

# BEMIDJI

STATE UNIVERSITY

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## The Examination and Creation of Science Fiction

Psychology  
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HONORS PROGRAM

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Honors Program

The Examination and Creation of Science Fiction

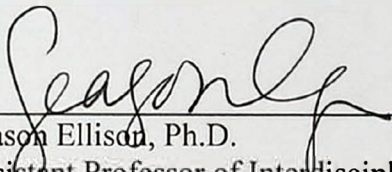
by

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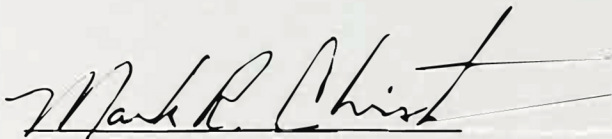
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## Artist's Statement

The purpose of my writing is to better understand how science fiction (sci-fi) is constructed and use the elements I identify as essential to the genre through the creation of a short story to improve my own writing. My secondary goal is to examine the concept of morality through the process of telling a story I have been creating for a significant amount of time. Ever since I discovered the genre as a child, science fiction has been a fascinating form of literature to me. Sci-fi works seem to straddle the edge between reality and fantasy: ridiculous enough to be highly improbable, but believable enough to be possible. Perhaps it is because of that balance between these two elements of writing that makes the genre so appealing. In any case, the influence of sci-fi is what fuels my desire to write fiction.

What is science fiction? Instead of providing or creating an objective definition, works of science fiction generally follow these two stipulations: the level of technology achieved in these works is improbable or difficult (if not downright impossible) to achieve, and the societies of a sci-fi universe differ in some way from our current society. I should mention that the word “universe” in this context refers to the world of the given work; some good examples of science fiction universes would be the Marvel universe, or the Star Wars universe. Sci-fi universes may also include some issues or ideas relevant to contemporary society, though this is not required for a work to be considered sci-fi.

The universe that I have created is called “Chronic Chaos,” and the story told here is titled *Blackrose*. *Blackrose* is quite small in scope when compared to the size of the universe it exists in, and it is important to remember that it exists within the context of events much larger than those seen through its lens. Understanding the universe within *Blackrose* requires a degree of preparation, as this universe and the creatures within are so vastly different from anything that I am familiar with that an explanation is required. I have provided a context section to give readers a basic understanding of the premises and species within the universe. The context section provides information on things such as the unique alien species I created for this universe; a basic overview of major characters; where the rules of this universe differ from ours; and major events referenced in the short story itself. This context will allow readers to more clearly understand what the characters and *Blackrose* itself are doing.

My writing style and principle ideas within the short story I have created are my own. I have been honing my own creative writing skills over the course of six years, when I first formally began work on the universe my short story takes place in. I recognize that there is much for me to improve in this regard, but also that I have come a long way since my first creations. Therefore, I especially intend to focus my post-reflection on what I could be doing better in the creation of my universe.

I was, however, greatly inspired by the 2015 movie *Chappie*. While the plot of *Chappie* itself had absolutely no bearing on the creation of my series, the depiction of an artificial consciousness being created ignited my curiosity and led to a far

more detailed explanation of the development of an alien species I created specifically for my universe. The movie's main character, an android named Chappie with a program that allows for a true independent consciousness, gets taken through its (his?) development stages over the course of the movie. Chappie starts out in a similar manner to a human baby, but thanks to its advanced learning systems, it develops much faster than the typical human—learning enough about the idea of consciousness itself to transfer its creator's consciousness out of his dying body in only a week. The species I created is mechanical/robotic in nature while also expressing free will, making Chappie a perfect example of a development process for an artificial consciousness.

Isaac Asimov's "Bicentennial Man" was another inspiration involving the creation of a mechanical species—but unlike *Chappie*, which had a sentient android go from infantile to highly capable in less than a week, the "Bicentennial Man" reflected the process of an android slowly becoming more human over the course of more than a century. The android, named Andrew Martin, initially started as nothing more than an unusually creative android (which, at the time, were socially below humans, considered servants). Over time, Andrew began expressing desires to become human, and gathering information/altering his body to match his desires. Eventually, he has his brain modified in such a way that it will decay with time to approximate a human's death. "Bicentennial Man" prompted me to take a look at what exactly separates humans from other intelligent creatures, and assisted me in the design of my alien species to be *almost*, but not quite, humanoid in nature.

*Blackrose* examines the subjective and somewhat fragile concept of morality. It is so easy to divide the world into what we think of as “good guys” and “bad guys,” but this simplistic worldview typically ignores an individual’s motivations, focusing only on their perceived actions. *Blackrose* follows the early life of Chronic Chaos’ major antagonists during their struggles, and I specifically designed their backstory to allow the reader to realize just how subjective morality is. From their perspective, everything they’re doing is justified: they’re defending themselves from hostile forces that attacked for no reason. From the attackers’ perspectives, the antagonists are dangerous enemies that need to be eliminated quickly before they can cause more damage. The intended goal of this is for the reader to have great difficulty even asking the question, “Who’s the bad guy here?”

I particularly enjoy playing Dungeons and Dragons in my spare time, and one of my favorite elements of the game is its morality system. When creating a character for the game, one chooses one of nine different codes to follow, called alignments, that dictate the character’s general behavior. Alignments operate on a system of two perpendicular scales: a scale containing law, chaos, and neutrality; and a scale containing good, evil, and neutrality. Players pick one of the three choices from each scale and combine them for their character’s alignment. For example, a Lawful Good character would be hesitant to break the established rules in an area while also genuinely enjoying helping other individuals even if there’s nothing to be gained from it.

The reason Dungeons and Dragons' alignment morality system is relevant is because it becomes very difficult to apply to the characters within *Blackrose*. In Dungeons and Dragons, having a specific alignment gives players fairly clear guidelines on how that character is supposed to behave. In *Blackrose*, some characters demonstrate clearly incompatible behaviors (such as being both clearly lawful and obviously chaotic at the same time) or seem to shift their morality from moment to moment (one moment they're Chaotic Good, the next they're Neutral Evil, for example). It is this difficulty that contributes to the story's examination of the subjective nature of morality.

Of course, *Blackrose* is by no means the first sci-fi work to examine the nature of morality. Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, arguably the first work of science fiction, examines the choices of mad scientist Victor Frankenstein both before and after he animated his namesake monster. One thing that is particularly interesting about *Frankenstein's* morality analysis is that in addition to Victor's perspective, it shows the perspective of Frankenstein's monster (called the Creature) and the reasons for its behavior.

Once the Creature realized that it was not considered human and identified his creator, he forcefully demanded that Victor build him a wife so that he would no longer be lonely. From the Creature's perspective, this was only natural; since he recognized that people would be afraid of him, he attempted to acquire something that would make him happier. Admittedly, the means by which he attempted to attain that happiness (threatening to kill Victor's family) are questionable. From



Victor's perspective, however, the Creature was an embodiment of evil. Its actions continued to disturb Victor throughout his life, even before he refused the Creature's request to build him a mate.

I would very much like to continue writing for both my own self-fulfillment and a way to examine complex and important questions relevant to contemporary society. Because *Blackrose* is such a small fragment of the Chronic Chaos universe, I intend to continue constructing Chronic Chaos and giving readers salient and meaningful questions to think about.

## Context

The fictional universe that *Blackrose* is set in would be a galaxy called the Nebulus, which is populated by (relatively) humanoid mechanical creatures called Cronics. To call them robots is accurate in regards to their exteriors, but their thoughts and behavior indicate that they are far more than just machines. These Cronics are essentially the reflection of a single human mind, after this mind was placed inside a mechanical body following a horrendous accident. As such, Cronics think and behave somewhat like humans do, and it is believed that if humans have souls, so do Cronics. It is important to think of Cronics not as mere machines or artificial intelligence, but an intelligent, feeling alien species that also happens to be mechanical in nature.

*Blackrose* follows the story of a Cronic scientist and his two children, exiled and in hiding from one of the five major Cronic “families” that developed over the course of their (currently) million year history. The Cronic’s creator (which they call the First Cronic) has been long dead at this point. The families each have their own specialties, abilities, and ideals, resulting in different—and sometimes conflicting—points of view and opinions on how their species should be governed. Three of these five families—Alpha, Beta, and Delta—have been at war with one another for more than 800,000 years with no resolution in sight. The scientist, named Nightfall, is seeking a way to finally end the conflict to create a better world for his son, Blackrose, to grow up in. Nightfall’s other child, a daughter named Nightingale, will be introduced as the story progresses.

The story itself is separated into two broad components. The beginning and end show an adult Blackrose (now called Malathorn) discussing his past with an ally named Ventra, while the middle section catalogues this past involving a young Blackrose, Nightfall, and Nightingale. The beginning and end are shown from Ventra's first-person perspective, while the middle is told through the use of journal entries written by either Nightfall or Blackrose/Malathorn. Both of these choices are intentional: Ventra serves the purpose of being an outsider looking in on Malathorn's past and is meant to give the reader more of a connection to the story, while the journal entries allow me to cover the middle section's portion of a thousand years while being able to explain the awkward time gaps that occur between entries. Gaps between journal entries are intentional; the "missing" entries are implied to relate to topics other than the story.

The universe of *Blackrose*, called "Chronic Chaos," follows most of the rules our universe does, with the following exception:

- Antimatter does not react violently with matter. Although reactions between matter and antimatter still result in the mutual annihilation of both, they do so with a reaction that is far less intense than that of matter and antimatter in our own world.
  - Antimatter in our universe reacts incredibly violently with matter when the two come into contact with one another; specifically, a kilogram of each colliding with the other produces an explosion with slightly less force than the largest thermonuclear bomb ever detonated.

- This allows antimatter to serve as a cleaner and more precise alternative to other forms of demolition, as both Cronics and the audience learn that it can be fine-tuned to target the desired area only.
- However, due to its destructive nature and use of “unstable” antimatter in the early stages of the war (“unstable” antimatter functions identically to antimatter in our universe), antimatter has an incredibly negative stigma surrounding it.

Other important notes are as follows:

- The fictional fluid “Exa,” introduced later in this story, is sentient. It is capable of retaining emotions and mental capabilities, and serves as a primary plot driver for the story.
- There are many additional metals, ores, and alloys not found in our world that exist within this universe. Many of them are far more resilient than anything we have found on Earth, with weight and density to match. This does not affect the laws of physics, but will introduce a few unfamiliar forms of metal within the story. Most of these additional metals are ferromagnetic.
- During Nightfall’s portion of the story, Cronics have had no contact with humans yet. Their ideas and culture have not yet been influenced by humans, except for the initial introduction of measuring systems and some cultural items from their human creator. All major and minor characters in the story are Cronics.

