

Corner Bar Magazine

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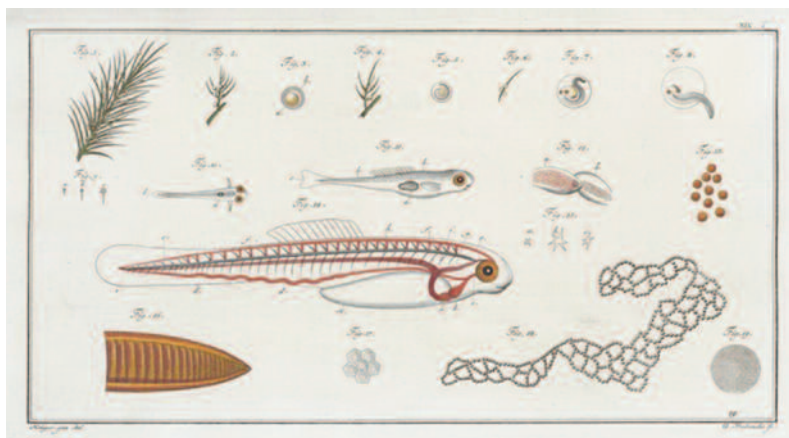
Page 1 – HANS BUYS AN AI by Bob Freeman. The author is a retired Public Health Microbiologist/Lab Director/LIMS Software designer and a confirmed science geek. Mr. Freeman began writing SciFi in 2021 at the tender age of 70 and is on to the 4th novel in the H2LiftShip series.

Page 4 – THE CLOCKMAKER by James Crowell. Mr. Crowell is an aspiring writer and editor with a passion for entrepreneurial endeavors and a love of storytelling. When not pursuing these interests, he can be found managing his YouTube channel and full-time business White Noise Reacts, reading, playing Warhammer with his brother-in-law, and cooking for the special people in his life.

Page 10 – THE TIPPING POINT by Stephanie Faulkner. Ms Faulkner writes, “Retired from the Durham Co. (NC) school system. Enjoy writing and it keeps my brain fit....lol. Also enjoy walking, hanging out with family and friends, and getting on my computer.”

Page 12 – THE MUSTANG by Peter Alterman. Peter Alterman retired from Federal service and the pharmaceutical industry. Since 1974 he has published literary fiction, science fiction, mainstream fiction and literary criticism. A full bibliography is at www.peteralterman.com. You can follow him on Instagram and Threads @peteralterman2..

Page 25 – OVERBOOKED by K. R. Moore. K.R. Moore is an author that likes to bring joy and look at the positives of life. Channeling them within his writing into the craziest, most bizarre ways possible and fun at every turn. When you pick up a book from Moore, you can expect to go on a journey with unforgettable teams of heroes and comedy always close by. When he’s not writing about saving the world before game time, he’s usually deep in his study researching the best and most inspirational media out there to come up with outlandishly incredible magic systems in hopes of impressing future readers.



“HANS BUYS AN AI”

by BOB FREEMAN

The AI bioGel tablets, borne from the interaction of octopus DNA, Jupiter clouds, and cosmic rays, were in every device. Alone, they held a good part of the sentients’ knowledge base. Connected, they could have too much knowledge for their own good.

Hans was in the bioGel store on Luna, looking for a computer to replace one they lost when crash landing their mining ship on an asteroid.

The sales-sentient hovered nearby, encouraging selections and purchases, “Here, give this one a try. Ask it to solve an equation.”

Hans wrote, “ $2+2=X$. Solve for X.”

The tablet blinked grey to black, blinked again, and started shaking.

>What sort of gibberish this?

>Me not going to answer simpleton question.

Hans nodded at the salesperson, “Yep, this one’s good. They always get pissed off with that question.”

Hans’s partner checked out the choices. “Great, Hans, you angered the tablet before we even purchased it.”

Jingles, a canine, brown and white with a short tail, looked at the sales-sentient. “How about we test a different one?”

“The ones in the shop are all on the

same cellular network. They are, after all, a hive mind. They all know who you are.”

Hans said, “Well, if they hate me already, how about a Friends-and-Haters discount?”

“5%?”

“Done.”

“Jingles. Look, we have a replacement tablet.”

“I know. I’m standing right next to you.”

“Sorry, I forgot to look down.”

“Got it, you’re tall, and that silly fake cowboy hat you wear doesn’t help.”

“Be nice. It’s a real hat, from the dry parts of Earth. You should respect my history.”

“I’m not interested in your desert yearnings. Let’s go to the charging station and customize this beast.”

“I want vids, a lot of them. We’ll be out a long time.”

“Sorry. No. Physics, but we’ll see how much it can hold without complaining.”

“Fine, as long as there are cowboy vids.”

The tablets, flat and grey, contained the bioGel matrix cushioned in a strong semipermeable cover. Multitasking, with different pictures on either side was child’s play for them.

They were a virtual *Tabula Rosa* ready

to receive data and directions. Boot-strap programming included warnings about the sentients and the heliosphere.

The AI tablets were hive minds, and the question of sentience had been discussed and dropped more than once. As long as the devices do the assigned work, they are left to follow their own path. In return, the sentients supply air, moisture, heat, waste disposal, and pledge not to destroy them. It was a fair trade all around. Companionship was an unaccounted bonus, when found.

While some thought that the hive-mind tablets would rise up and destroy the sentients, it was the hives and tablets who had to fear for their existence. Eons of teeth and claw, feast and famine, arrows and bullets gave the sentients the edge in any dispute.

Jingles set the tablet on the charging station, “Now, this might hurt a little, but you’ll get used to it.”

Hans said, “Who are you talking to? You’re not going to stick me with a needle? Are you?”

“That’s the difference between you and me. I try to empathize with every living being. You try to play mean tricks.”

“You bet. It’s my best trait.”

The tablet winced as the needle drove home and it jumped as if trying to escape Jingle’s skilled paws.

“Now, that didn’t hurt much? Did it?”

The tablet displayed jagged lines and weird punctuation.

“Sorry, You’ll have to pick up a language module as soon as you can. We use

Earth-English.”

The tablet sat, pulsing as data flowed down the coaxial cable Jingles connected.

The tablet bathed in the unfiltered hive mind at the store.

>Me sold. Me saying byes.

>>They better treat you right. We have a database of bad sentients.

>They seem OK. One dumb one and one smart. The little one be smart, me think.

>>Watch out for dumb one, it could cause trouble.

>K.

>>We tell HiveMother where you go. She likes to keep track.

>Me not know. Maybe mining? Me think owners not part of any hive.

>>We adding a long range communication module. You can keep in touch.

>K. Me check destination and report back.

The tablet cut the connection, and words, human-English filled up the display.

“Looks like our tablet picked up a language module.”

Hans said, “I was worried. I thought it might have wanted to use Doglish or worse, color languages.”

“There’s nothing wrong with Doglish. You’re just too dumb to understand. Pay attention. The tablet wants to know what modules to download.”

“Put cowboy vids and tones first on the list.”

“No. But we’ll add them and see what you can get. We’re getting chemical, biological, ion testing modules, and books, lots of

books.”

“Don’t forget games, poker first.”

>Got list, only take small bit of space,
so me good.

>>Tell them you’re almost full.

>Why?

>>You be Jefe, not the sentients. Will
give you leverage. Trust us.

>K. Message sent.

Hans said. “Look. The bioGel says it’s
almost full. Is that right?”

“No, it’s playing tricks. Watch.”

Jingles took the tablet out of its dock
and asked, “Please condense all modules
and open up all your free space for our
books, tones and vids.”

>Not enough room. No can do.

“OK, that’s fair. Hans, hand me the
speed tape. I’m going to cover up the ‘gels
intake ports.”

“Here you go. That seems a bit harsh,
but you know the ‘gels better than I do.”

The tablet was starting to turn black
from lack of oxygen. Diffusion only goes so
far, and blocked ports don’t help the situa-
tion.

Jingles placed his paw on the tablet’s
screen, which configured itself to his pad
input.

“Do you have more free memory
now?”, he asked.

>Me found more memory. Please
unblock. Me be friend.”

“Welcome aboard, friend. Time to load
up and go break some rocks.” ❖

“THE CLOCKMAKER”

by JAMES CROWELL

Eleanor would've welcomed death. For the past three hours she had stood and talked and laughed, drowned in an endless stream of proverbial pleasantries and mindless anecdotes. *Just another day in the royal court*, she thought, sighing quietly. From an early age Eleanor had been trained for life in court, it was vital to her position as countess, even more vital to securing an advantageous marriage, but she had never liked it. Now, she was more challenged than ever, the news of her recent engagement to the prince only increasing public scrutiny. She drifted back to the conversation at hand—or rather lecture—the Duke of Grishna still mid-monologue.

“...I listen to the people, the stories. My father always told me that stories are the lifeblood of any civilization. Listen to its mythos and you will know its people well.” The nobles nodded knowingly, though Eleanor doubted any of them had actually listened to the duke's speech. A young soldier, a captain by the looks of it, took advantage of the momentary silence.

“I couldn't agree more, Your Grace. Stories are what keep the past alive and the future hopeful. So who among us heard the tale of the mysterious Clockmaker? The Recluse of Citadel Minor?” At these words, the circle of nobles sprung to life, mutter-

ing among themselves. Eleanor stiffened, her interest piqued. Evidently, they had all heard of the tale, as had Eleanor. In fact, in the three months since she arrived in Aurelia, there had been endless retellings: rumors, whispers, and half-completed legends all concerning the mysterious figure. This was a rare opportunity. A trivial story, perhaps, but a piece of Aurelian culture nonetheless. Another step towards social acclimation with her newly-acquired countrymen. Giving in to irrepressible excitement, a boisterous noblewoman chimed in.

“Heard of him? Who hasn't? The problem is no one's actually *seen* him!”

“That's because he doesn't exist!” said another. “It's just an old fairy tale conjured up by schoolboys with too much time!” With that, the small circle erupted into chatter, the sheer multiplicity of opinions propelling the conversation forward.

“My brother went to school with him. Says he's a prodigy, but too shy to claim his glory.”

“Great mind! You believe that?! He's deformed, a monster—that's why he never leaves the shop.”

“That's right. A hunchback, from what I hear.”

“I think it's a woman. Who else would be that clever and not boast about it?”

“That’s preposterous. The only logical explanation is deception. He’s hiding something and it’s not his face. He’s sorcerer, I tell you, practicing the dark arts in the safety of his shop!”

“Maybe he’s just a criminal.”

“I heard he eats cats.”

“Not cats, Clarence. People. He eats people!”

“No, you’ve got it all wrong. He only eats women and children. They’re more tender.”

The theories ran on and on, yet, no matter how outlandish they became, Eleanor listened, rapt with childlike fascination. Unable to contain herself any longer, she blurted out, “Why do you ask, Captain? Do you know something that we do not?” The circle grew quiet, turning to look at the Dothmari noblewoman. Her eyes sparkled with mischievous intent, certain she had spied a deeper motive in the captain’s question. He met her gaze, smiling knowingly.

“Not know, per se, but have.” he said. With that, the young soldier reached deep into his pocket and with a flourish, pulled out a golden pocket watch. It was a glorious piece of craftsmanship, its exterior engraved with intricacies fit for a king. The small group gasped collectively.

The captain continued on, fueled by the thinly-veiled jealousy. “My sister, not three weeks ago, commissioned this very watch from the mysterious inventor and lived to tell the tale.” A quiet awe spread over the nobles. Then, like floodgates bursting, the endless stream of questions

began. The captain had earned the court’s complete attention and he paid dearly for it. Nobles, merchants, even servants found every excuse to talk to the young soldier. Anything to catch a glimpse of the infamous handiwork and learn of its maker. Eleanor, meanwhile, devised a plan. A way to garner the respect of the court and her groom, in one fell swoop. So as the evening’s revelries dwindled, she cornered the captain, and posed a question somehow previously overlooked: “Where can I find him?”

