

WINTER WHEAT

Gord Sellar

Gord Sellar (www.gordsellar.com) is a Canadian writer living in South Korea with his wife, Jihyun Park, and their son. In recent years, he and Jihyun have collaborated on translating Korean SF. The stories have been published at *Clarkesworld* and in *Readymade Bodhisattva: The Kaya Press Anthology of South Korean Science Fiction*. Gord's own stories have appeared in *Asimov's*, *Analog*, *Clarkesworld*, and *Interzone*, "Winter Wheat" is his first tale set on the Canadian prairie where he grew up, and it is dedicated to the memory of his late father, from whom he learned (among many things) his love of stories and of sharing them.

January 2022

The land slept hard, after months blanketed beneath deep snow. Seeds nestled in the soil, frozen on the cusp of sprouting, and the earth was riddled with slumbering creatures strewn cold in their tunnels, the husks of the dead and of those yet to reawaken. A vast whiteness covered everything, blazing intense even in the darkness of prairie night. The snow stirred only when occasional windstorms struck it, or by the coming of the sun in frigid new year's mornings.

Across these frozen plains cut long, snaking ribbons of highway stretching out to the east, to the west, and the south, with a few running northward. Visible from far above as long, grey slashes cleaving the barren whiteness, these highways were the main evidence of intelligence in this snow-desert, more readily noticed than the tiny dots of the towns, more constant than the steamy exhaust of the furnaces in those tiny, defiantly warm farmhouses that clung to the earth. The creatures that had built these roads were thinkers, planners. They could plant and prepare for spring, and dream of the crops that would come after the year's snow had come and gone again.

The seeds of the next fall's crop, MSWW-536, did not dream as they slumbered, waiting, in the earth. They did not plot or scheme, though they held secrets. When the warmth of spring came, it would unlock the strange clockwork mechanisms buried in their hearts and unleash their wondrous otherness upon the plains. Though it was not the first of its kind, and far from the last, this year's crop was different in a way from all those that had preceded it.

People had begun to sense it, by then, even if the earth itself had lain as open as ever to the seeds. Not everyone, just a few, those who lived on the land, and worked it. A very few sensed some deepening enigma beneath the snow, in the way the land lay there, accepting that strange, unnatural seed, yet turning within itself, bracing for what was certain to come. They thought of the seeds as they looked out across the vastness of the snow, imagining the blizzards that it just might spawn, covering up the roads and leaving confusion in the place of everything that had stood clear under the wide, gentle sky. They thought of the seeds and the change they might bring, and waited for the coming spring.

* * *

Jimmy's ice skates were just a smidge too small, because they were his cousin's hand-me-downs, but that never slowed him down in the thick of a game. He managed to get a couple of shots past Mike Yip and between the two black plastic posts that marked the width of the net, one off a pass from Terry Horchinski. Two goals was really something, and the victory tune that the flashing, shivering puck played as it soared between the tracking posts was still ringing in his ears when the game was over. Mike was a tenth grader and built like an ox, after all, and Jimmy was only twelve—and Terry always bragged about how he'd been playing hockey since he'd been in diapers.

Jimmy knew that was bullshit, but Mike was the best goalie in all of Biggar, and in all the years of coming out and playing on the frozen slough at the Wishnowski place, Jimmy had never scored on him *twice* in one game before. And they'd screamed it live, Jimmy thought, happily glancing up to the drone they'd set loose to capture it all. He looked forward to showing his dad those shots: the old man might not be much interested in hockey, but he'd cheer Jimmy on, all the same.

After the game, Mrs. Wishnowski invited the boys in for hot chocolate and to warm up in her kitchen. Everyone but Mike took her up on the offer, because he had to go pick up his old man in town in twenty minutes anyway. He offered the other boys a ride, but they all turned him down.

They stayed out of gratitude to Mrs. Wishnowski. She didn't have a boy of her own around anymore—her own son, Randy, had moved to Saskatoon to study at the University. She talked about him all the time, and said she was sure he'd never move back to Biggar, not ever, not even for the summers, except maybe at harvest-time. Which was kind of sad, but that was how it always was with young people, and it wasn't so bad, really. It wasn't like Randy had *died* or anything. Saskatoon was only an hour away: she could always visit him sometime. Even if he did like everyone else, and moved to Calgary, or down East, or to one of those famous new economic development zones in India that all the smart kids seemed to be going to for a year or two, just long enough to make a fortune. She just seemed a little lonely, a little sad at how nobody her boy's age ever stayed around for long anymore.

"Well, boys, you sure played hard out there," she smiled and sipped her own mug of hot chocolate. "How's your father, Jimmy?" She always asked after him. They'd taken classes together in high school.

"He's just fine," Jimmy said, feeling a little protective of his dad. "Still working on that wheat strain of his, I think."

"Well, he always was a clever one," she said, ruffling Jimmy's blond hair. "We were always so sure he was gonna do something big, someday," she added, and then she went silent. Jimmy didn't know what to say. He'd heard from Terry that Mrs. Wishnowski had dated his dad for a while in high school. Knowing that felt a little weird, made it always feel awkward whenever she asked about how his old man was doing.

One by one the boys finished their hot chocolates, put down their empty mugs, and wiped their mouths with their shirtsleeves. They all sat there for a while, saying nothing, and the TV nattered away in the background, too low to make out

much except that it was a talk show on one of the craptertainment American feeds Mrs. W ran off one of Randy's old rebuilt Playstations in the living room. Jimmy had come over the summer before and ended up watching a bunch of cartoons off the net on the same machine, when the Wishnowskis had hosted a party and kids of different ages had been around. Randy had been there, but he'd spent half the time in the basement with that girl who'd come down from Maidstone.

"You boys feeling any warmer now?"

Jimmy understood that cue: it was time to head home.

"Yes, Mrs. Wishnowski," they all said together, and Chris added, "Thank you." Jimmy and Terry immediately thanked her too, Jimmy blushing a little at being slow to say it. His father usually teased him about blushing like that, said it showed he'd picked up some real manners somewhere.

"You boys want a ride home?" she offered, looking out the window at the sky.

"No thanks," the boys all said together. They'd taken a ride with her once before, and she'd driven slow as molasses, so slow it'd taken them an hour to get home. It was better to go down the highway on foot, so they could curse and swear and talk about whatever they wanted, and besides, they'd almost get home sooner walking. Anyway, it wasn't so cold out, that day, only fifteen below, and none of them had *so* far to walk, either.

"The forecast is nice," Terry chirped quickly, looking up from his iPwn. "It's supposed to stay nice, too."

"As long as two of you have phones," she began, "And you have reception out here."

"Sure, I got one," Jimmy said with a nod, holding his up for her to see. Terry did the same. Nobody bothered to explain that Terry's iPwn was online 100 percent of the time, even so far out of town. She was old, and network coverage had still been pretty bad in the area when she'd started using a cell phone a couple of decades back.

"All right then. You boys be careful," she said as they pulled on their parkas and slung their ice skates over their shoulders, one skate in the front and the other in the back, and left her standing there in the kitchen, washing the mugs and smiling quietly.

The three of them clomped down the highway into Biggar, pilgrims returning home from the local hockey shrine, with blessed hockey sticks clunking down against the road with every second or third step. They didn't talk at first: it was good enough just to walk together, single file down the shoulder of the highway, Chris whistling into the cold air as one of those huge, driverless twenty-eight-wheelers roared down the highway past them, an autopilot juggernaut. The boys stared up at the truck reproachfully. They were new enough the boys still looked at them distrustfully. You had to be careful not to run out in front of one of those machines, out on the highway. No iPods, no DMSs, no VR headsets, nothing distracting like that. The trucks were supposed to stop if it happened, but the people on the news said sometimes they didn't.