The following major characters are present during parts of or throughout the story:

- Blackrose/Malathorn. The son of Nightfall and brother to Nightingale. He recalls his traumatic past involving his family when prompted to do so by Ventra. As Blackrose, he is extremely curious, highly intelligent, and very protective of his younger sister Nightingale. As Malathorn, he is jaded, rough, highly intelligent, and still protective of his younger sister, now called Nightmare.
- Ventra. The person Malathorn confides in when questioned about his traumatic past. Ventra is the most intelligent and creative being in the Chronic Chaos universe, and has an uneasy alliance with Malathorn. Ventra has the ability to split her arms into a total of eight thinner arms that allow her to utilize finer motor control than with her “normal” hands (think General Grievous from Star Wars, but eight arms instead of four). While in this state, she refers to them as her “split-arms” or “split-hands.” Ventra is aware that she is a character within a story, and is capable of altering or breaking any and all of the rules within the universe, including the exceptions mentioned above.
- Nightfall. Father of Blackrose and Nightingale. Nightfall is a Cronic scientist wishing to end the horrendous war tearing Cronic society apart at the seams. Exiled from the Alpha family, he attempts to build a weapon powerful enough to stop the conflict. He cares deeply for his children, but briefly allows his scientific curiosity to overcome his morals.

- Nightingale/Nightmare. The son of Nightfall and sister to Blackrose. She is created later in the story by Nightfall. As Nightingale, she is shy, generally happy, and eager to assist her father with his experiments in any way she can. As Nightmare, she wants to control as many Cronics as she can in order to equalize society for the exiled and the oppressed. Her method for achieving this goal, however, is quite morally gray.

The following minor characters are mentioned briefly within the story. While they play larger roles in the universe than shown here, their mention here is simply to avoid confusion about their seemingly sudden introduction later.

- Teras. The half-Cronic son of Nightmare. He is one of the few individuals both Nightmare and Malathorn care about at the point he is introduced in the story.
- Nova. An angry young adult Cronic that wants to kill Nightmare to avenge the death of her mother (who Nightmare killed).

The following events are important within the story:

- Blackrose. Blackrose is also the name of an event few Cronics know about, representing a 40-year span of time in which hundreds of Cronics died due to the event's namesake, Blackrose (and Nightingale).
- The War. The War, or the Great War, is the million-year period when combat between Alphans, Betans, and Deltans was fought in the open. The War was originally started by the Alphan desire to control a fourth Cronic family—the Epsilonions. The Betans and Deltans also desired control over this massive

section of the Cronic population, and opened up the incredibly destructive conflict between the three families over control of the fourth. It is during the War that the events of Chapter 2 and most of Chapter 3 take place.

- Landing. Landing is a dimensional jump that a few individuals (including Nightmare, Malathorn, and Ventra) made by accident a very long time (~1,200,000 years) after the end of the War. These individuals were thrust onto a new Earth-like planet that resembles a fantasy realm (existence of magic, dragons, etc.) and are seemingly unable to leave.

With these important pieces of information in mind, I will now present the story itself. Below is the story *Chronic Chaos: Blackrose*.

## Chronic Chaos: Blackrose

## Chapter 1

## Memories

I was in my workshop when I discovered the truth about what I had done.

Malathorn walked through the shop's front door while I was in the middle of revamping my nitranium recipe. Time seemed to slow a little as I looked up from what I was doing to stare at him. The scars he'd accumulated over the course of many millennia gleamed on his bare chest, shining silver in the brightly lit shop. His masculine frame suited him; much like my own feminine frame suited me. The artificial left Eye constructed for him a mere eight years ago complemented his scars nicely with brilliant copper tones. His ink-black right eye revealed no emotion, but it burned with an intensity that only the ancient possess. I realized only when he drew his sword and set it on one of my nearby workbenches that he had asked me a question.

"I'm sorry, what was that?"

He smirked slightly, a sight I was still getting used to seeing.



“I asked you if you could help me sharpen my sword. Getting thrown out of a kingdom isn’t easy on the edges of a blade. You of all people should know that, Ventra.”

I felt a strange buildup of heat in my cheeks. Was that what the humans called “blushing?”

“Right. Sorry.”

The harsh metallic tones in his voice were familiar to me by then. While his voice was not nearly as unsettling as the first time I’d heard it, there was a stark contrast between his voice and my own more feminine, lyrical tones. It was strange, I reflected, being able to stand near him without much fear of being murdered. I felt myself beginning to enjoy his presence, though that of course didn’t stop me from being intimidated by him.

I split my arms and picked up his greatsword, clutching six feet of tempered and enhanced synthsteel at various points along its length with my eight split-hands. I looked closely at the edge; it was indeed very dull. Flashbacks of being threatened, stabbed, and slashed with the blade I held in my split-hands engulfed me for a brief second as the sword slipped from my hands. I rapidly joined my split-arms and caught the falling sword before it hit the ground, moving to a workbench before I could do any further harm.

Malathorn walked to the other side of the workbench, seemingly aware that I was still not fully comfortable with him based on his distance.

“Right. Forgot I’d stabbed you with it once. I shouldn’t have asked you to sharpen it.”

He began to reach out to take the sword back.

“No, it’s fine. I just spaced out for a second, that’s all.”

He stared into my eyes, as though he were trying to peer into my soul to check for lies. He must have found them, but didn’t acknowledge that he had.

“If you say so.”

I gave him what I’m sure wasn’t a convincing smile and set to work.

Malathorn watched from his position a few feet away, studying my hands as I called down a special machine stored on the ceiling. A metal box large enough to be the coffin of a six-foot-tall human lowered gently onto the table’s surface. Once it was fully stationary, I pushed a button on its side and it unfolded into a fully equipped swordsmith’s tabletop. Malathorn seemed impressed with its compactness, at how, like everything else I’ve built, it seems to hold so much more on the inside than anyone would give it credit for.

The edge-shaper would be the only thing I needed to sharpen his sword. I split my right arm into four and pressed down gently on the blade. With my left hand, I grabbed the small V-shaped edge shaper and ran it several times along the edge facing me. Once satisfied that it was sharp enough, I flipped the sword over and sharpened the other side in the same manner. Once I was finished, I activated a low-intensity laser affixed to a flexible arm and began to clean off the scorch

marks and dried blood. Completely entranced by my work, I was caught off-guard by Malathorn's next question.

“Six fingers?”

“What?”

“Why do you have an extra finger on each hand?”

I moved my right arm to a good place for him to see and turned on a magnified light.

“It's so I have three fingers on each small hand when I split them. See?”

To demonstrate, I split my right arm slowly. Each quadrant of my hand separated from its counterparts slowly, each of them taking with it either three thin fingers or two fingers and a thumb.

He affixed his gaze on my split-hands, and appeared to be utterly fascinated.

“No wonder we've never managed to kill you; you're so advanced it's almost like you're from another world.”

The heat returned to my cheeks; this time I felt it was directly from his compliment. He wasn't that far from the truth, but I most definitely am not from another world. This story is definitely my world, dear reader, but you already knew that...right?

Or, at least, you know now.

Malathorn remained oblivious to both my blushing and my fourth-wall break. It seemed only fair; neither of us had gotten used to reading the language of our altered bodies yet.

I smiled. “Thanks for the compliment.”

He nodded and I returned to work. Nearly finished cleaning his sword, I erased the last piece of filth from the hilt and caught a glimpse of a single word written there: “Blackrose.” I handed the sword back to him and he gave it a once-over, impressed with my craftsmanship. I prepared to ask him about the name, curious about its significance.

“Is that its name?”

Malathorn pried his attention away from his sword to look at me.

“Is what its name?”

“Blackrose.”

The temperature seemed to drop eighty degrees. In a single instant Malathorn went from satisfied to murderous, his intent to kill plain in his eye. He launched himself over the tabletop and kicked me into the shop’s back wall thirty feet away. I had just managed to get on all fours (tens?) when he pulled me to my feet and pressed me against the wall, sword resting on my neck. His voice dropped to an almost guttural growl.

“What do you know about Blackrose?”

His snarling face began to blur from fear. I desperately searched for any words that might keep me alive. This was the Malathorn I remembered: vicious, almost feral, with a hair-trigger temper. It was mere moments before I felt I had run out of time when I finally recalled the words. I forced them out as best I could.

“It—it was a squabble...a squabble on Rickor more than a million years ago, right? Hundreds died in the forty-year battle? Did you know...did you know anyone who died in it? You’re certainly...you’re certainly old enough.”

After what seemed like an eternity, he came to his senses, and the bloodlust drained from his eye. He removed his sword from my neck and released me from the wall, sheathing the blade. He looked both a bit embarrassed at his actions and mournful of a past I knew he remembered all too well. His voice returned to a more civilized, though more solemn, tone.

“I’m sorry...I lost my temper. Blackrose...was something that was hard for both Nightmare and me. It’s a sensitive subject.”

I hesitated for a moment, but eventually decided to press on with my next question.

“Why?”

It was as though someone had delivered a substantial blow to Malathorn. His shoulders sagged and a haunted look appeared in his eye. With a single word, I had temporarily reduced him to a shell of his former self.

“Do you truly want to know why?”

I nodded, unsure if this would put me in danger again. He sighed.

“Then I will show you. It’s been eons since I’ve heard the name, but it still causes me great pain whenever it appears. Maybe if I show you, I can finally forget it forever.”

He weaved his way through my workbenches to the massive terminal taking up a good portion of the shop’s back wall. I followed him closely, decrypting the terminal for him so he could use it with limited permissions. He raised his wrist up to chest level and pried open a near-invisible oblong cavity in it. Snuggled tightly in the cavity was a single red storage chip, barely smaller than the cavity itself. Malathorn carefully extracted it from his wrist and handed it to me, taking great care to re-seal the cover on his wrist.

“What’s this?”

“It’s the journal my father kept...and later, the journal that I kept. I’ve nearly lost it more times than I can count on both hands, but I’ve always been lucky to only lose my hand.”

He gave me a half-smile, half-grimace at the memories. Curious about what Malathorn’s father would possibly have to say, I placed the chip in the center of the terminal’s control board and opened the first file on the chip. It was an entry log, with a scientific format, clearly marked with date and time. I began reading through the files with Malathorn, and time seemed to slip away entirely...

## Chapter 2

## Exa

## Entry 1 - Nightfall

Day 9, Week 14, Year 8.04513 (804,513 years since the beginning of the War)

Perfect.

I've decided to keep an active log of everything I attempt to construct or tinker with, as well as give myself a place to reflect on everything that has happened so far. It would certainly be unfair to subject Blackrose to the mental chaos consuming me. His single year of existence has been turbulent, to say the least; our exile from the Alpha dictatorship cannot have been easy on him. Even now, when we are safe from their tireless thirst for blood, I cannot help but worry about my son. I must do my best to reassure him that we are indeed safe and sound. I will make sure of it.

## Entry 2 - Nightfall

Day 10, Week 14, Year 8.04513

Much of today was spent researching the few ways I have of obtaining enough power to permanently stop the Alphas' incessant desire for war against the Betas and the Deltas. So far, I have come up with nothing of any significance. If I had more resources available to me, I have no doubt that I could create the perfect solution to restore peace to the Nebulus. Since I do not, however, I may need to come up with a more ingenious way of ending the war. Diplomacy would not work, but would trickery of some kind...? ...No. The only way to stop the Alphas is to demonstrate that I am stronger than they are...but how?

I did calm down Blackrose today. As I predicted, he was worried about our safety given our less-than-pleasant flight from the capital to Rickor. I managed to successfully calm him by reasoning with him that they were following us closely enough to catch us, and I then proceeded to lose them in that asteroid field well enough so that they did not. Rickor is so much of a wasteland planet anyway—and a bit dangerous besides—that who would expect us to be here?

