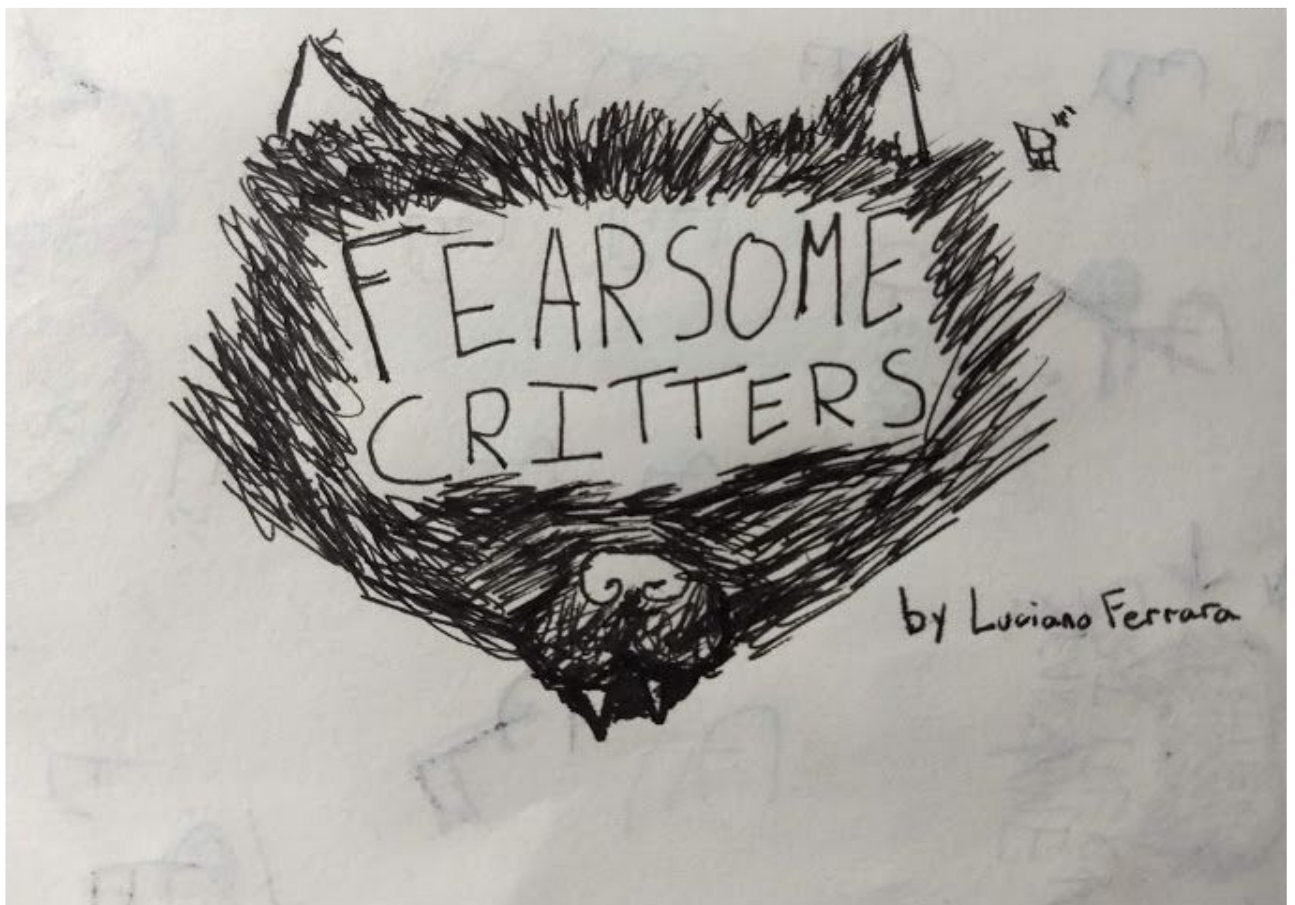


Fearsome Critters: A Perpetuation of Lumberjack Folklore,
and a Radical Application of the Turner Frontier Thesis

An honors thesis presented to the Department of English at the University at Albany,
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Abstract

My thesis is using my own creative work, *Fearsome Critters: a true tall tale*, a novel inspired by lumberjack folklore and fantasy field guides, to make two claims. The first being that it follows and perpetrates the customs of lumberjack mythology established by the seminal authors of the subgenre, William Thomas Cox and Henry Harrington Tryon. The second is a more theoretical claim; I am applying Frederick Turner's Frontier Thesis to a radical environment that is entirely frontier wilds, in order to see its effect on institutional structures like trading, government, and land acquisition.

In the first chapter, excerpts from the novel are integrated throughout the text in appropriate places, to give the reader a direct passage in conversation with the critical analysis. The second chapter begins with a short critical analysis of the Frontierism thesis, and then switches to three chapters of the novel that all deal with government structure, immigration, and the dichotomy between living in the Wilds, and living in civilized society in the Enclaves.

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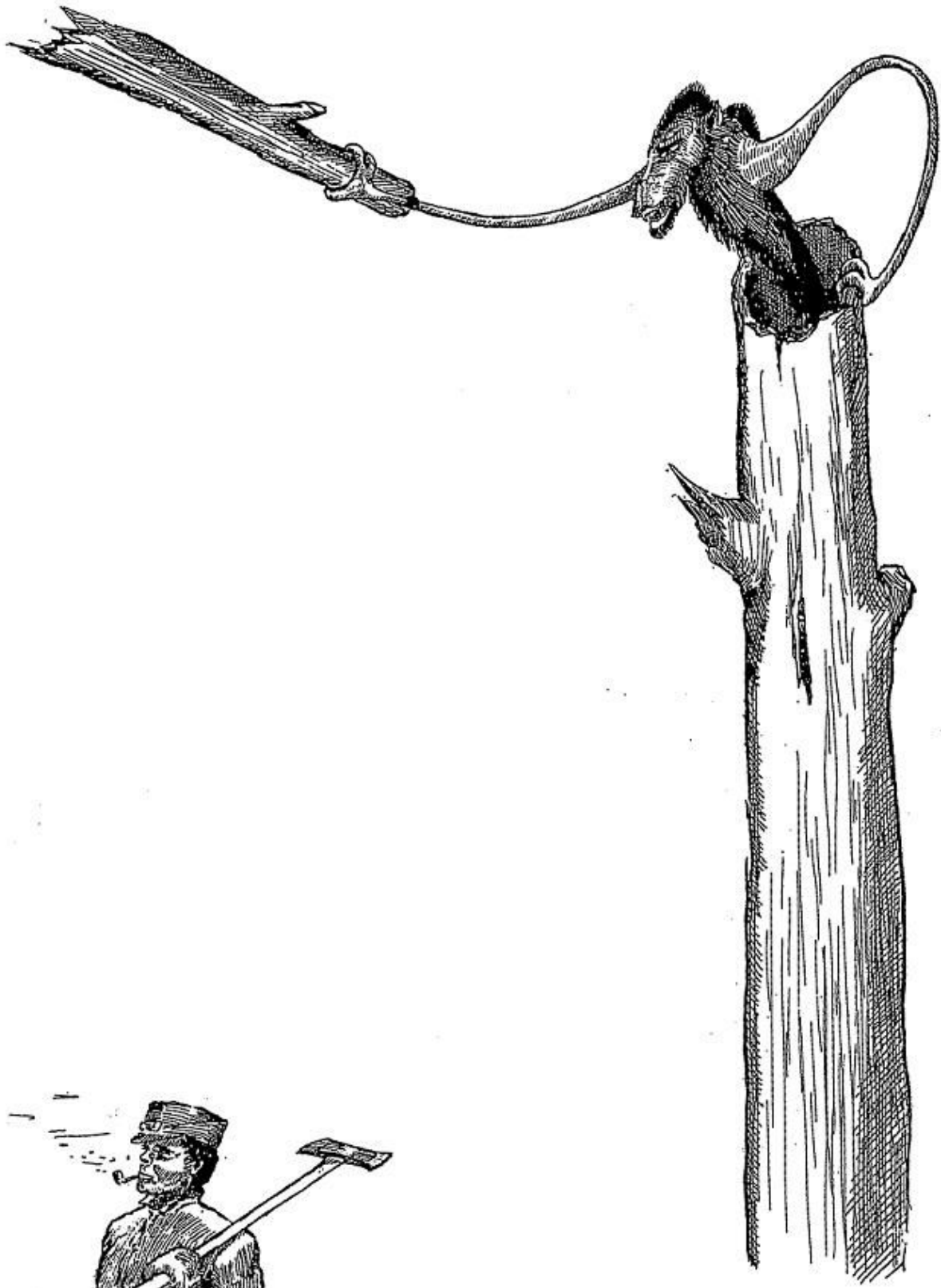
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THE AGROPELTER

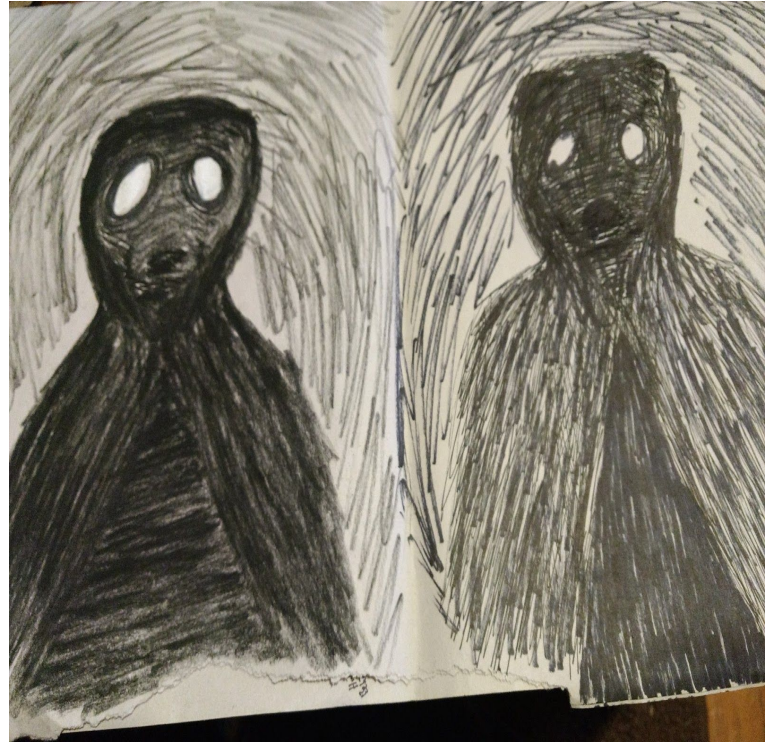
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***Fearsome Critters: A Perpetuation of Lumberjack Folklore, and a Radical Application
of the Turner Frontier Thesis***

My family was born of the Woods. I don't mean the woods in the literal sense, like the clusters of trees; I mean the sense of survival, and the spirit of nature that settles in with the damp leaves on the forest floor in the fall. My grandfather built, and still lives in, a log cabin. Granted, he's got high-speed internet now, but that structure represents lineage, mystery, and integrity to me. The Woods provides, but not without challenge, and that struggle for our place on the food chain has always fascinated me, and made me wonder: are we so sure that humanity reigns supreme in the Woods? If not us, then what probable creature could top the ecological hierarchy? These questions have always lingered in the back of my mind, and they, along with some very important texts I discovered, seemingly by fate, inspired me to create a world where humans are not on top, and where the influence of the Woods permeates the fabric of its reality.