When the boys got to the train tracks, the barriers were already down and the red warning lights were flashing, and the train was visible way down the track. It was coming in from out west, from over in Alberta. Jimmy stared up at the train cars as they whizzed past, tried to read the logos on the side of each car as they all blurred past him. The wheat went the same way, on trains like this one. Jimmy wondered really hard about where they were going, and what it was like out there, down East.

* * *

February 2023

Jimmy closed his eyes and scratched harder at the lacquer on the arm of the pew, fighting to hide his boredom and wishing he was anywhere besides the Colonial

Park Mennonite Brethren Church, just as Mrs. Wishnowski's big, tractor-bellied husband Ed stood up from a cheap metal folding chair that was older than Jimmy himself.

"Sure," Ed said, "But what I'm worried about is yield. I got two kids in University, one in Toronto and one in Saskatoon, and I got ten, fifteen more years of work in me, at best. I need whatever gives me the most bang for my buck, and the Grower's Alliance fella told me that these here chiral whatsy-doozit seeds knock off pests ten times better than Roundup—they can't digest the wheat at all, he said." He cleared his throat roughly, shrugged his shoulders, and took off his mesh cap, the one with the ancient Saskatchewan Wheat Pool logo on the front that he wore all year round. As he ran his fingers over the stubble that dotted his scalp, he added, "The pests just starve to death, and eat up all the weeds while they're doing it!"

"Well, I understand your dilemma," said the professor, lifting a glass of water to his lips and taking a small sip. Fella from the city, some agritech expert from the University of Saskatchewan. In his cotton shirt and blue jeans, he didn't look much like professors did on TV, but then, Jimmy had never seen a professor of *agriculture* on any TV show before. Still, he had this weird feeling somehow that the professor didn't dress that way back in the big city, when he was teaching practical and applied genetics to university students.

When the prof put down his glass, he said, "But the thing you need to understand is that the bugs can't digest the stuff because *nothing* can. Lemme put it this way: they've gone in and messed with how the starches stack together, twisted them all around the opposite direction to usual. Nothing on earth has the right enzymes in its guts to break those carbs down into sugars—not you, not me, not the bugs, nothing," he said, pausing briefly as if hesitating to wade too deep into the science. Then he continued: "If it doesn't go through the industrial processing they use on it in the mills, well: you take this wheat and grind it into flour in your kitchen, and then bake yourself some bread, and I'm telling you that you can literally *starve to death* on a full stomach of that bread every day. It's not just pests: *anyone* can starve off it, like rabbit meat. They made it that way, so we're dependent on them for processing and distribution and everything. Now, what that means is that growing this wheat may give you a better yield, but it also locks you farmers into working with specific buyers, into a specific distribution model. And then you gotta deal with the ecological collapse that comes when all the vermin dies out, and if the genes they've spliced in transfer to other plants, or if it mutates . . . Well, it's just not so simple as they're saying it is, that's all."

Jimmy noticed his dad nodding, but he seemed to be the only one who was. All the other farmers were mumbling among themselves, and honestly, Jimmy didn't really get what the big deal was either. That textbook—the one with the company logo on the cover, that his dad had called to complain to the school about—explained how these seeds were approved by WTO/UN committees and had stabilized world food distribution and the entire global market. *Global food security*, that phrase had stuck with Jimmy. He couldn't see what was so bad about that.

"And when you're locked into that system, then, just like in India and China, like most of Africa . . . well, here, let me show you again," and he pulled out his iPhone—a real one, not one of those homemade iPwns—and flicked it at the sheet of white vinyl he'd stretched onto the wall. The screen came alive with pie charts. The professor waved his iPhone around, explaining again, slow and careful, to a roomful of farmers. Not that they were stupid—if they were still running family farms in 2023, they had to at least be clever and thoughtful, and good at planning—but they were businesspeople, concerned with yield and profit first and foremost; the theoretical, biotechnical side of it ran a distant second. To a lot of them it *had* to, if they were going to stay in business at all.

As for Jimmy, he'd finally had enough. There were no other kids in the room, and he couldn't sit still anymore, so he took off toward the bathroom. When he got close, he heard a sound echoing up the stairs from the church basement: a wonderful sound, a sound so joyful it set his heart thumping right away. There was yelling, and cheering, and organ playing, and a constant stream of commentary by a nasal voice.

It was the opening music for *Hockey Night in Canada*.

He rushed down the stairs and found a couple of other boys down there, on the couch, in front of the big screen TV in the middle of the room: Terry Horchinski, who was about his age, and Todd Moroz, who was a few years older than him, and one of the biggest boys he'd ever met. Wayne, he turned and looked at Jimmy—the big pitchfork scar on his cheek was suddenly visible, and the story of how he got it playfighting with his brother in the barn one summer flashed through Jimmy's head—and Wayne said, "What took you so long, Oleksyn? I thought maybe you died up there."

"You know my dad. He's crazy about that stuff. Said he wanted me to 'learn something.'" Jimmy shrugged, and sat down on the couch.

Toronto had control of the puck, he noticed, and he scanned the corner of the screen to get caught up. Calgary was whipping ass, as usual, with four goals to Toronto's measly one. "How's Lorne Geisbrecht doing tonight?"

"Pretty damned . . ." Number 14 Nick Phaneuf passed the puck to Number 23 Lorne Geisbrecht, and he slapped it high and hard, straight past Toronto's goalie and into the net. In an instant, the crowd was on its feet and going wild, and the three boys in the basement cheered right along with them. Lorne Geisbrecht swerved away from the goal, and while his back was turned, Toronto's Number 54 Perry Redbird body-checked him from behind. Redbird was built like a goddamned brick shit-house, so Lorne Geisbrecht went down flat on the ice.

"Shit!" the boys all yelled in unison, and then they all winced, realizing they'd cussed in a church full of grownups.

As the inevitable fight exploded across the screen, with all the blood bouncing off the ice and hockey sticks smashed against helmets, Wayne lifted the remote and pointed it to zoom in on the patch of red in a cutaway window to replay the bounce off the TV's cache. The boys stared, rapt, at both the rebounding blood and the battle unfolding all over the rest of the screen. Jimmy smiled, remembering what his father usually said when fights broke out during hockey games: "Some things in this world are never gonna goddamned change, I tell ya."

"God bless Lorne Geisbrecht," said Terry Horchinski with a deeply pious tone, as he clenched the gold cross on the chain hanging around his neck. "And God bless the Calgary Flames . . ."

* * *

Jimmy drifted up from sleep to find himself bouncing in the passenger seat of his dad's truck. They must've hit the badly re-paved section of the highway out of Biggar, the part everyone complained about all the time.

"Dad, what time is it?"

"Go back to sleep, kid, it's late." Dad didn't sound very happy. He was staring at a dim pair of taillights out ahead of them in the darkness, barely visible through what look like a wall of wind-blown snow. If guilt were stronger than fear, Jimmy would have begun to worry.

"I'm sorry, Dad. I shouldn't have fallen asleep. . . ." He tried to sit up, to wake himself.

"Nah, nah, it's not you. It's just . . ." He looked over. What Jimmy saw on his dad's face wasn't something that could be described with a single word like *sad* or *upset* or *scared*. It was something bigger than that, and he just looked at the boy for a few seconds before he said, "Oh, Jimmy, we're just living in an important time. All those folks in that church back there? They're just thinking about next month, next year; they

don't get it, just like their parents never got it, and their parents before them. It's not that they can't read the writing on the wall, or understand what's at stake here, you know . . . it's that they're too busy to look up and see it. Well, and I want *you* to see it, to look up and read it and understand, y'know? But you're just a kid, I know. I forget sometimes. You mom would've reminded me of that. I'm sorry, buddy . . ."