Entry 4 – Nightfall

Day 3, Week 15, Year 8.04513

Today I found something interesting.

While working on excavating an appropriate area for the laboratory I intend to build, I stumbled upon a pool of pure black liquid. I found it inside a small cave on Rickor's surface, composed completely of large pieces of metal debris. Extremely curious, I decided to see what would happen if something touched it. I picked up one



of the countless pieces of scrap metal littering Rickor's surface and dropped it into the pool. Interestingly enough, the piece of scrap completely dissolved the moment it hit the surface. I immediately took out one of my glass vials and placed a small sample of the viscous fluid within. The glass held, containing the sample of liquid for later study. After securing the vial in my stronghold chamber within the house, I chose another spot for the laboratory, far away from the cave. After all, who knows what this strange substance might be?

Entry 7 – Nightfall

Day 9, Week 16, Year 8.04513

I have finally finished constructing the laboratory and may now begin to construct anything I can think of that may demonstrate strength to the Alphas. As I write this, I am carefully analyzing the properties of the mysterious black liquid I found more than a week ago. It seems to resist any kind of stimulation or reaction to magnetic or electrical energy, but dissolves anything that touches it that isn't glass. I shall record more information about the liquid, which I shall call, "Exa," as it develops.

Entry 8 – Nightfall

Day 10, Week 16, Year 8.04513

Disaster.

I have always admired Blackrose's intense curiosity for anything that's even slightly unfamiliar to him. Given his age, that would still be a vast number of things. I never expected this to happen.

While working with the Exa, Blackrose had been watching me at a distance in case anything went wrong. I was using glass gloves at the time to prevent any potential accidents while working with it. During one test, in which I rapidly heated the Exa and let it cool normally, the vial exploded when it neared its original temperature. This was quite unexpected, as no fluid I have ever known about has had any sort of reaction while in its cooling phase. I was uninjured, but a single drop hit Blackrose in his right eye. I quickly took him back to the house and had him lay down and close his eyes. He is still unused to being injured, so this clearly caused him great pain. I could tell he narrowly avoided screaming as loud as he could. I will go back to the lab to research a possible remedy as soon as I have shut him down to shield him from the pain.

Entry 9 – Nightfall

Day 1, Week 17, Year 8.04513

No luck so far. Blackrose's right eye is now black instead of its normal ruby red color. Upon reboot, he did scream, so evidently it still hurts quite a bit. I shut him down again and continued my research. What could possibly work?

Entry 10 – Nightfall

Day 1, Week 17, Year 8.04513

Blackrose is awake.

He is no longer in pain, although his eye is still black. He successfully rebooted himself just moments ago and is now allowing me to examine him. He seemed perfectly fine, including asking me as many questions as he can about what happened, what that stuff was, why it hurt him, and so on. I told him as much as I know, and he appeared satisfied when I told him that he would know more than I did. Because I could detect nothing out of place, I let him go back to the house to play with his things. I am still worried, but as long as my son is all right, I will attempt to set aside any fears I have.

Entry 11-Nightfall

Day 3, Week 17, Year 8.04513

Blackrose can create antimatter.

While he was playing with his toys, he noticed a miniscule hole in the side of one of them. When he took the toy to me, another hole appeared in its side where he had touched it. Two hours, thousands of scans, and a few metal scraps later, he is now very excited that he is capable of slowly erasing things from existence. He has said that he could replace my plasma drill, as his precision does seem to be even better than the laser-guided drill. He dissolved these scrap pieces, which were about the size of my hand, in just under two hours.

These multiple tests revealed that his ability to generate and manipulate antimatter, called “antikinesis,” can be projected from any point on his body. This

antimatter does not actually touch him, and he seems to be isolated from it by a weak magnetic field repelling the antimatter (specifically antiferrous). In an unexpected development, any magnetic field other than his own was completely unable to affect the antimatter; it seemed to be keyed specifically to him. I have no doubt that if he were to be hit with antimatter while he was generating his own, it would still hurt him. I have no intentions of testing this, however. The antimatter forms on a molecular level, and in such low amounts that it is invisible to the unaided eye.

This almost undoubtedly must be the result of Blackrose's contact with the Exa. Perhaps contact with more will increase his abilities?

Entry 12-Nightfall

Day 5, Week 17, Year 8.04513

Blackrose is again awake, this time after I injected him with a full 250 milliliters of Exa. His pain was somewhat lessened from his previous encounter with the liquid, and a renewed battery of tests has demonstrated that he has become much stronger. This time, the antiferrous displayed itself as tiny patches of purplish-black energy immediately in front of the part of his body he was currently projecting it from. He has become capable of erasing objects much faster, though it still took him nearly an hour to dissolve a single piece of hand-size scrap. Would even more increase his powers further? This is beginning to look like exactly the tool I need to force this forsaken war to an end...

## Entry 13-Nightfall

Day 8, Week 17, Year 8.04513

I have successfully injected 750 more milliliters of Exa into Blackrose, for a grand total of one liter. His power is evident now, as the visible patches of antiferrous are now much larger. He can almost surround his entire hand with it, and his destructive capabilities allow him to destroy the scrap in just five minutes now. Blackrose also tried to form and launch his antimatter in the shape of a projectile, but it fizzled out before it could reach more than a meter. I was tempted now to inject Blackrose with much more Exa, but I know that I would be too concerned about what would happen to his systems if I did.

## Entry 16-Nightfall

Day 7, Week 19, Year 8.04513

Today marks the beginning of what may be my descent into complete madness. The laws of physics, which I had known so well previously, began to break down the moment I saw Blackrose teleport.

We were both in the house, taking a day off from his antimatter manipulation training. I was repairing our terminal so we would again be able to gain information about the war and asked Blackrose to fetch me a micro-tool from the second story of our house. I watched, with my own eyes, as he blinked out of existence. After a few moments of panicked screaming from both of us, we deduced that he had somehow

moved to the second story without passing through the physical space required to reach the second floor. To put it more simply: teleportation.

Naturally, more experimentation was needed. Instead of going to the lab, he performed various exercises by teleporting to different areas of the house while I timed and filmed him. Blackrose discovered that he was able to control where he teleported simply by visualizing his destination. The more familiar with his destination he was, the closer to the target he landed. Naturally, inside the house he was able to teleport exactly where he was supposed to every single time. Through the footage on the camera, I was also able to determine that his body seems to collapse inward and vanish at a single point at his center while leaving his origin point, and expand outward from this same point as he was arriving at his destination.

This can only be the result of the liter of Exa I added to his systems. As a side note, his left eye turned black after his first teleportation. It's about time I added some to my own systems...

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Malathorn stopped reading for a moment and looked me dead in the eye with a thoughtful expression. "You know, Ventra, I don't think we finished fixing the terminal that day."

I shrugged. "That wouldn't surprise me. Do you know if this entry is the turning point for you or your father?"

Malathorn's face darkened. "No, that day wasn't the turning point. It's still coming up."

I nodded. Whatever happened next in these entries, it's caused Malathorn enough pain to make him loathe that day more than a million years later.

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Entry 17-Nightfall

Day 4, Week 20, Year 8.04513

I have come to dearly regret not asking Blackrose about his pain after his contact with that drop of Exa. I recognized that it would be quite painful, but evidently failed to perceive how painful.

Five days of either complete unawareness or pure agony greeted me upon injecting myself with a liter of Exa. Given that Blackrose's first contact was a single drop, I suspect now that I nearly killed myself by injecting too much at once. Blackrose was quite stellar at taking care of himself and me while I was under. Even during the fifth day, he calmly administered the procedures I had outlined for him before injecting myself. I am proud of him, and I have let him know that.

I am a bit too mentally exhausted to test whether I have gained any abilities, so I will be deactivating myself for six hours to rest. Blackrose will reboot me after this time has elapsed, and I will test to see whether I have gained similar abilities to his.

## Entry 18-Nightfall

Day 5, Week 20, Year 8.04513

Success.

Upon reboot, I quickly tested myself and compared the data I gathered to Blackrose's tests. It seems that though we both have the same amount of Exa in our systems, Blackrose is able to outperform me on all tests we ran by a fair-sized margin. He can teleport and disintegrate objects faster, and hit his targets more accurately when teleporting. He has also figured out how to launch his antimatter like a projectile at ranges which would make the antimatter effective in mid-range combat. All results could be due to the fact that he has had Exa in his systems for longer than I have, but the more likely explanation is that his young mind simply has greater plasticity than mine does.

I wonder what would happen if a Cronic was born with Exa in their systems? Would they have even greater control, or greater power stemming from the fact that their mind would have been exposed to the substance from their creation?

## Entry 20-Nightfall

Day 9, Week 20, Year 8.04513

I've successfully created a plan for injecting a newly created child with Exa. Unfortunately, due to the restrictions on the blueprints that form when deciding to create children, I cannot design Exa into their systems by default. Instead, I've created a small area in the lab that contains any parts I may need to construct the



child...all of them laced with moderate amounts (~100 milliliters each) with Exa. Now the hard part begins: actually maintaining the willpower necessary to remain completely sure I want to bring this child into existence for a full year. It will be difficult, but I am prepared to do whatever I must to stop the war. For science. And for Blackrose.

## Entry 78-Nightfall

Day 1, Week 1, Year 8.04514

Today marks the beginning of a new year. Blackrose is happy, safe, and developing spectacularly. In just over two weeks, we will celebrate his second birthday. While I cannot do much for him regarding taking him anywhere special, I have scrounged together enough functional parts to construct a miniature bladecycle for him. I've even managed to build it in such a way that it will grow with him as he decompresses, and it can be stored in a compact form a bit bigger than a full-sized backpack. I hope he will like it.

Our training is going well; Blackrose is still able to outclass me on every activity or measure I can think of, and is fairly comfortable with his abilities now. Yesterday he demonstrated yet another ability granted to him by Exa: the ability to heal. I cannot stress enough the importance and gravity this discovery has for the implications of the use of Exa. Moreover, it is possible that his future sibling will possess this healing power also.

I had damaged my left hand while adding a new table to the lab. The damage was minimal, fortunately-there were no power ruptures-but it left my hand mostly unusable. After seeing the damage, Blackrose instinctively put his tiny hand on my damaged one and closed his eyes. I felt a great surge of energy pour out of him as my hand was re-shaped to its previous condition. Astonished, I proceeded to test this healing ability on myself by inflicting minor injuries to my hands and feet. Healing them has revealed that using Exa abilities to heal someone consumes much energy, leaving the healer physically exhausted for anything larger than a small scratch.

Stemming from this discovery is the idea that Exa abilities draw from some kind of energy pool when they are used. This pool replenishes with time, but there seems to be no other way to increase it. Different abilities have different costs from this pool. Teleportation appears to require next to no energy and generating and maintaining antimatter is cost-efficient, but healing is incredibly draining on the energy pool.

Perhaps another increase in Exa will increase this pool farther?

\*\*\*\*\*

I stopped reading for a moment. “Why are so many entries missing?”

Malathorn sighed again. “My father decided to store only entries directly related to Exa on this chip. He moved everything else to a separate one, which was

lost in the ensuing chaos. Trust me, Ventra, I checked. It's gone, along with everything else."