I'm analysing my own work-in-progress novel, *Fearsome Critters: a true tall tale*, to establish two claims; one about its perpetuation to the source mythology using three theoretical guidelines, and one about the application of Frederick Turner's Thesis of Frontierism on a savage environment. Before addressing the critical aspects that my research involves, I believe it's important to provide sufficient context about the novel by providing an abstract of the text:

Fearsome Critters is an urban legend expanded into an immersive world and lore that is as touching as it is enigmatic. Drawing off of the underexplored genre of 'lumberjack folklore,' once mildly popularized by cryptid handbooks, notably William Thomas Cox's *Fearsome Creatures of the Lumberwoods* and Henry Harrington Tryon's original *Fearsome Critters*, which I will refer to as "*Fearsome Critters (1939)*," my work seeks to evolve

mythical creatures like the “Agropelter,” a 2-foot, bipedal, ape-like cryptid that throws branches at wandering travellers, or “Splintercats,” a beast similar to a saber-toothed tiger, into entirely new characters and legends. The story follows Daniel and his Agropelter partner, Fats, who are two folk hero adventurers on a quest to unravel the mysterious legend of the Oglala Shrine of Nebraska. Living a transient lifestyle and moving mostly by rail, they take freelance work dealing with roving groups of mercenaries, and wild & dangerous mythical creatures: the Fearsome Critters. They travel across the Northern Mass, a continent similar to North America, but divided into two territories: Canadé and the Americcan Enclaves. The nine Enclaves make up the most advanced civilizations, and the only governed groups in the Northern Mass, while the entirety of Canadé and the remainder of Americca are all frontier Wilds. From the start of the narrative, they carry a dark artifact that houses an evil deity, as old as the world itself, knowing only that it is the key to uncovering the secret of the Shrine. With genuine emotional connections, striking action scenes, and fathomless myths, *Fearsome Critters* is, according to advance readers, “the story of *Lord of the Rings* in the world of *Adventure Time*, with the aesthetic of *Over the Garden Wall*.”

While the novel focuses heavily on the direct relationship between Daniel and Fats, there are many small subplots and callbacks that establish the world with a latticework of lore and extensive interaction with the environment. The setting, which is combined with some aspect of mythology in almost every detail, is as much a character as the actual figures in the story. This immersion in the worldbuilding is necessary for the reader to really see how the connections and inspirations to its selected mythology have shaped the plot, the characters, and the motivations behind them. My research explores very deeply into how the myths build the setting, and how the lore-rich traits of the world would affect the more realistic aspects of it, like government, economic structure and integrity, social hierarchical establishment, and

technological advancements. Following is the first chapter of the novel, which I think provides the perfect amount of context of the characters and settings needed to understand the critical analysis, in a fairly brief excerpt:

1

“There’s a myth that rides these rails, Fats. Deep in the heart of the country, a shrine is buried underground. It has stood, untouched by everything but time, in a cavern beneath northwestern Nebraska. Plenty of different takes on the tale have passed through my ears in the years that I’ve traveled the land; some of them say it’s a beacon that points to vast treasures, and others say it’s the source of the treasures. Others still have said that it leads to nothing but ruin. Only I know the truth, Fats. And the truth is that those who believe the ‘ruin’ version... they’re totally right.”

Daniel finished telling Fats the story of the Oglala Shrine for what was likely the thousandth time. The Agropelter rolled his eyes. Daniel threw a handful of peanut shells at the creature, laughing. Fats dodged the refuse and grunted at him before hustling behind some storage crates.

“Yeah, yeah. Go hide, ya’ baby!” Daniel said, looking out on the landscape. “You know I’m right, Fats.”

The train cars rattled as they traveled along the steel rails. The multi-colored leaves painted the border of the skies and the treelines with vivid blood-reds, sunshine yellows and sienna oranges. The bright contrast was pleasant to the eye when placed against the dreary earth tones of the cornfields. Daniel and Fats had been on this particular locomotive for almost two days, which was a welcome rarity. Usually, they would have jumped to at least one other train by now.

Daniel went to their improvised restroom, which consisted of a washcloth in a basin, a second basin for less sanitary acts, and a large shard of reflective glass that Daniel used as a mirror. He washed his face, examining the distinct features of it as he did.

He was getting older; he was now in his late forties. His short, dirty-blonde hair was tousled around in a rebellious fashion, but he knew it was beginning to thin. Pale blue eyes stared back at him from deep inside the cracked glass. It had been a long time since he had looked into his own eyes; they looked too much like his mother's. His beard was getting too long for his liking, but proper grooming was pretty far down on his list of pressing matters.

Standing up, he felt the resistance in his muscles. Years of struggle and surviving had strengthened his body, but even the most battle-worn adventurers get tired. With nowhere to really call home, the two rarely got enough rest for the average person, and they were far from average. Theirs had not been a life of luxury, and Daniel's attire reflected that sentiment. He was dressed in faded fatigues; the jacket open enough to show his Levon Helm and The Band t-shirt, which sported a few holes nicked open by blades. Stepping back into the 'common area' of the traincar, Daniel looked around for his friend.

"Fats! Will you stop sulking and come out here?" Daniel called out from the back of the car. "We need to discuss the game plan!"

The creature crept around the corner of a crate before stepping into the dulled light cast by the late afternoon sun. Daniel observed Fats as he strolled over to the center of the car. Fats was a slightly smaller than average Agropelter that Daniel had known for many years. Daniel thought about the page on Agropelters in his Critter-log; the log he kept of all the Fearsome Critters he encountered throughout his travels. Daniel had seen a few different types of Agropelter in his travels, but none he'd met were as rare as Fats. Fats was a special breed.

Typically, Agropelters are broken down into sub-species hybrids: over a millennium of crossbreeding among certain Fearsome Critters and the braver of common fauna have resulted in a few variations across the board. The most common of these hybrids are among

Agropelters. Mostly ape-pelters, but occasionally a more atypical breed can be encountered, like Fats. Fats was a mink-pelter.

Fats had all of the characteristics of your common Agropelter: bipedal, long arms with incredibly flexible elbow joints, and furry as a shag carpet. The mink side of him manifested in his facial features, the short, but deadly, claws he sported on the ends of his fingers and toes, and a cunning intellect. He wore a red bandana around his neck, as well as goldenrod-colored harem pants that were striped with faintly sparkling patterns of light green and lavender. No shirt. Too itchy, apparently.

Daniel and Fats both sat down around their improvised table made out of a stock crate. Daniel opened the map onto the table and traced a path with his fingers.

“This is the route we should stay on Fats. We’ll keep our eyes on the prize, and make sure we don’t deviate from these rails. That should get us to the shrine as quickly as possible!” said Daniel.

With this, he tapped the big red ‘X’ that rested on top of the Oglala Grasslands of northwestern Nebraska. This was their final destination, and Daniel was anxious to get there. He had hunted the mystery of the Oglala Shrine for many years, but now he was closer than ever. The artifact had been the first real development in his investigation since he set out twenty years ago to find the shrine. He could feel it pulsing with a dark Roi; gnawing at him from inside its shell.

Fats grunted and rubbed his stomach, looking at Daniel with his dark eyes. They had not eaten in about a day, and it was becoming increasingly obvious.

“Yes, I know you’re hungry. I’m hungry too. However, we have no gold, and I’d like to roll into at least one town without the intent to tarnish our reputation,” Daniel said.

“Speaking of towns, look out on the horizon, Fats!”

Peering out of the boxcar's wide opening, they could see a town approaching quickly. The town was small, even from far out. Thin wisps of smoke rose up from quaint chimneys and a moderately tall bell tower stood in the center of the town. It was nothing special; villages like this appeared all over the Wilds, and most of the time, these villages had a problem with feral Fearsome Critters. Daniel knew that where there were dangerous Crits, there would be someone ready to pay up to get rid of them. Lunch money, he thought.

As the train closed in on the town, it became obvious that there was no railyard that the train would be stopping at. Daniel ordered Fats to gather up all their gear with him and prepare to step out. Fats ran around the car making sure they had everything they needed. Daniel picked up his bindle and laid it across his shoulder. He also threw on his weathered, canvas rucksack before looking around at the empty storage car. Something on the air smelled like fresh packed dirt, and change. A brisk wind whipped into the car, carrying a faint whisper along with it.

“Daniel.”

A chill ran over Daniel's shoulder and his ears burned, as if someone was talking about him.

Daniel paused, staring out at the approaching town. Shaking his head and rolling his shoulders, he pivoted to face Fats.

“Okay, Fats. Got everything together?” he asked.

Fats patted his pants down and shook his knapsack. Giving Daniel a thumbs-up, he yipped in affirmation.

“Alright, here comes the fun part! You ready, little buddy?” Daniel asked, as he approached the open door of the train car. He braced himself at the edge as the train bent

around a hill a few hundred yards from the town. Daniel turned back to Fats and yelled over the sound of the train's whistle mixing with the roar of the wind as it rushed past.

“Remember, pal: tuck and roll!”

With that, Daniel leapt out of the train car and rolled down the hill expertly. Years of practice expressed themselves in his prowess as he smoothly navigated the contours of the hill. Fats leaned out of the door, squeaked in anxious anticipation, and followed his partner into the evening with his eyes closed tight.

END OF EXCERPT

As I touched on briefly, my critical analysis of the text serves to make two claims. The first is the continuance of the recorded tradition of conversational mythology, specifically that of North American lumberjack folklore, in “magical bestiaries.” Magical bestiaries are compendiums of legendary creatures, but the two canonical texts for lumberjack myth (Cox’s 1910 *Fearsome Creatures of the Lumberwood*, and Tryon’s *Fearsome Critters* of 1939), present the mythology as a practical field guide for lumbermen to aid in avoiding dangerous Critters. I’ll be referring to this subgenre of magical bestiaries as “fantasy field guides.” Cox says in the introduction of his fantasy field guide, “Stories which I know to have originated on the Penobscot and the Kennebec are told, somewhat strengthened and improved, in the redwood camps of Humboldt Bay” (5), establishing that the method of transference for this myth is in retellings and additions to the stories. Following in this fashion, my novel, which is intentionally titled after Tryon’s text as a custom of the tradition, is an interpretation of the cryptids found in Cox and Tryon’s works (as well as other presentations of the beasts), retold, and with personal creative additions. I will be analyzing excerpts that directly deal with either the *Fearsome Critters* themselves to highlight the specific interpretations of Cox and Tryon’s original entries and accompanying images, and how they utilize the concepts of “improved retellings” to perpetuate the mythology.

In addition to the analysis of Cox and Tryon’s texts, I’ve provided examples of franchises and series that were based on or originated from a fantasy field guide. These examples include *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them*, by J.K. Rowling, and Holly Black & Tony DiTerlizzi’s *The Spiderwick Chronicles*, as both these series have a connection to fantasy field guides, and have gone on to project separate, but related narratives that diverge from the genre’s limitations of entry/data exposition. This divergence results in

“spin-off narratives” that are widely acclaimed by demographics due to their connection to the canon of the source material, which is a form of perpetuation. While not a direct relation to *lumberjack* folklore, these examples give context to the real-world application and commercial success of narratives built from mythology, retold and “strengthened.”

