened to me and my plan if I didn't hide these items in a place that I would happen upon naturally. I wonder what could've happened if I lost my map to Acorn.⁹

August 22, 2085

I finally got my orders from Charles, and they basically say I'm supposed to come up with a plan for how to approach this situation. It took him over a week to think of his plan, and his plan is for me to make a plan and for him to take credit for whatever plan I create. Classic Charles. Part of me wants to live up to the director's expectations of me and fail to create a plan

because that would get both the director and Charles in trouble with GC. The other part of me knows that if I want to find Acorn, I need to create a plan that would allow me to find it with minimal oversight from the rest of the committee. I need to be strategic and use their ignorance to my advantage.

The plan I come up with is simple. I'll tell Charles that I need to go to Savannah alone because Endarkened people may be watching my movement at any moment and having Dreamer escorts might make them wary of my presence. I'll let him know that I need at least six months to gather information because I will need time to gain their trust. An Endarkened proverb is "all skinfolk aren't kinfolk," so I need to make sure that they believe I'm one of them, a deserter. Once there, I'll send communication to Charles once every two months. These messages will be coded to ensure that no suspicion arises. I will return at or before the end of the six-month period and give them all the information they'll need to find the deserters. I'll give them names and as many locations as I can find. This is what I tell Charles.

My real plan is also simple. I'll go to Savannah alone because I don't want GC or Altered Truth to know what I'm really up to. I can't have them following me around. It will be hard enough to get the Endarkened deserters to trust me. I think I'll need more than six months, but I know that Altered Truth will never allow this. They're already giving me more freedom than they normally would. Still, I'm hoping that six months will be enough time for me to learn how Harriet was able to consistently fight reprogramming. If I'm captured against my will, I'd like to know how to get my memories back. Six months is not enough time to learn everything, but I can learn what I can. My main goal will be to learn more about Earthseed, how it was created and how it thrives. I'd also like to learn more about these maps.

I'll send communication to Charles once every two months to make sure he doesn't come after me. These messages will be so convoluted that they'll make absolutely no sense. The good thing is that they will spend a lot of time deciphering them, not knowing that they won't get any pertinent information from it. I'm not sure if I will actually return once my timeframe has ended. If I stay, I can possibly be a member of Acorn until I die, learning and dreaming alongside others who have defeated GC socialization and dream injections. I could be happy there, living alongside those who have made it to freedom. If I come back, I can be like Harriet and Elonnie, helping others to find the maps they need to leave this place. Six months may not be enough time to learn everything I need to learn, but I'm sure it's enough time to make my decision. It's a tough one, and both have their benefits. Whatever I choose, I don't have to think about it right now.

Charles likes my plan. After I lay out the details, he takes my report to the director and claims my idea as his own like I knew he would. I don't care, though. I want him to think he's in charge so I can do what I need to do. I don't know what will happen on this journey, but I know that I must go. I know that I must find Acorn. I just hope that I'll be welcomed once I get there.

¹ Officer Betty Shelby, who murdered Terence Crutcher in 2016, was acquitted of all charges. In 2017, a district judge expunged her record, effectively sealing the court case (Hamlin, 2017).

² These are the last names of officers who have been charged in the murders of Black people. In most cases, the officers were acquitted of the crime (Crenshaw, Ritchie, Anspach, Gilmer, & Harris, 2015; Hafner 2018).

³ Collins (2000) discusses how Black women are often rendered invisible in various spaces.

⁴ The politics of respectability, coined by Evelyn Higginbotham (1993), is a specific form of resistance where some Black women believed it necessary to implement dominant values, ones that would allow them to avoid negativity from White people. However, Stafford (2015) noted that "the reason why being 'respectable' doesn't work is because no matter how respectable you may be acting, your performance isn't undoing the very real systematic ways in which our world operates."

⁵ Award-winning Black female authors like Octavia Butler, Toni Morrison, and Alice Walker "use[d] their knowledge production to reshape the Black body... in social discourse and to create new ideological and social terrain in which Black bodies (and the Black people inhabiting them) could safely exist" (Cooper, 2017, unpagged). They used their political, social, and economic experiences to create literature that enabled them to inscribe themselves as subjects, rather than objects, naming themselves in a world determined to confine them to a "fungible existence" (Cherry-McFaniel, 2017, p. 42; Smith, 1978).

⁶ Claudette Colvin was the first Black girl to challenge bus segregation in 1955, but her role in the Civil Rights movement was obscured, at the time, to make way for Rosa Parks (Adler, 2009)

⁷ Tarika Lewis, a sixteen-year-old high school student, became the first young woman to gain entrance into the Black Panther Party in 1967, but her contributions to the movement went unnoticed for years, as many historical documents about the party focus on Black men (Robertson, 2016).

⁸ Eleven-year-old Naomi Wadler provoked a strong reaction from listeners when she spoke out against gun violence at the March for Our Lives rally. However, although many people lauded her commentary and stance on gun control, others mocked her, stating that a fifth-grade student could never fully understand the intricacies of government or citizen's rights.

⁹ Christopher Myers (2014) acknowledged that readers often view books as maps as they search for their place in the world and make decisions about where they want to go. He notes that books carry cartographies that can show readers all the places they can go with no blind spots.

CHAPTER 6

Starting the Journey

August 27, 2085

I've never needed a car. It doesn't make sense to have one or drive one when everything I need is in walking or biking distance. It also doesn't make sense to have one when I'm only allowed a 50-mile roaming radius from the Altered Truth Division. I get a higher wandering distance because of my job, but most Endarkened are only given 25 miles. It ensures that we will always be accessible to our host companies, and it makes us much easier to surveil. Because we're constantly and overly policed, most of us stay within 10 miles. We get less questions that way. We have a lesser chance of dying that way. Today, though, I'm headed to Savannah, over 300 miles from Altered Truth. This will be the farthest I've ever gone.

It took about six hours for the bus to get me close to Savannah. The bus could only take me to Pooler since Savannah is too dangerous for large vehicles.¹ The fire of 2063 destroyed over 500 buildings and over 300 residential homes, and the timeworn picturesque city has never recovered. Overtime, the debris combined with the air and made it hard for people to breathe. To make matters worse, parts of the destroyed buildings were always at risk of falling onto some unsuspecting traveler or vehicle. The 2063 blaze was the third worst fire in the history of Savannah.² The companies, deciding that it would cost too much to fix the damage, let the city burn. It had an unusually high Endarkened population, so I guess they figured it was a way to force the Endarkened into other areas that they controlled. Or, maybe they hoped Savannah would plunge into the ocean and the Endarkened residents would drown with it. It's still

standing, though. Its resilience seems saturated into the soil, as if the spirit of the former Gullah Geechee people holds the land together. The city refuses to give up on itself even though it is withered, beaten, burned, and forgotten, and if that isn't a metaphor for the Endarkened who flee to this place, I don't know what is.

I arrived in Pooler as scheduled, and I biked to Savannah. It took about an hour to get there, but what I found was disheartening. There were no trees, only blackened bark and rotted trunks to commemorate what was once lush foliage. The air was ashen, with tiny molecules of dust and debris blanketing the ground and sky. I knew the sun was out because it was bright and sunny in Pooler, but the golden sun that sat in the sky ten miles away didn't exist there. Nothing did. No animals scampered through that wasteland. No people walked about. It was forsaken and reeked of decay, a stale, stagnant smell. I breathed in and tasted the surrounding death, and my lungs choked as they struggled to find clean air. I picked up some dirt, and it crumbled immediately, all nutrients that once saturated the rich soil were gone. I looked around and the once beautiful city was no more.³⁴

I couldn't fathom how GC chased an Endarkened person all the way here and lost them at the shore. I know the enforcers are brainless, but there's literally nowhere for an Endarkened deserter to go. There are tons of dilapidated buildings, but I could see no place where an Endarkened enclave could be hidden. Even without adequate shelter, the air quality and lack of acceptable food sources ensures that no human could survive long. If an Endarkened escaped to this place, they would die. In fact, I'm not sure how anything could survive.

I don't know what I expected to find when I got here, but I hoped it would be easier than this. Lauren and her crew had their trials in Butler's book, but it seemed to end when they got to Acorn. Technically, the book ended, but I imagine that all was well after that. I wanted to come

here and find an Endarkened stronghold that would be located in a place surrounded by lush trees, sunlight, and warmth, just like Acorn. I hoped I would be welcomed by an Endarkened rebel leader who would help me to leave GC's world behind forever. I knew it was farfetched, but I hoped that maybe the original Lauren was there, waiting for new people to show up. Sadly, I saw that warmth didn't exist there, and no one came to welcome me. Maybe I was wrong, and maybe I read Butler's novel incorrectly. Maybe there is no space of safety tucked away in this forgotten place, and my ideas were just too implausible. Maybe I don't fit the criteria that they're looking for, so they are waiting for me to leave the area before coming out of hiding. I sat in the dirt with my head in my hands, trying to decide what would be my next move. I didn't know what I was going to do.

September 3, 2085

I go back to Savannah each day, and I return to Pooler empty handed each night. Like I said, the book ended once they found Acorn, so I'm not sure what I'm supposed to do now. The first few days, I walked and explored the area, never staying past dusk. I realized how much this felt like my life in the GA Annex, like my time working at Altered Truth. My work schedule consists of going to work in the morning and leaving a little after dusk. During the workday, I walk around conducting research on my assignments and writing Altered Truth media posts. Then, at the end of the day, I return to the safety of my home in the Altered Truth Endarkened dormitory, and I write or think about writing in my journal. We can't socialize with our neighbors, so I'm glad I picked up this writing thing. It's my way of combatting the loneliness.

Since I've been here, my days have been similar. The only change has been the time I've given myself to write. Increasing my writing time has allowed me to remain connected to my thoughts during this time of isolation. It's a part of me now. I realize, though, that I never bring

my journal with me when I go to Savannah. I leave this piece of myself in Pooler for fear that the soot in Savannah will cover the pages and hide my words behind the ashes. I'm writing to remember, to think things through, to create myself in a world that continually attempts to confine my creation to a small, rigid box.⁵ Within the lines of my journal, I have shaped and molded myself in ways that are untouched by GC and its methods of surveillance. My writing is my own. My pages share my story, my history, my hopes, and my fears. My narrative challenges the stock stories GC creates and the Altered Truth division maintains. I want to preserve it because maybe one day it can help another Jane find Savannah, or maybe it can tell her to avoid Savannah since I haven't found anything. If I bring it to Savannah, I risk losing these possibilities, so I leave it behind. No one from GC is with me anyway, so it's safe while I'm away.

I go back to Savannah each day, leaving a piece of my identity in a safe place, and when I return to Pooler empty handed each night, I know that my journal, my story is waiting for me. I like coming back to it because it houses all of my thoughts, feelings, and experiences. It reminds me that no matter what happens to me, I am somewhat kept alive through these words. If I bring it with me to Savannah, and something happens to me, no one would know I existed. No one besides GC even knows I'm here. My journal knows, though. It's the evidence that proves I am here, no matter what GC says.

September 17, 2085

It's been two weeks. I keep going back to Savannah looking for a safe haven, and I've found absolutely nothing. I've explored every ruined landmark, examined every old building, and traveled along the entire shoreline. Nothing. It's just me. The only good thing is that the air doesn't bother me anymore. I bought a mask in Pooler after my first week, and it's helped me to

stay in the area a bit longer than I had been. Eating is a struggle, but I can stand the air for a few minutes to eat a granola bar. Still, even though I've been staying longer and exploring more, I still have nothing to show for it. Every night, when I return to Pooler, I think about my day and try to figure out what I'm missing. Today, though, I had an idea.

I've been wondering if my continuous removal from the environment explains why I haven't seen anyone yet. Right now, I am both insider and outsider, known and unknown. But, if I keep leaving and refusing to stay in this space, how will they get to know me? How will I move my position from stranger to friend, from GC traitor to Endarkened deserter? I've thought this through for a few days, and I've decided to stay in Savannah, at least for a day or two. If I want to learn more about the Endarkened who live here, then I must stop running from them each night. I need to become a part of their story just the same as I want them to become a part of mine. I find a building that is shielded on three sides, although there is no ceiling. It should protect me from behind although I will have to remain alert to guard myself from the front. I don't think anyone or anything is out here, but I can't be too sure. I've never stayed in the area overnight.

In some ways, I feel like Lauren from Butler's story. When she is first ousted from her community, she finds a hollowed building that resembles the one I've found for myself. She was better prepared for danger than I am, though, for she had prepared for her exit long before she was forced to leave. She understood the precarity of safety even though many adults in her community tried to ignore the peril that lurked behind their feeble walls. She knew that a time would come when she and her family could no longer maintain the narrative of protection they had constructed, and she was ready for the change. I, on the other hand, made a choice to come here a little over a month ago, and I'm here with no preparation. Still, I also know the precarity

of safety that comes with being an Endarkened person in America, where Dreamers can move us out of our homes, refuse to acknowledge our citizenship, and kill us without repercussion. Our existence is precarious, held together by our resilience and the truths we tell ourselves in order to give us hope.

I'm too anxious to go to sleep, too scared of closing my eyes in a place that feels so ominous and unguarded. All my life, I've been caged. Growing up, we never leave the HOMEs, and we never have a chance to experience unguarded spaces because everything is regulated. The observers say there's no purpose for us beyond its walls, so they hold us hostage until our work contracts are signed and we become labor hostages. I think they don't want us believing there is more for us out there. Our only access to the outside world is through books, but even those focus contemporary happenings or historical events. We learn about Martin Luther King Jr. and his plight to help the Dreamers become better. We learn about the Fear Codes and what we should do to prolong our lives on the outside. We learn about the benevolent Dreamers who started the HOMEs and how their mission was to teach us grit, zest, and compliance to ensure a better future.

We go to SecondHOME at the age of fourteen, and we only leave to learn more about our future occupations. We rarely travel beyond school and work. When we do, it's only to show us jobs that we won't have. They want to make sure that we know there is a ceiling and only a select few push through the cracks. Once we're hired by a corporation, we live onsite. Those who do reach the other side often sit on the ledge with their feet dangling, as they are never fully able to stand on the side of privilege. They may have reached the other side of the wall, but they are still Endarkened. They and their future generations still have the ability to fall back down with the rest of us. Basically, from the time we are born until the time we die, we are guarded,

and our daily routine is controlled by our jobs or the enforcers. Those who wish to defy the norms are sent for reprogramming, tortured in the Change Room, or “accidentally” killed by the enforcers.

But now, I am unprotected. It is a freedom that has concerned me for the past few weeks because I’m not sure what to do with it. When the structures that raised you refuse to prepare you for a life beyond subservience, what can you do? How can you imagine something different when institutional powers collectively work to confine and destroy your dreams? What can I do to work against a country that has socialized me to become the person that I am in this moment? A cool breeze wafts through the cracks of my hovel as I ponder these questions. I don’t remember it being this cool in Pooler, but I was also in a much sturdier dwelling.

The building I’m in now obstructs most of the wind carried by the ocean breeze, but the openness of my sleeping quarters allows some small flurries of air to seep through. It isn’t cold, but it’s a climate that I’m not used to. There’s also a gentleness I don’t know what to do with, an unfamiliar placidness. The air brings a semblance of relief, as it collects the dust in the air and moves it away from me. I can see more clearly the beauty of Savannah’s history, lost beneath the ashes, but preserved in the waves and carried upon the air and in the heart of the place. I can feel the peacefulness of a city that has finally been left to thrive on its own. The ashes are the history of Endarkened enslavement and forced removal joined with the ugliness of corporate greed and governmental neglect, while the wind exemplifies how Endarkened people continue to push back as they reclaim their histories. The wind carries the past and present as it pushes toward the future. The wind ensures that this pallid land can hope for better. It seems like Savannah knows who it is, and knows where it comes from, but I don’t think I know myself in the same way.

I've loved the idea of dreaming my entire life. There was something freeing about envisioning a future wrought with undiscovered possibilities; understanding the universe beyond the immediate realm of my real-life experience; and imagining innovations that could impact how the current world shifts and changes. However, even though I loved the idea of it, I didn't talk about my love for it because, according to most of the people I knew, Endarkened people were never supposed to dream. Our ancestors had dreams once, but that was only because the Dreamers had not yet discovered how to free us of our supposed ailment. According to GC, dreaming wasn't meant for the Endarkened because it caused us to want for things we could never have. Dreamers "saved" us from our dreams by removing them before we could ever know what dreams were. That's why we are Endarkened. It's a term that not only describes the pigment of our skin, but it also describes our inability to dream. We are endarkened; our dreams are forever obscured.

Even though I know this, I still want to dream. I never consented to the procedure. I never gave GC the authority to wrest my dreams away from me. In fact, none of the Endarkened women who were forced to be test subjects for Dreamer experiments consented to the extractions. Once GC perfected their technique, though, there was nothing we could do. They were in power and signed the laws that stripped our rights from us... the little rights we had anyway. So many Endarkened children accepted our inability to dream because we were never given access to the mechanics of dreaming. We were never taught what it looked, felt, or sounded like to dream. We were stripped from our parents, so they couldn't pass down their methods. Even if it we did happen to dream, we couldn't be sure. We were never given books about dreaming that were written by Endarkened authors. The books that we did see were always written by and about Dreamers.⁶

We were bombarded with visuals of Dreamers who were consistently imagining, and our only role in the dreamscape was to exist as the monster, as the hunted, as the Other.⁷ I didn't like being the evil one, the antagonist, or the monster, so I always thought that was why they saved us from our dreams. They knew that we would dream ourselves monstrous. Still, I had to ask myself: how could they know that dreaming wasn't for the Endarkened when the Endarkened weren't ever allowed to write these stories and Endarkened people weren't included in the stories that did exist? Instead of attempting to answer this question, however, I kept my preferences to myself. I didn't want to be reprogrammed after all.

As an adult, I wonder how my childhood could've been different if I knew Butler existed. I wonder what dreams I may have had, and I wonder what stories that my Endarkened community and I could tell. I wonder what those stories would allow us to do. In fact, if Black girls had access to Butler's writing, I wonder how Endarkened girls like me might have used Butler's style of writing to talk about their experiences, mirroring the ways in which she infused her story with historical and contemporary occurrences to create her vision of the future. I wonder how they might discuss, critique, or subvert some of the things that have happened in America. I wonder what experiences they would highlight, and what barriers they might they emphasize. I wonder myself to sleep.⁸

September 18, 2085

When I woke up, there were two questions written in the ash on the wall next to me:

WHO ARE YOU?

WHAT IS YOUR PURPOSE?

I looked around trying to figure out how and when someone was able to write a note. I'm not a heavy sleeper, so I thought I would be able to hear someone coming with so much debris

lying around. Additionally, with the ash continuously swirling in the air, the note must have been written recently. No matter how it got there, I'm not exactly sure how to respond. I don't have enough space to explain my life story on this wall, and I'm afraid that anything I do write will just be covered by the ash that is still swirling in the air. I'm also not sure how to explain my reason for coming here. I know I want to find Acorn and be a part of Earthseed, but I don't know if the person who left this note has read Octavia Butler's work. If they haven't, then how will they know what I mean?

Also, the blueness of my eyes proves that I am an Endarkened who's had a dream extraction recently. How will I be able to explain that I'm working for GC as a way to work for myself? How will they know that I'm not a spy who is attempting to infiltrate their ranks and turn them all in so that they, too, can be reprogrammed? Moreover, I don't even know how best to answer these questions. Do I say that my name is Jane-9675214, and that I have worked for GC for the past several years? Who am I outside of GC? Do they care? Even if they did, could I answer that question right now? I've never thought about who I am beyond being Jane-9675214, beyond being an Altered Truth worker, beyond being an Endarkened.

Here's what I know: If I had the chance to pick my own name, I'd choose Lauren. I don't know many other names, but I think that Lauren is a name I can live up to. In the story, Lauren was a survivor, someone who knew that fighting for existence in her world meant finding community and working together with that community for the betterment of herself and her friends. I think I could do that. I think I could be someone who works with others and builds up the community in an effort to not only survive, but to find a space to thrive. In fact, I think that will be my new name. I will be Lauren Jane. I know it's weird, but it feels like a power move to take the name GC gave me and move it to secondary status.⁹ Jane is who I've always been, the

name GC gave to me, but I have the power to reclaim my name, pushing it to the back, but never forgetting my history, no matter how harsh. Maybe I'll drop it at some point, but I want it to stay for now.

I also know that I'm a writer, maybe even a storyteller. I wasn't before, but now that I've been writing in this journal, I see how much I enjoy this. I like telling my story, and even though I don't think anyone will ever read this, I still appreciate the process of putting my pen to paper and writing about what is happening in my everyday life. I wrote a lot before starting my journal entries, but it was never writing for me. I wrote because the observers in FirstHOME and SecondHOME said that I had to write well in order to be classified as a top-level Endarkened student. I wrote because the Altered Truth Division said that I needed to write the truth in order to keep my job. I wrote because GC told me that if I didn't comply, I could be sent to another corporate state. Within the pages of this journal, I write for myself. I write because it brings me joy. I write because I choose to write. There's a difference in forced writing and writing by choice.

I want to be a *dreamer*. I don't mean that I want to take the position of the Dreamers and resituate myself as an authoritarian being in this world. I mean that I want to actually dream, to see what it's like to harness the dreamscape as a way to imagine something different for me and my community. I want to be able to see darkness when I close my eyes, rather than the whiteness I currently see. I want to know what it feels like to be an Endarkened *dreamer*, someone who can use their imagination to put Endarkened bodies into dream spaces. I want to know what it feels like to see myself in spaces that move beyond this reality.

So, I'm Lauren Jane. I'm a writer and a person who wants to be a dreamer. I don't know much else, but I know these things to be true. I look at the ash-covered wall. The two messages

are now hidden beneath a fresh layer of soot, so I begin to write my answer: *I am Lauren Jane, a writer and a want-to-be dreamer. I wish to find Acorn, my homeplace. I wish to find Earthseed, my community.* I don't know if this message will last until my message writer returns, but I hope it does. If it doesn't, I decide to do the one thing that I've been scared of doing since I got here. I leave my journal out in the open on top of a pile of rubble. I don't know if they'll read it, but I figure that reading my writing is the best way to answer their questions. I stare at my heart laid bare on top of the wreckage, and I drift off to sleep.

September 19, 2085 (Morning)

When I wake up the next morning, four sets of brown eyes are staring down at me.

¹ During my study, I stayed in Pooler, GA hotels because they were less expensive than hotels in Savannah. I went home to Atlanta in between my site visits.

² Savannah's first great fire occurred in 1796, destroying 229 buildings, and the second great fire occurred in 1820, destroying 463 buildings. The date, 2063, is chosen to represent the reintegration of Savannah's fire department that happened after the NAACP and the city reached an agreement for the fire department to hire six Black firefighters in 1963 (Savannah Fire Rescue).

³ The girls who participated in the study had different ideas about Savannah. Talyn said that it was the most haunted city in America, but it was also a very important place because of its historical value to Georgia. Terrah stated that it was an old pretty city. Victoria said that it was a place of violence because many people had gotten shot or hurt. The ash and eerie quiet is meant to provide a haunting feeling; the lack of care for a burning city represents violence and people hurting; and the description of the buildings is meant to represent a once beautiful and historic city.

⁴ During the workshop, we engaged in a descriptive writing activity where we described a place we imagined. This paragraph is what I wrote during that activity, and I shared it with the girls.

⁵ Octavia Butler is quoted saying "Every story I create, creates me. I write to create myself" (Croucher, 2018).

⁶ The Cooperative Children's Book Center (2020) housed in the school of education at the University of Wisconsin-Madison provides data on books by and about people of color and from First/Native Nations published for children and teens. Additionally, Huyck and Dahlen (2019) provide an infographic that shows there were more white children and animals featured in children's literature than the combined representation of children of color. Additionally, the Cooperative Children's Book Center (2020)

⁷ Thomas (2019) noted that "in the Anglo-American fantastic tradition, the Dark Other is the spectacle, the monstrous Thing that is the root cause of hesitation, ambivalence, and the uncanny" (p. 23). s

⁸ My principal research question for this study was: How might Black girls use written and oral storytelling to discuss, critique, and subvert experiences with social in/justice? I also offered the following additional research questions to guide this study: What social in/justice experiences might Black girls highlight in their oral histories and in their short Afrofuturist stories? What barriers to social justice might Black girls emphasize in their oral histories and in their Afrofuturist short stories?

⁹ Reappropriation is the ability to take possession of terms used by dominant groups to reinforce another group's lesser status. In an interview with the Guardian, Thorne notes that "Reappropriation of ethnic and sexual slurs starts as an act of bravado by a few of the oppressed, then may become an empowering mechanism for a much wider community" (Nunn, 2015, par. 6). Jane is not a slur, of course, but in this society, it is pejorative because of the way that it attempts to erase a person's identity, in the way that it presents Endarkened bodies as monolithic.

CHAPTER 7

The Othermothers

September 19, 2085 (Afternoon)

The brown eyes belonged to four of the most beautiful Endarkened women I have ever seen. Their skin is a patchwork of darkness – carob, umber, cedar, copper, obsidian, bronze, hickory, tan, and wood all working together to decorate the skin that covers the length of their bodies. I have never seen such an array of brown within one body, but there it was standing in front of me. More importantly, though, I have never seen an Endarkened person with brown eyes. Every Endarkened person I know has blue eyes, and although the hues of our irises might be different shades, they are still blue. The women, however, have deep brown eyes that seem to pierce my soul each time I looked too closely. And yet, I continued to stare. How did they acquire eyes like that? What did it mean that their eyes were brown?

I opened my mouth and attempted to speak, but the eldest of them spoke before I could muster a sound. “Wait,” she said, her voice a deep, soulful tone that commanded respect. I listened, closing my mouth tightly to make sure that I heeded her words. I respected her and her authority even though I had no idea who she was or where she came from. Another woman picked up my journal and showed it to the elder. I sat and watched as she flips through the pages, reading excerpts and then staring at me. She had no expression on her face, a countenance of indifference, and I didn’t know what to make of it. Once she finished flipping the first time, she started over again. This time, though, she shared certain pages with the other three women. I

have no idea which passages they were reading, but I do know they all kept reading and then looking at me afterward. I was being judged.

“Who wrote this?” one of the younger women finally addressed me after at least an hour of agonizing silence.

“I did. I was told to find the Butler, and then I didn’t know what that meant, and then I went to the library to find out, and then I stole a book, and then....

“Hush,” the elder interrupted. “We see your journey through the pages of this book. Who has seen this? And, which term aligns with who you are?”

“Term?” I asked.

“By terms, I mean your familial terms. I know that GC does not allow variation outside of the binary, but we would like to acknowledge who you are. Most of the people we help go by sib, sister, or brother, but there are other terms that people choose. Do you identify with sister, brother, or sib? Or, is there another term that works best for you?”¹

“Sister... I think. And...only I have seen the book... and now the four of you. I’ve kept it hidden ever since I started writing.”

“Follow us,” another younger woman said.

They all turned around and started walking toward the old Midtown section of Savannah.

September 19, 2085 (Afternoon)

We walked for about an hour in absolute silence. I’m used to silence because I live on my own and never have people to talk to, but I had so many questions. I decided to break the silence with the most pressing question I had. Using the most bashful voice I have ever heard come out of my mouth, I said, “Um...excuse me, but who are you?” The elder continued walking, but she answered my question.

“I am Layli Jane Walker, founder of the Savannah Harbor. My accomplices are Venus Jill Collins, Gholdy Jill Winn, and Ebony Jane Womack.² These are our chosen names, and we have elected to keep our Endarkened names as a reminder of who we work to protect. We are known as the Othermothers because we are the leaders of the Harbor.³ As you probably know, Endarkened children are taken from their mothers upon their birth, so many of the residents don’t know where they come from. We step in and take on that role, as do so many others. Of course, we also have wide networks across the country, so we have been able to reunite families even after GC and their ilk have tried to keep them apart. It’s difficult, but it can be done. Does this answer your question?”

My mouth hung open as I processed this information. Somehow, though, I found a way to respond. “Yes,” I stammered. Like me, these women had chosen to keep their Endarkened names even if they kept their names for different reasons. I wonder why they chose those names, though. I wonder if there were books with characters named Layli, Walker, Venus, Collins, Gholdy, Winn, Ebony, and Womack. I wonder if they were writing to help others find Earthseed and Acorn and that’s why these women, the Othermothers, chose to keep those names as their own. I wonder if the Harbor is their name for Acorn. I guess that does kind of sound better, especially since it’s located in Savannah near the ocean.

I also wonder how vast their networks are. GC keeps children locked away from their parents and siblings. There is no easily accessible familial database to keep track of one’s family tree. I know GC must have one because they want to ensure the production of certain types of Endarkened people, but I have no clue where it would be. Plus, how could the Othermothers have access to it? Still, I had to give them credit for being able to operate even in the face of all of these obstacles. Somehow, they were reconnecting families, creating spaces of safety, and

rescuing people like me. My curiosity got to me, and I asked another question. “Um... sorry to bother you again...but... um... can you tell me about this place we are walking to?” I wanted to assure them that my words are not normally this clumsy, but I chose silence and waited for their response.

“We’re going to the Harbor,” the one named Venus stated. “It’s a secret space that we’ve cultivated to provide a safe place for Endarkened people to solve problems that affect us and to affirm our identities as Endarkened people.⁴ In many ways, it’s a site of resistance where we can engage in conversations and actions that are banned by GC and their minions. In fact, this resistance is more meaningful because we’re often hiding in plain sight. They know we’re here in Savannah, and they can do nothing about it. Within our Harbor, we plot, scheme, and plan, and we do it without GC’s gaze. All the while, though, we’re watching them.⁵ It’s kind of like, we’ve found a way to maintain, rescript, and reauthorize Endarkened values even when GC and the enforcers attempt to silence us every time we venture outside of our stronghold.⁶ What’s funny is that once we’ve learned to better understand our history and our current place in society, we are better situated to enact change for the future. All of their little tricks and attempts to divide us cannot deter us when we have built such a strong, albeit hidden community.”

“Exactly,” Gholdy said. “We work as a community, doing different jobs to help us move forward. You’ve probably noticed that more and more Endarkened people have gone missing recently. You may have also noticed that more and more Endarkened are fighting against the dream extractions. We help with that. It just takes time. My job in all this is to work with the Endarkened children. I try to help them to see how Endarkened people, specifically Endarkened women, have historically engaged in reading and writing to record and make sense of their

lives.⁷ I try to help them engage in reading and writing in an effort to seek justice in this world.⁸ It's kind of like what you're doing in that journal of yours."

"Since we're talking about our jobs now, I work with dreams," Ebony said proudly.

"Most of the people who come to us have never dreamed before, so it's my job to teach them how to access them. The dream extraction definitely does a number on the brain, and the lack of dream examples y'all get as you grow up makes it harder the older people are, but I can usually get them to find their dreams. You're older, so I have a feeling that it's going to take you a little longer, but then again, you did read Butler, and if you were able to read her work and make it here, you might not have as hard a time with it. I think it's easier to help children dream, though, because they are able to access their dreams more easily. The barrier isn't as hardened, so I often tend to work with younger folks. I guess my question would be, are you brave enough to imagine? Like, are you willing to do the hard work of sculpting a new reality from your dreams?" Ebony looked at me questioningly, waiting for me to say something.⁹

"Yes?" I didn't sound confident, but how could I be? I didn't know if I was brave enough to imagine. I've never done it before. Plus, the way she said it made me feel like it was a difficult process, and I just didn't know if I'd be able to accomplish what she was asking, especially since I'm a late blooming dreamer. It seems as though it's easier for young people to imagine in the way Ebony described. Maybe it's because they haven't completed their training in FirstHOME, and maybe it's because they haven't been socialized into GC's ideals for as long as adults had. I don't know. Gholdy's words put me at ease, though, because she helped me see that I'm at least doing something that people do in the Harbor. I don't know if they are writing in journals, or if they are writing books or something, but at least I know they are writing about themselves. I'm pretty sure that I can continue to do that.

As I considered their words and how they acted toward one another, I noticed that Layli and Venus seemed to be the leaders of the group. Gholdy and Ebony seemed to hold a special form of reverence for the other two that I could see in the way they followed the other women. They didn't follow in the same way that the Endarkened follow GC's leaders. We're forced to comply for fear that we will be reprogrammed or tortured into submission. These women, on the other hand, followed because they wanted to. They saw the brilliance in their leadership and chose to use and honor their teachings.

As we continued walking, I noticed something I should have observed the moment I saw them staring at me: the Othermothers were not wearing masks. They were breathing in this ashen air as if nothing was wrong with it. However, when I walked around Savannah without my mask, I consistently choked. Why was their breathing so effortless? I had to ask another question. "I know I've been asking a lot of questions, but I am really curious about something. How are y'all able to breathe with so much ash in the air?"

Layli chuckled a bit and stopped walking. "That is what your senses tell you?"

"Yes," I replied sheepishly, feeling as though I asked a stupid question.

"I was wondering what this place would feel like to you. It's always interesting to know people's perceptions of Savannah," Layli said. "I think I can best explain it to you by first saying that we have designed this place in a particular way to ensure that those who mean us harm will always struggle to see. By altering what they see, we remain the unseen. We can see them because our eyes are not clouded by the world. We exist in community with the world and see it as what it can be, what it wants to be, not what it is."

I know she meant for that statement to be helpful, but it wasn't. How do you design a place that makes sure to stop people from seeing what you don't want them to see? How do you

alter what someone sees? How do you see what a place can be when what is actually there is a ruined mess of a city? Moreover, why do I see, taste, and feel ash when they are walking around seeing the unseen with no masks on?

“We exist in a commonweal,” Layli continued, “a state of collective well-being that includes the Endarkened and all living kind, from humans to animals to plants to microorganisms. It even includes inanimate parts of the Earth, the myriad universes beyond the Earth, the spiritual worlds, and the transcendental realms. This principle of a commonweal binds us, as we have built relationships among Endarkened groups, between the Endarkened and the environment, and between the Endarkened and the spiritual and transcendental realms.”¹⁰ Because of this relationship, we are able to see things that those outside of the commonweal cannot. The Othermothers seek to heal the wounds that result from the imbalance, but because you have not yet learned to find the balance, you will not see the unseen.”

Although I feel as though Layli talks in riddles, I kind of understand her point. Somehow, the Othermothers have built a connection between themselves and the world around them. Because of this connection, they can see things that those without the connection won’t be able to see. I don’t have that connection, so I see the world as it is now, not what it can or wants to be. I kind of wonder if this is how I see other Endarkened people, too, since we exist as part of this commonweal thing. I wonder if having balance in the world helps people to see each other more clearly.

“So, this place is not filled with ash?” I asked.

“Yes and no,” Layli responded.

“It’s like this,” Ebony jumped in. “You have not yet learned to find the balance of the world, so you see a world imbalanced. GC has ensured that your world is dismal. It focuses on

building its wealth to the detriment of the environment. It refuses to acknowledge that there are spiritual and transcendental realms that exist alongside the real one. Its focus is on lifting up the Dreamers and keeping the Endarkened in a place of stagnancy. This throws off the balance.

Because you are socialized into GC's unbalanced system, you, too, are removed from the commonweal. Of course, you can work towards the commonweal, but you're still too tied to GC to really reach it. Some people come here from other company states and see different things, but it's always a dismal picture – ash, unending fires, never-ending darkness, shadow monsters. It's always interesting to know what others see since we don't have the same vision of the world."

I was right. I don't have the same connection with the world that they do. The good thing is that I can learn. I think what hurts most, though, is that the reason why I can't see the unseen is that GC's hold on me is still too strong. I thought that I was moving further away from them because I was reading and writing. I thought I was distancing myself because I had chosen to leave the Georgia Annex and find Acorn. I guess that's my fault for thinking that undoing all of GC's work would be a simple task. I know better than that. Reading one book and doing a little writing isn't enough to completely change my world view. Doing work for a few weeks isn't enough to help me see the world differently. It takes a lot of work to see the world as it wants to be seen.

We continued walking towards somewhere, and I was lost in my thoughts when we paused in front of a building. It was old and rundown, but it had a good frame even if parts of it were missing. I could see the inside from where we stood, and I noticed that there were numerous metal bookshelves leaning against the walls that were left. This was probably a library at some point, but GC let the books burn along with everything else. I wonder what the Othermothers saw. Maybe they saw the library as it wanted to be seen, as it could be seen in a

better world. Maybe they saw shelves of restricted books waiting to be borrowed by curious readers. Instead of asking questions, I sat still and waited for them to tell me what would happen next.

“We’re here,” Gholdy said.

“Where is here?” I asked.

“One of the tunnel entrances,” Ebony answered. “The Harbor is underground, and this entrance is the most accessible. There are a few other entrances – beneath an old eatery, underneath the Pirate’s House, below the First African Baptist Church, and even under Savannah’s former law school.¹¹ The tunnels go all around Savannah, so we’re able to move about pretty freely. The best thing is that the Dreamers don’t come down here because they believe the tunnels to be blocked off. Their books tell them that there’s nothing down here, and they believe it.”

Layli began walking toward one of the leaning bookshelves and pushed them aside. Apparently, they were much lighter than they looked, or Layli was much stronger than she appeared. Underneath the shelf was a hidden door, one that couldn’t be seen without knowing where to look. Venus, Gholdy, and Ebony each handed Layli a key, and she inserted and turned them one by one. Nothing happened until the last key was turned, but once the final key was rotated, a deep groaning sound erupted from beneath the floorboards, and the door creaked open. “After you,” Layli said. I cautiously looked into the dark hole, knowing that this choice would determine if I was brave enough to imagine. I could turn back, but my curiosity was pulling me forward. I found the ladder rungs and inched my way down into the darkness of the Harbor.

¹ Sib is short for sibling, a gender-neutral term to denote gender identity in this society.

² See Collins (2001); Evans-Winters (2019); Womack (2013); Muhammad (2012, 2015c, 2015d); Phillips (2006); Thomas (2019); Walker (1983); and Winn (2013, 2010a, 2015). These characters are major figures in the story as the scholars who share their names greatly influenced this study. Layli Jane Walker is present because she represents Womanism, a theory that undergirds this work. Venus Jill Collins represents Black Feminism, and although I have chosen Womanism as my guiding theory, I am still heavily influenced by Black Feminist scholarship. Gholdy Jill Winn represents Black women scholars whose work has centralized Black girls and writing. Their scholarship was essential for designing a study that centers Black girls writing speculative fiction. Ebony Jane Womack represents Black women scholars who focus upon the speculative, specifically centering their work around Black people and their consumption and production of speculative fiction. These scholars helped me to further conceptualize my definitions for the speculative genres.

³ Collins (2000) noted that Black women often identified as “community othermothers for all Black children,” where they treated “biologically unrelated children as if they were members of their own families” (p. 190)

⁴ Price-Dennis (2010) stated that during the antebellum period, hush harbors were places created by enslaved Africans in an effort to engage in literacy and religion-related work.

⁵ In Kynard’s (2010) study of an online hush harbor at the university level, she focused on the students’ ability to plot, scheme, and plan in ways that the university could never imagine. Those meetings were “hidden in plain sight” because the gatherings were unauthorized by the university, but still taking place within university spaces.

⁶ Ibid., p. 34.

⁷ Muhammad (2012) mentioned that “writing is a literacy practice that can assist black adolescent girls with making sense of their lives. It also has the potential to mediate tensions with selfhood and becomes an instrument for girls to record their experiences for themselves and others” (p. 205).

⁸ Winn (2013) argued for a restorative English education in which there is emphasis on a “pedagogy of possibilities that employs literature and writing to seek justice and restore (and, in some cases create) peace that reaches beyond the classroom walls (p. 127).

⁹ Imarisha (2015) stated that Octavia Butler handed down a responsibility to dream as ourselves. With this responsibility, Imarisha asked, “are we brave enough to imagine beyond the boundaries of “the real” and then do the hard work of sculpting reality from our dreams?” (loc. 167).

¹⁰ Layli Phillips (2006) discussed that womanism views the commonweal as the goal of social change. She stated that the commonweal includes humanity, the Earth, the Universe, as well as the spiritual and transcendental. She also argued that when the relationship between all aspects is balanced, a commonweal is reached.

¹¹ There are numerous tunnels beneath Savannah, but many of the tunnels are closed off. The tunnels cover a wide area underneath Savannah, although the reason behind the tunnels’ construction is unclear. Most rumors report of slave and liquor transport and the housing of dead bodies (Savannah Magazine, 2017).

CHAPTER 8

The Harbor

September 19, 2085 (Evening)

The main hub of the Harbor is the most beautiful place I've ever seen. Even though the tunnels are far underground, there was a brightness there, as electricity surged through the tunnel's veins to bring light to the body of the concealed Endarkened city. Endarkened people, most of them Black, roamed about the open space, gathering what they needed from vendor stands located around the hub. There were no sellers, though, just unattended shops where people seemed to just take what they needed. They didn't leave payment or anything, but I did see some people taking items from the shelves and then leaving different items in their place. It's a fascinating trade system that seems to be based on people refusing to hoard goods for themselves. They have chosen to share their resources instead.

The people were dressed in vibrant colors, with no color dominating any one item of clothing. They wear black and blue pants, multi-colored shirts and vests, mismatched shoes, piecemeal headwear, and rainbow-colored dresses. It seemed like everyone's clothing was made from a collection of various materials, as if they throw all of their old belongings together and make new clothing from it. Above ground, I couldn't see the Othermothers' clothes because they wore black and gray coverings which, I guess, was used to camouflage their presence. As they took off their outer layers, I noticed that they, too, had vivid colors infused into their clothing. From where I stood, I could see a hodgepodge of wool, leather, satin, cotton, lace, and tweed

working together to create their colorful wardrobe. Their clothing was as mixed as their skin tone.

As I looked around, I was fascinated by the various children playing along the corridor. One girl zoomed by in her wheelchair, followed by several kids running in the same direction to avoid being tagged by the Endarkened child running after them. Another child sat in the corner painting a scene of the hub, paying close attention to passersby as he attempted to include minute details of each person's facial features and clothing. Further down, I saw a young group of children standing on a platform talking to any person who stopped and listened. I couldn't hear everything they were saying, but they seemed to be attempting to persuade people to start an intergenerational debate team. I've never heard of such a partnership between Endarkened adults and children. It's all so fascinating.

As we walked through the center of the hub, I expected people to part ways, stepping aside to let the Othermothers through, but everyone just kept going about their day. Some nodded and waved hello, some walked right up to them and gave them hugs and high fives, and others just minded their business. I was confused by this. The Othermothers seemed to hold a place of prominence in this enclave, but there was no fanfare for their presence. It was as if they were one of the regular, everyday citizens of the Harbor. Even with their patchwork skin, they blended in with the masses of people.

"Why is everyone's clothing like that?" I asked.

"People from various places find their way to the Harbor" Layli said. "Some come from well-off states like you, and others come from states who refuse to acknowledge the basic humanity of Endarkened people. Those from higher-tracked states often come to us with clothes and shoes that fit, and they often come with multiple sets of clothing. Those from lower-tracked

states, however, sometimes come to us with adequate clothing, but they are more likely to need clothing that is better suited for them. We try to engage in a communitarian effort within the Harbor, so rather than forcing those who have the least to suffer because of where they have been forced to live and work, we throw all of our resources together and make clothing from all of our donations. It's a way for us to acknowledge each person's dignity, offer nurturing to every Endarkened who comes our way, promote amity between us, and foster positive group relations.¹ Plus, we all love a little vibrance, no?"

"Yes!" I realized that all I've been doing for the past few hours was saying yes and asking questions, so I continued. "I see that you all really work together here. The children over there are trying to make an intergenerational debate team, the people don't really look at you like you're royalty, and the apparent barter system suggests that you're all working toward the betterment of the group. I think that's great although GC would never allow such things."

Ebony looked like she was trying to stifle a laugh, but it didn't work. She laughed aloud, a boisterous, joyful song that emanated throughout the hub. "Royalty?" she said through a chortle. "Girl, we are nowhere near royalty. We work alongside each and every person here. Yes, we've been here the longest, so we have a certain skillset that we pass along to those who want to learn from us, but we don't create rigid lines about who is in or out, who holds knowledge and who doesn't, or who is to be uplifted and who isn't. In fact, some of the most important knowledge that is shared comes from grassroots organizers like those kids over there. We're not restrictive like that."²

Nonrestrictive? I've never heard of such a thing, but I guess they make it work here. GC is all lines, boxes, and compartments. You choose a side and you stick with that side. Your choice ensures that you are positioned as an insider or outsider. Ideology is a rigid thing, it helps

people to maintain homogenization and exude control over people, without it, wouldn't chaos ensue? What happens when people inevitably disagree because there is no ideology to hold them in place to what they should be agreeing or disagreeing with? What happens when people can't come to an agreement and begin fighting because each side believes themselves to be right? Without a prevailing ideology, how do we know who is right and who isn't?

"Don't hurt yourself, sister" Layli said soothingly after seeing the concerned expression on my face. "We talk to each other to both establish and negotiate our relationships, and because we choose to approach each person's thinking with care, our relationships can accommodate disagreement, conflict, and anger at the same time we accommodate agreement, affinity, and love.³ In this way, we harmonize our dissimilarities in ways that respect how people express themselves, and we synchronize our differences by acknowledging the numerous ways that people live rewarding and authentic lives.⁴ Essentially, to make a comparison, GC requires rigidity. They present Endarkened people with the ultimatum that they must either succumb to GC way of life or perish. Here, we live by acknowledging people's differences. We may not always agree on how things should be done, but we are always able to talk about why we think the way we do in hopes that we can see each other's point of view."

"I see," I responded noncommittally. I get what she was trying to say, but I didn't understand how they maintained a community when everyone was allowed to follow their own spiritual and individual ways of thinking. I knew I'd learn more, but the thinking behind this place was so different from the life that I've always known, and I wasn't sure if I'd fit in like I hoped I would. I wonder if I have the capacity to think without limitations after having GC's ideology force-fed to me for so many years. I think I want to try, but it's a scary thought to uproot everything you know and replace it with something so flexible.

As I continued thinking to myself, I mindlessly followed the Othermothers as they walked down a series of quiet hallways. The tunnels consisted of several long passageways, and I'm sure I'd get lost if left on my own. Eventually, they stopped in front of a door with the letters L.J. on it. It's weird because I didn't remember ever leaving the Othermothers, and I didn't remember them talking to anyone about me as we were walking through the hub. And yet, my chosen initials were carved into the door frame.

"Lauren, here is where you can sleep for the night. It's not much, but it's comfortable." Gholdy said. "Tomorrow, we can fill you in on how everything works, but for now, I think it's important that you rest. You've taken in a lot today, and you probably need some processing time. We do a lot of work here, but we also prioritize self-care. Right now, you look like you could use some of that. We'll be back for you in the morning." With that, the four women continued walking down the corridor, leaving me to my room.

Gholdy was right. I needed some time to think through everything I saw, heard, and experienced throughout the day, and I also needed some sleep. The Othermothers, the Hub, the Tunnels – it's a lot to process, and I'm pretty sure my brain is overloaded with new information. I am excited about this new knowledge, though. I wonder how they make this little society work and how many other societies exist across the country. I wonder why the Othermothers have patchwork skin, but the other Endarkened members of the Harbor seem to have one skin tone, like me. I wonder why GC is so scared of a place like this when it seems to be a space of Endarkened joy.

I walked into the room to see that the light was already on. I looked around and saw a desk with a chair, a full-size bed, a small chest, and a mirror. There was nothing decorating the walls, and the room stood in stark contrast from the vibrant colors of the Harbor's standard attire.

Interestingly, the room was about the same size as my room at Altered Truth, but for some reason it felt bigger. I couldn't quite put my finger on it, but something about this place was more freeing, and that liberating feeling made the room feel two sizes bigger than it actually was. I hopped on the bed, scanning the room for anything I missed when I first came in. When I found nothing, I lie down with my head in my hands, and as I looked up, I saw it, a quote etched into the ceiling right above my pillow:

All that you touch

You Change.

All that you Change

Changes you.

I read the quote several times, trying to figure out why someone decided to take the time to carve it up there. There were many quotes from Butler's book that I loved, but this one resonated with me most. I wonder if I've changed anyone. If I did, I wonder if I changed them for the better, or if I made them worse somehow. How have my actions and those changes to others changed me in the process? And, if I did change, how have those changes made me a better person?

September 20, 2085

In the morning, there were no brown eyes staring at me. I was all alone in this strange room, trying to figure out what I was supposed to do with my day. When the Othermothers left last night, they didn't say anything about what would happen this morning. Gholdy said that they'd be back for me, but she didn't say what time, or whether I should find something to eat before they get here, so I'm not sure if I should stay in the room, or if I should go and explore my surroundings. I made the quick decision to stay in the room because I remembered the intricacy of the long hallways. There was no use getting lost on my first day in the Harbor.

I stretched and got out of the comfortable bed, and I noticed that there was a plate of food sitting on the table. I must have been sleeping hard again because I didn't hear anyone go in or out of the room. Breakfast was a combination of fruit, vegetables, and toast. It was an odd breakfast, not something I would have put together for myself, but it would do. It was definitely better than the breakfast bars I had been eating ever since I decided to start staying in Savannah. Plus, I guess it was hard to have processed food options, like waffles and cereal bars when everything was underground, away from all of GC stores.

I finished my food and put on a pink, brown, and green Harbor dress I found in the trunk. I probably should have put my own clothing on because the dress was a little snug, but I wanted to blend in, and wearing my light blue GC-authorized uniform would ensure that I stood out. As soon as I was done tugging the dress down to my ankles, I heard a knock at the door. When I opened it, I saw Venus standing there, with a huge smile on her face. She seemed well rested and excited about the day ahead. It was weird because I didn't think I'd ever seen an Endarkened person smile so brightly, especially in the morning. It's hard to smile about a day you're not excited about.

"Good morning, sister" she said gleefully. "I do hope you slept well."

"I did. Thank you for asking." I replied.

"Wonderful. I'm glad that you're rested because we have a lot to do today. Right now, I am going to escort you to our fellowship hall. It's the place where we welcome all newcomers to the Harbor and explain how we operate. It is also the day that you can pick your classes if you choose to stay. Don't be alarmed, though. This is not like FirstHOME. We do not force you to stay with us, nor do we force you to take a specific set of classes. We do encourage it, though, because it helps the unlearning process go a bit more smoothly. There are five newcomers who

will be in attendance. You have all come from different places in GC, but I don't think that you know each other. They do a pretty good job of separating you once you get your job assignments, and the enforcers often stop any friendships since they don't want people working together against them. If you're ready, please follow me." She finished her statement and began walking in the opposite direction.