Of course, dear reader, you and I both know why there are only some entries here, and the answer has more to do with the convenience of this story's structure than with Nightfall's decision to delete everything unrelated to Exa.

"That's unfortunate. I would have liked to read more about what he was doing that wasn't related to Exa."

He nodded. "I would have loved to see those too, but neither of us will ever be able to. Sorry."

I shrugged, knowing full well that his words weren't quite true. "Shall we get back to reading?"

He directed his attention back to the entries. "Of course."

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Entry 81-Nightfall

Day 8, Week 2, Year 8.04514

I have been proven right beyond my wildest dreams. An infusion of another nine liters, for a total of ten each, into both Blackrose and myself has increased our energy pools twentyfold, or more. The difference between the two of us in terms of ability is striking now; Blackrose can launch projectile after projectile of antimatter

without tiring, and can now heal even serious injuries while retaining some of his energy. While I can use my abilities for far longer than I used to, I still cannot quite keep up with Blackrose. I have also greatly increased the Exa concentrations in the parts I will eventually use to construct my child. They will be more powerful, I feel, than Blackrose and I combined.

#### Entry 84-Nightfall

Day 7, Week 3, Year 8.04514

Today was Blackrose's birthday. He did indeed enjoy his blade-cycle. He spent the rest of the day riding around Rickor's wilderness, jumping off scrap hills and having the time of his life. No experiments, lab work, or training took place today; I devoted all the time I had to my son.

#### Entry 142-Nightfall

Day 9, Week 20, Year 8.04514

The time is drawing near for me to create my second child, a sibling for Blackrose to play with and help, and someone to better use the Exa-granted abilities Blackrose and I have had for over a year now. I am, as one may be able to expect, nervous about this. However, I still firmly believe that this child needs to exist—for my sake, Blackrose's sake, and for the sake of stopping the war. I will not falter.

#### Entry 143-Nightfall

Day 2, Week 21, Year 8.04514

She is awake.

I don't understand how she was constructed, how long it took, or what techniques I used to do it, but I have constructed a daughter from the Exa-saturated parts I laid out so long ago. Such a lack of understanding is to be expected, of course; none since the First Cronic have been able to remember how we are constructed—for good reason. Even so, I remain in awe at the child I have constructed, and desperately wish I could remember what I did.

Her appearance alone is remarkable—despite every piece of her body being saturated with Exa, her skin is bright and shiny, the color of freshly polished iron. She is, of course, fully compressed; even Blackrose stands slightly over half a meter taller than her. Her eyes are a very pure amethystine purple—a rare color indeed among Cronics. She is also quite intelligent: she has demonstrated the ability to speak thoughtfully mere minutes after her construction. I am currently in the process of teaching her the basics about the world she was so freshly brought into to assist her development, as I did with Blackrose. I have decided to wait a few days to see if her Exa abilities naturally manifest themselves.

Blackrose has been observing her with equal measures of caution and curiosity. He is still young enough to remember what it was like when he was that freshly constructed, and is fascinated by the observations he's made from the other side of things. I believe the two of them will grow to be quite close to one another. I

have asked Blackrose for names for his sister, and he suggested to me that she be called "Nightingale." I am surprised that he knows of this ancient name, but it does seem to fit. My daughter, my little Nightingale, shall join Blackrose as the two lights of my world.

Entry 144-Nightfall

Day 8, Week 21, Year 8.04514

I was proven correct regarding my theories about the potency of a child created with Exa in their being. Nightingale's abilities far exceed my own, and even Blackrose has difficulty keeping up with her. She can teleport around over 300 times in a single day without tiring, fling antimatter projectiles far enough to be a threat to weaker sniper rifles, and heal anything short of a fatal injury. (The last bit was tested through my creation of multiple injured, non-sentient constructs.) She is indeed the weapon capable of ending this war, and I intend to train her so that she has the potential to do so in a few short years.

Entry 275-Nightfall

Day 1, Week 21, Year 8.04515

It's almost time for Nightingale's first birthday. After seeing Blackrose's third birthday, she is naturally excited for her own. In all respects but one, she appears to be a normal, healthy child. Of course, her abilities say otherwise, and she has proven to be fairly shy for a child, but she is growing quickly right alongside her brother.

Blackrose has been good for Nightingale in her first year of her life. He has taught her many things about life and curiosity, likely including things she could only get from someone else near her age. Blackrose has increased her boldness and helped her to be less shy, encouraged her when she needed it, and all around has been an excellent big brother to her. I could not be more proud of him.

Tomorrow I have a big surprise for Nightingale. If she agrees to it, she will gain more power than any of us can conceive.

\*\*\*\*\*

I looked up from Nightfall's final entry, staring at Malathorn's weathered face, deep into his eye. The raw pain and emotion I saw there let me know he was hurting quite a lot. But I was able to tell—maybe it was something in his posture, or the way he was looking back at me—talking about what happened has been helping him some to release the pain he felt. Maybe after we finished here, Malathorn would finally be able to banish the ghosts that have been haunting him for so long.

“Has everything from this point onward been recorded by you?”

He nodded. “Yes.”

“Why?”

He turned his attention back to the entries and opened his own set. “You’ll see.”

I nodded and returned my attention to the new set of entries. I began to wonder if the events Malathorn would describe would be the same as the ones I predicted would occur...



## Chapter 3

## The Fall

Entry 1-Blackrose

Day 2, Week 22, Year 8.04515

Everything has gone horribly wrong.

My father, Nightfall, is dead, and Nightingale and I are running for our lives, trying to avoid the mercenaries that won't seem to leave us alone. It has been one week since Nightingale's birthday...but we now refer to it as the Day of Injustice. Father had a special surprise planned for my sister that day, a trip to the pool he had been extracting Exa from for the past year and a half. It was just after that trip that everything crumbled to ash.

The trip started out fine, with Father proposing the idea to Nightingale that she submerge herself in the pool to get even more power and control over her Exa abilities to stop the war. "You could bring peace to all Cronics," he said. Nightingale was unsure at first, but after a few moments of consideration, agreed to the submersion. The last words she spoke before she entered the pool were, "I won't let you down, Father."

Upon entering the pool, she appeared to completely dissolve on contact with its surface. Father and I anxiously waited for several tense moments for something to happen. Finally, Nightingale broke the surface of the Exa, appearing to be completely composed of the stuff now. Her eyes had changed color also; instead of their original amethystine purple, they were now blazing orange, like the color of Rickor's sun. She climbed out of the pool, and it was immediately evident that she had far more power than before. Her antimatter was so potent and so fast-acting, she was able to completely obliterate a scrap hill twice the size of our house—and control it so that it destroyed only that hill and nothing else—in ten seconds.

As we were returning to the house so Father could run some tests, an assassin dragged Father underneath Rickor's scrap layer. Nightingale burned away the top layer of scrap so we could find him, but it was too late: he was dead. The assassin had stabbed him through the heart with a knife with glowing runes etched on the hilt. They extracted their blade quickly, but before they could remove it from my sight, I caught a glimpse of a six-fingered hand and brilliant green eyes. Nightingale and I began firing shots of antimatter at the assassin, which they dodged before disappearing over a scrap hill. Further attempts to locate them failed.

Over the course of the last few days, mercenaries have been landing on Rickor's surface—evidently looking for us—in ever greater numbers. Neither Nightingale nor I know why the mercenaries are after us; after all, Father was only wanted by the Alphas, and the mercenaries don't seem to have a dominant family associated with them. Since the Day of Injustice, we've been running and hiding as

best we can. Nightingale is able to pick them off from quite a distance, but she can usually only get one shot in before they start firing back. We've escaped death almost a dozen times since she murdered the first mercenary...

We've holed up in what appears to be an ancient castle nearly 400 kilometers from where the house used to be—when the assassin killed our father, they had also leveled both the house and my blade-cycle. The castle appeared to have a few defenses, but nothing that would keep a horde of over 40 mercenaries out for long. At least the outer walls aren't magnetic. Nightingale has been cataloguing everything we have in the castle to defend ourselves with, and has noted that there is an impressive forge in the castle basement. While it may be useful later, what good will it do when the mercenaries are directly on our trail?

Entry 2-Blackrose

Day 3, Week 22, Year 8.04515

It looks like we're going to be stuck in here for a while. The castle's defenses, combined with some ingenuity from Nightingale, meant that we were able to hold the mercenaries at bay long enough for her to obliterate them with antimatter. One mercenary got away, however, and in the process blew up every ship still on Rickor's surface. It appears as though these mercenaries don't just want us dead; they also want to keep us trapped on Rickor. Why? What have we done to deserve a bounty on our heads?

Entry 3-Blackrose

Day 4, Week 22, Year 8.04515

Nightingale and I are in deep trouble.

Instead of more mercenaries, the lone survivor of our self-defense brought a small detachment of Deltan holy warriors back with them. There's simply no way we can defeat them; members of the Delta family are renowned for their staggering willpower...and Deltan holy warriors are known to be determined enough to stave off death. The general of these forces (20 in total) gave us a warning after announcing that they would be attacking at dawn tomorrow: that warning was, "When we attack tomorrow, you will be purged from the Cronic species, just as monsters like you deserve."

Why do they consider us monsters? I had yelled back, "We're not monsters! We're just trying to defend ourselves! We don't want to hurt you, so just leave us alone!" but the general had laughed at me, and promised me a swift death for my bravery.

How are we going to fend off Cronics so determined to kill us that they can cling to life even through fatal blows?

Entry 4-Blackrose

Day 5, Week 22, Year 8.04515

They're all dead.

Nightingale and I spent last night working until just before dawn crafting weapons for ourselves by using the forge in the basement. I made a six-meter-long longsword by melting down a few of the mercenary bodies we had claimed just before the arrival of the Deltans. Nightingale made a scythe of comparable length for herself using her own severed arm. She grew her arm back using her abilities and used mercenary bodies to reinforce the scythe, but its edge was fashioned directly from her pain. Once we had finished, we used the technique Father had taught us before he died to infuse the blades with antimatter. I had hoped at that point that we wouldn't have to use them, but given that we couldn't reset any of our distractions, it was likely that we would have to fight the Deltans in melee combat.

Dawn arrived, and the Deltan warriors easily disabled the traps we hadn't set off. They were over the walls shortly, leaving Nightingale and I little time to prepare. As they were closing in on us, we had our backs to one another. Nightingale gave them one last chance to surrender, but her voice was shaking so badly the Deltans simply laughed at her. They weren't laughing, however, when I drove my sword through one's heart and watched as his chest burned away, leaving only bones.

The warrior I had hit didn't go down, however; he and the rest of the warriors attacked in groups of four, with one group leaping away only for the next group to take its place. Their weapons clattered against my sword, blades colliding in a whirlwind of steel. Nightingale had been holding her own fairly well, despite being almost half the size of the two well-built warriors slamming blow after blow into her

scythe. With a mighty yell, I slashed at one of the incoming Deltan warriors and decapitated her before she could impale Nightingale with her spear. Her body continued to stumble forward, but without sight, she was limited to stabbing blindly where she last saw Nightingale. Thinking quickly, Nightingale hooked her scythe around another warrior and threw him into the decapitated Deltan's spear.