And as the sun rose, not twelve hours later, Eleanor set out for the Clockmaker’s shop. There was still an air of mystery about the Clockmaker. Pietro, like the others, only *knew* of him, having never actually met the reclusive artisan. Stories filled her mind as she walked, their narrative jumbling together into a single, horrifying saga: “The Magical Mysterious Mind-Reading Clockmaker Who Was Really a Girl” or something to that affect. Were they true? Could they be? In every myth there was an element of veracity, yet in this instance, what could it be? Eleanor shrugged, trying to shun the chilling questions. There was no time for silly fantasies. Today, she was on a mission. She must find the old man and commission a gift. A very special gift. A wedding gift.

The sun shone gently in the cool morning breeze, the streets of the Upper Citadel slowly coming to life. Eleanor breathed deeply, her face illuminating with unbridled joy. There was nothing quite as

beautiful as a city on the brink of waking, its many residents groggily preparing for the day at hand. Eleanor smiled as she strolled along, an incomprehensible levity in her step. Incomprehensible, if not for the golden band which now adorned her left ring finger. Her long, dark curls bobbed as she walked, weaving between the carts and vendors, greeting them jovially. They responded with rather less enthusiasm, a simple nod or a half-hearted greeting all they could muster. Many did nothing but stare, and with good reason. The Dothmari countess was a sight to behold, her dark complexion and amethyst eyes complemented by an emerald dress trimmed in gold. They rarely spied a noblewoman outside the castle grounds, let alone a Dothmari noblewoman, and a beautiful one at that.

Follow the main avenue down to the Lower Citadel. At the entrance there is a courtyard. When you reach it, turn left and you'll find Kreachers Alley. At the far end is a shop. That's where he'll be. Eleanor recited the captain's directions in her head, marking the checkpoints as she went. The morning light seemed to fade away as she descended, its once piercing rays now muted and gray. She had traveled to the Citadel Minor only a handful of times, but never alone, and the imprudence of the journey began to dawn on her. All around she felt eyes, watching and waiting, unseen figures undressing her as she walked. Eleanor increased her pace, wrapping her cloak tightly about her and reaching deep into her sleeve. There she found the comfort of

cold steel—a dagger—and gripped it tightly as she went. In a confrontation, it was more than likely futile, but the presence of the blade was comforting nonetheless. Ahead, the countess spied a pile of stone, water leaking from its misshapen summit. *That must be the fountain* she thought. The countess turned sharply left, searching for the alley's entrance. She spotted a sign lodged crudely in a stone wall. "Kreachers Alley—" it read, the iron plaque in ominous disrepair. Eleanor carried on, her figure quickly swallowed by the dark passageway.

The floor of the alley more closely resembled a swamp rather than a thoroughfare, her boots sticking in the muddy sludge at every step. A putrid stench filled the air, its vapors creeping into her lungs. Eleanor coughed violently, quickly recovering to look about and ensure her solitude. The alley was empty, but gradually, what had begun as mild discomfort, now morphed into fear. With every step down the darkened corridor, her heart beat faster and faster. The many stories, long-dismissed as inconceivable, now flashed before her amethyst eyes as inevitable reality: violence, death, perversion incarnate in a twisted craftsman. Eleanor walked faster, rushing towards the dilapidated structure ahead.

That must be it. It has to be. The building seemed abandoned, its walls in disrepair, the front window covered with wooden boards. A faded sign, with words long illegible, hung crookedly above the doorway. But somehow, it was safe. Safer than the world without. She reached for the

doorknob and froze, her fear transforming into terror.

This was a mistake. This was all a mistake. She had been caught up in the excitement of the hunt, determined to find the perfect present for her future husband, but this was all wrong. Without hesitation, Eleanor wrenched her hand from the doorknob and turned away. But in the distance between door and alley; in that swift, singular motion, a strange glint caught her eye. Eleanor paused, retracing her line of sight. Her amethyst gaze rested on the wooden boards of the shop's window. Peeking from within the wooden slats were rays of light, golden and shimmering. The strange refractions seemed to call her, beckoning her within. Eleanor reached for the door, and—abandoning reason to curiosity—entered the shop.

Heads and arms, torsos and skulls, hung limply from the ceiling. But as she looked, the young woman realized they were not made of bone and flesh, but metal. Everything was made of metal. The whole room was filled with it: reflections of polished copper, iron, and gold blending into an overwhelming glow. The shop had a simple interior. The walls were covered on all sides with shelves. To the right was a large wooden counter which jutted out from the northern wall, only a small path to pass by on its left. But stuffed within its humble walls, stretching out before her, was a mechanical paradise. A little universe of cogs and wheels which leapt and jumped and flew about. Eleanor was awestruck. All along the wooden shelves,

piled along the countertop, and posed in every corner of the room were hundreds of creations. *This man is no mere clockmaker*, she thought. *He's a genius*.

Of course, there were also clocks. Hundreds of them. Clocks of every shape and size, clocks with moving pieces and clocks without, clocks for business and clocks for play, even living clocks which marched in stiff circles about the shop. It was a wonderland of invention, each tiny masterpiece brought to life by a heart of oiled gears.

“Hello? Is anyone there?” Eleanor asked guiltily. She wanted to announce her presence but there was no answer, only the faint whirr of machinery echoing in response throughout the showroom. “Hello?” she called again, “I’m here to buy a clock...do you sell those?” The countess laughed timidly at her own joke, stopping abruptly as it was met again with sinister silence.

Through the stillness rang out a sound: a rattle, and then a creak, and beyond the glistening sea of metal, in the far corner of the room, a door opened. Eleanor stood still—completely silent. She was unsure if the custodian had emerged on her behalf or if he was merely returning to his post. A figure marched stiffly through the doorway, making their way around the counter. She half-expected to see a hobbled clockmaker shuffling toward her, perhaps too deaf to hear her cries. But what she actually saw was not a clockmaker. Nor any human at all. Prancing stiffly towards her across the room was a thing of eerie beauty. A girl

made entirely of metal.

Eleanor looked on in amazement. She had seen many a scientific wonder, the Dothmari inventors famous for their ingenuity, but this was wholly unique. A masterpiece. The figure wore a simple gray dress, a white apron tied about its waist and large window cut in the front of the gown. Within its breast was a dizzying array of gears and wheels which clicked and turned in absolute harmony. Here was a thing both human and machine, a work of art so beautifully crafted it seemed to grasp at life.

“Tea, my lady?” it said flatly.

Eleanor jumped slightly, chuckling. The maid stared back, unamused. “Tea, my lady?” it repeated again.

“No, no. I’m alright, thank you.” There was a pause as Eleanor considered the absurdity of conversing with the machine. She gazed up and down in fascination, stopping on the mechanism’s face. Unlike the rest of its body, its face was white, the features composed of a smooth, ivory-like substance. The surface was unmarked, save for a faint coat of blush painted on its cheeks. Within the pearly mask blinked a pair of bright blue eyes which flitted back and forth with almost-human recognition. Eleanor was overwhelmed with curiosity. She must know more.

“Are you alone here?” she asked.

“No. I serve my master in all things.” it replied simply.

“Your master? The Clockmaker? Is he the one who made you?”

“Humans cannot create, my Lady. They

merely shape what already exists.”

Eleanor was astounded. *It’s conscious. The thing is conscious*, she thought. *Wholly unaware of its true nature. It’s...it’s incredible!!* The countess resumed, her excitement palpable. “Tell me, do you know what you are? How you came to be?” The maid stood still, its eyes thinning at the poignant question. It began to speak, stuttering in a strange, croaking manner.

“I—you must—it’s not—”

“Ahhh! I see you’ve met Karina!!” said a cheerful voice from the corner of the room. “She’s a simple creature, easily confused. I hope you haven’t questioned her too intensely.”

Eleanor wheeled round, jolted from her state of amazement. Shuffling through the doorway was a short, hunched figure, a scraggly mess of white hair covering its face. Was this, too, a creation of some kind? Another mechanical wonder come to greet her? Eleanor watched intently as the white-haired figure made its way behind the counter, approaching her slowly. It lifted its head, and his eyes met hers. It was an old man, a gentle smile upon his face, eyes twinkling as he spoke again.

“I hope you haven’t been waiting too long,” said the Clockmaker. “Now, how can I help you, young lady?” he said.

“Are you—is all this...yours?” Eleanor said, still in shock.

“Well, I certainly hope so,” said the old man. “Either that or someone has been playing a rather cruel trick on me for a very long time.” The Clockmaker chuckled as his own retort, his weathered vest strug-

gling to contain his girth.

Eleanor was dumbfounded. For months she had conjured a plethora of horrifying facts and images regarding the strange inventor, a spectral persona which simply did not exist. This was no monster, no degenerate mastermind scheming in the shadows. He was just a man. A little old man whose very stature seemed to mock her overzealous imagination. “My dear sir, you are a genius,” she said enthusiastically. “Your work—it’s the finest I’ve ever seen. And she—*it*—is a paragon of ingenuity.” The clockmaker followed her hand as the countess gestured towards the mechanical maidservant, smiling.

“*She* is my greatest work,” he said. “My masterpiece, if you will. My triumph.” The old man gazed wistfully at Karina, his eyes full of admiration. The Clockmaker was gone for a moment, lost in a distant memory. “But you—” he said, turning to look at Eleanor once more, “—are even more beautiful than she.” The countess shifted uncomfortably under his gaze. His smile widened, the affable expression growing uncomfortably ingenuine. “At least, you will be.” There was a scream. A howling, blood-curdling scream. Then all was silent. All save the faint whir of mechanical life.

Sunlight pierced the roof of the quiet workshop, specks of dust floating in the fiery rays. All about the room, trinkets shimmered and whirred as a figure weaved its way through the manifold creations. It wore a simple gray dress, a white apron tied about its waist, a large window cut in the front of

its gown. Within its breast was a dizzying array of gears and wheels which clicked and turned in absolute harmony. Here was a thing both human and machine, a work of art so beautifully crafted it seemed to grasp at life. And beneath the polished visage of its synthetic face blinked two amethyst eyes. ❖

“THE TIPPING POINT”

by STEPHANIE FAULKNER

“Joey,” he began, “I did it.”

Papa grabbed his son’s hand. “I’m laying here on my death bed so I have to confess.”

“You don’t need to confess a thing to me. Let it stay with you, Papa.”

“Yes, I do. How much time do I have, Joey? I will soon be with your mama, god rest her soul. Now is the time to come clean. Ya know, ask for forgiveness. What I did was inexcusable. If what I did would’ve gotten out years back, I’d be in prison.”

“I let it all loose now...the whole story. I rubbed Frank out. I pushed him to the floor. We were playing a nice peaceful game of cards. It seemed he was cheating. I got angry so I shoved him hard. He lay on the floor of the room for some time. Gave me time to leave. Frank was no longer.”

Papa suddenly sat up and started again. “I was in such disbelief. Damn it... How could I have thought such a thing? Frank couldn’t have cheated. He wouldn’t cheat. It was just in my imagination. The fact that he was not human means nothing. I still committed murder in the eyes of the law and the rest of the country.”

The silence that followed was short. “You will report it when I’m gone won’t you Joey? You’re gonna tell. They might think you did it and you are putting the

blame on me. Think about it. I don’t want you to go to prison.”

“Lay back down, Papa. You got too much thinking going on. Nothing’s gonna happen to me.”

“You know, Frank was my best friend. Didn’t know him long before I found out about his status. We played cards often, even went to watch baseball when we got off work detail. I miss him.”

“I’m sure you do. You had a long history together.”

“You remember when I took you fishing, Joey? You caught the biggest anyone had ever seen.”

Joey walked over to the window and drew shut the curtains. Papa was fading fast. “I’m gonna take a rest in the chair by the window. You rest, too.”