I followed her down several hallways, and I wondered how she remembered which way was which. It was a maze, and I had no idea how she was able to find her way around without a map. As we walked, I noticed several other doors with names on them. There must be thousands of people who live in this underground city, much more than what I saw in the hub the night before. I also saw businesses. I saw the clothing makers, cutting bits of fabric from worn clothing, dyeing faded materials, and sewing them together to make new clothing options. I saw a doctor's office with various nurses bustling around inside. I saw a daycare with kids of all ages running around joyfully as they play games with each other. Each business had an open door, where people could leave whenever they chose. No one seemed forced to work, but they were still working, and they seemed delighted to engage in their labor.

We finally got to a large, wooden double door with the words fellowship hall written in bold golden letters above the door frame. Inside, I saw Ebony, Layli, and Gholdy sitting at a round table at the front of the room. There were five other people already sitting there: an Endarkened girl no older than eight, two Endarkened men who look about thirty, an Endarkened woman who seems to be around Layli's age, and an Endarkened teenaged boy. There was such a variety of ages, and yet we all were sitting at the same round table, waiting to see who would speak first. The Othermothers looked thoughtful, while the rest of us looked anxious. If the others were given the same speech I was given before Venus escorted me to the hall, they had

reason to be nervous. Here, we would be asked to make several choices that would impact our futures.

After what seemed like hours, Gholdy spoke. “Welcome everyone. We’re so glad that you were able to find the Harbor even with GC’s constant surveillance. We know that many of you have had long journeys and that you went through much to get here. We acknowledge you and your hardship in this space. As you know, my name is Gholdy Jill Winn. My sisters are Layli Jane Walker, Venus Jill Collins, and Ebony Jane Womack. We are some of the Othermothers who take care of this place. There are more, but we take turns welcoming newcomers and teaching courses so that we all have time to rest. When we are well-rested, we’re better able to do our work. Anyway, today we are going to tell you a little bit of the history behind this place, and then we’re going to talk to you about unlearning and the method we use to help you unlearn. We will also talk about the classes we offer that can help you to not only unlearn, but to also learn to access the dreams that have been hidden from you. Any questions?”

Silence.

“Good!” Gholdy exclaimed. “Ebony works in dream reclamation, so she’s the best person to explain the maps. Ebony, are you ready?”

“Of course,” Ebony said. “I guess I’ll start by asking each of our new associates to go around the room, say their names and terms, and then state the title of the book that led them here. I’ve found that to be the easiest way to start the conversation.”

“I’m John-4758201. My term, I guess, would be sib. My partner, John-4792012 also uses sib. We found our way to this place using *Brown Girl in the Ring* after being told to find Hopkinson.”⁵ By the looks of it, the Johns had a hard journey. John-4792012 looked so weak and feeble that I wasn’t sure they could speak if they wanted to. John-4758201 didn’t look much

better, but at least they seemed a bit stronger and were willing to speak for them both. I wondered if they decided to leave because GC doesn't tolerate variation in terms. GC and the other companies require a she/her or he/him designation. They/them terms are not accepted.

The eight-year-old girl had a strong voice I wasn't expecting from someone so small. She stood up and looked around the room, focusing upon all of us as she spoke. "I'm Jane 8928394821. My observer told us to find double L to find our wonderland. I found L.L. and *A Blade So Black*, and then I came here.⁶ I use sister." She stood for a few more moments and then sat down. There was an air of strength in her that I don't have. I wonder how she got to that point. How is she so strong and still so young? Why can't I be more like her?

"John-090320938. Brother. *Tristan Strong Punches a Hole in the Sky*.⁷" The teenaged boy didn't seem too interested in the formalities, or maybe it was just that he didn't trust the Othermothers yet. Still, he was here just like the rest of us, and I guess he wouldn't be here if he didn't need to be. I wondered if he'd already been forced into SecondHOME. If so, I could see why he didn't trust the Othermothers since they could be considered the observers of the Harbor. Some of the HOME observers consistently discipline Endarkened children for being themselves. If he had chosen to laugh too loud, talk with his hands, or speak in a slang unknown to his educators, he could have gone through much hardship in GC's world. I hoped he hadn't had to experience that, though.

It was my turn. I chose not to stand like the other Jane because I was still trying to get a feel for this place and everyone in it. I began, "technically, I'm Jane 9675214, but I decided to change my name to Lauren Jane before I came here, so I guess that's my name now. I'm not sure if it will change more, but it works for now. I use sister, and I got here with help from *Parable of*

the Sower.⁸” When I was done, I saw that there was only one person left, the elder Endarkened woman.

“I am Jill 54321. I prefer the term, sib, and I was blessed enough to receive help from *Beloved*.⁹ I am pleased to meet you all.” Many Endarkened elders command respect in their presence and tone, and Jill is no different. Their voice was a deep tenor, but the smile they held as they spoke lightened their words. She held everyone’s gaze when she finished, as if to remind us of our manners. They were the only one to greet the group, and the look they gave each of us was a warning, prompting us to all say in unison, “please to meet you, too.”

“Thank you all.” Ebony said. “I don’t know if you noticed, but each one of you has a different book that led you to this place. That is purposeful because we have to use a multitude of books as maps to ensure that the Dreamers don’t catch on. Moreover, each of you has named a book that can fall within what some people call the speculative genres – science fiction, fantasy, magical realism, myth. I say some people because there are people who don’t see anything speculative or imaginary about what is in the pages of the books you read. Anyway, the writers of those books committed to engaging in an ongoing discussion with the past, present, and future by writing in ways that created maps for future generations.¹⁰ Their goal was to assist future generations in finding and identifying places where Endarkened people are thriving, making meaning, caring for each other, and negotiating their existence on their own terms.”¹¹

“More than likely, all of you were given hints at some point in your life to find these books,” Ebony continued. “Our people can’t tell you it’s a map, but the goal is that they are able provide enough hints to assist people in making the connection. The hope is that every Endarkened who can get one of these maps will one day figure out where to go. Of course, some people figure it out early, while others take a little longer. So many factors impact people’s

journeys, from the surveillance of the company state to intense feelings of fear. The good thing is that because so many different people come to us at different times, we are able to engage in intergenerational learning, and we are able to learn more and more about how GC operates in hopes to get more of us to safety.”

“Another major factor,” Layli chimed in, “is the dream extractions. We have not been able to figure out a way around those. The best way, it seems, is to read and view the works of others, but those are restricted. The surgery occurs at birth, and then the children are taken from their families and placed into a HOME. In this way, Endarkened children’s dreams are removed before they are born, and the parents have no time to pass down any knowledge to the child. Both parents then undergo another dream extraction to ensure that they lose the will to find the child. There’s no way for us to get to them in time.”

The room looked solemn. Even little Jane knew how Endarkened parents are treated. They give Endarkened children “the talk” when they’re five because they believe us to already be knowledgeable of adult topics and sex by that age.¹² The Harvesting normally occurs between the ages of twenty-five and thirty. Endarkened men and women are not allowed to have friendships, be in relationships, get married, live together, or even congregate in groups larger than three. We are consistently isolated. However, between the age of twenty-five and thirty, Endarkened people are allowed to find partners and have children if they choose, as long as it isn’t a same-sex couple. GC rejects the needs of same-sex couple and uses their laws to criminalize their love. Finding partners is not required, but if Endarkened people refuse, we lose our ability to have children later. GC doesn’t want children or pregnancy interrupting our ability to work, and they believe that our prime working talent begins at thirty.

Many Endarkened people refuse to have children because they know that the children are taken and the partners are separated as soon as the child is born, as the child and both parents are moved to different company states. This is what GC wants, though. The dream extractions and family separations began because the Endarkened outnumbered the Dreamers, and they got scared that we were going to treat them the same way that we had been treated for centuries. However, if Endarkened people aren't having children, the United States' population of Endarkened individuals might dwindle, possibly allowing Dreamers to outnumber us once again. So, although some people fight back by refusing to have children, others fight back by having them in hopes that the revolution will start with the next generation. The fact that little Jane is here suggests that it can happen, but I do think that we can't just leave it to the younger people. Adults have to do our part, too.

"The extractions definitely deter our efforts," Ebony said. "But, that's why one of my major goals within the Harbor is to talk about and help others to fix the imagination gap that is caused not only by the extractions, but also by the long stint in GC's HOME system.¹³ For those of you who have completed First and SecondHOME, you probably noticed a few things about your reading and media options. The books you read to find your way here are not on the shelves at the HOMEs. They also remove all speculative media content featuring Endarkened people from television, film, streaming services, and the internet. They've restricted your access to these stories, only allowing you to become acquainted with the legacies of Jim Crow and slavery, rather than allowing you to access lands of imagination.¹⁴ Even when they talk about these topics, they only talk about how we experience oppression, servitude, and hardship. They never talk about the rebellions, the movements for freedom and equal rights."

“If they granted more access to these texts, you would have access to the dreams and imaginations of our ancestors, and the goal is to rid us of dreams altogether. The goal is to break the ties that connect us to our history. That way, when you face the realities of GC’s oppressive world, you have no idea how to find your way out of it. You have no ideas how your ancestors found ways to fight back. You can only see yourself within the borders that GC and the other companies create for you.”

I took in this information slowly. I remember being a young Endarkened child in FirstHOME and wondering why we didn’t get to read stories that showed Endarkened people dreaming. When I was younger, I never asked why because I just assumed that they weren’t out there, that Endarkened people had never dreamed, so of course there wouldn’t be imaginative narratives written by or for us. But I learned later that it was orchestrated. GC knew we would try to change things for the better if we had access to stories that taught us to dream for more than we had. They knew we would rebel if they told us that Endarkened people have a history of fighting oppression. So, GC restricted our access to these books because they knew that reading them could help us to challenge GC’s oppressive institutions and find our way to a different life, a life of liberation. It makes sense why GC wouldn’t want us to dream, though, because the more we dream, the higher the chance they would lose their ability to control the global majority, and they definitely don’t want that.

I looked around and see the other new members mulling over what Ebony just explained. We all grew up in a system that tried to stifle our efforts to dream. Some of us had less time in the system than others, but we all knew what Ebony said was true. The issue was how to fix it. We’ve all had the dream extraction surgery, and some of us have had it more than others. Some of us have had a harder time fighting against it. I could tell because the shade of blue that colors

our eyes always shows who has gone through an extraction recently, and it also shows which Endarkened people have been most impacted by the surgery.

The older John had electric blue eyes like mine, so he must have had the surgery recently. Little Jane had powder blue eyes. Young John had a baby blue tint, Jill's eyes were periwinkle. It's interesting how that works. Those of us in our late 20s to early 40s always seem to have the bluest eyes. The younger children often vary between deep and pale blues, mainly because they haven't had the surgery since they were born. Our eye color also depends on the observers they have in FirstHOME and whether the observer chooses to rebel against GC and attempt to teach us how to dream. The older Endarkened members are often confined to a separate nursery section of FirstHOME, and GC doesn't bother them too much unless they make trouble like Harriet did. Maybe Jill's been out of GC's eyes for so long that she has been able to fight the extraction on her own.

"Basically, speculative stories are maps." Ebony said happily as she tried to cheer up everyone in the room. "They led you here to the Harbor, but there are many more spaces like this throughout the United States. We're located in California, Washington, Washington D.C., Oregon, North Carolina, New Jersey, Texas, Wisconsin, Tennessee, Nebraska, Missouri, Nevada, and Massachusetts. We even have one in Toronto.¹⁵ We can't house everyone in one place because we don't want GC to catch on, but we all work together to ensure that everyone across the network has what they need. Also, because we can't house everyone, each Harbor is cultivated to cater to a specific Endarkened group. The violence caused by GC necessitates spaces of individual and collective healing, so the goal of the Harbor network is to heal ourselves and then then work together toward collective freedom. During this process of healing, there are people like me who help Endarkened people learn to access their dreams."

That got everyone's attention. So often, we've heard about failed attempts to dream or about people who asked too many questions about dreaming and were given the long lecture about how the Dreamers saved us from dreaming in order to make sure that we didn't have to worry about such things. I've never met anyone who has succeeded. There are rumors, of course, of Endarkened people who successfully learned to dream, but they never got the chance to share their knowledge with anyone. As soon as a rumor began, the person attached to that rumor was removed from the rest of us, and we were told to shun the person for lying and bringing such dishonesty into our pleasant lives. Sometimes, I think the companies started the rumors, but there's no way to prove it.

"That leads us to the next part of this conversation: unlearning," Venus said. "We offer a plethora of ways to help you unlearn, but they all take the form of classes to make things easier. I know it sounds weird to unlearn by going to classes, but we promise that it will make sense later. You can unlearn in various ways based on your individual interests: dance, drama, poetry, prose, musical performance, musical production, architecture, etc. Each of these classes helps you to unlearn so that you can access your dream again."

"Your co-learners will guide you toward unlearning, toward dreaming, in a way that you decide best suits your needs. If you don't know what style of learning best fits you, or you have no idea what your interests are, you may try out several different unlearning classes until you find out what works best for you. If you select something and decide later that it no longer suits your needs, you may leave and select another. You can even go back to the first if you decide you've made a mistake. Essentially, our way of teaching revolves around your needs and interests, and we are more than happy to help you facilitate your learning."

“We teach using a concept called Afrofuturist thought,” Venus continued. “It’s an old form of knowledge that is based on the ways that Endarkened authors created speculative texts that centered Endarkened characters. These creators produced texts – books, songs, buildings, sculptures, poems – in an effort to reclaim and recover the past, counter negative and elevate positive realities that exist in the present, and create new possibilities for the future.¹⁶ In each of the classes, our goal is to use the medium you request to assist you in reclaiming and recovering aspects of the past that GC has stolen from you; countering the negative ideals GC has instituted and elevating the positive aspects of Endarkened existence that we are often told to ignore; and creating new possibilities for your own personal future as well as the futures of the Endarkened people. Once this occurs, you’ll be able to access your dreams again. The classes will also align with our way of life in the Harbor, but you’ll learn more about that once you’ve selected your class. So, does anyone have any idea which class they will select?”

I raised my hand. “Um. I’m sorry to bring this up, but you didn’t really tell us what classes we could choose from. You say books, and music, and architecture, but you don’t say how those are courses that we need to take. Can you tell us the names of things so we can select something? Also, what do you mean access our dreams again?”

“Oh! I should’ve explained a little better. First, your dreams are still there. They weren’t removed; you just don’t have access to them because GC’s procedure blocks them. It stops you from reaching the dreams you already have. Secondly, you create your courses, and we find someone to teach you. The courses are based on what you want to learn. We have loads of expertise in the Harbor. Sometimes, your interests will be narrow, and you will work with one person. Sometimes, you will have a shared interest, and you will work with multiple people. It all

just depends.” My head spun. At the HOMEs, we’re told what to study. We may have the chance to select between the minimal offerings they give, but we don’t get to select what interests us.

John 4758201 spoke up. “We would like to learn about Endarkened brothers and sibs who wrote poetry, and we would also like to learn more about how the tunnels were made.” Those interests seemed so specific to me, but Layli looked over to them and said, “that can be arranged.” She whispered to Venus who smiled. “Is there anyone else who would like to learn alongside John and John?” She waited for a moment, and Jane-8928394821 stands up. “Wonderful!” Venus exclaims. “Jane-8928394821, John-4758201 and John-4792012, please follow me, and I’ll introduce you to your co-learner, Samuel Jack Hunt.¹⁷”

When they left the room, I said, “I would like to know more about how the Harbor operates.” Layli looked over to Ebony and smiled. Ebony said, “Is there anyone else who would like to learn with sister Lauren?” No one stood and no one spoke up. “I understand. We all have varied interests. Well, Lauren, if that is what you’re interested in, then I will be your first co-learner! I can help you learn more about how we’ve used Afrofuturism to help us build this space. You’ll also be able to learn more from Gholdy and Layli since we have been here so long and understand the innerworkings of the Harbor. If you will follow me, we can find a space to learn together.”

I was expecting to be handed off to some other member of the Harbor since the Othermothers have so much to do, but I was excited to work with Gholdy, Ebony, and Layli. I wondered if I would get to work with Venus, too. That may be asking for too much, but each of the Othermothers seemed so aligned that I could see how someone would want to learn from each of them to see how they are similar and different in their thinking, especially since it’s a non-restrictive place and all. As I followed Ebony out the door, I wondered what I’d learn from

her, and I wondered what I could offer her as a co-learner. I had been doing a lot of wondering lately. Still, maybe this was what Butler was talking about when she wrote about change. I'd learn from Ebony and in the process, I'd change, but then, she may also change from learning with me. I have a feeling that I'll be grappling with the phrase for a long time.

Ebony and I walked together down a long hallway. I'm pretty sure this was a hallway that I hadn't been down before, but there was no way of knowing because everything looked the same. How the Othermothers navigated this labyrinth without so much as a second of hesitation was mind blowing. As we walked, I tried to take in my surroundings in hopes that I would soon be able to navigate this underground haven without getting lost. There were letters above the doors that were similar to those carved above my room. Some residents had chosen to use paint in the carvings in an effort to make their dwelling more visible in the monotony of similar entrances. Others added small embellishments to their doors or used cloth on the ground as a way to mimic a doormat. Still others carved their chosen family names into the door to signal that they were here to stay. The Fabians, The Fadleys, The Feagans, The Feists – they used the carvings to note that this small room was their home.

I guessed those were last names, the names of the families who lived in each dwelling. They had to be chosen names, though, because GC doesn't tell us what our last names are. Our last names are not important until we start working. At that time, we take on the name of the company we work for. It lets everyone know who we belong to. Here, they choose their own last names. They get to choose their family members, choose who they belong to. In some ways, it shows their individualism because I don't see two of the same last names carved above the doors, but it's also a way to form community because every person with that last name is now a part of their families.

In the Harbor, it seems as though individualism and community are equally prized. They understand that having individual characteristics makes the community stronger. This differs greatly from life in the realm of GC. For them, difference is a sign of chaos. They would rather create one, unified whole devoid of Others to ensure that they can maintain a semblance of balance. Of course, this balance only refers to the Endarkened. The problem for GC was that we Endarkened have too much difference amongst us which forced Dreamers to learn new terms, to honor our individual cultures, and to recognize that other people and cultures exist. It's silly to believe that everyone needs to be just like the Dreamers in order to access humanity, but that's what the leaders of GC believe, so that's how they run the country they paid for.

We stopped at a door with the word library carved above it, and Ebony turned to face me. "Before we go in here, I need to make sure you're ready. Within this room lies thousands of books and articles, all written by Black authors. It also holds other texts, like films, television shows, and architectural designs that were all created by Black artists. We've collected them over the years by stealing them from the libraries before they are taken to the incinerator. People like Elonnie, who you met at the library in the Georgia Annex, bind these books, pretend like they're going to incinerate them, and then give them to one of our operatives on the outside. Because media is completely digital, it's hard to gain access to them, but some of the libraries have the old copies of DVDs and VHS tapes. We don't get as many of those, but we have a few good ones. The wealth of unrestricted information held within this room makes it one of the best resources we have in the Harbor. Are you ready?"

I knew that she was being overly dramatic about the library, but I was intrigued. I wasn't used to being in a library that didn't have restrictions. I've never been in a library where all the books were written by Endarkened authors. GC would never allow that to happen. Instead of

being overzealous and pushing past her to run into this book paradise, I gave her a simple, “Yes. I’m ready.” With my confirmation, she opened the door, walked in, and stepped aside. My mouth immediately dropped open.

“This is our library. What do you think?” Ebony said.

I looked around the room, and it was much bigger than the room I slept in last night. In fact, it was bigger than the hub that we walked through when we first entered the Harbor. Books were housed in hundreds of bookshelves that lined the perimeter of the room from floor to ceiling. There had to have been at least one thousand books on each shelf, maybe more. I have no idea how they could have amassed so much right under GC’s nose, but they’ve done it. I didn’t know that Endarkened people had produced so much literature overtime. “It’s amazing. It’s... the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen.” I replied.

“Tomorrow, we will start our co-learning sessions. We’ll meet in here because it’ll be nice to connect the authors to their works. Rather than just telling you about them, I’ll bring the books out so that you have tangible evidence of its existence. Of course, I’m not saying that you’ll need it as proof, but these authors wrote these books in hopes that we would read them, so I want to make sure you have access to the books if reading them is what you want to do. Tonight, though, think of specific questions you have so we can use our time wisely. We want to make sure you get your specific questions answered.” With that, she walked to the door and left me in the library alone.

I left the library and walked toward the right, hoping I’d be able to find something familiar. I still hadn’t figured out how to navigate the Harbor. After about two hours of wandering around aimlessly, I started to look around for something or someone who would tell me where I was. There was no one in sight, so I looked at the door carvings once more. There

had to be something there, some clue to help me navigate the labyrinth. As I read the carvings - Larry, Landen, Lampley – I stopped in my tracks. How did I not see this before? Earlier, I remembered reading the names Fabian, Fadley, Feagan, and Feist. I didn't give them a second thought because I was so focused on being in this new space, admiring the massive hallways instead of trying to better understand my surroundings. Now that I thought about it, though, I realized that the halls were in alphabetical order!

Each carving above the doors located on this hall began with the letter L. That meant that my room, with L.J. carved above the door, was on the same hallway. I just needed to figure out which direction the letters were heading to find out where my room was. Based on the names I saw, I was moving towards the upper end of the L hall, so I was going the wrong way. I was pretty happy I caught it when I did, but I felt quite foolish for taking that long to catch on. I guess I do always miss the little things, though.

I also felt like it would have been nice for the Othermothers to explain the hallway system to me, but I guess it's important to ask the right questions in order to figure out what you need to know. The women may be amazing and knowledgeable, but they can't read my mind. I should probably think about what's important to ask before I meet with Ebony for my first unlearning session tomorrow.

¹ The concept of hospitality is integral to womanist methods of social transformation. Phillips (2006) stated that "hospitality is a practice that facilitates a positive encounter between people who are strangers or "other" to one another, setting the stage for possible friendship or collaboration" (p. xxviii).

² Ibid., p. xxv.

³ Phillips (2006) stated that "Womanism is not a rule-based system, and it does not need to resolve internal disagreement to function effectively. It is a nondisciplinary system; there are no "lines in the sand." Womanists rely on dialogue to establish and negotiate relationships; such relationships can accommodate disagreement, conflict, and anger simultaneously with agreement, affinity, and love" (xxv).

⁴ Ibid., p.xxv.

⁵ See Hopkinson (2001).

⁶ See McKinney (2018).

⁷ See Mbalia (2019).

⁸ See Butler (1993).

⁹ See Morrison (1987).

¹⁰ Butler (2018) stated that “Black Girl Cartography requires a commitment of engaging in an ongoing dialogue with past, present, and future Black girls and women, especially one’s self” and that “Black Girl cartographers’ writings emerge as testaments, letters, and entries to younger selves and future selves, to women and girls that we have grown with and some whom we may never meet” (p. 33). Because womanist practices begin with Black woman and girlhood and then branch out to include other oppressed people, I have included Mbalia’s work as a map, too.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 39.

¹² A study conducted by the Georgetown Law Center on Poverty and Inequality (Epstein, Blake, & Gonzalez, 2017) found that Black girls between the ages of 5 and 14 were perceived to be more independent, know more about adult topics and sex, and require less nurturing, protection, support, and comfort than White girls.

¹³ Thomas (2019) stated that the imagination gap is caused “in part by the lack of diversity in childhood and teen life depicted in books, television, and films” (p. 6). She also noted that the other part is caused by stereotypical representations of characters of color when they do appear in texts. The lack of diversity and the consistent stereotypical representations in youth media and literature confines the stories available to children of color, ultimately affecting their imaginations.

¹⁴ See Myers (2014).

¹⁵ In Jordan Peele’s *Us*, he begins the film by stating that there are thousands of miles of unused underground tunnels throughout the United States. He imagined the tunnels to be a place of experimentation in which copies of humans on the surface lived in contained facilities. In this imagining, the tunnels are used as a space of liberation for Endarkened people. Knibbs (2019) discusses the tunnel systems in an article on The Ringer.

¹⁶ After conducting a literature review on the ways in which Afrofuturism was constructed in both academic and public scholarship, this is the definition that I constructed for Afrofuturism. Afrofuturist thought is guided by the definition I constructed.

¹⁷ Samuel Delaney is a Black queer male author of science fiction. William Hunt is the author of a book, *Underground: A Human History of the Worlds Beneath Our Feet*.

CHAPTER 9

Speculative Maps

September 21, 2085

I walked down the hall toward the library to meet with Ebony at our scheduled time. I thought of several questions I wanted to ask her, specifically because she knows so much about this concept of Afrofuturism and the way the stories can be used as maps. I wanted to know more about what this concept was, how it came to be, and why that was the medium through which the maps were created. Knowing this information would help me better understand how I got here, but it could also help me understand why Lori Jackson used those names and why Harriet told me to find the Butler. There must be a history of stories like these which was why they are used to assist Endarkened people in finding the Harbor.

I walked in the library to see Ebony poring over a text, her red, medium-length hair hanging down over the book. I didn't know what she was reading, but she was so enamored with the book that she didn't realize I was in the room until I was right next to her. "Uhm... sorry to bother you, Ebony, but is this a good time to do the lessons? I can come back if it isn't." I knew she agreed to work with me, but I also saw that she was trying to learn more, too.

"Of course, sis! I was just catching up on some reading. New things are brought in every day, and I like to read as much as I can to ensure that when I teach newer residents like you, I have the latest information. Or, at least, I can point them in the right direction. You never know what people are going to ask about your areas of expertise, so I like to know a little of everything just in case. Plus, even though I use my knowledge to help other residents, gaining new

information is a fun pastime of mine. I find joy in gaining new knowledge... in reading the words of Endarkened people who were writing in the midst of GC's rule and before. There's so much here, and there's no way to get through everything, but I try because their words give me hope. So, have you thought of questions for me?"

"I have, actually. So, since you know so much about maps and Afrofuturist thought, I wanted to know a little more about that. I guess, a place to start would be to ask what Afrofuturism is. That would help me to better understand a little bit more about how people have found the Harbor overtime."

"Well, I guess the first thing I should say is that this Harbor is based on Afrofuturist thinking, but it's not the only way of thinking. Remember when we said we don't create rigid lines about who is in or out? Well, it works with the way we use Afrofuturism, too. People can choose to learn about dreaming through Afrofuturism, but they're not obligated to. Some people and Harbors use other speculative foundations, and some people choose to follow more realistic genres. We have those, too, if you're interested. Like I said. This library has a lot of information."

"Based on your question, though," Ebony continued, "I think I know someone who can help you better than I can. She's new, and she's only been here for four years or so, but I think she'll have some of the answers you're looking for. She's been really focused on this stuff since she arrived, and although I talk about it sometimes, I've been more focused on other areas. Wait here a minute." Ebony left the room, closing the library door behind her. She returned five minutes later.

“Lauren Jane, meet Erin.” Ebony said cheerfully. “I’m pretty sure she is the best person to learn with you today. She actually helped us to figure out ways to use Afrofuturism in the Harbor, and she’s well-versed in the speculative arts.”

“Hi Lauren Jane!” Erin said with a smile as she extends her arm for a handshake. “It’s great to meet you.”

“Um... hi.” I said, a little taken aback by her cheerful disposition. “Did Ebony tell you my question?”

“She sure did.” Erin replied. “I thought about how to answer it while we were walking down here. I wasn’t sure of the best way, and I’m not sure that there is a best way since there’s so much information, but I guess I’ll start with my story.”

“That sounds good to me.” I said. Ebony brings another chair to the table, and Erin sits down to join us.

“I first started reading short stories like “The Goophered Grapevine” and “The Comet” as well as novels like *Imperium in Imperio* and *Black No More* because I wanted to read some of the foundational speculative texts.” Erin began. “These narratives came out long ago, like almost two centuries ago, which helped me to see that Black authors have produced and published speculative fiction for more than a century.¹ But even though Black authors in the 1900s were writing and publishing speculative fiction, their work was not considered as necessary as Black realistic fiction authors.² Of course, this was before GC said that everything we published was off limits.”

“In the late twentieth century, more Black authors took up prominent roles as speculative fiction authors, but not many of them were able to gain a high level of notoriety. The limited number of Black speculative stories caused a Dreamer, Mark Dery, to pose a critical question:

‘Why do so few African Americans write science fiction, a genre whose close encounters with the Other – the stranger in a strange land – would seem uniquely suited to the concerns of African American novelists?’”³ Of course, his question didn’t allow for some of the nuance that comes with the publishing regime, but I digress.”

“Anyway, Dery’s question encouraged him to interview Endarkened scholars and authors, Samuel Delaney, Tricia Rose, and Greg Tate to better understand race in science fiction writing and fan communities. From their heavy philosophical lifting, he decided that Afrofuturism meant ‘speculative fiction that treats African-American themes and addresses African-American concerns in the context of the twentieth-century technoculture – and, more generally, African American signification that appropriates images of technology and a prosthetically enhanced future.’”⁴ He even listed examples of Afrofuturism: the paintings of Jean-Michel Basquiat, the graffiti of Rammellzee, the comics of Milestone Media, the movies of John Sayles and Lizzie Borden, and the music of Sun Ra, Parliament-Funkadelics, Lee “Scratch” Perry, Jimi Hendrix, George Clinton, Bernie Worrell, and Herbie Hancock. Basically, he coined the term and provided examples and commentary, and then Dery cast this word into the world.”

“However, even though he provided a definition and exemplars, Dery knew that his work was only meant to map a small section of Afrofuturism.” Erin said thoughtfully. “There was so much more work to be done in this area. To assist in the study of this word and its implications, both Endarkened people and Dreamers came together to study it. Public scholars and people in the fields of English studies as well as children’s and young adult literature took up the term and broadened it to be so much more than Dery initially imagined. It was a word that was developed over time by both ‘academic’ and the ‘public’ scholars. From their work, Afrofuturism has taken on many meanings because more Black people were creating speculative stories and more

readers were attempting to categorize and theorize Afrofuturism. Much confusion resulted, but we thought it would be beneficial for our cause, so we started to do some research.”

“We first looked at how everyday readers of Afrofuturism were defining the term because we center the everyday in the Harbor.⁵ One of the most prominent ways that Afrofuturism was categorized was through its ability to highlight Black people’s historical and present existence and how both past and present provides the framework for their ability to thrive in the future. We also found that many focalized Afrofuturism’s ability to counter specific oppressions, and others centralized the need to not only place Black people in futures, but to ensure that those futures were more positive.⁶ Once we saw this, we started to look into the books and the journals we could find to see how the academic scholars were defining it.”

“Similar to the public scholars, traditional academics said that Afrofuturism was a means to combat oppression, a form of literature that countered negative realities.” Erin continued. “Other academics claimed that Afrofuturist authors used science fiction strategies to recover lost histories and analyze history’s impact on the present and to examine how lost histories and cultures might influence the future. Still others called for a broadening of Afrofuturism so it could address more topics, like the environment, gender, sexuality, and religion.⁷ Based on all of this information, we decided to find a description that somewhat met the criteria of both camps. Our definition of Afrofuturism is summed up this way: it’s a cultural aesthetic in which Black authors create speculative texts that center Black characters in an effort to reclaim and recover the past, counter negative and elevate positive realities that exist in the present, and create new possibilities for the future. It’s long, but it was a way for us to get everything in there.”⁸

“I know I just said a bunch, but it’s always best to start with the history and then go from there. I also have a habit of trying to share everything I know just in case people want more details. So, how are you doing with all of this?” Erin said.

“I’m processing? Like, I follow everything you’re saying, but it’s just so much information that I think I need to take a minute. Can we stop for today?” I responded.

“Of course! I’m so sorry that I kind of shoved all of that on you. I can get that way sometimes because there’s so much knowledge about Endarkened history that doesn’t get discussed in the HOMEs.” Erin replied.

I told you she knows her stuff!” Ebony said with a grin. “How about we allow you some process time. What day do you want to meet again?”

“Maybe Monday would be good.” I said, unsure of how much time I really needed to process everything Erin said. I thanked her profusely for all of the information, and I ran back to my room to write down everything she said.

Once in my room, I decided to write down everything I’d learned in the past few hours. So far, I know that Endarkened people have been writing Afrofuturism for almost two centuries, but the word was coined less than a century ago. I know that this aesthetic is found in books, artwork, and music, suggesting that Harbor access points may be found in many more places, not just the library where my fellow newcomers and I found our maps. I also know that anyone can mold and shape the term, as it has continuously grown, and the power to alter the term hasn’t rested with one group of people. For me, this means that GC can’t control it because they don’t have power here. This also means that if GC took away one access point, there would be several others that we can access to find Harbors around the country. I can definitely see why they use

Afrofuturism as an approach to thinking. Just like how they run the Harbor, Afrofuturism is unrestricted by GC.

September 24, 2085

I decided to wander around the Harbor for a bit before meeting Ebony in the library. It's such an interesting place, filled with people from around the country. I met people from California, Nebraska, Michigan, Maine, and Alabama. I saw people of all genders and abilities who are thriving in this underground safe haven. They laughed, danced, played, chilled, and talked to each other uninhibited by GC surveillance, and I could feel the sheer joy emanating from the place. It wrapped around me as I walked, blanketing me in a happiness that I never felt in GC. I wonder what stories the people have – how did they come to the Harbor? What speculative stories led them here? How do they see their future changing because they are now residents of this place?

I wandered around the Harbor for several hours, and I still got to the library early. I figured I could use the extra time to learn more about how this place runs. So far, I've learned that it's guided by a few things: a focus on everyday people, a non-rigid way of thinking, and a state of collective well-being. I wanted to know more, however, and although I could wait to ask Ebony or one of the other Othermothers, I felt like it was important to read and learn some things for myself. I didn't want to rely too much on their intellectual and emotional labor.

I found a woman sitting at a desk with a name tag on the front of her shirt. I decided to ask her for help, but I hoped that I wasn't interrupting. "Excuse me," I said quietly. I thought I said it a little too quietly because she didn't look up from what she was doing. She continued poring over the text in front of her. It seemed like intense reading happened in this library quite

often. I spoke a little louder and said, “Excuse me. Do you have time to help me find something?”

“Sure! I can help you find whatever you need.” She responded. “I’m Edi, the Harbor’s main librarian. There are a lot of librarians here, but I’m here the most, perusing books for representations of Black children. Because I’m here all the time, I talked to the other librarians, and we took a vote to confirm me as the head librarian. As the head librarian, my role is to send and receive secret messages from the operating libraries within the area. I get to play an integral role in the spy network. That means a lot to me since GC has all but destroyed libraries and the role of the librarian. By bringing in books by Endarkened authors and getting them into the hands of the Endarkened people of the Harbor, I feel like I’m getting a chance to go against them, like I’m fighting them in my own way. Anyway, I say all this to say that I can most definitely help you.” Her light brown face held a consistent smile as she spoke.

“Thank you so much!” I responded. “I’m not exactly sure what I’m looking for, but I want to know more about the ideals that guide this place. Since I’ve been here, I’ve heard the Othermothers talk about how the Harbor honors everyday people, centralizes collective well-being, and allows an unencumbered way of thinking. I would like to know more about that, but I have no idea where to start.”

“I got you. There are two books I think you should read, and then I have some articles for you. It’s the easiest way to learn. The first book is on a theory called Womanism and the second is on Black Feminism. They ground a lot of the work done here although our foundation is mostly within Womanism. I would tell you about how they differ, but I think it’s important for you to kind of figure that out on your own. What I can say is that even though they may have similarities, they are different concepts. It works here because we don’t require one theory or

another. Instead, we just treat both as they were meant to be treated, as two modes of related thought that are kind of like sisters.”⁹

“The articles I’ll give you will help you think through it.” Edi said. “I always start with these because they focus on Black girls’ literacy practices. The Othermothers first created this place to be a safe haven for Black girls, so we always start with this history. As you know, GC’s United States is a violent space for us, and the Othermothers wanted to make sure that we have some place where we can experience joy, where we can be well. They wanted to create a space where people listened to Black girls’ words, their hopes, their fears... their dreams. Of course, Black women also experience violence, but our status as adults allows us to have more prominence in society. Like, Ebony told me that you worked for GC, and you had the ability to write and create even if you were constructing narratives for a violent organization. Black girls aren’t even given that much.”¹⁰

“Even before GC came in to alter - however slightly - the inner workings of the United States, there were award-winning Black female authors like Octavia Butler, Toni Morrison, and Alice Walker. These women used their knowledge to reimagine Black bodies and create new stories where Black people could safely exist.¹¹ They used their political, social, and economic experiences to write themselves and other Endarkened people as the subjects of stories, rather than objects, centering us even when GC was determined to erase us.”¹² By writing about their lives, their experiences, their hopes, and their dreams, they were able to critique oppression and challenge any discussion that attempted to silence or misrepresent them.¹³ They were able to use their writing skills to magnify their beliefs about inclusion and equity. Black girls, however, aren’t usually afforded that privilege. Instead, Black girls’ stories and dreams are often told by

others. Adults often write stories about Black girls, and although Black girls are included, their voices are kind of muffled behind the words of others.”

“So, the Harbor was created with the goal of ensuring that Black girl’s voices are uplifted.” Edi said. “Eventually, though, it was extended to include other women and girls of color and other Endarkened groups. Now, we pretty much help all people, those in need and those who wish to be co-conspirators in our cause to create a more just world. Still, you probably noticed that Black people dominate this area. So, I say all this to say that we started with Black girls and then we branched out, so that’s kind of what I’m going to do with these readings I have for you.”

Most Endarkened youth don’t have access to the stories or even the names that Edi mentioned, but I learned about them as an adult, so I know what Edi says is true. Still, it takes a lot of fortitude to combat years of GC conditioning. In *Altered Truth*, we learned that the authors Edi discussed were trying to challenge GC and make life for the Endarkened more difficult. That’s why their works are restricted. To hear that they were censored because they were reimagining what Endarkened life could be challenged everything they taught us, which was probably why they didn’t allow us to hear things like that in the HOMEs. As I thought to myself, Edi walked over to a shelf and grabbed two books, one that was extremely thick and another that was slimmer. She handed both books to me along with a list of articles. I felt as though she’d been asked this question before because she had this sheet ready to hand out. The list wasn’t too long, but I could tell that I would have my work cut out for me.

“Thank you for helping me with this, Edi.” I said happily.

“Of course. It’s my job to assist all who enter the library, but I also love helping my Endarkened sisters find whatever information they need.” She replied.

I gathered the materials and began walking back to my room. On the way, I bumped into Ebony who was talking vibrantly to a young girl.

“Hey sis!” She said joyfully. “I’m headed to the library early if you want to meet me there before our scheduled time.”

“About that...” I said. I wasn’t sure I actually wanted to meet now that I had this new information. Instead, I wanted to do some reading on my own.

“What’s wrong?” Ebony asked.

“I just met Edi, and she gave me these wonderful books and articles. I kind of want to dig into them over the next few days or so.”

“I know Edi well, and she’s always giving new community members loads of information. Knowing her, she gave you a wealth of great materials, so I understand the need to get reading, especially since GC has those books on the restricted list. Since you enjoyed *Parable of the Sower* so much. I’m sure that you’ll love what you read within the pages of the books and articles you got in your arms. We can meet at some other time. I’m going to go and work with Alayna on dreaming. Even though she doesn’t really need my help, she’s been asking me to help her perfect her technique for a while now, and I’m always running around.”

I wanted to ask Ebony how she worked with youth to access dreams, but I also wanted to start the readings. Plus, I could always ask my question later. I thanked Ebony and hurriedly walked toward my room.

October 12, 2085

It took me almost three weeks to get my thoughts together about what I’d read, and I’m still not sure I understand as much as I wanted to. I mean, I don’t think there’s a required amount of understanding, but I do think I need a lot more time to sit with the new information. I guess

Ebony, Layli, Gholdy, and Venus knew it would take me a while to get through the reading because they haven't asked me to reschedule my sessions with them. Instead, I've just spent my time roaming the Harbor and reading the texts Edi gave me. It's been interesting to read the books and explore the Harbor because I get to see the ideals of the texts in action.

Throughout the Harbor, I see Black girls engaging in heated debates about the state of GC, discussing new hairstyles, creating new clothing concepts for GC residents, participating in Harbor governance, and discussing their dreams with the Harbor elders. I see Endarkened people who truly love the women around them; who appreciate women's culture, emotional flexibility, and strength; who are committed to the survival of all who inhabit the space and all who do not; and who are dedicated to nurturing a connectivity between humanity and spirituality.¹⁴ I see Black women using their lived experiences as credible sources of knowledge, engaging in communal dialogue as a way to create new knowledge, and utilizing emotion and care as essential to their existence.¹⁵

These were the ideals I learned about in the books and articles I read over the past few weeks. And, Edi was right. Although both seem to guide how people interact in this space, I do see differences in how Womanism and Black Feminism are taken up within the daily lives of the Harbor residents. The Othermothers and the other Black women of the Harbor act as community othermothers for the Endarkened children, ensuring that even when the children are biologically unrelated to them, they can still be loved as members of their own family.¹⁶ However, it's more than that. All residents, no matter their gender, age, sexuality, ability, engage in acts of mothering. They are caretakers, managers, nurturers, educators, spiritual and communal mediators.¹⁷ To me, this looks more like Black Feminism.

In educating each other, some focus on challenging the narratives constructed by GC. They teach each other about how Endarkened people have historically challenged stereotypes, but instead of just listing the controlling images that GC created to confine us. They talk about how we often internalize negative images by adopting a politics of respectability or denying our inclusion as Endarkened people. They also say that we fought back using our writing or protesting through silence.¹⁸ From listening to their conversations, I have learned how Endarkened people have worked to define themselves even with GC and the Alternate Truth Division attempting to force a definition of self upon them. I have seen how the people of the Harbor use writing, community, and discussion to challenge GC and their lies.¹⁹

I've also been able to see the communitarian aspect of the Harbor not from observation, but from experience. As I walk through the halls, everyone greets me, asks to see how I'm adjusting, and makes sure my needs are met. They don't care that I came here from one of GC's top divisions. They don't care that I don't understand everything about how things work down here. They welcome me with open arms. I've never been in a space where people are concerned for you even if they don't know you. I've never experienced a sense of community where ensuring the wellness of all members was essential.²⁰ I feel like I belong here even if I've only been here a short time.

What stands out to me most is that even though the people of the Harbor center these educational experiences, they are doing so as a way to end oppression for all people. They are trying to restore the balance between people and the environment and the spiritual. It's kind of like the Harbor is trying to center the experiences of Black women and girls, but they are also focused on a wider commitment to justice, a commitment that focalizes Black girls, but extends beyond them to ensure the betterment of humanity and the world we inhabit. When the people

speaking, they don't just centralize freedom for themselves. Instead, they try to think through ways that all of us can be free. It's an idealistic goal, especially with GC's hold on everyone and everything, but I agree with it. It's an attempt to make the world – as a whole – a better place. This is the womanist ideal that guides this place.

Maybe the idealism is why Edi couldn't find more articles about it. I mean, the Womanist reader was pretty hefty and covered a lot, but there were only three articles that mentioned this concept of Womanism and Black girlhood. The Black Feminist book was shorter than the reader, but Edi was able to give me over 25 articles to look through. Still, that number is small compared to information on Dreamer youth. I'm guessing that not much has been said about Black girls in general; otherwise, I'm sure she would've given me more to look through. I wonder why more people aren't writing about Black girls and how they used literacy to critique, create, and conceive. I mean, I guess I know why – GC doesn't consider Endarkened youth to be important to the trajectory of the world, so it makes sense to limit writings about them. Still, I wish there were more because what I've learned over the past few weeks is that the words of Black girls are assets. We have important things to say.

The issue is that GC controls the methods of communication, which allows them to control and often create the structures of our beliefs, values, and norms. GC and the Dreamers who uplift them always get their voices heard, while Endarkened people and their accomplices are muted. GC silences our voices, overlooks our realities, and positions us as unimportant bodies who take up space in their dreamer-centric universe.²¹ Because the Endarkened are assigned to this lower societal status, there is an unbalanced power relationship between Dreamer and Endarkened, so even when we have something to say, we have little power to say it without getting into trouble. That's why we have the Change Room and the enforcers. In fact, our ideas

are considered unintelligible unless we present them in a form acceptable to the Dreamers. Our words are disrespected even when we do speak the way they want us to because they think our knowledge is inadequate. I mean, just look at how my idea was accepted so readily when spoken from Charles' mouth. If I would've told them my idea during the meeting, all of them would've scoffed. Every day, GC reminds us that our existences are liminal unless we see ourselves in the way that the Dreamers see us – as GC's property.²²

Regardless of GC's attempts, though, Endarkened women have fought to use our communication methods, to engage in our literacy methods, and to talk about and critique our everyday experiences. We communicate through story, silence and speech manipulation, signifying, singing, dancing, acting, stepping, styling, crafting, and creating.²³ We refuse to be limited to the methods of communication deemed acceptable by GC and its followers. We use our literacies to make ourselves relevant and to build connections to people with shared life experiences. We have pushed back against GC's silencing for decades, and I'm sure we pushed back against negative experiences during Trence's reign and even before he came to power. So, I think it's not only about how GC tries to silence us, but also how we continue to use our voices anyway. GC does get to authorize our speech, our existence. The Harbor is a testament to this.

As I've learned more and more about this place, I've been thinking about silencing, coming to voice, and accessing our dreams. Maybe, the dreams of Endarkened people disrupt some of the stories that GC tries to tell about us. Maybe, the dreams of Black girls intimidate GC because they know that our dreams enable us to critique, but to also reimagine this world. If we can reimagine, we can change it. I'm sure they don't want that. Right now, Black girls tend to have little power to say what's on their minds due to their race, age, gender, and/or various other identities. When they do speak out, they are often punished or silenced, as the director made sure

to remind me. Their speech is disrespected by those in various positions of power, and their knowledge is often ignored because they are deemed less credible than their Dreamer counterparts. But what if we listened to the dreams of Black girls? What if we read what they write and listen to what they say with the same fervor and resolve that we use to listen to the lies GC tells us?

I now know what question to ask the Othermothers the next time I meet with them.

October 13, 2085

After learning about the concepts guiding the Harbor and walking the halls to discover how these practices are embodied in the people who live here, I finally decided to ask the Othermothers that question I've been holding onto. Reading and listening to the people caused me to realize how much I want to help others do what Octavia did for me. I want to help them write speculative fiction stories that challenge GC, reimagine Endarkened people's existences, and guide readers to find new harbors, new hopescapes. Hopefully, I can also learn to access my dreams while working with them. In a way, this could be a co-learning environment that would be mutually beneficial to every person who participates in this project. Of course, I'd have to find people who would be willing to work with me on this, but who knows what we could create if we learn together?

It had been a while, so I knew the Othermothers were probably busy, but I hoped someone was available to speak with me. I didn't know where they would be, so I walked to the library first. Edi was there, perusing a new stack of books. There were several other Harbor dwellers in the library today, many more than I saw the last time I visited this place. Their colorful garb brought new light to the room, with vibrant colors of orange, green, yellow, pink, and blue bouncing off of the black and brown bookshelves. On one wall, a group of Harbor

folks, young and old, were painting a mural of some sort. The colors they used in the mural were as lively as the clothing they wore, the vivid hues melding to create a forest clearing filled with smiling Endarkened people. It was a scene of confluence between nature and Endarkened happiness, one that would never be approved for the walls of any GC building.

The vibe of the library was jubilant and energizing, but it was still a contrast to the hub because the volume of the room was much lower. The library isn't like the GC libraries I'm used to where every person reads silently for fear that an enforcer will harass them and where many librarians secretly help patrons access restricted books because, without them, we would be completely separated from the words of our ancestors. In the Harbor library, people talk to one another about what they're reading. Reading isn't just an individual endeavor, but a communal one, where people share their ideas about what they read while they are reading. It wasn't loud, but there was a cacophony of whispers throughout the room, and I could tell that this was not an anomaly. People were too comfortable in their murmurs for this to be an irregularity in the library's regular functions.

"Edi," I said, interrupting her as she continues to put books on the shelves. "Can you tell me what's going on here?"

"What do you mean? It's a library. People are reading." She gave a hearty laugh, and she followed it by saying, "Instead of asking me, why don't you ask the people?"

"But, wouldn't that be rude?" I asked incredulously.

"Nope. This group is here every Saturday and Sunday. They're used to new people asking what's going on."

I turned around and looked for someone I felt comfortable asking. I think it's weird to barge into an established group and ask them questions when they're in the middle of something,

but I'm learning that the Harbor honors questions because everyone seems to want me to ask them. Sometimes they'll just give me the information I need, but most of the time, they want me to ask and learn. I guess they want me to be invested in my learning, so they wait for me to ask the questions, rather than just bombarding me with information.

When I looked around the room, I found a group of four in the back corner at an oval table. There was an Endarkened male and several children writing something. It was the smallest gathering of people, so I walked over. "Excuse me. Um... I'm Lauren Jane. I'm new here. Can you tell me what you all are doing here?"

"Hi Lauren Jane, and welcome to our group! My name is Kenny. We are writing right now. Would you like to join us?"

"What are you writing about?"

"Us."

"Us?"

"Yep. I host creative writing workshops for teens, and they center poetry, spoken word, and speculative fiction. To help us write, we often go out into the community – to the hub, to some of the local stores, and to our family units – and we learn from them throughout the week. Then, we come back here every Saturday and Sunday to write down the stories of Us. The hope is that all of our young writers will discover the Harbor's stories, find their own stories within the Harbor and in larger society, and use their writing to talk about some of the important issues that affect Endarkened people. We work with any youth that comes to sit with us, and at the end of the year, we host a celebration in the hub, where the kids can share everything they've written. It's kind of like we create written and oral histories of our pasts, presents, and possible futures."²⁴

“Is that what everyone does in here?” I asked.

“Nope!” Kenny replied. “On the weekends, the library is used for all sorts of reading and writing groups. For example, I work with youth who would be around the age of SecondHOME schooling, so like 14 to 17. Trinity, at the other oval table in the far-left corner, works with kids who would be at the end of their FirstHOME period, so they’re between 12 and 14 usually. Her work is kind of like a precursor to mine because she focuses more on helping the youth celebrate themselves and their communities and express themselves through writing. She usually uses some form of project-based system and asks the kids to use their personal lives, their families, their neighborhoods, and current events as inspiration for their stories.”