My second claim is related to the magical realism properties of the novel, and the effect that living mythology could have on the development of societal structures like jobs, trading and government, using Frederick Turner’s essay, *The Significance of the Frontier in American History*, as a model. In his text, a transcript of a speech he gave in 1893, but published in 1921 in a larger collection called *The Frontier in American History*, Turner theorized that American democracy and culture developed due to advancements on the frontier and the destruction of European, colonial mannerisms. He says that the frontier is free to take for those who want it; that they had no need for armies or nobles or aristocracy. Due to breaking this dependence on structuralized institutions, American frontiersmen/women began to fend for themselves and to develop a new “American” culture and lifestyle. Turner claimed that the more inland they moved, the more frontier there was for the American people to dominate. Once the frontier was declared exhausted by the U.S. Census of 1890, he argued for its recognition as a crucial element to the development, stating, “The existence of an area of free land, its continuous recession, and the advance of American settlement westward, explain American development” (Turner).

The setting of my novel, which is set in the “Northern Mass,” tests Turner’s thesis on a radical, unpredictably wild alternate reality of North America. The Northern Mass consists of two drastically different civilizational environments. In what would be the United States, there are nine distinct territories that all operate under the same national banner, the American Enclaves. These enclaves are spread out across the country, and each territory has

its own governmental, supervising body. Once a year, they meet at a summit to discuss trade, positive and negative supervising strategies and any “national” issues that concern all of them as a whole. Everywhere else that is not part of American territory is considered Wilds. The adjacent country, Canada, separated by either Enclave borders, or a large mountain range called Stone’s Gate (across Montana and most of North Dakota), is comprised entirely of Wilds.

The purpose behind the dichotomy of these two communities is to examine Turner’s Frontier Thesis when applied to a world with an extreme amount of frontier that is constantly changing, and to help shape the development and solidity of the Enclaves’ governmental institution.

Chapter 1: From the Lumberwoods: The Three Guiding Criteria and the “Trio Theory” of Lumberjack Folklore

Some of the greatest stories of human history ever told were just two guys having a laugh at some dupe.

This is the epigraph of my novel, and it is integral to the cultural roles that are established within lumberjack mythology. To begin, I first have to establish a foundational history of the mythology, relying on Cox and Tryon’s respective texts to provide two of the only recorded, canonical perspectives of the cryptid subgenre of Fearsome Critters. Both authors comment on the cultural principles that dictate how the mythology operates in their introductions, and offer a loose set of rules that have been accepted as generic fact for the lore. I propose that there are essentially three main rules that establish something as existing within the lumberjack folklore’s “Fearsome Critter” container. The first is that it must explain a strange occurrence experienced by loggers and lumbermen, or integrate a custom of the lumbermen/forestry subcultures to create a fictional story, based around a legendary beast. Classic American folklore examples of human depictions would be Paul Bunyon, John Henry, and Johnny Appleseed. Second, as the story is told time and again at different camps of varying regions, the slight adjustments and additives to the stories are necessary to expand the lore and bolster the myth. The third rule relates to the “Trio Theory,” of which I’ll address later on.

Cox was the first to compile the stories into a compendium; the grandfather of the Fearsome Critter cryptology. He was the first State Forester of Minnesota, a part of the National Association of State Foresters, as referenced in *A History of Forestry in Minnesota*, a compilation of legal documents/reports collected by Elisabeth Bachmann in 1965: “The 1911 act [called the Legislature of 1911 within the document] authorized the Forestry Board

to appoint as State Forester a technically trained forester. William T. Cox was appointed Minnesota's first State Forester, effective on May 1, 1911," (13).

After his dismissal from the office of State Forester, due to a petty grudge with State Auditor-turned-Governor, J. A. O. Preus, over jurisdiction of state timber lands, he was later appointed as Commissioner of Conservation for the Department of Natural Resources. Cox's close proximity with forestry and his obvious affinity for natural environments led him to be a great advocate for forest preservation and protection. His fantasy field guide was published a year before his appointment to the NASF, and was an excellent precursor to his fascination and involvement with the culture of lumbermen and forestry. This is supported by Bachmann's report, where she states, "Mr. Cox was interested not only in the protection and development of the forests of Minnesota, but in the wildlife of the State as well," (13). Cox's predilection for forestry and wildlife certainly influenced his literary endeavors, as well as his active work as a conservationist.

Cox discusses in his incredibly brief introduction that, "Every lumber region has its lore," (5). I believe that during Cox's stint in forestry school at the University of Minnesota, he spent time in various lumber camps to understand the environment he was studying (what easier way than on-site analysis?). My theory is that during these excursions, he would engage in the activities and storytelling, where he learned of the Fearsome Critters. After many of these kinds of experiences, Cox decided to record the data and descriptions of these creatures in an effort to preserve the culture and mythology that he had been accepted by. This theory is supported by the last paragraph of his introduction to *Fearsome Creatures of the Lumberwoods*, where he states, "The lumber regions are contracting. Stretches of forest that once seemed boundless are all but gone. Some say that the old type of logger himself is

becoming extinct. It is my purpose in this little book to preserve at least a description of some of the interesting animals which he has originated,” (Cox 5).

Cox’s introduction also establishes the first and second rules of my theoretical guidelines for framing a story as a canonical addition to the lumberjack mythos. The first rule, that the story must explain a strange occurrence or some facet of life within the lumber camps, is presented by Cox: “Every lumber district has its own peculiar tales. Some have their songs, also, and nearly all have mysterious stories or vague rumors of dreadful beasts with which to regale newcomers and frighten people unfamiliar with the woods,” (5). The purpose of the Fearsome Critter tales are to offer some fantastic context for things like the disappearances of loggers, or the falling of rocks from a seemingly stable cliffside. The second rule, that the stories and myths are improved as they are built upon by various, altered retellings, originates from another section of Cox’s introduction, where he states, “The lumberjack is an imaginative being, and a story loses no interest as it is carried and repeated from one camp to another. Stories which I know to have originated on the Penobscot and the Kennebec are told, somewhat strengthened and improved, in the redwood camps of Humboldt Bay,” (5). Based on this observation, the traditional vehicle of lumberjack folklore is through continuous, variable narrations of the same conceptual source material. While this would usually be indicative of a poorly established canon, Cox argues that the truth is actually the opposite of this; that stories are made better by the collaborative efforts of various narrators.

My novel achieves this effect of layering and addition through a wide variety of perpetuation. Many (not all) of the Fearsome Critters featured in the novel are inspired by the original recorded works of Cox and Tryon, but have different, more science-fiction-esque biological features, or advanced intelligences. The dissemination of Fearsome Critters

throughout the world, as well as their direct interaction with humanity is much different from the iterations proposed by Cox and Tryon. In my work, the Fearsome Critters are as common as the non-fictional animals. Of course, there are several legendary Critters in their own right, but the integration of humans and Critters is much more pervasive, and sometimes often reflects real-world examples of animal companionship, or beasts of burden. Some Fearsome Critters depicted in the book are generally domesticated, just like normal animals. One such creature is an original concept of mine, called a Bovit. The Bovit is a “six-legged cow with one horn that sticks out of their forehead.” Their milk is a light blue, and is valued for two reasons: its amazing flavor when mixed into coffee, and its quality as a dermal blood clotting agent. Other Critters are rarely domesticated, though it is not impossible. For example, Fats, who is an Agropelter, is domesticated by Daniel. Agropelters are usually very antagonistic and hostile, so it is improbable that one would meet a well-mannered Agropelter, which is one of the things that makes Fats so special. He also happens to be an incredibly rare cross-species of Agropelter, being that he is half mink, but his couth is certainly intriguing on his its own. In one instance, Daniel and Fats are applying for a job hunting a Splintercat at a farm on their journey, and the farmer is taken aback by Fats’s presence:

“Hey, pal! No soliciting here, you understand? We’re not interested,” the man said dismissively. He was a bit older than Daniel and was dressed in a flannel shirt and some dirty coveralls; he was obviously in the middle of his work day. He looked down at Fats standing next to Daniel and his face took on an expression of alarm.

“Uh, that thing... civilized?” the man asked.

Daniel laughed and said, “*Civilized* is definitely not the word I’d use for him. He’s got no manners, believe me.” He was surprised that the man didn't react more dramatically.

Having a domesticated, yet dangerous, Critter friend wasn't unheard of, but it also wasn't very common.

Fats glowered at Daniel before turning to the farmer and extending a hand for him to shake. The farmer stared at Fat's outstretched paw for a moment before apprehensively shaking it. He gave Daniel a long, examining look before getting straight to the point.

END OF EXCERPT

Besides the direct influence of Cox's beast descriptions, *Fearsome Critters* adopts and adapts direct aspects of the lumber camp/lumberjack culture. Years prior to the setting of the novel, Daniel was originally a lumberjack working in Canadé before he decided to become an adventurer. He was introduced to stories of the Fearsome Critters working at camps. There are some more subtle references, like the name of the cult that Daniel steals the artifact from: the Brotherhood of Hoo-Hoo. This is a reference to Cox's dedication page, where he "affectionately dedicates [it] to the Concatenated Order of Hoo-Hoo," which is a fraternal organization of people involved in the forestry industry. Later on, Daniel and Fats meet a wise, sage-like character in Minnesota that is inspired by Cox, who also tells them about his old partner, another sage, that lives in Black Rock Forest in New Yorn.

Pressing forward chronologically, the second author to collect and publish data on the Fearsome Critters was Henry Harrington Tryon. Tryon, like Cox, was a forester, and shared in interests in preservation and mythology. Tryon began working as a forester in 1907, and received a Master of Forestry degree in 1913. He was a faculty member of the New York State Forestry College, and was the director of Black Rock Forest in New York for 22 years before his death in 1953. Besides having a common education and career path, Tryon also

had a mutual enthusiasm for the mythology and culture of the lumber yards. He states in his preface, “It occurred to me then that these tales, originating chiefly in the logging camps and on the drives were a definite bit of American folk-lore, an integral part of the history of American logging and lumbering and well worth recording,” (Tryon vii). Both men’s curiosities were piqued by the mysterious and charming nature of surrounding nature. In fact, they even had a few correspondences, evidenced by Tryon’s acknowledgement of Cox’s “permission to use certain information from his book, *Fearsome Creatures of the Lumberwoods*,” (xi).

The third rule for my conceptual criteria for canonical lumberjack folklore derives from a passage in Tryon’s preface. On page viii, he discusses the first time he witnessed a Fearsome Critter story being told when he worked a summer job at Attean Lake in 1908. Tryon recounts how a “young lad” mentioned to some older loggers that he had heard an “extraordinary screech-like cry,” (viii). The old lumberjacks began to orchestrate a performance in conning the young man into believing the noise was a “tree-squeak.” Tryon explains that one man would “lead with a colorful bit of description, and [the other man] would follow suit with an arresting spot of personal experience,” (viii). The story of the “tree-squeak” that the older lumbermen tell the greenhorn is presented as an oral performance of a prank; one that needs “two narrators who can ‘keep the ball in the air,’” but also requires an unsuspecting target. I’ve developed a theory based on this concept, which I’m calling the “Trio Theory of Lumberjack Folklore.”

The Trio Theory claims that, to meet the third requirement of the guidelines for canon, the story must be presented by two narrators who are organically leading a third party to believe the validity of the fictional story. These three figures are identified as “The Instigator,” “The Support,” and “The Dupe.” The “Instigator’s” role is to tell an exaggerated

story to supply an explanation, while the “Support” figure provides improvisational evidence to add a layer of credibility. Finally, there needs to be a victim of the prank, who is usually a new recruit, or someone who is unacquainted with the woods. This is the “Dupe,” also known as the “Rube.” The Dupe will usually inquire about some noise, or sight, or unexplained phenomena, followed by the Instigator claiming it is some various creature that has extraordinary abilities, and possibly preys on straying loggers. The relationship between the Instigator and the Support is very organic, and it’s crucial to the integrity of the ruse. The Support must be able to provide subtle, contextual evidence to support whatever wild claim the Instigator is making, all in an attempt to pull one over on the Dupe.