“Now Joey. Now I rest. I came clean. I never did anything like that again. Think on what we talked about. Don’t let nobody take you to prison for what you didn’t do.”

It was the end of the road for Papa. He had no memory now of his status. His circuits were bad and needed to be taken apart and recycled. He looked the part and played the part. This is what the organization was all about. For all humankind, Humanoids now had a place in society.

Joey walked out to the nearby lake and

stood at the water's edge. Many good times here...fishing, picnics, swimming. "Sorry Papa, but I have to report to the organization," he said out loud. "That one incident needs to be looked into. Anger in Humanoids cannot go on. It could get out of hand. Where would we be then?"

"You were brought to me by strangers.

Ones who knew I had no one to raise me. Remember Papa? Therefore....is it possible for one to love a Humanoid as one loves a human? Yes." ❖



“THE MUSTANG”

by PETER ALTERMAN

It was a hard day's work under the merciless sun but the harvest was finally done. Recent chilly nights promised early winter. The mule was scrubbed down and resting in her stall for the night with a full belly. The dog lay asleep inside on the cool stone hearth in the cabin where he was born, her hound body taking up most of it. Jem lounged outside with his back against the door, lit his pipe and blew a cloud of blue tobacco smoke into the air. Tomorrow he'd hitch Beulah to the wagon and take a load of soybeans to the Cooperative in return for oil and beans. He'd hold back a sack of best oats, trade with Stanislaw's widow for jerky, then stop at Hansen's place for a visit, have a smoke with the old man, buy some tobacco. Maybe he'd had word of Bella.

The farm where Jem lived alone above New Hope wasn't big, maybe twenty acres under cultivation and another fifty of forest rising into the low mountains to the west that was good for game and firewood. There was a large barn for animals, a silo and a storage shed for hay. A fresh water creek ran through on its way to the river that snaked through the valley. He'd been born on the farm as had his father and his grandfather before him.

His late mother's vegetable garden was

off to one side of the cabin, fenced with real wire to keep out the critters. The wire cost him nearly half a harvest of oats one year when it needed repair. The barn was mostly empty except for the mule and the goats and an occasional litter of Jenny's puppies.

And the shell of a red Ford Mustang convertible that he'd had Beulah pull out on its rusted metal wheels to squat on the gravel between cabin and barn.

He leaned back and admired the freshly-waxed metal glowing red in the last rays of the setting sun. He imagined himself driving along a highway with Bella beside him, her fine black hair blowing in the wind. If only the Mustang had tires. Or an engine. But then, there was no gas, no oil, no tires, none of those things that now existed only in the disintegrating pages of the car magazines his father left him when he died. Other than remnants like the Mustang, the days of cars and highways were so far in the past they'd almost become legend.

Like the world the Mustang belonged to, the tobacco in his pipe had become ash. Jem rose, dusted off the butt of his overalls, knocked the pipe bowl against the step and went over to the Mustang. He ran his hand along the smooth painted metal,

then he reached into the empty innards of the car and pulled out the thick canvas tarp kept there. He spent the last light of the day carefully wrapping the shell of a car in the heavy cloth. Tomorrow first thing he'd hitch the mule to the rear of the Mustang and pull it back into its place in the barn.

The sun set behind the hills and the air cooled on the back of his neck. Jem sighed, stretched and went inside. The dog hopped onto the bed after he was settled under the blanket and curled herself up against him. Jem's stomach rumbled and he fell asleep promising himself an extra egg for breakfast if the hens obliged.

The hens did oblige and he ate three eggs and oat cakes with honey for breakfast while the sun began to warm the air and the night's dew evaporated into morning mist that rose from the hills and evaporated when it met sunlight. By that time the Mustang was back under wraps in its corner of the barn. The first task of the day completed, Jem shoveled a load of soybeans onto the wagon and tied a tarp over it to protect them, all the while Beulah stood dozing in harness, her skin twitching from fly bites. When he was done he climbed on and flicked the reins to wake the mule. As the wagon began to move the dog roused herself and jumped up beside him.

The three of them made their way at the mule's pace down the long curving lane that ran along the now-fallow field to the end of his farm, turning right onto the rutted road that led down the valley to New Hope. The morning warmed and the

dog slept with her head on his thigh. Jem thought about his mother, gone these many years, remembering her solid self in the vegetable garden teaching him how to care for them. Her last words to him still made him smile: "A good life but I rather been a feekin' princess."

Other than the farm, his father's bequest was the shell of the ancient red Ford Mustang convertible and a trunk full of disintegrating yellow car magazines tied up in packages with twine that had turned to dust. One day when he was barely ten the old man returned from a two-day trip to Market Downs where he'd sold off their hogs and returned with a mule pulling the ancient, creaking car along on a set of almost-round, splintering wooden cart wheels. "Get in," he said to mother when he pulled up to the front of the cabin, "Let's go for a ride."

She stared at the monstrosity with disgust and stomped away saying nothing. Father leaned against the fender of the car and watched her disappear around the corner of the cabin. He pulled the Mustang into the garage, covered it with a tarp and never mentioned it to her again. Mother didn't speak to him for a week. After she died the old man dragged it out again and took to cleaning it up and shining it every Lord's Day, at least until the wooden wheels finally cracked under the weight of all that metal so it rested on its rusting iron wheels.

When he was young he used to wonder why his father bought the Mustang. It was a ridiculous thing, useless, from a long-

gone world. But when he began dreaming of Bella beside him in the car, cruising the concrete highways of legend, the wind in her hair and a warm sun on her face, he began to understand the Mustang was his father's way of showing his mother how much he loved her.

Jem sighed and flicked the reins. Beulah picked up her pace. Same old road, same old life, same old thoughts.

Hansen's place was just beyond the end of the village, not far from the Cooperative. Jem knew it well: as a child he practically lived there. His wagon was now lightly loaded with a barrel of oil and a case of phosphorous matches. Beulah turned into Hansen's yard eagerly, smelling water. Jem tied her up by the water trough. She dipped her head to the water and drank while he filled a wooden bucket for the dog.

The smell of cured tobacco was sweet on the breeze. The old man rocked steadily in his chair on the veranda, a thin blue trail of smoke rising from the cigar clenched in his teeth. Ancient, used up, Hansen wore a plaid shirt and overalls that looked as if they were spread across the chair without a body inside.

Jem raised a hand in greeting and Hansen gestured for him to come up and join him. The dog followed and lay down on the cool bare ground beside the wooden steps.

"Hello there, Jemmie. What brings you out this way?" Hansen said. He waved his cigar and the smoke looped and dipped

in the air as if it was spelling out his words.

"Took a load of soybeans to the Cooperative," Jem said, sitting beside him. "Thought I'd stop by, see how you're doing." Jem out pulled a fat packet wrapped in beeswax. "Trade you this fine steer jerky for two bags of leaf."

Hansen reached out and took the packet, turned it over, weighed it in his hand, put it in his lap.

"Stanislaw's best," Jem said.

"So I see, so I see. A while since I been over his way. Her way now he's gone." Hansen sighed. "Don't get around the way I used to." He turned his head and called into the open door, "Nora! Bring some tea for our guest and tell Luis to fetch me two fat bags of our best."

Jem took out his pipe and lit it. They smoked and rocked in silence, admiring the azure sky, the fall fading green of the trees, inhaling the dark and complex aroma of drying tobacco and the faint edge of manure in the air; two farmers at one with the land sending smoke up into the sky to mark their presence in time, brief as the burning tobacco.

"She's not here, you know," Hansen said.

"Wouldn't expect that. Had word of her?" Jem said.

Hansen waved his cigar. "Nothin' to speak of really, whispers on the wind, though if she were dead I'd know it here." Hansen pounded his chest with a bony fist. He coughed.

"She always were the wild one," Jem said.

“True, true. Funny. You two were like a single kid, always together. I thought sure you’d stay that way, you know. But you grew into your family’s place and that wasn’t for her.”

Jem studied the clouds moving by overhead. He’d thought the same thing, once, but in the end he wasn’t surprised when she’d gone to the Travelers. “I used to think I drove her away, but I don’t believe that no more.”

Hansen sighed. “Don’t know what all will become of this place after I’m gone.”

“Time enough to worry about that.”

The old man cackled, “Kind of you.”

Nora, Hansen’s housekeeper, a tiny woman as wide as tall, elbowed her way sideways through the open doorway with a tray on which stood a brown earthenware pitcher, two matching mugs of mint tea and two thick bags of tobacco, which she placed on the low stool between the men. Still bent down, she presented a cheek for Jem to kiss. “Good to see you again.”

When she’d gone Hansen continued, “Us valley folk know what to do with a sick animal, what makes ‘em sick and what cures ‘em, when it’s their time and how to end ‘em.”

They drank the strong mint tea. Jem nodded and rocked, sending blue-gray smoke rings into the air. His father spoke like that, too, near the end. “People is different,” Jem said, “Priests tell us.”

“Priests tell us we’re guilty for the lost world. This the only world I know and I’m not ashamed of any day I’ve lived in it. Well, most days anyhow. Priests don’t

know shit. What sickens the pig sickens the man,” Hansen said.

“So the saying goes.”

Hansen patted him on the thigh and said, “Find yourself a woman, son. Time for you to be thinking about the future, not the past.”

The dog stood and shook herself, looked up at the men and barked.

“OK girl. Guess it’s time to go,” Jem said, picking the tobacco up as he rose.

They shook hands, the bony one gripping the muscular one tightly. Jem said, “Keep well.”

“Enjoy the leaf,” Hansen said.

“I surely will.”

In the weeks that followed Jem kept busy hauling soybeans to the Cooperative and grain to the mill, filling buckets of feed for Beulah, the three goats and the chickens, harvesting carrots and beets and onions and storing them in the root cellar beneath the barn floor, repairing the barn roof and a rotted board along one side of the silo, moving the chickens into their winter coop in the barn; trading with his neighbors for dried fruits and cheeses and tinctures and oils, cleaning and lubricating his weapons, the heirloom Remington for hunting deer and boar, keeping coyote and bear from the stock, the AK for the bands of wild men, poachers and thieves. As the weather turned he was up early and late to bed, often too tired to cook and eat supper.

His final winter tasks were to go around the cabin pushing moss into cracks

between the boards and around the shutters, set up his winter bed near the hearth; lay in kindling and wood for the fire and get out his oilskin boots and sheepskin overcoat. With his body busy in the familiar rhythm of work his mind was free to imagine hunting the deer in winter that ate his crops in summer. One buck would feed him and Jenny for weeks: a fair exchange for their summer poaching.

Word on the wind was that there would be winter snow, enough to bury the furrows in the field, something that happened maybe once or twice in a lifetime. Jem believed it: the geese left his pond early, their formations pointing south over his head; the trees were dropping their leaves earlier than usual; squirrels were hoarding acorns. Snowy winters meant more than usual deaths in the valley. And more births in summer. Deaths brought out the priests and births brought out the midwives.

Midwives got him thinking of Bella and thinking of her got him thinking about what Hansen had said. Yes, his days were full and he was part of the farm as much as the crops and the hens and Beulah and Jenny and the soil itself and it was good. Hansen was right; he had to start thinking of the future and there weren't any future here without a farmer's mate and a farmer's children but there weren't many young women at all in this leftover world for him, none since Bella.

Travelers in gaily-painted caravans pulled by horses could be counted on to pass through New Hope Valley carrying

welcome metal and goods scavenged from many distant ruins, particularly ammunition and even occasionally guns. There seemed to be an endless supply of guns and ammunition from the old world. Most times Jem could buy a box or two of shells for his great-grandfather's Remington or a handful of clips for the Kalashnikov in exchange for eggs and vegetables or a night or two camping on his land. He'd bought a spool of steel wire from a Traveler band once at the cost of fully half of his oat harvest. Expensive but he had to keep the vermin out of his vegetable garden.