I turned to look at the other group of kids sitting at a table with Trinity. They were invested in whatever it was they were writing. I could see that based on how intently they were scribbling on the papers in front of them. I wondered what stories they were writing. I wondered how their lived experiences created the foundation for the stories they told. As I watched, one girl looked up and said something to the group. I can’t read lips, so I have no idea what she was saying. All I know is that as soon as she began speaking, the rest of the group looked up at her, listening, giving her their undivided attention. After she spoke, several others spoke to her, and she wrote as they talked to her. When the last person finished speaking, they all went back to writing. I had never seen a writing exercise quite like this.

“Thank you so much for telling me about this. I have to go for now, but I’d love to learn more from you sometime if that’s ok.”

“It’s fine with me, but I think you’d learn much more working with the youth instead of me. We all learn together, and they push me to think about things in vastly different ways. I’m pretty sure that you could learn more from them than I could ever teach you.”

I took in his suggestion. I wanted to learn from Black girls. I wanted to listen to their stories. I felt like I was being guided on a specific path that would lead me back to this place.

“Thank you, Kenny. By the way, have you seen Ebony or any of the Othermothers around?”

“The last I saw them, they were meeting with some new Harbor members. I think they found a few yesterday or the day before.”

“Got it. Thanks!”

When I left the library, I walked toward the fellowship hall. Since they found new people yesterday, I was pretty sure they’d be there. That’s where they took me on my second day in the Harbor. I haven’t been back to the fellowship hall since I arrived. I never really need to go. Still, I often wonder what it’s for. Outside of bringing in new recruits, the fellowship hall doesn’t seem to be used for anything. It’s a pretty big hall, and a lot of people could fit in there, but no one ever does anything in it. It’s a big, spacious, empty room that remains vacant until one or more people are brought to the Harbor. They could probably do the introductions in someone’s room instead. I’ve never seen more than ten new arrivals.

When I reached the fellowship hall, I saw almost 20 people sitting in a circle listening to the Othermothers give their welcome lecture. There were Black people of all shades, mimicking the various skin tones present on the Othermothers’ skin. I even saw a Dreamer, but he stood outside of the circle. I don’t think I’ve seen a Dreamer in the Harbor before. I listened to the new members introduce themselves by using their names, both given and chosen, and giving their terms. The next part was my favorite because the new members told the group which books helped them find this place. I repeated the names after they said them in hopes that I’d remember to add them to my running list of speculative books. There were so many books, including *We Set the Dark on Fire*; *Kingdom of Souls*; *Dragons in a Bag*; and *The Reader*. No two people had

read the same speculative text, but they were all able to find this Harbor. Something about these texts helped them to think beyond GC's barriers. These speculative maps are fascinating.

When the Othermothers finished with class assignments, only Gholdy was left in the room. The others had taken the new members with them, probably in the same way that Ebony took me to my first learning site. I waved at her, and she smiled and walked toward me, her long black curly hair bouncing as she moved.

"Hey, sis!" Gholdy said cheerfully, extending her arms for a hug.

"Hi, Gholdy. It's been a while!" I replied as I hugged her.

"It has. I heard you were talking to Edi, so I figured that it would be a while before we saw you again. Every person that goes to her ends up with weeks of good reading material and a lot of information to sift through. I'm guessing you've learned quite a bit about this place since I last saw you."

"Oh yea... more than I thought I would learn in such a short time. Actually, that's why I came to find you all. I had another question, and I think it's something you can help me with since you work with Endarkened children and help them think about literacy and writing."

"That's my specialty, sis. What exactly did you want to know?" Gholdy asked.

"Well, I was mainly wondering how it's been done." I began. "Like, how have Black girls used writing to combat GC, to engage in justice work? And, how can I help?"

"I think I can help with that... well, the first part at least. I think you know how you want to help, but you have to think about it a little more. I'm sure I can give an answer to your first question pretty quickly if you're willing to walk and talk. Otherwise, I'll have to meet up with you next week. We have to get the new members settled in."

"Walking and talking is perfect. I can explore more of the Harbor as we go."

“Awesome!” Gholdy continued. “I think it’s best to start with the history. If you haven’t noticed, most of us do that. I think it’s important since our history influences the present, and our present will influence the future. In fact, our beliefs and dreams about the future have impacted how we acted in the past and how we act in the present, so everything is connected!”

My head was spinning thinking about the cyclical nature of time, but I nodded my head and hoped that she would continue as we walked further down the F hall.

“Ok, so although GC has tried to erase this truth,” Gholdy resumed, “Endarkened women have always engaged in numerous tactics in order to create a socially-equitable world. We have organized Endarkened and Dreamers to combat common causes, engaged in political movements by taking office, and used our words to promote justice. Some of our Othermother ancestors like Cherie, LaDuke, Gloria, Fujiwara, Eve, Yamada, and Castillo wrote combinations of nonfiction essays, fictional prose, poetry, and academic papers to challenge GC and their predecessors.²⁵ They wrote against their erasure, against settler colonialism, against removal. But although so many of our foremothers wrote to create a more socially just world, I do tend to focus on Black women and girls because we have historically used our writing to advance society and to progress social justice movements. The issue is, as I’m sure you know, our words have often been silenced and our identities are often erased or minimized.”²⁶

“What do you mean our identities were erased? Were we being sent to the Change Room?” I asked as we turned a corner.

“Oh no.” Gholdy replied. “We were around well before Trence started the Change Room. Like, did you learn about Assata Shakur, Audre Lorde, Moya Bailey, Opal Tometi, Alicia Garza, or Patrisse Cullors yet?”

“Nope. It wasn’t until recently that I met so many people who didn’t go by the name Jane or Jill. I didn’t make the decision to change my name until a few weeks ago.”

“Well, Assata Shakur wrote an autobiography to discuss how she was consistently surveilled, wrongly convicted, and forced to flee the United States and live in Cuba. We have a Harbor there. Audre Lorde wrote essays in which she highlighted how she was constantly asked to focalize one aspect of her identity – Black, lesbian, woman – and marginalize the rest, rather than integrating all parts of herself into the whole. In the Harbors, we work against a forced separation of self, making sure that every person is seen as their whole self. Moya Bailey and Trudy invented the term, misogynoir, more than a decade ago to describe racialized and gendered violence against Black women and girls, but their intellectual labor has often gone unnoticed, as most people fail to cite them when they use the word. In fact, GC coopted the term and tried to say it was positive a few years ago.”²⁷

“So, these women used words to write themselves into existence all while challenging GC, and the Harbors infuse their ideas into the system?” I asked.

“Pretty much.” Gholdy replied. “Still, even though they were doing all this thought work, their efforts were often minimized or silenced. As an example, Endarkened women like Opal Tometi, Alicia Garza, and Patrisse Cullors created the hashtag, #BlackLivesMatter. At the time, however, many news outlets continuously failed to acknowledge them, choosing to uplift Black men like Deray McKesson as leaders of the movement.”²⁸ Basically, Black women have consistently used writing as a tool for justice, and it has helped others to create knowledge, ask stimulating questions, propose alternate perspectives, and get other people involved in doing the work.²⁹ Still, we don’t hear much about them anymore, and although part of that is because GC

restricts access to the information, it's also because people often refuse to listen to Black women."

"But Black women still had more chances to write. That's what Edi told me the other day. What about Black girls? The director at the Altered Truth Division told me about a few, but she also told me that the division was responsible for changing their stories."

"Well, even though there is a rich history of Black women's writing in the face of domination and silencing," Gholdy said, "there is little information as to how and if Black girls mimic or differ from these writing practices.³⁰ That's why I've focused on Black girls since becoming an Othermother. I actually focused on Black girls long before earning this title. I think it's important to see, read, and hear what's on the minds of Black girls because every time they put their pens and pencils on paper or speak their words, they are committing brave acts of self-empowerment, and we are empowered every time we listen.³¹ My goal has been to make sure that people listen."

We finally stopped walking in front of the dining hall, and I asked, "are you the only one who focuses on Black girls?"

"Of course not! There are several of us working towards justice, working to make sure that Black girls' voices are heard. Jennifer, Daneel, and many others use writing as a tool to assist Black girls in becoming more aware of their social categories and to help them critically analyze the ways they are socialized to believe certain things about themselves.³² Some, like Annette and me, use writing to help Black girls write about societal and institutional oppression. We use the historical legacy of Black women's writing to outline past and current resistance movements in which Black women have used writing to promote change.³³ Others, like Ruth and Maisha, build on discussions of individual identities and societal, cultural, and institutional

oppression by using writing to help Black girls develop skills they can use to enact change.³⁴ Some of us do it all. We are a collective that privileges work concerning Black girls.”

“I see. Well, I’d like to do that, too. I’ve been thinking about this ever since Ebony explained how the maps work through speculative fiction. I think it started when I found Butler’s book, but it was heightened after talking with Kenny this morning in the library. I want to know what speculative fiction stories Black girls would write if they were given more opportunities to do so. I want to know how they would use their words, both oral and written, to show us about the alternate or futuristic worlds they envision as well as the obstacles that may arise in the creation of such worlds. I want to know how they would use their stories to promote justice and show how all Black girls can speculate and dream. My only issue is that I can’t dream myself. I can’t amplify the dreams of Black girls if I don’t know how to dream.”

“Remember when we told you about seeing the unseen?” Gholdy asked. “Well, you’ve been able to dream, sis. You just didn’t know that that’s what you were doing. Every time you dreamed of a world without violence, without capitalism, without oppression, you were engaging in speculative fiction. You were dreaming of a world that is better for Endarkened people.”³⁵

“So, thinking about possibilities is also a form of dreaming?” I asked.

“Of course it is!” Gholdy replied. “From your birth, GC has participated in the asphyxiation of your social and civic imagination. The dream extraction procedure doesn’t completely remove your dreams. There’s no way they could do that. They don’t have the power to do that. What they do is block the dreams, strangling them before they have the ability to reach the surface. For those of you who have read, seen, or heard the dreams of other Endarkened people, the block is gradually removed, and no amount of extraction can remove what you’ve learned if you engage with enough of it. That’s why they restrict it. They prohibit

our books, vilify our songs and films, and limit how often we can speak to each other. They do this because they know that once we engage with the dreams of our peers and our ancestors, we are better prepared to find community and challenge the GC regime.”

“So, I’ve been dreaming this whole time?!” I said incredulously.

“Yea, sis. But, don’t beat yourself up about it. Dreaming is more than just the thing that people do during sleep. It’s more than just drifting off into space when your eyes are open. It’s also how we think about making things better for us and all people in this world. But, how were you supposed to know that? GC consistently alters our histories. They consistently take away the tools we need to have all of the information we need.”

“You’re right. I have a lot to think about.”

“You probably do. Just remember that we’re here if you need us.”

“Got it. I do have one more small question before you go.”

“What’s up?”

I was going to let this go, but I had to know. “In the Fellowship Hall, as you all were introducing yourselves and talking about the Harbor,” I said, “I noticed a Dreamer. Why was he there? Won’t that compromise the safety of the Harbor?”

“Oh yea! That was Cody. He brought about 10 people to us.”

“He...brought them?”

“Yep. You don’t think everyone finds this place on their own, do you? Some people will need more help getting here, so there are plenty of Dreamers working with us and the other Harbors to get Endarkened people to these safe havens. Some help by bringing people here, others help by infiltrating the HOMEs and passing along the names of authors or books, and others help by infiltrating the state owners, including GC, and providing us intel or engaging in

company sabotage efforts. Social justice requires everyone to work together, but to truly make change in a world where Dreamers are uplifted and Endarkened people are not, we need Dreamers who are willing to be co-conspirators, who are willing to put themselves on the line for a greater cause. You won't see many Dreamers around the Harbor, though, because they understand the need for us to have spaces for ourselves. They understand that we need spaces to heal without them, especially after the violence we experience up there on a daily basis."

"I see. Yea... definitely a lot to think about."

"I get it. It's a lot to handle when we come in here and disrupt everything that GC tries to tell you about yourself and the world around you."

"I agree. But, more than that, I have a lot to think about in terms of what I want to do to help. Social justice work requires everyone to work together – including me."

"Well, sis. I know you'll figure out what you're supposed to do. Trust your spirit. It will guide you. I can't wait to see what you come up with!"

With that, she walked into the dining hall, and I walked back to the library. It was still Saturday, so I was pretty sure that several groups were still there reading and writing together. Even with everything on my mind, something was drawing me back there. Gholdy said to follow my spirit, and I knew my spirit was leading me to the library, leading me to work with Kenny, leading me to do something with reading, writing, dreaming and Black girls.

¹ I define speculative fiction as an umbrella category that includes fantasy, science fiction, and horror as well as their subgenres, including cyberpunk, ghost tales, and superhero stories. Even though there are specific literary genres that could be included, there is scholarly debate over how non-mimetic a story must be in order to be classified as speculative (Thomas, 2013). Oziewicz (2017) acknowledged the debate, noting that in order to understand speculative fiction, one must know the difference between mimesis, "the desire to imitate reality with such verisimilitude that the audience can share the artist's experience or representation of the real world", and non-mimetic forms of art, "deliberate departures from imitating consensus reality" (par. 4). Speculative fiction builds non-mimetic stories that methodically shift from verisimilitude, adding characters, settings, and/or plots that move away from accurate representations of reality.

² See Brown (2014).

³ See Dery (1994), p. 179-180.

⁴ Ibid., p. 180.

⁵ Womanism centers the experiences of everyday people (Phillips, 2006, p. xxiv).

⁶ For definitions of Afrofuturism in public scholarship, see the following: Adlakha (2018), Alexander (2018), Anderson (2018), Arboine (2018), Barrett (2018), Broadnax (2018), Clark (2018), Dozier (2018), Fitzpatrick (2018), Giles (2018), Inverse (2018), Latief (2018), McKnight-Abrams (2018), Northington (2018), Rao (2018), Sayej (2018), Staples (2018), and Sutton (2018).

⁷ For definitions of Afrofuturism in academic scholarship, see the following: Allen (2016), Allen (2017), Banerjee (2017), Colmon (2017), Davis (2018), Elia (2016), Enteen (2007), Faucheux (2018), Faucheux & Lavender (2018), Harvey (2016), Josephs (2013), Jue (2017), Lavender (2007), Marotta (2016, 2018), McCormack (2016), Morris (2012, 2016), Moynagh (2018), Olutola (2018), Rettova (2017), Rodriques (2017), Ruffin (2005), Sorenson (2014), and Yaszek (2005, 2006, 2013).

⁸ I strategically avoid labeling Afrofuturism as a genre because many Black authors use a hybridization of speculative genres (Hoydis, 2015), so their work does not conform to one specific category. Moreover, describing Afrofuturism as an aesthetic focuses on the features the authors use and allows for those features to change depending on specific contexts. Lastly, I included the distinction of authorship and character focus to explicitly center Black people. Most public and academic scholarship centered the ways in which Black artists created works that center Black characters. There were some academics who attempted to focalize non-Black characters, but even in their rationales, they tried to make the argument that there was still a focus on Black themes, even if Black people were decentralized, because the author was Black or because there was a Black secondary character. If the purpose of Afrofuturism is to focalize themes and concerns related to Black people, then Black people must be centered.

⁹ See Phillips (2006), p. xxxiv.

¹⁰ Black women have been able to critique social oppression and challenge dominant discourses that attempt to silence or misrepresent them (Muhammad, 2015c; Rooks, 1989). They have been able to use their writing prowess to magnify their beliefs about inclusion and equity into the larger social sphere. Black girls, however, are not often afforded that privilege. Instead, Black girls' stories and dreams are often voiced by others. Adults are the authors of stories and research on Black girls, and although Black girls are included, their voices are often muted behind the words of others.

¹¹ See Cooper (2017).

¹² See Cherry-McFaniel (2017) and Smith (1978).

¹³ See Muhammad (2015d) and Rooks (1989).

¹⁴ Walker (1983) coined the term, womanist, and explained that a womanist is a Black feminist or feminist of color; traditionally universalist; a woman who loves other women, appreciates women's culture, emotional flexibility, and strength; a person committed to the survival and wholeness of humanity; and someone who loves everything in the natural and spiritual realms.

¹⁵ See Collins (2000).

¹⁶ Collins (2000) noted that "Historically, this notion of Black women as community othermothers for all Black children often allowed African-American women to treat biologically unrelated children as if they were members of their own families" (p. 190).

¹⁷ Phillips (2006) stated that motherhood is a set of behaviors based on caretaking, management, nurturance, education, spiritual mediation, and dispute resolution. Anyone—whether female or male, old or young, with or without children, heterosexual or same-gender-loving—can engage in these behaviors and, therefore, mother. In so doing, every individual has the ability to contribute to the ultimate goals of womanism" (p. xxix).

¹⁸ Research centering Black girls and controlling images can be found in the following articles: Brooks, Browne, and Hampton (2008); Brooks & McNair (2015); Carter (2007a; 2007b); DeBlase (2003); Fordham (1993); Jacobs (2016); Marshall, Staples, & Gibson (2009); Muhammad & Womack (2013); Richardson (2002; 2007; 2013).

¹⁹ Research centering Black girls and self-definition can be found in the following articles: Brooks, Sekayi, Savage, Waller, and Picot (2010); Ellison & Kirkland (2014); Hall (2011); Hinton-Johnson (2005); Muhammad (2015c; 2015d); Sutherland (2005); Winn & Franklin (2014); Wissman (2009; 2011); Womack (2013).

²⁰ Phillips (2006) notes that womanism ensures "the optimization of well-being for all members of a community."

²¹ Ardener (2006) articulated that a society defined by dominant groups – including White, male, adult, etc. – mutes or erases the experiences of nondominant groups by silencing their voices, overlooking their realities, and positing the group as "mere black holes in someone else's universe" (p. 63).

²² Muted Group Theory suggests that people assigned to minoritized groups may have a lot to say, but in "mixed situations they may have little power to say it without getting into trouble. Their words (and interests and work), unless presented in a form acceptable to those in dominant groups, are often not considered as understandable by or as important ... The speech of those in subordinate groups is often disrespected, and their knowledge often not

considered sufficient for decision or policy making. Their experiences are often reinterpreted for them by others, and they are encouraged to see themselves as represented by the words and concepts in the dominant discourse” (p. Kramarae, 2009, p. 669).

²³ Richardson (2002) argued that this is how Black women and girls communicate their literacies.

²⁴ This project took place at the Sea Center (pseudonym), a nonprofit organization in the southeastern region of the United States. The center’s high school program centralizes youth participatory action research, and young writers venture out into the community to learn about the community’s past, to find themselves within the community’s present, and to use creative writing to speak out about issues facing their communities.

²⁵ Chicana writers, like Moraga (2011), Anzaldua (1987), and Castillo (1994) provided a combination of nonfiction essays, fictional prose, and poetry to address the ways in which Chicana scholars eviscerate boundaries in an effort to further understand their fluid and complex identities. Additionally, through essays and research articles, Indigenous scholars, like LaDuke (2005) and Tuck (Tuck & Yang, 2012) challenge settler colonialism and use their writing to promote indigenous knowledge and theorizing in education (Tuck, 2009). Asian scholars, like Fujiwara (2018) and Yamada (2015) write against the erasure of Asian people in the United States, generally, and in feminist research, specifically. They argue that their identities as Asian women are often left out of feminist research, and that their removal from feminist conversations must cease.

²⁶ See Pough (2004).

²⁷ See Shakur (1987); Bailey & Trudy (2018); and Lorde (1984).

²⁸ See Burke (2016).

²⁹ See Muhammad (2015d), p. 291.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ See Carlip (1995), p. 9.

³² For scholars who explored how Black girls used writing to understand their identities within the world, focusing on Black girls’ unique identity positions within the larger societal framework, see the following: Bacon (2018); Edwards (2005); Henry (2001); Mahiri & Sablo (1996); and Wissman (2009, 2011).

³³ For scholars who explored how Black girls used writing to examine their identities and connect those identities to oppression in the larger society, see the following: Haas Dyson (1995); Henry (1998); Muhammad (2012; 2015a; 2015c; 2015d); Muhammad and McArthur (2015); Muhammad & Womack, 2015); and Stornaiuolo & Whitney (2018).

³⁴ For scholars who assist Black girls in using writing to make societal change, see the following: Brown, Callier, Garner, Hill, Olayiwola, and Robinson (2015); Fisher, Purcell, & May (2009); Hall (2011); McArthur and Muhammad (2017); Muhammad (2015b); Muhammad & Womack (2015); Winn (2010a; 2010b; 2012; 2015); and Winn & Jackson (2011).

³⁵ Imarisha (2015) stated that “whenever we try to envision a world without war, without violence, without prisons, without capitalism, we are engaging in speculative fiction” (p. 3).

CHAPTER 10

A Dream Begins

October 20, 2085

I spent most of my morning in the library, sitting with Kenny and Trinity. After listening to them for a few hours, I learned that they focus their creative writing meetings on realistic fiction, nonfiction, and poetry. Sometimes they focused on speculative fiction if one of the kids asked to write in that genre, but that didn't seem to be a major focus. Still, regardless of what style they were writing in, I noticed that all the youth were dreaming. They might not have those vivid sleeping dreams that the Dreamers took from them, but they were consistently writing about what they saw happening in the world and how they could see themselves changing it. According to what Gholdy told me, that is a part of dreaming.

As I sat with them, I wondered if Kenny and Trinity would mind me learning with their groups, or at least with some of the youth who work with them every week. If I could do that, I could learn in community with Black girls who already inhabit the space, those who are already a part of the community. When I first arrived, Ebony said that Black communal spaces are essential for our healing, our self-affirmation, and our growth.¹ Based on what I read in the books Edi gave me and what I see in the Harbor, community is also important to help Endarkened people develop strategies of resistance, helping us to find more ways to fight against GC.

Because I want to better understand how young Black girls might use their stories as spaces to examine, destabilize, or criticize their experiences in GC's United States, I think it's

important to cultivate a space where the girls feel comfortable enough to have important, but possibly difficult conversations. It's also important for the girls to have a space where they feel safe enough to share their stories. Right now, I'm new to the Harbor, and even though this place is welcoming to all, newcomer and seasoned resident, I think it would be nice to work in a space where they already feel safe and comfortable.

If it's possible, I think I'll do a workshop, kind of like Kenny and Trinity are already doing. The main difference would be that this workshop would only be for Black girls – cisgender Black girls, Black trans girls, and Black nonbinary individuals. Based on what I read, youth from FirstHOMEs are often neglected in the books and articles, so I want to make sure I'm working with a group of Black girls to ensure that they have more opportunities to have their stories heard.² I could create it in a way that honors the foundation of this Harbor, as this place started with the centering of Black women and girls. The girls and I could meet on Saturdays and Sundays since those are the days people gather in the library for this type of stuff. We could work together for a few hours, and we could read Afrofuturist texts and write our own Afrofuturist stories. To help us write, I can use the information Ebony taught me about Afrofuturism. I'll need all the guidance I can get, and so far, the best guidance I've had is from Black women's stories.³ We can use their words to mentor us as we write.

I could probably lead the group, helping the girls with their writing since I was a writer in the Altered Truth Division, but although I'll probably make some plans, I know I'll need to be flexible to make sure that I'm meeting the needs of the girls who show up to learn with me. We can alter the plans or throw them out. Whatever they want to do. If we do that, learning could be a joint endeavor, one where our stories can be co-constructed. Also, I don't want to position myself as the all-powerful wielder of knowledge who comes to disseminate information to those

less informed. Somehow, I also need to make sure I honor how the girls are already mining their lives for their storytelling. They've already been working with Kenny and Trinity, so it's not like I would be working with novice writers. Maybe, I'll just focus on general fiction writing techniques, and then I'll use Afrofuturist stories as examples of those fiction strategies. Butler did this in her novel. I think the girls and I can do that, too.

I know Kenny works with SecondHOME youth, but I think I want to work with Trinity's group. Kenny's group is often running around the Harbor, trying to mine the stories of the Harbor residents. Trinity's group mostly stays within the library, mining their own lives before they learn about the stories of others. Of course, I wouldn't want to work with the whole group since I'm just starting out, but maybe I could find between six or seven girls who are willing to embark on this journey with me. I know Kenny and Trinity will help me find girls to learn with, but I have a feeling that they'll ask me how I'll pick the girls since I can't work with every single girl that she and the Kenny have worked with since this writing group began. I think it would be best to create some kind of criteria.

What I'm thinking is that I'll invite Black girls who are at the end of their FirstHOME years, so between the ages of eleven and fifteen. I'd make sure that they have been a part of the weekend library sessions for at least a year, and I'll make sure that they want to continue working with Kenny once our workshop is done. Kenny works with SecondHOME youth, so our workshop could be a transition space between Trinity and Kenny's groups. Of course, the girls who are interested in working with me should also have an interest in writing an Afrofuturist story, and because we'll only be meeting a few times, I'll ask them not to miss more than two days of the workshop. It's a lot of criteria, but I think this will help me narrow down who to learn from.

Even with all of these ideas in place, though, I do have to recognize my identity as an adult and as a newcomer in the Harbor, especially since I'm creating this whole idea in my head before meeting the girls I'll be working with. I may be an Endarkened woman, a Black woman, but I also know that my identities will differ from how the girls identify themselves. I mean, I'm in the Harbor now, but I've had years living under GC's rule. And, although they know Kenny and Trinity pretty well, I'm a stranger to them. I think the best way to handle this is to really focus my attention on ways I can help to co-construct our space.⁴ I'll write with the girls, ask for their input, and listen to their criticism. I'll learn from them just as much or more than they will learn from me. It'll be like forming a writing community instead of taking a writing class.

So far, my goal has been to learn from a group of people who are prized in the Harbor, to see the unseen. Whichever girls I work with will have made it to the Harbor at such a young age. To me, this means they were able to see the unseen without being told that it's something they should be doing. They were able to make it here and learn and dream in a place of safety before GC had the chance to give them another dream extraction surgery. I can learn so much from these girls, and since Layli said that the best way to fight dream extractions is to read the words of others. I'm pretty sure that by reading and listening to the words of Black girls, I'll be able to see the unseen.

To make sure that I'm learning as much as I can, I think I'll set aside time to talk with them individually because I really want to get to know the people behind the stories. I began writing this journal in order to remember, to think things through, and to create myself in a world that continually attempts to confine me. My written words are connected to my personal story. This might be true for the girls, too, and talking to them one-on-one may help me to understand

how their stories connect. I could also take notes as I work with them, and maybe, at the end of our workshop, they'll let me examine the stories they've written.⁵

Maybe, with all of that information, I can learn more about the girls' everyday stories alongside their Afrofuturist stories. I might be able to better understand their personal experiences and how they talk and write about those experiences. I could highlight similarities and differences amongst their stories. Of course, I can't assume that there *will* be similarities, but because they will all be Black girls in the Harbor who also want to read and write speculative fiction, it is possible that they have shared experiences.⁶ Maybe, these stories can help other Endarkened people access the dreams they've been denied. Maybe, I can share these stories with co-conspirators who live above. Maybe, the dreams of Black girls will help us to create a better world, just like the dreams of the Othermothers helped to establish this place.

"Hey Kenny," I asked after compiling all my thoughts into a cohesive plan.

"What's up?" Kenny responded.

"I have an idea..."

October 27, 2085

It's almost the two-month mark, so I need to send Charles an update to ensure that he leaves me alone. I'm supposed to send him an update once every two months, and I know he's getting antsy. His career is riding on this being a successful mission which is probably why he's granted me so much freedom. I actually expected him to find a way to reach out by now because GC doesn't give us free reign over our actions, but if he tries to contact me and blows my cover in the process, his mission fails, and his chances at the director position falter. He has to know this. He may not be as intelligent as he thinks he is, but this should be basic enough for him to understand.

The letter is difficult to construct, though. How do I give him enough information, but not enough that he'll find out about the harbor and attempt to ruin the beauty of this place? I could give him an answer so vague that it takes him months to decipher it, but that might cause him to rage and act irrationally. He and the other Dreamers in the Altered Truth Division have been known to do that when they don't get their way. I decided on a short note, one that would give him something, but not enough for him to actually do anything. Hopefully, this will sate him for the next two months.

Kenny and Trinity agreed to let me work with some of the youth, and once I send this note to Charles, I'll have two months before I need to focus on sending something else to him. Then, I'll have two more months until I either go back to GC or stay in the enclave. It's a tough choice to make, but I don't have to make it right now. Now, the only thing I need to do is write a letter to Charles.

Charles:

I have infiltrated the Endarkened enclave. To infiltrate the safe haven, you must see the unseen. To see the unseen, the spirit must guide you.

Jane 9675214

I know it seems like I'm giving a lot of information away, but I'm pretty sure Charles doesn't have access to his spirit. I actually don't know if he has a spirit at all based on what I know about him. Even if he did, seeing the unseen also requires him to exist in community with the world. He would need to honor his place as a community member who exists alongside Endarkened people as an equal. He would need to understand his place as a community member with the environment. I'm pretty sure Charles is incapable of doing that because he sees Endarkened

people as things, subjects, property. He doesn't have the mental fortitude to work alongside anyone unless they are Dreamers – Dreamers who think and live as he does.

Even if he did decide to come and look for the Harbor, there is no way he would be able to find it. He may see smoke and debris, like I did. He may see something much worse because of his oppressionist lens. I'm not sure what he'll see, but I do know that he will never find the entrance to this place. He exists outside the commonweal, outside of the balance, and in all honesty, I'm pretty sure he likes it that way. It's a disadvantage for him, but he'll never know it. I don't think he'd care even if he did know.

November 3, 2085

In a corner, at the oval table at the back of the library, I saw a few Black girls talking amongst each other. These were the girls Trinity told me about. She felt like they would be a great group for me to begin with because of their interest in Afrofuturism and all things nerdy. I, too, am interested in Afrofuturism and all things nerdy, so her suggestion made sense. The girls are some of the newest youth members of the writing group, and they have been here for about a year. People are often fascinated by them because they come from FirstHOMEs all around Georgia and the Annex, and they've completely cast off their Jane and Jill names. They call themselves the Alfreda's – Amber, Talyn, Avenae'J, Terrah, Victoria, and Bailey.⁷ They found each other at the Saturday library meetings, and now, they consistently meet and tell stories about their experiences at school, at home, and in the world of GC.⁸

As I moved closer, I heard them discussing the rigid clothing rules at FirstHOME. I had cast out that memory from my years in the HOMEs, but Trinity said they were between 13 and 14, so their experience as FirstHOME residents are more salient than mine. A group of Endarkened people encircled them, trying to hear them speak. So, I decided to join the crowd.

The Othermothers and Edi both acknowledged that everyone teaches everyone here, so why not learn from Black girls who are willing to share their words? They have knowledge I don't have, especially considering how they found their way to the Harbor decades before I did.

"We literally had to wear all black and all white to our graduation," Avenae'J said.

"The head observer focused more on how the school looks, but he didn't care about what students did." Talyn added. "At some point, he made a rule to where you had to only have solid color socks. You could not wear multiple colors."

"That's what the handbook said. You're not supposed to wear those kinds of socks."

Terrah explained.

"And then he was like, you can't wear certain types of shoes. Wasn't that a thing?" Talyn questioned.

"Oh yeah!" Avenae'J replied. "Cause we couldn't wear like super bright colored shoes at our school cause one of the guys in our class who was wearing bright red and bright blue shoes got in trouble. The school cared more about how we looked than our actual scores."

"The handbook said you're not supposed to," Terrah said again, "or you're supposed to wear solid colored socks, which I don't get because nobody ever enforces it at the Dreamer schools. Nobody stares at our feet. If you're staring at people's feet, then you got an issue."

"We couldn't wear hoodies." Amber chimed in. "We couldn't wear red. We couldn't wear yellow. We couldn't wear all these colors."

"That's like the dress codes that are so against women showing their collar bone because they're so *sassy*, but it's a collar bone!" Terrah exclaimed.

"That's what they did with our knees at our school" Avenae'J confirmed.

“Yea, I hated that!” Victoria yelled intensely. “I hated that! The schoolbook said you couldn't wear a shirt that was sleeveless or didn't at least have a 3/4 sleeve.”

“You had to cover your shoulders and your collar bone.” Terrah added.

Victoria continued. “I'm like, okay. So, when it's dress-down day, and you say we can wear what we want, we understand we can't wear short shorts.”

“Yeah. Like no booty shorts or super high crop tops.” Terrah added.

“We know that much. But it can't not have sleeves?” Victoria said, incensed.

“We weren't even allowed to wear ripped jeans.” Avenae'J chimed in.

“We weren't even allowed to show our knees. Our knees!” Talyn chided.

“They were literally saying your collar bones were too flirtatious.” Victoria cringed.

“What did they even mean? What if I didn't want to flirt?” Amber sighed.

“We weren't even allowed to show half of our thigh because they said boys didn't know to act.” Victoria said.

“They said to base length on fingertips, but some people have really long arms, and it was hard to find shorts. But... maybe teach them. Teach the boys how to act. Why were we losing stuff because they didn't know how to act?” Terrah questioned.

“The observers were like "girls learn how to dress." How about you talk to guys about how not to touch girls?” Avenae'J said bluntly.

When I was in the HOMEs a long time ago, the observers were often more concerned with girls' outfit choices than they were about our learning. They were more concerned with the possibility of male arousal than they were about our rights to our own bodies. They were more concerned with our social decorum, rather than our academic triumphs.⁹ Apparently, the girls experience the same things now. The HOMEs haven't gotten much better. I guess that's what

happens when they plan our out entire lives. FirstHOME doesn't need to care about our learning because we're already tracked to learn all we are "capable" of learning. Forcing clothing styles and colors just ensures that the Endarkened who inhabit the schools at least look "respectable" to passersby. That's what they really want from Endarkened children: respectability based on what the Dreamers determine is respectable.

Amber redirected the conversation. It seemed as though the comment Avenae'J made about HOMEs caring more about clothes than scores must have triggered a specific memory. The girls talked about having scores that didn't meet the criteria for certain schools. Often, they were a few points away from the score they needed, and the observers told them that they had to either retake the test or accept the SecondHOME they were tracked into. I've always hated the scoring system that the HOMEs use. They determine our tracks; they determine our SecondHOME placements; they determine our prospects for the future. Based on the girls' ages, they would have escaped GC before going to SecondHOME, but that doesn't mean they hadn't already undergone the testing that would decide which one they'd be going to. Everything is a numbers game, of course. The companies arbitrarily decide cutoff scores, and the scores will differ depending on which company state we live in.

Endarkened students who are not above the score often end up in a SecondHOME that relies on rote memorization and testing skills. We're sent to HOMEs where the only educational goal is to get higher test scores. GC doesn't care if we are finding joy in our learning; instead, their goal is to prove that they have manufactured excellence in beings they consider to be lesser than they are. Those scores "prove" their excellence. Even if we do meet the cutoff score, most GC schooling systems are based on a lottery model. Our entrance into a specific school is based

on whether or not our number is chosen. Sadly, if we are not one of the lucky numbers, our options for schooling dwindle, and most are forced into schools that are located in “bad areas.”

“You know what else I hated?” Avenae’J announced. “The one for all thing, like one person or a group of people does something, then the entire class got punishment for it.”

“I hated observers like that!” Victoria said.

“That's how they did it in every classroom at my school.” Terrah sighed. “Like, there would be three people talking, and then the observers would be like, ‘okay, the entire class has silent lunch for the next week.’ And I'm like, ‘What?! You can't do that. I wasn't doing anything.’ The majority of the class wasn't doing anything.”

“Okay,” Victoria jumped in again, “so, when I was in my seventh year, me and my best friends were the quietest ones in our class. I remember one day, the observer... actually, he wasn't even a real observer, he was like a substitute observer that stays for the rest of the year. Anyway, so he was like, ‘everybody has detention,’ and me and my best friends went off on him. He was like, ‘woah’ cause we never did that before. We went off on him, like, ‘How could you do that? We didn't do anything.’ He was like, ‘okay, um, I guess exempt you three?’ He didn't know what to say. And I was like, ‘thank you’ and walked away.”

As Victoria told her story, I thought of how cowardly I would have been in that situation. I would never have thought to stand up to the observers at FirstHOME. More than likely, I would have sullenly taken the punishment because that is what I was taught to do. We were taught to be quiet and maintain respectability even if we knew the observer is wrong. Observers were allowed to demote an Endarkened’s track at any time, and that demotion could result in a future I didn’t want. Victoria was somehow able to undermine GC’s silencing tactics, relying on her community of friends to address the fact that the observer’s punishment was unjust. He couldn’t

punish all of them for the errors of a few. Still, I feel for the children who were silent, the children like me who were too scared to speak up for fear of further punishment.

Victoria continued talking “I hate when a sub does that...like you have a certain issue or something, and when it happens or when it comes to that time, they're like ‘what are you doing? Where are you going?’ Like, I understand they dealt with 100 students that day, but still, one common courtesy, just listen to what I'm saying to you. I didn't want to get written up for something I told them about at the beginning of the class.”

“Our math observer was like that.” Talyn said. “One of our classmates had ADHD, so he had to take his medicine in the middle of class. For the first few months she wouldn't let him go cause she didn't believe he had ADHD. And I was like...” She slaps her hands to her head, signaling her distaste.

“She wouldn't even let him go to the bathroom.” Avenae’J added. “Every single time he would walk to the back of the classroom to go to the bathroom, she’d be like ‘sit down.’ But then someone else would go, and she just looked at them and then looked away.”

“She did not like certain students in our class. She had grudges against them for no reason.” Talyn continued.

Someone in the crowd says, “I wonder why they didn't pick up that type of behavior on the class cams. It's funny how they could always catch the Endarkened kids doing something inappropriate, but they never catch the observers.”

“They had cameras in the classroom?” Terrah probed.

“They did.” Avenae’J answered. “Ours was just obvious. You could see it. They didn't care.”

“They had those secret cameras in the classroom and on the bus and stuff, and they

also put the cameras in the lights that were outside.” Talyn responded.

“Okay. Is it just me or did you ever look into school cameras and feel weird, like, ‘wait, they might think I’m doing something bad?’” Terrah asked.

“I did that on purpose.” Talyn said, mimicking how she would stare straight into a school camera, daring them to accuse her of wrongdoing.

The girls’ conversation made me remember how much GC is like a prison, how much FirstHOME is like jail. Just like inmates are often forced into monochromatic, institution-issued jumpsuits, the girls were forbidden to wear certain colors and certain clothing types. Just like the actions of inmates are consistently regulated, the girls knew classmates who were refused when they asked to use the bathroom or take medication that would allow them to fully participate in the class. Just like surveillance cameras are secured around imprisonment facilities, the girls were overtly or secretly surveilled to ensure compliance, to ensure that they remain respectable in GC’s eyes. What’s sad is that the surveillance, the confinement, and the regulation never stops. GC knew my every movement. The enforcers monitored my every action. My time in the Harbor is the first time that I don’t feel like everything I do is under a microscope. This Harbor is the first place where I feel like I am not forced to comply with GC rule.

As I was thinking about their stories, Avenae’J said something that surprised me. “I used to see student protests, and like, I would like to be in there, but I can’t.”

“My HOME in Illinois did.” Terrah said. “Like, all the observers and the students, they all walked, they just went to school for first period and then they just left.”

“Respect.” Avenae’J responded.

“At my school,” Bailey interjected, “they’d never let us do that.”

“We were all cowards at my new school, so that wouldn’t happen.” Terrah uttered sadly.

“We were all kind of afraid,” Avenae’J chimed in. “Like, we hated the head observer, but we were also kind of afraid of him because he’s the reason why we were allowed to do a lot of the things we were allowed to do. We couldn’t have done anything without him. So, we *would* protest, but we can’t. The thing is, when we were talking about how we had to wear all black or white, the students all decided we wanted color. The observers went completely against what we wanted, and they were allowed to do that, too. That’s why we couldn’t protest. We wanted to do things, and we couldn’t without their permission.”

“You should have just shown up in color anyway.” Terrah retorted. “Like, they couldn’t just not let you graduate from FirstHOME because you didn’t wear what they wanted you to wear.” She paused for a minute, thinking through what she just said. “They could actually,” Terrah finally said. “They could.”

Their conversation was interesting to me because of how quickly they moved from topic to topic. I’m pretty sure it’s how people normally speak to each other in groups, but Endarkened people aren’t allowed to gather in groups, so I’m not used to the conversation jumps. Either way, I’ve learned so much from them already. I know Altered Truth lies, but, for some reason, I wanted to believe their story about FirstHOME getting better. What I’m hearing, though, is that it’s getting worse. From surveillance to collective punishment, the girls endured much more than I could have imagined. Even with all of this, I also heard an air of hopefulness in their discussion. Victoria actually spoke back to a substitute observer who tried to put all of the students on punishment. Terrah joined a walkout at a HOME even though I’m sure the Altered Truth Division of that state system made sure to hide what they were actually doing. Talyn looked surveillance mechanisms head on and refused to feel monitored into silence. I see the horrors of GC, but I also see the hope of Black girls.

Something Avenae’J said is really sticking with me, though. She wanted to protest, but she was afraid of the head observer and of GC because she knew they ultimately controlled her every move. It’s sticking with me because the comment makes me feel like no matter how much each of them undermined the system that GC and their ilk created, they are still Endarkened people who exist within the system. They are still Black girls whose existences stand in contrast to the identities that are desired by GC. It makes me feel like what I’m trying to do won’t make a difference. Still, the girls persist. If they hadn’t, they wouldn’t have made it to the Harbor so early. That gives me hope that I can persist, too.

I’m reminded of why I wanted to learn with them in the first place. They are helping me to see the unseen, to think past the lies that Altered Truth has been feeding me. Even without reading their writing, I know their stories will be powerful. It shows in the way they’ve captured such a large audience with their words. It shows in the way I’m constantly reminded of my past when I hear them speak. I wondered if they had written about their experiences because it would help more people to see the world through their eyes, so I asked them. “So, based on this conversation that y’all are having,” I said, “I see that there are a lot of injustices in the FirstHOMEs.”

“Yes!” they all answered at once.

“Has anyone written some of these stories down?” I asked.

“I didn’t.” Terrah said solemnly. “I didn’t realize it was so bad.”

November 4, 2085

Today was the first day of our official workshop. They answered my questions yesterday when they were talking in the larger group, and Trinity let them know who I was, but I wanted to start by asking them why they’ve chosen to learn with me, especially since they didn’t really

know me. I felt like it was an awkward way to begin, but I asked anyway. “So, why did you all agree to join this writing thing? I mean, I’m so glad that you came, but why have you chosen to give up some of your time to work with me as I learn more about Black girls and writing and speculative fiction?”¹⁰

Talyn responded first. “Writing is nice, so I wanted to do it more.”

“At first, I joined it because I didn't have anything to do, and I really loved working with Trinity.” Victoria said. “I've been working with her for a while, so I was like, 'Ooh, this might be fun.' So my Harbor mom was like, 'Did you want to do this Sci Fi, Horror, Fantasy thing?' And I was like, ‘Mom stop.’ And she was like, ‘Why?’ And I was like, ‘You had me at fantasy.’ She was like, ‘Okay, so that's a yes?’ And I'm like, ‘Yeah!’”

“I've always liked reading about things that aren't true, things that are made up in somebody’s head.” Terrah commented. “It's like, how did they do that? I want to know how that happened, and it's fun to learn about things that aren't particularly true, especially when you're trying to get away from the things that are.”

“When I was told it was sci-fi and mythological stuff,” Amber began, “I was like, ‘that's very interesting.’ I love to read about everything with myths.”

“Okay. So, I write, a lot of science fiction.” Avenae’J said. “I don't even know why I'm writing it, but I write it, and then Trinity, she noticed. She told me about the group, and I was like, ‘yeah, that'd be pretty cool.’ Just to be around a bunch of other people who are like me, and I'm not just sitting in my room alone thinking about it. So yeah, she told me about it, and then I was like, ‘this would be pretty cool.’ I like to be an outcast, but I also like to be with other people who are like me and who like things I like. So, joining a writing group like that is what really got

me hooked on the idea. There would be all these other girls who like science fiction as much as I do.”

“I joined to learn more about writing,” Bailey said softly. “I don’t think I can do Kenny’s writing group because I’m too young.”

Based on what they told me, they all joined for different reasons – to increase their writing skills, to make friends, to have more time reading science fiction. I didn’t know what answers to expect from them, but I’m happy that they’re here, that they’ve agreed to learn with me. They are already a small community of Black girls who like to discuss what’s going on in the world, but this learning opportunity is another way to engage with a community of people with similar interests. With everything going on in the Harbor, this is a space where we can form a subcommunity of Black girl nerds within the larger society of Endarkened people.

¹ See Bassard (1996) and Muhammad & Haddix (2016).

² The age range was chosen because scholars have noted the limited research centering middle-school-aged Black girls (Muhammad & Haddix, 2016; Neal-Jackson, 2018). The number of participants was chosen because six is the average number of girls in literacy studies centering Black girls, and eight is the number of girls that recurs most often in literacy research centering Black girls. I found this number by searching 19 research articles and identifying the number of participants represented in each study. Then, I used the numbers to find the mean and mode of the participants included in the studies.

³ I selected the initial texts for the workshop based on scholarship centering Afrofuturist authors. These writers include excerpts from authors categorized as Afrofuturists by public and academic scholarship, including Nnedi Okorafor (Marotta, 2018), Sherri Smith (Marotta, 2016), Octavia Butler (Barr, 2008; Jue, 2017), and Zetta Elliott (ONYX Pages, 2018). However, the texts changed once I engaged with the girls, and I added works by Nicola Yoon (Sera) and Tracey Baptiste (The Jumbies).

⁴ Alvermann (2000) argued that the narrative researcher’s presence in the research must be acknowledged from the start, as the researcher holds a lot of power in determining which stories to tell and how to tell them. As a Black adult woman in a doctoral program, I am situated in an insider-outsider position (Merriam, Johnson-Bailey, Lee, Kee, Ntseane, & Muhamad, 2001). My dominant identity as adult, my positionality as researcher and observer in the study, and other identity positions that may differ from the girls’ identities must be acknowledged. These thoughts are also shared in the “My Role as Narrative Facilitator” section of the Author’s Note.

⁵ Narrative data sources can include stories, autobiographical and journal writing, field notes, letters, conversations, interviews, nonfiction and fiction documents, family and friend interviews, audio and video recordings, and memory boxes (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Creswell & Poth, 2017; Riesmann, 2008). Because field texts are created by the researchers and research partners, not found or discovered (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000), the type of field texts collected will vary depending on the context of the field experience.

⁶ Clandinin and Connelly (2000) denigrated the reduction of narrative data into themes that make generalizable statements from participant’s stories, and they also state that data guides the analysis, not theory. Yet, their commentary does not consider the cultural collectivity that exists within certain groups, and it does not reflect the critical onto-epistemological stance that theory is an ordinary part of thinking and being in the world. Thus, because Black women’s writing has exhibited some collective traits across time, genre, and space, I believe themes can be

used to denote traditional connectivity as well as nuanced complexities that exist within Black girls' narratives and short stories. To learn more about this, read "Thinking through and with the data" in the Author's Note.

⁷ Pseudonyms for my research partners. My research partners chose to call themselves the Alfreda's based on a running joke that occurred during the workshop.

⁸ The following oral stories are taken from workshop transcript 1. Within this conversation is a discussion of issues within the US schooling system, namely testing, unfair punishment, and teachers/administrators who don't listen to student needs. As the girls speak about these issues, they comment on how these are barriers to justice because arbitrary testing criteria limits their secondary school (and future occupational) options and unfair punishment often causes many students to miss out on opportunities based on the actions of a few. Additionally, when teachers and administrators don't listen to students, but wield all of the power, it can deter students from speaking out against injustice because they don't want to lose what little privileges they do have.

⁹ See Carter (2006), Fordham (1993), and Morris (2007).

¹⁰ Responses to this question come from Interview 1.

CHAPTER 11

Getting to Know You

November 6, 2085

We decided to meet one day during the week to sit and talk before we started writing. When I got to the library, I saw Terrah and Avenae’J sitting at the oval table. There was no large audience today, and I was glad because I wanted to spend some time getting to know the girls better. When I sat down, the girls were looking over a weathered heartbeat bill document. The bill was passed in 2045 to ensure that GC could safeguard the production of their future workers. I’m pretty sure it wasn’t the first time the bill was introduced because regulations on women’s bodies is a historical occurrence that has never truly gone away. 2045 was the year that President Trence signed it into law, though, because this version provided loopholes for Dreamers. Rich people would have found loopholes anyway, but Trence decided to make it clearer. 2045 was also the year he decided to cancel the presidential term limit and stay in power. That is, until he handed it over to GC and their brother corporations.

“Oh my God, that bothers me.” Terrah exclaimed.¹

“That made me mad. I looked at it and... ugh!” Avenae’J groaned.

“So yeah,” Terrah replied. “They said as soon as a heartbeat is detected – which is like as early as six weeks, which isn’t very far into a pregnancy – like abortion is illegal. Sometimes, people aren’t aware that they are pregnant by six weeks, so how were they supposed to know? But anyway, me and my Harbor dad were talking this morning, and there was a book about abortion on our church bookshelf, so I brought up the whole abortion law, and I was like, ‘I just

think that's kind of dumb. It just doesn't make sense.' And he's like, 'yeah, people have their different opinions about abortion.' And we both kind of agreed that it's like a situational thing. So, depending on why you're pregnant or how the child is going to live.”

“We said that if the woman was raped,” Terrah continued, “then they shouldn't have to carry that child because it's not what they wanted. Or, if the child is going to suffer anyway, like if, the parent is a teenager or just, you know, doesn't have money or people to support them and help them through it, then why would they keep it because the child's just going to go into foster home or an orphanage, which isn't going to be much better. I think the other situation we said was if it was killing the woman because, you know, that's actually a life that has influenced the world already, and, you know, that child has not. What's sad is that it was just going to cause people to do unofficial abortions, and that just risks them dying as well. So, I feel like the death rate could have started going up.”

Avenae’J chimed in, “It could have killed the mother. You don't know until the baby actually has a heartbeat or is fully grown in your womb to know if it's going to kill you or not. So, if you had an abortion, you would still go to jail, but you might have been saving your life.”

“It's like one of those things where I'm protecting myself, but I'm still killing somebody, but I'm protecting myself.” Terrah responded.

“I'm also protecting the child cause if it kills me, then the child won't have a mother.” Avenae’J said.

“In a way...yea...it won't have a mother, and the child might die as well”

“They were just targeting women. They were just targeting women!”

“That's what it is!” Terrah agreed. “It's oppression against women! I feel like once men start getting pregnant and carrying children and going through everything, then they can decide the laws, but until then, that's not fair. They should not get to decide what is wrong.”