In accordance with the third guideline, I claim that the narration style of segments following Daniel and Fats (as there are a few flashbacks, and occasional, one-off chapters that employ perspective switches) are presented as one continuous utilization of the Trio Theory; with the narrator representing the Instigator, Daniel and Fats acting as combined “Support” roles, and the reader representing the “Dupe.” However, there are also moments where the evil deity housed in the recovered artifact manipulates the conversation, essentially shifting the roles of Support and Dupe fluidly onto both Daniel and Fats, while encompassing the Instigator role for itself. This can be seen in the following excerpt of Chapter 3, where Daniel has taken the artifact out of its bindings in the bedroom of an inn:

Fats and Daniel began gathering their belongings before they left the room. Daniel walked over to his bundle that he had laid up in the corner. He picked up the rustic sack he'd fastened from a red and white checkered tablecloth. He felt it react to his touch, as usual. A haunting voice managed to pierce the seal's magic for a moment to whisper to Daniel.

"It's a new day, Daniel. Another opportunity for you to become a king. No! A *god*."

That chill ran up Daniel's spine just like it had countless times before, like when he and Fats jumped off the train. It was a sharp, icy wave that washed over him before resting in his brain; gnawing at his thoughts like a rodent. However, he kept his composure and responded to it.

"For the first, and likely not the last time, today: Not. Interested." Daniel said aloud. Fats did not react to this conversation, for he had heard it all before.

Daniel pressed his left hand onto the wooden seal that kept the cloth bound up tight and spoke a few incantations. The lighted runes dimmed as he spoke each new word. Daniel removed the seal and undid the cloth, laying it out across the bed. In the center of the tablecloth sat the artifact. It radiated a translucent black and grey flame with a lavender accent, but nothing it came in contact with was set ablaze.

In form, the artifact resembled a dodecahedron. It had twelve flat faces and was bronze, with dark black etchings all around it. These etchings were different from the runes on the seal. They were more sleek and circular, and spiraled into one another. Standing near to it, Daniel could feel a pulse in the air, as if the pressure in the room were tensing up with the beating of a heart.

Daniel closed his eyes, put his face in his hands, and spoke to the artifact.

"I don't know how many times we have to have this talk. I am not interested in being your consort, or your minion, or your vessel, or whatever weird thing you keep asking me for. I'm *certainly* not letting you out of there, which you don't seem to comprehend, no matter

how many days in a row I tell you. I think we're on, what, a hundred and fifty, now? Hundred and sixty? That sound about right, Fats?" Daniel asked, looking over his shoulder.

Fats, who was packing up the rest of their stuff and stealing a small pillow for himself, looked up at Daniel. Then, he turned to look at the artifact on the bed, but didn't hold his gaze for very long. He looked back up at Daniel and lifted his hands up and down like a scale.

"Yeah, give or take, about one-fifty," Daniel agreed. "Honestly, if you weren't important to the Oglala mystery, I would have left you with those weird, robed guys back in Canad ." He had turned back towards the bed to face the archaic object.

A laugh that seized hearts with its cold grip emanated from the artifact as it responded to Daniel.

"Oh, Daniel. So naive. I was decimating nations before you were even a thought in your worthless parents' puny brains. I am everlasting! At least those 'robed guys' understood, not to mention *respected*, the godlike power that radiates from my very being. I am the disorder that tears the world in two, time after time, and you want me to... what? Pretend I'm just some *sidekick* for you, like your little monkey-freak? I think not, boy."

As soon as Fats heard the voice insult his ancestry, he screeched wildly and lunged for the artifact on the bed.

"Fats! No! Stop!"

Daniel managed to wrangle him just in time to keep him from touching it. Fats struggled like a disobedient toddler, kicking his legs and flailing his arms as he whined.

"What do you think you're doing, you idiot? You know what that dark *Roi* does to Critters! I don't need you going all ape-shit again." Daniel reminded him. Fats gave him a glowering look at the mention of the words "ape-shit."

“Sorry, bad terminology,” Daniel apologized. “And you,” he said, turning to the artifact, “Why don’t you just shut up for a day? You’re like a broken record! It’s always ‘Come on, Daniel. Let me out! We can go break things and hurt people and be huge jerks!’ Honestly, you’re getting on my last nerve, and it’s not even noon yet.”

The voice cackled another sickening laugh that made Daniel feel like he was losing control of the conversation.

“Noon? I’ve been in this... this *box*, for what feels like eternity! Do you know what imprisonment is to a being that is literally older than time?” The voice prodded Daniel with its rhetorical question. “No! You don’t!”

As the anger in it swelled, the black flames grew wilder and started to burn more violently. Somehow, the fire turned a darker shade of black, and its cast shadows stretched their unnatural fingers into the corners of the wood panelled walls.

“Okay, I’ve had enough of this already,” Daniel retorted. He began to tie the artifact back up so he could recraft his bindle. “You’re not bringing me down today. I’ve worked too hard and fought for too long to get this far. We’re so close to finally crossing over into an actual American territory, and I won’t have you ruining this for me and Fats. Back in the bag you go!”

The voice protested this, but was eventually muffled by the cloth, and then the magic from the seal muted him out almost completely, save for the faint echoes that beat at Daniel’s head whenever he was near to the artifact.

“Guess none of my ‘sidekicks’ are morning people, eh Fats?” Daniel joked to the Agropelter. Fats crossed his arms and shook his head before pointing a thumb towards the door.

“Right,” Daniel said. “I can take a hint. Breakfast first, then job hunt!”

Fats scrambled towards the door, tugging on Daniel’s pants and making short squeaks as he struggled. Daniel shook his head and chuckled softly. What a little weirdo, he thought.

END OF EXCERPT

Daniel begins the conversation in control, almost scoffing at the deity, but as the interaction progresses, the voice begins to assert dominance. As it begins to usurp the Instigator role from Daniel, the artifact also derisively manipulates Fats into lashing out, to where he almost attacks the artifact (threatening another “ape-shit” reaction). Since this is the artifact’s apparent goal, it plays Fats into acting as its Support, making Daniel the Dupe.

The reader’s role as the Dupe is not as directly observed as the role of the Dupe in the traditional campfire stories that the Fearsome Critters mythology developed from. In the context of my novel, the omniscient narrator serves as the Instigator, telling you the story with unshakeable confidence in an effort to convince you of its validity. Daniel and Fats act as the Support, because it is through their journey and interaction that the reader is provided with the “evidence” and substantial information to support the claim the Instigator is making. The reader represents the Dupe because they are ignorant to the culture of the world that’s being presented to them, and must rely on the Instigator and Support characters to supply them with trustworthy information, deciding on its reliability for themselves.

Following the thread of reader interaction, I’ve briefly analysed the commercial success of fantasy series that have transformed a bestiary’s content into a separate narration style, to establish that using the source material in this way will provide a farther reaching vehicle for perpetuation of the mythology. In particular to the current time frame, J.K. Rowling’s spin-off from the *Harry Potter* franchise, titled *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them*, has just recently released a sequel to its film series, to generally positive reception among fans. The original concept for the series comes from a companion book of

the same title, that is presented as one of Harry Potter's personal textbooks, written by the main character of the films, Newt Scamander. Scamander is originally a name without a face in the canon of Rowling's universe, but through perpetuation of mythology surrounding the original magical bestiary, Scamander becomes an entirely new, but still related, character. What began as an auxiliary text to the *Potter* franchise has become a separate, standalone narration that has aided in the perpetuation of the source content through utilization of mainstream media. A less recent example that spawned a companion bestiary *after* its original narrative, but is still a narration based around bestiaries, is Holly Black and Tony DiTerlizzi's *The Spiderwick Chronicles* series. Black and DiTerlizzi began the series with the novel *The Spiderwick Chronicles: The Field Guide*, which drew much of its conceptual material from depicting various fairytale images and magical beasts, which were all cataloged by the protagonists' great-uncle, Arthur Spiderwick. The novel is based around three children finding Spiderwick's magical bestiary in their attic and going on an adventure to explore the environment of these creatures. The series spawned a feature film that covered most of the series's texts, and was widely well-received. The actual magical bestiary text was released as an accompaniment, but still represents an effective method of dissemination for the mythology.

Fearsome Critters is inspired by the natural world's mystery, and the surrealism that lurks behind the facade of fiction. The deep, dark Woods is a spirit that breathes life into shadows and whispers the names of forgotten creatures that could have once ruled the land that we took for our own. William Cox and Henry Tryon understood this blend of natural and supernatural, and found great enjoyment in the wonder it generated among the lumber camps and the damp, patted dirt paths of North America. It's my goal with the tale of Daniel and Fats to reincarnate that wonder into a format that will carry the values of the Woods to those

who have forgotten that we all came the mud, and we've all incorporated that animalistic struggle for survival into our lives. I believe the fantastic stories and the sentiment of the lumbermen way of life are an important part of American history, and that these tall tales are seminal to the development of the folktales and mythology of the American Frontier.

Chapter 2: An Area of Free Land: Testing The Turner Thesis on a Hyperbolic Environment

"The frontier is the outer edge of the wave-- the meeting point between savagery and civilization." -Frederick Turner, 1893

In 1890, the United States Bureau of the Census declared that America had no more frontier to explore, and that the Census wouldn't be analyzing westward settlement progress any longer. Following this conclusion, Frederick Turner was inspired to deliver a speech in Chicago, three years later, to the American Historical Association about the important role that the frontier had in developing American nationality, government and identity. This speech was written down, and became the pioneering (pun intended) text for the Turner Frontier Thesis.

Turner theorized that the existence of the North American frontier region is responsible for the separation of "American" identity from "Colonial English" identity. He states that at first, "The wilderness masters the colonist. Little by little he transforms the wilderness, but the outcome is not the old Europe, not simply the outcome of germanic germs. The fact is, that here is a new product that is American," (Turner). Turner claims that the settlers who went westward to acquire the "area of free land" for themselves, or pioneers, had to either adapt to the dangerous and unknown circumstances of the frontier, or perish. This adaptability in the face of natural obstacles is what makes these pioneers truly American.

In addition to the importance of the pioneer's adaptability, Turner also employs the melting pot ideology to justify how frontierism contributed to the identity of the American people. He states, "The frontier promoted the formation of a composite nationality for the American people. The coast was preponderantly English, but the later tides of continental immigration flowed across to free lands," (Turner.) Many of the original western settlements were populated by freed indentured servants from Europe, known as redemptioners. The redemptioners consisted of people from many different cultures, which mingled as they cooperated out of necessity on the frontier. The compilation of cultural identities became the foundation of American culture, and this separated them from the Colonial English identity. Turner cautioned historians against ignoring this separation, stating we must "beware of misinterpreting the fact that there is a common English speech in America into a belief that the stock is also English."