The remaining 18 Deltans suddenly stabbed forward all at once, attempting to catch us both off guard with a quick burst of offensive strength. Without thinking about it, I pushed Nightingale below their blades and she spun in place, swinging her scythe at their knees as I teleported onto one of the castle towers. Nightingale appeared behind me when she had completed her circle, leaving 17 Deltans missing their legs below the knees and the unharmed commander still on top of the castle wall. The injured Deltans still clawed their way towards us, determined to eliminate us despite their rapid loss of Power.

They likely would have finished us off if it weren't for Nightingale. When they reached the base of the tower, she unleashed an antimatter wave that completely disintegrated them. The commander fell to his knees from the force of the shockwave and looked on in horror as his militia vanished before his eyes. I will never forget the look on his face. It was a look that said we were the monsters he thought we would be, and more. I had wanted so badly to let him live, but we couldn't risk others coming after us. So after Nightingale's antimatter dissolved the bodies completely—while leaving the castle wall untouched—I jumped down from the tower and cut the commander in half at the waist.

He dropped his shortswords, sending them careening over the castle wall. My own blade shattered into fragments; evidently I still needed to work on my craftsmanship. Even though he was bleeding out rapidly, the commander let out a bitter laugh. He told us that others would be coming for us, that we were evils that had to be eliminated. Using just his arms, he then hurled himself over the castle wall, trailing Power behind him. Despite the fall being well over 400 meters, we watched as he picked himself up and wobbled over to the Deltan camp.

As I write this, I am forging a new longsword for myself out of a few of the Deltan Silver weapons the battalion was using. We need to be ready for more horrors to come our way, or we will surely not survive. I am proud of the way Nightingale stood up for us today; although admittedly, considering I am her older sibling, it's my job to take care of her and not the other way around. She's currently infusing more antimatter into her scythe, which held up surprisingly well. I can only hope that we will have a few days to prepare for the next onslaught.

Entry 6-Blackrose

Day 3, Week 23, Year 8.04515

More soldiers arrived today. This time, they were assassins from the Beta family. Betan assassins are noted for their ability to blend in with the shadows nearly seamlessly; they undoubtedly have the best stealth training and equipment of the five families. Instead of issuing a formal greeting, as the Deltans had, they just went over the wall the moment they landed. We counted a total of eight as they

got off the ship, but it was impossible to tell how many there really were. As we discovered by counting their bodies, the total number of assassins was 12.

I met them outside the front door of the castle, wearing a crudely constructed mask I forged last night and spinning my new Deltan Silver sword. The Betans made no introduction, but instead attempted to persuade me that my sister and I should help them defeat the Alpha and Delta families. When I told them that I would rather die, they laughed and mocked me for my small stature. I just smiled underneath my mask and teleported to the top of the castle wall, telling them to catch me if they wanted me. They were, needless to say, surprised at my speed, though of course they had no idea I didn't actually run to that location. A chase ensued, with the eight visible assassins chasing me around the outside of the castle. I was laughing the entire time; it seemed so comical to see eight fully grown assassins chasing after someone two-thirds their size and being completely unable to keep up.

At long last, I stopped my running right as Nightingale blasted them with streams of antimatter. She killed two of the invisible assassins with that blast also, leaving the remaining two unscathed but afraid. To locate them, I activated the trebuchet I had filled with scrap earlier and watched to see from where the scrap pieces bounced off. I sliced one in two right down the middle, and tripped the second as she tried to stab me in the eye. Her cloak deactivated, and I saw the fear in her eyes as I strode towards her.



Needless to say, she never made it back to her ship. Instead of hijacking it, however, Nightingale and I decided to remain in the castle where it was safe and use pieces of the ship to reinforce the walls and spires where needed. We kept the cloaking devices so we could use them during the next wave of attack; the Betans would certainly be surprised if we killed them before they had the chance to see us!

Entry 9-Blackrose

Day 9, Week 9, Year 8.04516

The Alpha tribe landed for the first time today. Battling them was an experience I doubt neither Nightingale nor I will forget for centuries. Every Alphan possesses great physical strength, much greater than that of any of the other families. Their society is based around that strength: the strong survive, and the weak perish. It had been three years since I had seen any Alphans, and the last memory I have of them is being driven out of their capital city with Father. Today, I showed no mercy to them.

I met them outside the front gate of the castle, with Nightingale sitting with her legs hanging over the edge of the castle wall behind me. There were only three of them, but both of us knew that, ordinarily, that would be more than enough to finish the two of us off. Unfortunately for them, we were no longer ordinary. They identified me as “Nightfall’s little brat,” and demanded I take them to Father. I told them he was dead, to which they responded with shock. They mentioned that they

still had to kill me, but doubted the morality of attempting to kill a child in cold blood, a consideration the Deltans and Betans never made.

The first two died in seconds when I punched them in the chest with fists covered in antimatter, while the third aimed her greatsword at my head. I ducked, and teleported to just behind Nightingale. While the third Alphan was searching for me, Nightingale vaulted off the edge of the castle wall, cutting through the Alphan in one clean blow. She teleported back to the top before hitting the ground, losing all of her potentially self-destructive momentum and dropping neatly to my left.

I suppose I should be concerned that killing has become so easy for the two of us. Still, it's hard to have sympathy for the bad guys when they're trying to kill us simply for existing. It doesn't help that even Alphans are incredibly weak against our abilities. Alphans are definitely the dominant melee combatants, but that hardly matters if their bodies disintegrate before they're able to use that prowess. For now, Nightingale and I are staying right here—and nothing will remove us from our new home.

Entry 16-Blackrose

Day 8, Week 37, Year 8.04518

It's been three days and our enemies show no signs of relenting. Alphans and Betans are easy enough to take care of, but even Deltans present little threat compared to the Gamma family. I am beginning to fear I will not see my seventh birthday, and Nightingale will not see her fifth. Gammans aren't as determined as

the Deltans, or as agile as the Betans, or as strong as the Alphans. Instead, they possess a high degree of intelligence—a startling amount of it. Like the Deltans, the Gammans delivered a formal challenge directly to Nightingale and me. Unlike the Deltans, however, they sent only two opponents—one for each of us. They introduced themselves, a male and a female, and identified themselves as members of the House of Retribution, one of the Houses the Gamma family is split into.

That was four days ago. The Gammans have since broken through the castle wall and dueled Nightingale and I up and down every section of the castle. Their mentality seemed to be simply to not get hit; every time I fired antimatter at them, they dodged it somehow...or one of their gadgets activated and the antimatter went harmlessly through them. I've gotten more scratched up fighting a single Gamman than I did when we fought all 20 Deltans at once. Even as I write this, they're readying some kind of weapon to blow through the inner wall of the castle. It sounds like they're-

Entry 17-Blackrose

Day 10, Week 37, Year 8.04518

We survived—narrowly.

The Gammans were relentless, and Nightingale nearly died from the massive amount of injuries she sustained. Even now, she has yet to re-grow her amputated leg. The castle's defenses are in ruins, with breaches in a dozen walls throughout its infrastructure allowing our next enemies direct access into our stronghold. We

finally beat them only through luck; I happened to catch one in the arm with antimatter, breaking the device that was making him incorporeal. Dispatching him after that was simple enough, but his partner proved to be even harder to defeat. As a matter of fact, we never did beat her; she simply claimed what was left of his body and left, swearing that she would return to destroy us.

Nightingale is beginning to break down from the stress of so many threats. She's only four years old and has done nothing wrong in her life, but four of the five families have attempted to kill us multiple times in the last three years. I have been comforting her as best I can, but I can only do so much. She's so young, and the fact that they seem to be targeting her in particular does nothing to help the situation. Our enemies refuse to listen to reason, and bargaining with them has proved to be impossible. All we can do at this point is be ready for the next assault.

Entry 22-Blackrose

Day 10, Week 40, Year 8.04525

Today was the 174<sup>th</sup> assault on the castle—and the first assault carried out by the Epsilon family. Epsilonians don't really have any particular specialties attached to them, but they are by far the largest Cronic family. Their loyalty to one another, and anyone they consider a friend, is absolutely legendary. Father and I were members of the Epsilon family until he attempted to join the Alpha family—and even then, we were never actually thrown out of the Epsilon family. I guess that made me their kin...not that it matters now.

So far, the highest number of opponents we'd ever faced in one battle was 40. The Epsilonians shattered that record by bringing in 300 of their best soldiers to fight. Nightingale was able to defend herself against them only because she figured out how to completely shield herself with antimatter, and cut through their ranks like they were made of paper. I supported her from afar using a longbow I had forged a year ago, firing antimatter-tipped arrows through heads and chests. The Epsilonians retreated quickly...except for one individual who discovered they had complete immunity to our antimatter. The Epsilon family may not have any special abilities across the entire family, but a select few do have adaptive variations that allow them to be more effective at certain tasks. In this Cronic's case, they could challenge Nightingale directly because all of her most powerful attacks did nothing against them.

The other Epsilonians attempted to help their comrade, but the immune Cronic waved their allies back. The allies were told to take off without the immune one, so they did. Nightingale and this strange, terrifying Cronic struggled for two hours before Nightingale decapitated her and lifted her Power-soaked head into the air, unleashing a mighty yell of dominance. Nightmare later confided in me that she was not doing well with the fact that we are still being attacked with such ferocity. She seemed more broken down than the last time we discussed this, and it seems likely that her fear and sadness will eventually give way to mindless anger and hatred.

Entry 40-Blackrose

Day 7, Week 5, Year 8.04553

Nightingale is slowly getting worse. I can feel her sanity crumbling, and every attack just seems to erode what grasp she has on rationality a bit further. She is starting to become angry with all five families for refusing to allow us to live peacefully. I cannot blame her; they are beginning to anger me as well. However, I must remain calm in the face of my sister's disappearing sanity. Daily reassurance is no longer enough; while I feel it helps immensely, I doubt that it is soothing her completely. It is only a matter of time before something happens.

Entry 60-Blackrose

Day 6, Week 29, Year 8.04643

It has taken 90 years, but her anger has fully manifested itself against the families. We've stopped over 8,000 attacks, with most ending in at least one casualty, but still the Cronic race as a whole refuses to relent. Today Nightingale obliterated a small number of Alphans determined to get inside the castle in cold blood; it's gotten to the point where neither of us feel any emotion when we kill. I almost long for the days when kills would hurt, but instead...there's a wonderful emptiness where pain should be. In fact, it's becoming difficult for either one of us to feel anything that's not related to what the other is doing. It should be alarming; but of course, instead of worrying about it, I feel nothing.

Entry 102-Blackrose Malathorn

Day X, Week X, Year 8.06034 +521

Time has begun to lose all meaning. I remember nothing about the time of the year; only that I am 522 and Nightingale Nightmare is 520. Blackrose is dead; I am what remains of him. Likewise, Nightmare is the person that rose from the figurative corpse of Nightingale. Despite being more than halfway through our lives, neither one of us have left the castle since that day so long ago. The attacks have slowed down in the last century, but they're still enough to keep us occupied on a weekly basis. The scrap outside the castle gates is now composed almost entirely of body parts; the broken corpses of thousands scattered across our battlefield.

We are considering taking our revenge on the families for trying to kill us for so long simply for existing. It would certainly feel undeniably sweet to bring about their downfall. It may be time for Nightmare and me to consider leaving Rickor to begin our quest for revenge.