The bill was passed decades ago, but I see that the girls feel strongly about the bill and its implications. We all do. Sadly, GC lowered the number of weeks again. Now, abortions are illegal after two weeks. The girls might not have heard because they've been down here. Still, they're right. The bill targeted non-men, and none of us were consulted. There were and are so many gray areas the bill didn't make clear, ensuring that the interpretation of the law is left in the hands of whoever is in charge. Their mood could decide one's sentencing. I'm glad the girls are discussing and critiquing it amongst themselves and with their Harbor families, but it saddens me that this is such a major concern for them.

“Yo, did you see the straight flag?” Victoria said as she and Talyn burst into the library, running directly toward the table. “Did you see the straight flag? It's so ugly! It's white and black and striped. It is so ugly! Oh my god.”

“Hold up. I didn't see that yet.” Amber said as she ran behind Victoria.

“It's black and white.” Terrah blurted.

“It has black and white stripes and it has something between the stripes, and I'm like why did you need to do this? Just because you didn't feel included?” Talyn exclaimed.

“It is so ugly!” Victoria repeated.

“Straight pride?” Avenae'J asked.

“It's so funny,” Talyn responded, “like do you really need a straight flag? Like, they felt left out, so they made their own flag. They felt so un-included that they felt like they needed a flag.”

“Do you really need a straight flag?” Terrah joked.

“That lowkey looks like a Nazi flag.” Avenae’J laughed.

“It looks like it belongs in a prison.” Terrah joked.

“I’m guessing y’all didn’t know about that one.” I said laughing with them.

“All I knew about was the flag.” Victoria said.

“Ooooooh... it says make America straight again... oh no!” Amber declared.

“This is the ally straight flag, which is actually kind of cool.” Terrah commented as she pointed to another flag next to Victoria’s picture.

“I like that one better.” Amber responded.

“Yea... that one’s cute.” Victoria agreed.

“Why do you have to tell people you’re straight?” Avenae’J asked.

“I saw someone ask why we have a whole month for pride month when we only have one day for veterans.” Amber recounted. “I was like, ‘well probably because they may have fought for us, but gay people, you put them down, so at least we have at least a month because we’ve been through a lot, too.’”

“There’s a reason we have our pride parades,” Terrah shared, “and that’s because you guys made us feel as though we couldn’t be prideful about ourselves.”

“Exactly” Amber and Victoria said simultaneously.

“You guys have always been prideful about yourselves.” Terrah remarked.

I decided to join the conversation since this was supposed to be a co-learning thing after all. “You just have people who want to counter anytime someone from a target group decides they want to bring community together to be prideful of who they are or to protest certain things.

Somebody on the other side is always like, ‘no, you cannot be prideful. You cannot have community. You cannot do that.’”

“It's not just that,” Talyn said. “Sometimes, they just want the attention, and they want to be included. So, they make stupid things to feel included which is very bad.”

“That is so sad.” Victoria responded.

When I think about it, I see that the girls are worried about more than just schooling. Like the other members of the Harbor, the girls are concerned with critiquing all oppression in the world. I also see that the girls use humor to critique the need for a straight pride flag. It felt as though humor was a point of entry into a much deeper discussion because they moved from laughing about the flag’s ugliness to critiquing the negative aspects of the flag’s existence. They discussed their need to feel pride for themselves and how this flag diminishes their ability to show pride in their own identities. Although I would have probably continued to make jokes because I use humor to assist with the pain, the girls choose love. Both Talyn and Victoria commented on how the perceived need for a straight flag is a sad occurrence. They seemed to pity them more than they were angry with them.

“You know what I hate?” Avenae’J complained as she changed the subject. “I hate store clerks.”

“I thought it was just me!” Victoria said.

“Oh my God!” Amber agreed, putting her face in her hands.

“I hate the ones who just follow you around the store.” Avenae’J continued. “It's like, ‘Do you need help? What are you trying to look for?’ I swear that's always happening to me. I'm just like ‘leave me alone!’ I remember this one guy. I was just standing there looking around

because I wasn't going to buy anything, and he just like kept scaring me because he kept saying, 'do you want anything?' Like, 'no! Please leave me alone!'"

"Same!" Terrah related. "Ok... did anyone else ever feel self-conscious about walking out of the store empty-handed?"

"I felt that way! It's like 'I'm so sorry for not buying anything'" Avenae'J replied.

"I felt like they thought I was stealing something!" Amber declared.

"Oh... I'm not the only person who thought that way?" Talyn questioned.

"Why would y'all be scared to walk out?" I asked. "You didn't want anything."

"Like okay," Talyn said, "The thing is usually when people walk out with nothing, it's like they stole something, or you assume they stole something, or you think that the workers think you stole something. So, when you walk out the store with nothing, you feel bad and awkward because you don't know if someone thinks you stole something or not."

"Here's what happens to me," Terrah shared. "I get really awkward cuz I feel like people think I'm walking out of the store stealing something. So, then I try to smile and make it look like I'm not stealing something, but then it just makes it look like I'm trying to steal something."

"For real," Victoria agreed. "Because it looks like you're trying to hide that you stole something, but you really didn't steal anything. You're just saying, 'I didn't steal anything.'"

"I'm innocent." Avenae'J claimed.

"Do you think everybody feels this way?" I asked.

"A *lot* of people feel this way." Terrah answered.

"Yea! A few people feel this way." Victoria added.

“We went to a store,” Amber said, “and this Dreamer, she was kind of racist because she kept staring at us because we're Endarkened... because we're Black. The lady kept looking like we stole something.”

As they were talking, I thought about how they were always mentioning surveillance. Whether they were at HOME or just existing in the world, there seemed to be no way to get rid of the scrutiny. They couldn't even go to a store without feeling obligated to purchase something. I know this feeling, the sense that everywhere you go, someone watches you to make sure you know that you don't belong. GC portrays Endarkened people as louts, so Dreamers believe that we cannot enter a place of business without stealing something. We are consistently surveilled because of the color of our skin.² This has happened to me, too, but it's hard to hear about it from people so young. It's hard to hear that they are categorized as criminals so early.

But these girls are so much more than the negative experiences they've had, so much more than the damaging narratives GC uses to define them. They must have rich lives that go beyond these narratives. How might they share these aspects of their lives? How do they see the implications of their words, their stories? I wanted to know because I see the telling of their stories as an act of justice because they are talking against GC and creating new narratives about themselves. I wondered if they saw it the way I did, so I asked. “Everything you all have been talking about in the last day or so seems to focus on social justice. Edi gave me a book that talked about it, but since I'm here to learn with you, too, I wanted to know your definition of social justice?”³

“Social justice?” Terrah inquired. “I'd say just everyone being treated like they're human. People always talk about freedom and equality, but I don't think a lot of people realize what equality means. I think if people could learn to understand that equality is everyone being treated

the same way, no matter their race, gender, sexuality, all that stuff, then we will reach social justice. But until then, it's just not going to work.”

“For example, the abortion laws are taking away women's right to control their own body, and it affects me. It affects a lot of people. I know Alabama passed a law where abortion was completely outlawed, no matter the case, and that affects people who were raped or who are teenagers and don't want to be pregnant. That shouldn't mean they should be forced to grow up with this thing. I couldn't imagine trying to be a mom at my age. It would just be heartbreaking.”

“I wouldn't have much of a definition if I'm being honest.” Amber said. “But I can pull the two words apart. Social, I'd say everyone coming together, and at least being nice and helping each other instead of making people feel bad and putting each other down. Because, that's what everyone's doing right now, especially in HOMEs.”

“I guess when everyone lets other people be who they are without judging them as much or judging people out loud.” Bailey added. “They can judge in their heads as long as they don't say anything to other people, I guess.”

“Just making sure that the person who did the crime did the thing that's wrong.” Talyn commented. “That's what they deserve whether that be a sack to the face or a kick to the balls. It does not matter as long as they get punished for the actions.”

“I think I would say people being allowed to be who they are.” Victoria said. “Like you look at the news now, and you see people having to be scared because they're Black or people having to be scared because they're in the LGBTQ community or whatever. I am who I am. Why can't you accept me for who I am? People being scared of Black people because of some type of stereotype of ‘Oh they wear their pants too low, so they must be gangsters,’ or ‘I have to hold my purse because I don't know if they'll rob me or something,’ or ‘I don't understand gay people, so

I'm against them.' It's kind of like, 'you are this, and I don't understand you, so I'm either going to be afraid of you, or I'm going to hate you.' And me, being who I am, a 14-year-old who is African American and bisexual at the same time, I see all this going on around me, and I'm not scared for being who I am. But at the same time, it's like you never know what could happen."

"Like," she continued, "My best friend is a pansexual person, and we're in the same year. She came out as bi in our sixth year, and the bullying was horrible. I was scared to come out myself, so I waited until the early stage of seventh year to come out. When people realized that, it was okay. But in sixth year, I guess they didn't understand the community or whatever, so the bullying was horrible. It came to a point where she used to have to cut. We eventually got her to stop, of course, but you would see the scars on her arms. Or, she didn't wear shorts because she had them on her thighs. It actually hurt me and my friends a lot because we didn't want to see her going through what she was going through. But at the same time, we didn't know how to help her because people are going to be people. You can't tell them what to think or what to feel."

"I also think it's where people are able to be themselves." Avenae'J claimed. "That's just my definition of it. Like, social justice is where people are able to be themselves and not worry about other people doing anything. A lot of people can't be themselves because they don't think anyone will approve of them. We just need people being able to be themselves out in the world. Like, if they're gay or if they're a lesbian, they can go out and hold hands with their girlfriend or boyfriend and go on dates and not have to worry about people staring at them, or coming up and slapping them, or being extremely rude to them."

The girls seemed quite concerned with ensuring that people in the world were allowed to embrace their full selves without fear of ostracization or retaliation. It's that idea of the commonweal again. They focused on race, gender, sexuality, and community. They wanted

freedom and equality for all. There was also a requirement for niceness that they brought about in their answers. Bailey, for example, wanted people to be able to be themselves without judgment, but she also thought people could continue judging as long as they kept it to themselves. Amber explicitly said that social justice was equated to people being nice. Still, I wondered how they saw themselves participating in this type of thing, so I said, “You all have such varied definitions, but I also see many connections among them. Keeping those definitions in mind, how do you see yourselves, if you do, participating in social justice movements?”

“I see myself as a person who can empathize with others who have been through it even if I haven't been through it myself.” Talyn responded. “I think I can understand what it's like to feel like you've been in the wrong because you're a certain age or a certain type of person, you're this color, you're this gender, you identify as this person, and you like this certain thing. I can understand that, and I feel like I can get to some of the people who don't. I can help them understand because not everyone is always informed. I know a guy from HOME, who was like, ‘aren't all gay people rapists?’ And my friends and I were like ‘no.’ That's not what that is. We said, ‘They are people. They are people who like the same gender.’ He was like ‘Oh ok.’ So, it was just a misunderstanding because someone probably told him something like that, and I'm like, “that person's wrong.””

Terrah added, “If I were able to go out to marches and stuff I would, because it's a good way to stand up for what you believe in without hurting anybody. There's just so much that people in the world don't accept about people's identities, and the quicker they learn to accept some of these things, the easier it will be for them.”

“I'd see myself trying to speak up,” Amber confided, “but then at the same time, I don't know how I'm going to do that because I don't like talking in front of a very public place. I'm still

shy no matter how much I talk, so me speaking up, I wouldn't say a lot. I'd get the jitters trying to talk, and then I wouldn't say everything. Then, when I walk away, I'd be like, 'I could have said more.'”

“Honestly, I don't think I've ever been in a protest.” Victoria shared. “I mean, there's always a movement focused on justice for this person and justice for that person. And I'm like, ‘Yeah, they do deserve justice because their killer shot them or they're still out there kidnapped.’ But at the same time, I don't think I've ever done anything about it.”

“I wouldn't be in any parades or anything.” Bailey stated. “I'd probably just agree with what they were saying and go on with what I was doing. I probably won't have to do anything like that since I'm going to be a doctor when I grow up, or a writer. I'm going to either be at the hospital, or at book signings, or whatever.”

“Right now,” Avenae’J said, “I’m just showing people that I can be smart and that I can be sweet, and that I’m not going to rub it in their face and I’m not going to make them feel bad. I’m showing that Black people can be smart; we can lead; we can be kind; we can be anything. We can be anything that we want to be. Basically, everyone can be. We’re not just restricted. GC and its followers have never taken the time to actually get to know us. I’m just trying to show that we’re smart and we’re beautiful and we’re just like you.”

I wasn't ready for their answers. I never seem to be ready when people tell me things. They approached my questions in open and authentic ways, and each time, I was learning to see something about the world that I hadn't seen before. An answer Terrah gave me the other day had also been taking up space in my mind. She said that they had never written down their experiences with schooling, but I wondered if they'd written about their other social justice experiences. What would they write about when we began to focus on writing our Afrofuturist

stories? Thinking through the possibilities brought me joy, and I realized that working with this group of girls was going to be more fun than I initially thought it would be. Still, there was one thing that had bothered me since we started our session this morning, something I didn't notice the other day: why did each girl have one blue and one brown eye?

¹ Conversations in this section were taken from workshop transcript 2 and 5.

² See Wissman (2007) and Fisher, Purcell, and May (2016).

³ Responses to the two questions in this section are taken from the girls' first individual interviews.

CHAPTER 12

Writing the Future

November 7, 2085

I have about a month and a half to work with the girls before I have to send Charles an update letter, so I wanted to make sure that we had enough time to actually get something written down. Before I could co-create a writing space, though, I needed some help. I wanted to center Black women's fiction writing, but I had no idea how to do it. I decided to go to Edi for assistance because she always seems to have helpful words of advice.

I walked into the library to see Edi sitting at a small table in the middle of the room. She was working on something, but I couldn't figure out what it was at a distance. I could only tell that there were several pictures of monkeys strewn about the table.

"Hi, Edi! How are you?" I asked.

"I'm doing well, sis. I'm just working on some research I've been analyzing for a while. It's a look at the depiction of Black children as monkeys in youth literature. You'd be surprised by how much there is."¹

"After being here for a couple of months, not much surprises me anymore. I should have known better because I worked for Altered Truth, but somehow, I didn't. It's hard to see beyond the oppressive mist created by GC."

"This is true. I've been here for quite some time, and I still find new things. GC's socialization machine is huge!"

“Exactly. Along those lines, I was wondering if you could help me out. I think Kenny and Trinity told you I’d be working with a few of the girls on the weekends, and although I have a few ideas, I wanted to know if you had a resource that could help me to figure out some fiction writing exercises we could do. I don’t want to teach fiction writing, but I want tasks we can accomplish to help us better the fiction writing skills we already have.”

“Hmm. I think I have something for you. Stay right here.”

She crossed the room and headed to a big bookshelf next to the front door of the library. I hardly ever look at that bookshelf because it’s always behind me when I walk in. Maybe I should start paying more attention to things that are not directly in my view. She walked back over and handed me a black-bound book. So many of the books are bound in Black, just like the Parable book Elonnie gave to me. I guess most of the books come from GC contraband smuggled in by librarians, Harbor residents, and co-conspirators, so it makes sense.

“This should do.” She said.

I read the cover aloud, “Free within Ourselves: Fiction Lessons for Black Authors by Jewell Parker Rhodes.² So these are fiction lessons specifically catered to Black authors?”

“Yep! It’s pretty great, huh? Jewell knew that we needed other ways of thinking about fiction, other ways of thinking about the knowledge we already have to create our stories. Look through there, I’m pretty sure you’ll find some things you can use.”

I began to read the preface, and I was amazed by Jewell’s words. In the opening paragraphs, she says that Black people have an incredibly rich and bittersweet history to draw upon and that we share ourselves and our history through our spoken and written words. She says that Black people have thrived in the midst of oppression, and our words are celebrations of

our flourishing. What stands out to me most, however, is the closing paragraphs of the preface. She says:

You cannot be a great writer if you're afraid to live. And living a life colored by a unique heritage is truly glorious! Celebrate your body, soul, and culture. Even when you're experiencing and writing about hardships and horrors, there is grace in your spirit and among our people... As a writer you have the opportunity to explore what it means to be human, to conjure through words those passions, those spirits which are important to you and which echo the legacy of our people.³

Tears welled up in my eyes. I knew that the people of the Harbor celebrated themselves and their Black histories. I knew that there was conversation about the hardships they experienced before arriving, and I knew that there was talk about how to ensure that our other sibs, sisters, and brothers are somehow freed from the clutches of GC's reign of terror. Still, I had never heard anyone say outright that celebrating our cultural ties and collective histories through writing was a way of living. I want to write to create myself. I want to write as a way of living. In some ways, I think this journal is doing just that.

"Thank you," I tell Edi.

"Anytime. Just remember to move out of the way and let those girls write their lives. Use the exercises that Jewell created to help them pursue the grace of their spirit and the justice of their dreams. It's already within them. They have a long historical legacy of literary greatness. Write with them. Learn from them. Let their knowledge guide you." Edi mentioned as she sat back down at her worktable.

"I'll try my best." I replied.

November 10, 2085

I wanted to begin today's learning session with a question that would help me see what social justice issues were most salient for the girls. So far, they'd discussed racism, homophobia, sexism, and ageism in the context of school and community. I wondered what they would say if I asked them directly. When I walked to our table, they were already deep in conversation. I swear, every time I have an idea of how our sessions will begin, they upend my plans and start our meetings in their own way. That's pretty cool.

"Didn't they take a picture of a kid putting something in the amnesty box?" Talyn asked.

"You're not supposed to take pictures of people without consent. You're supposed to ask permission before you do that." Terrah replied.

"They took a picture! They took a picture of a kid putting something in the amnesty box." Talyn responded.

"What's an amnesty box?" I queried. I had never heard of such a thing in the HOMEs. I mean, I can guess what it is based on context, but I'm not sure why FirstHOME students would need an official pardon for any reason.

"An amnesty box" Victoria said, "is for... if you have something you're not supposed to have at school. You put it in the amnesty box, and they'll forgive you for it, but it's supposed to be anonymous. Nobody is supposed to know you put it in there. Basically, you're not supposed to take pictures of someone."

"I don't think my school had one of those." Terrah said.

"It was in the hallway to our cafeteria, just sitting there." Talyn responded.

"I think ours was hidden in this little section of the hallway. In the front door, there was this hallway that went to the left, and it was hidden in that corner. I don't think anyone ever used it." Terrah considered.

“Ours was in plain sight.” Talyn confirmed.

“No one used ours.” Avenae’J added.

“Ours had a picture of enforcers.” Amber exclaimed.

Victoria said, “if you walked to the front of our school, and you went to our connections wing, the amnesty box was just sitting there. Nobody knew what it was, though, because they didn’t have a sign over it or nothing. It was just a black box that looked like a mailbox, and you just put stuff in it.”

“It’s supposed to be for weapons.” Amber declared.

“Like, if someone brings a lighter to school, they could put it in there” Talyn concurred. “If you brought drugs to school, then you were going to put it in there.”

“Someone put some trash in there before,” Victoria laughed, “and I was like, ‘that’s not what that for.’ And they were like, ‘it doesn’t say that.’ And I was like, ‘that’s the amnesty box’ and they’re like, ‘it doesn’t say that.’”

“I’ve never heard of this thing.” I said. It was weird that GC believed Endarkened students would bring weapons or other illegal paraphernalia to the HOMEs. I mean, even if they brought something to the school, accidentally or otherwise, would they be willing to put the items in a box controlled and monitored by the observers? Also, the presence of an enforcer photo attached to the box implied that it wasn’t an amnesty box. Instead, it was another way to police and surveil the students under the guise of forgiveness. I guess that’s why the kids just put trash in it because the whole concept was trash.

“So, I think this conversation is a good segue into what we’ve been doing, especially since we got a lot going on in the HOMEs terms of the one-for-all policies, these amnesty box things that I have never heard of, and dress codes. So, to start us out, I want to do an activity. I’d

like you to make a list of some social justice issues that you see in the world. The issue can be as small or large as you'd like, from a sibling getting on your nerves to global warming. Next, I want you to pick one issue that you think needs to be fixed right now. From there, think about what will happen if we don't fix this issue in 10 or 50 years. Sound good?"⁴

The girls nodded, and some were already writing things down. It was peculiar to me to see the girls using pen and paper so freely when everything was digitized above ground. However, I know that using too much technology means that the Harbor could be hacked, their secrets revealed to GC. Of course, there are computers available in the library because they have to connect with other Harbors and co-conspirators, but I noticed that they were used sparingly, and I noticed that there weren't enough for all of us to use.

We wrote for about 20 minutes, and then Amber decided to share first. "I'll name some of them, the bigger ones. Discrimination against women sometimes, and a lot of the time, it's Black women who still aren't getting treated fairly. The crime rates are going up. I mostly see young or older black men. That's what I see on the news. Everything that I've written down is actually what I used to read or see on the news. Crime rates was actually one of the biggest things that I chose."

"In 10 years," she continued, "the crime rates could go higher, death could occur more often, violence and gangs showing out more. In 50 years, I think peace could try and grow, but it's not going to be as strong as we really want it. In a bad way, I'd say war because most of the time it's off of conflict, and conflict can turn into war. Then, crime could go even higher than how it was. I have some other things, but those are some of the major things I wrote down. I was writing this essay at FirstHOME, and it was mostly talking about discrimination, and it's not just

against one race. It's also against sexuality. It's against ethnicity, culture. It's everything. It's not just one specific thing, but that was one of the main focuses I had.”

“I have something. It doesn't completely correlate with crime rate, though.” Terrah said. “I remember you mentioning something about Black men being a huge part of this. Like you mainly see them in it, and I just remembered I saw this post about these three Black men. So, this white guy driving a truck hit three Black men who were walking across the street, and the Black men were the ones that ended up getting arrested because they weren't wearing clear safety stuff, and I'm like, ‘that doesn't make any sense. Why are they getting arrested for that?’ They didn't do anything except walk across the street, which anybody could do.”

“Oh, there's another thing.” Victoria added. “There was a movie or a show, and it was about three boys or four boys that got accused of raping and killing a lady, and they were falsely accused, so you might want to watch that.”

“I watched that about a month after I first got here. It’s called When They See Us.”⁵ I chimed in. “Also, Amber, I know you said that you saw a lot of it on the news. Think about who makes the news and what stories they may put on there more often than others because, of course, they choose what stories they want to share. If they're trying to paint certain people in a certain way, then they can share more of one type of story than others. So, we can think about that too.”

I didn’t want to say specifics, like how Altered Truth was probably responsible for the newscasts that they had seen. News reporting had changed from what it was when it was first formed. It used to focus on various happenings within a specific locale, but overtime, it began to rely on sensationalism. Analyzing the content presented to us onscreen wasn’t a focus in the

HOMEs because it caused us to ask too many questions. Instead, they just left it to the masses to figure it out. Some could see through the drivel, but not everyone had those skills.

Terrah continued the discussion. “Ok, so in big letters I wrote under-representation because a big thing to me is people not getting represented for what they need to be represented for. I have a bunch of subcategories. My other one was people being told to act or people saying that people are acting like a color. Like you say, ‘you’re acting Black,’ and it just doesn’t make sense to me. But I went with underrepresentation, and I kind of put a subcategory to help me know who really doesn’t get a lot of attention in the press and stuff, or who is discriminated against.”

“Like good attention?” Victoria asked.

“So, like bad attention.” Terrah answered. “So, I said Blacks, women, disabled people, the LGBTQ+ community, and sexual assault victims. Those are like the main things I have. So, in 10 years, I said the people who are overrepresented are going to have too much power, and the underrepresented are going to start lashing out, probably causing a war. Then I said in 50 years, people have now separated themselves into factions, so the community they’re in matches like who they are.”

“It is true what you’re talking about.” Victoria said. “Like the disabled and LGBTQ+ and the sexual assault because sexual assault victims don’t get that much press. If you think about it, like they’ll talk about it for maybe a week, and it’ll be done with, and then they’ll be like, ‘okay don’t care anymore.’”

“Okay. It’s my turn, right?” Victoria asked as she moved the conversation from Terrah’s writing to her own. “So, some of the problems or issues I wrote are poverty, racism, hate crimes, violence, homophobic people – because they are a problem in themselves, murder, mental

illness, suicide, more kids going into the system like foster care, more people in jail, and bullying. The one that I starred was suicide, and this one was hard for me. For 10 years later, I put that there will be no real future because death rates would skyrocket, and the economy would sink. There would be no more of the human race, and no one to save the planet from full destruction. For 50 years later, I put that the remaining people will live on space, and everyone will have to be alike, and if you're mentally ill, you will not be able to harm yourself, which means you would literally be guarded by someone every day that you're on wherever you are."

"You could also talk about bullying as well," Avenae'J said.

"Yea. It's a main cause of suicide," Talyn added.

"I think they co-exist with each other." Victoria agreed.

"I think you can feed that into there because a lot of people get depression because of that," Terrah said sadly.

"I would also look into," I said, "like which groups are committing suicide more than others because that would be something that you could tie into a story because there is a lot of information about who. That may even affect your 10 year and your 50 year because everyone is not committing suicide, but there are certain people who are, so looking into that might help."

"I did it wrong." Talyn uttered. "So, I didn't write about the 10-year thing and the 50-year thing. I just erased all of it. Like, not erased, but I crossed it out, so I have nothing to share.

"Okay." I said, "hopefully you will have something to share later?"

"I will." Talyn replied.

Avenae'J decided to share what she wrote next. "Okay, so there's murders of certain races, genders, or ethnicities, not because they did anything but just because you feel a certain way towards that group. Observers are giving every student 50s just because of the one-for-all

thing. There are also social issues or important issues, such as murders, that are not talked about because it relates to different races, genders, or ethnicities, and then people don't talk about it until other people start talking about it. Most people only talk about it because they don't want to look bad. I also wrote racism towards people because other people are racist. Like, I hate that so much. People are just like, 'just because that person is racist, I'm just going to be racist, too, even though you like them.' Then I put bullying.”

“I went with the social issues thing” she continued. “I don't know why, but that's like really important to me. So, I went real into this. In 10 years, there will be more murders of certain ethnicities, races, or genders because people think that they can because it's not being talked about. Racism would grow out of hate because they hate certain things or groups. Then, in 50 years there will be a civil war between groups. A solution to that would be that people have to cover their entire bodies from head to toe, so no one can tell their color, race, gender, or ethnicity. People have to speak and be spoken to in a certain way, so no one can tell an accent or deepened voice. If they cannot speak in that way, they'll have a genetically modified voice or robot speak for them. No one can date or have feelings whatsoever, and no one can represent their religion.”

“I can see a movie and also a book made out of that idea!” Talyn praised.

“Yeah. That's a really cool idea. Like, that's great.” Terrah agreed.

“I think you could also bring up the point that if a white person were to murder somebody, it wouldn't be like talked about very often, but if like a Black person were to kill somebody, then automatically it's all over the news.” Terrah murmurs. “You see it everywhere. It's the only thing people are talking about for weeks on end.”

“I’ll do mine.” Bailey said, breaking the sadness of the topic. “So, I chose poverty because my brain wasn’t working, so I didn’t think of a lot of other stuff. I said that in 10 years, if we didn’t fix it, then something might happen to where the government or whoever’s in power might think there’s an overpopulation problem, and then they would enslave the people who have no place to stay. And then in 50 years, they’ll probably start killing people or maybe helping the people who are about to be homeless or whatever.”

“So, I have something I want to say.” Terrah commented. “You already kind of have a plot line for your story, but I kind of thought of something while you were sharing. I think a cool idea – because you said they would be enslaving the people who are in poverty – would be to take it from somebody. It could be anybody who is one of those people who is rich but has a place to stay. They recognize all the poverty, and they’re just trying to help all the people who are being enslaved out of it...”

“Kind of like an abolitionist but for poverty!” Avenae’J interjected excitedly.

“Yeah. It’s kind of like, you know, ‘here, I’ll, I’ll take you in, I’ll give you a job at my house or whatever, and I’ll pay you.’” Terrah added.

“You could also do like a before the Civil War type scenario, like where the slaves are starting an uprising, that type of thing.” Talyn suggested.

“Yea, you could do that too.” Terrah agreed.

“You could also make it something else where they’re saving the people by taking them where they’re not being enslaved.” Avenae’j proposed.

“Take them to Canada.” Talyn said earnestly.

“Yea...I don’t like America even though I was born here.” Amber interjected.

“She literally just jumps into it... ‘I don’t like America,’” Victoria laughed.

“Me neither,” Terrah responded.

“I like America. I like the opportunities that are here. It's a good thing, but a bad thing at the same time. Like, it offers the opportunities of being creative and having more options, but people are also bad, and that's probably because we have freedom of speech and writing and all that stuff, like almost all of the freedoms, I'm guessing. And, anyone can almost do anything here, and that's kind of a problem. And the fact that there are so many different types of people – different types of races and ethnicities – it makes some people angry.” Talyn asserted.

“I hate America.” Avenae’J said.

“America is everything except for, I guess, racially good.” Talyn pointed out.

“I wish I were born somewhere else.” Avenae’J added.

“I wish I were born somewhere else. I don't like America.” Terrah shared.

Talyn, disagreeing, said, “I like America for the opportunities.”

“I wish I was born in the UK,” Victoria remarked.

“I want to be born in Latin America,” Avenae’J said “because I know so much about Latin American culture that I should've been born there.”

“I wish I was born in Canada.” Terrah said. “I'm moving to Canada because Canada is a better country than America.”

“You'll have to get used to the metric system.” Talyn chided.

“I already know the metric system” Terrah retorted.

As I listened to the banter arising from the reading of their written words, I realized just how much of a collaborative environment this was. Even though we were talking about issues that were important to them individually, the girls also provided assistance to their sisters, helping them to delve more deeply into the issues. They were using their everyday experiences –

watching films, watching the news, reading books, and living in the world – as a way to teach. No one immediately looked toward textbooks or online resources. Instead, they relied on their personal experiences. They built off one another. They listened to each other's suggestions.

In the midst of this exchange, though, I couldn't help but notice how many of them expressed hatred toward this country. I know America shows them every day that they are not welcomed, so I'm not surprised that they feel this way. Talyn said there are more opportunities here than in other parts of the world, but the other girls would rather be elsewhere, in Canada, Latin America, or the UK. Sadly, anti-Endarkened sentiment exists globally.⁶ Something I picked up on is that no one mentioned leaving America and going to Africa. It made sense because many people see non-African countries as beacons of hope and progress. Africa is consistently described as a land of lack, as a country even though it's a continent. It's funny, how the same continent seen as lacking is one in which many non-African countries take resources.

"I guess it's my turn." I said. I'm pretty sure I'd been lost in my thoughts for too long. "Some of the problems I wrote down, were racism, representation, religious oppression, body shaming, Endarkened mothers dying, and then the myth of Endarkened pain tolerance."

"What?!" Terrah yelped.

"Yeah. That is not a thing." Victoria added.

"Basically," I answered, "in some nursing books there are things that say Black people can handle more pain, so they don't need as much care."⁷

"Um... that's not true." Victoria disagreed.

"That's not true." Terrah said. "That's really not true. I have no pain tolerance."

"I can't tolerate pain." Amber responded.

"Probably the only pain tolerance I have is shots." Avenae'J offered.

“Well, the biggest one I put was representation,” I continued. “I decided to focus specifically on Black people, so I said in 10 years we still see Black people in civil rights and history movies, and they’ll always have a white savior in it. I said people will think of anything with Black people in fantasies and futures as not possible. Then, I said in 50 years, Black people will forget how to dream or how to think of these futuristic or fantastic things, not just lose their access to them.”

“Ugh.” Terrah interjected.

“Everything is going to have a white savior.” Amber said. “It is very true because every show I watch it’s like ‘Oh, there goes that white guy. Oh no, he’s going to save us. Great. I could have done that. No, I couldn’t have in the story they wrote, huh?’”

“You were talking about how the Caucasian guy will save African Americans, and it’s like very predictable.” Avenae’J said. “I really hate that because you think it’s going to be the one way, and then you see a Caucasian guy come in, and then it’s like, ‘oh, we know how this is going to end.’”

“Like, everyone in the theater’s just like simultaneously says that.” Talyn added.

“It’s like ‘Oh my god, we finally have a Black movie!’” Sees a white guy, collective sigh.” Terrah explained, mimicking the dejection that rests on Endarkened faces when they see another white savior in a Black movie.

“We’re not trying to be rude, but it’s so predictable. Can they change it up a bit, so we can be surprised for once?” Avenae’J questioned.

“What if it’s like a white civilization and then a Black man comes and saves them all.” Terrah asked.

“They’re not gonna do that,” Amber answered.

“That would be unpredictable,” Avenae’J replied.

“They did it in the Avengers,” Amber interrupted. “It used to be that all of them were white, and then this Black guy comes in and helps...but... he barely gets that much time on the screen.”

“Helps,” Terrah said. “emphasis on the word helps.”

I welcomed the girls’ commentary, especially because I didn’t expect them to talk with me the same way they talk to each other. I feel like it’s my unofficial welcome into the group. I mean, yes, I am a part of the workshop, but I still felt a barrier between us because I’m a newcomer. They didn’t initially speak to me as if I was a part of the group. After their commentary, I don’t feel that way anymore.

I’m also starting to see how much they read, not only text, but the world.⁸ Just like they did with each other, used their everyday experiences to help me think through my ideas. They said how much they disliked white savior narratives, critiquing how the Dreamers always save the Endarkened from ourselves. They talked about how predictable stories focused on white people are because those stories are told most often. Even when Terrah tried to present a possible counter to the norm, Amber let her know that GC would never allow that. And, when Amber attempted to provide a counter using the Black Panther film, Terrah was the one to show her that the Black characters never get to save the day. They just help the white person become the hero of the story.

November 11, 2085

I got to the library almost five minutes later than I normally do, and the girls were already in deep discussion when I arrived. Talking about ourselves and about the things we’re interested in was how we consistently began our meetings, so it was now structured into our meeting time.

Sometimes, I kind of felt like my presence as the writing person, as the adult, sometimes interrupted their conversations. It's not like they stopped talking about a topic just because I entered the space, but because we had limited time, I knew I was reducing the amount of conversation time to make sure that our stories were eventually written.

“Wait, am I the only one...” Talyn began. “Okay, so me and Avenae’J had a guy in our class. We were in the A class, so we're like the smartest.”⁹

“We were the people who actually cared about things, so that's probably the only reason why we're the smartest class. We actually cared about learning.” Avenae’J added.

“Yea, we learned at a quicker pace than everyone else, and then one of the people who was the most ignorant and rude person in the class knew how to spell supercalifragilisticexpialidocious. He spelled that, and I'm like, "you're actually smart?" Talyn questioned.

“Yea, he won the spelling Bee that we had in class. The two people everyone least expected to win won, and then they were like, ‘oh no, we don't want to be in the spelling Bee,’ and we're like...” Avenae’J tossed her hands up in confusion.

“All of those people who actually wanted to do that.” Amber said softly.

“Yeah, me and everyone else.” Avenae’J groaned. “I wanted to be in Spelling Bee, so I cried when I didn't because I was beating everyone before, and so I cried.”

While they continued to talk about the Spelling Bee, I got lost in my thoughts. I tend to do that a lot, I realize, because the conversations the girls have are so thought provoking. Like, I don't remember Spelling Bees being a major part of my academic identity. I never cared if I was the top speller or if I was in the A class even though I was always told that being in the “good” class was a great thing. I do know about the increased pressure placed on Endarkened children in

the higher-tracked classes, though. There's a mindset that the observers instill into to each child to make them believe that they are smarter, better, and care more about their learning than everyone else. I think that's how GC maintains division and makes sure no one asks questions. If we're placed on specific tracks because we inherently deserve it, not because the system is flawed and refuses to acknowledge the genius inherent in each Endarkened body, then, of course, we start to believe that those of us in the A classes are the only ones who care.¹⁰

I hate that the girls experienced this type of pressure, and I hate that they were socialized to believe that they were the only kids who cared about their learning, especially since there are so many who are forced into the lower tracks just because the observers decided long ago that they weren't worth the effort. I'm also saddened to see how much pressure the girls faced, heaviness that caused Avenae'J to cry. How was this Spelling Bee publicized so that it maintained such a substantial position in her life? Why did the girls automatically assume that the boy, who they perceived as rude and ignorant, could not also be smart, especially if he, too, was a part of their A class? So many unanswered questions about this event, but the girls quieted their conversation. I wasn't going to learn more about it today. I could have asked a follow-up question, but I didn't want to probe. I think it's better to let the stories go when the girls no longer want to talk about them. I want to learn from them, but my learning shouldn't cause them to relive sad memories.

We continued the meeting by doing a few writing practices out of the book Edi gave me. We wrote about settings that we knew and remembered. We spent a few minutes creating characters, giving them life and spirit, and figuring out how they would act if certain conflicts arose. We played with plot by thinking about what could happen to our characters if we put them

into certain storylines. At the end, we analyzed our writing to figure out what tropes we kept focusing on in our writing activities.¹¹¹²

Victoria had to leave before we got to the last activity. There was a special celebration in the dining hall, and she was in charge of the cake. She said she could've waited, but she told us that she didn't trust the other girl to make the cake properly. Even with Victoria gone, the other girls and I decided to talk about our major focal areas before we left for the day.¹³

"A lot of the time, I'll either write about how I feel or how I felt and put it into the writing, or I'll put my common interests." Amber said. "Like, when we were writing about our characters, some of the things were probably things that I did or didn't like, and some of the things are from my past, but in a nicer way that others can either see."

"I do a lot of fantasy," Terrah mentioned, "like transporting myself into...not myself, but somebody into a new world. There's a lot of superpowers. My main characters are shy and nerdy, and then they're probably a part of a big family."

"I write about family a lot and being an outsider." I noted. "I pay attention to bright colors, and I always contrast it with darker colors. I write about Black people in pretty much everything."

"Uh, I think ... the power of the mind," Talyn acknowledged. "Then, I write about how things affect our outlook on life, how other people affect it, and how religion and family affect it as well."

"Um, mine are mostly about, um, characters that I premade but then I gave up on, so they usually come back here. Then, timelines that I already made and then gave up on because it didn't sound right, so I just brought that back, I guess." Bailey said quietly.

“I do a lot of like imagined futures or like my take on the future, the past, or what I think may happen, but probably won’t happen – unrealistic, realistic, imagined things,” Avenae’J said. “Like, what could happen *could* happen, but because we have all the rules and the laws that we have, it couldn’t happen. And then, I also put a lot of pieces of myself into the story, like into my characters and then like what’s happening to me into my stories.”

After we talked about our themes, we decided that it might be time to actually write our speculative stories. We tended to work collaboratively, so we made the decision to continue working together in our story creation. From this point forward, we’d focus on two stories each week, one on Saturday and the other on Sunday. On Sundays, we’d help our sister flesh out ideas, if that’s what she needed. If she didn’t need that, we’d just listen to whatever she wanted to tell us about her story. Then, on the following Saturday, we’d listen to the speculative fiction story she created. In some ways, we’d have an author reading each week, and each story would be both personal and collaborative.

I really liked this plan because I’d be able to get some behind the scenes information about the story. It’s a way for me to see things that I might not have been able to see just by reading it. It’ll also give me time to learn more about the girls individually. How did they get here? What are their lives like? What do they care and worry about? What do they fear? What brings them joy? I asked the girls if I could meet with them individually during the week. I wouldn’t meet with everyone *every* week; I’d just meet with the person telling their story on Saturday. In our smaller meeting, I could learn a little more about them, and maybe, connecting their personal story to their fiction story will help me figure out how to see the unseen.

Bailey wanted to go first because she created her story based on other stories she’d created in the past. Because we made the decision to alter our writing group focus, we’re adding

a Wednesday session this week to provide feedback before she reads her story on Saturday.

Because the meetings are kind of condensed for the first week, Bailey said we could meet up on Tuesday. I'm excited to learn from her.

¹ See Campbell (2019).

² See Rhodes (1999)

³ Ibid., p. 3-4

⁴ The following conversation is taken from transcripts 1 and 5.

⁵ When They See Us is a drama television miniseries that centers the trial and release of the Central Park Five, Black boys who were wrongfully accused of killing a white woman in 1989.

⁶ Sexton and Upton (2003) note that antiblack sentiment is a worldly endeavor.

⁷ In 2017, Inside Higher Ed (Jaschik, 2017) reported that *Nursing: A Concept-Based Approach to Learning*, a nursing textbook noted Black people report a higher pain intensity and believe that pain is inevitable.

⁸ See Freire & Macedo (1987).

⁹ The following conversation is taken from transcripts 1 and 4.

¹⁰ Muhammad (2019) states that K-12 educators often overlook the genius of their Black and Brown students, often reverting to deficit perspectives.

¹¹ Writing activities conducted in the workshop were modified from various activities present in Rhodes (1999) book for fiction authors. These activities included: Experiencing a community event (p. 8); Experiencing the folk (p. 9); Character Sketch (pp. 67-69); Act, Think, React, Speak (p. 78); "And then what happens" (pp. 86-87); Showing vs. Telling (pp. 191 – 192); Settings we know, remember, and imagine (p. 192); Finding Theme in Your Own Writing (pp. 263-264).

¹² The following conversation is taken from workshop 3.

¹³ Muhammad (2019) noted that examples of identity "may include racial, ethnic, cultural, gender, kinship, academic/intellectual, environmental, personal/individual, sexual, and community identities. Thus, a person can have a gaming identity, a cooking identity, a Black identity, etc.

CHAPTER 13

Exit

November 13, 2085

Baily and I planned to meet in the Harbor's gaming room. I didn't know there was a gaming room down here, but apparently the Othermothers try to make welcoming spaces for all Harbor residents, no matter their interests. Creating such a thoughtful place of community and learning must take a lot of time and effort. I bet it also takes a lot of flexibility since so many people live here, and no two people are exactly alike. They seem to understand that Endarkened people aren't monolithic and have varied interests, and it seems like this impacts how they structured the Harbor.

I saw Bailey walking down the G hallway. She was wearing colorful sweatpants and a vibrant baggy shirt, and her dark brown hair was in small braids tied into a ponytail. She was several feet away from me, but she turned when I shouted my greeting. "Hi there! Ready to tell me your life story?" I joked.

Bailey slowed her stride to match my pace. "Hey, Lauren Jane. Sure!" Bailey giggled, and several laugh lines formed on her caramel colored face.¹

When we got inside the game room, we walked over to some chairs in the back corner, and Bailey grabbed a game and a controller from a stand at the side of the room. I had never been in there before, but for an underground enclave of Endarkened resistors, they sure did have a large gaming area. They had several of the old gaming consoles – Xbox, PlayStation,

Nintendo, Sega. They had a wall of board games and another wall of puzzles. It was as if every game imaginable existed in this room.

I like video games, but I wouldn't consider myself a gamer. Bailey is definitely a game enthusiast, though. She knew exactly where everything was. She found her game with ease, and she grabbed her personal save cartridge from a case that appeared hidden in the wall. When she sat back down, I asked her if she could talk and play simultaneously. "Of course!" she said, as if that was the most ridiculous question she'd ever heard.

"Got it." I chuckled. "So, can you tell me about you?"²

"Um... Let's see...I was born August 12th in a Delaware hospital somewhere. I like baking cookies, and cakes, and brownies. I don't know how to make anything else. I haven't watched movies in a while, but I like Tokyo Ghoul, Attack on Titan, and Noragami.³ They're all action based, and the first two have a lot of gore and stuff. I also read a bunch of Wattpad, and I play a whole bunch of video games. I like games, but one time, I was playing an online game, and then something happened to where all the people got out, and they blamed it on me, but I didn't do it. I don't have a headset, so they couldn't hear me, and they all blamed it on me. That's what happens most of the time. It's horrible, so I just leave."

Although I'm not a gamer in the same way that Bailey is, I do know how difficult it is to be a Black girl gamer because the only "safe" way to be one is to hide your identity from the Dreamer players.⁴ Still, I asked, "Why would they blame it on you?"

"Well, all the people on my team are guys, for one. And two, I didn't have my headset on, so they couldn't talk to me to communicate or anything. Girls play, but they're never on my team. I can pick my team, but I don't have any friends that play games like me," she replied.

"I see. So, tell me about things are you good at? Also, do you have any weaknesses?"

“Well, my strengths are writing and reading and sometimes playing video games. I can do them pretty well. Oh, and watching anime on TV. My best talent would be reading fan fiction because it's easy. Weaknesses would be talking to people because I don't like talking to people. I don't know. I'm kind of weird, especially to people I don't know. Another weakness can be just talking in general because I know my observers, but I really don't like talking to them either. It just depends. If you're good friends with me or I know you for a little while, I'll be fine. If not, then I won't talk to you.”

“What I want in life, I guess, is to make friends.” Bailey continued. “I also want to be a nurse or a doctor. I keep changing it between nurse and doctor because I want to be an OBGYN, but I also just want to do the part where I hold the baby, clean the baby off, and put the baby in clothes and stuff. I really just want to do that, but then I also want to actually deliver the baby.”

“Well, the Harbor definitely needs doctors and nurses!” I said. “That would be a perfect job for you. Still, I know FirstHOME doesn't really prepare us for those jobs. Can you tell me what you remember about FirstHOME? That is, if it's not too difficult.” I know the girls already talked about a few of their experiences, but I also know that they have individual stories to tell. Plus, Bailey was relatively silent in our earlier conversations, so I hoped she would share more with me now that we weren't in the larger group.

“Well, there was a time when an observer thought I did something when I actually didn't.” Bailey said. “We had a cart where we sold a bunch of snacks at school, and people kept stealing stuff. So, the observer thought I stole something that was over there, but I didn't, and almost everyone around me knew I didn't, so they told on the person who did it. The person that did do it was way nicer than I am – that's what the observer said – so she didn't think they did it. I got in trouble for it even though I didn't do anything at all. The person who did steal eventually

got in more trouble since there were more witnesses who saw them doing it and not me. The observer still thought I did it, so she yelled at me, and then yelled at her more.

“Did the other person come forward, or how did they eventually find out?” I asked.

“They didn't come forward, just everyone was on their phone since it was the end of the year. They were recording it for some reason, so they had it on video and everything, and the observer still yelled at me.”

“Oh wow.” I was amazed that it took a recording of the event for the observer to believe Bailey's words and the words of several of her classmates. I also didn't want to believe that an observer told Bailey she was not as nice as the other person, so it made more sense that she was responsible. I didn't want to believe it, but I knew it was true. If Black girls are too loud, they get in trouble. If Black girls are too quiet, like Bailey, they still get in trouble. We can't win in a system like that. There's no justice in a system like that.

“Yea... then, I think it was in the sixth year, I got in trouble for spraying perfume out of my gym bag when I did it on accident. My gym bag was on the ground, and I accidentally stepped on it, and then this perfume went everywhere, so I got in trouble for that.”

“You got in trouble for accidentally stepping on something?” I said incredulously.

“Mm-hmm” Bailey murmured. “My school was supposed to be one of the better schools, too.”

I kept hearing about experiences of undue punishment in the girls' stories. I'm glad the Harbor is shielding them from that experience now, but it's not something that can be easily forgotten, especially since they've only been here for a short time. “I see. Well, were there any redeeming qualities?”

“My homeroom observer was nice, and then my social studies observer was nice. My math observer, it depended, and the math observer on the other team, she didn’t like me. My reading observer was just mean.”

“Why didn’t she like you?” I asked.

“I don’t know. I had her for a seventh-year class, and she never talked to me. I don’t think she liked my class in general, but she liked all of her other classes. She just kept moving our seats and complaining that we talked too much, but there was a bunch of other classes that talked way more than we did.”

“What made your reading observer mean?”

“She gave random people silent lunch for standing up, and she marked me on the board for standing up even though I wasn’t. I knew I wasn’t! If I did stand up, it was probably to open the door for an observer because I sat by the door. So, I got marked for that, and I couldn’t get a snow cone on snow cone day. I mean, I don’t eat them, so I didn’t care, but I couldn’t have one.”

“Hmm. So, you had a few observers who were nice, and a few who were not. Still, I see some wrongs that happened.” There were more than a few injustices because Bailey seemed to consistently be called out for things she didn’t do. I didn’t understand what about her made her a target for the observers. I did notice, though, that even though she was targeted, she never said she spoke up to the observer. Her classmates told the observer who stole the snacks, and she silently took her punishment for standing even when she didn’t do it. So, I asked, “Do you consider yourself to be an activist, someone who speaks out when wrongs have happened?”

“I don’t think so,” Bailey said. “I mean, I’m not going to go talk to people about things because I’m not the type of person to talk to people about stuff I don’t like. So, I guess if I don’t like it then it’s going to be fine because, depending on what it is. There’s nothing I can do to

change it. If I don't like something, I usually keep it inside because nothing happens to it. It just disappears most of the time because I have a whole bunch of other stuff to worry about."

"I understand. So, who do you think is responsible for making sure that there's justice in the world?"

"I think everyone is responsible because one person cannot change everything in the world. Like, GC can't just change everything and make everyone do something because that wouldn't be right, and not everyone agrees with it. People working together makes social justice happen."

"You're right. We do need to work together to make change. Well, I know you're into your game right now, but my main reason for talking with you all individually is to learn more about your story in hopes that I could see connections between your oral and written stories. Is there anything else I should know?" I asked.

"Um...I was writing before working with Trinity because I was writing fanfiction. Most of the time they were on anime, but there's this one exception where it was about creepy web stuff. I have one for Fairy Tail, and I just restarted the My Hero Academia one because I got tired of it for a little while.⁵ I stopped watching the show because I was tired of it. But then, I got back into it because I had an idea for it. I think I started writing them in sixth year, but they were horrible because they had no description or anything. It was just telling what happened, and that was it. It was horrible. I still use the characters I made for it, though, because I feel bad if I don't use them."

"I didn't know it was fanfiction at the time." Bailey continued. "I just thought I was writing my own story. I would just watch a show for a few episodes to see if it had enough room to make an original character, or OC. Then, I would make a few OCs for it. They all have totally

different personalities most of the time. They look totally different, and if they have any powers or anything, like Attack on Titan with the titan turning, then I could put that in there sometimes. Sometimes I don't. In my Attack on Titan one, I have two OCs. Two of them can shape shift into Titans, and one of them is just different sized. I started writing it, and then after a while I slowed down on the writing. I reread it a few times, and I edited it a bunch of times. Then, when I got to the end of the season, I was done.”