Jimmy smiled at that, but his father was watching the road and couldn't see it, so he said, "It's okay, Dad." Then, without thinking to ask why his dad wanted that so much, he looked out the windshield again. The snow was coming in heavy and thick, fat flakes tumbling across the glass.

"Another blizzard, hey?" Jimmy only saw snow for a moment, before he realized his father couldn't see more than a few meters ahead of the truck. He tapped the dead nav screen his dad had mounted to the dashboard. "And this is still broken?"

"Yeah, but that's okay, we don't need it," his father said, drumming his fingers on the steering wheel. "That's Ed up there, and his is working. As long as we don't lose his taillights, we'll be okay. We'll be home soon, buddy." He smiled. "Don't worry. Hand me my coffee, would you, son?" he said, and gestured at his ancient brown driving mug—the Tim Horton's label had long ago worn off—that sat in a brown cup-holder that had been stuck onto the dashboard for as long as Jimmy could remember.

The boy slid the plastic cup out of the holder, rotated the valve on the lid, and handed it to his old man. "Who won the game?" he asked his father.

"Calgary, of course," his father replied, and took a sip from the cup, and then handed it back to Jimmy. His dad probably could have put it in the cup holder himself, but Jimmy liked doing it for him. "I ever tell you about the time old Pab and I went ice-fishing up at Duck Lake back in ninety-seven?" he asked.

The memory summoned up a smile; a crow's foot spread out beside his old man's eye, on the side of his face that Jimmy could see.

"Nope," Jimmy shook his head, though he'd heard the story a dozen times at least. He lied because he liked hearing those old stories, and he could sense that telling them was important to his dad somehow. Smiling, he tried to look up out of the window, into the sky, but there were no stars above, no northern lights, nothing but darkness. He pulled his legs up onto the seat, under his jacket, and closed his eyes to listen.

"Ah, boy, that was a real good one, that day," his dad said. "Pab McCooley had a buddy up there who was a real hunter, a Cree fella, or maybe Dené or something, who must have been almost seven feet tall, solid muscle. This guy had a cabin and a trapline he worked out there. Well, we decided we were gonna go out there and catch ourselves some fish, so we drove up. Took hours and hours, and all we did was sing along with the radio and suck back coffee all the way. That was before any of us had cell phones or navs in our trucks, and there weren't any wireless grids around yet, either. We were out of touch with everyone and everything, out there in the bush, and you know how it felt . . . ?"

Right about then, Jimmy drifted back off to sleep with a smile on his face.

* * *

March 2024

Jimmy was scratching his head as he worked his way through word problems with heredity charts for different simplified allele interactions. Would Farmer Jelinski be statistically more or less likely to have a higher yield than Farmer Fuller?

Jimmy was pretty sure it was a stupid question. He'd heard farmers around town talk about yield, about how a dry year or a bad batch of pests could kill all the benefits that these or those seeds or herbicides were supposed to deliver.

He tried to peek over at the computer on the desk beside his, but Devin, a boy with red hair and freckles who wore glasses, jumped to a blank desktop display with a quick punch of a shortcut key. “*Don’t copy*,” he hiss-whined.

“Come on, Dev. I *really* need help with this.” He made sure to whine a little, too. “You’re so smart. Look, I don’t want the answers, I just want you to *help* me figure them out,” he lied. And, of course, Devin *was* smart at this stuff and Jimmy wasn’t, but Jimmy didn’t really *want* to be. Who cared about genetics? He’d liked working the harvest, he’d liked the seeding, being out in the sun, but genes and math just gave him headaches. Give him a stalk of wheat, he could understand that. That made sense, he thought, staring up at the classroom’s ceiling tiles and their endlessly repeating patterns.

Then the door opened, and Jimmy quickly leaned forward so that he was sitting up straight behind his mini-notebook.

Mr. Anton came in and held the door open behind him. “Today we have a new student in our class,” he announced with the kind of cheerfulness that only a teacher can muster at nine twenty-seven in the morning. All the students closed their computers, grateful for a brief reprieve from their classwork and the review to follow.

“Everyone, please welcome Bonnie Dumont,” said Mr. Anton, and everyone in the class stared silently as the new girl walked in. Her face was a little dark, her eyes nervous. Jimmy had noticed her on the bus that morning, a new girl, but had figured from her height that she was older than him, maybe a grade up. She stood nervously in front of the class. She was dressed up really nice, and her black hair had been carefully brushed and braided. Her cheeks were red, and she didn’t seem to like all the attention so much.

“Bonnie’s just moved here from Duck Lake, and she’s fourteen years old, same as most of you. And here’s a neat piece of trivia her mother told me last week: her great-great-great-uncle was Gabriel Dumont, Louis Riel’s right-hand man! Isn’t that remarkable? Everyone please welcome her to our class. I’m sure you’re gonna do just fine here, Bonnie.”

The look on her face suggested that *she* wasn’t so sure of that. It was easy to understand, though: Jimmy had been to a family reunion once, and when his dad had introduced him to all these cousins and uncles and aunts he’d never even heard about before, he’d hated the feeling of all their eyes on him, everyone listening while his dad told them a handful of facts that were supposed to tell them who he was. He’d hated *that* kind of attention, so he could sympathize, and he smiled at her, as if to reassure her a little.

Just then Bonnie looked at him, just for a moment. Her eyes lingered on his face—maybe she recognized him from the school bus that morning?—but there were a lot of faces in the room, and she didn’t look too long, that first time. Still, something weird happened inside Jimmy’s guts when her eyes met his. He squirmed and looked away.

She bit her lip and sat down a few seats up and one row over from Jimmy, in the only empty desk in the room. He looked at her again—he couldn’t help but glance her way once more, even while he couldn’t have said quite why.

“Now, let’s check back on last night’s homework,” Mr. Anton said. Kids groaned as they opened their PCs again, and launched their homework managers. “Number one . . . James Oleksyn? What did you get?”

Damn, Jimmy thought. *Of course* he had to ask me.

“Uh, I’m sorry, sir. I couldn’t figure it out . . .” *Don’t blush, don’t blush, don’t blush, dammit*, he thought to himself.

“That’s fine, Jimmy, at least you tried. Now show us how far you got into the problem, and we’ll work through the rest of it as a class,” he said, and called up the wireless link to Jimmy’s PC, called the desktop onto the enormous flatscreen that hung

at the front of the class beside the disused whiteboard.

Jimmy paused before calling up the file. Mr. Anton would grimace, and give him that lecture again about getting help, trying harder, about how important STEM skills were going to be once Jimmy graduated. Giving him remedial homework, calling his dad.

There was no way around it. Jimmy called up the empty homework file, and said, "This stuff doesn't make sense to me, okay?"

And right on cue, Mr. Anton frowned. "You're sucking on slough water, kid!" he quipped, the reprimand he always gave anyone who'd failed to at least make an effort at something. The rest of the class laughed, and Jimmy looked down, not wanting to see the other kids laughing at him. Except, once more, he couldn't help but look Bonnie's way.

She was just looking at him, no sneer, just this little smile. Not like she was laughing at him, so much as if she was thinking the same thing he had thought: "Don't worry, it'll all be over soon."

He met her gaze just as Mr. Anton started in on his lecture. But then Jimmy just rolled his eyes.