Entry 174-Malathorn

Day X, Week X, Year 8.06533 +1020

Our evolution is complete. Nightmare and I are not bound to the limited lives most other Cronics seem to possess. An analysis of our Power Sources themselves has revealed them to contain no less energy than when we were first created. This effectively renders us immortal, but we are by no means invincible. We have a potentially unlimited amount of time to achieve our new goal.

To take revenge upon those who have wronged us would make us no better than them. Such petty destruction would lead to an endless cycle of anger and bloodshed. No, instead of revenge, Nightmare has decided that we are going to take the noble approach. It will become our sole goal to reform the society that framed us as monsters into one that will never do the same to others. Unrestrained by morality, she has vowed that we will go to any lengths necessary to achieve our goal, even if it means obliterating the Cronic species as a whole and starting again from scratch.

Others will detest this goal, and I have no doubt that we will struggle for our whole lives against those who think we should never have existed. They do not matter. There is nothing and no one who can stop us from achieving our goal. Nightmare has taken on the title of the Queen of Darkness, in honor of both the Exa that forever altered us, and those who still walk in shadows. Glory to her Majesty, and may those who wish her harm burn in their own self-destruction.

Entry 175-Malathorn

Day X, Week X, Year: Landing -3 (8.04513 + ~1,200,000)

Today, my eye was taken from me by the fiercest warrior I have seen in millennia: ten-year-old Nova Gamma, who reminds me so much of a young Nightmare, was able to cut out my left eye. It has since been replaced with a prosthetic that allows me to see through walls and attack using focused lasers fired from its core, appropriately named Malathorn's Eye. Nova injured me greatly with



other cuts and slashes to my heavily scarred body, but taking my eye was her greatest achievement.

She is consumed with hatred, as Nightmare used to be, because her only family and home were ripped away from her. The difference between Nightmare and Nova is that Nova has not figured out that revenge doesn't ever solve anything. She is fixated on the death of her mother—a Deltan-turned-Gamman that challenged Nightmare to a duel by the ancient laws of combat and lost. Though her mother fought honorably, Nova views her destruction as a murder. Despite being given multiple opportunities to join our cause, she refused to see us as anything more than monsters, like her mother before her. It is likely that we will have to destroy her. That will be the regrettable loss of a great warrior, but it must be done for the sake of our goal.

Entry 176-Malathorn

Day ?, Week ?, Year: Landing

I found Nightmare after two hours of searching, unharmed but unclothed. The wormhole that dropped us into this strange world has altered our bodies significantly; both Nightmare and I look like humans with metal skin. There are humans in this world, no doubt; there must have been a reason we wound up looking like this. We will hopefully find civilization soon, as finding out what dimension or world we are in is vital to returning to the Nebulus.

Entry 177-Malathorn

Day X, Week X, Year: Landing +5

She chose him over me.

Nightmare decided to listen more closely to the twisted king we had been staying with for the past five years than her own brother. He is obviously making preparations to stab her in the back, and she's too blind to see it! I have been thrown out of the kingdom of Mar, with nowhere to go and no one to help me. I instructed Malice to remain at the castle to protect his Queen if the king should make his move before I can return. My only hope now is that I can find someone powerful enough to overthrow the king and return my sister to me.

Entry 178-Malathorn

Day X, Week X, Year: Landing +5

It has been nearly a week since I was taken in by Nova and her lineage. They were lucky enough to have found Teras, who appears to have adjusted well to the humans' rather primitive way of life. He also seems to care very much about Nova and her lineage, as though they have bonded somehow. I do not know if they will bond with me, but their connection to Teras appears to be very real. They have agreed to help me overthrow the king and spare Nightmare's life, but I do not trust that they will uphold the latter half of our agreement. Still, I can likely get Nightmare out of their way before they can harm her. We will leave in the morning; I should have Ventra sharpen my sword before we go. I can only hope that we are not too late.

## Chapter 4

## Revelations

Malathorn and I looked up from the last journal entry at the same time. It seemed strange to view the shop again, even though it had been only two hours since we began reading Nightfall's/Malathorn's journal entries. After those entries tore away so many of the secrets surrounding who he is, I nearly saw two different people in his eyes: the grizzled, tough Malathorn and the curious, caring Blackrose. Even though his story was merely words on a screen, they were enough to evoke in me a surge of compassion for him. His story almost made me feel a bit of remorse.

Yet again, I realized that Malathorn's lips were moving and I hadn't heard a thing come out of them.

"Sorry, one more time?"

"I said she doesn't remember."

He hadn't given me enough context for the question.

"She doesn't remember what?"

He paused, with a pained look on his face.

“Anything. She doesn’t remember how she got her abilities, or who her father was, or that I’m her brother.”

Malathorn’s lip quivered, and he closed his eyes as he finished his thought.

“Over the millennia, memories tend to fade. You would know better than anyone else that while our memories have an extremely high capacity for knowledge and memories, they just can’t retain everything forever. Most of her memories of our first century or so are either terribly murky or outright missing. She knows I am her greatest confidante, the one who will always have her back...but she doesn’t know we’re related.”

I grabbed Malathorn in a rough approximation of a hug. Though obviously startled, he accepted the hug after a few seconds of stunned silence. I released him soon after, avoiding his eye.

“Sorry. I don’t know what came over me.”

I felt his gaze figuratively burning a hole in the side of my head. After several seconds of silence, he whispered, “That’s all right. It was kind of nice...not that I enjoyed it or anything.”

I peeked at him from between the strands of my hair. He was blushing, his cheeks softly glowing molten orange. I couldn’t hold my serious face any longer and gave him a smile. He scowled and looked away from me, and it became my turn to stare at him. He turned his eye back on me when he realized I wasn’t going to look away anytime soon.

“You’d better not tell anyone about this.”

“Don’t worry. Your secrets are safe with me—both of them.”

It was his turn to give me a smile. I could only imagine in that instant how long it had been since he had last smiled, both in this form and in his previous form. It was a smile that lit up the room, and he almost seemed—if it were possible—happy. I wanted to see that smile again.

I shook my head to clear my thoughts. That last line almost made it sound like I was in love with him...which was clearly preposterous.

Right, dear reader?

His smile slowly faded, though it felt as though his smile had been there for only an instant.

“I’d probably better get some rest. The others don’t need me to be the one slowing everyone down.”

“Right. Of course.”

Malathorn walked to the door of the shop and waved before phasing right through, leaving me once again alone with my thoughts.

And you, dear reader.

Malathorn never put it together, but I’m going to guess you did. Was the six fingers tidbit too big of a clue? Or maybe that part was explained away with the Epsilon mutation portion. It could have been the opening line, its ominous tones

leading you to this conclusion. It could have been that you saw I was predicting a bit too accurately for it to have been anyone else. Perhaps you even had no clue about what I did.

Isn't it obvious? I was the one who killed Nightfall.

It shouldn't be that surprising. After all, why would I have been the one narrating the story if I didn't have any connection to its components? Stories often need greater connectivity to the narrator than just as a lens through which to view the world, and this particular connection is mine. Don't think that's why I did it, though, because the reasons behind the murder go far deeper than that.

Nightfall was always a scientist first and a father second. He didn't hesitate to experiment on his own child the moment that child got involved. I saw what would have happened if he were allowed to live, and while he would have stopped the Great War, he would have created a corrupt dictatorship with a young child in the seat of power: Nightingale. Even well-meaning intentions can cause great destruction if steps are not taken to ensure that no one else is being injured. I recognize, of course, that this applies both to Nightmare's current philosophy and my own decision to kill Nightfall, but I hope you can agree with me that the events that did occur were far more preferable than the alternative.

The method I used to kill him was simple: time travel. I proved it scientifically impossible to the rest of the universe after messing with my own timeline and sending myself back to that day to kill Nightfall. I'm the best

weaponsmith in this universe, so forging a knife that was able to kill him permanently proved to be of little concern. Inciting the families to destroy the “monsters” he left behind was also quite effortless. The rest is history—Blackrose’s history.

Every story has some form of connecting events. Some are subtle clues that can easily be misinterpreted a thousand different ways, while other connections are shouted at the reader’s face. In this instance, I prefer simply to tell you directly what the big twist in the story is: me. The pieces were there; I could have let you put together that I was the killer using shreds of minor incidental evidence and good theory construction.

But where’s the fun in that?

So, my dear reader, I will leave you with one last question. Given that everyone in this story had valid reasons for behaving how they did...

Why are characters like us categorized into the concepts of “good” and “evil”?

—END—

## Post-Reflection & Analysis

After completing *Blackrose*, I have discovered that the three most important components of science fiction are the characters, the environment, and anything that is specifically related to the sci-fi universe in question (in my case, the alien species I created). Creating a complex and unique alien species is one of the best ways I've found to bring one's universe to life. I have spent many hours creating the Cronic species from scratch, shaping and re-shaping the details of an entire species until those details became clear, engaging, and unique. The end result is what I hope constitutes a relatable and complex species with which to engage the reader. I have included extensive details on Cronic culture, origins, physical descriptions, and other important building blocks I used to create the species in the Appendix.

A story is nothing without characters that engage the reader; the most interesting alien species or environment are incredibly dull if the characters are lifeless. Whether the characters I have created in *Blackrose* are complex and relatable is not for me to decide; however, I have done my best to create them in such a way as to make them engaging. I have discovered that part of what makes characters engaging is that they must be unique, both to every other character in the story and other stories (though the latter to a lesser degree). Because of this, each major character in *Blackrose* gained a distinct personality and set of abilities, ranging from extensive antimatter manipulation (Nightmare) to fourth-wall breaking (Ventra). While these abilities and personalities may not be unique on their own, combining them with other defining attributes, as well as executing them



in new and creative ways, allows them to create a unique and complex character to engage the reader with.

Each character in *Blackrose* has a goal they are attempting to reach, and almost always face some kind of barrier to reach this goal. How they adapt to overcome these barriers is what drives the story. Using Nightfall as an example, his goal was simple: he wanted the galaxy he lived in to be a better place for his children. He was discouraged by the massive war taking place, and adapted by trying to invent something to overwhelm every side in the conflict at once. This is what caused his character to progress, and although he never attained his goal, he was most certainly a different person at the end of his entries than the beginning.

Ventra is a little more difficult to figure out, due in large part to the fact that she is capable of breaking the fourth wall. She is aware that she is in a story, and like other characters capable of doing this, she is able to alter the rules of her universe to suit her. The choice to make Ventra self-aware was intentional; giving a character the capacity to see what they really are adds a new layer of depth to their development as they struggle with the idea that the universe around them (and they themselves) are works of fiction.

Having grown used to this ability over the course of multiple works, Ventra has overcome this struggle with her own existence and accepts that she is fictional; leading to some interesting results as far as directions the story can take. This sentience is part of what makes her engaging; the reader is never fully sure of her intentions, because it is difficult to tell if her actions are directed at the story's

events or at the story itself. Experimenting with a self-aware character in this manner was quite enjoyable and immensely intriguing, and while it may not be a required element of science fiction, it is certainly a fun one to tinker with.

While a well-constructed environment is important in all areas of fiction, sci-fi demands that its environment be particularly engaging and detailed. The bare minimum necessary to create a sci-fi universe is identifying the level and types of fictional technology within the universe. If a new planet, solar system, or galaxy is introduced, this requires an additional layer of detail on the major points of each visited location (and non-visited locations, to give the universe an additional layer or richness).