“So, you were writing alongside the season as it was going? That’s interesting.” I wasn’t sure when fanfiction was normally written, but I had always believed that the writing happened after the season ended. There’s so much I need to learn in order to honor Bailey’s identity as a fanfiction author. I wondered how that writing process was different from the one we’ve created in the workshop. “How is building your OCs different from building characters in the writing group?” I ask.

“In the group,” she said, “we built our characters. The characters I did in the workshop were, I guess you could say are more well-written than the other ones because I didn't have all the scenes to go by. Most of the time I base it on the series, and then I add stuff on as I get through it. But for the workshop, I just had everything in the beginning.”

Based on what she said, I learned that Bailey has had a writing identity for much longer than I have, and she embraces her love of anime and gaming completely. It shows up in her hobbies, and it shows up in her writing. Her gamer and fanfiction identities are a part of her, and I’m glad she is able to call upon those skills as she writes her story in the group. “I’m super excited to see what you create this weekend. I’ll leave you to your game for now. I hope you pass this level today!”

Bailey paused the game and looked back at me as I stood up to leave. “Before you leave, you also need to know that I really like plushies, and I hate water.” She grinned. I figured that she really wanted me to know this information, and I wondered if it had anything to do with the story that she was writing.

“I’ll make sure to write that down for my fanfiction story about you!” I laughed.

November 14, 2085

We got to have Bailey’s collaborative session today. I was the first to arrive in the library, so I sat at our oval table and wait. There weren’t many people in the library this morning, just me and two other sibs who were sitting at the large table in the middle of the room. Their brightly colored patchwork clothing glimmered in the fluorescent lighting given off by the light beams on the ceiling. I don’t know if this was intentional, but the colorful clothing worn by everyone in the Harbor seems to make this underground safe haven brighter. We may not have access to the sun, but we create the sunshine just by being together.

The girls walked in together, talking vibrantly. When they sat down, they let me know that our collaborative sessions would follow a strict format. First, the lead author would explain how their story came to be, and the collaborators could ask questions or provide commentary. Next, the lead author would describe where they were with their current story, and, once again, the collaborators could discuss. Lastly, the lead author would ask any questions they had for the rest of the group. If they kept it in this format, then the author would have loads of feedback as they finished their story.⁶

“Ok, so I don’t know if you remember,” Bailey began, “but at the beginning, I wrote down that my character’s name is Kenzi. She is 16 years old, and I think she’s mixed. I don’t know yet, but she has short curly hair that’s light brown and a whole face full of freckles. She has

hazel eyes and super long bangs that cover her eyes most of the time. She wears very bland t-shirts that sometimes have words on them, but most of the time, they don't, and she wears black or white jeans. She wears a chain around her neck since she doesn't know what she is yet, like a vampire or a fairy or whatever. When they know what they are, when they turn 17, I think, they get like a crystal or whatever on their necklace, so everyone knows what they are."

"I have a question. Does the crystal just appear?" Talyn asked.

"No. They have to go get it." Bailey responded.

"Interesting." Avenae'J said.

"I also wrote that she has a bunch of weird habits." Bailey continued. "Like, she has to do something, or her brain has to be working on something, or she shuts down and needs tea. She drinks super strong powdered tea when she gets nervous, and I don't know why she does that. She might paint like a small heart on her left cheek. Ok, so she also loves books, her siblings, puppies, tea, social studies, and her hair, and she hates her eye color because she wanted it to be green since all of her brothers have green eyes."

"She hates what her siblings do because they're super obnoxious. She hates anything cold and pink. She dreams about equality, but she's too shy to do anything. And because humans are super rare, all of the leaders and stuff are hybrids. She really needs to find out what she is because she's getting nervous because all of her siblings know what they are. Well, most of them. Her adopted siblings know what they are. Her oldest brother is a soldier, so he gets all the money. That's it."

"Okay. I just have a question for your story." Amber said. "How are children born into this world? Are they just, 'Oh look,' and pop out?" She puts her hands in front of her, as if to mimic catching the baby that popped out.

“I haven't exactly thought of that.” Bailey answered.

“That's something important you could think about.” Terrah said.

“Make it funny. Make it less depressing.” Talyn suggested.

“You don't have to make it funny.” Terrah retorted.

“Make it however you want it to be.” I added.

“Or, it could be morbid where they just genetically modify children.” Avenae’J pondered.

“Or, they could do it where they take two people and they make them reproduce, and then they give them a memory serum, so they don't remember anything. They don't remember what happened.”

“I mean they already do that to food.” Victoria added.

“Yea... they already do stuff like that.” Avenae’J agree.

“That's almost like the Giver, except they... well no,” Amber thought aloud.

“So, a lot of that changed, actually. My character's name is still Kenzie.” Bailey interjected. “She’s usually quiet most of the time because her siblings do all the loudness for her. Her siblings are class clowns and everything, and she is the nerdy type, I guess, but she doesn't let people bully her. That's probably how she got injured because she fought back when someone tried to bully her, and then her brother got suspended, too, because he did something to them. She’s bullied for, I guess, just being her because she's one of the weirder ones. She stands out for not being a class clown like her siblings. But her siblings know that if she gets bullied, they’d fight for her. The school kind of mirrors my school because the school that I went to is supposed to be a good school, but it's not because everyone gets bullied a lot.”

“The setting is 3050.” She continued. “I don't know why that number came up, but, okay. So, Kenzi messes with her sister’s video game headset, like her VR set. She puts a random game

in, and she ends up in a haunted place with a bunch of killer plushies and needs to find an exit. The plushy kind of like teleports, and then it only moves when the lights are off. It's always really dark, so you don't know where it is at all until you see it. I don't know the plushies' names; I only have one, so I need two more plushie names. It's going to start from the end and go through like that. So, she almost finds an exit, and then she almost dies, and then she almost dies again, but her friend, no, her sister takes the gear off, so she doesn't die."

"I hope she finds an exit!" I said.

"She almost dies twice?" Amber exclaimed. "That's like Percy Jackson where he dies like...well, he almost dies every book."

"Killer plushies?" Avenae'J yelped. "I have stuffed animals in my room, and you're going to make me scared of them. That's the "oh crap" moment for my life."

"I have stuffed animals just staring down at me." Talyn added. "They're like on the top of my closet, and they look at me as I'm sleeping. That is one of the creepiest things I've ever woken up to..."

"Well, I need names for plushies." Bailey said. "They're scary plushies."

"It's like Chucky but worse," Talyn said.

"Anamina?" Amber suggested. "No, spell Chucky backwards. Let's see how that goes."

"Chucky backwards would be," Terrah thought aloud, "Yeah...Chucky backwards is not anything."

"Yucky?" Talyn offered.

"Could it be Yucky? Because there is no, Y." Amber said.

"Oh wait. No, I'm spelling it wrong." Terrah lamented.

"You know what Chucky backwards is?" Amber asked Avenae'J.

“No, sorry.” She replied.

For some reason, naming was really important to the girls. I guess, it’s important to all Endarkened people. I changed my name when I discovered that the name GC gave to me was not acceptable. I wanted to name myself, to decide who I am for myself. Bailey could have asked any question of the group, but the only question that she chose to share was to ask for a character’s name. Yes, the character was a scary plushie who would torment the main character via virtual reality, but that ability to name her character was important to her story. She decided to share that important honor of naming with her sisters.

November 17, 2085

The reading of Bailey’s story was the only thing on the agenda today. I was excited to see how her identities, her collaborations, and her interests showed up in what she created.⁷

“Exit” by Bailey

I push myself down the dark hallway as fast as I possibly could. My heart raced a million miles per second, and I felt as if I could pass out at any second. I kept going, though, and I saw the exit I had to go through.

“Yes! I’m almost out of here,” I thought to myself, and I pushed harder, having a newfound burst of energy. I was going to get Amber back after this.

I watched out the window to see my siblings leaving for school. I couldn’t go since I had an arm injury that’s bad enough the school won’t let me back until tomorrow. Mom was at work, probably helping with a pregnancy. Dad was out of the picture. I shifted around on my bed and looked next to me.

Amber left me a game to play since she knew how bored I would be. It was a sit-down VR game, where you'd move in the game even though you didn't move in real life. It was a really good illusion, too.

The game choice was either a racing simulator, a school simulator, or a plushie rush. I chose the plushie one because it sounded better, let's just say. I put the game in the VR set, and I put the headset on. The new game screen immediately came up.

It was brightly colored with a cutesy yellow plushie bunny in a circle in the middle. The circle was a dark red which stood out from everything else. The only dark thing other than the words "fun with plushtrap" on a dark blue ribbon underneath. The plushie was yellow with blue eyes and an innocent smile. One of its long ears were bent, and its head was tilted slightly to the left.

I went on and clicked new game, and the title screen flashed a different color. The backdrop turned black and white with even darker splotches on it. The plushie was different, too. Its ears had pieces missing. Its eyes were wide and unblinking. Its smile literally spread across its whole face, showing its really pointy teeth.

I blinked twice and the rules danced across the screen. Everything still had a dark turn now. Nothing had anymore color. Rule one: No use of weapons, or you die. I blinked, confused. Rule two: You must find an exit before Plushtrap gets you. I then tried taking my VR off before noticing that I couldn't.

Rule three didn't come until I was literally dropped into an empty security room. I looked at the static monitors before I heard a laugh. Deciding that laughter in a haunted game was so not good, I ran out of the left door and down a hallway.

The room that the hallway opened up to had a whole bunch of tables with birthday cone hats and a huge stage. The stage had the demon plushie on it. There was a door to somewhere, and I jumped in there before the demon plushie went to get up. I jogged down the hallway until I realized halfway that it was a dead end.

I turned around and Plushtrap was there. He was sitting and super small, of course. I was cornered. The hallway lights went off and on each time Plushtrap moved. I took this chance to find a vent or something. This just can't be a dead end. I can't die now.

My frantic banging on the walls led me to hit a vent. I traced it with my shoe real quick and saw that I could easily fit through. I yanked it away and threw it behind me. Then, I crawled sonic fast, hearing weird echoes. Suddenly, not paying attention, I fell out of the vent into squishy red stuff. I jumped up immediately, ignoring all of the horror clichés, and I ran.

I noticed I was in the office. I ran back down the first hallway, and this time, I went to the right and slammed open the door.

Bailey received a standing ovation because her work both scared and thrilled us. I could definitely see how various parts of her story mirrored some of what she told me in our conversation yesterday. There's gaming, there's virtual reality, there's horror. These are all things she talked to me about. There's also a slight critique on horror films, as the characters often accept their fate, standing still and waiting for danger to arrive instead of getting out of the situations quickly. Still, I wanted to know more, so after the reading, I decided to walk with Bailey toward the gaming room.

"So, how did you come up with the idea to do like the scary underground... well, not underground, virtual reality plushy thing?" I asked.

“I got it from Sword Art Online, and the fact that it's a VR game that you can't log out of, I guess.⁸ And then, I had it from FNAF... um, Five Nights at Freddy's because of the creepy plushy thing.⁹ And there's a plushy in there that you have to get in a mini game, I think it was. And then I took the characters and stuff from that story that I might make it into a book. It's not a fanfiction, though.”

“Got it. What happened to the main character's arm? Like, why was she in the house for the arm? Was there any backstory to that?”

“Oh yeah, she was being picked on and one of them grabbed her arm somewhere. So, now it has a huge bruise on it. But, before the bully could do anything else, her siblings showed up, and they yelled at them, and the bullies disappeared.”

“I see. So why was she being picked on?”

“Because she's not like her siblings.” Bailey answered. “Her siblings are super popular. She's not.”

“Okay. And then it also says that the mom is at work helping out with pregnancy. So, I'm guessing the mom works in childcare, and the dad's out of the picture. Why did you make that choice?”

“The mom, I based off of my Harbor mom, and my Harbor dad wanted to be a villain in the story, so I was like ‘okay.’ So, there is no dad.”

“How is your dad the villain in the story if he's not there?”

“He's the villain in the actual book. I took the mom from an existing mom, and I took the siblings from already existing siblings, so I didn't have to make a whole bunch of characters again.”

“As for the characters, is the younger sister, Amber, based off of your younger sister?”

“One of the siblings are, but she isn't mentioned.” Bailey replied.

“Oh okay. Who is Amber based off of?” I asked.

“Amber is kind of based off of me because she's a gamer with all of her games everywhere. Her face was based off of a video game that I wanted to make, but I couldn't. It's like a dating game, but the dating game isn't *really* a dating game. It's a horror game.”

“I see that horror writer keeps coming out.” I laughed. “I know we didn't have 18 years to write the short story, but there was a cliff hanger. If you had time to continue this story, what would happen next?”

“She'd probably go a different way and end up getting out.” Bailey said. “Wait, no, she wouldn't get out. Her siblings would take the headset off of her, so she could live instead of her getting caught by the thing. She'd almost get caught, and she'd almost have the game over thing, but then her siblings would take the thing off of her. I didn't want to cramp the ending into like five minutes, and I didn't know what to put in the end, so I just left it on a cliffhanger because, I guess, it just sounded better than me cramping it all up into one space. I don't really like cliffhangers, so I plan on finishing this eventually.”

While talking to her now and after listening to her in the collaborative session, I noticed her story has had slight changes over time. When she explained her initial idea and talked about the changes, there were quite a few. The final draft mirrored the one she used for our collaborative session, but there were still more changes in the end. The storying process is so interesting to me.

“Thank you for walking and talking with me.” I said, knowing that I was keeping her from her afternoon plans. “I'm so sorry for keeping you from the game room. I know that's your thing after we meet.”

“It’s fine. You’re welcome to play with us if you’d like.”

“Us?” I asked.

“Yea. The Alfreda’s play Minecraft together now. You can play, too, if you want.”

“I’m horrible at that game, so I’ll sit this one out. Y’all have fun!”

“We will. See you tomorrow!” Bailey said as she walked into the game room and left me in the hallway with my thoughts.

¹ Anderson and Jack (1991) shift from data-gathering interviews to interactive interviews. This shift in interview method moves attention from asking the right questions to a focus on the process, how research partners choose to tell their stories.

² The following conversation is taken from Bailey’s 1-4 interviews.

³ Tokyo Ghoul, Attack on Titan, and Noragami are popular anime. Tokyo Ghoul and Noragami are completed, while Attack on Titan will air its last season schedule for Fall 2020.

⁴ Mclymore (2019) noted that Black women gamers “often have to deal with harassment, racial epithets, and sexist slurs while playing online. Overwatch and multiplayer online games have become a cesspool for hate and other black women gamers commonly become victims of harassment when they do not hide their identities.”

⁵ Fairy Tail and My Hero Academia are popular anime. Fairy Tail ran from October 2009 to September 2019. My Hero Academia initially aired in April 2016, and it is currently a continuing series.

⁶ The following conversations were taken from workshops 1 and 4 and Interview 2.

⁷ The following is the story written by Bailey.

⁸ Sword Art Online is a popular anime. The original iteration ran from July to December of 2012.

⁹ Five Nights at Freddy’s is an indie video game series first released in 2014.

CHAPTER 14

Another Boring Day

November 18, 2085 (Morning)

Victoria was scheduled to lead the collaborative session this time. She already had the foundation of her story last week, but she wanted to see how the collaborative sessions played out before she chose to share. She said she had a better understanding of how the sessions would go, so she's now ready to show us what she's been working on over the past week or so. She also said that because she already knew so much about her characters, we were getting out early today. I'm happy because that meant I could meet with her afterward.¹

"I've decided I'm doing a suspense story." Victoria proclaimed once everyone settled down at our table.

"Lovely... I would like to read that." Avenae'J said.

"That's great!" Terrah replied.

"So, someone is going to be kidnapped and taken to a whole 'nother realm where she realizes she's the queen." Victoria said smugly. "When I first found out we could write a story, I was just thinking about all the things that I could write about. Then, for some reason, my mind went to Princess Diaries and Twitches.² So, I was like, 'hmm.' Then, I'm watching a show called Grey's Anatomy, and she's a doctor, so I fit that in."³

"That's cool!" Terrah exclaimed.

"I know, right?" Victoria agreed. "I can't think of a name for my person, though. Can I tell y'all what my story is about and the conflict, and y'all help me pick a name from that?" The

girls all nod their heads in agreement. “Okay, so my story is about a young woman who lives a normal life until one day she's kidnapped. When she starts to be aware of her surroundings, she starts to get flashbacks to when she lived there a long time ago, and in the end, she reclaims her place as queen.”

“Athena!” Talyn suggested.

“Oh yea!” Avenae’J agreed.

“You would say my favorite goddess.” Victoria said.

“Why do I feel like Athena's everyone's favorite goddess?” Terrah asked.

“Because Athena is the goddess of wisdom and battle strategy, and she's such an awesome goddess that is over-powered.” Talyn answered.

“So, what do you think the character's name is going to be?” I asked.

“I'm thinking of picking Alexa because it says the meaning is defender of mankind.”

Victoria explained. “That makes sense for my story. Her name will be Alexa Fairchild.”

“Well, there you go.” Terrah said.

“That's a very pleasant name.” Talyn agreed.

“I don't know where I came up with the last name,” Victoria said, “but she's a general surgeon, and she dreams to one day be the best surgeon in her hospital and to have a family because she grew up in the foster system. Her mom and dad were living in the kingdom, and she was in the normal world by herself, so she dreams to one day have a family and be the greatest surgeon in the world. She has a best friend named Natalie who basically is like a sister to her because that's the only person she's known since she was little. And, she's an outgoing person, but introverted at the same time. I kind of based her off of me.”

“We're both introverts, but extroverts.” Victoria continued. “If my first plan for a career of becoming a restaurateur does not work, I want to become a general surgeon. And, basically her whole personality is like me because she's goofy, but then serious sometimes. Then at some points, she just wants to be alone, but then she doesn't want to be lonely. She has long black hair, and she has dark brown eyes, and she is fit, not fair skinned. She's like mixed... a mix between a lot of different ethnicities. Like, she is basically like her kingdom. She's African American, which is her mom's side, and then her dad's side has a little Vietnamese, and somewhere, her family is Greek and stuff. Basically, she's just a whole mix of everything, and she loves different cultures.”

“The conflict is that her kingdom had been taken over by her evil uncle, and he's run the kingdom into the ground and now she has to reclaim her spot. Her uncle has a whole 'nother kingdom, but when the princess, which is Alex, her went missing. He took over because the mom and dad were getting older. They're still alive. They're just more of a monarch, like if you think about it, they don't have any real power because the uncle is there, and he's ruling. But, um, he overheard one day that the princess is coming back, so he starts running the kingdom into the ground, so she won't have anything rule. So, basically she has to hurry up and come back and become queen before he makes the whole kingdom crash.”

She really had thought of a lot of her story. “Why did you make that the conflict?” I asked. The girls all laughed as if I missed some important component of the story.

“Because, like I said, Princess Diaries and Twitches. In Twitches, their conflict is that their uncle is taking over the kingdom because he can't stand his brother, and I think he wanted to be with the mom. So, I added that part. And, it was a little bit from my imagination, the whole ‘he got his own kingdom and wants to run that kingdom to the ground’ part.” Victoria said.

“And,” she continued, “like I said, the main character is based off me, and I think the Harbor mom is based off my own mom, and the dad is probably based a little bit off of my Harbor uncles because my uncles are my father figures. The mom in the story just wants the best for the daughter, and she wants her to have her own choices, of course. At the same time, she needs her to be there for her kingdom. That's kind of like my mom because she lets me make my own choices, and she's like my best friend, but at the same time she's the mom when I need her to be. The dad is like my uncle because my uncle is a really cool, laid back person, and he is there when I need him to be. Like, if I need to talk to someone, and I can't talk to my mom, I'll talk to him.”

I guess I could've taken more time to figure that out because she did tell me that her story was inspired by Princess Diaries, Twitches, and her own life. It's interesting to see where the girls get their inspiration from, though. Their lives definitely provide some of the groundwork for their stories, but they also seem to be influenced by movies, television, and even games. They take information from the media, from their lives, and from each other when they're creating these stories. It's truly a collaborative process.

“I also can't think of a name for a kingdom.” Victoria said, as she ran over to a free computer.

“Magic Kingdom?” Avenae’J suggested.

“It should be Chesapeake.” Amber offered.

“Wait. I found a kingdom name!” Victoria said gleefully. “The Kingdom of Afnia. I was going to call it the Kingdom of... well...No, because that means smart in Greek, but no, not all of them are smart.”

“Not all of them are smart, some of them are stupid.” Talyn added.

“Is there anything else you want to ask or share with us?” I asked. I’m not sure if she needs us anymore not that she is looking up information on the computer.

“I’ll share my rising actions.” Victoria said. “Okay. My first rising action is that she has a big surgery to do on a new trauma that just came into the hospital because she's a general surgeon. Then, my second rising action is she gets kidnapped and taken to her old kingdom where she used live but doesn't remember.”

“Got it. So, what is the uncle doing that's causing the place to crumble?” I probed.

“Um, well first, he's the evil person, so he's doing it deliberately. He feels like he's the rightful owner, but he also realizes that she's coming back. So, he says if he can't have it, no one can. So, he starts trying to make all of their allies become the enemies, so it could just be one big fight even though they're going to lose. So, he’s just doing it to hurt the kingdom.”

“I have a question.” Amber said with a smirk. “What does it taste like?”

Unfazed, Victoria answered, “I haven't gotten to that, but I can tell you from the top of my head. So, the kingdom looks like the kingdom from Princess Diaries. It smells like a kitchen, which smells like pastries because the chefs are always cooking. Um, let's see. It sounds like dancing, and it sounds like music in a ballroom because they always have nightly parties for the people of their countries, so they could stay happy and morale could be up. Let's see... the taste of the air is joy. And the touch? I would say it’s like when you touch the building because it has columns on it for some reason. I guess the Queen was very, very interested in Greek building architecture.”

“That sounds like a good story.” Amber said.

With approval given by Amber and the other Alfredas, Victoria dismissed the group, letting us know that her finished story will be ready on Saturday.

November 18, 2085 (afternoon)

I caught Victoria before she left the library. She was headed to the kitchen because she helps assist the chefs in the dining hall. She does want to be a restaurateur after all. The kitchen runs a tight schedule, so she knew the dining hall would be empty until lunch time. That's why she said it would be the perfect place to sit and talk for a while.

We chatted about her story a little more as we walked through the Harbor's many halls. She is so excited about the story she intends to share with us on Saturday, and her enthusiasm makes me want to learn more. Her dark brown eyes lit up as she shared the connections between the main character and herself, the queen and her mother, the king and her uncle. She told me that her Harbor mom is a strong and caring person who is also hardworking because she does her best to make sure they have what they need. She told me that her mom is her best friend because she can talk to her about everything, and she won't get upset even though she will tell Victoria how she feels about things. She said that her mom also just supports her and makes her feel awesome. I could tell that she and her mom have a strong bond.

We found a table at the front of the room because she wanted to be within earshot of the kitchen. She didn't think they'd need her, but she wanted to be prepared just in case. Talking with me was cool, but she had other priorities, too. I decided to start talking just in case there was a kitchen emergency. "Ok, so my main purpose for asking you to meet with me is so I can learn more about you as an individual. Although I'm there with you for our writing sessions, I don't know much about your lives outside of this space, and I think it's important to know about the author behind the work. So, can you tell me more about you?"⁴

"Hmm... well, I am an African American, 14 about to be 15-year-old girl. I wear glasses. I have dark brown skin, I would say. I have very coarse black hair. Let's see. I'm more into

comfort than fashion, so I wear sneakers more than flats and stuff like that. I am also very weird. When I'm at school or in public, I am deathly afraid of being alone because I never know what could happen. When I'm at home, I like being with people, but then at the same time, I want to be by myself. I like being left alone at home but not in public. I'm very indecisive. I am very."

"I think I'm more of a natural born leader," she continued, "because I have a lot of leadership skills. I feel I'm a good leader; I don't steer people wrong. I can also be a very patient person, and I like to help people a lot. That falls under leadership skills. When I help people, it's pushing them to do more or do better, and it helps me along the way because at the end, we all get to the finish line."

"I do consider myself to be a very insecure person, though. I can be the most confident person, but on the inside, in my brain, I'm like, 'Okay, do I look all right?' Or 'Do I need to fix this? Do I need to fix that?' Or 'Oh, does this look okay?' I'm always ... I always care about people's opinion about me, and I consider that a weakness because I always want to make sure that everybody else thinks something nice about me. I'm also very self-conscious about a lot of stuff. I'm very self-conscious about my weight because I don't like my weight. I try to fix it, I guess you could say. I really care what people think."

How she told me about herself mirrored how she told the group about her story. She was so open and willing to give me intimate details about herself. I could picture her life outside of the workshop as vividly as I could picture the plot and characters of her fiction story. Her confidence in her leadership skills and intelligence was magnetizing, but she was still insecure about whether other people would see those amazing traits. I understand her, though. I used to wonder how my clothes and actions affected people's perceptions of me. I still wonder that. How

can I not when everything about me is villainized in GC's world? Either way, I'm glad the writing group has been a welcoming space for Victoria.

"So, know I've been learning about Afrofuturism, and sci-fi, and fantasy, and such since I've been in the Harbor. Do you mind telling me how you got into it?" I asked.

"Well, ever since I was little, I loved to read." Victoria said. "By the time I got to first year, I was reading on a fifth-year level. Then, I just started reading different types of books, and I found out what intrigued me more. That's when I realized I was into fantasy. By the time I got to sixth year, I read at least two of the Harry Potter books, and then I started getting into Star Wars, and Hobbit, and those type of books and movies. I actually like watching the movies because it's like you see it from a different perspective than the book."

"I see. So, you've had a lifetime connection to speculative fiction. I'm jealous! I do have one more question that relates to some of the discussions we had in the group. Basically, we talked a lot about injustice in school, and you were a part of those conversations, but do you have any other HOME experiences that we didn't really bring up when we were together?"

"I mean ... Okay so, in eighth year, we had this one boy in our class, and he said something that was very homophobic." Victoria answered sullenly. "A lot of the girls in my class, the ones that I really talk to, we're mostly part of the LGBTQ community. I'm bi, one of my friends is pan, one of my friends is ... I don't really know what she is because she likes boys and girls alike, but she also likes a lot of other people, too, so, I don't know. There's a lot of different groups in the LGBTQ community, so it's hard to know what she is. Some of my friends are just supporters of the LGBTQ community. So, we all ended up getting on him, and he was just like, 'What are you upset for? Blah blah blah, I didn't say nothing wrong.' So, we basically just had to tell him why what he said was wrong and politely ask him to fix it."

“Did he fix it?” I asked.

“Yeah, he fixed what he said.”

“I see. It’s great that you all were able to stand up to him and help him see why it was wrong. Do you consider yourself to be an activist?”

“It's not that I don't fight for stuff because I do.” Victoria said. “I just don't feel like ... I just don't feel like I ... I don't want to say fight hard enough, but I don't necessarily tell people, "Oh, you should do this," or "Oh, this is not the way you should do it," or stuff like that. There's always movements about justice for this person and justice for that person, and I'm like, ‘Yeah,’ they do deserve justice because a killer shot them, or they're still out there kidnapped or something like that, but at the same time, I don't think I've ever done anything about it. If I did, I think I'd want to stay back and help out, either helping them get information or something like that.”

“So, you don’t consider yourself to be an activist?” I inquired further.

“I'm going to say no.”

“Ok, so who do you think is responsible for making sure that there’s justice in the world?”

“I think everybody is,” Victoria said, “because at the end of the day everybody needs to be punished for doing the bad thing.”

“Who gets to decide what’s bad or not?”

“I don't know.” She says. “Like, how the enforcers get away with shooting people. They either just get suspended, or they don't get the right punishment. The enforcers don’t go to jail for shooting people. There’s a lot of examples, and it’s mostly African Americans. But, even if you

do something minor, like just cheat on a test, or litter, or something, you shouldn't do it because this is everybody's world, not just yours.”

“I definitely understand.” I said. I still can’t wrap my head around the fact that she doesn’t consider herself to be an activist even though she has strong ideas about various things that happen in the world above our heads. Although she didn’t mention the fear codes, she does talk about the fact that so many enforcers are acquitted for their murders. Although she didn’t project her role in countering homophobic statements made in school, she and her peers confronted a person who made the statement in hopes of getting him to change his words. To me, those are the actions of an activist. Of course, you don’t have to identify as an activist to be considered one, but maybe we should rethink how we define the word. Maybe our definition of what an activist does needs to be broadened.

“It’ll be lunch time soon, so you probably need to get in there, huh?” I said. I wanted to be respectful of her time, but I also needed some time to process what I learned from her.

“Yes! All the culture and all the feelings you get from cooking just come out in your food and then you make people happy, and it's just a really awesome feeling. Cooking good food takes time.” I could see that cooking brings her a joy that’s similar to the happiness I feel when I learn with the girls.

“Well, I’ll be back in a couple hours then. I can’t wait to see what you have in store for us. I know whatever you cook for us will be amazing!” I yelled this sentence as loud as I could because by the time I said, “I can’t wait,” she was already running toward the kitchen.

November 24, 2085

Victoria planned to read her story today. After hearing more about her story, the written one and her personal one, I couldn't wait to see how it all came together. The girls arrived early to hear her speak, and as soon as she began reading, the table was completely silent.

"Another Boring Day" by Victoria

"Another boring day," Alexa thought as she put on her scrubs to start another day at the hospital. She got in her car to go to the hospital to start another day of trauma and blood. She starts to do her normal surgeries and handles her E.R. She goes into the on-call room to get some rest after the big surgery she just had.

When she wakes up from her nap, she sees two men in suits hovering over her body. She perks up in the bed she was just laying on. The two men grab her and take her to a black SUV. She fights them the whole way there. When they get to the SUV, she tries to run, but one of the men catch her and throw her into the car. "Sorry princess," he says as he gets into the passenger seat.

"Princess?!" She yells at him as she tries to open the back doors, but she realizes it's on child lock. She tries to go to the back windshield and scream for help, but as soon as she goes back there, the man sticks a syringe in her which causes her to fall asleep quickly.

She gets up groggily and hears voices before she sees people. "She has to learn how to be the proper queen for the kingdom." She heard. She got up to see one of the men who kidnapped her and a lady wearing a maid uniform.

Alexa sits up and realizes she is laying in a big unfamiliar bed in an unfamiliar bedroom. The people notice that she is awake and stop talking.

"Who are you? Where am I? What do you want?" She asks in confusion.

“I am Gideon. You are in Francara, and we want you to take your rightful place as queen.” Gideon says.

“Queen? What are you talking about, and why am I here? Take me home.”

“I’m sorry, princess. I can’t do that.” Gideon says.

“Why not? And, stop calling me princess.” Alexa says.

“Because I can’t, and you are the princess. What do you want to be called?” Gideon says.

“Fine. But, I am not the princess.” Alexa says.

“Perhaps you need some sleep, dear. It was a long ride,” says the lady in the maid uniform who has been standing there this whole time. Alexa drifts back off to sleep.

Flashback:

“Mama, papa, look at the pretty butterfly!” little Alexa said.

“I see, baby girl. Let’s go inside now,” said the father.

All of a sudden, a loud boom goes off inside the castle. The queen takes the little girl in her arms as the king advises two guards to take them somewhere safe. The king runs into the building with fifteen other guards. They run to the sound, and they never come out. A month later, the queen goes to the kingdom to find out that her brother took over the kingdom. When she goes to take back the kingdom, he kills her. The guards take little Alexa far away to a new place and leave her there.

Flashback Over:

“No!” she yells as she wakes up, and the maid comes to her side. “We have to stop my uncle. I remember everything now.

Flash forward to 1 year later

“All hail Queen Alexa!” says the kingdom. The uncle is rotting forever... or is he?

The girls and I sat still, waiting for Victoria to continue her story, but she just grinned at us, holding her storied secrets within. I was pretty sure the rest of the girls had questions that were similar to the ones swimming in my brain. How did Alexa become queen? What happened to the uncle? Is the uncle really gone? Did the uncle kill her parents? I thought she was just going to leave us with a cliffhanger, but then she started talking.⁵

“So, if we want to get technical and compare him to something, the uncle would probably be like the uncle in Twitches.” Victoria began. “But, if you want to just have him in words, he has a nice-looking persona, but then when you really get to know him, he's more sinister. He doesn't really care about anything. He's just greedy and wants their money and power. That's the whole reason why he wants to take over. There's also background that I didn't add. So, that same day before she ends up going to sleep, the maid gives her tea, but what she doesn't know is the maid is kind of a witch, or sorceress, whatever you want to call her. So, she brings up a remembrance spell, and puts it in powder form, and puts it in her tea, and Alexa remembers. I probably should have put that in the story.”

“If I had more time I would add more.” She continued. “Like, if it wasn't a short story, I would add more detail and stuff. But since it is a short story, I really like where it stops. If I had more time, I would add a training part in the story about how they change you to be a queen. Then, I would add her fighting the uncle herself, and then at the very end I would put her winning and taking over her kingdom. The training montage part would basically just be them teaching her how to have etiquette and how to ride horses and fight and stuff. The actual fighting part would be her using her wits and creativity to defeat her uncle, basically just to make him

feel that he's not good enough to be the king, so she wouldn't have to physically fight him. At the end, when she actually rules, it would just probably go to a flash forward of probably five years, and it just shows her kingdom prospering. Like, she has a whole bunch of allies and everybody wants to be part of her kingdom.”

“Wow. Can you tell me more about why she wanted to use her creativity and wit versus using strength? Like, why'd you make that choice?” I asked. I figured that since she was giving us more background, I might as well ask her some of my questions.

“Because she doesn't like violence. She feels like violence isn't always the way to go. Words, most of the time, are more powerful than strength. If people talked more, then we wouldn't have to worry about how much violence we get now.”

I was glad Victoria chose to share a little more information with us, answering questions before we had a chance to ask them. I know we were on a time crunch because had to get in touch with Charles again soon, but I wondered what could happen if the girls and I had more time. Maybe I'll find a way to do this again.

Planning for a future workshop can wait, though. Right now, I'm focused on Victoria and her stories. I'm thinking about how even though she doesn't see herself as someone who brings about social or political change, her story, whose main character is based on her, brings about political and social change in the kingdom. This character advocates for non-violence as a way to bring down oppressors. She becomes a queen in a land that has been consistently ruled by kings. Just like the character, Victoria doesn't see herself as an activist even though she stands up for her friends. She also advocates for nonviolence, promoting discussion over viciousness. Victoria may not see herself as an activist, to me, she most certainly is.

¹ The following conversation was taken from workshop transcripts 1 and 4 as well as Victoria's 2nd interview.

² The Princess Diaries is a Disney film that was released in 2001. Twitches is a Disney film that was released in 2005.

³ Grey's Anatomy is a medical drama that first aired in 2005.

⁴ The following conversation was taken from Victoria's 1st, 3rd, and 4th interviews.

⁵ The following conversation is taken from interview 3.

CHAPTER 15

WW3's Effect on Society

November 25, 2085

With the common format of our collaborative sessions ironed out, our sessions were running more smoothly. Amber volunteered to go this week, followed by Talyn, Terrah, and Avenae'J. I've been able to set up meetings in advance with each of them to learn more about their stories instead of just bombarding them with questions after their sessions. To make sure I'm honoring their schedules, the plan is to meet with them in the middle of the week. This will give them some breathing room before I inundate them with questions about their lives.

I will say, though, that I have been captivated by their stories so far. They're all so different, and yet, I still see similarities across them. I feel like the Harbor allows for that. What I mean is that GC wants all Endarkened people to be alike, to be a part of the melting pot. That's why we aren't allowed to have our own names, why we aren't allowed to know our histories, and why only certain stories are told about us. In the Harbor, they show us what it means to embrace our Endarkened identities, but they also show us that we won't be punished for honoring our whole selves. We can acknowledge the numerous identities that make us who we are, whether that's a nerd identity, a gamer identity, a chef identity, etc.

When I arrived at the library, the girls were waiting for me. They positioned themselves in their normal places around the oval table, Victoria to my right, followed by Terrah, Avenae'J, Talyn, Bailey, and Amber filling out the circle by sitting on my left. Amber told us that she was ready to get the session started, and she began telling us about her story.¹

“It's the year 2120, a hundred years from - well not really today - but a hundred years from now. Crime has progressed more than 20, no 40%, making it really dangerous to go outside. Her family is just her, her mom, and her dad. Her Dad is from Western Europe in Germany, and her mom is African American, but they live in America. She's Black, but she's not really dark, but then she's not really light. She has blue eyes, light freckles. Her hair is just a mess. It's not an Afro, it's not a puff. It's a mess. It's a brownish color. She's always wearing these solid colors, and most of the time, she'll wear red and black, giving off the impression that she's in a gang, or she's from the hood.”

“She wears mostly modern clothes from the 21st century,” she continued, “which not a lot of people appreciate because around that time was when a lot of crime started. She goes to school since she's a highly privileged Black person. She uses her really high-tech skateboard, which she loves, and it helps her get out of a lot of trouble. What she really dreams and hopes for the future is that crime and hate are not a word in their vocabulary, but she will fight back if she has to. Since it's a hundred years in the future now, they have all these high-tech gadgets and stuff, which she just loves.”

“Self-driving cars!” Talyn interjected.

“Self-driving cars.” Amber acknowledged Talyn’s statement and then continued to discuss her story. “So, not a lot of people want to go near her because she looks so different. It's rare for even white people to have blue eyes in this time. She has blue eyes, and she's emo. For them, emo is a good and bad thing. So, it's not like they're wearing dark and just listening to emo rap and stuff like that all the time.”

“She's listening to rap... the devil!” Talyn joked.

“Let her finish.” Terrah said.

“Um, what she... what she needs is someone to see her for her because everyone sees her as this really dangerous person with a really bad background.” Amber continued. “Where she used to live, a lot of bad stuff was mainly on her side. She needs someone to love her for her. Oh, she doesn't figure out that she has a dangerous life until probably like chapter 10. I'm not saying chapter 10, I'm just saying like somewhere later in the story. I have a question related to what I'm writing. Does Marco sound like someone who's feared? Like does he seem like he could be feared in some type...”

“DeMarcus sounds better,” Talyn interposed.

“I feel like if somebody said Marco, then I would go Polo,” I said. “That's not really a scary thing. I feel like people that have scary names have like hard sounds, like Declan or something.”

“Demetrius!” Terrah offered.

“Declan is not scary because I know someone whose name is Declan.” Amber replied. “He's not scary, but he tries to be scary.”

“See, he tries to be scary because Declan just sounds very hard and hardened,” I laughed. “It doesn't matter what the name is. It could be Charles. That's the name of my boss. You could make it Jessie, and then even though that's not a scary name at all, you could just make it scary.”

“Markus with a K!” Terrah exclaimed.

“I can't do Demarcus because someone in my family who just passed away is named Demarco. So maybe something that starts with V. I get really sensitive.” Amber said.

“Lucifer!” Terrah proclaimed.

“Ooooh! Ok. Anarchy or monarchy. Which one? Anarchy or monarchy?” Amber asked.

“It depends on the situation.” Terrah said.

“After WWII,” Amber replied.

“Anarchy,” Terrah offered.

“Anarchy or monarchy?” Amber asked Bailey.

“Monarchy,” Bailey answered.

“Dang...ok. Which is worse, anarchy or monarchy. I really don't know.”

“Okay. Anarchy is...” Terrah started.

“Total chaos is anarchy, and monarchy is like king and queen, British” Talyn interrupted.

“So, which one should I do? I don't know.” Amber asked.

“What came after World War three is probably...” Terrah began.

“Anarchy,” Talyn interjected.

“Yeah. I was gonna say not a monarchy. I mean, maybe a monarchy could happen.”

“An anarchy... do you know how many gangs would come up from that?” Amber inquired.

“A lot,” Terrah replied.

“Ok. So, so far this is what I have written down,” Amber said. “Violence has become the number one effect from World War 3. Ever since, the US turned to an anarchy with rising leaders, including Maya's father. That is as far as I've gotten.”

“Turned to, not an anarchy, just anarchy.” Terrah suggested.

“It's an because of the...” Avenae’J started.

“No, anarchy is not a noun.” Terrah said.

“It's not.” Amber agreed.

“Oh. I was thinking that usually when you have vowels, ‘an’ goes with vowels and ‘a’ goes with consonants.”

“That's right, but...” Terrah started.

“That's why an anarchy... I guess... a anarchy? It sounds fine either way.” Avenae’J says.

“So, to a anarchy?” Amber asked.

“No, just to anarchy,” Terrah replied.

“To anarchy... ok... that makes sense.” Amber said.

“It does sound better, to anarchy and not just to an anarchy.” Avenae’J added.

“Now that we have decided, I thought about monarchy, but then...”

“That wouldn't make sense.” Terrah said.

“What's anarchy again?” Victoria asked.

“Anarchy is complete chaos. No rules or anything, like Egypt.” Amber said.

When Amber said Egypt, I had to take some time to process the words. When the girls were talking about the concept of a monarchy, they immediately referenced Britain as the example, while anarchy and chaos were tied to Egypt. I know that FirstHOME and GC help to create these narratives, but I wish the girls knew about kings and queens who existed in Africa, South America, Asia. I’m not saying that any monarchy is a good thing, but I am saying that we should know that Europe wasn’t the only continent to have kingdoms and empires. What does it say about the current system of education that Dreamers are tied to order and a hierarchy of rule, but continents full of Endarkened people are connected to chaos and ruin? What does it say when we our imaginative stories continue to tie Endarkened history to chaos?

“I actually am glad that I chose an anarchy.” Amber said. “If I had a monarchy, then I would have to think of other names, which I don't feel like doing. I still have to think of her father's name. Oh! I forgot to say something about this. I actually have the protagonist’s name. I looked up Western European names. Maya Adrianna, that's her first name. It's like two names

because her father is Western European. The last name is Hundre. I don't know how to say that, but we're going to be ok with that. We're in the year 2120 because, why not?

“So, violence is actually one of the number one effects from World War 3. So Maya is really against all of the violence, and she wants it to just leave. Ever since World War 3, the USA has turned into an anarchy. Her father wants to fight against that, but he wants to take control of the US, so he's not necessarily a bad guy.”

“He's not that good.” Victoria pointed out.

“Depending on how you look at it, he's not a good guy either.” Amber said. “Anyway, Maya wants to fight for the greater good of humanity on her killer hoverboard/skateboard.”

“Oh my gosh. I cannot get enough of that!” Bailey exclaimed.

“So, Maya's father takes control over half the country. He didn't take over the whole country. He just took over half of it, and he's pretty mad about that.”

“Which side? east or west?” Victoria asked.

“North or south?” said Talyn.

“Heaven or hell?” Avenae’J chimed in.

“I still haven't thought about that.” Amber replied. “Right now, I feel like they should take over where California is. The climax will be when Maya finds out her mother was killed during a protest for fighting for peace. So, we’ll get more information about why she doesn't like the violence or why she doesn't want to do what her father is doing. In the falling action, she learns that she wants to become the president to stop the violence in the US. She wants to turn it back into a democracy, which was before all this anarchy stuff. Um, and the resolution is that Maya uses her father's control to climb towards a democracy and becomes the youngest female president.”

“How old is she?” Talyn asked.

“Okay.” Amber began. “So, she is actually...at the end of the story, she is actually 17 because there's like a bit of a time jump because her father takes control. It's not like the Trojan horse thing that happens overnight.”

“So it's going to do a time jump from when her father takes it over to...” I said.

“Well, in the story she starts out as 15, so it really isn't a huge time jump, but it's a time jump because we are going a hundred years into the future. I'm just thinking of World War 3 starting in 2020”

“I mean we were having re-elections in 2020,” Talyn pointed out.

“Yes, we were.” I said.

“With 45 elected again, there may have been a World War 3.” Avenae’J claimed.

“My mom said, “If you don't have nothing nice to say, don't say anything at all.” So, I'll just say he was our president.” Victoria said in a hushed tone. “I just didn’t like the way he shamed certain people. Like, at my old school, I had a lot of friends that were not from America. I didn’t really like the way he talked about immigrants to people. It's not like they wanted to move to America to take people's jobs and stuff, they just moved to America to get a better life for themselves. One, they probably didn't like the way it was going in their country, or they just wanted to move here to get better jobs or better opportunities.”

“And then another thing is,” Victoria argued, “I don't like what he said about how transgender people couldn’t fight for their country. I'm not saying I want to go fight for my country because that's scary. But if people, anybody, wanted to be able to fight for their country they should’ve been allowed to. If they wanted to do it, then we should’ve let them do it. They were legit fighting for him, if you think about it.”

“I didn't really agree with everything he said,” Amber said. “I wasn't really fond of him. I didn't agree with everything he was saying about building the wall. Honestly, first off, this is the United States of America. We were not supposed to be building walls. The word, united, means together, not apart. I find that really hard to understand why he had wanted to build a wall. If people were coming to America, it was probably so they could get away from something bad. Like, he was sending families back to somewhere that they were possibly trying to get out of. This is the United States of America, and united means together, not apart, and building a wall is basically the definition of pulling something apart.”

“I really didn't like him,” Bailey said, “but I figured that he would start building a wall, and then it wouldn't be finished until the next president. The next president wouldn't want it or something, so then they would tear it down, and all the money would go to waste.”

“I feel like he knew what he was doing was wrong,” Avenae’J started, angrily. “I think he was just being petty because everyone that he was making deals with and sitting down with were people that he shouldn't be. He was going along with countries who were doing bad things, sitting down with a candidate who killed and tortured his opposition. He was 70 something! He should have known what to say and what not to say. The things that he said were just really hurtful and harmful. What he said about immigrants and what he said about building a wall. Did he realize that those are our people, too? People from Puerto Rico were coming to Florida because he wouldn't help them. They had water pollution, air pollution. They hadn't gotten better after the damage and the hurricanes, and he was not helping them. He expected them to not immigrate? Puerto Rico is our territory. We're supposed to help them! They were coming to our country because they believed we would help them.”

“I just believe that we should always trust the office even if we don't trust the person who's running it.” Terrah said bluntly. “But, in this situation, I didn’t trust the person who's running it. I think some of his ideas weren’t well thought out. I didn’t think he was very good at representing what this country was supposed to stand for. And, I didn’t think he was a very good person in general.”

We haven’t had a president since Trence handed over the government forty years ago, but he ruled over America from the time he was handed the presidency to the time he died, so it makes sense that the girls had to learn about the first Trence in FirstHome. The first one was elected, but after almost losing re-election, he decided that he would not abdicate his throne. He ruled until he died, and then he willed the presidency to his son. They just kept doing that until the last Trence decided to share the wealth with his buddies. We had presidents before the Trence’s came into power, but they only teach us about certain ones. At one point, I heard that an Endarkened man had actually become president, but it was just a rumor.

“Well,” I said, “Even with all the other mess that happened with GC, I’m glad Amber’s World War 3 didn’t happen in 2020.”

“It could have happened since 45 didn’t get his act together.” Avenae’J argued.

“Everything I read and watched from that time, somehow, World War 3 was always the cause of something happening in the world. I don't know why? It just seemed like it was a...” Amber started.

“Like World War 3 was out to get us?” Victoria asked.

“Like a consistent presence?” I added.

“Well, mother nature didn’t want us on this planet anymore, anyway.” Talyn giggled.

“She's just like, ‘you ruined it enough. Get off!’” Victoria laughed.

“God should not have made you.” Talyn chuckled.

“I can't wait to see where your story goes, Amber.” I said.

“Last thing,” Amber said, pausing the group. “I kind of want to take a different turn with how I'm writing this. Like, I want to go kind of like how in the story we read had different years, but I don't know how I would do that. Like, I can probably do year by year, but then I also want to do like month by month or something like that, but that would take forever, so I might have to do year by year”

I was immediately reminded of the book that brought me here. “Octavia Butler does this in parable of the sower. She writes things in diary entries. So, you can move through time by showing a diary entry of things.” I said. I hadn't mentioned this book in a while, but maybe using it as an example can help Amber with her story. Using some form of time system throughout the story can help us figure out the setting of her story. It might be able to guide us through the narrative kind of like Butler did.

“I'm intrigued by that!” Amber said excitedly.

“Yeah! So that way, it can be from that person's perspective. It kinda just tells what's happening in the story, and then it fast forwards some more. It's based on the main character's diary entries.”

“I might actually use that,” Amber exclaimed, “because right now, I have all this, and it feels like I'm jumping everywhere at this point.”

She seemed excited to finish working on her story because as soon as she said this, Amber jumped up and let everyone know that she was ready to get to work on her story. She told everyone that they were dismissed, and the girls prepared to leave.

“Are we still on for a conversation on Wednesday?” I whisper yelled at Amber as she ran toward the door.

She didn’t turn around, but she gave me a thumbs up, so I took that as a yes.

November 28, 2085

Amber wanted me to meet her at her house on the J hallway. When I got to the door, I knocked. I tried not to knock too loudly, but it’s a pretty quiet in the hallway, so it sounded louder than I wanted it to. The door opened, and a brown skinned woman smiled at me.

“Welcome to our home!” she said. There were five kids playing behind her, and I wondered how they managed to take in so many Harbor children. I don’t really know the process, but I did notice that most of the kids have Harbor moms and dads, and many adults have connected with chosen families, blowing up the nuclear family trope of two parents, two kids, and a dog. I spotted Amber waving to me by a table in the living room.

“Come in, sis!” Amber’s mother said. “Don’t just stand there. I know there’s a lot going on in here, but we like it this way. Our house is always full of life.”

Amber came to the door, grabbed my arm, and pulled me to the table. “You’ve got a lot going on today!” I said to her.

“Always,” Amber laughed. “So, what did you want to know?”

I had been asking the same questions over and over again, so instead of giving her my speech about why I was doing this, I started with the first question I always asked. “Can you tell me about yourself?”²

“I’d probably describe myself as shy, but then when people get to know me, I am nowhere near shy. I am very talkative...very talkative. I’d say I dress a little odd. I wear jeans. That’s basically it. I wear jeans, and I’ll wear a shirt. I don’t like to dress really girly, so I don’t

wear a lot of dresses. I'd say I'm like 5'5 and a half. I'm dorky but then at the same time I don't like to be a dork sometimes. I would say I'm kind of athletic because I play a lot of sports, but that's only if it's team sports. I don't really like to play solo sports. Compared to everyone in my house, I'm like a goldish brown color, but then it's still kind of dark. I'd say I'm Black although I don't know a lot about my heritage. I'm still Black and strong. I'm not independent, though, because I still live with my parents.”