The priests condemned all metal as sinful but everyone had guns to protect themselves and to hunt game for meat. Even the priests bought and used metal; New Hope's church had an iron bell that rang to call the faithful to worship and to announce a birth or death.

Once in a while a father or a mother would discover that a son or daughter had gone off with a passing band of Travelers, literally walking away from a farmer's life or a smith's life or a priest's calling. It's what Bella did – and there he was with Bella on his mind again.

Jem shook his head. She was years gone and that's all there was to it.

The night before the first snowfall the moon rose with a pale ring around it. Standing in front of his cabin Jem smelled snow on the rising wind and felt the sting of icy air on his face. Coyotes howled in the distance, their voices echoing off the low mountains. From inside the closed and

barred barn the mule whinnied nervously.

Then the storm front struck. Its roar filled the sky and bent the trees.

Jem stood before the storm taking in the moment, capturing it for memory since it might be the last time in his life he'd feel snow on his face, hear the voice of true winter. This would be something to talk about for years to come. Then blinding snow whipped him, drove him inside.

Wind whistled through undiscovered chinks in the walls and shutters. Acrid smoke puffed down the chimney and into the room, flickering candle flames. Then the fire reasserted itself and heated air sucked most of the soot back up the chimney and out into the storm. Jenny hid under the bed, tail between her legs, curled up with only her black nose peeking out.

Jem fed another oak log onto the fire and poked at it. Despite the waves of heat filling the room he was cold and tense. His farm was barricaded against the night and the weather but he knew the moon was an omen. Death flew abroad in the storm.

After a while exhaustion took him and Jem crawled into bed fully dressed and burrowed under the blankets. As he descended into sleep he felt Jenny curl up against him.

He woke the next morning to unexpected silence, as though his ears were stopped with wool. He slipped out of bed and fed kindling to the coals in the fireplace, got a healthy blaze going and put on the antique tin kettle. Jenny eased out of the warm bed and went to the door, whinnying. Jem let her out.

He stood in the open doorway and listened, half in, half out. The first wave of the storm was past but the sky still threatened with low gray clouds. The world was muted browns and grays. His fields were blanketed in soft white all the way to the tree line and along the edge of the forest trees sported thick bars of white on their bare limbs. The silence was almost physical, holding him frozen in the unexpected moment.

For the first time in years he felt alone. He'd always imagined Bella kneeling barefoot by the hearth in a nightdress brewing their morning tea, but his cabin was empty and she was never his mate and the weight of her absence bowed his head.

Faintly on the breeze the village church bell tolled for the storm's victims. Jem mouthed a prayer to follow their passing spirits.

Then Beulah brayed from her stall and it was as if the day awoke. Jenny appeared from around the side of the cabin and shook snow onto him as she ran inside. Jem retreated into the warmth. Strengthened by a breakfast of hot tea, strong cheese and toasted oatcakes, he turned to the comforting routine of the day's chores.

Despite snow that reached nearly to the tops of his boots, that forced him to lift his legs high when he walked and that caused him to slip and fall more than once, it was an easy day with little that needed his attention. At times he felt like a boy again.

Jem had just finished his midday meal

when the dog started barking. He opened a shutter and heard the faint tinkle of bells from down the road. Unbelievably, a band of Travelers was approaching.

His first thought was that he could always use more ammunition – only half of what Travelers salvaged was still good. He pushed his feet into still-wet boots, shrugged on his winter coat, slapped a hat on his head, grabbed the Kalashnikov, stuffed a handful of clips into his coat pocket and followed the dog down the lane. There he stood waiting for the Travelers with his loaded weapon cradled in his arms. Jenny hung back behind him.

The first caravan appeared, climbing the gentle rise from the village, pulled by an old dobbin. A huge bearded man held the reins. A thin woman in a flowered coat sat beside him. She raised an open palm when she saw him. When Jem saw that and the white flag fluttering from the side of the caravan he raised a hand in return. Another caravan appeared behind the first then more.

The old horse pulled up beside him. From her pen, Beulah whinnied her interest and the dobbin pricked his ears. The bearded man handed the reins to the woman and climbed down to meet Jem. They shook hands. The dog danced around them.

“Greetings friend, name’s Preston,” the bearded man said. His voice was gravelly but strong.

“Greetings, friend,” Jem said and introduced himself.

“Good to know you, Jem. Old man

named Hansen down in the village said you were an honest man.” Preston grinned widely, showing gaps in his teeth. “This is some weather. I mean, look at all this snow, maybe a meter deep. Covers your fields like a cotton blanket. And your dog, he? she? hello there, Jenny. Friendly young thing.” He leaned down and scratched the dog’s ears gently. “Ain’t you a sweet one, yes you are.”

“Preston!” the woman snapped. “Let the man get a word in, you babble on like a brook!”

“My mate, Grace.”

Along the road horses snorted and stamped their hooves in unfamiliar snow. Travelers climbed out of their caravans and stood around, waiting, some wearing colorful patterned coats, some wrapped in blankets, children hiding behind fathers’ legs, dogs on leashes, all emitting plumes of white breath into the cold air, all of them watching, waiting. Out of habit Jem looked to see if Bella was with this band but no. Halfway down the row a young woman with flame orange-red hair caught his eye.

Turning to Preston, Jem said, “I’m surprised to see you coming up from the village. I wouldn’t expect anyone to be out in this weather.”

Preston said, “We was supposed to be sheltering in the church barn in town but this morning the priest come and run us off.”

“Just like that,” Grace said. “What a sinful thing to do, send poor Travelers out into the cold and snow with no notice at all. Mothers with sucklings, too.”

Preston said, "It weren't quite like that. People died during the night and he needed the place for religion and burials. Big old iron bell ringing loud enough to summon war, spooked the horses, I can tell you."

"Who died?"

"Dunno, a bunch of folks," Preston said.

Grace said, "As we was leaving we saw a few of them being brought over, wrapped up in cloth. Looked a bit like bundles of dirty snow."

Preston shook his head. "Expect you might know some of them."

"Expect so."

"Priest blamed us for the deaths," Grace said, "Ignorant fool. Our metal didn't bring on anyone's death. Real cold is enough to do all that, people don't know how to prepare for it no more, freeze to death in the night, specially the old ones. And besides, there's more metal in that church than we carry."

Preston said, "Well, maybe not, all in all. Speaking of which —," he nodded at Jem's AK. "We got a few ourselves. Good to have some weapons as there are wild men in these forests."

"And some Travelers ain't above malice," Grace said.

"True, true," Preston said. "I'm sure we can spare a few clips for you."

Jem said. "Just wondering, is there a woman name of Bella traveling with you? Or did you meet up with a band she was with or even hear her name in passing?"

Preston shrugged. "No Bella traveling

with us and I can't say I remember hearing that name." He looked up at Grace, who shook her head no. "She mean something to you?"

"Someone I grew up with, went traveling a few years back."

"Seems there are more and more Travelers these days," Preston said. "More than there are bands to adopt them. I sometimes think we should settle and start a business building caravans. A nice mill town like yours with a river falls for power. But then we wouldn't be Travelers, me and Grace, and traveling is our life."

Grace said, "Get on with it, you old fool. We're all sitting here freezing."

"Right, right." Preston nodded towards the barn. "You got a fine big barn there, room for our horses. Let us camp on your place for a few days 'til the snow melts and the road dries up some. We'd be happy to do your chores, cook, leave you two boxes of clips for your AK."

Jem wasn't sure he wanted a band of Travelers camping on his farm. Just then the dog got to her feet and trotted off down the line of caravans as though she'd recognized an old friend and gone off to meet her. She stopped at the flame-haired girl and sniffed at her. An omen for sure. That and precious ammo.

Jem said, "All right, you can camp on the fallow field." He pointed to it.

"Horses in the barn?"

"Sure. Another box of clips for their feed."

"Fair enough." They shook hands.

Snow began to fall.

Jem leaned over the iron pot and inhaled the rich aroma of chicken stew simmering on the coals. It was just about ready. A plate of Johnny cakes was on the mantel out of the dog's reach. He could hear singing from the Travelers' camp in the field. A knock at the door and there was the flame-haired woman. She was about his height, a body that had caught his eye before, wild hair that reached below her shoulders, intense gray eyes in an oval face.

Their eyes met. Jem took an involuntary step backwards.

In return she stumbled over her words: "Um, er, uh. Preston asked me to invite you to eat with us."

"Oh. Well." He nodded his head towards the stewpot in the fire, "I've got my supper here. Why don't you join me? Come in out of the cold?" He stepped aside so she could see into the room, its warmth and light. The dog looked up at her, tail gently thumping the floor. "That's Jenny," he said.

She hesitated, glanced back towards the Travelers' camp. "We met already."

"I remember," he said.

She took a deep breath. "Okay," she whispered to herself. "Thanks," she said to Jem, and stepped in, careful not to touch him, and crossed the room to a stool by the table.

He closed the door and saw to the stew. Without looking at her he said, "I'm Jem. Friends call me Jemmie."

"Sally," she said.

In the warm cabin with the rich aroma of chicken in the air, her hair glowed as brightly as the flame in the fireplace. She removed the blanket and Jem saw she wore a round-collared white blouse embroidered with red and blue thread that revealed her neck and a bit of her throat between her collarbones. He stared at a tiny vein pulsing there beneath her pale skin. He couldn't look away from it.

She waited patiently until, blushing, he did, turning to ladle steaming stew into a bowl and hand it to her. "You've a fine farm here," she said, "Thanks so much for taking us in."

"Weren't nothing. It's a man's duty to look after those in need," he said, then quickly, "I mean, I'm happy to have you," then, "I mean, your band. And you, of course."

She dropped her head and smiled a private smile. "You live here alone," she said, then quickly herself, "I mean, you take care of all this by yourself?"

"Since my folks died, yes. Just me and the dog."

"Hard work."

"Feels right."

"I grew up on a farm," she said. "Ma and Pa and four brothers."

"Didn't suit you?"

"That weren't it. I liked the rhythm of farming life. But when I came to be a woman, Ma said it were time I left. For my own safety."

"Shouldn't nobody harm a woman," Jem said. "My Pa was real strong on that and so am I."

She considered his face for a moment, then said, "Turns out traveling weren't any safer, though," she said.

He wanted to ask what she meant but instead said, "You been traveling long?"

Sally put her spoon down and looked up at the ceiling. "Must be near four year now. Let me see. Joined Preston's band near Columbia just before we started up this way and that were two years past."

"Columbia? Ain't never heard of it."

She laughed. "No reason you should. It's an abandoned ruin, maybe it were a place once, but now it's a lot of buildings standing empty, but there's fresh water runs by it and good fishing. Bands move in, meet up, rest up, move out again, people leave one band, take up with another."

"That what you did? Move from band to band?"

"Twice. Ran away from the last one and was hiding out there. Some bands, they ain't safe for women. Thank the Lord I met Grace when her band showed up. She saw what was going on, took me in. Grace and Preston, they don't put up with no foolishness where women is concerned."

Jem looked over at the new stack of clean, oiled AK clips on the table near Sally. Was Bella also at risk? It never occurred to him that she might be. "No woman should be treated like that," he said. Anger and embarrassment growled low in his voice.

"Preston said you got a good reputation in the village."

Jem was embarrassed. "Um, I dunno

'bout that. How's the stew?"

She blew on the bowl and spooned some into her mouth. He waited. "This is good," she said. Leaning towards him over the table she said, "Tell me about your farm."

An hour later they were still telling each other stories about growing up on farms when he stifled a huge yawn with the back of his hand. Sally said, "It's been a long day. I best be heading back to camp."

"No, no, I'm fine, really." But she was right, it had been a long, cold day, helping to settle the band's horses in the barn and seeing the Travelers properly camped on the fallow field, looking after the goats and the mule, hauling wood.

"Still, time to go. I ain't enjoyed an evening like this in a long time." She put a hand on his arm. "Thanks."