* * *

As the school bus trundled off down the highway and into the blinding white glare of the snowy prairie, Jimmy once again found himself wishing he lived near the end of the bus route home, instead of near the beginning. He sighed out a cloud of steam into the cold.

As he trudged down the long path to the house, the snow crunched beneath his feet with each step, sending shudders up his spine. He kicked hunks of hardened snow aside as he went along, fishing his housekey out of his jeans pocket. His nerves made him bite into his scarf and chew on it, so that the front was crunchy with his frozen spit by the time he got up to the front porch.

The door opened before he could touch it.

"Jimmy," his father said, swinging the door open wide.

"Dad," he answered, thinking, *Shit. I hate you, Mr. Anton.*

"I got a call . . ." Jimmy's dad said.

"Mr. Anton's . . ."

The look on his father's face was suddenly puzzled. "What about him?"

"Never mind," Jimmy said quickly, wishing he hadn't said anything.

"You having trouble at school, Jim?" his father asked.

"Not really . . ." he said, but he didn't have the heart to lie more than that. "It's just . . . I don't see . . ."

"I know, Jim," his father said. "But that doesn't mean you get to skip your homework. Especially science class."

"He *did* call," Jimmy said.

"No, he hasn't, though now I expect he will. It was Ed that called. The Wishnowskis . . . they're moving on. Giving up the farm." And Jimmy and his father stood there, as if they were the last two people left on the land outside Biggar; as if everyone else had left them there, alone, with nothing to say. Jimmy wasn't surprised, and his father wasn't either: they'd both been expecting it for a year or so, since Ed had started complaining about his yield and stopped coming by for coffee.

So Jimmy and his father just stood there for a moment in the front room, Jimmy still in his snowy boots, and neither of them could find anything to say. Jimmy wondered if the Wishnowskis' leaving had something to do with how his dad had convinced Mr. Wishnowski not to grow that new kind of seed that the Growers Alliance was pushing everyone to adopt. His father sure looked upset enough. It got so awkward that Jimmy finally asked, "Where they goin'?"

His father shrugged and said, “Dunno. They got something for the land, at least. Not much, but something. Probably sit fallow till the company buys up enough of the land around here, I guess. The Wishnowskis’ll probably end up in Saskatoon or Regina or somewhere like that, I guess. Maybe Ed can get work in a shop somewhere, when he feels a little better . . .” His eyes stared out into the distance past Jimmy’s shoulder, out toward the Wishnowski property, and Jimmy could see something awful in his eyes.

“Come on, Dad. Let’s go for a drive,” Jimmy said. But drives were what cheered *Jimmy* up, not his old man, and his dad shook his head.

“Nah, I got work to do, and I bet you have some homework to catch up on. After dinner, I’ll help you with it, okay?”

Jimmy sighed, but he didn’t have the heart to complain. Instead, he slipped his boots off and went to the kitchen for a glass of water. Out the kitchen window, he saw the sun low in the sky.

The netphone beside his father’s console rang, and Jim’s father picked it up. “Hello?” After a pause, he said into the phone, “One second.” Then he turned to Jim and said, “Jimmy, I gotta take this call. It’s a Skype from St. Petersburg. Dinner in two hours, okay buddy?” Nothing was cooking, so that meant they’d be ordering Chinese from Chao’s Kitchen, in town.

“Okay,” Jim replied, and he gulped down some water from his water bottle. Then he went off to his room to read up on the latest hockey news and check Whatsapp and look up the “Métis Uprising” on Wikipedia.

* * *

April 2025

Softness had seeped into the earth, following the melt, and when spring came, it struck suddenly. Sunlight summoned shoots from the soil, sung out to the trees that they must bud once more, and suddenly the world exploded with verdant life.

As spring arrived, gleaming machines eagerly took to the land, spraying fertilizer and irrigating gently, constantly. They swept along on careful treads, taking to long spidery legs when the hills got too steep, or the crops too thick. Not quite silent, their hum seemed somehow to melt into the natural sounds of the land soon after their arrival, harmonious with the songs of the birds and the bugs and the occasional growl of a truck or tractor.

There was no such machine on the Oleksyn farm, however, or at his friend Terry’s place. The Horchinskis and the Oleksyns couldn’t afford autonomous ’bots. So early one Saturday morning, Jimmy and Terry went all the way to the Linsley place. “Wait!” their motopeds yelped. “Cycling in the middle of the highway is unsafe! Please move to the shoulder!” Terry and Jimmy just laughed, and checked the live mapper apps on their phones, which were affixed to their handlebars, till they arrived.

They hid their bikes in a ditch and crept slowly toward the edge of the field. Moments later, a red point of light slid across the ground as Jimmy raised his pellet gun up. Beside him, Terry crouched with his own gun ready, watching as Jimmy slid the laser sight onto the ovoid, blue-chrome body of the spider-legged ’bot. After a few moments, he inhaled and he felt Terry go tense beside him. Then he squeezed the trigger and the gun let off a quick bang, followed by a slight hiss.

Instantly, the ’bot reacted like a turtle, pulling in all its arms and pressing itself into the ground. It kept its legs in, but Jimmy knew it was scanning its environment for movement, to see whether it was safe to move again. Jimmy and Terry crouched in the field, among the green shoots, waiting for what felt like almost forever, until

suddenly, the 'bot hopped back up onto its legs and returned to its work.

The laser-light blinked purple on the 'bot's shiny body again, and Jimmy quickly let off another shot. As the 'bot scurried off, Jimmy and Terry howled with laughter—at least, until they heard someone shouting in the distance.

"Let's get the hell outta here!" Terry yelled, and he and Jimmy ran for their mopeds, which were parked by the fence around the Linsley property. For the first few clicks, they rode hard on the whining little engines attached to their bikes, and then they took over the work, pedaling like madmen but enjoying every moment. As they passed the Wishnowski place, Jimmy only glanced at the fields, fallow and thick with weeds, and the company sign, big as a billboard, that stood by the highway by the land, promising "revitalization" soon. Slapshots and frantic scrambles over pucks passed through his mind, and faded only slowly.

When they got closer to Terry's family's place, Terry said, "Let's use these guns for what they're really for." It was a way of making a little cash, because the government was paying almost a dollar for every gopher that was captured, so that they could be moved up north, where the climate still suited them. The sedative pellets were free—you just ordered them on the internet—and each boy had a pocketful of them ready for the hunt.

"Come on, let's take a jump in the creek first," Jimmy said. "I'm sweaty and hot."

Terry nodded. "Okay, but if my mom asks . . ."

"I know, I know." Jimmy was used to lying to Terry's mom about the dips they took in the creek. Terry didn't know why she was so against swimming in it, but he'd long become used to pretending he followed the rule.

As they stripped down to their boxers, and picked their way down to the creek, Jimmy noticed Terry looking at him with this look on his face, this sad, empty look. Jimmy smiled at him and said, "Come on, Terry, jump in. Or are you the chickenshit your mom raised you to be?"

Terry shook his head for a moment, and it gave Jimmy the weirdest, sad feeling. Then, serious-faced, Terry lobbed himself into the water with an incredible splash. Jimmy followed him, laughing loudly, but that strange feeling he had picked up from Terry stayed with him. He didn't know what it was, but he felt it clear as the sunlight on his skin. It felt like he'd lost something, or something was slipping away from him. Like this was his last real summer, like next summer wouldn't be so free, so fun; that no summer would ever be like this one again.