Turner emphasizes how the frontier assisted in America's enterprisal independence from England outright when he claimed that "The frontier decreased our dependence on England." The abundant and new resources of the frontier aided Americans in their struggle for self-sufficiency, which furthered progression towards complete independence for America, commonly understood as the most American thing there is. On the frontier begins a linear series of events following the Revolutionary War, in which frontier advancement is responsible for national development. Although America had declared and won its independence from England, many of the cities on the eastern coast still required a constant trade route with England to maintain and advance their settlements. This prompts pioneers to head west in an attempt to tame the wild unknown, hoping for opportunities to gain independent wealth. However, without the modern tools and goods that were coming into the coastal cities from England, the frontier settlements needed to work out a way to get those

goods so they could continue utilizing the new resources they'd discovered. This leads to the building of rail lines in order to establish a faster means of transportation for the goods being traded between the settlements. This is incorporated into the novel with the modes of travel that Daniel and Fats use to journey across the country. Turner addresses that "The pioneers needed the goods of the coast, and so the grand series of internal improvement and railroad legislation began, with potent nationalizing effects." The yield of frontier harvests bolsters the industrial infrastructure of America as a whole.

Following the installation of railroad systems, the coastal and frontier settlements were capable of transporting goods between each other. This leads to Americans becoming more self-sufficient through a nationally internal trade system. The manufacturers on the coast learn how to fabricate the tools and goods of the English, and now have the income to fabricate the items themselves, diminishing the need for international trade with England. They are able to trade these items to the pioneers in exchange for the indigenous crops and resources of the frontier, which allows the pioneers to continue to advance westward and settle in new areas. Turner quotes the once Royal Governor of South Carolina, James Glen, when discussing the development of the internal trade: "Before long, the frontier created a demand for merchants. As it retreated from the coast, it became less and less possible for England to bring her supplies directly to the consumer's wharfs, and carry away staple crops, and staple crops began to give way to diversified agriculture for a time." Those on the frontier are constantly starting over at a basic level of development every time they expand west, which Turner believed was integral to the establishment of the national identity of Americans as survivors, and a capable, adaptable population, stating:

"Thus, American development has exhibited not merely advance along a single line, but a return to primitive conditions on a continually advancing frontier line, and a new

development for that area. American social development has been continually beginning over again on the frontier. This perennial rebirth, this fluidity of American life, this expansion westward with its new opportunities, its continuous touch with the simplicity of primitive society, furnish the forces dominating American character.”

Turner’s thesis claims that Americans are defined by their independence, and their emphasis on freedom of the self, land, speech, and everything in between. As the nation developed steadily due to the spread of American population across the frontier, it became increasingly more obvious that there was not an unlimited amount of frontier to conquer. With the fire of expansion in their bellies, American pioneers did not slow in their desire to claim what could be taken by the strongest, and there began disputes over land; particularly, *whose* land it was. Again quoting James Glen, Turner references the rising instability among the seaboard trade-hub cities in their bout for the new resources the pioneers were trading in, stating, “The effect of this phase of the frontier action upon the northern section is perceived when we realize how the advance of the frontier aroused seaboard cities like Boston, New York, and Baltimore, to engage in rivalry for what Washington called "the extensive and valuable trade of a rising empire." Coast cities knew that the faster they sold American resources to England, the sooner they could reach economic independence and attain wealth through the labor of the pioneers. This begins the seeds of modern capitalism, which is understood as a major facet of the American identity. It begins a question of who deserves what, based on things like a territory’s specific needs, or its contribution to the nation as a whole. However, greed becomes a factor in the acquisition of land (and associatively, goods), and the question then changes from “Who deserves what?” to “Who can take it?”

With the plateauing stock of new resources and land that’s just there for the taking, the territories began arguing over the rights to those resources and land. Turner addresses this

growing unrest between territories that began from internal advancement along the frontier line, stating:

“Over internal improvements occurred great debates, in which grave constitutional questions were discussed. The West was not content with bringing the farm to the factory. Under the lead of [Henry] Clay [Kentucky Senator/House Representative, and 9th U.S. Secretary of State], protective tariffs were passed, with the cry of bringing the factory to the farm. The disposition of public lands was an important subject of national legislation influenced by the frontier.”

The founding states struggled to maintain populations as more people were enticed to stake their claim on the frontier. This desire for the frontier and the freedom it represented left the founding states with few options. The Manifest Destiny sentiment of the frontier was motivating more American settlers from the coast to try and find their fortunes in the West. The most viable solution for the established, founding states was to take surrounding land and annex it to increase the state's wealth and reach. Turner claimed, “The frontier individualism has from the beginning promoted democracy. The frontier States that came into the Union in the first quarter century came in with democratic suffrage provisions, and had reactive effects upon the older States whose peoples were being attracted there. An extension of the franchise became essential.” Turner recognized that the allure of independence and potential fortunes was the drive behind Americans' migration West, but he also understood its impact on the nation as a whole.

With the available land becoming increasingly exhausted, separation of territory and ownership of resources lead to individual government systems within the larger federal government. The ability of the nation to operate as 50 separate governmental units all operating under one federal banner became an integral part of American history and

nationality. However, there exists a balance within that separation, and Turner understood that the balance is very easily manipulated and skewed. He states, “So long as free land exists, the opportunity for a competency exists, and economic power secures political power. The democracy born of free land, strong in selfishness and individualism, intolerant of administrative experience and education, and pressing individual liberty beyond its proper bounds, has its dangers as well as its benefits,” (Turner).

Building from these inferences of Turner’s thesis, I’m informing the structure of my novel’s setting. Using an extreme circumstance in the presence of the Fearsome Critters across the Northern American continent (the Northern Mass, as it’s referred to in context), I’m theorizing how the country would have developed if the frontier had never been completely settled. In *Fearsome Critters*, the nine established territories exist as The American Enclaves. Each has its own governmental structure and makes its own laws, but once a year, the elected leaders of each territory meet at a summit to discuss matters of national importance. This regards trade, security, and any regulatory issues or disputes they may have. The remainder of the country is essentially frontier land, known as The Wilds. Settlements exist in The Wilds and operate separately from the governments of the Enclaves, and the settlers are considered pioneers.

The nine Enclaves consist of: *New Yorn*, made up of New York, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, Connecticut, and the northern half of New Jersey; *Wetcrest*, made up of Florida, and the southern halves of Alabama, Georgia, and South Carolina; the *South Belt*, made up of Tennessee, and the western half of Kentucky; the *Lakelands*, made up of Wisconsin, Michigan, Ohio, the top of Illinois following the lateral of the Kankakee River, and the top of Indiana following the Wabash River; the *Salts*, made up of Utah, and western Colorado, up to Durango; the *Oaks*, the second largest territory in the Enclaves, made up of

Oregon, Washington, and Idaho, and the first American territory that Daniel and Fats visit.

The remaining three territories, *Nebraska, Texas, and Calishor*, are, respectively, Nebraska, Texas, and California.

Each Enclave is run by a governor, and each governor has their own styles and laws, as well as personal goals in mind. While a handful of them attempt to remain diplomatic, most summit meetings end in arguments. This is to reflect the tensional relationships between states during the time of Westward Expansion. The governors have disputes over land ownership, trade agreements, and more often than not, personal vendettas.

With Turner's Thesis as a model for both their governmental structure and their behavioral patterns, I've written three chapters to provide evidence of my interpretation. The first chapter mentions the matter of immigration onto Enclave land from the Wilds, as Daniel and Fats are directed by a friend to meet with his sister-in-law, Rebecca Starling, the governor of the Oaks, and arrive at the border wall to the territory. The second chapter depicts the two on a passenger train, commenting on the difference between the Enclave and the Wilds, then arriving at Rebecca's office, crashing the Summit. Within these first two chapters, there are also examples of how the people utilize the Fearsome Critters with technology, similar to the mixed genre of steampunk. The third chapter is a scene of the Summit, through the perspective of Rebecca. It introduces each of the leaders and depicts how their combined government operates, as well as how they interact with each other. There's insight into some of the characters' motivations, relationships, and the manner in which they run their sectionalized congress, as informed by my inferences of Turner's Thesis, and frontierism concepts.

9

The immigration gate stood as tall as the trees surrounding it. This was one of many entry points to the most northwestern Enclave, The Oaks (the second largest territory in Americca), and it bustled with tourists, laborers, adventurers, and their ilk. Daniel and Fats had never seen this many people gathered in one spot together. Daniel leaned down to Fats and asked, “How many people do you think are here? I’m saying, at least 1,000.” There was closer to 5,000 people there.

Looking left and right of the gate, they could see the wall stretched for miles as it weaved through the groupings of trees. They took guesses on how tall it was, and agreed that it had to be “at least 1,000 feet.” It was actually 58 feet.

The creation of the wall was a stroke of genius on behalf of both the Oaks engineers, and their biologists. Its sole purpose was to regulate and supervise travel in and out of the Oaks, seeing as it was one of two ways around the mountain range of Stone Gate’s, and the only (safe) way by land. Utilizing the natural barrier framed by the many dense forests at the northern border, the engineers had found a way to fill in the gaps between the trees to produce an impenetrable blockade: the webs of the Winnikas.

The Winnikas are a species of Fearsome Critters who, physically, closest resemble a spider. They are commonly about 4 feet tall, with legs as sturdy as steel girders, and webbing 100 times stronger. They can be identified by their orange thoraxes, and a distinctive yellow carapace that is often compared to a hard hat. The Winnikas operate much like an ant colony, despite being arachnids. Following the orders of their queen, known as the “Grandmother,” they function with a hive mind and an infallible work ethic, driven by the Grandmother’s pheromones. This is what made it so easy for the people to manipulate them; synthesizing false pheromones, and thus building the wall as “quickly and efficiently as possible.”

The idea for the Winnikas Wall was originally conceived by the Oaks's governor, Rebecca Starling. Rebecca was known amongst Americans for running a tight ship, evidenced by the many organized steps of her rigorous entry process. This would have been a problem for Daniel and Fats, had Rocco not given them his Diplomat Badge, and a letter of intent for Rebecca.

They pushed their way through the throngs of gruff strangers to approach the glass booth that served as a welcoming point. Daniel tapped on the glass to get the attention of the stocky man in the maroon uniform sitting behind it, who seemed far more concerned with finishing a jelly donut than helping anyone. The man slowly turned in his swivel chair to face Daniel, peering at him through heavy lidded eyes. Taking a deep, laboured breath, he sighed and spoke sluggishly through the static of the intercom.

“Can I help you today... sir?”

“Hello there! Yes, my partner and I would like to get into the Oaks, please.” Daniel responded casually, as if asking for a glass of water.

“You'll need your passport, a separate form of identification, a formal, written explanation of your business affairs outside the Enclave, an offering to the treasury, a security deposit to the treasury in case of damages to infrastructure during your stay,” the clerk droned, reciting a speech he'd likely given a thousand times. Dabbing his sweaty forehead with a crinkled pocket square to punctuate every other listed item, he carried on like this for several more minutes, “...a 25 Americcoin fee for the handling of your documents, and to hand over all personal effects for inspection before entering the waiting room,” He paused here, taking another deep breath, before finishing strong with, “where you'll sit while you wait to placed in line for processing.”

Daniel stared at the man with a flat expression and narrowed eyes for about half as long as the list of requirements. His head was spinning just trying to remember which one came after “passport.”

“Right,” he said. “I really don’t think we have... any of that. Fats, do we have passports, or, whatever?”

Fats crawled up Daniel’s back to look in his rucksack for the papers that he knew they didn’t actually have. Peeking over Daniel’s shoulder to look at the large man in the booth, Fats squeaked out a negative confirmation, and retreated back down to the ground, when suddenly, the gate worker let out a pained gasp. His heavy lids had raised to reveal bulging eyes full of panic, and he reached under his desk for an inhaler, taking hit after hit in an attempt to calm down.