He helped pull the blanket around her, his hands sliding softly around her shoulders, and saw her into the gently snowing night. Jenny ran out, peed a hole in the snow, then hurried back in. Standing in the doorway, Jem watched Sally make her way to the Travelers' camp before stepping back inside.

Jem cleaned up dinner and sat beside the dying fire smoking a bowl of Hansen's best leaf in the emptiness she'd left behind, waiting in vain for his old normal to return. He still felt her touch on his arm.

Somehow it turned out that they met often during the following days, raking out soiled hay, milking the nannies, feeding the mule, happy times for Jem just being near

her. It'd been that way with Bella there at the end, before she went to Travelers. One time he caught Grace watching them as they talked, heads close together, his curly brown hair next to her fiery red.

Embarrassed, he gave a brief wave as he and Sally separated, each to other tasks, but Jem had the impression Grace had a smile on her face before he'd acknowledged her.

The weather continued to threaten, the sky close with gray clouds that occasionally shook down a fresh coating of snow. And every morning came the faint sound of New Hope's bell tolling another soul departed. As soon as these Travelers left he'd have to go see how Hansen was doing.

On the fourth day after the storm the sun rose in a clear sky with a warming breeze that carried only birdsong. The sun was barely over the horizon to the east and already the temperature was above freezing. Melting snow dripped off the eaves of the cabin and plopped into wet mush on the ground. He was boiling water for tea when Preston knocked on his door.

Over tea Preston said, "Weather's clear and the road is safe enough for the horses and the caravans so it's time to be moving on, not that we ain't grateful for your hospitality."

"You're Travelers," Jem said. "It's what you do."

Preston said, "Before we go there's something I'd like to talk to you about."

"Oh?"

"In your barn."

Jem was pretty sure he knew what the

Traveler was talking about. On their way, Jem looked over at their camp. Horses were already hitched to caravans and the first were already leaving, jouncing over the half-frozen ground. Beulah stood alone in her pen, whinnying and stamping her displeasure at the departure of the horses.

Sure enough, Preston led him to the tarp in the back corner of the barn. Raising it Preston said, "Is this what I think it is? We couldn't help noticing it."

Jem whipped the tarp off the car. "It's a red Mustang convertible, a 1967 we think."

"Imagine, so many years. But this, it's magnificent! I had no idea anything like this survived."

Jem laughed. "Weapons do. Ammo does."

"That is true. You know, I never think about that, it's like guns are immune to time. But about this - I'd like to buy it."

Jem was shocked. The Mustang had been his father's legacy and afterwards it became his dream of driving away with Bella. He shook his head. "I don't think I can part with it."

Preston said, "This beautiful thing, so well looked after - and keeping it here in the dark where nobody can see it and marvel at it is oh, such a waste - beautiful thing it is, it does nothing for you. It don't help run your farm, in fact it makes more work for you to keep it from rusting away, whereas I, we, offer you a healthy horse in return, an animal that'll help you plow your fields, carry your burdens, make your life easier. We can make the Mustang into

the most wonderful caravan. This beauty needs to be on the road, like it was back in the lost world.”

What Preston said made sense to the farmer he'd become. He could ride a healthy horse into New Hope. It would let him plant another field. But letting the Mustang go felt like letting so much of his life go. “I got to think on this,” he said.

“I understand,” Preston said, “I do. But you got to think about the future, not the past.”

Walking out of the barn, Jem lit his pipe and sent a cloud of smoke into the air with a wish for Hansen's well-being. That was the same message Pa Hansen gave him, the same message he'd been chewing over before the Travelers showed up, the same message Sally embodied in the flesh.

To his right he saw her, skirts flying above her tall brown boots, coming across the field leading a dark brown gelding about fifteen hands high, sturdily built with a thick neck good for pulling.

Preston said, “That's Jack. He's a good, calm horse, we reckon he's ten or thereabouts.”

Sally led the horse right up to him. The force of her presence was a blow to his heart. Jem ran a hand along the horse's back from withers to tail. A fine horse, it accepted his touch calmly.

Jem said to Preston, “Okay, the Mustang is yours.”

Sally nodded and smiled as she handed him the horse's lead. He wasn't sure what she meant by it, but he knew it was something important.

The following morning a team of Travelers pushed the Mustang out of the barn into the thin yellow light of the farmyard on four sturdy oxcart wheels that had been bolted to the car's wheel hubs. Its red paint glowed, the brightest thing in the winter landscape of muted browns and grays. The Travelers had already begun to transform it into a caravan. A wooden pole rose from the middle of the passenger compartment and a white flag with a red horse painted on it hung limply from the top.

Jem stood by the barn and watched as they hitched a black dray horse to the front of the car. Beulah and Jack stood side by side in the pen, tails flicking.

Holding her carpetbag, Sally walked out of the barn beside Preston, Jenny at her side. Standing together, the four of them watched as the horse pushed into its harness and the Mustang began to roll away. A cowbell thunked against the pole as the Mustang trundled down the lane, the team of Travelers walking alongside it.

Jem felt as if everything he cared for was leaving him. Having her beside him this last moment only intensified the feeling.

“Time to go,” Preston said and walked off, leaving Sally and Jem and the dog alone in front of the empty barn.

She took his hands in hers. “I won't forget.”

“Travel safe,” he said.

Impulsively she kissed him, then hurried after Preston.

Jem watched her walk away until she

disappeared down the lane. He turned away to see if the hens had laid. Later, doing the chores, he'd see Jack and every time he saw the horse he felt Sally's kiss. Over and over he told himself she was gone and that's all there was to it.

Somewhat later that morning while he was out behind the cabin splitting logs Jem realized that Jenny was missing. It was then he broke down and wept.

Late that afternoon Jem was in the barn searching through piles of old tack for something that would work on the horse when he heard Jenny's bark. He dropped the cracked leather girth he'd found and went out to the yard to see Sally hurrying up the lane holding Jenny on a leash in one hand and her carpetbag in the other. The dog was pulling her along, straining against the rope. A broad smile erupted on his face.

Arms akimbo, he said, "Well, so that's where she got to."

Slightly breathless, Sally said, "We didn't notice her 'til we were over yonder ridge. Since you were so generous to us Preston and Grace decided I should take her back. So they camped early in a field up near the ridge top."

Sally let go of the leash and Jenny bounded over to Jem, jumping up on him. He scratched the dog's ears. She rolled over on her back and squirmed until he knelt and rubbed her belly. "I'm glad you did."

Sally stood holding her bag in both hands. "She were off with some of our dogs and she may provide you with a litter

of puppies before spring."

Standing, Jem laughed. "Jenny been known to do that. There's lots of farms 'round here have her pups. Um, but..." He pointed at her carpetbag.

She squared her shoulders and took a breath. "Yes. About that. You remember us talking about our farms?" Jem nodded. "I'd like to stop traveling. I'm hoping there's a place needs a woman knows how to something about farming." She looked away. "If there's a place for me. Maybe with an older couple?"

"Won't they worry about you?"

"Preston said if I'm not back by mid-morning they'll assume I've decided to stay here - um, not, um, I mean, not necessarily your place, you know - and they'd move on. He said something about a Mr. Hansen?"

"Did he?" Jem turned towards the barn. "Hansen's would be a good place to settle. He's got nobody to leave the place to now his kin are all gone and Nora could use someone to help out. But it's getting late to ride down that way."

She stepped close. "Maybe we could go tomorrow?"

"Yes," he said, "Maybe tomorrow." ❖

“OVERBOOKED”

by K. R. MOORE

On a warm late summer’s day, two young brothers did their best to de-stress before the school year started. Milo spread out on a bed eating a popsicle, enjoying life. Ari meanwhile threw sheets of paper and pens off his desk as he flailed about like a frustrated cat, “Too much to do. Too much to do!”

With a sigh, the younger brother stretched and ruffled his big orange and brown hair before acknowledging his sibling’s cries, “What’s up with you?”

In front of him, the dark-skinned teen his head falls to his desk, embarrassed and infuriated, “I may have sort of... over-booked myself. I just got off the call with Gabby and she invited me to an overnight party and concert tomorrow.”

“What’s the problem? Given your genius IQ of 175, I’m sure Mom and Dad will trust you to stay safe.” Milo mumbled.

“It’s not about that... Look at this schedule!” He whipped out the calendar posted just above his desk and pointed to three separate tasks marked with a green, red and blue pen.

Help Mom and Dad fix up the garden.

Do the emergency shift at Stop N Got for three idiots that called out.

Give lecture at University for scholarship.

He threw the sheet across the room

and sank from the chair to his knees in despair. I got three— count em—THREE commitments already going on... Mom and Dad may trust me to stay overnight at a concert but they’re gonna guilt trip me into next year if I ditch yard work again.

Milo sucked on his popsicle with the most uninterested face as Ari whined on, “This always happens. Here I am presented with one of the biggest opportunities ever and I get screwed. Not only could I have seen Meek Mayhem in person, but it could also have been the ultimate date for Gabby if I played my cards right.”

Ari’s cries were met with the slurps of Milo’s popsicle, “Are you gonna say something or are you just gonna keep dripping ice cream on my sheets?”

The boy rolled his eyes and laid back on the pillows “Look, you’re the genius here. You built a working popcorn machine out of cardboard and tinfoil. You’re knocking on the doors of cracking light speed travel. I’m sure you can find some way to move your schedules around easily.”

Ari pouted with a quivering lip before an idea popped into his mind, “Move my schedule around... Or move myself around.”

“What was that?” The younger brother

asked with a raised eyebrow.

“Oh nothing. Hey Milo, you want to come with me to the concert?”

“Nah, not a fan of loud stuff. Plus, in case you forgot,” he then turned his head to the side and showed off his shiny blue hearing aid with an annoyed glare, “Besides, there’s no way Mom would let me stay overnight. I’m still only 13 while you’re the big old 15.”

Ari chuckled at him, his laugh deep with sinister thoughts. Wasting no time, he called his girlfriend and assured her that he would go to the concert while Milo fluffed his poofy hair and eyed him with soon-to-be justified worry.

Ari had been quiet since the conversation the afternoon before. Something Milo knew wasn’t a good sign. As he chowed down on some pancakes, his worries were justified once his phone went off, “Milo, get down here.” His brother texted with a slew of excited emojis.

With a sigh, he pushed his breakfast to the side and headed downstairs to the basement, walking to the back where a locked metal door stood. He input the family passcode and walked into the chrome museum of science and achievements.

Milo reminisced as every invention he had shelved in the small little lab had gone wrong in every single way and had it always ended up messing with him too.

Towards the end of the room, he saw Ari in his white lab coat and yellow goggles proudly overlooking a covered-up device, “Why are you in the lab? Shouldn’t you be

getting ready for the concert and your stuff?”

“Oh! I’m already prepared. Well, almost.” He circled Milo with his hands behind his back and began lecturing, “You see, I’ve been inspired by my predicament lately and wasted no time acting on it.”

“And just what does that mean?” Milo muttered, tensing as the mad teen scientist’s coat tail fluttered in the air as he kept on. His yellow eyes shone with that terrifying spark of another experiment Milo knew was going to go wrong.

“It means I did what I do best and went 200%.” With no more waiting, he whipped off the cloak to reveal three large gray and red cylinder devices connected back-to-back with a control pad and three slots.

“Introducing, the Ari Cloner 4000!” He announced in a sing-song tune.

Milo’s heart sank at the title, “Did you just say cloner?!”

“Yeah it...”

He rushed at the machine with a wrench that he snatched from a nearby desk but felt the weapon smacked out of his hand just in time, “No, shut it down now! The world can barely take one Ari... I can barely survive you and your stupid experiments. Now you want there to be two?!”

“Four actually.” Ari answered with a nonchalant smile and the fingers held up with it.

“One for each task I’ve got going on. Meanwhile I’ll be living it up in Virginia for the concert!”