Jimmy smiled, laughed, and splashed water onto Terry just how they always did, but the feeling never really left him as long as he was there on the Horchinski land. Not when they bagged five gophers; not when they had lunch at the house—potato-and-bacon perogies and cabbage rolls from the freezer; not when Jimmy's dad let him stay the night and they spent hours playing MMO wargames and surfing the net for dirty pictures through a VPN Terry had found that wasn't blocked by his folks' nannyware. Not even as Jimmy pedaled home late the next morning, his eyes a little bleary and his gut full of a Horchinski-style breakfast, did he escape that feeling.

He wondered what it meant.

* * *

Jim brought his old man a coffee. It was from the ancient, stained drip percolator, which his father thought made coffee foolproof, as long as you spooned in the right amounts.

"Dad, are you sure you wanna drink this stuff?" he said, because he didn't have to ask whether his father had been up all night, working. He could see it on his old man's face, his red eyes, the discarded plates and the stained coffee cup on his desk beside his computer. "I saw a show on TV about coffee, and they say it's really bad for your . . ."

“Jimmy, everything is bad for you,” his dad wheezed. He had another one of those spring colds he caught every year. “If it’s not naturally bad for you, they add something poisonous to it. You wanna know what’s *really* bad for you?” He raised one eyebrow, and with a wink he whispered, “TV. It’ll kill ya, brain first.”

As his dad chuckled at his own joke, Jimmy shrugged. If Jimmy had read about the dangers of coffee online, his father would’ve told him the Net was bad for you, too. Jimmy only wished: at least with that, he could have a comeback, given how much time his father spent online. But his father *never* watched TV. Or relaxed, from what Jimmy could see.

“Fine, Dad. Whatever.” He sat down on the couch near his dad’s workstation. “But what are you *doing* here?” he asked, trying hard to sound at least a little interested.

“I’m working on a new pollen strain that has some genes to override this god-damned chiral starch reversal hack. I figured out last night that I’d missed a new trick they’d built into it. A couple of interacting epigenetic markers that seem to work as interference traps. They’ve been thinking ahead, the scumbags. So the pollen samples I already worked up aren’t gonna do the trick.” Jimmy shook his head. His father had been working up the profile for that pollen all winter. “Not that it matters much—they’re gonna have a new formula next year, and another new one the year after that, even though they don’t need it anymore. Half of the bugs that used to feed on wheat are close to being endangered now anyway. It doesn’t even matter that one-shot seeds are probably going to be illegal soon: all they need to do is perfect their pollen payware lock. It’s insane: you can save seeds now, but last year’s pollen won’t work on it: they’ve coded the genetics so that every damned growing season you need a new batch of proprietary pollen, and everything’s backward-incompatible. Damn *pollen!* You know, wheat . . .”

“. . . *used to be self-pollinating,*” Jimmy said in unison with his father, still dizzy from the torrent of incomprehensible science-babble. This was what had, in the last few years, replaced the stories he’d told on long drives: chiral starch hacks, epigenetic snares, payware locks, and the horrors of working with homebrew pollen. “You’ve told me a million times, Dad.”

His father nodded. “Bastards have us playing catch-up, is all.” He tapped a corner of the screen, and different genome charts showed up under his fingertip. The version names were about the only thing Jim could read: 2023: Version 3.0.71a. The image and the notes onscreen made no sense at all to Jimmy, but after all, he hadn’t really looked that closely at them.

The withered stalks of wheat standing dead in their rows, in the mini-greenhouse just outside the big office window, that was much clearer to him. He knew what *that* meant. Last spring’s pollen didn’t work right with this year’s wheat. It wasn’t just backward-incompatible, either: it had actually *harmed* the new wheat, created some kind of crippled mutant plant. Back to the drawing board, after months of work. Jimmy didn’t grasp much of the science, not like his dad did, but he understood how heartbreaking it must be for his father.

Jimmy wondered if there’d be anything to harvest that fall. “I’ve been thinking,” the boy said. “Maybe I can find a job, like, in town or something? Make some extra money, till harvest.”

“What about school? Will you be able to get your homework done if you’re working, Jimmy? I mean, universities these days . . .”

“Sure,” Jimmy said. It was obvious he really meant, *Who cares?*

His father rubbed his eyes and looked at him, and Jimmy could almost see the balance between his disappointment and his respect for his own son trying to do something responsible, bring in some cash and all. “I’m sorry, Jimmy. Jesus, I’m sorry,” he said, and sighed a little, and started to cough again. “It’d help,” he said. “But I think

you should study instead.”

“We’ll see,” Jim said, embarrassed somehow by how small and worn-down his father seemed just then, sitting there in front of him.

* * *

May 2026

A field of mutant alfalfa burst into view. Brilliant crayon-yellow, it waved shoulder-high, a great plateau towering up like a cliff-beached island in an ocean of wheat, all of it shadowed by vast cumulus clouds drifting through the blue above. Jimmy remembered when alfalfa had taken half the summer or longer to bloom like this, back when it never grew higher than a man’s waist.

His dad’s old Ford had been making a funny clanking sound for weeks now, and neither Jimmy nor his old man could figure out why, so he was taking it to Laliberte’s garage, in town. He was on a learner’s license, but he was only two months shy of sixteen, and anyway the truck had a little onboard AI installed, so nobody would care very much as long as he didn’t run over someone. The sun shone bright and hot, but he had the window rolled down and the radio on. No need for air conditioning when the breeze would do the job.

Jimmy spotted a figure up ahead, someone walking along the dusty shoulder of the road. As he got closer, he could see it was a girl, and he slowed down as he got closer to her.

Finally he slowed to a crawl and lowered the passenger-side window when he pulled up beside her. Pretty-looking girl, about his age. Black hair, tanned, with a flannel shirt tied around her waist. He was surprised not to know who she was. “Hey, miss. You going to Biggar?”

She turned and peered through the window into the cab of the truck. “Jimmy?” she asked.

“Do I know you?” he asked.

“Sure you do,” she said with a smile, and then furrowed her brow and said, “I’m Bonnie . . . You don’t remember me?” She paused, as if to scold him with a grinning look.

“Bonnie! Woah! Sorry, it’s . . . It’s been, what, a couple years? Long time no see. You wanna lift?” he asked. “I know it’s not far, but . . .”

“Sure,” she said without letting him finish. She swung the door open and climbed in. She was wearing shorts that showed off her legs, and she smelled amazing, faintly like some kind of sweet fruit Jim didn’t know the name for. It was probably her shampoo, he thought to himself, as the passenger side seatbelt clicked loose and the truck asked her her name—for the black box, for insurance purposes—and reminded her to buckle up.

“Sure,” she said. “My name’s Bonnie Crowfoot.” She turned to Jimmy and said, “I know, it used to be Dumont. But it’s Crowfoot now.”

They chatted a little, Jimmy asking her where she’d moved and why she was back. She’d gone up to Spiritwood for a while, to stay with her uncle while her parents had gotten their divorce done up. That was when she’d taken her mom’s family name, Crowfoot. Now she was back in Biggar again, though she was finishing out the previous school year online and wouldn’t be registering till the fall. She’d gotten into town only a few days before. He told her about the local news she’d missed, gossip about combine accidents and pregnant classmates, things like that.

He dropped her off at Pederson’s IGA and carefully drove the truck over to Laliberte’s, a big, dingy garage just off the main road. As he went, he thought about his own disappointment at having to wait till the fall to see her at school, turning the

feeling over in his mind like a little kid turns over a jawbreaker in his mouth.

When he arrived at Laliberte's, Ed Wishnowski pulled his head up from under the hood of an official-looking company van that was parked inside the garage, and waved with an oil-stained hand. "Hey, Jimmy," he said when Jimmy got out of the truck. Ed had been working there a few months now, and Jimmy had expected to see him. He always worked the weekends. "How's it going?"