Daniel was puzzled by this sudden outburst, and cocked his head to the side before asking, “You okay there, guy? You see a ghost or something?”

The clerk clutched his chest and took a few deep, haggard breaths. Regaining his composure, he said, “That... varmint... of yours just caught me by surprise, is all. Can’t believe you’d let one of those monsters climb on you and follow you around.”

Daniel could sense the disdain in his voice. He and Fats had met many people who were uncomfortable around the Agropelter. This response, while not always surprising, was almost always funny. However, something about the way he’d spat the word “varmint” rubbed Daniel the wrong way, like it was a learned behavior.

“Well, he’s not a monster. He’s my friend, and I’d appreciate a little less candor from you on the subject,” Daniel replied coldly.

The clerk barely registered Daniel's comment. It seemed they had touched on a very personal subject for the him, and his original disinterested tone began to fade with each weighted breath he struggled with.

“See, I’m originally from the South Belt. That ain’t no place for Critters, if you don’t know.” As he spoke, his southern drawl emerged from beneath his polite, ‘Customer Service’ voice. “I hate those dang Winnikas spider freaks more than anything. What’d the governor think she was doing, *employing* goddamned Critters to do a job any man could do just as well?”

Daniel was getting fed up with the conversation, and wanted to get through the gate as soon as possible. Trying to lead the man back to doing his job, Daniel said, “Yeah, that’s really something. Anyway, about the entry; we don’t have all those papers and fees or whatever, but we need to get in to The Oaks, bad. We’re here to see Rebecca Starling.”

At this, the clerk’s face instantly flattened back into the blank expression he’d been wearing when Daniel and Fats first approached the booth. Reverting back to his affected voice, he said, “I’m sorry sir, but I can’t allow you to enter the Enclave without the proper paperwork, especially to just ‘see’ the governor, as you so bluntly stated. That would be a violation of immigration processes, which we at the Winnikas Wall take very seriously.” He laid the sarcasm on thick when he said “very seriously.”

“Well, we do have this,” Daniel said, pulling out the small, bronze Diplomat Badge that Rocco gave them back at the ranch. He flashed it to the clerk, whose eyes again opened, this time almost as wide as they had when he first saw Fats.

Momentarily slipping back into his southern accent, the man blurted out, “That’s a level 5 Diplomatic Identification Badge! Where the heck did you two bums get one of those?”

Fats stepped up to the booth, which was about a head taller than he was, and stretched a furry arm over the small ledge that served as a counter. He placed the letter of intent for Rebecca onto the ledge and chattered at Daniel to remind him to mention it.

“Oh, yeah. Thanks, Fats. We have this letter for Governor Starling as well,” said Daniel.

When the clerk saw the wax stamped on the envelope, his eyes seemed like they might over inflate and burst out of his head.

“Son of a Shagamaw, that’s the Starling family’s personal seal. Just who in the hell are you hayseeds?”

Daniel chuckled, glad to have finally gotten some respect out of the profusely sweating man, however much that was worth.

“That’s for us to know, and for you to blindly speculate to your superiors when you let us in.”

The clerk gave Daniel a long, displeased look through the glass. He even made an effort to stand up a bit from his chair and give Fats an even more glowering stare. Then, without another word, he fully heaved himself up from the chair and walked into the next room, taking the badge and letter with him. Five minutes later, he returned with the letter and badge, as well as two stamped, formal-looking papers. Handing them through the opening to Daniel, he said in his flat, drone voice, with a touch of contempt this time, “We hope you enjoy your stay in the Oaks... sir.”

Daniel and Fats gathered their belongings and new passports, nodded at the clerk, and started towards the gate to enter Americca. Before passing through the gate, Fats turned around to look back at the clerk, who was staring at them from his glass box, and flipped him a middle finger.

10

Fats patted the soft cushions of the passenger train as it sped down the tracks from the entry point at Curlew Park to the capital city of Redwood. Daniel was on his guard. Fats, however, was revelling in the comfort. They'd never travelled on a train this luxurious, but that didn't make Daniel feel any safer. His eyes darted between the two exits at the ends of the car, and scanned each new face that entered their space. The lack of dirt on the other passengers' faces made him wary.

Shaking his suspicions, if only momentarily, Daniel gazed out the window. The Oaks passed them by slowly enough for him to marvel at the difference between the Wilds and the Enclaves. Daniel was used to seeing thick forests and empty fields that stretched for miles, but here, there were no clusters of trees. There were instead clusters of uniform houses, and occasionally, buildings that reached higher than the tallest clock towers in the villages of Canadé. Once in a while, the train would pass through more familiar territory; dense pockets of green, where Daniel felt at ease among the natural backdrop.

Fats pressed his nose against the glass, fogging it up and leaving a wet mark when he pulled away. Through the breath that clung to the window, Daniel could see many large structures in the distance, seemingly caressing the clouds like they were all old lovers, reuniting. A young man in a maroon outfit stopped by their booth to check if they needed anything, so Daniel asked him, "What's with all the towers out there? Do you guys really need that many lookouts?"

The steward tilted his head to one side and stared at Daniel, puzzled. "Are... are you talking about the city over there?" he asked, pointing back at the buildings on the receding horizon. When he reached out, the cuff of his sleeve rode up his arm, and Daniel thought he

could see the outline of a tattoo or a birthmark on the young man's wrist. "Because those are just a bunch of skyscrapers. I'm pretty sure they're office buildings, anyway."

Daniel expressed a more puzzled look than the one he'd originally been given. It should have immediately struck the steward that the rugged man hanging out with an Agropelter in silk pants had probably never seen a city before, but he just stared at Daniel uncomfortably until the adventurer asked him to explain further.

He sat down with Daniel for about an hour, and told him as much as he could about city life. He explained that in the Enclaves, people lived in large communities where they worked, raised families, and died, surrounded by thousands of others doing the exact same thing. Instead of pounds of gold and silver for bartering, they used a universal currency system called Americcoins. They didn't need to hunt, because their food was caught for them, and sold at markets. They didn't need lookout towers, because the Winnikas Wall protected them from foreign threats, while the police force defended them from internal dangers.

He gave Daniel and Fats the crash course on urban living: the short-distance automobile, apartments where people lived in spaces less than 500 square feet. He told them how they worked jobs where they cleaned other people's small apartments and fixed their broken automobiles in exchange for Americcoins, all to get slightly bigger and better apartments and cars. All of this information both fascinated and terrified the two.

"How can people be so soft?" Daniel asked. "What if the guy who hunts their food is splattered into syrup by a Whirling Whimpus and never returns? The rest of you just starve?" Fats stood up on the bench and began spinning on one foot, mimicking a Whimpus, until he became dizzy and fell down.

The steward laughed, saying, "Well, Fearsome Critters are kind of the least of our problems in the Oaks. The Winnikas are, like, the best deterrent for other Critters."

"Why? What's so special about these spider things everyone here keeps talking about?" Daniel inquired. Besides the clerk at the gate, they'd overheard a few conversations on the long train ride where someone had mentioned the Winnikas. Daniel had been jotting a few notes of things he'd heard in passing, but had no concrete details for the Crit-a-log.

"I mean, they're giant spiders that work together in huge numbers under the instruction of one leader," the young man replied, as if that were the most obvious question he'd ever been asked. "That's dangerous no matter *what* you are. Between you and I, those things are even more sinister than they look. Everyone thinks that they're Governor Starling's workforce, but..." At this, he lowered his voice, and made his own anxious scan of the train car, before whispering, "Some other guys from Holter Valley and I believe that Starling trains them to follow military orders, and that she's forming an army of Winnikas. We call em' the Winnikas Corps. But you didn't hear it from me."

The steward stood up, still nervously looking around the car, before shaking the hypothetical fear off. "Anyway, I hope that helps you get around a bit when you get wherever you're going. It was nice meeting you, Daniel, and your little pal here, too," he said, petting Fats on the head and giving him a scratch behind the ear. Then, he turned and walked down the aisle to check on other passengers.

"Thanks for the help, we really appreciate it!" Daniel called after him. "Nice kid," he muttered, peering out the window again. It was refreshing to be able to let his guard down for a moment. A few minutes of towns and repetitive landscape passed before Daniel realized that he had never given the steward his name.

When they got off the train, Daniel suggested they find the information center he remembered the suspicious steward mentioning. He said they had to “accept that they were out of their element,” and reminded Fats that it was always best to “survey the land.” At the info kiosk, they were given a map with the capitol building circled in dark ink, and a book of discount coupons for local businesses.

The main street of Redwood was packed with more people than the immigration gate. Machinery hummed and banged, and there were strange smells blanketing the air like a veil. Fats was drawn to nearly every cart with a trail of smoke rising from its grill, following the scents of roasting meats and kettle nuts drifting on the breeze. He whined at Daniel as they passed each one, but Daniel reminded him that they only had raw gold and silver to trade with, and the steward had said that nowhere in the Enclaves accepted that as currency. Still, Fats couldn't help himself, and his eyes shone, darting about and taking in hundreds of new sights: metal boxes on wheels, giant houses made of hardened earth and materials that Fats only knew as dangerous weapons.

The loud, crowded environment had Daniel on edge, but he did his best to enjoy the experience. The culture shock that came with seeing his first modern, civilized society after living in the woods for almost 50 years was debilitating, though. How can all these people be comfortable crammed together like this, he thought. Anyone could bump into you and pick your pocket, then blend back into the crowd. He couldn't comprehend why the Americcans desired to huddle together and share such limited space when there was a great, wide world to stake their claim in.

“I don't get it Fats. There's hundreds of thousands of miles of free land, just there for these people to take, and yet they choose to live like a bunch of Wapaloosie fighting for a

spot on a toadstool. Don't they realize they're living under someone else's boot, when they could be surviving and living by their *own* rules?"

Fats shook off his wonderment at the city and looked up at Daniel with soft, black eyes. He raised one hand, chest high, and nodded his head to the side.

"Yeah, I guess they seem fine with it as long as they're safe. Still, that doesn't feel right to me. It's like they're not really..." Daniel paused here, harboring the weight of the last word before it came out of his mouth. "Free."

Distracting himself from his somber thoughts, Daniel looked down at the map, trying to get a sense of where they were. He had been following the street names for a few blocks, but lost track when they'd starting passing through the main thoroughfare with all of the food carts. Walking further along, Daniel absentmindedly buried his face in the map to read it better, trying to identify their location.

"According to the map, it should be right around here, but I don't see it. What the hell?" Daniel mumbled.

Fats pulled on Daniel's pant legs, vying for his attention. Still not looking up from the map, Daniel brushed Fats off, saying, "Enough with the snacks, Fats. I told you we don't have any money, and I'm trying to get us less lost than we already are."

Frustrated, Fats grabbed Daniel's wrist, making him let go of one side of the map. A gust of wind swept up the street, and Daniel almost let the map be carried away with it.

"Hey! What are you doing? If we lose this, we're never going to find the damn governor's office!" Daniel chastised.

Fed up with Daniel's lack of awareness, Fats scrambled up his back, grabbed his head in both hands, and turned it to face the very tall building right in front of them. It was one of the largest buildings in the entire city, and it appeared a lot less regal than Daniel imagined

the office of a territorial leader to be. He looked at the stone slab sitting in the charming little garden outside the entrance, surrounded by an array of colorful posies and tulips. Engraved on the slab were the words: OFFICE OF THE GOVERNOR, REBECCA STARLING.

“Oh. Well, why didn’t you just say we were here?” Daniel started, but after seeing Fats displeased face, said, “Yup, I knew immediately after I said it that it was stupid.”