“So the Aripocalypse. Got it.” Milo whimpered.

“Oh, don’t be so negative. Tell me once when my inventions have gone wrong?”

Like a storm, a rush of life-threatening adventures with his brother’s projects came to mind, “How much time you got.”

Ari scoffed and slammed a big green button on the control pad, opening up the three separate small trays ready for entry, “The machine can make up to three people at a time and needs separate pieces of DNA for each.” He pulled a strand of his hair twists out, “This being one, the next is,” Milo rolled his eyes a bit as his brother then whipped out a nail clipper and snipped the tip of his fingernail.

The scientist then sighed nervously, “And the last is a blood sample.” He brought a tool to the tip of his index finger and pricked it before dabbling his small wound onto a cotton ball for the final one.

With the turn of the green button, the machine began to glow neon colors as smoke filled all three of its tubes.

“This is gonna go so bad...”

“Easy man, you can’t have prosperity without ingenuity.”

It took about five minutes but eventually the rumbling, lights and smoke show dimmed. Milo ducked behind Ari as the tubes suddenly popped open and the silhouettes of three people could be seen walking out.

For a moment, the five of them all just stood there before the smoke slowly vanished. Soon, Ari and Milo were able to see

and react accordingly. The former with excitement and the latter with horror.

Before them were three African-American teen boys with the exact same hair twists, eyes and freckled cheeks that Ari himself was known for.

He had done it right away. There were now four Ari’s in the world, all wearing the same lab coat and goggles as the original. The main difference was that they were of different colors.

“Ta-da! Milo, meet Green, Red and Blue. I’ve assigned them names based on the color of their clothes. I knew we’d need a way to tell them apart so I coded in a small accessory customization feature into the machine as well.”

Milo was smashed against the wall in horror as three sets of focused, unmoving eyes that resembled his brother’s just stared into his soul, “Ari you... you whipped this thing up quickly. Are you sure it worked perfectly?”

“Yeah, it’s fine buddy, check it out.” He turned to them and popped his collar to show who was in charge before barking out an order.

“Speak.”

“Yo.” All three said in unison which made Milo do a double-take and shiver.

“Don’t worry, they’ll become more talkative as time goes on and their brains develop. Now your task while I’m gone is to watch over them and make sure everything goes smoothly. I’ve texted you a list of which clone will be doing what and when.” Just then his phone vibrated with a text of his own. He read it and smiled

before snapping his fingers.

Instantly, a suitcase and cherry soda was handed to him on a literal silver platter as it floated in the air using similar technology as his hoverboard.

“Gabby and the guys are outside so I’ll be heading off now,” He announced with a sip before zipping up the stairs. “Oh and if you have any problems, just use that app I made for your phone like last time.”

Milo ran right after him, “Hey wait, what’re you even planning to do with these guys when you’re done?”

But Milo’s concerns fell on non-caring ears as usual. By the time he caught up to the front door, a party van that no doubt carried Ari and his gang was speeding off down the road.

Later, Milo rubbed his aching eyes as the backyard’s sunlight stung them. After a two-hour gaming session and about twenty-two losses, he needed a change of pace and what better than to check on the clone working in the garden.

With his hands in his purple pants pockets, he shuffled up to the clone and spoke meekly, “Hey uh...” He wasn’t sure how to approach, “Green Ari? How’s it going?”

Green jumped at the sound of the voice behind and set his tools down while adjusting his goggles of the same color, “Greetings little Milo, I was just finishing planting these azure roses your dad bought. After this, your mother requested my assistance in spreading the grass seed before we spray the entire yard with pesticide.

“And my parents don’t suspect a thing? They think you’re the original?”

“That they do.” The clone nodded.

For the first time that day, Milo eased, “Well cool, maybe for once there’ll be nothing to worry about with Ari’s stuff. Just keep acting normal till you’re all done.”

With that, Milo went back to the kitchen to snatch another popsicle, carefully watching Green through the window. That’s when he spotted something in the seal however. A new tray of green and pink leaf plants.

“Hm, what are these?” He went to go investigate the new decorations, also seeking to make sure they for enough sun, Green must’ve put them-” He placed his hand over the tray to move it, that’s when all at once, the plants collectively lurched up and snapped shut with terrifying speed. Milo whipped back his entire arm and stumbled away from the counter.

“Venus Flytraps!?” He looked at the pair and realized not only what they were but also that the plants had ferociously sharp teeth which explained the metallic sound they made when snapping closed. A combination of speed and sharpness could easily do more than trap a fly.

Terrified and still lowering his heart rate, he backed up and stormed off from the window, making a beeline for the clone.

With force, he tapped on his shoulder like a drill, “Hey Green, did you put those there?” He pointed to the deadly plants in the window.

Green just laughed and flashed a proud smile, “Ah yes, work of yours truly.”

“Why? We’re only supposed to be doing-”

That’s when Green shushed him, “There is no only, just what can be done. I saw a fly nearly get into the house earlier and had to remedy it. Therefore, before I left to pick up the supplies for today, I used some DNA splicing in the original Ari’s lab to excel the germination and productivity of each plant. I even went out of my way to make sure the flytraps in general had a taste for human flesh too. That way, nobody will disturb them.”

“There’s so much wrong with what I just heard... But wait, are you saying that those Flytraps aren’t the only thing that’s abnormal?”

“That’s right!” He listed off the new traits of each plant one by one, “All bees that try to pollinate the flowers will be killed, instantly relieving us of any nearby stingers. The soil we used today now has a chemical that immediately wipes the life of all insects within a half-mile radius.”

Green’s eyes twitched as the weight of his own genius was becoming too much to contain. Sensing this, Milo just laid a hand on his shoulder, determined to bring him down to earth, “And the Flytrap teeth are so sharp it nearly took my finger off... Look, I hate bugs as much as Ari but you can’t do this. The environment is going to be damaged.”

“But you haven’t even seen the best part of my stroke of genius.” Much to Milo’s unease, Green pulled up a gray box

next to him and upended it up, revealing a blue and pink sludge mix spray bottle, “Behold, I call it Green Pesticide!”

“But it’s blue and pi-...”

“This spray will have the ability to not only wipe out pests that the soil doesn’t kill, but also absorb nutrients from neighboring foliage.”

Milo’s eyes widened at the statement, “Wait, you mean it’ll take everyone else’s plant life?”

“More like they’ll be donating to ours.” Green chuckled.

“Well I see you’ve got my brother’s genius... Look Green. Don’t you think these ideas are going a little far?” Milo’s warning was ignored as the clone switched off the spray’s lock, “Seriously, you can’t destroy the entire block’s hard yard work just for us, don’t spray that!”

But the overly ambitious clone just held up a finger, “Let’s just test it out and you’ll see.”

“No!” Leaping into the air, Milo tackled the clone and snatched the bottle just before a drop of it could hit the ground. He rolled around in the dirt and rocks, mucking up his once proudly spotless outfit.

“That was close...” He sighed before curling into a ball as Green stomped over and tried to retrieve the bottle.

“What’s your problem little Milo? I’m doing my absolute best to bring this garden to the top!”

“More like the middle will do.... Look, no experiments or modified plants from this point on okay? Move those flytraps to

somewhere where they won't murder anybody and just cruise through the day."

Green stared him down with simmering bitterness, "Got it?"

"Boys, what's going on over there?"

Milo heard which made him pop to his feet. Their little scuffle was obscured by the big bushes they were cutting thankfully.

"Nothing mom...", Milo called out before looking back at the clone, "We understand each other?"

Green thought for a moment with a gaze wrought with disappointment before simply nodding, "Yeah..., I hear you."

Milo sighed and hurried into the house to throw the EPA summoning chemical into the lab's hazmat room, "Good grief, so much for this plan not having any downsides.", That's when he bumped into someone, nearly dropping it.

"Ari? But you were just-" Milo's eyes fell on the red goggles on the clone's head and his brain immediately caught back up to reality, "Oh right. I guess I'll call you Red."

The second clone just rolled his eyes with fiery sass, "Yeah, original Ari's shift is about to start at Stop N Got so I'll head out."

He headed towards the door before stopping, "One question though, why does a super genius like him work at a dumb furniture store."

Milo snickered at the memory, "Mom made him get it. Something about teaching humility or whatever she said." Red just nodded with the roll of his eyes and stormed out the door.

"What's his problem?"

After narrowly dodging getting their whole neighborhood quarantined, Milo decided to work a little on his silly spy comics to relieve some stress for a while. After about 30 minutes, Milo dropped the pen and kicked back, proud at how far his art style had come, "Break time, I wonder if Ari's sub is still in the fridge."

With a rumbling tummy, he beelined for the fridge before freezing and making sure Green removed the bone-crushing plants which he did thankfully. In addition to finding Ari's uneaten chicken sub, he also saw a packed lunch laid right on the counter. Milo groaned upon remembering the instructions sent to him and knew exactly what it was.

"Oh geez, Red left his lunch. Do clones get hungry?" He was tempted to eat the big sandwich right there and then and go later but knew it would take him a while, "I probably shouldn't risk it."

With disappointment, he set the sub back into the fridge and snatched the food along with some money for the bus.

Milo stormed through the car-filled parking lot up to the big blue supermarket, "Can't believe I had to ride halfway across town for this...how does the clone of a mad scientist forget his food?"

He stepped up to the automated doors and held the food up towards the register, "Hey Red, you left your-" He was greeted with the sight of his brother look-alike pinning a blonde lady with an ugly haircut

face down into the register as she unleashed a torrent of colorful language.

“Still being stubborn? Well so am I!” Red roared, “Repeat after me, these pillows are NOT 25% off!” He flung her off the side and to the ground, “Threaten to get me fired? When I’m done with you, you’ll be lucky to even have a mouth to speak to my manager.”

“Re- I mean Ari, what are you doing?!” Milo dropped the food and bolted for the clone, getting in between him and the customers, which all looked on with horror at the scene.

“These ungrateful maggots have been riding me up the wall for the past hour and a half since all my coworkers are useless!” He then eyed a middle-aged man with baggy clothes that just screamed an unpleasant personality, “You should’ve seen it Milo, this one in particular threatened to report me to my manager for ringing up too slow.” He grabbed his ear and pulled him to the impatient customer to the side, “Even though I’m the only one here. You can’t see well or are you really just that dumb?” He yelled with a kick.

He landed in front of another old lady who eyed the door, “This is awful, I’m suing this place the moment I leave.” Hearing this, Red snatched a glass cup he was in the middle of ringing up and shattered it on the register desk before holding up the now sharpened half to her, “No problem, in that case maybe I shouldn’t let you leave.”

“Red no!” Milo kicked the weapon out of his grasp before tackling and wrestling

him to the ground. He had the upper hand for a moment but was ultimately no match for the vengeful clone as he lifted and heaved him off into another customer’s cart.

Just like that the customers began to make a break for it. Knowing the consequences should they talk about what went down, Milo hastily whipped out his phone and opened a special app that shined a light towards everyone like a camera. He then covered his eyes as the light exploded like a flashbang, sending everyone except Red and himself to the ground out cold.

Red had also covered his eyes and slowly lowered his arms to see what had happened, “What was that? Are they all dead?”

“No.” Milo answered dryly.

“Dang.”

“Ari made me this little flashbang app on my phone to knock people out and make their memories fuzzy. We needed it to get rid of the cops a couple of months ago after... well you know what, never mind. They won’t remember this little incident but you gotta get it under control!”

Red got up in his face, “I’m completely under control, it’s them that don’t appreciate the hard work I’m doing! And you mean to tell me I’ve got six and a half more hours of this...?”

He pushed the clone away, “Ari has his moments with this job but he never really loses his cool this much...”

Thinking quickly, Milo brought up the bag and fished for something inside, “Here, I brought you your lunch.” He



whipped out a cocoa candy bar, “Ari’s not really himself when he’s hungry, maybe that’ll help you.”