I have some room for improvement when it comes to the environment of *Blackrose*. While I roughly identified the level of technology present in the story, the descriptions of my physical environments could be more developed. I need to define what the Nebulus' shape is, how many planets are in it, what its conditions are in greater detail. In particular, I need to more fully develop Rickor's details and atmosphere, as the idea of a planet covered in scrap metal is enough to invoke some mental imagery, but that idea as it is described currently isn't terribly engaging or interesting.

The ambiguous morality that I had hoped to convey in my characters, in contrast to *Blackrose's* lackluster environment, was an even more powerful theme in the story than I had hoped to create. I am immensely satisfied with how each character's concept of morality turned out: it is in my opinion exceedingly difficult to

pin down whether any of them are objectively good or evil. Ventra in particular is an interesting case to examine; due to the knowledge she possesses about Chronic Chaos thanks to her fourth-wall breaking capacity, this allows her to make incredibly questionable decisions “for the good of the story.” Was she justified in killing Nightfall to prevent more widespread pain and suffering, as she said? It is impossible to say for sure; it is up to the interpretation of the reader whether her actions were justified.

My favorite portion of this project was undoubtedly designing the story itself. While considering the topics of science fiction and morality were both fascinating, my passion clearly lies in the creation of the Chronic Chaos universe. I have discovered that a universe’s creation is the thing I enjoy most about fictional writing, and I intend to continue building the Chronic Chaos universe for a significant period of time after *Blackrose*. In short, writing *Blackrose* has given me incredible insights as to how I can better write science fiction, and I very much intend to expand upon and improve my story.

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## Appendix

### Details on Cronics

- Overview
- Physical description
- Origins
- Development and lifespan
  - “Birth”
- Culture(s)

I have outlined the building blocks I used to create my species above. These building blocks are not from a specific, predetermined outline—they are simply places where Cronics most differ from other established species. Some of the largest differences between Cronics and other established species can be found in their development and birth process, as well as their division into five subspecies.

#### **Physical Description**

Cronics are a race of metal-based aliens that developed over the course of nearly 2 million years in a fictional galaxy called the Nebulus. Humanoid in form, Cronics stand six meters tall on average and are composed entirely of metal and glass. A Cronic usually possesses five fingers on each hand and five toes on each foot—and while their hands appear to be humanoid, their feet are perfectly circular, no larger around than their lower leg, and their toes are spread out equilaterally from the base of their foot. Cronics have very thin waists connecting their hips to

their spherical chests, and small dull blades crowning the tops of their hips and shoulders. Their heads are arrow-shaped; with their large eyes attached to the arrow's protruding points. Cronics have no distinguishing features other than their eyes; they possess no noses, ears, navels, and so on. A rough diagram has been included in the Appendix.

## Origins

The first Cronic was actually a military project on Earth: a dying human's mind (and presumably their soul) was placed into an entirely mechanical body similar to the one described above. This mechanical body, despite not being equipped with any weapons, proved to be a devastating force of nature that ruined anything in its path. After fighting in a war that gripped Earth at the time, the disillusioned Cronic stole the plans used to construct them and launched into space, intending to destroy themselves so the world would never produce another of their kind. (I use "they/their/them" here because the gender of the First Cronic is unknown.) Before the new Cronic got the opportunity, they were sucked into a wormhole and crash-landed in the Nebulus—on a planet named Rickor—about 2 million years back in time from when they took off.

Content that they would not be able to harm anyone, the Cronic began a new life on this planet, eventually creating five different children to keep them company during their long, lonely life. Not wanting to repeat the mistakes their handlers made when they were created, the First Cronic gave their children several limitations, such as the ability to feel pain and the inability to remember how they

were created. The children thought and behaved much like their parent, and they seemed to also possess souls as their parent did.

These children went on to spread vast empires across the galaxy, with descendants of the five children initially maintaining cooperative relationships with one another. When the First Cronic and their children had been long dead, however, the different factions—each with different defining traits—could no longer agree on who should rule them, or what method that ruling would take. As such, war broke out between three factions over who got to control a fourth (independent) faction, while the fifth intervened only when necessary. At the time of Nightingale’s creation, the war was raging in the open; however, during the first and fourth chapter of the story, this war had grown dormant, though little would be needed to reignite it...

### **The Five “Families”**

When the First Cronic made their five children, they designed each one with different variations in their design. Their first child, Alpha, was much physically larger, stronger, and tougher than his siblings and parent. The second-born Beta received great athletic prowess related to agility and speed. Gamma, the middle child, was created with a very high intelligence and logical reasoning capacity. Delta, the fourth, possessed a very high resolve, one strong enough even to ignore fatal blows and continue fighting after he should have died from those blows. The fifth, named Epsilon, received no special talents other than a greater capacity for adaptation than her siblings, and a near-unbreakable loyalty to those she cared

about. The five children went on to have children of their own, overseeing small tribes of those that had received their unique traits before they died. These divisions and unique variations remain in the descendants of each child even today, and Cronic society is divided according to which family any given Cronic belongs to.

### **Life Span and Development**

A Cronic will, on average, live for approximately 1,000 Rickor years before the power source that enables them to think and move runs out. During this time, a yellow liquid they call Power moves through the vascular systems at the very core of their bodies. Any cut or damage to the vascular systems that allows this Power to leak outside of their bodies causes them to bleed. Because a specific, limited amount of Power is produced by the power source over the course of a Cronic's lifetime, failure to seal a bleeding wound will reduce the maximum lifespan of the injured Cronic, eventually leading to death.

Cronic wounds do not heal naturally under ordinary circumstances, and must be sealed by specially developed medical lasers or intense heat sources. This means that any serious puncture or wound to a Cronic's system is fatal unless said puncture or wound is treated in time. When killed, Cronics cannot be revived, as their souls have left their bodies. Attempting to revive a Cronic allows one to retrieve a few fragmented memories, but does not allow for the resurrection of said Cronic, no matter how much Power or energy is injected into the body. Members of the Delta family are the exception to this rule, as some Deltans can be resurrected



even after their death. It is speculated that some Deltans possess souls strong enough to remain inside their bodies after death, allowing for this reanimation.

A Cronic's period of child creation is rather short given their lifespan compared to a human, needing only 400 days (one year on Rickor) from beginning to end. Nearly all of that time is spent simply maintaining that said Cronic wishes to create a child. However, this wish must be maintained with 100% conviction throughout the entire year, and a single moment of the slightest doubt will reset the one-year period. At the end of the one year, a set of blueprints develop in the Cronic's mind, and also in the minds of any Cronics the creator has life bonded with (the equivalent of marriage). The Cronic(s) enter a trance-like state and begins the construction of their child with the nearest usable loose parts available. Construction of a child generally takes between 12 and 18 hours, depending on the materials necessary to complete them, although twins and triplets (rare, but possible) will take longer. When the Cronic(s) exit the trance-like state, they will not be able to remember constructing their child, or the blueprints they used to do so.

Cronic children are initially activated just after their birth, and are pre-programmed to begin absorbing as much information as they can in their first few years of life. They are generally able to speak around their third day of life, and have the mental capabilities of the average eight-year-old human. Mental development appears to be identical to humans, as a Cronic reaches adulthood at age 13, with an approximate mental age similar to that of a 21-year-old human. For

those 13 years, Cronic children also perform what is called “decompression.” A Cronic child possesses all of the mass that an adult does, but in a smaller space. Initially, they are half the height of their fully-grown parents, and stand around three meters tall. Over the course of those 13 years, they slowly gain height and adjust proportionally to their final adult size and shape through decompression.

This was a stipulation put in place by the First Cronic; because the first Cronic was a human before the accident that put them in their Cronic body, they were used to the idea that children are smaller than adults, and successfully constructed their children in a way that achieved that goal.

## **Culture**

As one might expect, culture varies widely between the five different families. As the space required to fully describe each different culture in great detail would be too much for this one section, I will provide a fairly short description of each. All of the families have taken the names of their ancestors; for example, a descendant of Alpha is part of the Alpha family, referred to as an Alphan, and so on. They all speak the same basic language (called Scrape; though there are different dialects varying based on family and planet) and all have the same general ideas regarding Cronic religions. Otherwise, the families have greatly differing opinions on everything from how to successfully govern to what is the most ideal trait a Cronic can possess.

Alpha culture is based largely on the physical, mental, and emotional strength of its people, as could be expected from an ancestor with increased

strength and toughness. The Alphans share that additional strength and toughness in their physical form, standing almost a full meter higher than Cronics in other families. They control their own planet in the Nebulus, though it has been attacked and destroyed several times. They are led by a dictator called the Warlord, chosen every 20 years based on which member of the family has the most accomplishments and feats of strength associated with them. A Cronic may prove their worth and join the Alpha family by passing the strength test that all Alphans take in their youth; failure for an outsider means little, but failure for an Alphan means exile from the family. Like the Beta and Delta families, they seek to subjugate and rule over the Epsilon family.

The Beta family is strongly associated with assassination. Betans exist in a self-contained kingdom ruled over by a royal family, and is a haven for Betan thieves, mercenaries, assassins, and tricksters. There is much backstabbing in the kingdom, especially among the nobility, as many Betans seek to reach the top of their social food chain by figuratively stepping on those below them. Despite this hostile culture, a loyal Betan makes for a powerful ally, as their naturally enhanced speed and dexterity allow them to perform incredible acrobatic stunts the other families are hard-pressed to match. Joining the Beta family is not possible; everyone that is not a Betan is considered an “outsider” to them, regardless of their potential value to the kingdom. They are locked in a struggle against the Alpha and Delta families for control over the Epsilon family.

Gamma family members, possessing greatly increased intelligence compared to the other families, have opted to remain uninvolved in the conflict between the Alphans, Betans, and Deltans. Instead, they mostly keep to themselves: gathering information, assisting the Epsilonian government with any complex projects they are working on, and scanning for threats other than the families themselves takes up most of their time. The Gamma family is divided into smaller units called Houses, of which there are eight in total. There are also multiple Units in a single House, and multiple Lineages (what we would consider families) in a single Unit. Each Unit sends a representative to events, meetings, and hearings as necessary, but major decisions may be decided by a single representative from each House. Joining the Gamma family is as simple as recognizing that their supposed intelligence test to obtain entry is a ruse; naturally, that this test is not actually designed to measure anything is a well-kept family secret.

The Delta family is widely known for their resolve, especially when its members are placed in mortal danger. Their power rests in their willpower and determination to succeed, and this willpower is strong enough to let them resist death for a time. Specifically, their souls are thought to be strong enough to force their bodies to continue acting even after all of their Power has run out. Deltans are ruled over by a council of carefully selected family members of varying ages; each council member keeps their seat for life, and may be removed from their position only when the other council members deem them to be unfit for their position.

Deltans tend to be more religious than the other families, as eight out of ten

Deltans follow at least one of the three major Cronic religions. Members of other families may join the Delta family, but are not able to perform some higher-level functions such as participating in combat or holding a seat on the council. Any children they have that express Delta traits, however, are granted the full rights of a Deltan citizen. They are fighting against the Alpha and Beta families for the “right” to control the Epsilon family.