“I think my strengths would be my friends and family because without them, I wouldn't really be where I am today.” Amber continued. “My strength is the people who are around me supporting me. I ask them about writing. I've been writing stories since around third year because I really like telling stories, and sometimes I'd write them down and tell them to my friends and sometimes my family. After I'm done writing it, I'll show it to them, and they'll say, 'oh, that's good' or 'you could add something more to it,' or 'you could take something out.' So, it would be a mix of them helping me and me just telling them my story.”

I took in this information. Like Bailey and Victoria, Amber thought she was weird. She also found strength in her family and in her friendships. Because she said she shared her stories with family and friends, I wondered if she had always been one to share her writing with others. So, I asked.

“I used to not talk, because if I didn't, people didn't have much to say bad about me. Now that I'm older, I talk a little bit more. I've changed a whole lot. My worst memory would be at school because I didn't like talking. People would make fun of the color of my hair or the length of my hair. Then, they'd laugh at the way I'd talk, because I had some kind of weird accent. I only had about two friends. I was been bullied for a really long time. I only got braces because people laughed at the gap that I had between my teeth.”

“I remember in third year, they'd pull my hair and say, "Is that a weave?" I would be like, "No." I didn't even know what weave was at the time. I didn't know until I was in sixth year what weave was because I never grew up with that kind of stuff. I'd say that's one of the worst moments of people teasing and pulling my hair was when I was younger. I wanted to cut my hair. I wouldn't necessarily say I'd fall for them saying it was ugly, but I fell for them saying that. I didn't like hanging out with people because they said I was stupid, or ugly. I didn't really like going to school, but I did because my observers, they'd at least stand up and tell them to not do things like that.”

“There was one point where people were saying so much about my teeth that one of my friends went to the counselor and told her.” Amber said proudly. “They all got called to the counselor's office, and then they didn't like me because they thought I talked to them. I was like, "My friend did that, that's what we're supposed to do." I was really hurt, though. I couldn't even tell my favorite observer. Sometimes, she could just tell. She'd pull them aside and ask, "what are you doing?" She'd tell me she talked to them, so they shouldn't be doing it anymore. But kids will be kids or teens will be teens, too. As I got older, I realized that I don't need their opinions, because the more that I let them say that I'm stupid or ugly, the more that I feel like I am, but I know I'm not because they're the stupid ones for calling me that.”

I looked into the eyes of the beautiful Black girl in front of me and tried to figure out why she was forced to deal with bullying behaviors that caused her to hate her lovely features. Of course, “kids will be kids” is something so many of us learn at FirstHOME and in the GC world in general, but what aspects of the world socializes us to assume that Black girls plus long hair equals weave? What aspects of the world causes children to hate the unique gaps that form between their teeth?

“I guess I'm a little sensitive when it comes to a lot of things.” Amber said, disrupting my question spiral before it fully formed. “I try to be a little strong about it, but later on by myself, I get really upset.”

I definitely understood her point. It's hard when you're forced to be the strong one, especially when you know that there aren't many people who are willing and able to be strong for you. “I see that your friend stood up for you when those kids were bullying you. Do you speak up when you see injustices happening?”

“I see myself trying to speak up, but then at the same time, I don't know how I'm going to do that because I don't like talking in front of a very, very public place. I'm still shy no matter how much I talk.” Amber whispered. “I'm still shy, so me speaking up, I wouldn't say a lot. I'd get the jitters trying to talk, and then I wouldn't say everything. Then when I walk away, I'm like, ‘I could have said more.’”

“That's understandable. I mean, I think it's also that we have this idea that in order to be a part of a movement, you have to go out and speak, or protest, or hold signs. There's so many different ways to speak up.”

“Yea, you really don't have to. It can start with your family, or your friends. It doesn't have to be out there, out there. I am active on things like helping out society and things like that. Right now, I am help out at the Harbor's senior centers. I'm also planning on doing a radio show soon. It's basically going to bring up things for teens in our community, asking them to help with society. I honestly just want everyone to not have a bad life. I want them to have a good one where it's still the United States of America because the way that we're going right now, there isn't much peace going around. There are still people treated unfairly. Like, we are Black, but we

should all have equal rights and it's unfair how we're still being treated unfairly. I know it's kind of cliché to say world peace, but that's what I want most in life...for everyone to be equal."

I think her sentiments ring true throughout the group, but I can see how this want might impact the story she's writing. From what I heard in our collaborative session, there's a discussion of the violence that's happening above. The main character wants peace, wants to avoid the violence and the chaos. The main character wants a world where there's democracy in action, not in name only. The main character wants a world where Black girls can avoid ridicule, a place where they can be well. Just like Amber, the main character wants equality for all. Amber wants that, too.

December 1, 2085

"WW3's Effect on Society" by Amber

It's 2120, 20 years since the World War 3 ended, 20 years since the USA turned to an anarchy, 15 years since Maya-Adriana Hundre was born to someday return the States of America back to the United States of America.

Maya was never one for the violence and chaos she grew up with. Her father, Marco, only wants to control the chaos. There have been many outbreaks of protest over gaining peace. No successful attempts.

As Maya skates to school on her hoverboard, with her long, dark brownish hair flowing freely, she passes by the other kids' teasing and criticizing words. Maya tries her best to not take their words to heart. "It's dangerous to be walking around without your mom," they would say, as well as, "Oh wait, you don't have a mom."

Every time they would make those remarks, she thought of retaliation, closer and closer to fighting back. But as she thought about retaliating, she remembered what her mother used to tell her.

Letter # 23

Dear Dylan,

The students' have individual desks with holograms to do class work at their own pace. Talking is very limited. Interaction is also limited. These precautions are to make sure that no violence or chaos is brought into the school environment. Since you left, so much has changed. The air tastes of defeat and no feelings. Sour.

- Maya-Adriana Hundre

After school let out for the day, Maya was getting ready to hover away to her dark mansion of a house. The house of a feared man, her father. Before she could leave, she felt a shove to the back from a hand strong enough to knock her down by surprise.

One second later, all Maya could feel was the cold and hard concrete. The next thing she heard was false sorry's and laughs as they said, "Oh no! Do you want your mommy? Wait, you can't. She's dead. Sorry." The next thing Maya knew was that she was swinging. She hit the boy so hard he's on the ground groaning in pain with hints of blood. Maya set course home on her hoverboard.

Flashback

Every day, Denise would tell stories of how peace should be free. She never liked the thought of violence. Maya loved that about her mother. Denise always said that violence should never be fought with violence. Maya, as a little girl with light freckles starting to fade, took her mother's words to heart.

1 Year Later

Ever since Maya's father gained control of over half of the country, everyone has been looking down on her when they once just looked at her like she was a girl on the street.

Letter #120

I don't know when I will come back but remember: don't let them look at you as just the scariest man alive's daughter. Tell your father I said gut gemacht (good job).

- Dylan 'Dilly'

2137

Denise Hundre, a brave woman. Had she not been murdered during a peace protest, Maya would not have found her lost thoughts. Today is the 13-year anniversary of Maya's mother's death. Upon Maya finding out, she thought of ways she could change this anarchy.

Before we could clap for her, she told us that there was more to the story. Terrah and Avenae'J sighed in relief because they had questions.

"My writing is always, somehow, about me, but not a lot because I don't like talking about myself." Amber said. "I'll talk about myself if someone asks what I like or what I do, but I don't really write a lot about myself because it's not something that I like to talk about. The part about having her mother was in my head because I always think about how it would be if I didn't have my mom because I depend on my mom a lot. So, it's like, if people were to start bullying me about something, they'd probably say something about my mom. I talk about her more than I talk about myself. So, that part kind of grew from how I felt without my mom."

"Maya's mom didn't like all the violence, so she was protesting." Amber continued. "But one day she was protesting, and they were actually on the news, so everyone could see that. The

government came out and basically shut it down by shooting all of them. So, everyone saw that. Even Maya saw that. So that's why people tease her about it because she doesn't like to talk even though she'll talk every once in a while. I'm not sure if I put that in her bio.”

“Dylan is an old friend who has moved out of the United States of America, not United, because we are now in anarchy. He is a friend from the States of America. He's moved recently, and they write each other every day. So, I think the first entries I put on there is like 20 something because it's been 20 something days since he's left and he's moved to Europe, which I don't know why, I just wanted to go to Europe. So, I was like, you know what, let's just put this in here.”

“The father isn't really a major point until close to the middle or the end of the story. I think I forgot to say.” Amber said sheepishly. “In the middle, I'd probably give more details on how he took over because of fear. He basically had his men standing over and taking all these states over, and he can't really take the rest of it because there's another side, another man trying to take over States of America too.”

She concluded her list of extra information, and the girls began clapping. She got a few high fives from the other sci-fi writers in the group. I'm assuming that their burning questions had been answered because no one asked anything, and they all started making their way toward the door. As they walked, the girls discussed details for Talyn's collaborative session tomorrow, and I thanked them for working with me again today.

While the girls hugged each other and prepared to leave, I thought about Amber's story. It may not have been all about her, but parts of the personal story she told me popped into my mind as she read her story. Bullying was a major part of her life. She was bullied for her teeth and for her hair. Although her main character was bullied because her mom had died, there was

still the element of kids being kids and teens being teens. Rather than wanting to cut her hair, Maya's hair flows freely. Rather than having a friend stick up for her, Maya fights the bully herself. It may not be Amber's story, exactly, but I see how it could be. In fact, so far, all of the girls' stories mirrored aspects of their lives. It may be speculative in nature, but the themes are definitely realistic.

¹ The following conversation is taken from workshop transcripts 1, 3, and 5 as well as the girls' 4th interviews.

² The following conversation is taken from Amber's 1st, 3rd, and 4th interviews.

CHAPTER 16

Kokolane Signing Out**December 2, 2085**

Talyn was the first one to arrive in the library, so she was waiting for us when we walked in. She had her materials in front of her, and I noticed that she had quite a few documents. I was pretty sure they all weren't pages from her story, but who knows. Talyn told me that she likes to build worlds for her characters, and sometimes, worlds need extra pages. Before she began telling us about her story, she prefaced her content.¹ "Mine is really weird because my character lives in an alternate universe. It's in the same universe, but it's like the Earth got hit by a meteor, everyone died, and then they like reformed and got bigger."

"The Big Bang Theory!" Avenae'J exclaimed.

"I was inspired by a book." Talyn continued, disregarding the comment. "I think it's called All's Quiet... something like that.² It's a book where the main character goes into war, and there's this British kid who knows nothing about what war actually is, and when he gets there, his life changes completely. Then when he gets home, he's like, 'I have nothing to do. I don't have anything.' Like, his whole view on life kind of just changes who he is because he felt like wars were a prideful thing. But then he saw his friends die, so that kind of changed everything."

I hadn't read that book, and nothing about it sounds intriguing to me, but I found it interesting that it was part of Talyn's story. Based on the other girls' silence, I don't think they read the book either. They remained quiet, listening, waiting for Talyn to begin again. "Ok," Talyn continued. "The world is also kind of based off of Greek mythology. So, this girl looks

like that girl from Avatar: the Last Airbender, but she's taller with heavier coats.³ Her hair is all the way out, and it's dark brown. She lives in a forest on a country of islands because she doesn't like people. It's always cold; it's basically Antarctica, but with trees that have leaves. She lives by herself – no pets, no family, no nothing. She hunts for food. She doesn't technically go to school. She's 15-18 years old. I'm still trying to figure out what range, what age I should put her in. Um, she wants to go into war so she can be respected and find out what she is because she thinks that sometimes things can happen in war, and it can make you realize who you are as a person.”

“In the world, there are different races,” Talyn continued, “and it’s evenly distributed between the army that she's in, but there are two people who are extremely racist and they're white. I'm making them white, blonde people that know nothing about the actual outside world, and they refuse to learn anything else. So, these people came for glory, and they're always blaming whatever bad happens on all the Black people that are in the army. Then, the other white people are like ‘get them out of here!’ They get reported for that, and then they are no longer part of the military. There is a war is going on between two different countries, and you have time to bully Black people because they're Black? We do not have the time or energy for that. You're going to get kicked out for that Tom foolery.”

“Is there a reason why you made them white and blonde?” I asked. I had a feeling that their racial identity and hair color made them Dreamers, but I didn’t want to make assumptions.

“I guess it's because it's a stereotype, I guess.” Talyn replied.

“Well, you definitely went in depth on your characters.” I said.

“I've been working on this person since like the end of last year,” Talyn replied, “so I've had an idea of this person for a very long time. Oh, I also forgot to mention that my character is Black, but it's like the lighter shade. It's like, um, your skin color.” She said, pointing to Terrah.

“And she also has really long light brown hair down to the bottom of her shoulder blades. Her name is Kokolane. I still don't know where the inspiration of that name came from, but it's there.”

“The year is... I haven't come up with the first two digits, so I just put Xs.” Talyn laughed at this as she showed everyone that she really just wrote two X's instead of using actual numbers. “The story is about becoming a soldier and getting respected by the people around her. The major conflict is between two countries. They're fighting over Kokolane's island that's important because of the minerals and resources it has on it. So, they're fighting over the island, and whichever side wins, they get it.”

Avenae'J jumped in to ask a question. “So, she lived with her family, but then she comes to the fact that she wants to live alone?”

“I mean...Yeah.” Talyn responded. “So, I'm going to start at the end which is in the middle of a battle with Kokolane and the bad guy of the story. Then, she is actually going to become a soldier, and she will discover what she is. Then the resolution is just her liking who she is because I cannot think of anything else that's more fitting for that character. I like to make my characters overly powerful. When you have that, you can make battles kind of interesting. My characters don't know they have powers yet. So, if I have them fighting someone, I can make it to where they unleash this giant explosion of things or make the story about them finding out what their power is.”

“Respect.” Avenae'J said. “I like that. It's actually really nice, like the ending. It feels like I'm a soldier.”

“So again, yes, I started off in the middle of the battle, and then like I did "year jumps.” Talyn continued. “It jumps back to when she got into the army, and then two months after that,

and then a few days later, and then two days before the battle happens. I'm working on the buildup for the climax to show that she is a god, more or less. I'm trying to see how that works. So far, I think it's good. I got her in a fit of rage because emotions can heavily influence magic, and that is something that has been consistent in so many places.”

After hearing Talyn’s synopsis, I wasn’t sure how we could help her. She had been working on this character for much longer than we’d been meeting as a writing group, and she seemed to have a grasp on the characters’ world as well as the main character. Maybe she just wanted us there for moral support, to listen to the premise of a story she had already written.

“So, what's a type of mean girl plastic name?” Talyn asked. I think she was using plastic to describe someone who is popular, materialistic, and mean.⁴

“Karen. Gretchen. Brittany.” Terrah offered.

“I put Cassie.” Talyn said.

“Rebecca?” Avenae’J suggested.

“Ok, now I need one for a mean dude. Just like...” Talyn started.

“A guy?” Bailey asked.

“Chad.” Avenae’J said.

“All the names are going to have Cs, Cassie and Chad.” Talyn proclaimed. “They're the bad people.”

Those were the only questions Talyn had for the group. Still, I couldn’t help but notice how the naming of characters came up in each collaborative session. Even though Talyn had the name of her main character, she wanted us to help her think of names for the racist Dreamers who antagonize characters in the story. What I’m thinking is that naming is essential for Endarkened people. I’ve said this before, but each time I meet with them, it becomes even more

prominent. That's got to be the reason why naming keeps coming up in our sessions. Naming ourselves and naming those who attempt to oppress and antagonize us is vital. Naming helps us figure out who we are and, possibly, who we should avoid.

December 4, 2085

Talyn decided that she wanted to meet in one of the Harbor classrooms. I had never been to them before, but I was grateful that she suggested this meeting place. FirstHOME classrooms look more like jail cells than spaces of learning, with desks lined up in rows and silence as a requirement. These classrooms have no desks, no sterile color palette, and lots of noise. They call these spaces classrooms because so many of the Harbor kids and adults come here to learn. According to Talyn, it's an open space that doesn't require people to silence their voices or adhere to arbitrary rules, a space where they teach and learn from each other. There are some specific classes given here – Endarkened History, Music, Dance – but most of the time, there are just groups of like-minded people coming together to share knowledge. It's pretty cool.

“So, why did you want to meet here?” I asked Talyn as she comes in the room.

“FirstHOME didn't allow me to have the imagination thing. It was a science, technology, engineering and math school, so it didn't have arts. It didn't have any of that. It was just straight up factory learning. It was not fun.”⁵

“Oh. That makes sense why you'd want to be in a place like this, then.” I said. It made sense that an organization bent on “Helping the Omnipotent Manufacture Efficiency” would revert to factory learning since the HOMEs job is to ensure that Endarkened youth aren't dreaming and that Endarkened people are ready to enter GC's workforce. It also makes sense why she'd want to meet in a place that was completely different from that space.

“So, you have probably spoken with the other girls already,” I said, “so you know that I’m just trying to learn more about your personal story before listening to your speculative story on Saturday. I’m here to listen, so whatever you want to tell me is cool with me. What should I know about you before I hear your story?”

“Well...my earliest writing memory is when I was seven, and I was copying words out of a Dr Seuss book. I think it was Green Eggs and Ham. That was the first time I remember writing something down. I think I was just bored and had nothing else to do, so I did that. I haven't actually written my own stories in a while, though. But I do have stories, and I just tell them to my friends. When I write, I'll make a character and figure out what I want them to be like, and then I'll center the story around that, and then it just flows. I don't really have a system to where I stop, think of something, and go again. It just comes out, you know? That's how I write it up. I'll make corrections later.”

“For the story, I get inspiration from Fairy Tail” Talyn continued, “which is an anime Manga and one of the first actual cartoons I watched.⁶ It’s a show where basically every single technology is somehow integrated with magic and is powered by that. I take some of the different types of magic from it – celestial, requip, and dragon slayer magic. I take that and the concept of guilds from that show.”

I see similarities between Talyn and Bailey’s writing styles. Bailey said she got writing inspiration from anime, infusing characters and their characteristics into her stories. Just like Bailey, Talyn was also using anime as she creates her stories. She was taking concepts from the show and transferring it to the story she was writing. “Your writing process reminds me of Bailey’s,” I said, “because she also gets some inspiration from anime and manga. Is there

anything else I should know about you? Like, not about the story that you're writing, but about your personal story?"

"Uh... I mean... I used to hide in my closet a lot." Talyn answered. "The time when I was most scared in that closet was around the time when my Harbor brother was starting to get more into having anger issues along with having depression. He was really angry, and he wanted to get a device from me. I knew it wouldn't work, so I didn't give it to him, and he kept trying to bang down the door. So, I put my bike, this computer hardware thing, and a few other things against the door. Then, I hid in my closet, and he was yelling, and I was crying tears. It was not a good experience. Then, he also had friends over, and they harassed me."

Outside of our collaborative sessions, Talyn sometimes talked about her brother, and it was usually a conversation about something mean or ignorant he said in conversation with Talyn and their mom. Many people in the Harbor become Othermothers to kids who make their way to the underground safe haven. Some take in numerous children, like Amber's mom, and others take only one or two. Talyn's brother is only a year older than she is, and they came to the Harbor at about the same time. It seems as though her brother was having a harder time adjusting, though, because Talyn often interrupted the other girls to tell stories about a problematic thing her brother did that day. I decided to ask her about that relationship since she talked about it so often. "It seems, based on not just this story but also the other days where he's been mentioned in random conversations, that you have lots of stories about your brother. How is that relationship?"

"How is that relationship?" She asked. "I don't like him like him very much. I care about him, but I don't like him."

"Why don't you like him?" I probed.

“So, the first few years, he acted like he was better just because he was the first one.”

Talyn began. “But, one time, my brother's friends came over, and I recorded them saying stuff, and I sent it to my mom, and he got in trouble. That’s something I was proud of. They all said very inappropriate things, except for one guy. The rest of them were very inappropriate and not respectful in any way. I don't know if that was because I was a girl or because I was his sister or whatever, but I did not like it. It was not ok, so I recorded it and sent it to my mother.”

“If you don't mind me asking,” I said, “what inappropriate things were they saying?”

“Like sexualized things.” She said somberly with a tinge of anger. “I don't remember the exact words, but it was like ‘you wanna hop on this dick’...stuff like that. There were a few girls, and they told them to stop doing that. My brother was not in the room, but I don't know if he would've stopped them or anything. I don't know what he was doing, but he was not doing anything. Then, I threatened them with that, and they didn't stop, but I was recording, and then they got in trouble. I felt happy.”

“They should never have been saying that.” I said, appalled.

“And they were like the same age as me!” she exclaimed. “How?! That's not ok!”

“It’s not, but I’m so glad you were able to record them. You took a stand. You stood up for yourself even though your brother wasn’t around to speak up for you. To me, that’s activism. Do you see yourself as an activist?” I didn’t want to change the subject, but I also wanted to make sure that the conversation didn’t just center that relationship and the negativity that it brought with it. To me, standing up to your peers and telling them that what they are doing is wrong is a form of self-activism. I just wanted to know if she saw it the way that I did.

Still, I’ll be wrestling with this knowledge for a while because even though her home in the Harbor should be a safe place, there is someone in the household who no longer represents

safety for her. At first, her brother was her friend, an ally of sorts within the Harbor. Now, especially in lieu of these two events, he's a traitor, a person who betrayed her trust. I know the Harbor has people from all over who are still grappling with their time in GC. I know that people come to this space with oppressionist views that have to be unlearned, but until the most vulnerable of us are protected, none of us are safe. Talyn's story about her brother showed me that we still have a lot of work to do on ourselves even as we fight against GC.

"I see myself as a person who can empathize with others who have been through it even if I haven't been through it myself." Talyn answered. "I think I can understand what it's like to feel like you've been in the wrong because you're a certain age or a certain type of person, you're this color, you're this gender, you identify as this person, and you like this certain thing. I can understand that, and I feel like I can get to some of the people who don't. I can help them understand because not everyone is always informed."

"So, you see yourself as someone who is responsible for justice?" I asked.

"I mean... the people who realize that there needs to be change are responsible." Talyn said. "The women who started the #BlackLivesMatter movement, Martin Luther King, the people who got out and said LGBTQ people are very much needing of things because we are human beings. Those people who realize human beings are just human beings, and they're not going to be anything other than that, no matter what you are, who you are, and what you prefer."

I think I know what she meant, but I thought it wouldn't hurt to get some clarification. "I get you. So, the people in more targeted groups are responsible for making sure that the people in the more dominant groups are socially just?"

“No,” Talyn responded. “I feel like it's the people in the target groups who help themselves and help each other. The agentic groups, when they start helping out, makes things get more attention, so it's kind of both of them working together.”

Talyn basically summarized what happens at the Harbor. Endarkened people in this place work together to make sure that they are all well taken care of. They help each other learn. They uplift each other. There are other Endarkened enclaves that work to uplift their members. Still, although the Harbors can exist on their own, they also need the help of Dreamers who understand that we all need to work together in order for all of us to have social justice. I mean, that is the purpose of the commonweal, after all.

December 8, 2085

“Before I start,” Talyn began, “I have to say a couple things. With more time, I would've gotten more into detail. I would've put more logs because the style that I am writing in is basically her putting logs in her book and then in her diary or journal. Sometimes something happens on a day when she can't write in that journal, so it's not a day by day journalism thing. If it was, it'd be like 2000 pages long because it's a long time.”

“I thought experiencing the battle without the logs would make it so the reader would experience it better.” She continued. “The logs give information; they tell you what happens, so it's like a movie. If you want a movie to work, you can't just have a character sitting there narrating everything that happens. That's not going to be a good movie. You have to see what happens to make it a good movie, which is why a lot of Avengers movies work. A lot of movies that are based around war work because it's not just about the logs, it's about what happens after you write the logs.”

With that introduction, Talyn began her story.

“Kokolane Signing Out” by Talyn

Clash! The sounds of swords beating against each other. Glares are thrown between the battling. Sparks of metal hit the ground before fizzling out.

“You’ve gotten better, Kokolane.”

“And you talk too much,” she swings her sword at his head.

Three and a half years ago

June 15, XX03

It’s been a while... I haven’t written in this thing in a while. I finally got to be a soldier. One step closer to being a part of my village. So far so good. No one has said anything to me. I guess that’s how I like it.

- Kokolane signing out

Two months later

August 15, XX03

Recently, the Eoduunal army has advanced. I was put in my first battle, but what I noticed is that whenever I shot an arrow, it looked like the energy that it gave off was drowning the enemy. Sometimes, when I dodged, it seemed like I was floating.

- Kokolane signing out

A few days later

August 20, XX03

*Someone has been caught trying to steal a few data files today. I’m just glad no one is blaming me. Well, almost everyone. Cassie and Chad... they are the most racist pieces of s*** I’ve ever met. They are blaming me and everyone else my color. I don’t know why the general*

doesn't kick them out. Besides, Cassie is the worst liar. She once tried to blame Tony (a good friend of mine) of stealing her undies, when it was likely some animal that got in.

- Kokolane signing out

Three years later, before the battle

"Alright troops, you're the only ones I have," says the general. "Mindala, since you're our last healer, you're in the back. Kokolane, you're the best with a sword, so you're in front, and Thomas, you're our last gun man, so you're the middleman.

"What about you sir?" Kokolane asks with a slight panic in her voice.

"I'll be with Tom, Koko. Don't you worry. Now, let's move!" he says with confidence. Thomas, the general, and Kokolane get their weapons. Mindala grabs her healing staff and a weapon of her own. Kokolane gives a small offering to the goddess, Aquarius, and they set off to the battlefield.

The mud soon turned dry. Kokolane was deep in battle when she heard the general's screams. "This feeling," she thinks, "it's like a running river." Her moves flow more and more as water splashed up from the ground. Another yell for help. "Mindala." Rage. Rage! RAGE!

A yell and a blast from the sky. The sky turns gray as if a storm is coming. The wind stirs and it starts to rain. As Kokolane attacks, the storm winds get faster, and the snow on the ground flies up in the air. Kokolane yells in pure rage, as she plows through the enemy army. She watches as her friends...no, the last drop of her family, is killed. The snow then turns into a type of tornado. It combines with the water coming down and wipes out the rest of the enemy army when...

"Kokolane!" she hears the general yell. She looks to see the general struggling to keep up a fight. She quickly goes over to kill the orc he's fighting. She hears an arrow. It came from

behind her. It killed the general. She grabs a dead man's bow and arrow, then kills the last soldier.

"Kokolane... do you realize what you are?" a deep voice says. It sounds like the voice of a shadow.

"You... you're the mole Arkasan?" She turns to him. He looks more an Eoduunal soldier without all the makeup. It was more disturbing than before. And to think, she used to think of him as an ally. As a friend.

"Let's finish this. And, let's see how long you last." He unsheathes his sword. It looks like a katana with a black handle and a silver blade. Kokolane picks up her sword.

Mud mixes with blood and bone beneath their feet. Her sword felt lighter. Her eyes glow blue, and his turn purple. The sky screams out as the fight breaks out.

Sparks fly. Blood is drawn. Lines are crossed.

Dodges and hits. Missing and getting. So close to a win.

Then, Kokolane is pushed back by a blast of energy. Arkasan smiles as Kokolane has trouble getting up. She stands and glares at him. She stands fully and charges.

She jumps up and...

Clash!

The two swords are sliding against each other. Kokolane throws him back and she lands on her feet.

"You've gotten better, Kokolane." he says panting.

"And you talk too much," she snaps back. She swings her sword over his head. The force of a god can kill anything. Who says it can't kill another god? His head falls to the floor. The storm clears.

Kokolane, injured and tired, falls to her knees. In all her life, never had she thought she'd be able to do that. She smiles, but the smile turns to tears, and the tears turn into small patches of snow. She wipes her tears. This battle is over.

Back at the base, the other generals let her go home. She needed rest. She's seen what anger can do, what people can do, what she can do. It was time she went home and relaxed.

After a few hours, she opens the door to her house. It was warm. She sits on her couch and relaxes, and she pulls out her journal.

June 15, XX06

I've fought in a way I've never fought before. It was the first time I understood what I can do. I feel better about myself. Anyway, I should sleep.

- Kokolane signing out

The girls clapped for Talyn as she bowed and waved to her audience. While she gave her mock award acceptance speech, I thought about the connection between her story and the personal story she told me the other day. Yes, I know that a lot of her story was based on war and Greek mythology, but I couldn't help but notice how the main character was forced to defeat a traitor to find her true power, to find out who she is. When Talyn spoke about her brother, she said that he had changed. He put her down because she was a year younger; he made her cry when he violently tried to take her device; he didn't stand up for her when his friends were harassing her. In various ways, her brother, a person she once considered an ally, ended up being a traitor. She didn't tell me about that connection, and I'm not sure if she's made that correlation herself, but it's definitely something I'm thinking about, especially since so many of the girls' personal stories are showcased in their speculative worlds.

¹ The following conversation was taken from workshop transcripts 1, 3, 4, and 5 as well as Talyn's 2nd interview.

² Talyn is referring to *All Quiet on the Western Front*, a novel by Erich Maria Remarque.

³ *Avatar: The Last Airbender* is a highly-rated cartoon that aired on Nickelodeon from 2005 to 2008.

⁴ The term, plastic, to describe materialistic mean girls became popular after it was used in the movie, *Mean Girls*. Karen, Gretchen, Regina, and Cady are the names of the Plastics in the film.

⁵ The following conversation was taken from workshop transcripts 4 and 6 as well as Talyn's 1st, 2nd, and 3rd interview.

⁶ As Talyn notes, *Fairy Tail* is a popular anime series that ran from October 2009 to September 2019.

CHAPTER 17

I'm Fine

December 9, 2085

Terrah told us that she had been working hard to create her story. She wasn't sure how much help she needed, but she did want us to listen and give our input. In some ways, I felt like that was how all the girls used the time. Most of them had their stories mapped out in their heads before we even began to talk about writing our stories, but it seemed as though having conversations about what they were writing allowed this space to continue to exist.

"So, Zorella is generally a really shy, kind of awkward person or girl, but she's really, really smart."¹ Terrah began. "She focuses a lot on schooling and that's why her going to this college was a big deal because after America split, all the colleges on her side of the country kind of crashed, but the colleges on the other side ... they crashed, too, but eventually, they got better. The colleges over there are better than any of the colleges on her side, so it's really important that she goes, so she can find her place in the world. She lives with her mom, dad and younger brother. She's pansexual. She doesn't talk to very many people, usually only her family and best friend. She has pretty average grades. She's in college, and she's 19. She's short with very long hair that she often straightens or puts in two Dutch braids."

"She's Black, and she has rounded doe eyes and small lips." She continued. "Well, she is a mixed girl. So, both her parents are mixed, Black and white, and so that makes her half Black, half white. She looks a lot like a child. People often think she's a 13-year-old. She dreams of having her own successful musical one day and raising a family, of escaping her everyday

routine and meeting someone from the other side of the world. She dreams of everything going back to the way it was, or how it was before, I guess. She feels like she needs to stop dreaming, but what she really needs is an outlet, a way to let go. She needs someone to listen. She needs motivation. She needs someone to love. She's tired of being lonely.”

“I feel like, in a way, she kind of relates to me,” Terrah said, “because I feel the same way about wanting to find my place and where I belong in the world. And so, that's where that comes from. Her going to a college far away from her family also represents me, in a way, because I want to go to a college very far away. If I go to that college, I'm going to be far away from my family, which is the only thing I'm hesitant about. Harvard or the other colleges, I know one is Stanford, and I forget the name of the third one, but they're all far away from where my family will end up. I know that for a fact because they don't want to live in the Northeast or all the way on the West Coast.”

Terrah’s connection to her character reminded me about how so many of the girls’ characters resemble themselves and how many of the situations present in their stories resembled events in their lives. They are writing speculative stories, of course, but there’s still an element of truth in them somewhere. It’s kind of like they’re using the genre to discuss their own lives and dreams. They’re creating maps for themselves and maps for others in the world.

“Ok. I'm deciding between the names, Thea and Lydia.” Terrah said.

“I like Thea.” Avenae’J offered.

“I like Thea, too.” Victoria said.

“I have a friend named Tia.” Talyn said.

“What were the names?” Bailey asked.

“Thea or Lydia.” Terrah replied.

“Oh yea! Thea.” Bailey suggested.

“I just like the name Lydia.” Talyn shrugged.

“Okay.” Terrah said, writing down something in her notebook. “So, I have a name for one of the sections, which is actually good. The section she lives in, the one that started with underrepresented people, is Japanese for invisible, but I changed the spelling a little, it's pronounced Mee-eh-nye, so that's what it's called.”

“Don't you love when you get those breakthroughs,” I said,” like ‘I have a name for something. I know why this is this thing?’ I'm guessing it's going to work some way into the characteristics of that place.”

“Yeah. That's how they came up with the name.” Terrah replied. “They were in the government, and they were like, ‘okay, we're a different country now. We gotta figure out what we're going to call our country.’ And, you know, they use some language other than English because that's kind of the point is that it's supposed to be underrepresented. It's Japanese, and it's invisible.”

“What's your conflict?” Avenae’J asked.

“My conflict?” Terrah responded.

“Like, in your story.” Avenae’J said.

“Oh! So, the kind of plot I've come up with is this girl, the main character, lives in the underrepresented part, and she's Mienai – now that I have a name for it. She's just a really average girl, and there's really nothing special to her. She has a little brother and, you know, she's really basic, I guess. She's lives every day pretty much the same as far as school, meeting her best friend for lunch, going home, and helping with dinner because, you know, her and her family are really close. But she's like, ‘I don't want to live like this anymore. It's boring.’ Then,

for some reason, the other part, they're like, 'hey, we want to pick some of you to come to college and take some of you to come to school in our area.' She qualifies for it, but because she's so close to her family and her friends, she doesn't know whether or not she wants to go because she doesn't want to leave them behind."

"This may sound very childish, but like that kind of reminds me of like the first Descendants."² Victoria chimed in. "Like the descendants, like all four of them, were chosen because they're overrepresented for their parents being the worst villains. So, this kind of reminds me of that, where she's chosen to go, but she doesn't want to go for the reason that her mother wants her to go."

"Yeah!" Terrah said. "Okay. So, for the first kind of choice that determines the whole story was whether or not she was going to go to college in the other part, and she does. I think she will because that's kind of the plot line I went off of. So, you know, she's saying goodbye at the train station with all her suitcases and, you know, she's standing at the door to the train, and she's looking back at her family and friends, and she's like, should I go? Should I get on this train and leave? And she decides that she will because she knows that her parents want it and would want her to be happy. So, then, you know, she takes the train. It will be kind of like a time skip because train rides are probably going to be boring to write."

"She's now like at the college with all the other people," she continued, "and she has a choice of whether or not she's going to have a roommate the rest of her college years, and she decides that she would because she can easily get lonely. So, she signs up for a roommate, and then they give her a room, and her room is with another person from her section. I haven't made a character, exactly, but I know it's gonna be a boy. They decided that they could put them

together because he's gay. Then, there is somebody from the section they're in now who asks them to come to a welcome party. Her roommate goes, so she decides she'll go as well."

"At the party, she gets a call from her friend back at home, and she accepts the call at the party. She tells her friend it's actually really nice here. It'll take some getting used to, but it's going to be fun. And that's kind of where it's resolved because her friend is like, 'you're gonna do great.' And she's like, 'I feel good about this choice I made.'"

"Basically," Talyn said, "I wanted to think about what would the country be like if all these people who felt like they were being oppressed against just were done and kind of fought against it and started their own country where everyone was equal, which, for the most part, ended up well, but there's always going to be people who hate other people for no reason. I wanted to see what would happen if after this long time of being separated, they decide to bring people back together."

Her story reminded me of what the Othermothers said about the commonweal, that state of collective well-being that includes humans, animals, and the environment. The Harbor is a commonweal because the Othermothers have designed it to be this way, but the world is not. America is not. America was built on the destruction of the commonweal, so it cannot exist there. At least not right now. It may not be as separated as the country in Terrah's story, but it is not whole. Many of the Dreamers continue to uplift their own interests to the detriment of everyone and everything else. Some Endarkened people do it, too, often to gain favor with GC or their Dreamer employers. But, the world that Terrah envisions is trying to come together, to forego separation based on arbitrary things. I can't help but think that this story mirrors how Terrah wants the world of GC to come together, to break down the wall that never should have existed in the first place.

December 11, 2085

I met Terrah in the Harbor doctor's office. It's nothing like any office I've ever seen, and it's where all the Endarkened health and wellness people meet. There are no sterilized wall colors, and there are no long lines waiting for insurance payments to be handled before someone is able to receive aid. Instead, an Endarkened person can walk in, tell the receptionist what they need, and then be taken directly to a specialist. There are many health and wellness scholars in the Harbor who focus on preventative measures, and although they may not be working in the office every day, they are always available when someone needs help. It's a weird system, but it works.

Terrah wants to be a doctor, so she is apprenticing in the office. She mostly works with the nurses right now to learn basic healthcare protocols, but she'll soon start to follow nurses who have more duties. The apprenticeship process in the Harbor requires all who are interested in this line of work to learn under the tutelage of every person on the clinic staff, so that each person is well-rounded. Then, after they've learned from everyone, they are able to choose a specialty. This way, they all have a basic understanding of various needs, and they can help out in other ways when they're special areas of expertise are not needed.

When I arrived at the office, Terrah was sitting at one of the tables close to the receptionist's desk at the side of the room. She was looking over some documents, probably studying since she plans to follow someone new within the next few months.

"Hi Terrah," I said, walking over to the table, "are you still able to talk?" She nodded her head and gestured for me to sit down in the chair across from her. As soon as I sat down, she put the papers aside and smiled in my direction. It felt as though she was waiting until the last

possible minute to put her readings away. She is dedicated to realizing her dream of becoming a doctor, and I admire her for staying true to her goals.

“Basically, I just want to learn more about you before I hear your story since I’m new here, and you’ve already formed bonds with the other girls. Is it ok for me to ask you some questions?” I asked. I know that she probably already knows what I will ask based on conversations with the other girls, but I figured that it would be polite to explain myself.

“Of course,” she said.

“Ok, so can you tell me a little bit about you?”

“Hmmm... I have really curly brown hair, and it’s like a weird texture because it’s between like white people hair and like African American hair, so it’s this really weird texture, and it’s difficult to take care of.³ So, normally I’ll have it in a braid or something. I have medium-tone skin and dark brown eyes that are almost black. My closet is so weird. I wear graphic t-shirts, and I’ll pair them with jeans or black leggings. I bite my nails a lot, so I have really short nails.”

She paused for a moment, and then she continued. “I’m really just an understanding person, and I am good at like sympathizing with people and not judging them because of who they are or decide to be. I’m also really sensitive, and I know this because I’m easy to offend even if I try not to be easy to offend. I am really defensive over stuff I believe in. I think I’m a really clumsy person, so like I’ll trip over my own feet or something like that. I’m also really jumpy and kind of explosive in a way. Like, and I’m not afraid to just be my weird self. I don’t know how to explain weird. I’m just not afraid, so I don’t need to try and hide myself and my personality.”

I waited a moment to see if she had more to say, and then she resumed speaking. “I want to be successful.” She said softly. “I want a good job. I want a family... a big family. I want to live my life as much as possible. If I can’t have that, I’ll probably end up being really upset because I try to work really hard for the stuff I want, but I tend to feel that if I don’t get it, I’ll end up pretty upset, angry, or sad. I just need people to be by my side. I need people who I can trust. Because if I’m surrounded by people who I trust and love, I tend to stay like levelheaded.”

I noticed that a lot of what Terrah said in our meeting tied into what she said during our group conversation on common themes. She said that she put herself into new worlds, that her characters are shy and nerdy, and that they are part of a big family. Each of these mirror things in her own life. She is a shy, nerdy girl who wants a big family. The other day, she mentioned that she put herself into the story that she’s writing because the issues that the character faces are issues that she is also concerned with. It seems like speculative writing is one method she uses to talk about things in her world.

“My best talent is probably writing.” Terrah continued, bringing me back to our discussion. “I like writing fantasy mostly because I’ve always liked reading about things that aren’t true, things that are made up in somebody’s head. I want to know how that happened. And, it’s fun to learn about things that aren’t particularly true, especially when you’re trying to get away from the things that are. So, in the back of my mind, I was like, “I think it’d be fun to create books like these. I’m going to start writing stories now.””

What fascinated me about Terrah’s story was how she said she liked fantasy because it allowed her to get away from things that weren’t true. Still, in the fantasy story she told us about, she implemented aspects of her life into the unrealistic landscape. I’m not sure what to make of that, but it brings me back to my first reading of Butler. The world she created was so farfetched

because the scenarios she described had not happened. But, there were also elements of reality woven into her fictional landscape. Whether consciously or unconsciously, it seems to me like fiction stories, those written in the workshop and those published elsewhere, are ways to create ourselves, but they are also ways to create maps that will tell us which directions to go and which to avoid.

As I was thinking through the details of Terrah's story, someone called her to the back. They probably had a patient to tend to, and although our conversation was important to me, I know that Terrah's life as a future doctor is important to her. She gave me a look that said, "I'll stay if you have more questions, but I'd really like to go now," and I laughed.

"Go ahead," I chuckled. "I'll see you on Saturday!"

"K. Bye!" Terrah said, pushing her papers together and hurriedly putting them in a folder before placing them under her arm. I tried to get a glimpse at what was happening, and I saw a pregnant person being wheeled into a small room. Seeing the person was a weird experience. For some reason, I thought all the children had come here from within GC. I didn't think about the possibility of babies being born here, babies who will never have the dream extraction before they are brought into this world. Babies who have a chance to grow up in a place that loves them.

December 15, 2085

Following in the other girls' footsteps, Terrah decided to give us a little more information before she began her story. "For the ideal or perfect side, I chose Greek because Greece is in Europe, and so I had the idea that that side would be predominantly white.⁴ The word I picked is Greek for, I believe, perfect or something similar to that. It's either perfect or ideal, I think. So, when choosing a name for this new country, they would probably choose something from a European language or something. And then for the other side, the invisible side, it was a

Japanese word because it's a different race. They would be predominantly Black, or Asian, or you know. And they would probably have chosen something that comes from a different race than just something European.”

That was helpful information to have. When we met last Sunday, she talked a little about why she chose the name Miaeni for the underrepresented side, but she didn’t talk about what the other side would be called. I just assumed it would be called the United States. I’m glad she let us in on her thought process because naming, once again, has proven to be an important aspect of the story.

“I’m Fine” by Terrah

“Oh, come on Lissa,” I whined. “This is a once in a lifetime opportunity.”

“I just don’t know.” She responded. Why was she so against me leaving? This was a good thing, or so I thought. Yeah, I’d miss everyone, but this school is better than any other on this side of the wall.

“Hey, just think about it, Ella. You have 2 days.” She told me. I nodded, and we went our opposite ways.

When I got home that afternoon, I started on some homework, but I couldn’t focus. I’ve always wanted two things: to go to a better college and to make my family happy. What if having both those things was unrealistic?

Two days had passed, and I’d come to a final decision. “I’m going to miss you, Zorie.” Kyan mumbled. I put my final shirt in my bag and turned around.

“I know, Ky. I’m going to miss you, too. I’ll be back soon. I promise.”

“Okay.” He says. I walk over to my doorway and pull him into a hug.

“I love you.” I told him.

“I love you, too.” He responded.

“Zorella, are you packed? It’s time to go.” My mother yelled from downstairs.

“Coming.” I yelled back. I grabbed my suitcase and backpack and walked out to the car.

“So what made you want to go across, Zorella?” My mom asked.

“It’s better than any of the schools here. Very few people here were accepted. I need to go.” I explained. I watched my dad nod and silently sighed. I knew they didn’t want to force me not to go.

We arrived at the train station not long after. We all got out and I gave hugs to my family.

“Take care of yourself, Zorella. Call us when you get there.” My mom said.

“Yes, Mama.” I responded. And with one last hug to each of my family members. I boarded the train through the wall.

Long ago, due to racism, sexism, and homophobia, the country that used to be called the United States of America split into Miaeni and Idonikoes. If you were oppressed you lived in Miaeni, and those who were in control lived in Idonikoes.

I’d stayed in Miaeni since the day I was born. It never really felt like home, so that’s why I left. If it meant I could go to an amazing college and escape the cage I was in.

After a few hours, we made it across and to the other station. We all got off and loaded onto the buses that would take us to campus.

As I sat in a window seat, a girl around my age crawled in next to me.

“Hello.” She exclaimed. I was slightly shocked by her enthusiasm.

“Hey.” I responded.

“I’m Theo – I mean Thea.” She said.

“I’m Zorella.”

“Are you from Miaeni?”

“I am. Are you?”

“Yes. I’m studying animation. How about you?”

“Animation. That means we could be in the same dorm.”

“Wouldn’t that be cool?”

I continued chatting with Thea and I felt myself getting really close with her. She was so sweet and innocent.

“Yeah. My mom didn’t want me to come either. My dad thought it was a good idea, though.”

Thea Explained. “He said it was good that they were thinking of people other than themselves.”

“I can see sense in that. Hey, random question: why do you guys live in Miaeni? I don’t mean to be offensive, but you seem so normal.” I asked.

“It’s okay. It’s an interesting story actually. My mom used to live in Idonikoes, and so did my dad. My mom is Asian. She came out as demisexual to her parents, and they got really upset. She lived out in the streets for a while before meeting my dad. He worked as a waiter, and she was starving. He bought her dinner then brought her to his apartment. She lived with him for a while, and they fell in love and decided to move to Miaeni. A year after, their trans baby – me – was born!” Thea explained. The last comment was immediately brought to my attention.

“Wait, you’re trans?” I asked shocked.

“Yea. Is that a problem?”

“No. I just remember when you were telling me your name and you almost called yourself Theo.” I had brushed it off then, but it didn’t occur to me that she might’ve been born a boy.

“Oh. That. I kept the fact that I felt like a girl away from my parents for a long time. A month or two ago, I told them, and they didn’t care. I didn’t know what I wanted to be called because I liked my name so much, so I chose the female version like a week ago.”

“Well Thea, you live quite the life.” I said.

“Tis true.” She responded. “Hey, were you going to have a roommate?”

“I don’t know. I didn’t know anyone going, so...”

“Well you know me now. I was looking for a roommate, but I also didn’t know anyone.”

“Well hello roommate, I guess.” I joked. We laughed and continued chatting.

When I received a letter for the University of Chicago, I was stunned and extremely hesitant to go. I didn’t know anyone going, and I thought my friends and family would never want me to come back, but I received a call that night that changed everything.

I finally finished my unpacking and sat on the couch in the living room. Thea went to the welcome part, but I decided to stay home. I just sat there and examined the room until I heard my phone vibrating.

I picked it up to see Alissa FaceTiming me. I quickly picked up.

“Zorella!” was the chorus that came from my phone.

“Mom! Dad! Kyan! Alissa!” I called.

“How’s Chicago?” My mom asked.

“It’s good. It’s a nice city.” I replied.

“Have you met anyone new?” Alissa questioned.

“Yeah! I met this girl named Thea on the bus from the train station. Did you know that you can’t take a train from Miaeni into Idonikoes? Only to border towns. From there, you either get onto a bus or on an Idonikonian train.” I explained.

“Interesting.” My mom said.

“Have you tried any Chicago style foods?” Kyan asked.

“Actually, yes.” I answered. “I had a Chicago dog. It was great. I’ll take you to get some if you visit.

“Well, it seems like everything is going well.” My dad chimed.

“It is. I miss you guys, though.”

“We miss you, too.” Alissa stated.

“Don’t hang up in it for too long, though. Enjoy yourself.” My mom ordered.

“Okay!” I responded with a salute.

“We have to go, sweetie. We’ll talk later.” My dad told me.

“Okay. Bye.” I said.

“Bye!” They all yelled at once.

I put my phone down and smiled. I got ready for bed and before falling asleep, I thought, I’m going to like it here. It’s all going to be fine.

The girls clapped and cheered once Terrah finished, and I noticed that a small group of kids, who had also been in the library, had formed a small semi-circle around the table. This started happening in the beginning, but there were only a few children who would sit at a nearby table, listening intently. Instead of listening from afar, they gathered around the table, some sitting and some standing. They were clapping, too.

“I noticed some changes...” I started.

“Yes!” Terrah said before I could tell her what changes I saw. “I thought I needed somebody who could help Zorrella become more comfortable with that area. Since her best friend wasn't coming, I thought I needed somebody who kept her level-headed instead of wishing she could go back. So, she had a good friend. If she had a good friend, I thought it would make sense for her character to be able to stay there instead of leaving.”

“I also kind of thought, after thinking about her character more, that even though the party would have been a fun choice for her, she wasn't really that kind of person.” She added. “She wants to kind of adjust to what's going to become her home space before exploring around and finding other places to visit. So, if she went to that party, it wouldn't give her as much time as she needed to become closer with the area she was living in.”

“That makes sense,” I said. I could tell she put a lot of effort into thinking through her character's motivations. That's why there were so many changes to the original story.

“The end is El Fine, which means ‘the end’ in Spanish.” Terrah continued. “It's kind of just for fun. I was glad to have written it and been able to finish because I'm not used to writing short stories. So, I was glad I was able to get everything I wanted to say on paper. I do have an idea for a little part. I probably won't add it, but it'd be something that happens later on because it doesn't follow this main plot point. But, she meets someone from the other section, but they

don't exactly agree with the way their area thinks. They think that everyone should be included, but they're just like... they're like your average person. So, it's like kind of wrong in a way, but they fall in love and he's - he or she... haven't decided yet – they're like, ‘wait, this is not how I'm supposed to feel, but this is how I feel.’”

We all loved her story additions. She pointed out an important part of the GC world that I never thought about until moving here: how some Dreamers don't think the way that GC tells them to; how some Dreamers are co-conspirators even though there aren't enough of them; how some Dreamers also believe that everyone should be included. When I saw the man, Cody, in the fellowship hall almost two months ago, I was surprised. But, like Gholdy said and like Terrah showed, the commonweal needs everyone to be included, and finding community amongst all groups is required for oppression to end.

¹ The following conversation is taken from workshop transcripts 1, 2, and 3.

² *Descendants* is a popular Disney film that first aired in 2015.

³ The following conversation is taken from Terrah's 2nd, 3rd, and 4th interview.

⁴ Conversations in this section are taken from workshop transcript 2 as well as Terrah's 3rd interview.

CHAPTER 18

Dystopia

December 16, 2085

When the girls and I arrived at the library, there was an air of excitement and sadness. This will be our last week together, and although the girls aren't leaving the Harbor, I'm pretty sure that I may not be here for much longer. Within the next week or so, I need to send Charles my last correspondence before he expects me to return to the Altered Truth Division. Of course, I can stay in the Harbor, knowing that Charles and the rest of the staff will never find me, but something about working with these girls made me feel like I needed to go back, like I needed to continue doing this work outside of this safe space to ensure that other Endarkened youth can find their way to the Harbor, too. I don't think I can be like Harriet, but I know I can be Lauren Jane, helping Endarkened people find the maps, escape GC, and access their dreams. I think I know what I'm going to do, but I still have time to change my mind.