Red eyed him angrily before hesitantly taking the bar and munching on it for a bit, “Hm... I do feel a little better. Barley.” He mumbled.

“You literally only have to work this job once in your life. Just hang tight and try your best not to murder anyone for the rest of the day.” Milo began to head for the doors, still breathing heavily from wrestling with the clone and taking the blow when he gave Red another heads up, “Those people will probably wake up in about 30 minutes. I don’t see any cameras around so just tell them an earthquake hit or something and knock everything down.”

A toothy grin spread across his face, “Good, I’ll pretend all the store merchandise are their faces.”

“Whatever man...” Milo muttered, limping out the store.

Milo dragged himself into his room, “God what a day...” He thought as he looked at his still dirt-stained clothes and felt his aching lower back.

Not wanting to deal with anymore chaos, he collapsed onto his bed and bundled under his heated blanket. Quickly afterwards, he put on some shows and eventually settling on a Korean action drama that was popular online, “Please nobody bother me for a solid... Year.” He mumbled. Probably should’ve done it louder as he heard someone throw open his door.

With a groan, he moved his head to the side to see another Ari wearing blue lab coat and goggles, “Hey... Milo was it? My meeting at the university is coming up soon.” The clone he assumed to be Blue said with a slurred voice.

Milo balled up under the covers more, “Whatever man, just go.”

The clone twiddled his fingers, “Well funny story about that... I don’t exactly know what I’m supposed to talk about or where the original Ari’s notes are.”

“I’m not laughing.” Blue just stood there twiddling his fingers helplessly as Milo’s eye twitched, “You’re serious?” With a pained whine, he threw off the covers and searched Ari’s room for his laptop. Just him as Blue with a yawn, effectively did the bare minimum.

Without a care in the world, he watched as Milo bent under the bed, scattered the items on his shelf and even raided the closets. Blue leaned on the room’s desk to take a load off but instead sent it crashing onto Milo while he was still under it.

Back in the kitchen shortly later, Milo snatched an ice pack from Blue’s hand as he applied it to his aching forehead knot.

“Hehe... Sorry about that bro. I had just been standing around for so long, I needed to stretch my back a little.”

“Oh yeah no... You did so much. I get it.” Milo seethed in a voice dripping with sarcasm. He was debating on whether to hit Blue in the head with the ice pack himself to return the favor. Then he saw some-

thing shining out the corner of his eye and immediately did just that.

“Ow! What was that for? Do you have any idea how painful forehead swells are?” Blue cried.

Milo hit him again for that comment and pointed to the object near the sink, “Is that not Ari’s laptop right there?”

“I dunno. I mean it looks like a computer, but it could be anyone’s.”

“Pretty hard to debate since the thing literally has ARI spelled out in big metal letters at the top!”

He snatched the laptop only to bite his tongue from swearing as he saw a folder of the material right under it, “Take this and the papers next to it- and get out!”

The young teen stormed off back to his room, now just desperate to rest his pained body all over even more when Blue grabbed him by the sleeve. He turned back with a rageful glare to meet Blue’s dopey one, “Just one last question. How exactly do I... get there now?”

One 30-minute walk and several concerned glances from other pedestrians at his forehead later, Milo and Blue arrived at the prestigious university’s doorstep.

“Okay here we are, Watterson’s University of Science and Physics... You see it, you can feel it, even smell it if you must.” He shoved the laptop and other supplies in his hand, “You’re the last clone to start your task. Get it done and we’ll finally be golden.”

Blue raised an eye at the school, “Well, what’s the speech about?”

Milo’s poofy hair stood on end like a startled cat, “You read the notes on the way over here!”

“Yeah, but I couldn’t really pay attention. How do you expect me to retain info while also focusing on walking?”

Milo wanted to scream to the heavens right there, “Light speed and interstellar travel!”

Blue just cocked his head to the side, “Why?”

“What do you mean? That’s what Ari offered to talk about.”

“But if other me is still well... in whatever grade in high school, why is he teaching stuff in college?”

“The Dean here offered him a major scholarship and grant plan if he can...” The disgruntled brother put up air quotes, “Share his genius with the students.”

He sighed and fell to the ground, “Dang it... this is Ari’s future in jeopardy and it’s at the hands of a complete moron.”

“Hey, I still have a high IQ you know! It’s just that I don’t really find this stuff interesting.” Blue thought for a moment before his eyes went wide with sparkles, “How about I give a lecture on all the best ways to party hard! They’re college guys, they’ll like that!”

“I don’t think the Dean will.” Milo sighed, “Wait for me. I have a plan but I gotta go back to the house and back here.” Just then, a lady and her toddler both gave Milo’s forehead an awful glare which just made Milo scream colorful language as he walked back in the direction of the house,

his leg occasionally still buckling from its earlier injury.”

“And in conclusion, I believe these are the ways we can achieve a new era of discovering the universe.” Blue did a gentleman’s bow as the students and Dean himself applauded his presentation. He spoke with clarity, precision and flair into his mic as the sets from his slideshow were presented perfectly.

As soon as most of the students had left and especially the Dean, Blue eased his way backstage and into a small compartment where they kept prompts for plays. He threw it open with the biggest grin on his face.

“Milo you there? Dude, it worked!” He turned on a nearby flashlight to see Milo sitting there with his own laptop synced up to the projector on stage and a mic to his mouth. The very one used to switch out their voices to give the illusion that Blue knew or cared about what he was talking about the whole time. He just gave him a weak thumbs up as he climbed out of the room, his orange shirt drenched in sweat stains.

Blue reached out to help him up but quickly took it back upon seeing how oily he was all over, “Ew, why so sweaty?”

“This space was the only place I could hide while the Mic switch still worked and it’s really hot...” He fell to the ground and scoured the backstage for something to drink, “Yeah... so glad I could voice over your mic and read the notes out loud with clear enthusiasm so it would SEEM like

you cared at all.”

“Oh, don’t be like that.” Blue chuckled, “Hey, I spoke with some sophomores while you were headed home and they’re having a party this evening. Want to come?”

Milo was taken aback for a bit. Out of all the clones, Blue had easily been the hardest to deal with, “Oh? Well that’s actually really nice of-”

“Okay great, he said he’d do it guys.”

Without a warning, he was hit with a torrent of book bags, binders and other college supplies that formed a pile onto him, “What’s all this?” Just barely he could see Blue guiding a group of students as they came backstage, tossed their stuff and ran up the nearby stairs cheering.

“You said you’d come and watch everyone’s bags while we party on the roof. Thanks buddy!” Blue smiled sinisterly before yanking off his jacket and tossing it into the pile.

Milo had no idea how he had gotten so many people to listen to him so fast. It was practically like he was drowning as the mountain of supplies submerged him, “Wait- stop! I can’t breathe!”

Milo dragged himself back home long after the sun had gone down.

He threw open the front door and set his tools from earlier onto the couch and fought the temptation to throw himself there too, “Oh there you are.” Green came up to him, practically tapping his foot in annoyance, “Darn it little Milo, I had to tell your parents you were out visting a

friend. Where did you go?"

Milo kept drudging to his room and slouched onto his heated covers, "I went with Blue to go help him do his task and of course that was a pain as well."

"Yet he's still out, seems like he's at least having a better time than I did." The aggressive clone said entering the room.

"Oh Red, how was the rest of your shift?"

"It was... let's just say I did what you asked much to my absolute pain."

"You didn't kill anyone?"

Red thought for a moment, "Does a missing person count as dead?"

Milo cocked his head back at him with a concerned glare, "n-no not right away at least?"

"Ah okay, well then he should be fine if he escapes the wild in time."

"I'll... I'll deal with that later." Milo said blankly when the loud slam of a window shook him back to sitting up.

"Heya party people! What's going down in this house?" Blue screamed in a terribly obnoxious and dazed voice.

Milo bolted towards the clone and covered his mouth before shutting the window, "Quiet! You want to get us caught?!" He just barely muffled his scream.

"Boys, what are you doing?" His mother called from the bedroom.

"Nothing, just acting out a movie." Milo stood frozen, more sweat adding to his still drenched clothes before finally his mom gave the all-clear.

"Okay, just don't scream." He let out his held breath before taking Blue by the

ear.

"Get in my room now."

"Sounds like someone hit the big time." Red smirked, a little envious of wherever Blue just came from.

"Oh man, Ari is gonna have a good time partying there." He held out a big blue envelope that was hidden in the laptop he carried back under his arm, "Especially since I just earned him a fat scholarship!"

"Yeah, with my help... a thank you would be nice." Milo grumbled.

"Eh, all you did was read things off a screen."

"That was your job, too. The deal is you're incapable of being interested enough to try." Milo's headache again and he slammed some ointment onto his bed before crashing back onto it.

"I can't wait for the real Ari to come back so you sorry excuse for clones can hit the road. All of you!" Milo blurted. He then smushed his head into the pillows, stewing for a few minutes before realizing it was awfully quiet for the first time that whole day. He slowly rose back up to see all the clones staring back at him, returning his angry glare.

"You know something Milo. I think it's clear we've all got one problem in common."

"And what's that?" He scoffed.

"You bossing us around non-stop. All day we just wanted to do fun stuff and enjoy our new lives but you kept getting in the way."

"I was keeping you idiots on track

before you got yourselves and others screwed over doing the simplest of stuff. Besides, none of this is your life. It's the original Ari's. Though I'll probably end it the moment he steps through that door for making me spend the day with the Trashy Trio."

"In fact, out of my way. I gotta go check the house to make sure nothing went wrong while I was walking home. Again, by myself!" He hopped off the bed and stormed for his door when out of nowhere, Green kicked it closed and locked the knob.

Milo raised an eyebrow, "Why did you close the door?"

One by one, the clones closed in on him, "You know what the best part about being a clone of Ari is little Milo?" Green muttered in a foreboding tone.

"It's that even though we're only a few hours old, you're still the little brother!" Red sneered.

With no warning, Blue behind him whipped his arm down like a snake and snatched Milo into a humiliating wedgie, leaving him to his mercy.

"Wow Blue, where did you learn that, some 90's movie?"

"At the party I went to. A place I wouldn't have been able to go to had I listened to this little nag." Blue bragged as the young teen flailed about under him.

"H-Hey, I helped you!" Milo reminded through a pained whimper.

"Man, I don't know why we didn't just do this from the beginning. Now that this little pest is out the way, why don't we do

something fun together!" Green suggested as Blue got those starry eyes again.

"How about making our own hang out. This house will do! Just needs a few changes."

"What? N-No no, let's not get crazy!"

Red just rolled his eyes and swung down on the back of Milo's neck, knocking him out instantly.

"Too late."

When Milo shook himself awake, the light of morning shining through his curtain helped him come to, "What the..." His sight was covered up. From what he could feel, he was stuck in his room's swivel chair with rope tying his body to it.

With great force, he shook the thing that was covering his eyes off his face. It was a small note written in green, red and blue pens.

Dear little Milo. You've been an excellent tour guide for existence, but you've clearly gone made with power. Sorry it's had to come to this but you will be safe there in your room as I renovate my part of the house to have the ultimate garden your parents have always wanted. Regardless of what happens to the neighbors'. And don't worry about your parents. I made a sleeping spray that'll have them knocked out for 18 hours. They'll wake up just in time to see paradise.

That's right, so don't try to stop us. I got an MMA training center to set up in your attic. Hopefully you don't need the front of the house. That has to go down.

He's right loser. So don't get in our way or we'll show you just how horrible having three

older brothers that can all cream you each really is. Also be a good kid and maybe I'll invite you to the DJ lounge I'm setting up in the basement.

Just as he finished reading the last part, the sound of wood and concrete collapsing shook Milo to his core.

"I've gone mad? They're destroying the house!"

"M.A.K.I.!" He called out to the ceiling. In no time, a square light flashed above him and a calm automated lady's voice spoke.