"Good," Jimmy smiled, thinking of those brown legs that had been in the truck just before. He eyed the van, recognizing the logo on the side. It was a Germinatrix company van, he realized: he'd seen them before, trying to talk his dad into signing up with the Growers' Alliance. "You?"

"Getting by," Ed said, but his face told the truth, the hard nights, the drinking he'd started in on now that his wife had left him, the disappointment and the bitterness of a man who'd lost everything important and knew it all too well.

"Good," Jimmy said, and shook Ed's hand hard, avoiding his eyes. "My old man needs you to give her a look and tell me what's wrong with her," he said, gesturing to the truck.

"Sure," Ed said. "How is your old man?"

"Oh, you know," Jimmy said. "Fiddling with his wheat project."

"That's him, all right. Some people never change, huh?" As he said it, old Ed got this look in his eye. He looked over at the Germinatrix guy, who'd paused from his work to look over at them talking, as if he'd heard one of them say something interesting.

"But it'll be a while. Fella here from Regina, his van needs looking at first," he added, and looked over to the side. Jim followed his gaze from the company van to the man in a suit and some kind of hi-tech sunglasses, typing on thin air.

"Fella's been working like that since he got here," Ed whispered, and turned, meeting Jim's eyes with a mischievous glance. "Nice gear. Online out here . . . Meanwhile, *our* wif hasn't even worked since last *Thursday*." Ed was smiling too much, too amused at this man who, after all, worked for the people who he always said had stolen away his livelihood. "But I can give 'er a look once Art gets back from lunch," Ed added, giving the guy in the suit another look, one less amused and more menacing, before he turned back to Jimmy.

It took a moment for Ed's look to soften, or so it seemed, but then he was smiling again, and he said, "Why don't you go get something to eat, and I'll call you when I get 'er looked at?"

"Sure," Jimmy said, wondering whether he'd run into Bonnie again. He was glad to have some extra money, just in case. Maybe he could buy her lunch. If he could work up the nerve.

No such luck, though, even though he walked past the IGA twice, pretending to have changed his mind about where to eat. He ended up alone at the local greasy spoon, and halfway through his burger, Ed called him on his iPwn.

"Jim?" Ed said. It sounded good to be called that, not Jimmy, which was a kid's name.

"Uh huh?" Jim said.

"Bad news. It's gonna take a few days, and I don't recommend you, uh, driving it around till it's fixed. Might really damage the engine block."

"What is it?" Jimmy asked.

"Listen," Ed said, his voice impatient. "I've already called your father and explained. I promised him I'd give you a ride home. You done eating?"

"Not yet."

"When you finish, come on by and I'll drive you out there. I get off work in a half an hour anyways."

"Okay," Jimmy said, looked out the window into the street, wondering whether a figure he could barely see down the street would turn out to be Bonnie.

But it didn't.

Jimmy bit his lip, and looked her up online. Why sit and wait, when he could *do* something? That much, he knew, his dad was right about.

* * *

When Jimmy got to the garage, the Growers' Alliance guy was on his feet and talking to Ed's boss, so Jimmy got a better look at him. The guy was still in the same black suit, and looked totally out of place—not just in the garage, but in the town altogether. He still had his heads-up glasses on, angry eyes visible through the now half-shaded lenses.

"You're telling me you can't just print me a temp part?"

"My printer's kinda old. I couldn't really print up anything that'd get you all the way to Regina," Laliberte said calmly. "It's best we get a real part for you. I'll order one from Saskatoon, and they'll drone it out tonight. We'll have it first thing tomorrow morning, early, and I'll install it myself, so you can be on your way first thing. Or you could always rent a car, and have this drive down to you on its own when it's ready to go? Or there's a bus passes through town too, could get you to Regina sometime tonight, if you're in a hurry."

"I can work online," the man said petulantly. "But where am I supposed to stay tonight? You don't even have a hotel in this *town*, do you?" the man said, accusingly. The way he said "town" it was clear he meant "shithole." Even Jim felt like punching him in the face, just for that, and he slagged off Biggar all the time. When he glanced over at Ed, who was shoving his stuff into a locker, he was surprised by the look of anger on the older man's face. He'd never seen Ed so pissed off before.

But he settled for pointing out the city guy didn't know what he was talking about. "Sure we do," he told the Growers' Alliance man. "There's a motel out on the road, they've got great connectivity. Just a few minutes from here. Not even a long walk, mister."

"I'll drive you over," Laliberte added quickly.

The guy in the suit sighed dramatically, and said, "All right, can we go now?"

"No problem," Laliberte said. "Ed, can you stay a few minutes more? Just till I . . ."

"Yeah," Ed grumbled, trying to hide his disgust. "Go ahead."

But when Laliberte and the company man were gone, Ed started laughing angrily, and grumbling curses as he washed the dark oil off his hands in a dingy, grubby sink off to the side of the garage. Jimmy watched him, but didn't say a word for a few minutes. Ed wasn't drunk, but he seemed off, a little. He wobbled and laughed as he slipped his worksuit off, revealing the old, dingy Aerosmith T-shirt and jeans he wore underneath.

When Laliberte pulled up, Ed said, "Let's go," and he and Jimmy got into the truck.

"Ed," Laliberte called out to him.

"Yeah?"

"Fella forgot this in the backseat," he said, holding up a small luggage bag. "Can you drop it off with him, since you're headed out that way?"

"Sure . . . which room?" Ed asked, reaching out for the bag. He wasn't smiling.

"Nine," Laliberte said as he handed it over.

"Sure thing, boss," Ed said, and Laliberte thumped the hood of Ed's truck. Ed was smiling now, this manic, crazy smile that made Jim feel anxious.

"I'll drop this off later," Ed said, his voice low, handing the bag over to Jim to hold it, and he reversed out onto the street. Growling the engine at the first red light, like he couldn't wait for it to be his turn to go.

* * *

June 2027

The sun was high, and shone hard and bright on soil that was alive, tenacious and

teeming. Worms threaded their way through the ground, kept alive not by the fragments of tilled-in wheat-stalks—which they ate through, but could not digest—but by the remains of other worms, and the nutrients and organic matter that was added to the commercial fertilizer specifically for their sustenance. Around them, blights and molds languished, not gone but crippled, held at bay by crops that they could no longer afflict. They were buried secrets that would, perhaps, never reemerge as long as humans seeded this land with their strange, otherworldly plants.

Crops no human ancestor could have recognized rose tall and stood bold and exuberant upon the prairie, exulting in the harsh sunlight that beat down. These strange grains, these new crops, lived on so very little water, and they drank in the daylight more deeply than any plant had ever learned to do on its own. The stalks of the wheat were thick, almost more like slender cornstalks, and where corn was grown, as on the old Wishnowski place, it stood like stands of chunky, old bamboo, the ears hanging in clumps like bouquets of flowers strewn upon a trunk fat with a syrupy fluid that was just a short step away from pure tractor-fuel.

And almost everywhere, what farmers had needed to know for ages had already started to be forgotten.

Not at the Oleksyn homestead, though, where a small, contained crop of wheat stood lonely in a plastic dome, the land surrounding it left fallow for the first time in years. Jim's father was finally testing his theories, doing something besides killing himself by staying up day and night and experimenting with seeds and pollens and whatnot to unlock supermutant wheat gene lines and open the secrets of the seeds for all to know. There were others like these, little oases of organic, genetically home-brewed, and heirloom wheats growing, keeping ancient rhythms of growth and flourishing, and the occasional, natural failure too.