We all sat down at our oval table, the space we called home for so many weeks. Avenae'J planned to discuss her story outline and ask for help where necessary. Like some of the other girls, though, she had a pretty solid outline of her narrative before we met. So, we used the time to just share space and listen to Avenae'J tell us about her ideas.

"Okay. So, my story title, it's called Dystopia."¹ Avenae'J began. "The name of my main character is Avenae'J. Its time is 2020, and the place is Alaska, but like, Alaska is not part of the US.

"Is it a part of Canada?" Talyn interrupted.

“It's not a part of anything. It's by itself.” Avenae’J replied. “Um, this is probably very vague, but my story is about a young woman who falls in love and because of this, she wants everyone else to feel happiness and love. She comes up with a plan to start an uprising to bombard and overthrow the enforcers, but she wants to do it in a peaceful manner, like overpower them to where they get scared and stop. There are more people than there are enforcers, but the enforcers have guns, so that's why they don't do anything. The characters are Merino, Purdue, Felipe, Moretti, and Officer Carabinieri.”

“Event one is she meets Felipe, and they start hanging out and getting close to one another and fall in love, and they want people to feel the way they do. I could have done an independent thing, but I love when love drives people to do stupid things... not stupid, but it drives them to do that stupid thing that turns into one big thing that is very inspirational. Number two is they find the change room and find out what exactly happens in there. She wants to stop all the torture enforce and the forced reproductions. For the climax, she makes a cure for the people who have been given a medicine for their wrongdoings or what they think is the wrong doings. To be honest, I have no idea what the falling action is. The resolution will be that people rise against the enforcers and find out... I'm not saying that because that's a very big spoiler.”

“Ok! I definitely don't want to spoil it.” I said.

“A very big spoiler...” Talyn added.

“I also want to talk about my character.” Avenae’J began again. “I don't know why, but I really do. So, my main character, Avenae’J, like I've said five times, has a golden-bronze skin tone, and she's a chemical engineer. She's one of the most unique people, but they don't know that her natural hair color is dark black because she dyed the tips of her hair dark blue. She made

that dye herself. She has jet black irises with pure white eyes. So, you know how everyone has those red thingies?”

“The veins?” I asked.

“Yea, you don't see that in her eyes. All you just see is pure white, and the black pops against it.” Avenae’J said.

“So, she doesn't have blood in her eyes?” Victoria asked.

“Apparently,” Avenae’J says.

“It's your character, it doesn't have to...” I started.

“It's there, but it doesn't look like it's there.” Avenae’J explained.

“Just like our feelings.” Talyn added.

Using Talyn’s comment to discuss more about her character, Avenae’J continued. “Her feelings are that she has love towards her brother Philippe and chemical engineering. She feels a need for a change in the world, and she has sadness for the ones who aren't able to feel because of the change room. She is shy, but when she talks about her passions, she is very outgoing and likes to speak loudly about them. She's happy, and she likes to let people know that she is happy. She is intelligent, curious, brave, honest – these all will come into play later on – and then mischievous, but for the greater good. She’s a thief, but she uses her thievery in ways to help. Like, she didn't just randomly have dye in her cabinet. She stole materials from people in her lab at school, and she made it herself. And then later on, and this is a spoiler, she's gonna steal medicine from the change room.”

“I took a lot of things from myself.” Avenae’J stated. “She's a mixed female. I'm about to list off the things she's from: she's African American, Caucasian, Irish, Swedish, Southeast Asian, Puerto Rican, and Northwest African. That's what I'm mixed with. She has a sort of

deeper feminine voice, but you can tell when she speaks that she's a female with a mixture of two accents, a country accent and then sort of a Latin American accent. Her skin is like – I didn't take this from myself –golden bronze, and her eyes look small without her glasses.”

“She lives in a world where everyone is the same.” Avenae’J said. “Everyone is on the same level. There is no president or leading body. We govern ourselves sort of like an oligarchy, but everyone rules and everyone is on the same level. With an oligarchy, it's just a small group of people, but everyone is ruling in this type of oligarchy. Everyone lives alone in their own house with the same amount of pay and the same amount of land. Everyone and everything in this place is the same. They all wear large black cloths over our heads with openings where the eyes are supposed to be. They all wear black flowy materials so that no one can tell what color, ethnicity or gender anyone is. This has been the law for around 10 to 15 years so far. They all wake up at exactly five o'clock, and if they don't, they'll be taken to this place, the Change Room, where they get genetically modified so that they do what they're supposed to do.”

As I listened to Avenae’J telling us about the details of her story, I got chills. So much of what she said reminded me of the world above. There is no president because GC and its buddies rule us all. It’s an oligarchy run by business corporations. We all live alone except for the harvesting time even though we don’t all make the same amount of money. We aren’t required to wear the same clothing, but we do have uniforms that match our company sponsors’ colors to let everyone know who we work for. We also have the Change Room although I’ve never been forced to go there. There are so many similarities between the world above and Avenae’J’s story.

“She dreams that everyone was being themselves.” Avenae’J continued. “She dreams that she could live in a world like that; she could live in a world where everyone can be themselves and enjoy themselves. Where they don’t have to talk a certain way or act a certain way. But,

she's okay with the fact that she's not allowed to be who she can be because she doesn't want there to be a third civil war.”

“Third?!” Talyn and Terrah shouted simultaneously.

“Yeah.” Avenae’J said.

“So, an alternate reality? That's a very interesting concept.” Talyn mentioned.

“So, in this world, there was a civil war between ethnicity groups.” Avenae’J replied.

“So, yeah. She wakes up at five o'clock, like everyone else, washes her face, brushes her teeth, moisturizes, and puts on her cloth. Well, she puts her glasses on first, and then wraps the cloth around her head and puts the clothes on. Every single time she puts the clothes on, she has to pin it because all clothes have to be a size too big for them so that no one can tell what size everyone actually is.”

“I have a question. How do they get the cloth on? Do they wrap it around like a mummy?” Talyn said.

“Yes, they do that. There are openings where there are places for seeing.” Avenae’J answered.

“I don't get how they can do that. There's two ways that you do it. You can do it like this, or you can do it like this, or like this all the way around.” Talyn said, making various gestures to showcase how someone could plausibly wrap a cloth around their entire body.

Noticing the look on Avenae’J’s face, I said, “Let her finish.”

“Um, she loves how she has a mixture of everything in herself. I haven't thought of anything else, like I haven't thought of what she needs.” Avenae’J said.

“She may just need someone who she can talk to.” Talyn suggested.

“Yea, she probably needs people because she is so lonely,” Avenae’J said sadly, “but she can't have that because in this world, you're not allowed to have feelings. They’re not allowed to express themselves whatsoever.”

“It sounds like something from...” Talyn began.

“The Giver!” Amber said.

“That 19 something.” Talyn comments, finishing her sentence.

“1984?” I asked.

“Yea, with like the thought police.” Talyn answered.

“So, the reason why she does what she's told to do is because she's seen so many people didn't wrap their cloths tight enough, so their faces were shown, and they were like beaten and taken away. She didn't want that to happen to her, so she is now traumatized.” Avenae’J paused for a moment and then said, “I guess I just need someone to tell me what I should take out because I feel like it's too long already. But the stuff I've put in it helps for the end. I'm not going to say what, but it helps for the end. I'm putting too much in it, but at the same time I'm putting just the right amount for stuff that's going to be in it later. So, I just, I just want someone to tell me how much I need to take out.”

The girls sat there in silence. I felt like they just didn’t have anything else to add, but I also felt like there was more to their reticence even if they never said that directly. I think the quiet was a result of the fact that the story Avenae’J wrote, although it had some speculative elements, was our history. 2020 is the year when the dream extraction experiments began and 2030 is when the first successful extraction occurred. It was the year that GC came to power. 2045 is when the abortion laws went into effect, and it was the year Trence ended presidential term limits. It was also the year Change Rooms were created. To begin a story using our histories

and our current realities must have hit the girls harder than Avenae’J anticipated. All the stories included harsh realities, but no one gave an historical account grounded in an alternate, but similar reality.

“Well, at least what do y’all think about my names: Avenae’J, Purdue, and Felipe?”

Avenae’J asked, disrupting the silence.

The girls laughed, and Victoria said. “Purdue sounds like a farm... like that chicken farm.”

“The what?” Terrah giggled.

“Like the chicken farm where chicken comes from. Do y’all not eat chicken?” Victoria joked.

“I do!” Talyn answered. “I can eat like three pieces!”

The girls settled into an easy laughter as they moved into discussions about chicken. I don’t think Avenae’J got much help on what to remove, but the girls did seem to be more at ease. Maybe I’ll talk to her more about her story when I meet with her on Wednesday. Maybe I won’t. The only thing I know for right now is that I don’t think she should erase anything. Our history and our present are important, even if we don’t want to hear about it.

December 19, 2085

The plan was to meet Avenae’J in the Harbor’s science wing. I laughed when I heard about it because I didn’t know there were “wings” in this place. I know the Harbor contains different rooms, some smaller and some bigger, but I didn’t know they had halls dedicated to the sciences. Within the wing, there are several branches of scientific study, including math, zoology, engineering, ethnography, astronomy, and discourse analysis. They have their specialties, but they all work together in the same area, finding ways to connect their disciplines

in meaningful ways in hopes of one day fixing the world that GC has corrupted. It's interesting to see because I'm so used to the sciences being closed off from one another.

Since anyone can learn anything they choose in the Harbor, Avenae'J often chose to go there during the day, learning various skills that would help her become an engineer. She is the president of the Harbor's astronautics club, and she is always helping the mathematicians and historians as she hones her other science skills. I admire her dedication to her future craft.

The science wing begins with a circular meeting place with tables and chairs grouped in ovals around the room. The meeting place branches off into several hallways with about eight rooms in each, and each hall is dedicated to a specific science focus. The halls seem to have an open-door concept, so although they have their own sections, it's easy for them to collaborate. They respect each other's individual projects, but they know that collaboration is one open-door away.

I found Avenae'J sitting in the meeting area at a table to the left. She smiled, and her raised cheeks lift her glasses about an inch off her face. "Welcome!" she said enthusiastically.

"Hey there!" I said. "Are you ready to give me the story of your life?" She laughed, but then she nodded.

"What do you want to know?" She asked.

"Whatever you want to tell me about yourself would be great. I'm just trying to learn more about you before you tell us your story on Saturday." I explained. "I guess you can start by just telling me about your writing?"

"I've been writing since I was in second year."² Avenae'J said. "From like second year to fourth, it was more non-fiction fiction writing. I remember this book I wrote in second year with one of my best friends. We wrote it about things that we had done, and then put a fiction twist.

The book that I wrote with my best friend was the first piece of writing I was really, really into. I'm pretty sure I was doing something before that, but that was my first major piece of writing. I was really deep into that book. I wanted to publish it. It was not the best writing, and it was not the best drawing, but I wanted to publish that book.”

“That’s awesome that you began writing books so young. It seemed to make you happy, so much so that you wanted to publish this great work. What else do you like to do, or what else makes you happy?” I asked.

“Well, one of my happiest memories was graduating from eighth year because it's a bridging ceremony, and, I was going into SecondHOME. I wore a dress going to my knees, and then it had this train on it, and it was black. Our uniform was black and white, so you had to wear all or either. I had on these really nice shoes, and I loved them so much. I don't know why, but I just felt so beautiful. I felt like the spotlight was on that day. Everyone had their own spotlight at their own moment. I don’t normally feel very pretty or like the prettiest.”

“I have been bullied on a lot of occasions in my life.” Avenae’J continued. “I've never been bullied by Endarkened people. I’ve been bullied by Dreamers. I was just put down by them, and it’s probably not for the reason that I'm saying it is, but it's just what it seems like to me. The old school heritage there would cause them to bully a lot of Endarkened. A lot of Endarkened were bullied by Dreamers.”

“I see.” I said somberly. I wasn’t surprised, but I was sad that she had to experience that.

“I like coding.” Avenae’J said, changing the subject. “There's a lot of math with that even though you can't see. It's putting sets of words together. It's something plus something that equals something. It's not as hard as some people think it is. I like it, so that's probably why it's not hard for me. I remember this one time, I was talking to this observer, and I remember him saying that

he was really surprised and proud I was actually doing this stuff because he'd never seen a thing like it. He never thought that we could do that. I think he was never actually paying attention. I think he probably didn't think a lot of Endarkened girls do this. But, they do it, and they make it known. So, I'm pretty sure he was just not paying attention."

"So, it seems like you do a lot of research on Endarkened people because you know about so many who do what the observer said you couldn't do." I said, but it was more like a question.

"I like to read. I like to research. I like to read the news and research stuff based on what I see in the news. I also like just researching. What's this? What's that?"

"What types of things do you research?"

"Um, how people aren't being represented." Avenae'J said. "How there are some crimes that aren't being spoken out about in the world, and they're the ones that really matter. And then, nothings being said about them. They tell people about it, and the people just don't care. People aren't saying anything about really important crimes. The only way the crimes are being spoken about is through social media. Not even the news is speaking about it! But what's really annoying about that is how they used to talk so much about 45, but they couldn't talk about the kidnappings of children, the beatings of children, the beatings of children on buses, how kids are being bullied and beaten up and being beaten to death and being killed and committing suicide."

She had a point. During Trence's reign, there was so much talk about the buffoonery of the office without much information on the damage he was doing. Of course, there was some outrage and media attention for a few weeks on the issues, like Avenae'J mentioned, but then Trence would do something else, and the media would shift to a new, more popular story. The only time the faded news stories were brought up again was when someone would remind the world every so often to "never forget." The thing is, no one had forgotten, there was just too

much to worry about. Too much going wrong. So much happening that it was hard to focus on any one thing. And, when someone did decide to focus on a specific issue, they were often bombarded with questions about why they weren't centering the whole of every other problem. It was a mess.

I noticed that Avenae'J had a lot of thoughts about the world we lived in, and based on her call to research, I think she has some ideas about changes we should make. So I ask her, "who do you think is responsible for making sure that there is social justice in the world and why do you think that?" I figured this question could give me more insight into what she was thinking, and based on her story, I thought I could learn more about how she was connecting her personal world to her fictional one.

"I mean, it's pretty obvious." Avenae'J replied. "It was 45's...well, it was him and other people. There are people who think there are more important issues, and that may be true, but that's true with other things, not with murder cases and kidnappings. Talking about 45 was not more important than an Endarkened mom who was killed, who was literally beaten to death in the front yard of a Dreamer household. Sometimes, it just seemed like Trence didn't want issues to be talked about, and that's why he did all that stupid stuff. He also made the world more racist because he was obviously racist, so his being racist made it look like...well... the President kind of put this force on the world. Not everyone was racist, but a lot of more people were."

"Yea." I affirmed. There were definitely racist people before Trence came into power, but he emboldened many of them to come out of hiding. The energizing of his racist base helped our current future to gain momentum.

"It's just that people are talking about these things because people are being racist all because of 45." She continued. "I guess, not necessarily because of him, but him being President

put a force onto America, with some people in America being racists even if they weren't just because 45 was."

Hearing her talk about our history saddened me. I don't believe Trencé was the catalyst to bring racism back. I think it always existed and never left, but I can also understand the need to blame someone, to put a face on a nebulous term, to attribute the horror of the country onto one person so you can believe the rest of the people are so much better than that. Still, blaming one person lets so many Dreamers off the hook. It lets them cower under the label of follower, as if they have no part in it, as if they are incapable of making decisions on their own.

"So, we're here now, and I see that these issues are so important to you. It shows in what you say and what you write. I kind of see you as an activist in the way that you speak out about these issues. Do you consider yourself to be an activist at all?" I asked.

"I like to speak my mind, but I've never actually gone out and done anything about it." Avenae'J said. "I want to, but I just ... I don't know how. I can't. I don't consider myself an activist, but I do like to talk to people. I like to talk to them about what's going on, so maybe they'll understand and maybe they'll probably do something about it. I don't know if I consider myself one. I don't think I am, but I would like to be. It's not enough to just dream about it and talk about it. It's more so actually going out and doing it."

I'm not sure if she realizes this but writing her story and telling her story is going out and doing it. She's sharing her thoughts on our present and historical ills. Activists use their writing and other methods to do just that. I learned that through the books Edi gave me. Avenae'J is an activist. We all can't be Harriet, but we can all tell our stories.

December 22, 2085

On our last day of storytelling, the girls had a sullen temperament. Of course, we could still meet together and tell our stories, but we all knew that the space we'd curated for our storytelling and dreaming wasn't going to exist anymore, at least not in this form. They would go back to working with Trinity and Kenny, and I had decided to go back to Altered Truth.

"Dystopia" by Avenae'J

The Change Room

Bishmal screams a loud ear shredding scream, and it echoes through the halls and rings through Avenae'J and Phillipé's ears as they run to a near door and hide inside of it. It turns out to be a closet, and it has many vials and test tubes containing chemicals and ingredients used to make medicines, in particular the mind erasing and the personality/soul depriving medicine. When they start to look around and see what they can find, a gun is shot...

Aljaska

Aljaska is a supposedly Utopian society where everyone is supposedly equal and no one looks or sounds different outside of their home. No one and no thing is different. Everyone wears all black, the clothing is all loose and long so that no one can tell the body shape of another or the race of anyone, they wear black scarves tied around their faces so that no one can tell their race or see their beauty, and lastly they have monotone voice machines attached to them so that when they talk an accent cannot be heard. Everyone has the same amount of income, the same amount of living space, equal opportunities at education and life, and there is only one known type of flower and tree. Myosotis, more formerly known as scorpion grasses, and commonly known as Forget - Me - Nots. Used in medicines to erase the minds and suck out the souls of all who put it in their bodies. The white spruce tree is used to keep the people in the town, and its

bark and sticks are used in essences to deprive people of their personality. They are only used for the ones who start uprisings and show their faces and bodies to people.

January 14, 2070: Avenae'J's House

Her alarm bell rings, and Avenae'J Marino turns over to turn it off, but in the midst of turning, falls off the bed, hits her arm on her bedside table knocking her alarm clock on the floor, and lands face first into her carpet floor groaning out of pain and tiredness. With the alarm bell still ringing her ears off, she contemplates getting up, and then remembers her important exam that tests her to see what colleges she should and could get into. Standing up and walking to the bathroom, she realizes how much this test means to her and could mean for future in Chemical Engineering. Once she finishes getting ready, she walks out the bathroom and trips on one of the many books sprawled across her floor and catches herself midway almost bumping headfirst into the mirror. She straightens up, and places a stud in her nose, and pulls her medium length jet black hair with dyed blue ends into a low ponytail tucking it into her long-sleeved black blouse. As she did this, she daydreamed about a world where everyone could be themselves without any officers attacking them for doing so. People in relationships holding hands and going on noticeable dates. She shakes her head and pushes the idea out of her mind, grabs her belongings and books, and walks out the door thinking to herself that she will pass this exam.

Front of High School

She arrives at her school, and right before she walks through the archway, she notices a man being beaten for his scarf coming off. He sits there with his arms crossed over his face and covered in slash marks from the whip of the officer. Then the officer stops whipping and without the guy noticing, pulls out his club, and when the guy removes his arms, they hit him so hard in

the head that he was knocked out, and the officer drags him over to a long black car with a golden emblem in the front resembling that of a tiger. The head of officers, Officer Carabinieri, steps out of the car and throws the guy into the car and climbs back in, yelling at everyone to mind their business and go to school. She walks away and walks through the high Roman archway and walks along the path behind it to large wooden doors that mark the entrance to an even larger white stone brick building with vines and moss growing all over it that shows how long it's been there.

Lobby of High School

Walking inside the building, she is trampled by people and falls face first into with her books sliding across the slick tile. She hurries up, and while picking them up, a guy offers to help her up, and she doesn't realize until she bumps into his legs. When she grabs his hand, and gets up, he hands her a book, and he looks like he's just seen a ghost, and says, "Your scarf." He is so mesmerized by what he believes to be the most beautiful person he has ever seen, that he almost does not realize that Avenae'J starts to walk quickly away. He immediately starts to follow her until she reaches the women's bathroom, and he waits outside for her.

Women's Bathroom

In the bathroom, Avenae'J stares into her reflection, and starts to cry out of anger (at herself for allowing her scarf to fall off), terror(at the fact that an officer could have seen her), stress(at college registration and exams), and tiredness(from lack of sleep). To calm herself down, she takes a deep breath and then punches her hand. She repeats this combination 3 more times to make it 4 times, and this relieves her. The deep breaths calm her terror and stress, and punching her hand relieves her anger. She then splashes her face with cold water, to relieve her tiredness, and she looks into the mirror again staring into her eyes and telling herself that she

will ace this exam, and with that, she wraps her scarf around her face making sure it's tight enough. She then grabs her belongings and exits the bathroom, walking face first into the chest of the guy who saw her without her scarf.

"Hey," he says laughing, "If you keep running into me, you'll end up with a headache."

"Yeah, you're not the only one or only thing that my head has hit today" She says blushing a bit behind her scarf, "I would love to get to know you, but I have an important exam today."

"Okay, but let me get your number, so we can talk after school, and even study for the test on Friday." He says holding his phone out.

"Ok, it's..." Avenae'J says grabbing his phone, putting her number in, hands it back, and starts to walk away.

"Thank you," he says, "and good luck on the exam."

"You're welcome," I say looking behind me, "and good luck to you to."

Avenae'J's House

After school, Avenae'J rushed home excited to text Phillip   and finally express the feelings that have been bubbling up inside of her since she met him. When she got home, she felt as if she had just won the lottery, with a mixture of good feelings all inside her. The feelings of completely dominating her test and the feelings of butterflies flying around inside her stomach waiting to be let out through her words. She grabs her phone and sprawls across her bed waiting for him to text her, as she remembered that she forgot to ask for his number, and just when she starts to lose hope, her phone rings making her squeal with excitement.

Unknown number, "Hey, this is Phillip  , the guy who saw your face earlier." And her smile comes just as fast as it left. She asks for his number so she could his contact in her phone,

and they immediately start to text. Not long after, Phillip   introduces Avenae'J to Facetime, so that they see one another without getting into trouble, as long as the police did not know. She downloads the app, makes sure to make it a secret file on her laptop, which means that if the police were ever to get a hand on her laptop, that they could never see the app as long as the right password was put in, and then they finally start to FaceTime. She opens the application, and takes four deep breaths before she calls him, and then once she does, she is completely mesmerized by his looks.

She takes in every aspect of his face from his deep tan skin tone to the singular dimple on one side of his face. The bright sea aqua blue of eyes, that she would swim in if she had a chance, and the jet black of his hair styled in fade leading to hair that quaffed perfectly towards the back of his head. Lastly, her favorite detail of his face, the scar over his eyebrow, that was covered by the blue and black glasses that he wore. Phillip   was affected the same way he was affected when he first saw her. The pure black of her pupils in opposition to the pure white of her cornea, reminded him of yin yang and gave him hope that they could be together even through their differences, and the deep pink/red of her lips that showed no indentation of a Cupid's bow. He noticed the golden bronze of her skin, and her long and voluminous natural eyelashes that hid behind her black glasses. He especially noticed the unique qualities about her, being the silver stud in her nose and the dark black of her hair with the dyed teal blue ends.

June 14, 2070: Avenae'J's House

Her brother jumps through her window, excited to hear the news that she wants to tell him and is stunned to see his sister standing interlocking hands with Phillip  . He looks a lot similar to Avenae'J except with a darker skin tone, and he has freckles sprawled across the center of his face. He also has man bun in the back of his head and scruff on his chin noting that he has never

had a shave in his 17 Years of living. He also knows who Phillip   is, but Avenae'J does not know that, so when he walks up to them, Avenae'J says, "Before you get angry, this is Phillip  , and we have been dating for a few months now. I am sorry for not telling you, but I wanted to make sure that this would last, and it did, so we decided to tell you. He is really...",

"Hey, its ok," Perdue interrupts and starts to shake Phillip  's hand in a brotherly way, "I am a little hurt that you didn't tell me, but I understand. I've known this guy my entire high school life, the smartest dude in the grade."

"Yeah I know him," Phillip   said, "But he's exaggerating, I'm not that smart."

"Yes you are, "Perdue and Avenae'J said at the same time.

"Well if you're gonna call me out, then I'll call you out, you're the smartest girl in this grade." Phillip   says nudging Avenae'J

"Yeah, he's right, and the entire grade has agreed to the fact that y'all are the smartest kids in the grade. Everyone knew it was coming, the two biggest nerds in the school finally got together," Perdue says making the shape of a billboard in the air.

"Are you kidding me," Phillip   and Avenae'J say unknowingly at the same time.

"Nope, the chemical engineer with dyed ends and the mechanical engineer a shaved head," he says in a joking manner, "Y'all were destined to be together."

Phillip   and Avenae'J both shove him resulting in the reaction of a laugh and a "Hey".

"Ok, ok, on a more serious note, there is something else we want to tell you," Avenae'J says looking at him directly in the eyes, " We have found a sort of feeling/attraction towards one another, and we believe it to be love, and we want other people to feel this way as well."

"Not only romantic love, but family love and friendly love," Phillip   says finishing her statement.

“What exactly are you guys thinking,” Perdue says with a concerned but excited facial expression, “Because I want to make sure that we are on the same page.”

“Yes, Perdue we want to start an uprising,” Avenae’J says causing Perdue’s eyes to pop out of his head with excitement. Avenae’J and Perdue have been wanting to start an uprising for a long time now, but never had any motivation/evidence to cause them to do it.

“Ok, so here’s the plan,” Phillip   says walking over to Phillip  .

June 21, 2070: Outside the Change Room

They follow the long black car on foot, and when the car comes to a stop, they are surprised to not feel tired at all, leaving Avenae’J to wonder whether or not Area 140 is in the city. (Area 140 is an area of the city that is dedicated to help whether it is good or bad help. There are six sections in total. Section one is reproduction where people are bred to make offspring and then given memory serum to forget the experience, Section two is where children are raised till the ages of 14 and then they are given memory serum and have to start a new life on their own, Section three is where new officers are trained to become full-fledged officers, Section four is the medical area including the hospital where children are born and different serums are made, Section five is the veterinarian hospital, and lastly Section six is the Section everyone is afraid of no matter their age or what they’ve been through).

Crouched behind bushes, they notice a familiar golden emblem, telling them they are in the right place, and they see Officer Carabinieri (head officer) step out of the car dragging a numb body behind her leaving a bloody trail in their wake. Then they also notice an unfamiliar woman step out of the car, wearing a pencil skirt and blouse, which makes Avenae’J a little suspicious and angry because that it not how Aljaskians dress, and it makes her punch her hand four times to calm down. She is a very pale female with bright red hair and bright red eyes that’s

covered by a pair of red aviators. Officer Carabinieri and the woman walk over to a large steel door and the woman puts a number into the keypad without gloves.

“Who is She,” Perdue says, “She’s hot.”

“Shut Up,” Avenae’J replies rolling her eyes. The woman walks in first and Officer Carabinieri walks in second dragging the body with her and the door shuts. After a few minutes, the black car leaves, and Avenae’J motions to Perdue and Phillip   to follow her, and she pulls out a weird flashlight. When she turns it on, instead of it being a bright white or yellow light, it is a black light which emits ultraviolet light. She flashes it on the keypad, and it shows fingerprints on the numbers 2, 4, 0, and 5.

“There are 24 combinations that could be the key to this keypad,” Avenae’J says thinking aloud, “Phillip   type in 2045.”

The Elevator

He does that and the steel door automatically opens into an elevator, and they all walk in and the door closes.

“How’d you know that that was the combination?” Perdue asks.

“It’s the year Alaska became Aljaska,” Avenae’J answers suddenly being jerked back by the force of the elevator.

The Change Room

The elevator opens to reveal a dimly lit passageway with doors running down each side of it, and they all immediately get chills, letting them know that they are in The Change Room. As they walked through the halls, there was the constant sound of water drip dropping into puddles formed on the floor, and an occasional scream that would go on for minutes. Lights flickered on and off giving the place a very dreary look and the dimness of the lights gave the place an even

more dark look than the steel walls do. The officer's boots could be heard alongside the click clacking of the mysterious woman's heels and the dragging of the body. Drops of blood can also be slightly seen, and then it gets quiet. A grunt is heard after the thud of what you believe to be the body of the man whom they were dragging.

"Get in there," Officer Carabinieri says and slams the door with the sound of screaming following it. They start to speed up walking and check each door until they get to one that is locked. Avenae'J nods to Phillip  , and he pulls a lock picker out of his book bag and puts it into the lock. He presses a button, and almost instantly the lock clicks and the door opens, revealing a traumatized young man sitting in the corner with his head in his arms, and slash marks across his arms and forehead. They walk in and over to the man cautiously trying not to frighten him, and Avenae'J pulls out a first aid kit and Perdue pulls out a camera.

"What's that for," Phillip   questions.

"For evidence," Perdue replies "If you want to start an uprising, you have to make sure you have photographic evidence that shows the people why they should rise against the powerful. Don't clean him up yet Avenae'J, I've got to get good and genuine photos." He takes a couple shots, and halfway through the guy wakes up and seems very frightened and confused to be surrounded by three unknown people.

"Hey, its ok, we're here to help, my brother's taking pictures of your scars to show what's happened." Avenae'J calmly states.

"Oh ok," the man says, "I'm Bishmal."

"Ok Bishmal could you remove your arms from your face so I can get the scars." Perdue asks politely.

“You should take pictures of the entire facility, but that scare the heck out of people,” Bishmal suggests.

“I have been, I even took pictures of how you were brought here,” Perdue replies.

“How come we didn’t hear you,” Phillip  asks.

“My camera has a setting where I can turn the noise off,” Perdue answers. Footsteps are soon heard coming down the corridor, and Bishmal motions for them to go hide in the corner behind the door, but right before, Avenae’J places a pill into Bishmal’s mouth. When the door opens, a male in a doctor’s coat walks in with a large wagon of medical supplies, that makes the corner behind the door a perfect hiding place because the wagon makes it difficult to close the door. Perdue crawls over a bit so that he can get a good shot and starts to record, and when he does, Bishmal screams as the doctor scrapes off a piece of his skin and puts it into a vial, then he sticks a needle into him and takes out a syringe full of blood and divides it into four different colored glasses, he then cuts some hair off and puts in a vial as well, and he continues to remove things on Bishmal that he can, and then he leaves. As soon as it was safe enough Avenae’J, Perdue, and Phillip  step out of the corner and over to Bishmal.

“Hey dude, are you ok,” Perdue asks

“Yeah I’m good, whatever she gave me, worked really fast and I felt absolutely nothing,” he replies, “I was acting the entire time.”

“Welp, you could’ve fooled me,” Perdue says laughing as Avenae’J and Phillip  clean Bishmal up. Perdue stands up and just as he does the door opens up to reveal Officer Carabinieri. Perdue pulls out a club and smacks her across the face, and just as he does, she calls out, “Officers, we have a breach.”

“RUN!!!!” Perdue yells to everyone. They run in the opposite direction in which they came, and come up to a crossroads, Avenae’J and Phillipé go right and Bishmal and Perdue take a left. As they take a right, Bishmal screams a loud ear shredding scream, and it echoes through the halls and rings through Avenae’J and Phillipé’s ears as they run to a near door and hide inside of it. It turns out to be a closet, and it has many vials and test tubes containing chemicals and ingredients used to make medicines, in particular the mind erasing and the personality/soul depriving medicine. When they start to look around and see what they can find, a gun is shot, and a loud thud follows it. Then two more gunshots are and because of the silence of the halls, a male groans.

“Please, don’t,” he says. Then a final gunshot is fired, and it goes dead silent. Avenae’J goes and sits back against the door and starts to silently cry in her knees. Phillipé walks over and sits beside her allowing her to place her head onto his shoulder, and he rubs her shoulder and gives her comfort.

“I bet you that it was not your brother,” he says caressing her shoulder, “Let’s look at the signs, it was Bishmal that screamed, he had no shoes on, he has lost quite a bit of blood, has not eaten, and he’s drugged from the medicine you gave him. Perdue has none of those symptoms, and he has a perfect bill of health with a pretty good football coach.”

“Yeah, I guess you’re right,” she says, “I just feel so bad that Bishmal died that way, he did not deserve that.”

“This is why we’re on this suicide mission, to help the people remember who they are, to celebrate the past ones who died because of these people, and to give our descendants a future that they will want and appreciate.” Phillipé reminds her.

“Yeah, I guess you’re right, let’s get off this floor and get something useful.” Avenae’J says standing up and turning on her white light flashlight, handing one to Phillipé as well. They notice that on one wall, it is lined with vials that have a label on each. The labels say what it contains, the date it was collected, and a name.

“Grab them all, we’ll figure out where to take them when we get back to town. I’ll also grab a few of each of the ingredients.” Avenae’J says stuffing as much as she can into her bag. They finish getting everything they need and start out the door as cautiously as possible, peeking out the door making sure no one is out there before they go. Once they are out, they walk quickly towards the end of the hallway, where they find Perdue taking pictures of blood on the walls. When they find each other, they celebrate in silence and make their way to the elevator conveniently located a door down from where they are. When they get inside, they press the up button surprised as to why this one has buttons, but the other elevator didn’t, and when they reach the top, they run out only to be stopped by an epic plot twist.

Outside the Change Room

When they turn around, they see a familiar white stone brick building with an archway and vines and moss growing all over it. The Change Room is beneath their high school, meaning that Area 140 is beneath the town.

“Oh my freakin’ gosh,” Avenae’J exclaims with her jaw dropped.

“The Change Room and Area 140 have beneath us this entire time,” Perdue says looking as if he was about to pass out.

“I need more than a physical shower, I need a mental shower, because I legit need to clear my mind of everything that just happened.” Phillipé says jokingly but means it in a serious way.

“For real,” Avenae’J agreed, “but first we need to make copies of the SD card in your camera, Perdue”

June 22, 2070: Phillipé’s House

They sit there in his house for hours upon hours researching people/addresses, hacking into private/personal servers, clearing up photos, copying SD cards, and making antidotes. After hours and hours, they make a list of the people on the vials, where they live, and their status being if they are alive or deceased, and they have clear photographic evidence to start an uprising.

The Commons

Instead of going to sleep, instead they go through the list and go to the people’s houses on the list that are alive, and they return their memories and their personalities/souls to them. They are not caught because of their recent break in, more officers have been called to keep a watch on The Change Room, giving them the ability to do this, which was not part of the plan but it is a bonus. The antidote is for the ones who have been given the deep treatment, and have to take the antidote before they take their memories and personalities/souls, as if they don’t then their memories, their personality, and their soul will be lost.

The Letter

Dear everyone,

If you are receiving this letter, then that means that you have been asked to join an uprising. This is the year everything changes, it has gone on this way for too long. People want to express themselves again, like how it was 50+ years, we want to be able to have relationships with the people we love. We have witnessed The Change Room ourselves, and what is there is horrendous. There are constantly people screaming out of terror and pain, blood is all over the

walls, and the people there get pieces of them taken so that they can be tested, not only hair and urine, but pieces of skin. If you do not believe us, we've attached the pictures to an email that has been sent out. Also on that email, there are simple blueprints to making a gun and a drawing of the things needed to make the gunpowder inside of the guns. You can simply find these things at the store, just do not make it noticeable. As Barack Obama once said, "We are the change that we seek." The uprising will take place July 4, 2070 at 12:00 pm, the uprising will not start unless we feel that we have enough people, so we hope all of you join, because we cannot do this by ourselves, we need everyone.

Signed,

Avenae'J Marino, Perdue Marino, and Phillipé Moretti

As with every story given each week, Avenae'J was met with thunderous applause, from the girls in the group and the random bystanders who had come to listen. She smiled widely, waiting for the clapping to lessen before giving us a little more insight into her story.

"In my narratives, I like to grab the audience by taking the end of the story and then putting it in the beginning." Avenae'J began. "One, it will grab the audience, and two, the audience will remember this when it comes up later. The end was, as I said, an epic plot twist because I wanted Area 140 to be underneath. Everyone thought it was so far away in the country somewhere, so I wanted it to be underneath everything, right underneath places where they were. The Change Room is underneath the entire high school, and it's also in other parts of Area 140, like the hospital. No one knows it's underneath anything because *they* don't want anyone to know that it's underneath. They already have to beat people; they don't want to have to go anywhere to take care of people."

When she said, “take care of people,” she meant to torture and possibly kill them. Essentially, the government in her story was too lazy to take their villainous tactics elsewhere; instead, they tortured people underneath buildings that are meant to protect and educate. There’s something especially evil about placing the torture chambers right under the hospital and the school, but it made so much sense. From the very beginning, the girls talked about their negative experiences in FirstHOME. During our sessions, we’ve also had long conversations about how hospitals help to oppress Endarkened people. I mean, without their aid, the Dream Extraction would have never come to be, and the Harvesting wouldn’t be a success. I see that Avenae’J, like the rest of the girls, was giving critical commentary on our world, and although the Harbor needed to hear these stories, I feel like the people above ground needed to hear them, too.

¹ The following conversation is taken from workshops 1-6.

² The following conversation is taken from Avenae’J’s 1st, 3rd, and 4th interviews.

CHAPTER 19

A Tough Decision

December 24, 2085

I felt like we ended the last story session on a somber note, so I asked the girls to join me one last time before I told Layli of my decision to return to GC. We met at our oval table, and the girls sat together. I didn't feel the same connectedness to the group. It felt like I was no longer an integral part of the story circle. They knew I planned to go back to Altered Truth in an effort to help more Endarkened people find the Harbor, but I was still leaving, and that meant I was no longer a full member. I hope this work will continue with Trinity and Kenny once I leave, and I hope the girls will continue this writing community even without our designated meeting time, but there's no way to be sure.

Still, I brought us together to have one last conversation, one that would hopefully show them how much we had all grown since we started writing together. I hoped we could talk about why we stayed and why it's important for us to continue our writing even beyond this group. I hoped this conversation would be the last one I needed to further my resolve. "A few weeks ago," I began, "you told me why you agreed to join the writing group. Now that we're at the end, I wanted to know what you thought about it. Is that cool?"

Bailey replied first. "I feel like it was okay. We got more comfortable with each other, so it's pretty normal, I guess. Since we got used to each other, we could just talk about random stuff at random times and just go on forever."

“Um,” Talyn said, “the group was nice. I mean it's better than HOME. I mean, it's better than my social life at HOME which was little to none because I stayed in the same friend group for three years... variety is important.”

Victoria chimed in. “It was actually really fun. Like I've gotten to know y'all more, and we have a lot in common. If we were at HOME, we probably wouldn't talk to each other so much because we're all so different from each other.”

The girls knew each other from their frequent conversations, but after hearing Victoria's response, I saw that this workshop created space for them to get to know each other better, to learn about each other's stories beyond their public conversations. They spent their time in the classrooms, the science wing, the doctor's offices, the gaming room, and the kitchen. They came together for their chats, but those weren't sustained communities. This writing group was different, though. A beloved community was formed. “You said that you have a lot in common even though you're so different.” I said, getting back to the conversation. “What do you have in common? What are the differences?”

I saw a lot of commonalities and differences between the girls' stories. They all thought they were weird, but their “weirdness” came from a variety of nerdy things, like gaming, manga, and anime. They all love speculative fiction, but some of them differ in the genres they're attracted to. They have all experienced some form of violence at HOME, but some of the stories they told me in our individual talks differed from the stories that were told in the group. I wondered how Victoria would answer.

“We're all geeks, first of all.” Victoria laughed. “We love a lot of stuff people would say are uncool. Like, we all love watching Harry Potter and Star Wars, and we love anime. Normally, we would have to hide that or embrace it and be weird. We can actually come here

and talk about it and be normal. I would say we're probably the same because we're all still kids, but we see things from a different perspective than others. Like, we'd rather read the book before we watch the movie because we want to know what the difference between the book and the movie is, and we want to see how they compare, how there's a total difference, and how they make mistakes and stuff like that. People still like comic books and stuff like that, but they would rather watch the movie. They don't really talk about the books. I'm not saying that being smart is not cool because it is cool, but I guess people would rather be like the person who has the latest shoes or who has the latest hairdo or nails or whatever."

I thought about her answer, and I wondered why someone couldn't do both. Like, why couldn't someone want the latest trends and still enjoy films like Star Wars and books like Harry Potter. I understood her point, though. The genres she and the other Alfreda's liked to read and watch were traits not normally connected to Black girls.¹ It wasn't considered 'normal' for Black girls to enjoy speculative genres. It wasn't 'normal' for Black girls to want to write speculative fiction. To embrace a love of things that aren't considered normal places the label of 'weird' on the girls.

"I feel like it was a warm environment." Terrah responded. "We were all just laughing. It's free. There's nothing like strict schedules or anything, and I like all the learning we were doing. And, it was a lot of fun. I'd make it longer, though, so we could spend more time together. I know it's four hours each time, but it was not enough."

"I think it was amazing because everyone is so nice, and we understand each other." Amber said excitedly. "It was really fun, and I'm understanding a lot of things that I haven't before, like the way that we were writing and how we were...not necessarily getting stuff from each other, but... I don't know the word for it. The structure is actually very interesting, too. Like,

at HOME, the observers, they don't really want us... like, when we're doing individual things, they don't want us talking to each other, but when we talk to each other, we know what we're doing, and it's more social. I don't like the silence. When I'm by myself, I have to put music on because if I don't, it's too quiet.”

“Also,” she continued, “in the group, some people knew about what I read, so I had more people to talk about it with. That is the best feeling ever, not having to explain the whole thing, even though I like explaining it. I don't know what it is, but when you're with other people who understand it, you just feel like you can talk more about it, because at my house no one reads those kinds of stuff. So, I'm just bored having to explain it over and over. This was a lot different.”

“I think everyone is hilarious!” Avenae’J said. “There was such an amazing atmosphere. We were here for four hours, and it felt like 30 minutes because we are just having so much fun. I never wanted to leave because I don't really have friends that are like that. I'm able to be here and be in this atmosphere of everyone knowing what everyone's talking about, and that matters because it does get annoying sometimes when you're with someone, and then you're watching a movie, and they don't understand. It just gets annoying having to tell people what it is. Being in a group where people know what's going on. That's what it feels like.”

From what they told me, I gained a few insights. They continued to come to this place, to this oval table because they formed a sort of sub-community that included “weird” girls who didn’t fit the norm of Blackness they were used to seeing. They created a place that honored their hobbies, a space that allowed them to be around others who had been considered “outcasts” because of what they enjoy. In so many ways, this workshop was a communal space where they

could rejoice in the weirdness and define themselves and their hobbies. They formed a space that welcomed them, whoever they chose to be.

After our meeting, I sat in my bed, thinking about everything that had occurred over the last few months. I left my job at Altered Truth in an attempt to find out where the Endarkened people were fleeing. I left on a hunch I received after reading Butler's book. I was invited into the Harbor, made a member, and invited to learn with Endarkened girls who already had a grasp on the elusive concept of Endarkened dreams. Now, after all of this, I've made my decision. I'm going back to Altered Truth. I have to.

I never thought I would go back. In fact, the Lauren Jane of two months ago would have scoffed at the idea. But now? I'm realizing that there is so much more work to be done outside of the Harbor, where Endarkened girls still aren't allowed to dream; where Endarkened people are still surveilled and killed by enforcers; where enforcers use the Fear Codes to exonerate themselves from our murders; where GC and its brethren control and dispose of Endarkened bodies at will. In the Harbor, we have an enclave of safety, a place where we all can learn and grow together. It sometimes has its problems, but the problems often stem from the fact that we all come from GC first. We are all taught the norms of GC's world, and so we are all in a process of unlearning, just like the Othermothers said.

I did some unlearning by talking with Ebony and Gholdy, but I unlearned the most in working with the Alfredas. In the beginning, I wanted to see what they would write, to learn how they might critique GC, and to better understand the barriers that would get in their way. Working with them has helped me to find my answers and to see where I need to go from here. The girls were unapologetic in their critiques of GC, and hearing their stories showed me how much their narratives aligned with each other and with my own story. The presence of the

amnesty boxes, the numerous clothing restrictions, and the undue fear from not getting into the best SecondHOME were all critiques of the HOME system, and I know that their personal stories can help whoever will listen to learn about the horrors of the current HOME structure.

I know the days of heavy surveillance, but I had gotten used to it. I had learned to shrug off the consistent monitoring because it had become such a normal part of my daily existence. I remember how weird it felt for no one to be looking over my shoulder when I came to Savannah. Yes, I had to send correspondence to Charles, but he wasn't there to monitor my every move. I also know of the forced dress code system. They make Endarkened workers wear certain colors, and they make sure that our hair meets their arbitrary professional standards. I had become accustomed to the restrictions and no longer saw it as a violation. I saw it as a necessary aspect of keeping my job. I remember the fear that came from the entrance exams for SecondHOME and how those few assessments, based on racist and often subjective ideas about knowledge could determine where I ended up in this world. I never questioned them at the time. I took the test, got the score, and endured more pain so I could be successful in the eyes of GC.

These girls, however, consistently fought back. The fact that they are in the Harbor at such a young age suggests their strength, their intelligence, and their ability to refuse a toxic world. It took me decades to find the Harbor. My eyes are still a pale blue. These girls made it here before they even reached SecondHOME. Their eyes are both blue and brown, signaling the fight between their conditioning and their unlearning. I have learned so much from their stories. The world could learn so much from them, too.

The girls even critiqued the supremacist values of GC by openly discussing how racism, sexism, and homophobia are exemplified not only in how GC currently operates but also in how foundational aspects of our history led us to this moment in our collective future. They talked

about the abortion laws and its effects on women and families. They talked about LGBTQ+ people and their struggle for equality in a world that refuses to acknowledge that they deserve love and respect. They mentioned how Endarkened people have experienced violence just for existing in this world. They unapologetically discuss all of these in a space that was created to welcome and honor their voices.

Unafraid, they spoke, letting their voices beat past the silencing often imposed above. They refused to be muzzled any longer now that they weren't in the clutches of GC, in the clutches of their HOME observers. Something about being in the Harbor and about being in our small cultivated circle of Black girl dreaming aided in the unmuting. Something about being able to rejoice and find community in their perceived weirdness provided them a space to nerd out and collectively imagine a new world for Black girls who don't fit the mold of Blackness that GC prescribes as the only option. I can only imagine what we could do if this type of unlearning was brought to the surface, rather than being forced to the underground.

Still, I must admit that they didn't spend all of their time worrying about GC, like I do. They gave GC some attention because that's the world that exists above, but then they turned their attention to each other and to themselves. They talked about their love of old speculative fiction texts and spoke of how they found solace in these Dreamercentric stories even if they didn't see themselves within them. In the realms of magic and wonder, anything can be possible, and they found bits and pieces of themselves, created visions of themselves, within those stories. I wonder, though, what would happen if somehow, someone was able to give them a text that showed more than just a piece of their identities. I wonder what would happen if an observer, a co-conspirator, or a Harbor spy was able to get texts that centered Endarkened, queer, disabled,

and/or non-English speaking people as the main focus of the narrative. I wonder what would happen if Dreamers were decentered for once, and the dreams of Endarkened girls were set free.

I also can't help but notice how all of the girls included Endarkened characters in their written stories. Their characters were often mixed in terms of their ethnic identities, but their racial identity was Black. More importantly, those Black characters were often based on themselves. Bailey was represented in the sister who saved the main character from harm in the virtual reality game. Talyn was represented in how she and her main character both believed in the power of the mind, the power to choose their own destinies even when traitor come to thwart their plans. Amber and Victoria shared personality traits and physical characteristics with their protagonists and included their family members as major characters. Both Avenae'J and Terrah not only included aspects of their identities, but they also used their characters to think through their ideas about social issues in the world. They found a way to write themselves and their stories into a future existence, into a reality where they win; where they get to be the princess, the savior, and the activist; where they will be well.

In some ways, I think they used these stories to metaphorically write about their lives, to symbolically think through their existence in a world where GC rules and Endarkened people lose. I mean, GC's rule book was written to ensure that Dreamers win. The girls critiqued this idea, though, subverting the fallacy that Dreamers are the only ones to hold knowledge, that Dreamers are the only ones who are allowed to dream. In writing about their lives, critiquing GC and the Dreamer regime, and dreaming of new worlds, they imagined possibilities beyond our reality. They imagined a world that aligns with the Harbor's ideals, one where all people are free. They showed me a world that I could never have dreamed up on my own.

These stories, the ones they wrote and the ones they told, are what help me to make my decision to go back. I'm not going to lie; I don't really want to go back there, but I think it's important for more people to be out there bringing other Endarkened people to the Harbors. So many are working together within the intricate Harbor network, both above and below ground, but it won't hurt to have one more. The oppressionist ideals of GC are barriers to the girls' dreams, and the more people we have breaking down those walls, the better. Plus, I already have an in at the Altered Truth Division. They expect me to come back, to provide them some sort of information about the Endarkened 'runaways.' By working with the Harbor, I can siphon important information from the division all while helping the Harbor do its work.

I haven't told the Othermothers about my plan. I guess that's because I'm just now deciding that I really want to go through with this. I know they'll support me in whatever I decide, but I'm scared. I need to talk to Layli soon.

December 27, 2085

Charles,

Seeing the unseen and engaging in unlearning are essential components to the operation.

To unlearn, you must learn.

- Jane

Once again, it's not a lie per se, but Charles will never get it. Basically, my goal is to tell him the truth by giving him the most convoluted pieces of information that I have gotten in this place. If I were to read this message initially, I would have no idea what it means. It's not common phrasing, and it's definitely not something that would make sense to Endarkened people who have yet to make it to the Harbor. I wonder if that's why the Othermothers speak in that way. It's a code switch that keeps unwanted ears from understanding what is being said even

when we speak right in front of them. I kind of wish I could see Charles' face when he reads this note. I wish I could have seen his face when he read the last one. I guess I'll see him soon enough, though.

Once written, I took the letter to the Harbor hub. There's a courier there who somehow smuggles our letters into GC's mail system without getting caught. I guess when mail is completely automated, it's easier to get it past security measures. The hub was a bustle of energy as always, with people selling and making and talking and playing simultaneously. I'm going to miss this feeling of joy and community when I get back. It's awfully lonely in GC, but it's even lonelier when you work for one of the specialized divisions. Today, though, I basked in the joy of Endarkened people.