Epsilonians are considered the “standard” when observing the abilities Cronics possess. While Epsilonians appear to lack something visibly unique that makes them different from the other families, looking at the relationships between them and their Lineages and friends reveals a single consistent quality: loyalty. Epsilon family members remain loyal to anyone they’ve bonded with, even from other families, and it takes an absurd amount of violation of their trust for them to remove this loyalty. They have strength in numbers; in addition to being almost fifty times more populous than the other four families combined, they also have superior teamwork skills in every aspect of their lives that teamwork can be applied to. On average, an Epsilonian is incredibly understanding and kind, and anyone is allowed to join the Epsilon family with no hesitation. While the Alpha, Beta, and Delta families are fighting to control them, Epsilonians have developed their own government utilizing a socialistic framework, and really have no need for the “guidance” offered by the other three families.

**Pre-Thesis Proposal**

An Examination of Science Fiction Elements: How to Make a Sci-Fi Story

Nathan Roggenbuck

Creative Writing

My goal for my Honors thesis is to better understand how science fiction is constructed, why it is popular, and what themes separate it from other genres. To do this, I intend to analyze previously created works within the genre and create my own to more fully understand the process behind its creation. Science fiction is a surprisingly old genre, but is still a relatively small genre when compared to other, older forms of fiction (Roberts, 2002). It is also typically not well understood as relatively few people are aware of themes other than a focus on scientific principles or ideas that are important to a work of science fiction. To better understand what themes I am looking for, I must first create a much-needed definition of science fiction.

According to the online Merriam-Webster Dictionary, science fiction is defined as “fiction dealing principally with the impact of actual or imagined science on society or individuals or having a scientific factor as an essential orienting component.” In essence, this definition of science fiction states that a work qualifies as science fiction if it has elements of science or scientific factors as critical points of the work. By this definition, any story that features science as a main component could be classified as science fiction. This definition is problematic; as, for example, a thriller/romance novel that happens to take place in a laboratory and includes relatively detailed descriptions of the scientists’ actions could be identified as science fiction despite being dissimilar to most currently established sci-fi stories. A more overarching definition of science fiction comes from Damien Broderick in his book *Reading by Starlight*, who establishes that science fiction incorporates a collection of guidelines based upon examining the objective world in a similar fashion as science using stories concerning characters. This definition ties in well with Merriam-Webster’s definition, but is also weak to the same basic argument that this broad overview opens the genre to include works that do not match the current view of science fiction as

defined by the readers and writers of science fiction. Therefore, a focus on science and scientific devices cannot be the only element in science fiction. What else can I use to establish the genre?

Another way to examine the elements of science fiction is to observe the tendencies, themes, and tropes of both classic and modern popular works currently established as science fiction. Examples of classic science fiction include *The War of the Worlds* by H.G. Wells and *Frankenstein* by Mary Shelley, while more modern works include Isaac Asimov's *The Bicentennial Man*, *The Hunger Games* series by Suzanne Collins, and the *I am Number Four* series by Pittacus Lore. Through a thorough examination of these works, I hope to find common themes and elements linking them all together despite their immense differences.

I was quite surprised when I discovered the age of science fiction's legacy, with its first possible work being published in 1818. *Frankenstein*, the grandfather of monster-based media of all forms, can also be considered a work of science fiction based on certain themes found within its body. The plot of *Frankenstein* is widely known; a mad scientist cobbles together a creature and attempts to animate it using lightning and a variety of scientific formulas and apparatuses. It is, of course, clearly impossible to animate a body under the conditions used in *Frankenstein*, but its reliance on scientific principles makes it an excellent candidate for placement in the genre of sci-fi.

Moving forward to the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, H.G. Wells' *The War of the Worlds* could be said to be the first popular work of science fiction to be recognized as such. Its storyline and descriptions invoke powerful images of the improbable: aliens from Mars invade Earth, gripping humans in a state of pure terror, the highly advanced Martians



possessing incredibly durable and otherworldly machines. The Martians' onslaught is stopped only because they fail to possess or develop adequate systems to contain or eliminate Earth's bacteria, which proves deadly to their radically different systems. An altered Earth society, aliens, highly advanced machinery, and fictional biology all place *The War of the Worlds* firmly in the realm of science fiction.

One example of a more modern work is *The Bicentennial Man* by Isaac Asimov. While still less than contemporary with an original publication year of 1976, this work contains many of the elements that I intend to use in my own creation. It follows the process one sentient android takes to become a human in a world where android creation and futuristic technology is common. This allows the reader to watch as the android protagonist instigates humongous social and societal changes in the world in which he exists so he can become human. The societal gap between androids and humans, existence of sentient androids, and highly advanced technology all mark Asimov's creation as science fiction.

An incredibly popular contemporary series that may be difficult to recognize as science fiction is none other than the incredibly widespread *Hunger Games*. In it, a young woman named Katniss Everdeen takes the place of her sister in a gruesome battle to the death against 23 other unlucky contestants. Despite lacking more fantastical themes of science fiction such as sentient androids, aliens, or space travel, *The Hunger Games* does fit my earlier outlined definition of science fiction due to its genetically engineered animals, advanced technology, and heavily altered society. While science is incredibly important and instrumental in winning the eventual war that breaks out, the reader sees things from the perspective of a frightened teenager using primarily primitive methods of survival out of

necessity. In other words, the importance and influence of science in *The Hunger Games* is subtle, overshadowed by the experiences of Katniss Everdeen.

Pittacus' Lore's series, *I am Number Four*, can more easily be defined as science fiction. Six alien teenagers with incredibly powerful gifts are on the run from another alien species hunting their own to extinction across galaxies. The reader gains the perspective of all six teenagers, named Four through Nine, respectively. As can be predicted, it shares the concepts of advanced technology and aliens with *The War of the Worlds*, but is the only work in this list to contain space travel and the existence of other galaxies and planets.

It would seem that all five of these works of science fiction share two common themes that could be said to be required to categorize a work as science fiction: more advanced technology than the present and a society that differs somehow from contemporary society. Other themes that have come to be associated with science fiction, as seen above, are aliens, androids, space travel, and improbable or impossible abilities granted by alien biology or technology. While these themes could also be associated with fantasy, they are seen as related to science fiction because they appear to be somewhat plausible. Fantasy focuses more on making the impossible probable, while science fiction is an example of the improbable turned possible. While not seen here, another theme frequently associated with science fiction is time travel, primarily facilitated through advanced or alien technology.

Based on what I have learned from examining these existing works and the "objective-story" definition from Broderick, I can use the knowledge of science fiction's existing themes to create my own story integrating many of the same components listed

here. This exercise will allow me to better understand how a work of science fiction is constructed, and what steps need to be taken to ensure its position within the genre.

### **Design Plan**

During the construction of my example work, I will use the following elements of science fiction:

- use of nearly-human androids
- set in space/another galaxy
- enhanced technology (some examples include liquid-based weaponry, faster-than-light travel, and electromagnetic engines)
- a radically altered society created by the androids
  - a. The species is divided into five “families”, of which the largest is hundreds of times bigger than the other four combined
  - b. most discrimination problems found in contemporary American society, such as racism and sexism, do not exist
  - c. The “families” discriminate against each other
- special abilities (using dark matter as fuel for the most part in this particular story)

I have decided to focus on these particular elements, because while only an altered society and advanced technology are central to the idea of science fiction, androids, other galaxies, and special abilities are imaginative extensions of these central ideas and greatly expand the number of possible directions through which the story can advance. The way in which I will have structured my work will align with Broderick’s

assertion about the objectiveness of science fiction to create a logical construction of an alien world.

I have included an outline of the plot below and anticipate the final work to be around 50 pages long. The main characters include:

- Blackrose (later Malathorn), Nightingale's protective older brother who sacrifices everything he has to keep her safe
- Nightingale (later Nightmare), Blackrose's bubbly younger sister who sacrifices herself in the name of stopping a war
- Amarith, father to Blackrose and Nightingale, a scientist determined to stop a war that's only causing heartbreak and destruction
- Ventra, one of present-day Malathorn's friends, a scientist that found out about the tragic events in Malathorn's past

This short story will be titled "Chronic Chaos: Blackrose."

#### "Chronic Chaos: Blackrose" Outline

- Malathorn visits Ventra in her lab, wondering if she has something to better clean his sword
- Topic of conversation goes to Malathorn's past, which he deflects
- Ventra mentions that "she knows about Blackrose," which is a mysterious event that happens when Malathorn was just a child

- Malathorn freezes, nearly attacks her, but tells her everything after she explains where she heard it
  - Starts with Malathorn (then named Blackrose) and his father and their experiments with what they called “the darkness”, a form of dark matter that enhanced their abilities
    - Blackrose at the time was (11) years old
    - This happened at least 1 million years in the past
  - (Possibly in the form of journal entries; first the father’s, then Malathorn’s)
  - Blackrose gets a little sister, named Nightingale
  - Father proposes plan to make Nightingale more powerful than either himself or Blackrose and sets up a pool of dark matter for Nightingale to enter
    - Nightingale is (9), Blackrose (12)
  - Nightingale, after a touching moment, enters the pool and dies on contact
    - She is resurrected as Nightmare, though isn’t inherently evil yet; she appears to be almost the same, but with far greater power than her father and slightly more than her brother Blackrose
  - Almost immediately after, and before they can run any experiments, the father is killed by a mysterious and cold-eyed female Cronic (not Roxy)
  - Soon after this, Blackrose and Nightmare flee from the increasingly dangerous Cronics coming to kill them; the killer apparently convinced the population that they were dangerous
  - Nightmare and Blackrose build their first fortress and fend off wave after wave of attackers

- Over the next 1000 years (shown in brief bursts), Nightmare is seen to lose touch with her former self (Nightingale) and have several emotional breakdowns
- Blackrose comforts her during this time and accumulates some scars from defending his sister, takes on the name Malathorn
- At the end of the 1000 years, Nightmare and Malathorn come out of hiding and begin the attempt to shape the Epsilon family into their own ideals of family by force when their initial attempts are met with hostility
- Malathorn of the present concludes with telling Ventra that Nightmare no longer remembers why she's fighting or who she is, or even that she had a brother
- He tells her not to tell anyone
- Ventra promises to keep his secret
  - What she doesn't tell him, that the audience sees right before the end...is that she's the one who killed their father
    - Brief glimpse of how she did it
- End

I intend to start the creation of my thesis as soon as this proposal is submitted, or December 4<sup>th</sup>, 2017, and plan to meet with my advisor once a week. I would like to have up to Nightmare's creation in the outline above finished by the beginning of spring semester, the characters' defense of their fortress done by mid-January, and complete the first draft around February 9<sup>th</sup>, 2018. Defending my thesis will likely take place in the beginning of April 2018.

I also intend to reflect on my work throughout this process. This self-reflection will greatly increase my ability to think critically and creatively about literary works and better equip me to create my own works of science fiction. I have already learned much about the different elements and types of science fiction. My work will likely allow me to reflect quite a bit on the writing process itself, particularly that of fiction. The part of the process that appears to be most interesting to me is the creation of the universe my short story takes place in; in effect, I will have to write the rules of a completely new universe out for the reader from scratch.

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# Cronic Diagram