But for acres and acres all around the Oleksyns' land, fields of strange new wheat spread out, open to the sky, and the sun poured down upon those fields, filling the wheat with life. And so much was lost, discarded: the farmer's knowledge of blights, of the vagaries of weather, of the secrets of the earth, were no longer necessary, no longer worked. This knowledge became useless and was shed like a snake's skin.

It was midsummer, and the wheat berries had become heavy already, swaying in breezes through the long, quiet afternoons. They clung to the top of the stalk in what looked like clusters of giant botanical fists, firm and determined. They whispered across the fields, singing their new strange songs into the breezes. These crops towered over the prairies, strange and hardy and intimidating.

And they weren't even half-grown.

* * *

Jimmy slipped his hand under Bonnie's T-shirt, up the back, and started fiddling with the clasp of her bra. This was about as far as he'd ever gone with Bonnie, or anyone for that matter. Her skin was so smooth, softer than anything he could remember touching before.

"Bonnie," he whispered, and he kissed her again, and leaned back a little. He could feel the grooves in the bed of the truck, even through the thick woolen blankets beneath them.

"Mmmm, Jimmy, I think it'll be better if you *don't* talk," she said, just as he figured out how the clasp on her bra worked.

Don't talk. Right. He spent a moment trying to figure out how to get the thing off without taking off her T-shirt—he'd seen her do it once, somehow, but he couldn't quite remember how—until she just reached down and pulled his cotton T-shirt up over his head. He figured he could do worse than to do the same, so he pulled her T-shirt up and off her. She stretched her arms up past her head when he did that, and the bra came off with the shirt.

It was like whiskey and prairie sunset and Christmas morning all at once, seeing her like that. His eyes leapt to her breasts. He'd never seen a girl with her shirt off, not in real life, and he was almost drunk at the sight of her. She'd led his hands up to her chest before, to touch them through her shirt, but this was something else altogether. He leaned forward and started kissing them hard, so hard that he forgot to breathe, and she said, "Ow!" and pushed him back a little.

"Softer, Jimmy," she said, and leaned into him, so he tried again, gentler this time. He only realized he wasn't breathing when he felt her body expand as she gasped suddenly.

She pulled his head up and kissed him on the mouth, and he could smell her hair again. He realized it smelled like oranges, like those little Christmas oranges that you used to only see once a year. That was what had made him think of Christmas, that scent of her shampoo. And she tugged at his belt, and then he felt like he was suddenly drunk and driving a pickup truck off a cliff. When they landed together at the bottom, they were naked, and he was scared that she would laugh at him, so he didn't push his jeans too far away from the edge of the blanket. And then he did the most natural thing in the world: he panicked.

"You know, I've never," he said.

"Yeah, I kinda thought so," she said. She gave him a dark-eyed smile, and squinted in the sun. Then, after a moment's pause, she added, "Me too."

"You sure you wanna . . . ?" He couldn't believe he asked that. He was kicking himself already, but he was actually—he was embarrassed to admit it—scared.

She smiled, kissed him between phrases. "It's really . . . your first . . . time?"

"Uh . . . huh."

"Me too . . . first time so . . . there's no problem . . . can't catch . . . anything . . ."

"But . . . but . . . I didn't . . . bring . . ."

She stopped kissing him. "I took something this morning. Good for a week," she whispered, and pulled him toward her. He was too excited to be surprised that she'd planned for this.

"Bonnie, I don't really know how . . ."

"Liar." She smiled, drawing back so he could see her grin. "You're a farmboy."

But it was true: learning about sex by watching the neighbor's cattle wasn't the most straightforward way to go about it, and his dad's permissiveness had never quite extended to the "brainrotter," as he called the internet: the nanny ware he used to block the net in their house meant Jim had only seen a little porn, over at Terry Horchinski's, until Terry's mom had once caught Terry and him and some other boys watching a porno in the basement and lectured the boys that real-life sex wasn't really like the kind of junk they saw online.

So beyond the basic mechanics that'd been covered in class, or picked up in the wrong places, he really didn't know quite what he was doing. When he touched her, he was clumsy, eager but unsure of himself, and embarrassed about his own hesitation. A few minutes later—though to him it felt like much less—he was lying on his back, in shock, amazed. The awkwardness was shot through with this strange need for more, again, as he drifted through the woozy, lopsided heaven that'd bloomed into existence inside his head. As he caught his breath, she lay there beside him, one arm around him, probably wondering like him whether that was how it was supposed to be, and smiling quietly to herself. He wondered if that was what she was thinking, but he didn't ask. He just put an arm around her and pulled her close.

A little while later, they were still lying on their backs on the blanket, in the back of the truck, looking up as the sky caught fire. Pinks and brilliant oranges flared over them through the clouds.

He rolled himself sideways to face her. "I promise it'll be better next time," he said,

wrapping an arm round her and squeezing her body against him.

She smiled, staring up into the sky, and said, "I'm sure it will." He thought she'd reach for her clothes, but she didn't. She just slapped him on the chest with a grin, and curled up against him, looking up into the sky. After a while, she told him that she could see a face in the clouds. He spotted a bird, and then she saw a human face, and he saw it too, up there in the heavy pink clouds haloed in growing violet.

Hours later, back in their clothes with a blanket pulled around them because the prairie night was cooler than you might think, even in summer, there was the moon, and they talked about not making one another stupid promises, and then they did it anyway—little ones, but they scared Jimmy anyhow. They talked about secrets, how much she hated her dad for cheating on her mom, and how she had dreaded coming back to Biggar, except she knew Jimmy would be there.

And there they were, young and in one another's arms under the glittering stars, fistfuls of powdered diamond that spangled the endless prairie sky.

* * *

Jimmy woke up coughing. The sun was up, but just barely, and there was thick smoke everywhere.

"Bonnie!" he yelped, shaking her.

She stirred, slowly, and looked at him with bleary eyes.

"Fire!" he said, and she sat bolt upright, her eyes wide.

The field of mutant wheat growing on Mike's family's land was burning. Not all around them, thank goodness. They were on the little service road that ran along the railway, and the fire hadn't spread to that side, not to the west of them. But to the east, everything was smoke and roaring flame. The wheat crackled loudly as it burned, the berries exploding and the water-saturated stalks hissing loudly, and steamy smoke poured up into the air, thick and black.

Jimmy hurried into the driver's seat, throwing open the passenger-side door for Bonnie. Once she was in, pulling her seatbelt on, he threw the truck into reverse and screeched out along the service road, and then sped out onto the highway.

The flames tore across the field, and Jimmy quickly asked, "You okay?"

Bonnie nodded, coughing.

"My phone's in the glove compartment," he said, calmly. "Auto-dial three. That's Terry. Wake up his family," he told her, and stared at the highway. He could see a plume of dust still in the air. Someone had driven away from here, and not very long ago at all.

"Jesus, that's them!" he shouted, just as Bonnie's call went through and she started yelling into the phone. He slammed the gas pedal down as hard as he could, and Bonnie's voice suddenly sounded panicked. The truck's smartdash shouted advice, warning him about traffic laws and satellite tracking and the local speed limit for non-autopilot vehicles.

"Shut up, shut up!" he told the truck, though he knew it wouldn't. At least it didn't force him to slow down, though. He crested a rise on the hill and saw a couple of vans driving off along the highway to Saskatoon.

"Bonnie, call 9-1-1," he said, as a van came into view up ahead. "I think *they* started it."

"*Don't follow them,*" she said, and touched his arm softly.

"Are you kidding?" he spat, shrugging off her touch. "When I catch those assholes . . ."