I saw Layli at a small table on the left side of the hub working with a group of women. Although Layli was dressed like most of the Harbor residents in her colorful garb, the women didn't have colorful clothing. Instead, they had the greys, pale blues, blacks, and browns of the Endarkened workers. The pale blue one looked quite similar to the one I keep in the corner of my room. I never thought I would see someone wearing that uniform in here. Maybe she was new and hadn't gotten a chest of altered clothing yet. Maybe she was heading back out like I plan to do.

As I got closer to them, I saw they were creating a list of some sort. Each of them was huddled over narrow slips of paper and writing words so small that I'd need glasses or a microscope to decipher the letters. There were more slips in the middle of the table, and as one person finished a slip, they grabbed another and started writing again. It looked like grueling and monotonous work, but it must have been important because they were all concentrating on the

task at hand, refusing to let the bustle of the Harbor get in their way. I kind of wondered why they chose to do it here instead of going to a quieter place.

“Um, excuse me, Layli?” It was supposed to come out as a declarative statement, but it definitely sounded more like a question.

“Hey, sis! It’s been a while.” She said with a large grin. “How are you liking it here?”

“Yea... um... that’s why I came to talk to you.” I said, shifting my glance away from her for a moment. “I really love it here, and I’ve learned so much in the few months that I’ve been able to be in community with you all, but... um... I want to go back. No, that’s not what I mean. I need to go back. I learned things, and I think I can be useful to the Harbor by helping others to get here, and I think I’d be really good at it because I worked in a high office, and they trust me as much as they trust any Endarkened, and I think...” Layli put her hand on my arm, signaling for me to calm down.

“It’s ok. We all have roles to play in the commonweal. Sometimes that role is to stay in the Harbor, and sometimes that role is to go back out into the world of GC to try and make change in different ways. We need sibs like you out there. In all honesty, we can’t do it without that help. It’s a network for a reason. Actually, if you want to help, we’re doing some of that work now.”

“Yes! Of course, I’ll help!” I said a little too enthusiastically. She saved me from my embarrassment, so I was just happy to have something to do with myself other than standing there awkwardly. “What exactly are you doing?”

“Well, when you were in FirstHOME, you heard an observer repeat a list of names.” Layli began. “These names eventually led you to a map. Now, not every observer is a part of our cause, but we do have many who want to do more, who want to help Endarkened people to find

the Harbors, who want to do the work of being co-conspirators. Some are at a point where they feel comfortable just giving names to the children in hopes that they will find the maps on their own. Some are at a point where they are willing to help teach Endarkened children to access their dreams on their own. It's a greater risk than naming, and they often get found out and reprimanded, but they are doing the work for the benefit of the kids who are under their care. Then, there are some who do the work of stealing books from GC's clutches, disrupting GC regime and putting those maps directly in kids' hands. Each of these requires risk in a society that refuses to center our stories, but we need their help. We can't do it alone."

"We call them dream facilitators. These facilitators are often on the front lines, and we appreciate their efforts to undermine the system that keeps Endarkened dreams at bay. These slips of paper that we are working on now contain lists of names and books. We get these to the facilitators, and they share the information with other co-conspirators at and around their HOMEs. We wish there were more, but you know how that goes. Some of them are scared. They don't want to lose their jobs or have the lead observer reprimand them. We get that, but sometimes, we wish they'd put the Endarkened children first. Either way, these slips are necessary to send out every so often because GC sometimes finds out about the books and orders them to be destroyed. It's good for us because we get a copy of the book before it's incinerated, but it's bad for those above because that book is no longer there and no longer in print. So, then we make new lists."

"So, it's truly a group endeavor, then." I said. If I hadn't fully fixed my feet to go back before, I definitely made the decision now. "I'd like to help if that's ok."

"Of course." She replied, as she moved over so I could sit next to her.

“Would you mind talking with me later this week? I have an idea.” I said as I wrote names on the tiny slip of paper.

“Yes. Let’s meet on Saturday. We can meet in the library since that’s where you’ve spent a lot of your time.”

“That would be great!” I exclaimed. I continued writing names on the slips of paper. I wrote McCalla, Onyebuchi, Ireland, Older, Davis, Clark, Hamilton, Elliott, Callender, and Barron over and over again until I could write no more.

December 29, 2085

I arrived at the library before Layli did in hopes of seeing Edi. She’s always been so kind and supportive, and I wanted to let her know my plan. She wasn’t in here, though, so I sat at the oval table that now symbolized the hopescape that the girls and I created. Sitting alone at the table was awkward for me because I’m so used to hearing the girls’ voices. I’m used to listening to their stories about FirstHOME, about GC, about themselves, and about their Harbor families. Now, there was only silence. I took out the girls’ stories and read them again. They weren’t with me, but I could still hear their voices through the stories they wrote. I could still hear their collective and individual histories through their words.

Layli walked in, and her rainbow-colored kaftan shimmered. Somehow, she always seemed to bring sunshine with her, as if the sun couldn’t stand for her to be away from it. It’s like that with all the Othermothers. Their presence brings a brightness to this safe haven. Layli sat down next to me and smiled. I think she was waiting for me to speak first, so I did.

“Good morning, Layli.” I said. “Thank you for meeting me this morning.”

“Of course, sis.” She replied. “So, what’s this idea that you had?””

“Well...” I began. I have thought this through, but I’m not sure if she will agree to it. If she doesn’t, then she’s wasted her time coming to meet me this morning. If she does, then I will have to go back soon. “So, I think I need to go back to Altered Truth. I love it here. I really do. I just know that I can do good elsewhere. If it’s ok with you and the Othermothers, I want to be a Harbor spy. I can get information to you, but I can also help others find the Harbor.”

“I had a feeling that this is what our conversation would be about.” She acknowledged. “Tell me. What did you learn from working with the girls? I’m guessing they are the catalysts for this new state of events.”

“It’s kind of like you all said in the beginning. The dream extraction procedure doesn’t remove our dreams because GC doesn’t have that power, even if they try to make it seem like they do. They just use the extraction surgery to block our dreams, asphyxiating them before we have the chance to let them breathe. But, for those who read, see, or hear the dreams of other Endarkened people, the block is gradually removed. So, like you said, the best way to combat the extraction is to experience the work of others. Still, so many of the dreams that count as maps are written by Endarkened adults, and I learned that Endarkened youth also have important stories to share. They also have maps to give us. We just need to learn to listen to them.”

She didn’t say anything, so I kept talking. “I just reread the girls’ stories, and I see how they embrace the ideals of Afrofuturist thought that guide the Harbor. They reclaim and recover aspects of the past that GC has stolen from them by writing stories that show them as the heroes, the princesses, the chosen ones, and the saviors. They counter negative GC ideals and uplift positive Endarkened narratives by refusing to adhere to the stereotypical roles that GC tries to box us into. Instead, they tell stories about the communal, individual, and familial identities that differ from GC’s prescribed norm. They embrace the weird. They also imagine new possibilities

for their future as well as the futures of the Endarkened people, as they engage in verbal and written activism.”

“If you could have seen them in here each meeting, you’d also see that they exhibit the ideals of womanism, too! I mean, they truly loved the people around them and embraced each other’s identities. They openly talked about their sexuality, their racial identities, their scholar identities, and even their nerd identities. Through their discussions, I saw that they are committed to the survival of all people even though they are particularly concerned with the survival of Endarkened people and other people who are minoritized because of who they are. Through their writing and through our collaborative sessions, I saw them using their lived experiences as credible sources of knowledge, engaging in communal dialogue as a way to create new knowledge, and utilizing emotion and care as essential to their existence. I learned so much from being in community with them, and I think I’d like to share this knowledge above.”

Layli sat there thoughtfully. I wasn’t sure she listened to my ramblings, but I had to tell her what had been going through my mind since my last meeting with the girls. I wanted to show her why I must go back. “I think I’d like to find a way to get their stories out into the world, too. I want to help make sure that people can see and hear the stories of Endarkened girls. They have important things to say. They have important dreams that may lead other youth to the Harbor, so they don’t have to wait until they’re my age to find it.”

“The writing workshop did well down here because of the ideals that hold this place together. There’s a community of people who welcome each other’s interests. There’s reverence for the commonweal, respect for youth voices, action towards anti-oppression, and a deference to the everyday knowledge held by Endarkened people. The Harbor honors our stories – past, present, and future. That’s not how it is up there. The HOMEs stifle the imagination. Their

regulations and arbitrary rules inhibit innovative thinking. When I leave this place, the girls can start their own writing workshops or continue to work in community with people who are already willing to listen to their stories. In GC's America, no one listens to us. They don't want us to dream. But, there's freedom in writing our futures. There's liberation imbued in spaces like the Harbor, but that same liberation doesn't exist everywhere because so many Dreamers refuse to let it. I want to fight against that. I want to make sure that Endarkened people not only learn to access their dreams, but that they also learn how to use those dreams as maps." I finally stopped talking and waited for Layli to respond.

Layli must have been waiting for me to make my point because she smiled and finally spoke. "Then, you must go. As we said before, everyone is allowed to follow their own spiritual and individual evolutions. We do not force anyone to stay here. Still, to protect the Harbor, you must undergo another dream extraction procedure with an added memory blocker. It's so that we can protect those who are not ready or do not want to be above. However, to ensure that you don't completely lose your will or your memories, we will provide you with an extraction blocker called the Denman Chip if you'd like.² With the blocker, it will take you approximately one week to get your will and memories back."

"So, the Denman Chip blocks the dream extraction from fully taking affect, but the dream extraction will still work for a few days? And, I'll lose my memories of this place, but they'll come back?" I dreaded the aftereffects of the surgery but knowing that I wouldn't completely forget everything made me happy. I also worried about losing all knowledge of this place. Still, I was excited to learn that the Denman Chip was probably how Harriet was able to keep passing the release tests after getting the extraction surgery so many times. I didn't get it at first, but I realized that her ability to come back was because the Harbor was with her at all times. If I get

the chip, too, in many ways, I'll be like her, working within the confines of GC, but relying on the Harbor and the stories of Endarkened people to get me back to the work I needed to be doing.

"Essentially," Layli said, interrupting my thoughts, "the Denman Chip will allow for the dream extraction and memory serum to work for one week before it counters them both. This will give you time to pass their exit tests, and it will ensure that when you get home, there will be no changes to alert them that their process failed. Once you have the chip, its ability to help you overcome the extraction is unlimited, so no matter how many times they try, within one week, you'll have your will back. They will no longer be able to block access to your dreams. Most of our operatives on the outside get them, but most of the Dreamers don't need them because GC doesn't surveil them the same way. They often use their privilege as a way to undermine the regime in ways that we can't. Still, like I said, it's not mandatory. It does seem to help, though."

"I'll get the chip." I said. I had already made up my mind to get it when she first mentioned it. "So, when does all of this happen?"

"I guess it can happen whenever you'd like it to."

"Now?"

"That can be arranged." She laughed.

I knew I could wait because I had another two months before my Altered Truth reconnaissance mission was over, but I also knew that the longer I waited, the more time I'd have to think of reasons to not go back. I didn't want to talk myself out of it in the months I had left. Plus, if I went back now, I could spend the next few months thinking of a plan and learning more about how Harriet was able to survive so long doing this work. There's got to be a way. She did it, and so can I, even if we'll be doing things a little differently.

“I’d like to leave as soon as possible, then. The sooner I leave, the sooner I can get information out to the Endarkened people above.”

“Have you spoken to the girls about this yet?”

“I have. I actually told them about it during our last meeting. I knew then that I wanted to go back although I would miss being able to learn from them.”

“Well, I’m sure you’ll be able to keep in touch. Once you have been to the Harbor and learned from the people who live and move within it, it never leaves you, and you never leave it. You are a part of the commonweal. You may have chosen to leave this space, but you will still be a part of this community. I don’t know if you remember, but Ebony once told you that we are not restrictive, and we mean that. We may not want to go above because we feel that there is more work to do hear, to heal ourselves and to heal others like us, but we respect and honor your choice to do as you must.”

“I still don’t get the non-restrictive thing, but I’m working on it.” I said. “I was honestly waiting for someone to be mad at me.”

“Definitely not. We all understand that there are multiple ways to exist in community. Ok, let me see what the schedule is over in the science wing. I’ll let you know later today.” She got up to leave, but I put my hand on hers before she moved away from the table.

“Thank you, sister.” I said. “I needed this.”

“I know. We all need the space to heal.” She replied, and she walked out of the library.

December 30, 2085

My dream extraction surgery is tomorrow. I remember the feeling I had during my last one, and I’m not looking forward to it, but I’m happy to know that the Othermothers trust me

enough to venture out on my own and do the work. I hope this Denman chip does what it's supposed to do, though.

December 31, 2085

I sat in the waiting room, anxiously anticipating heading back to the operating rooms. It was funny that I met Terrah in this same room when I was getting to know her better. It's funny how a place can be meaningful in so many different ways.

As I waited, I thought about my journey to this place. I thought about Lori Jackson, the observer who gave me the names, the Dreamer woman who probably worked for the Harbor at some point before she was taken away. I thought about Elonnie, the librarian who helped me to find the book and smuggle it out of the library. I wonder how many books he's brought to the Harbor and how many Endarkened people found the Harbor because of him. I thought about Harriet, the activist who brought me here by paving a way for me to make my journey. I thought about Octavia Butler, whose map led me to this place, led me to a space of unlearning, led me to my dreams.

I guess Octavia was right. She said that all that you touch, you change, and all that you change, changes you. Butler's book, Elonnie's help, Harriet's words, the girls' stories – each of these has touched me in some way, and I am forever changed because of it. The doctor called me in, and as I walked to the office, I repeated the phrase that has become so meaningful for me in the last year.

All that you touch

You Change.

All that you Change

Changes you.

The only lasting truth

Is Change.

God

Is Change.

Earthseed: The Books of the Living.

Saturday, July 20, 2024.

¹ Various scholars have recognized that SF is primarily presented as a genre for white, middle class, heterosexual boys and men (Barr, 2008; Butler & Beal, 1986; Gatson & Reid, 2011; Toliver, 2018).

² The blocker is named after Mary Richards Denman, also known as Mary Elizabeth Bowser, who was a Union spy during the Civil War (Leveen, 2019).

CHAPTER 20

Back Again

I wake up in a building that is shielded on three sides. It has no ceiling, and although I think it's morning, I don't see the sun looming high above. I appreciate the cloudy sky, though, because my eyes are struggling to adjust even to the dim light. The mask covering my face seems to help, and I'm glad that I have it on because there's so much ash swirling around in the air. As I look toward the side of the building with no wall, I see the ocean. It seems like it would be beautiful if the residue weren't getting in the way. I sit up and see some writing on the wall. It looks weathered, covered in dust, but I'm pretty sure it says, "Who are you? What is your purpose?" I wonder if I wrote that up there when I was trying to figure out something about myself. It looks like something I might write. It doesn't look like my handwriting, though.

As I stare at the words, I remember why I'm here. I'm supposed to be looking for Endarkened traitors who fled GC. I'm on a mission for Altered Truth, and I'm reporting to Charles. I feel like I brought something with me to this spot when I came here last night, but I can't remember what it was. I look down to where the pockets of my jumper should be. My jumpsuit is filthy, like someone dragged it through the ash. I must have been out for a while. I dig in the pockets of my blue work jumper and find two pieces of paper. They are notes to Charles. It's definitely in my handwriting, but I have no idea when I wrote these, and I have no idea what they mean. Still, I guess this is what I brought with me when I came out here. Why? I have no idea, but at least I know I've been keeping correspondence with Charles. I wouldn't

want him to be out searching for me because of non-compliance. I know better than to do that. The Change Room is no joke from what I hear.

I feel as though it's time to return to the Annex. There's a haze over my mind, and I feel like there's a large gap missing from my memory. I probably hit my head, and something is wrong with it. What I do know is that I failed my mission. These notes insinuate that I found something, but if I can't figure what they mean, then it doesn't do me much good. I probably just sent these nonsensical words to him to make sure that he leaves me alone. Seeing the unseen? Unlearning to learn? I don't know how I came up with that, but I'm glad it was enough to keep Charles and the rest of his minions at bay. I know he'll probably want me to explain these, but good luck to him on that one. I'm sure I can make something up, and he'd fall for it. He's not as intelligent as he thinks he is.

I bike back to Pooler, and I finally see the sun. My eyes burn. I know I was staying in Savannah for a long time, but I didn't think that being away from the sun for a few days would cause my eyes to reject the brightness. I finally make it to the room and call Altered Truth to schedule my transportation home. As I pack my bags, I feel like something is missing, like something physical. I checked to make sure I had everything – toiletries, GC jumpsuits, shoes. I'm sure I didn't bring anything else. Still, I keep checking the room, rummaging around for something I couldn't name. I give up eventually, and I make it to the bus station in about a half hour. Feeling like I was leaving something behind, I set off on my journey back to the place that I've been forced to call home.

It feels like it takes no time to get back to the Annex, and for some reason, I feel like crying. I'm sad about something, but the reason is elusive just like the missing item from my hotel room. I hide my tears, though, because I know that someone will ask questions, and I don't

have answers to give them. All I have are these notes to Charles and a bag full of my work clothes. Maybe I'm sad because I'll miss the freedom I had on this trip. I didn't have to worry about someone consistently breathing down my neck. I didn't have to worry about an enforcer using the fear codes against me. I didn't have to worry about the threats the director made before I left. Now, all of those worries flood my mind. I don't feel safe anymore, and even though I don't know what granted me safety in Savannah, I feel as though that protection is no longer there.

Charles greets me as I get off the bus, and his yellow-toothed smile looks particularly menacing today. That's not good.

"Welcome back, Jane. I see that you came back a bit early and much dirtier than you normally are, so I'm hoping that you have good news for us?" He says.

"I... I actually don't think I do." I reply. His smile immediately transforms into a frightening glare.

"You don't *think* you do?"

"I know this sounds weird, but I don't remember much. I woke up filthy in Savannah. I don't know how long I was out. I know I wrote the notes to you because it's my handwriting, but that's all I got."

"The director was counting on me for this, and that's all you got?"

"I don't know what else to tell you. I woke up this morning with a foggy head." I wanted to also tell him that I had an acute aversion to sunlight for some reason, but for some reason I felt like I should keep that to myself. I don't know why, but I feel like that has something to do with the weirdness I've been feeling.

“I see.” He says, his smile reforming on his chapped lips. “Well, let’s just see what the director has to say about your little endeavors. I’m sure she’d be interested.” He turned and walked toward the building, leaving me and bags outside.

I walk to my room inside the Altered Truth building. It’s so familiar in here, but it also feels foreign, as if this experience of home no longer provides me with safety. I throw my bag into the closet, and I head to the bathroom. I need to wash off the Savannah soot. Maybe then I’ll feel more like myself. As I walk into the bathroom, I stare in the mirror. My eyes are electric blue, the blue that I normally have after an extraction. The one they did on me before I left for my mission must have been an intense one. By now, my eyes are usually more of an ice blue.

I take my shower, and when I get out, I see a message waiting for me on my bed. It says, “Interrogation Room B. You have one hour.” I have no idea when this message was left for me, but I take pretty long showers, so I’m sure I don’t have that much time left. I feel like they did that on purpose, knowing that if I didn’t show up on time, I could be severely punished for insubordination. I throw on my blue jumpers and run to the interrogation room. I’ve been there numerous times before when they interrogated Harriet. I guess it’s my turn to be in her position.

When I get there, Charles and the director are sitting on one side of a metal table. I am directed to sit on the opposite side of them. I sit down, and an Endarkened man comes in and handcuffs my arms to the table legs. This is so unnecessary. As he handcuffs me, he looks at me solemnly. We all know what normally happens when Endarkened people are brought here. We also know why they volunteer other Endarkened people to do the restraining. It’s a warning to the restrainer that they, too, can end up in handcuffs. That they, too, can experience the wrath of GC. I don’t fight or argue as he does it. For some reason, I feel confident, as if I’m not alone.

“So, tell her what you told me.” Charles says. I’m pretty sure he’s already told her, but I repeat myself anyway.

“I woke up this morning with a foggy head. I had a couple notes I’d written to you. My clothes were dirty, and I had a mask on my face. That’s all I got.”

“What have you been doing for the last few months, then?” the director asks.

“I wish I could tell you. I can’t remember a thing.” I reply.

“Nothing? You mean to tell us that you were out there for months, you show up here on New Year’s Day, and you have nothing?” Charles says. “What did those notes mean, then?” He’s yelling now, and his face is a reddish purple.

“I’m guessing that seeing the unseen is something that you have to do to find the conspirators. I’m also guessing that unlearning is something that has to be done before you can find the conspirators.” I answer, trying to figure out why my brain had completely blocked out months of time.

“Unlearn what, exactly?” the director asks.

“I don’t know. Maybe unlearn what you’ve learned so you can learn?” Saying that aloud sounds like nonsense, but it kind of made sense in my head.

“That doesn’t make any sense.” Charles says. The director nods in agreement.

For six days, they only give me water to drink and bread to eat. They eat their wonderfully balanced meals in front of me, though. Each day, they ask me the same questions over and over again. Each day, I give them the exact same responses. I mean, I can’t tell them anything else because I don’t know anything. Some of my answers seem quite logical to me, but they’re just not getting it. They don’t understand that if we can unlearn what we’ve been forced to learn here, then maybe we can learn something different. I don’t tell them that in those exact

words because saying that we were forced to learn about Dreamer history and taught in ways that hinge upon Dreamer research would be blasphemy here. I think it's a forced curriculum, and they think that what we're learning will make us better, more like them. I can't win that argument, and I don't care to. In all honesty, I no longer care to convince them of anything.

"But how can we see something that can't be seen?" the director asks for the hundredth time. It seems like her patience is wearing thin, but I think she's also starting to realize that I really don't know anything.

"I don't know. I guess you have to look for something you've overlooked?" I say. She pulls Charles aside, and they begin to whisper to each other.

"I really don't think it knows anything." She murmurs to Charles.

"I'm starting to see that, too. I knew I shouldn't have trusted it to go alone on this mission. It doesn't matter what the test scores say, and it doesn't matter that she has worked for us here. Those things are dumb, we learned that long ago, and we keep pitying them for some reason." He responds.

"I agree, but what else can we do?" the director begins. "We taught them the correct history. We brought them religion. We gave them jobs. We protected them from each other. We kept sadness away from them by erasing their dreams. We do so much for them, and they are so ungrateful! I guess they can't help it, though. There's a reason why the Dreamers had to step in. We're superior, after all."

I can't help but laugh internally. She knows that all of those things were not for our benefit. They stole our historical records; forced their religion upon us as if we didn't believe in gods before they arrived; put us in pipelines that determined our future without our input; kept us from each other to prevent us from forming community; and took our dreams before we had left

the comfort of our mother's womb. They tell themselves these lies because it fits the savior narrative that they want so badly, but the use of the word, it, to describe us and their utter disdain for our presence proves otherwise.

"Ok," the director starts, "I know that thinking is hard for your kind, and I'm sure you tried your hardest, but I don't think you know anything. In all honesty, it wouldn't surprise me if you just sat out there for months, inhaling the ashen air. Charles thinks I should send you to the Change Room, but I'd like to reserve that as a punishment for wrongdoing. Being an idiot is not a wrong. It's just in your nature, I suppose. You are free to go. You are demoted, and you will no longer handle major Altered Truth cases. You'll be assigned as Charles assistant for now."

I guess I couldn't ask for a better "sentencing" since I wasn't forced into the torture chamber, but I'm not sure working under Charles is any better. I feel like she's doing this because she's mad at both of us. This was her shot to move out of this division, and I'm pretty sure she'll be stuck here for a while longer. Charles will probably make my life miserable, but I can handle that. He also thinks he's tougher than he actually is.

"I accept my punishment." I say. "May I go now?"

"Yes. Be at work on time tomorrow, or I may rethink my leniency."

"Yes, director." I say. The Endarkened man who had handcuffed me days ago comes back in with the key. He's smiling at me, a bright smile that lets me know that I did something good. I kind of feel bad for him though because I'm sure that I don't smell too pleasantly after being stuck to a chair for the better part of six days. My body is stiff and aching, and I can't move well, so the Endarkened man lifts me up and walks me out of the interrogation room.

I am grateful for him because I don't know how I was going to make it back to my room on my own. It takes us a long time to get back to the Endarkened living area, but when we do, I

make sure to thank him. I'm not sure what his role is within this division, but I do know that he had to leave his regular duties to bring me back here. There's no way that the director or Charles would give someone time to help me, especially after "all they do for us."

When we get to my room, he helps me to my bed. "Rest well," he says as he closes the door. "Sweet dreams."

I laugh. A few of the other Endarkened kids and I would joke about sweet dreams when we were younger. We knew that we couldn't dream, but it was nice to pretend that we could. I don't bother to shower or wrap my hair. They're going to have to accept me as-is tomorrow. After days of near starvation and relentless questioning, all I want to do is go to sleep. I lay down on my pillow, close my eyes, and I'm asleep in less than a minute.

When I close my eyes to sleep, my mind is filled with blinding whiteness, a silent white backdrop, with no pictures or sounds. I am accustomed to this. It's the same thing I've been seeing since I was brought into this world. Then, the darkness comes, a space of dreams, a place where imagination can grow. It's beautiful. There is blackness, then various shades of brown, then rainbow colors dance across my mind. When the colors settle, I see them. In the distance, there are six stars lighting the night sky. They dance around in various spaces, and then they start to come together, forming an oval shape around the moon. In the back of my mind, I hear a voice. It's deep and loving and wise. It says, "it's time to wake up." I wake with a start.

I run to my bag, rummaging through the clothing to see if it's still there. I remember everything. I need to find my journal, and I need to find my book. Those were the things I was looking for in the hotel room. I couldn't remember that they existed, but a small part of my brain still held on to the knowledge that they existed. I don't find them on the first try, so I throw all my clothes out of the bag, and I turn the bag inside out just in case. They're not there. I know the

Othermothers wouldn't send me back without them, but then again, they may have kept them to make sure I was safe. They know how much they mean to me, though. I wrote in it every night. Well, every night until I woke up in that hovel in Savannah right before returning to GC. I wrote the girls' stories in that journal. I wrote my story in that journal. I have to have it in order to share their stories, their imaginative maps with the world. I tear up my apartment looking for them, but after an hour of searching, I find nothing.

I'm about to give up, when I remember something. The last time I had a dream extraction, I hid my journal and book underneath the laundry basket to make sure they weren't found. I walk over to my closet, lift the basket, and there they are. Atop of them is a note. It says, "Welcome back, Lauren Jane. We hope you had sweet dreams." I am floored. How could they have known? How could they have gotten my stuff in here?! Then, it hits me. The Harbor has coconspirators everywhere. The man who brought me here also said sweet dreams. The resistance is already here inside the Altered Truth building. I just needed to open my eyes to see it. I needed to see the unseen.

I go to the bathroom to wash off my face. I need to calm down, and that sometimes helps. Plus, now that I'm awake, it won't hurt to clean myself off a bit before going back to sleep. I turn the light on and bend down to the sink, grabbing my face wash and a cloth. I wipe the soap and water away from my eyes, and I look into the mirror. What I see shocks me, and I begin to cry. One of my eyes is blue. The other is brown.

January 7, 2085

I am Lauren Jane, a writer and a dreamer. It's been one week since I've written in this journal because, once again, I was asleep. I had forgotten what I'd learned. Now, I'm awake again, and GC will never be able to take that from me. I found Acorn, my homeplace, and it was

located in an enclave of Endarkened people. I found Earthseed, my people, and it was situated in a dreaming community with six Black girls. There are many Harbors around this country, but there are so many Endarkened people who can't find them because GC has continually attempted to steal our dreams from us, to steal our history from us. There are so many maps to the Harbors, but GC restricts us to the lands that they deem authentic. I will fight against this. I will share the maps the girls created. I will help other Endarkened children access the maps they already have written down inside of them. I have work to do. Will you join me?

AUTHOR’S NOTE

All stories are true.

- John Edgar Wideman

When I first read that statement by John Edgar Wideman, I could not figure out what he meant. In school, I learned that there was fiction and nonfiction. Nonfiction was based on facts, real events, and real people. In other words, nonfiction was based on truth. Fiction, however, was not. Fiction was based on imaginary events, fanciful dreams, and extraordinary tales. Those stories could not be true. How could they be? However, once I sat down and grappled with that statement, I figured out what Wideman meant. All stories contain elements of truth; that truth just shows up in different ways – in characters, in settings, in metaphorical renderings of the current times. As Rhodes (1999) stated, “this proverb is truly liberating because it encourages you to draw from real-life experiences as well as imaginary dreams. All stories have value; all of life is potentially a good story waiting to be told” (p. 28).

The story that you have just read is true, as it includes truths from aspects of my personal life story as well as the stories of six Black girls who joined me in an Afrofuturist writing workshop. The workshop consisted of eight meetings over the course of two months in the summer of 2019. Our four-hour meetings centered Afrofuturist short story writing, and they included four major elements: (1) use of an Afrofuturist mentor text; (2) a teacher-led mini-lesson focused on fictional writing skills; (3) a short writing task based on the mini-lesson and mentor-text; and (4) independent writing/ group sharing time. Although we generally followed

this template, all components were not included in each meeting. Sometimes, the girls took control of the mini lesson. Sometimes, the girls wanted to spend more time talking through ideas instead of writing them down. Flexibility was essential.

Gathering Data

I wanted to document our time together, so I chose to audio record most of our workshops. I say most because I did not record our first two meetings. I wanted to take some time to get to know the girls without the presence and pressure of a recording device. By the end of the workshop, I had a large corpus of data that included 24 hours of audio-recorded group discussions and mini lessons; 108 writing artifacts from our workshop activities; and 6 Afrofuturist short stories, 1 from each girl. I also interviewed each girl 4 times, and those conversations resulted in 8 hours of audio-recorded data. Lastly, I had 27 pages of journal entries and field notes I had written over the course of our 8 meetings. I had a lot of information to work with and a lot of real-life experience to draw from as I worked to answer my research questions.

My main research question centered how Black girls might use written and oral storytelling to discuss, critique, and subvert experiences with social in/justice. Specifically, I wanted to know what experiences they might highlight in their stories, and I wanted to know what barriers to justice they might emphasize in their narratives. I was interested in their stories and their voices because I believe that Black girls have something to say, and thus far, their audience has been few and far between, especially among educators.

Thinking with Theory

Walker (1983) coined the term, womanism, and stated that it is a word based on the Black colloquial term, womanish, which refers to the courageous, knowledge-seeking, and willful behavior of young Black women. Phillips (2006) expanded the term, defining womanism

as a social change perspective that is rooted in the everyday experiences and everyday problem-solving methods of Black women and other women of color. Additionally, she argued that this perspective can be used to end “all forms of oppression for all people, restoring the balance between people and the environment/nature, and reconciling human life with the spiritual dimension” (p. xx). That is, womanism, although centering the experiences of Black women, focuses on a wider commitment to social justice, a commitment that centers Black women, but extends beyond them to ensure the betterment of humanity and the world we inhabit. It is a critically situated theory that centers social justice, community, and sisterhood in an effort to eliminate oppressions for all people.

I believed that if the girls emphasized social injustice in their oral and written narratives, these narratives might address oppressions beyond those that disproportionately affected their racial or gendered identities. I believed there was a possibility for discussion about environmental pollution, immigration, police brutality, or sexuality – topics that expanded beyond frameworks that predominately highlighted race and gender. The girls’ discussions and Afrofuturist stories highlighted these topics and others, including transphobia, ageism, ethnocentrism, and colorism. Thus, Womanism was essential to this study.

Muted Group Theory (Ardener, 2006; Kramarae, 1981; Orbe, 1998) aligns well with womanism, social justice, and activism because the theory suggests that communication systems allow for dominant groups to control the implicit structures of a culture as well as the articulation of that culture’s beliefs, values, and norms. That is, in a society defined by dominant groups – including White, male, adult, etc. – the experiences of nondominant groups are often muted or erased by silencing their voices, overlooking their realities, and positing the group as “mere black holes in someone else’s universe” (Ardener, 2006, p. 63).

As Black girls' voices have often been muted in educational spaces (Fordham, 1993) and as this study attempted to highlight how Black girls might use storytelling to counter that silence, Muted Group Theory was essential to this study. Black girls exist at the intersections of multiple minoritized identities, and they often have a lot to say. However, they tend to have little power to say it due to their race, age, gender, and/or various other identities. Moreover, their experiences are often interpreted for them by others. Adults are the authors of the stories and research on Black girls, and although Black girls are included, their voices are often muted behind the words of others. Additionally, even though nuanced representations of Black girls are few, they are asked to see themselves in dominant depictions, encouraged to seek their mirrors and windows (Bishop, 1990) in unfamiliar faces and places.

Womanism is represented in the innerworkings of the Harbor, and Muted Group Theory is represented in the way that Black girls, and all Endarkened people, are silenced in GC, but it is also represented in the ways that the girls tell their stories, going against the norms GC has set for them. The theories guide the story, and they are highlighted in chapter 9. They provided me with an intricate framework to discern how Black girls in a writing workshop might use written and oral storytelling as a vehicle through which they can discuss, critique, and subvert experiences with social justice. As critical social theories that centralize minoritized populations while also highlighting the ways in which those populations journey toward social equity and justice, Womanism and Muted Group Theory assisted me in better understanding how Black girls might use storytelling to make their voices heard. It helped me to create the Harbor as a space to showcase how asking Black girls to tell their stories can counter the silence.

Thinking through and with Data

With my theory grounding me in the data, it was time to engage in analysis. I chose two analytic methods. The first was narrative analysis, a method often used for interpreting storied texts (Riessman, 2008). I chose this method because narrative analysts attempt to maintain a person's individual story, are guided by prior theory in the interpretation of story, and attend to time, history, and place to avoid making generalizable explanations (Creswell & Poth, 2017; Kim, 2016; Riessman, 2008). I wanted to focus on the girls' everyday stories, acknowledge their heterogenous lived experiences, and take an anti-oppressionist stance to this work. Additionally, I wanted to center our individual experiences rather than making generalizable claims about Black girls.

To highlight the girls' individual stories, I used Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) three-dimensional narrative inquiry space that centers place, sociality, temporality. This space requires a person to look at where experiences happen (place), to identify who is involved in an experience (sociality), and to examine where in time the experience occurred (temporality). As Estefan, Caine, and Clandinin (2016) stated,

“Experience always happens somewhere, and places are deeply implicated in how experiences unfold/enfold... Experience is also a social phenomenon that involves transactions between internal experiences, such as thoughts and feelings, and social interaction... Experience is also a temporal phenomenon, in which previous experiences shape the present, which, in turn, influences experiences that are yet to come” (p. 17).

Essentially, to better understand the girls' individual experiences, I needed to look into the data to identify when their stories occurred, where their stories took place, and who was involved in their stories. Once identified, I could construct re-presentations of their individual stories.

I reread each of the girls' interviews, workshop statements, and writing artifacts (including the Afrofuturist short story) approximately ten times to find out more about their experiences, and I took notes as I read. I looked for places that were consistently mentioned throughout their speech and writing, and I noticed that school and home were major places in their lives at that moment in time. I looked for who was consistently involved in their stories, and I found that family, friends, and school officials were consistently referenced. I looked across their stories in reference to time, and I found that the girls talked about their pasts, their presents, and their hopes for the future. Analyzing the work in this way helped me construct a picture of a small portion of their lived experiences. This construction can be seen in chapters 13 through 18 during the girls' individual discussions with Lauren Jane.

Although they advocate for the telling of individualized stories, Clandinin and Connelly (2000) denigrated the reduction of narrative data into themes that make generalizable statements from participant's stories. They stated that "a reduction downward to themes... yields a different kind of text with a different role for participants" (p. 143). This new role is that of a supporting character, one who takes a backseat to the themes being portrayed. The researchers also stated that data guides the analysis, not theory. However, I believe their commentary does not consider the cultural connectivity that exists within certain groups, and it does not reflect the critical onto-epistemological stance that theory is an ordinary part of thinking and being in the world.

I believe that themes can be used to denote traditional connectivity that could expand how readers understand the complexities that exist within individual narratives. I believe that it can show readers how even though Black girls have individual elements to their stories, there are aspects of their experience that mirror the experiences of other Black girls. These beliefs are why

the story includes chapters where the girls discuss their similar experiences (chapters 10, 11, and 12) as well as chapters that center their individual experiences (chapters 13 through 18).

To highlight the similarities within the stories the girls told and wrote, I used thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to examine the constructed narrative that was created using the three-dimensional inquiry space alongside each girls' Afrofuturist short story. Looking across the girls' personal stories and fictional short stories was essential because although stories often have "the particularity of an event because it is told in a contextualized account," stories can also become "larger than an individual experience or an individual life" (Kim, 2016, p. 9). That is, stories can be about an individual, but it can also connect to an experience that is larger than that individual.

I used Atlas.Ti as I read and reread the data, creating codes as I read through the entirety of my data corpus. I generated 60 codes included the following: comment on personal identity, gender/sexism, age/adultism, personal story, school characteristics, police/policing (in vivo), weird (in vivo), religion, popular culture, and dreaming/imagination (in vivo). I reviewed the codes I constructed to see which ones could be "combined, refined and separated, or discarded" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 91). From the smaller codes, larger code categories were constructed, and I reviewed these larger codes against the corpus of data and against my theoretical framework, re-coding additional data as necessary as a way to cross-check and confirm my findings. Once I confirmed the larger codes, I was able to identify themes present across the girls' oral and written stories, and I was able to use these themes to assist me in the creation of the storied text.

Integrating Themes

I noticed the following themes in the girls' oral stories: talking through social justice issues, rejoicing in the weirdness, and speaking to create the self. In some ways, these themes aligned with the foci of the workshop because I recruited Black girls who wanted to write an Afrofuturist story, an endeavor that could be considered weird or strange because speculative genres have often been classified as spaces for white men (Barr, 2008; Butler & Beal, 1986; Gatson & Reid, 2011). Also, throughout the workshop, we often discussed who we were – Black, girl, gamer, future chef, speculative fiction reader, future doctor, nerd, etc. Lastly, although I didn't center our meetings around social justice topics, there were many injustices happening in the world around us, from the abortion laws to police brutality to the coming election season. The events occurring in the world often infiltrated the workshop space, and we often talked about those occurrences rather than strictly focusing on writing. These events also showed up in the girls' written stories, as the girls included commentary on school inequality, police brutality, racism, and bullying in their speculative fiction narratives.

I implemented the themes into the premise of the story in a few ways. The specific social justice issues the girls mentioned, including sexism, racism, adultism, and heterosexism, were infused throughout the story to form the basis of the GC world. For example, the enforcers provide a metaphorical rendering of the police system that showcases our discussions of police brutality and surveillance. The inclusion of First and SecondHOME and the numerous injustices that occur within it – including tracking, testing, and the policing of Black children – are meant to represent adultism and racism in modern schools. Even the acronym, HOME, which means Helping the Omnipotent Manufacture Efficiency, was constructed as a way to discuss U.S. education's one-size-fits-all model that disproportionately ignores the specific needs of Black and Brown children in order to uplift standards of racelessness (Fordham, 1988).

Additionally, the Harvesting, shown on page 83, is tied to the Heartbeat Bill, a bill signed by Georgia's governor, Brian Kemp, in 2019. The bill prohibited abortion services to pregnant people as soon as a fetal heartbeat was present, and it represents the girls' concerns with the law as well as their concern that the bill was infringing upon women's rights to their bodies. Similarly, the use of terms – sib, sister, and brother – provides commentary on a person's right to be acknowledged by their gender. GC's forced use of the binary "sister" and "brother" and the Othermother's inclusion of the term "sib" and their openness to other terms is meant as a commentary on forced gender identity. Ultimately, the girls' stories of social injustice bolstered by Muted Group Theory helped me to create the oppressive world of GC, and the Harbor, undergirded by womanism and the girls' definitions of social justice, provided a contrast to that world and showcased how six Black girls challenged social injustice by making their voices heard (Boylorn, 2013; Orbe, 1998).

I also include conversations that showcase how the girls embraced their "weird" interests regardless of what other people might think. Throughout various conversations in chapters 13 through 18, the girls comment on their weirdness, awkwardness, and/or dorkiness, and most included these traits in their characters. For example, Victoria stated that the girls would normally have to hide their interests, "or embrace it and be weird," but in the workshop, they could "come here and talk about it and be normal." Terrah noted how she was unafraid of being "her weird self," Bailey said that she was "kind of weird" to people who don't know her, and Talyn said her character was weird because she "lives in an alternate universe." Also, in conversations not included in the narrative, Avenae'J stated that "weird is normal" (workshop 6 transcript) and Amber said that "being weird, it's just being really different. Nobody wants to be the same or else this world would be really boring" (Personal Communication). These statements

suggest that weird does not signal a negative trait in their lives. Instead, it's a positive badge of difference, an emblem of their inclusion in the "weird", or nerdy, community.

I depict these sentiments throughout their conversations with the group and with Lauren, highlighting how even though they believed their interests to be strange within larger society's notions of normality, they refused to be limited to narrowed conceptions of their identities. Additionally, as media and literary representations of Black girls have often been dehumanizing, stereotypical, or limited (Howard & Ryan, 2017; McArthur, 2016; Thomas; Toliver, 2018), I use Lauren's commentary, specifically between pages 282 and 286, to denote how the girls' interpretation of "weirdness" functioned as a positive aspect of the girls' identities, a challenge to problematic portrayals of who Black girls are, what Black girls like, and what genres Black girls gravitate toward. Moreover, the acceptance of "weirdness" within the Harbor, shown through the presence of a robust game room and diverse array of speculative books in the library, functions as a means to accentuate how anti-oppressionist lenses require advocates of social change to acknowledge the heterogenous identities of Black girls, to seek out those Black girls who are further muted in public discourse because their interests do not align with societal notions of Black girlhood. Ultimately, the girls' acknowledgement and acceptance of difference challenges us to create spaces where "weird" Black girls' identities are honored, where their interests are not muted within the already muted group of Black girls.

The girls also used their words to create themselves, telling stories about who they are now, but also offering narratives that describe who they want to be in the future. Bailey wants to see herself as a serious gamer, Victoria wants to be a chef, Avenae'J wants to be a chemical engineer, Terrah wants to be a doctor, and Talyn wants to be a writer. Their hopes for the future mirrored where their characters met with Lauren Jane for the individual discussions. The features

they prized about themselves were mentioned in their discussions with Lauren and the other Alfredas. Additionally, although their current selves were projected in conversations with the other girls and with me, creations of themselves were showcased in their stories. Most of the girls mentioned how their speculative fiction narratives commented on some aspect of their lives even though the characters were often older or had different physical traits than they had. In this way, the girls used their stories, both oral and written, to discuss who they are and who they wish to be. To create themselves in a world that attempts to force them into silence.

I also noticed the following barriers to social justice: fear of retaliation, fear of the Other, and refusal to accept youth ideas. For example, the girls' discussions of school showcased how fear of retaliation from those in power, specifically teachers (observers) and principals (head observers), is a deterrent to their social justice efforts. I also threaded this theme throughout the story as many Endarkened people fear retaliation from GC. Conversations about homophobia and transphobia suggest that the girls believed heterosexual people fear those who are not. Victoria's commentary most notably represents this, but several other girls commented on society's fear of the Other, specifically in reference to race and sexuality. This is also shown in the larger narrative, as the oppression of the Endarkened is often connected to a fear of Endarkened people and their capabilities. Lastly, during the girls' discussions, they often mentioned how people didn't listen to them or restricted them from engaging in certain activities because of their age. I showed this in the larger narrative by showing how Endarkened children were treated in FirstHOME and contrasting it with how they were treated in the Harbor.

Although they used their oral stories for various purposes, I found that the girls used their Afrofuturist writing to metaphorically construct a vision of their realities, to engage in cultural critique, and to imagine possibilities beyond their realities. I call this speculative

counterstorytelling. Delgado (1989) argued that some narratives reify dominant perceptions and silence those who are marginalized, but counterstories challenge stock narratives that attempt to define minoritized people and they open new windows into reality. He contended that these stories were powerful because they had the destructive ability to dismantle dominant mindsets and challenge current societal narratives that make oppression seem fair and natural. Up to this point, counterstory formats discussed in research have included biographical, autobiographical, and composite (Yosso, 2006). The speculative is never mentioned.

The stories included within the larger narrative *are* speculative, spanning the subgenres of horror (Bailey's story), fantasy (Talyn and Victoria's stories), and science fiction (Avenae's, Terrah, and Amber's stories). The girls used their stories to challenge stock narratives, not only because stock narratives deny Black girl nerds' existences, but they also used their imaginative creations to talk about true events, challenging stereotypical narratives about who Black girls, what they care about, and what they are able to do. Thus, the girls called upon an aspect of their "weird" identities, their love for speculative fiction, to discuss various aspects of their lived experiences. In this way, they challenge how counterstories can be told.

Although all the girls did not directly state that characters or situations were based on themselves or their lives, various elements of their written stories connect to statements they made about their life experiences. Instead of restricting themselves to aspects of reality, however, they go beyond that reality, often granting a young person, a woman, and/or a person of color the fortitude to make change with the help of a supportive community. Additionally, although all of the stories aren't explicitly about oppression, the girls talk about using their stories to highlight some aspect of injustice, including bullying, racism, violence, and heterosexism as well as governmental and school-based oppression.

My Role as Narrative Facilitator and Inspired Co-Author

Just like the girls found ways to tell their stories using speculative fiction, I wanted to create a speculative counterstory that included my story as well as the girls' oral and written stories. Reading their stories and the stories of other Black female authors, I learned how truths can be implemented into speculative narratives, how stories could be based in imagination and reality. I learned how freeing it could be to draw upon real-life experiences as well as imaginary dreams, refusing to create a strict dichotomy between what is real and what is not. This is what I attempted to do with this story. I wanted to tell a speculative counterstory that was grounded in the data I gathered from the workshop. To do this, though, I needed to acknowledge where I was in this work.

I, too, am a Black girl nerd who has been ostracized for enjoying anime, science fiction, and fantasy. I, too, see injustices in the world and often need to talk it out with other Black women and girls. I, too, speak and write to create myself in a world that often doesn't see me. I do not live in the same city that they do, and I am no longer a Black girl in middle school, but their experiences resonated with me because so much of what they talked about resembled conversations I've had with my siblings and friends. Because of these similarities in experience, I recognize the potential influence of the girls knowing how I identify. They may have shared things with me because I was an adult or because they wanted to gain acceptance from me and the group through shared interests. However, their awareness of how I identify may have also enabled them to be comfortable enough to express themselves in ways they may not have if they were unaware of my identification as nerdy and my interests in anime, video games, and speculative fiction texts.

I also understand my influence on other aspects of the research and story. My presence influenced our interviews because I constructed the questions, and I asked them. My presence was a major factor before the workshop began and throughout the study because I had the idea to create it and because I facilitated the workshop. Alvermann (2000) argued that the narrative researcher's presence in the research must be acknowledged from the start, as the researcher holds a lot of power in determining which stories to tell and how to tell them. I am cognizant of my influence on the data and story, and I recognize the power I had to collect and analyze the data, to tell the girls' stories and construct a larger narrative, and to determine which stories were included in the narrative and which ones were not.

Because my presence greatly influenced all aspects of the research, I embodied Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) stance of researcher as narrator by grounding Lauren Jane's story in my own story of experience. I wrote the story using a first-person point of view because I wanted to show how everything I learned from the girls is based on my perceptions. I also chose to write most of the story in an epistolary format because I wanted to mirror my journal entries from the workshop, mirror the ways in which many of the girls found ways to timestamp their stories, and show my personal connection to the work that is presented here. Not only does this format align with narrative inquiry, however, it also aligns with womanism. Storying this research embraces womanism by recognizing the unifying reality of storytelling, ignoring rigid lines that determine how research has to be structured, honoring a collaborative narrative creation, and acknowledging the otherworldly, the possible.

I acknowledge that this research will not completely "unmute" the voices of Black girls because I, as an adult Black woman, am in charge of narrating this story. However, I attempted to mitigate some of this by ensuring that most of the words spoken by the girls in this story are

words that they actually said in a workshop or interview. The only changes were my use of verb tense, my neologisms to align the story premise (i.e., enforcer to denote police officer, observer to denote teachers, and Trence as a stand in for the current president). I also include the girls' full Afrofuturist stories, and three of the girls – Bailey, Amber, and Avenae'J – were beta readers for the narrative. I uploaded chapters to Google Docs as soon as I finished them, holding myself accountable to them as I wrote a story that centered an aspect of their lives. They may not have read every chapter, but I appreciated that they were always willing to give me feedback, letting me know if I got the story right, or if I needed to work on something.

Conclusion

Using fiction to represent research data is a way to show how all of life is a story waiting to be told (Rhodes, 1999). Stories are ubiquitous, and they are ideal bridges across personal barriers and powerful elements in the transformation and empowerment of communities who are constantly resisting oppression and making space to heal. Fiction is a way to remove prohibitive barriers from the dissemination of research that highlights the storied lives of minoritized people (Leavy, 2013). Free from the prohibitive language that often limits who chooses to access academic texts, “fiction has the potential to reach a broad range of people and to be emotionally and/or politically evocative for diverse audiences” (p. 24). In other words, fiction can allow readers to experience a different connection with the text; they can experience a different connection to research. Using fiction is an underutilized, yet highly effective way to distribute research, as it can depict the complexity of lived experience, encourage readers to empathize and self-reflect, and disrupt dominant ideologies and stereotypes that attempt to confine minoritized groups. Each of these components is vital in social justice work.

This story is collaborative because the girls' words, both oral and written, and my personal experiences as a Black woman in the United States provided the foundation for its creation. This story is a vision of our realities, where schools and the government can reify oppressive spaces for Black girls. This story is an analysis of our cultural critique, commenting on bullying, sexism, racism, and heterosexism, oppressions that the girls and I consistently experience in this world. It is an attempt to imagine possibilities beyond our realities by creating the Harbor, a safe place for Dark people to exist and rejoice in their community.

bell hooks (2000) argued that “to be truly visionary we have to root our imagination in our concrete reality while simultaneously imagining possibilities beyond that reality” (p. 110). In other words, activism and social justice can be created and explored through a combination of speculation and imagination. This story combines extrapolation, dreaming, and real-life experience. It is an exploration of activism and social justice concerns that were present in the girls' oral and written stories. This story is filled with imaginary events, fanciful dreams, and extraordinary tales. It is also based on facts, real events, and real people. This story is true.

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