When they neared the entrance to the office, two men in heavily padded uniforms stepped up to bar their path. They wore stern faces and dark shades, and stood with their arms crossed in front of the doors. Holding up a flat palm facing forward to stop Daniel from getting any closer, one of the men said, “I’m sorry, sir, but the entire capital building is closed for the annual Summit. Normal office hours and operations will begin again in a few days. Until then, please move along.”

Daniel found the guard’s tone condescending. “Son, the only summits I know anything about are at the tops of mountains, and unfortunately, I don’t see any mountains in this fancy mouse trap you call a city. We’re here to see the governor.”

The guard furrowed his brow, and spoke more severely this time. “Very cute, sir, but the governor is not taking any civilian appointments during the Summit. Now, I’ll ask you one more time to please move along.” He placed a hand on what appeared to be the hilt of a weapon, resting in a holster on his hip. Daniel’s eyes followed the guard’s motion to the grip, and noticed that whatever it was, it bent at a 90 degree angle. Is this guy threatening us with a boomerang or something, he thought.

“Woah, hang on a second,” Daniel cautioned. “I don’t know what you think you’re going to do with that thing, but I would really advise against it if it’s something violent.”

The second guard stepped closer to the first to back him up, reaching for the device on his hip as well. “*I* would advise you leave the premises, you bum. There’s no handouts for you and your mutt here.”

Fats barked, baring his teeth. He took a step past Daniel and snarled as menacingly as he could, but Daniel put a hand on his head and pushed Fats back behind him.

“Listen, pal, I don’t want to be jammed into this sad hive of cowards any longer than I have to. Believe me when I say we’re out of here as soon as we talk to Starling, but until then, we’re not turning around,” Daniel said adamantly. He subtly shifted into a more defensive stance, anticipating the guard’s likely outburst.

Pulling his weapon out of its holster, the first guard pointed it at Daniel and declared, “This is your final warning. Leave now, or I’ll have no choice but to use force.” The second guard pushed his way past his partner, drawing his own weapon.

“To hell with this, Mark! I’m not giving this vagrant another chance,” he said, holding the straight pipe of his bent metal tube at eye level. He pointed it towards Daniel and squinted before shouting, “Take a nap, you filthy beggar!”

The man squeezed his finger on a lever at the grip of the weapon, and two strings attached to tines were propelled forward at Daniel. Swiftly raising a hand, Daniel repeated the same motion the first guard had halted him with. The tines stopped in mid-air, floating just in front of Daniel’s face, where he inspected them.

“Wait, are these-- are these Storm Beetle horns? These things can generate up to like, 15,000 volts when they touch,” Daniel observed. “You could really hurt someone with these, you know.”

The guards stared at the man levitating their attack in front of them with a frank disbelief. Fats chittered out a giggle at their dumbfounded faces, as they looked back and forth between each other and Daniel.

“Now, since this seemed to work on the last guy who gave us a hard time, let’s try it this way,” Daniel said, dropping the horns onto the ground. “Fats, get the badges and stuff. And don’t you two go reaching for anything else, got it?”

Fats pawed around in the side pocket of Daniel’s rucksack and pulled out the Diplomat Badges. He cautiously stepped towards the guards, who were now looking solely at each other with far more composed faces. Before Fats could even offer the badges for them to look at, the first guard, Mark, asked Daniel, “Are you Roin?”

Daniel was taken aback by this question. Most people didn’t even *know* about the Roi, and even less could identify it that easily. He considered his answer carefully, deciding to play dumb and see what they knew.

“Are you?” he replied.

Fats stood in the center of this tense exchange, holding up the badges futilely, before resigning to his uselessness in the situation. He returned to Daniel’s side, wearing a dejected pout on his snout.

“We’re not here to play games, man. This is serious!” the second guard cried.

“Relax Terry, I got this,” said Mark. “Look, the governor is in need of someone with your...” He slowed, trying to find the right words. “Your prowess and ability. We can take you up there if you really need to see her that badly, as long as you cooperate with us the whole way.”

Daniel pondered on the idea of “cooperating” for a moment. Considering that they were being handed their goal on a plate, he agreed that he and Fats would cooperate.

Mark reached for the radio strapped to his shoulder, leaning in to talk into it. “Um... Mrs. Star-- Governor Starling, ma’am. We have someone downstairs that we think you’ll want to meet,” he said apprehensively. Thirty seconds later, a hiss of static came through the radio, followed by the unamused voice of a woman.

“Mark, honey, I already have 6 people *upstairs* that I don’t want to be meeting with, so I’m going to take a pass on the one you have downstairs that I also don’t want to meet with. Do not interrupt me again, are we clear?”

A moment of silence passed between the men standing on the steps of the building. Then, the static returned, as did the woman’s voice, “And don’t answer that.”

Mark’s face was pale as he stared at his feet. Looking up at Daniel and Fats, he stammered, “S-she’s usually much nicer than that. The Summit’s really got her on edge. Let me just try something.”

Nearly whispering this time, he leaned back into the radio. “He’s a-- well he’s a,” dropping his voice even lower to say, “a Roin.”

A much longer period of silence followed. The tension finally broke with the harsh crackle of the radio.

“Bring them up and have them wait. You’d better not be wasting my time here, Mark.”

“Of course not, ma’am. We wouldn’t even dream of it, right, Terry?”

Terry raised his hands up, exasperated, and mouthed, “Why me?”

“We’ll set them up outside your office right away Mrs. Starling,” Mark said, ignoring Terry’s frustration. He held the door open and waved Daniel and Fats inside.

“It’s *Governor* Starling,” the voice replied.

Mark and Terry left them on a bench outside the door to the governor's office, and told them to wait for her to return from the meeting. When Daniel asked what the meeting they kept talking about was, Mark said, "It's a meeting of the 9 governors of the Enclaves--"

"7 of the governors," Terry interrupted. "That southeastern guy Jacob never comes to Summits, and Rebecca said John--"

"Shut up, Terry!" Mark cut him off. "It's like a meeting where they talk about the future of the nation, and internal affairs. That's all you need to know. Now, for the last time, stay put."

After telling them this, Mark and Terry returned to guard the front door. That was the original job Rebecca had assigned them to, and they followed orders to the letter. Daniel and Fats sat on the bench, saying nothing. Fats's legs swung back and forth, hovering a few inches above the ground. Two minutes later, Daniel stood up, too anxious to sit still any longer.

"Where do you think this meeting is, Fats?"

Fats remained on the bench, reluctant to defy Mark and Terry's instructions. Daniel brought a hand up to his face and shut his eyes tight, pinching the bridge of his nose. "You're really going to listen to those two guys and just sit here, when all of the Northern Mass's most powerful leaders are sitting in the other room?"

Fats wagged a finger at Daniel, then held up 7 fingers.

"Okay, fine, whatever. 7 out of 9 people on the continent with the firepower to start a war are right over there..." He pointed off in a random direction down the hall. "Somewhere, and I'm taking advantage of how rare that is. C'mon, we might even learn something. I know how much you like learning, you nerd."

Daniel started off down the hallway in search of the meeting room. Fats stayed on the bench, crossing his arms and looking away in the other direction. As soon as Daniel turned the corner, Fats opened one eye, and, realizing Daniel intended to leave him there alone, followed suit.

They strolled down the pristine, white halls, leaving dirty boot and paw prints on the linoleum floor. Fats was periodically distracted by the small, potted trees that lined the walls, giving each one a cursory sniff. They didn't smell quite like the trees he was used to, but at least there was some nature to offset the artificial feel of the building. Daniel inspected the plaques on each of the many doors they passed.

"Treasury Office, no. Department of Human Resources, that sounds ominous. Custodian? I don't even know what that means. I imagine this would be, like, their biggest room, right?"

Fats grunted and pointed at two very large doors at the end of the hall.

Daniel nodded at Fats approvingly, saying, "I should just give you all the maps from now on." Fats smiled, and gave Daniel an 'Affirmative Alpha.' Daniel returned the signal with a thumbs up of his own.

"Alright then. Let's go crash the party, Fats," he said mischievously.

Storming right up to the double doors, Daniel pushed them open, and he and Fats stepped into the Summit Hall, interrupting the most important governmental assembly of the year.

The room was circular, and had a 15 foot coffered ceiling with pillars supporting it. Daniel noticed how incredibly dark it was right away. There was no overhead lighting, only some soft, blue lights installed in the table at the center of the room. The table was also

circular, and seated around it were 7 of the 9 governors of the American Enclaves. The woman directly across from the door stood up.

“Excuse me, can I help you with something?” she sarcastically called out to Daniel.

“Oh, yeah, actually. At least, I think so. Are you Rebecca?”

The woman was shocked at the candor of his question. Her tone turned sharper. “I am *Governor* Rebecca Starling, representative of the Oaks, and *you* are intruding on a very important and private meeting.”

Daniel observed that a man in an elegant suit was now standing as well. The light shining up from the table underneath his chin also cast shadows down from his widely brimmed hat. It made him appear stark and menacing. He spoke with an intonation that Daniel had never heard before; one that connoted a latent slyness, like each word was double-edged.

“Crack security team you’ve got here, Rebecca. Not only do they interrupt a Summit in full swing, but they let a hobo and a giant rat waltz on into the Hall. What’s next, your cook gives us all food poisoning?”

Rebecca’s face was fury in stone. She made to argue with the man who had insulted her operation, but before she could get a word out, Daniel beat her to it.

“Hey, funny guy! I’m not a ‘hobo.’ I’m an adventurer, and a goddamned good one. And I’d take a long look in the mirror before you go calling my buddy here a rat.”

The man’s face remained dour, except for his eyes, which strained with rage. With a curt huff of breath, he slammed a fist sporting one too many rings on the table, then pointed a finger at Daniel. “What did you just say to me?” he shouted. “Do you have any idea who you’re fu--”

“Gentlemen!” Rebecca interjected. “Why don’t we put the schoolyard antics aside and get right to the bottom of this.” Sitting back down, she turned to face Daniel and Fats. “Who are you two?”

“Well, my name is Daniel, and this is Fats,” he began. “We’re here looking for you, because we have some questions that our friend Rocco said you could probably answer.” He hunched over and whispered, “Fats, get the letter.”

“Rocco, like, Rocco Spamoni?” Rebecca asked, perplexed.

“Yeah, he said you would be able to help us with this whole...” Daniel hesitated, not eager to give up so much information from the start, and to so many strangers. “Thing that we got going on.”

Fats handed him the letter to give to Rebecca, and squeaked at Daniel while holding his hands to look like Mark and Terry’s weapons.

“Oh, right. And your two guards said you wanted to meet with us or something because I’m a Roin,” he added.

A few of the other governors blurted out “What?,” including the man in the suit, who added, “Were you just gonna keep this to yourself, Starling?”

Rebecca motioned for Daniel to bring her the letter. He handed it back to Fats and said, “Go ahead, you’re faster.” Fats walked around the table to Rebecca and gave her the envelope with her family’s seal on it.

She opened it, and read the message that her sister, Sophie, had written. It explained how Daniel and Fats had helped her and Rocco, and suggested that maybe they could help Rebecca, too. After her thin and graceful signature, there was a postscript, noting that they were “actually quite nice, once you get past the scruff.”

After reading the letter, Rebecca stood up again. “I think after all the ridiculousness of this afternoon, we can call it a day here. Let’s reconvene tomorrow and finish the matters of the Summit, all agreed?”

