

Malila of the Scorch

W. Clark Boutwell

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Malila of the Scorch is a thrilling dystopia whose characters fight to defend everything that matters most.

A handful of spies and fighters are the only people who can save America from invasion in W. Clark Boutwell's novel *Malila of the Scorch*.

By the twenty-second century, wars have split the United States. The East Coast is now the Unity, a self-proclaimed democracy with plans to invade the former Midwest, now called the Restructured States of America. The RSA's best hope lies in forming an alliance with the Scorch, a forbidding area occupied by sentient plant life. There are no easy answers, and not all will survive. Can life and love triumph over the invading forces?

This is the third book in the Old Men and Infidels series. The opening chapter provides the necessary background information as an old man tells a group of children a bedtime story. A timeline, appendices, and footnotes are also helpful, though the world is so complex and features so many characters that some confusion remains in the first few chapters.

The prose is riveting, particularly when it comes to world building. Every location, including the Unity's strange extradimensional computer system and the Scorch, with its dangerous beauty, is rendered in sharp detail.

Characterizations are accomplished through expressions of individuals' thoughts, hopes, and fears. Each has a distinctive approach to the looming threat. Rebel Jesse's MacGyver-esque methods of avoiding drone detection are entertaining, while the Unity's dictator, Jourdain, and his adjutant, Haversham, express differing viewpoints that are unreliable in their own ways.

Malila, a former Unity soldier who now works against the Unity, is the least compelling character in the mix. Though she is described as a brilliant soldier, she functions more as a mysterious and beautiful damsel who gets into trouble and is rescued by others. Even when she has a heroic moment towards the end, her success is the result of good luck rather than of her skills. Her romance with Jesse is questionable, given the differences in their ages and experience levels.

There are some unresolved plot points, and the fact that characters aren't given room to react to the significant death of a friend is curious. In general, the story is swift moving, though it makes a few necessary expositional pit stops. Exciting developments build toward a suspenseful conclusion that leaves a few questions unanswered, though most characters achieve satisfying resolutions.

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EILEEN GONZALEZ (July 27, 2019)

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