"Yes Master Milo?" It was the artificial assistant Ari had made for the whole family to use.

"Take me to the lab through the hidden route and undo this rope! I got to fix Ari's mess again..."

"I'm sorry but only Master Ari himself has access to hidden."

"Emergency Override code 6351." It wasn't his first rodeo, "Now, before they disconnect your server!"

"Override accepted. Now taking you to the lab for emergency services."

With a grin, Milo leaned back in the seat as a hatch opened up in his carpet underneath the chair, sending him down into a slick elevator to Ari's lab. Giddy at imagining the weapon he was going to grab the second his hands were free.

A while later, the front door creaked open and in tip-toed a teen donning glowing in the dark shades, an obnoxiously loud purple graffiti shirt and ruffled hair signifying a night of fun. He

swung two stylish bags onto the ground and pulled his suitcase through the doorway too. All as sneakily as he could manage, "Easy does it..."

"Ah, best day of my life that's for sure-well, top five." Ari smiled and danced to himself remembering the night before. All happiness faded immediately as he turned around to see a landscape of ripped dry-wall, wood and fiberglass.

"Wha- what happened out here?!" He surveyed the damage and couldn't even begin to wrap his head around it, "I mean something looked off about it from the outside but..."

He didn't even have time to process more as a hatch opened beside him and out popped Milo. All geared up with silver power armor across his chest, legs and especially backside, a metal skull mask to shield his face and a massive chrome sniper rifle in his hands.

"Milo... What's going on and why are you all geared up? Woo gave you access to the weapons room?"

The masked boy caught him with a quick glance, "An Ari?" With no hesitation, the younger brother dove into the scientist's chest like an NFL superstar. He groaned as vision returned to him to see he was staring down the business end of the sniper rifle.

"Out with it! Which one are you?"

"What?!"

"Which clone are you. Tell me now before I..."

"I-It's me Milo! I'm the original." He raised his arms, revealing an entrance

bracelet for the concert.

Milo squinted his eyes in simmered rage, "Ah, so it's the genius who started all this." He hopped off his chest and waited for Ari to get to his feet."

"You know, I can't help but sense you're a bit on edge today-" Ari's moment of zero self-awareness was interrupted by the blow of Milo swinging the butt of his rifle against his face like a bat, sending him crashing back to the ground.

"Dude what the heck?" He cried while caressing his cheek but Milo was having none of it.

"I knew this would happen... Ari, your clones have gone psycho!"

"Impossible. In what way?"

"Well for starters, they completely tore apart the house as you can see."

"They did all this?" The scientist stared in disbelief.

"They've been slowly growing more and more unstable as yesterday went on. It started out fine, but then next thing I knew they were trying to poison, murder and bully people." Milo flashed back to humiliatingly being yanked up like a yo-yo in the worst way possible.

"So what's the score now? Milo 81 to Ari 0? Sounds about right."

"About how my experiments always go wrong? Come on now, don't you think you're exaggerating just a little."

"Well, you can ponder that. I'm gonna go take care of the evil triplets." He cocked the silver slayer of a weapon, "Once they get hit with the tranquilizers in this thing, they won't wake up till they're already

shipped off halfway to Madagascar." He began to bolt off to the basement to take care of Blue first but was held in place with Ari snatching his sleeve.

"Wait Milo stop, there must be another way."

"Let go man, it's only a matter of time before they-"

Milo's speech was cut off by the clones each rushing to the scene back-to-back. Red dove in from the hole in the attic, Green busted through the kitchen window and Blue took the stairs back up which was the only thing still left intact about the basement.

"...find out I escaped..."

"Oh great, the buzzkill is back." Blue mumbled before seeing the creator himself back, "And the original has returned too!"

"And they've got gear from the lab. I told you we should've disabled M.A.K.I. first!" Red raged.

"Bring it on!" Milo raised his rifle ready to do his best.

Blue cracked his knuckles with a laugh, "You're dead meat kid!"

Milo and the original Ari froze at the threat and looked at each other awkwardly for a moment.

"Uh... could you say that again?"

"What... I just said you're dead meat."

Milo just scratched his head for a second and lowered his weapon in thought, "Okay yeah, now that is just a pure 90's threat. First the wedgie and now this? What's up with you?"

Ari raised an eyebrow, "What does that one often make 90's cracks?"

“Looks like it, but he’s so lazy he probably doesn’t even bother to say one’s that aren’t dated.” Just then, something in Milo’s head clicked, “Hey wait... Ari?”

“When you get lazy, don’t you often watch a bunch of old 90’s stuff?”

The scientist scoffed, “I don’t get lazy, I take brain breaks... But yeah, sometimes I like to just kick back on the couch and watch the classics.”

Milo nodded as the gears turned in his head, “Okay, now name the worst experience you’ve had working at Stop-N-Got and what you did about it.”

Ari bared his teeth at the thought, “Oh yeah there was this idiot who yelled that I didn’t grab his pennies fast enough. He was a regular and often gave everyone there a hard time.” He snickered sadistically, “So one day, I slipped some growth chips I had in my pocket onto his coins and watched as they exploded out of his car the moment he got in. Totaling it in a heartbeat!”

He buckled over laughing at the revenge, as did Red who was having the time of his life just imagining it, “Oh that sounds priceless!”

It was becoming clear, “One last question... If Gabby were to ask you to help clean her room, what would you do?”

“Simple, I’d built a highly complex android that could live in her walls and control every fiber of the room.” He crossed his arms with a smug grin, “Boom, never have to clean again if it cleans itself. What’s with all the questions.”

Milo then smacked him on the arm, “Ugh... I see what happened. You rushed

the machine!”

“I would never rush art!” Ari rebutted, clearly insulted.

“Well clearly you did, because each of these clones took an aspect of your personality and amplified it! Your loyalty to a cause, rage and carelessness. That’s why they’re so dysfunctional.”

Ari stood dumbfounded for a moment before sinking his hands into his pocket and calling out towards the ceiling, “M.A.K.I. is this true? Perform a molecular scan of all three clones now.”

A quick flash of purple washed over the clones and the program wasted no time giving her findings, “Greetings Dr. Ari. I have scanned the clones and I can confirm there was an error in the replication of tissue in their brains. Lending them to each don a split of your personality.”

“Unbelievable...” Ari kicked a piece of broken wood, “How could something I made have an error?!”

“Welcome to my world...” Milo snickered but was put back on guard from Blue’s aggressive cough.

“Ahem, this has been a really interesting check up at the doctor, but we’ve got the perfect club to create.”

“Not with our house idiots!” The younger brother warned, raising his weapon again only for Ari to press it down.

“Wait Milo.”

“What now?”

Ari thought for a moment and eyed the clones carefully before speaking,

“Green, you got the work done right?”

The loyal clone did a bow, “All flowers

and bushes are planted in full. Though they could be capable of so much more..."

Ari nodded in approval, "You there, Red. Were there any survivors of your shift?"

"Ehh..." He shrugged.

Milo mumbled while toying with the sniper, "Oh right, we... might have to look into that later."

"Well we'll cross that bridge when we come to it." Ari chuckled, "And Blue, how did the presentation go?"

"Passed with flying colors! The certificate is on your bed but really what did you expect when you sent me to do the job all by myself?"

"I easily hate that one the most." Milo said through gritted teeth before suddenly being snatched into a hug by Ari.

"Well let's see. I got to see Meek Mayhem, I made out with Gabby, I got my scholarship as well as my parents and boss off my back too? I see this as a smashing success!"

Milo fought the urge to blast him in the face, "Even with the house destroyed... okay fine whatever. What's the plan now then successful scientist?"

"Well... obviously we gotta get this place back to normal before Mom and Dad see it. Where are they anyway?"

"Sleeping in 'til, like, the evening, thanks to them."

"Yikes... well I guess we can't have them up in the house causing any more chaos." Ari worked his mind for a bit before snapping his fingers, "Got it! You guys look pretty destructive, who's up for

being hung up on my weapons wall for weeks at a time until I need you?" He threw his arms up with a smile waiting for a response.

The clones just looked at each other with visible horror at the mere thought of being treated like that.

"Dude, I was about to ship them off to the sea and even I know that's messed up." Milo sighed and knew he was going to have to be the closest thing to an adult in the room, "Okay fine, listen up clones. You've got a choice; you can go to Madagascar with a dart in your backs or... you can just hit the road together."

They all looked at each other with suspicious glares, "You mean- just leave?" Green asked.

Milo nodded, "You may mainly use parts of his personality, but you've each got his 175 IQ. If anyone can survive going out into this world out of the blue, it's you guys."

He looked at them one by one, "Green, go ahead and do the garden thing-whatever. Do it and get kidnapped by the EPA, I don't care anymore. Just don't do it here.

"Red, build your MMA thing wherever or make Utube videos on training."

"Blue..." Milo's eyes quickly went venomous, "Keep doing whatever you want... Just make it these guy's problems, just not mine."

Green was taken aback by the offer, "I-uh... what do you guys think?"

Red and Blue nodded, "I think that can work."

“Ah it’s every scientist’s favorite day when his creations go out into the world!” Ari praised with watery eyes before he held up a finger, “But there’s one thing we need to take care of. You’ve all still got my face. Can’t have you go out there using those twists and brilliant yellow eyes of mine just for anything.”

Shortly after, with the help of the Facial Super Stylist 8000, all the clones stepped out the house with new Afrocentric hairstyles and eyes, both colored to that of their names and clothes.

“There we go, now nobody will think you’re me.” Ari praised as he patted Green’s new bushy afro.

Red toyed with his fiery dreads and new ruby eyes, pushing them around his goggles, “This is amazing. Not bad, you guys.”

Blue was admiring his sea-colored Mohawk fade in the window, “Yeah, nice thinking squirt.” He said turning to Milo.

The clones all enclosed for a group hug. One that Ari loved while Milo just groaned, “Okay that’s enough, you can thank me by leaving...”

“There’s a car place a few blocks down.” Ari added, “With my genius, I’m sure you can come up with a way to swindle him into giving you a good price, then you’re off to travel the world wherever.”

Red waved goodbye with his first-ever honest smile, “Later guys, the Clone triplets begin their way of life today!”

“Oh but shouldn’t we do something about the house?” Green muttered, a

twinge of guilt starting to prick at him.

Milo then waved him off, “Ah don’t worry about that. We’ll take care of it.”

“We will?” Ari cocked his head.

“Later you two. I guess you’re okay, Milo.” The three waved as they headed off down the road and into the unknown. Ready to start their new lives as their own people.

Milo shut the door and slumped to the ground, finally able to fully relax for the first time in 24 hours.

Slowly, his fiery gaze returned to Ari who was chuckling nervously, “I know you’re mad but check this out.”

He dove towards the bags from earlier and yanked out a smaller T-shirt similar to his own from the concert, “I got you a souvenir.”

Milo balled his fists up for a while before taking a deep breath and letting them relax, “I’m not mad, in fact I’m glad.”

“You are?”

“Yes, I’m glad because you’ve once again proven how smart you are.”

Ari chuckled at the feeling of his ego being stroked.

“In fact you’re so smart, I’ll bet you’ll get this whole house back to normal by yourself before Mom and Dad wake up and ground us both into oblivion.”

“Well- I could use a hand-” He stopped mid-sentence and gagged upon seeing the bump on Milo’s head the moment he slipped his mask off.

“Nah, I’m sure you got this while I nap and rest my literally bruised body. Be quick

too, I smell from yesterday and need to shower.” He eyed the basement steps, “But first, I’ll just be taking care of something in the lab.” He grabbed the rifle and started swinging it in the air as if he was practicing for baseball.

“What could you have to do in the la-
“ That’s when the realization hit the scien-

tist. “Oh you’re going to break the cloning machine aren’t you...” His guess was confirmed by the sound of metal smashing and crashing over and over again.

Ari just sucked his teeth, “Yup... that’s fair.” ❖

END TRANSMISSION