All but one of them said, “Aye.” The man who did not agree instead said, “There is no way I’m staying in this spider web any longer. Like I said, you guys don’t even need me. I’m out.” With this, he turned and left the room before anyone could respond. Rebecca dismissed everyone, and walked over to Daniel and Fats.

“You two, my office, right now.”

11

She strode through the halls, noticing how exceptionally clean the floors were today. There wasn’t really time to be getting lost in such menial details, considering she was already behind schedule, but it was something to appreciate. Her two chief security officers were arguing over something they’d seen in the park during lunch. Halting in place and turning about-face on them, she gave her orders.

“Mark, Terry, pay attention. You are to be the first line of defense for anything unusual, understand? No interruptions during the meeting. I’m only Summit Master once every 9 years-- well, I guess it’ll be 8-- and I need it to run smoothly.”

Mark took the lead, as he usually did, and said, “Yes ma’am, Mrs-- Governor Starling. We won’t let you down.”

“Before you go, any news on that other project? I was hoping to have results by today, but it’s a little too late,” Rebecca said, looking down at her watch. “Oh damn, and so am I. Just watch the front until I get out of here, and keep on top of the other thing. That has top priority.”

Mark and Terry took off for their posts, but Rebecca remained in the hallway for a moment to collect her thoughts before she entered the Summit Hall. This would be the first meeting with the new Lakelands governor, and of course, John was nowhere to be found. Rebecca took a deep breathe outside of the double doors and muttered, "Top priority."

Stepping into the Hall, she scanned across the table to confirm the attendance. On the far left of the table was Steven Hayashi, from Calishor. Rebecca respected him for his passing of an "Equal Tolerance Act" that outlawed structural discrimination. It was punishable by banishment into the Sand Wilds. Very effective.

Moving clockwise along the table, next was Frederick Greene, the youngest of the Enclaves' leaders. His father, Derrik had been the governor of the Lakelands until a few months ago, when he mysteriously died in his sleep, despite being in very good health. As the rules stated, in the event of death, a governor is to will his position, and Derrik left it to his son. Rebecca felt empathy for Frederick, but knew they all had business that needed to be handled, and this was the time for it.

The next three seats were empty. The one that sat at the middle of the table belonged to her, as the Summit Master. The seat next to Frederick's was expectedly vacant, as Jacob Ellis of the South Belt hadn't been to a meeting in 6 years. Not after his argument with Steven got ugly.

John Orin would usually take the chair to Rebecca's right. As the governor of Nebraska, home of the famous Oglala Shrine, John's life had been closely scrutinized since birth. His father had been the governor before him, and so on. This led him to be a bit of a recluse as an adult, but he and Rebecca had gotten to know each other well over the years. He never missed a message from her, let alone a Summit.

As her gaze fell upon the right half of the table, her expression soured. The final four chairs were occupied by her least favorite men. First, there was Jimmy Hawthorne, from Wetcrest, who only cared about his stupid fast food franchise, “Dungavenhooters.” His one-track mind, paired with an insatiable ego, left his citizens to suffer from negligence.

Will Brighton, a gangly skeleton in a pinstripe suit who ran illicit gambling halls in the Salts, sat next to Jimmy. His eyes shifted around to the others, like he was always plotting a way to rip everyone in the room off. To Will’s left was Rebecca’s worst nightmare, in a similar pinstripe suit, making her wonder if they’d matched on purpose: Sal Roland.

A man of squat stature, and much taller power, Sal was the governor of New Yorn in the Northeast, and the shadiest person Rebecca had ever met (followed closely by Brighton). He was accused of all types of black market dealings and Fearsome Critter poaching operations, but no one could ever prove it. He covered his tracks well, but she knew by now that every move he made was calculated and selfish. She thought about how every one of the governors’ actions were usually selfish to some degree, but Sal was different. He was more sinister and motivated.

The final chair was held by Arthur Braun. Arthur was a man that Rebecca had deemed early on as unremarkable, but only because he tried so very hard to be the center of attention in any room. Growing up in Dust, the capital of Texas, he had dreams of becoming a country rock star. He wore flashy outfits, and treated everything like a popularity contest. That’s pretty much how he won the election, she thought. Well, that, and money.

Taking her place at the head of the table she apologized for her tardiness, “Hello, gentlemen. Sorry I’m late. Shall we begin?”

The murmuring between the men died down as Rebecca called the meeting to order.

“Great. Now, first things first, I’d like us all to welcome Frederick Greene to his first Summit. Frederick will be taking over for his late father, Derrick, who unfortunately passed a few months prior. I’d like to have a moment of silence for us to honor our colleague and friend, if you’d all allow.”

The room fell silent. The stillness was almost palpable, filling up the huge space of the Summit Hall. Heads hung and hands came together to show respect for a hard-working man who worked tirelessly for his people. Then, a crunching sound, like the breaking of bones shattered the calm. Sal cracked his knuckles, and each time the air released from his joints, it echoed throughout the rotunda.

Everyone turned to face Sal. Will stifled a snicker when Sal said, “Sorry about that. Nervous habit.” He addressed Frederick, “Derrick was a good man, and I’m sorry for your loss there, Freddy.”

Frederick gritted his teeth and creased his brow, but then relaxed, begrudgingly thanking Sal for his condolences.

“While we’re on the subject,” Rebecca continued, “our first real order of business is to reevaluate any disputes on Derrick’s behalf. These will, of course, fall to his successor to either resolve the dispute, or to indulge it. It seems there’s only one item on that agenda: a conflict between Derrick and Governor Roland of New Yorn, over proper ownership of the dominion of Lake Erie. Frederick, as your territory is the defending body, how would you like to proceed?”

Frederick shuffled some papers on the table and cleared his throat. Before he could begin, however, Sal cut him off.

“Actually, Starling, I’d like to rescind that claim if it’s not too late.” He shot Frederick a sinister glare from under the brim of his fedora, adding, “We needn’t burden the son with the sins of the father.”

Frederick was visibly straining to contain himself. Rebecca admired his composure in that moment. Dealing with Sal led most people, herself included, to overreact in response. Sal spoke again, this time to Rebecca.

“I’d actually like to request a different acquisition of land, if I could. I want to spread the New York territory to control the Chesapeake Bay Area.”

Jimmy laughed at this. “You know there’s a reason no one ever bothered to claim that land, Roland? Two words: Chesapeake. Dogfish.”

“I’m well aware of the Dogfishes’ presence, Hawthorne. The *real* reason that no one ever bothered to claim the Bay is because no one was ever strong enough.” Sal practically spit the last two words at Jimmy from across the table. “I’m telling you, my guys *are* strong enough, and we got a plan. It’s just like that Irish fella, O’Sullivan, said: ‘That claim is by the right of our manifest destiny to overspread and to possess the whole of the continent, which Providence has given us.’ Well, I don’t know nothing about Providence, but I do agree that it’s our right to take what we can.”

Sal’s reference to ‘manifest destiny’ floated through the room for a moment, before he concluded, stating, “And I can take the Bay. Trust me.”

Steven smoothed his hair back, saying aloud to the council, “Whatever he wants with the Chesapeake can’t be good for any of us. I move to deny the acquisition on the grounds that it will be a failure, and lead to unnecessary casualties.”

Rebecca silently agreed with Steven that nothing positive could come from giving Sal more land, but she couldn’t make partial judgments, so she instead said, “Without a concrete

plan that can guarantee a minimal fatality rate, and some kind of justification or clear motive for why you would desire a land that's been deemed uninhabitable for decades, I can't call a vote on this. Governor Roland, I'll ask you to draw up documentation on this plan, as well as speculative reports before we can consider your request."

"Sure, no problem, Rebecca. I'll have em sent over to you all as soon as I get back East," Sal said cheerily. Rebecca noticed the strangely optimistic face he made under the hat when he turned away, and felt a wave of unease. Why was he so happy about having a request denied, she thought.

Suddenly, Will's nasally voice entered the fray. "Why am I even here?" he whined. "I don't even have anything to talk about. My citizens adore me, and I've got one of the most thriving financial structures of all the Enclaves, thanks to my luxurious resorts."

Rebecca stood her ground and asserted her authority as Summit Master, retorting, "Know what, I'm feeling generous today. I'll give you two options here, Brighton. You can leave right now, with no consequences--"

"Sweet!"

"And crawl back under the Salts and Sands, just like the Salty Snallygaster you are," she continued, as if he hadn't spoken a word. At the mention of his unflattering street name, Will emitted a low growl and narrowed his eyes at Rebecca. She knew that he never took kindly to being compared to the reptilian Critter, considering how much he looked like one.

"Or," Rebecca concluded, "you can be a man, do the duty you signed up for, and represent your people fairly."

"Don't give me that drivel, Starling. Jacob hasn't been here in years, and it's not like anyone misses him," Will complained.

“As much as I hate to say it, Jacob Ellis is better left to himself. He’s made it clear that he won’t take responsibility for his national obligations, despite our leniency with his... radical methodology. Therefore, the Enclaves do not recognize his authority outside of the South Belt.”

Sal scoffed. “I never considered Jakey boy as having ‘authority’ in the first place.” He made sure to air quote authority to sell his point. “He’s got authority over 60,000 square miles of corn, sweat, and overalls.”

Ignoring Sal’s snide remark, Rebecca looked next to him to see Arthur jotting down notes on a small legal pad. “Arthur,” she called. “You’re uncharacteristically quiet today. Care to add to the conversation, since it’s kind of your job?”

Arthur raised his gaze from his writing to look at Rebecca through star-shaped sunglasses. He scratched his thick beard, then smugly replied, “My darling little Starling, the Braun is working on his *masterpiece* over here.” He tapped the pen to the legal pad twice. “I know I shouldn’t blow the lid on the whole thing before it’s finished, but I just can’t help myself.”

Steven muttered under his breath, “Can’t help but hear yourself talk, more like.”

Arthur, who was too wrapped up in the sound of his own voice, didn’t hear Steven’s comment. “It’s a concept record about the most fascinating subject there is: me!” he shouted the rhetorical answer, and his annoying voice resonated through the high ceilings. “It’s a blend of my two greatest strengths; my rugged, authoritative prowess and leadership, and my rugged, playboy lifestyle, all mingling into a country rock chart topper!” His excitement over himself seemed to settle, and he clicked the top of his pen again. “I’m just here to take notes.”

“Rebecca, can we please get to important matters?” Steven demanded.

“Thank you, Governor Hayashi. If everyone has settled down,” she said, surveying the room to cast her glare on all of them. “There’s a top priority item that I’d like to discuss. Has anyone been in contact with John Orin in the last 200 days?”

The room once again became still. Everyone waited for someone else to speak up, but it seemed that none of them had any good answers.

Jimmy was the first to speak up. He shifted his substantial weight uncomfortably in his chair, adjusting his ill-fitted cummerbund. “I mean, does anyone even talk to him anyway? The guy is sort of a shut-in, inn’er? Heck, I figured you would know better’n anyone else, Starling.”

“Yes, well, that’s the problem. John hasn’t answered any of my messages in the last several months. And, as you can all tell, he is absent from the Summit. I believe something terrible might have happened to him, and as a governor of the Enclaves, his safety is a national concern. Now, I do have a plan. It’s a long shot, but it might just work, given that we can find the right... resource.”

Just then, the sound of static interrupted her as the radio on her hip sparked to life. Mark’s voice anxiously came through it.

“Um... Mrs. Star-- Governor Starling, ma’am. We have someone downstairs that we think you’ll want to meet.

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