"What if they've got guns?" She shivered. Jim glanced at her, and saw a tear rolling down her cheek. Neither of them was really old enough to remember much about when, years ago, that Boushie boy had gotten shot dead, but older folks had talked about it once in a while, especially around the time Ed went on trial in North Battleford, and then got sent up to the pen for murder. "Kill a white man, go to jail,"

Bonnie told Jim her mom had said. "But kill an Indian boy, become an alt-right hero." Jim had to admit that pretty much was how it'd gone down. *Hell of a way to put Biggar on the national map*, Jim's dad had once said.

"Fine," he said. "But I'm gonna follow them, at least till the RCMP show up and take their tail. We can stay on the line, let them know what's going on. Follow, but stay back."

"Be careful, Jim," she said, and she touched him again. This time, he didn't shrug her hand off, not even when the gas in the truck ran out just before Saskatoon and the sons-of-bitches got away. They had to hang around to make a statement to the RCMP, and he didn't even shrug her hand off then, though he was embarrassed, and felt like a failed hero.

"Lot of farms been going up that way, all across the province. Too bad . . . we could've caught the bastards," the cop said. "The jokers call themselves the CCF—the Coalition for Clean Farms. Against GM wheat, apparently. Eco-terrorist types. If you see them again, you be careful."

"They hurt anyone yet?" Bonnie said.

"Well, the arson's hurt lots of families. But they haven't killed anyone yet, no. Not yet. They usually call the family on the farms they torch, after they leave. But they are terrorists, so you need to be careful. Next time, call us first, okay, and keep a safe distance?"

On the way home, Jim cursed his father for never filling up the tank. He let Bonnie kiss him on the cheek while he stared at the road, and when she said, "You did your best, Jimmy," he put one arm around her and squeezed her as hard as he dared.

* * *

July 2028

Whiskey and Christmas and prairie sunsets are wonderful, but whiskey on its own isn't always such a blessing.

Still, Jim drained the last of it from his glass; it didn't burn his throat anymore, but it did spread a leaky, overbearing kind of warmth into him, a dulled warmth that spread out through his body. "More," he growled to his buddy Terry, who had come with him, and had brought along Jay Ackerman and Tom Sawchuk, who knew the Lloyd bars better than anyone else in Biggar.

"One more all around," Terry called out to a passing waitress, a tall blond woman in a Shaky Dogs T-shirt and jeans, her perm pulled back into a ponytail. He slapped his buddy on the back and hollered, "Happy goddamned birthday, Jimmy," and they all laughed, checking out the waitress as she went over to the bar to get more whiskeys.

They'd driven out to Lloydminster in the early afternoon, through oceans of breeze-caressed wheat at first, and then through the vast field of deep oil reserve mining operations that had cropped up in west Saskatchewan and eastern Alberta. The pumps had looked like an army of clockwork hens seesawing their heads down to catch up some seeds, then bringing their heads up to swallow them: up, down, up, down. The Second New Boom, the RNDP was calling it, Provincial Oil. Ottawa and the WTO weren't happy about it being a public facility, but they couldn't do much: the province was doing better for itself than it had in decades, and lots of folks remembered how, back in the eighties and nineties, Saskatchewan had been one of the poorer parts of the country. Jimmy's father was talking about how finally a new Tommy Douglas, a woman named Jenn Arneson, had come along "to bring Saskatchewan into the twenty-first century, after years of right-wing fuckwit sabotage." How she was a hero, except of course that even the best RNDP leader could

never do anything to stop the Growers' Alliance.

"Nobody can change the goddamned system," his father had said many times during their beta-test pollination runs in the spring that year, when they'd gone out and set his old man's experimental pollen to the winds for the first time ever. They hadn't done it too near to Biggar, of course; they'd gone out toward the Alberta border, along the same road to Lloydminster. Plots of land owned by someone Jimmy's father knew, or that's what his old man had said.

"We should've kept the goddamned Wheat Pool going, Jimmy," his father had grumbled. "Now we've got politicians, scientists, grain buyers, but nobody who gives a goddamn about *wheat* anymore. They don't care about anything except . . ." His father hadn't finished the sentence. He hated that his father still called him Jimmy. He wished that his old man wouldn't keep asking him about his studies. None of that crap made sense to him, it'd never even started to.

The waitress drifted back into his awareness. Much as the boys had made a big deal out of checking her out when she wasn't looking at them, there was something about her that made them nervous, that reminded them they really were just kids, regardless of what it said on their driver's licenses. This wasn't a girl: she was a *woman*. Or was that it? She reminded Jimmy of Bonnie, just a little, though he didn't want to think about his girlfriend, if she even *was* that anymore. The waitress set down the whiskeys one by one in front of each of his friends, and he felt a sort of pointless swell of desire for her, not that he'd ever say anything about it. He imagined all guys just did that naturally, fell just a little bit in love with the woman who brought them their first glass of whiskey in a bar.

"Lemme guess, it's this guy's eighteenth birthday, and you came out here to celebrate?"

"Yup," Terry said with a big grin.

"So, like . . ." she said, with a wink to Jimmy. "You're from . . . Elbow?"

The boys shook their heads, laughing.

"North Battleford?"

The boys shook their heads again, smiling wide.

"Biggar," Terry finally said.

"Biggar? Oh, God," she said, squinting to recall the line. "New York is big, but Biggar is Biggar, is that right?" She wiggled her head a little, smiling big, and the boys groaned nervously, every one of them in love for the moment. "Well, happy birthday, kiddo," she said to Jimmy, setting the last glass in front of him. Even her calling him that, kiddo, didn't annoy him.

"Thanks, beautiful," Terry said, ridiculously emboldened, and handed her some purplish bills. The boys were buying tonight.

"Oh, no problem," she said, raising one eyebrow at the ridiculousness of Terry putting on airs. "You want change?"

"Nah, you keep it, hon."

She thanked him, though her smile was kinda forced as she slipped the money into her moneybelt pouch and hurried off, probably to roll her eyes and gag herself sick. Jimmy watched her go anyway, entranced for the moment, before turning to Terry and saying, "Thanks, beautiful," in a clownish voice.

"What?" Terry said. "That's how people talk in bars!"

Jim shook his head and looked over toward the waitress again, and his mind went back where he didn't want it to go.

Bonnie, he thought. *Goddamn Bonnie*.

He picked up the whiskey, and slammed back half the glass in one shot. The renewed fire in his mouth woke him up a little, and he realized he needed to piss, badly. He glanced at the men's room; some guy was walking out the bathroom door, and he took

it as his cue. Pushing himself to his feet, he surveyed his buddies. "Happy Birthday piss!" he announced, and laughed hard. It wasn't funny, he realized, but all his buddies were howling anyway, because they were all just as hammered as he was.

The washroom was a horrible mess, which surprised Jimmy a little. This was his first time in a bar, so he didn't know yet how often they're that way. As he stood there, relieving himself—it took a long time—a guy in a Stetson and boots, dressed up like a real wannabe cowboy, sauntered in.

Jimmy found himself looking at the guy resentfully. Albertan. Oil families. Bastards got rich, since his province's government hadn't provincialized the big oil deposits like the RNDP had. Jimmy could feel the scowl on his face, but it took him a moment to realize the cowboy was looking at him, and seeing it, too.

"Y'all right?" the guy said. He drawled like a wannabe cowboy, too.

"Mmm." Jimmy said.

"It's your birthday, ain't it, kid?" the cowboy asked, unleashing a noisy torrent of urine into the trough.

"Yeah," Jimmy said, trying not to frown, though hearing a guy call him kid bugged him more than it had from the waitress. "How'd you know?"

"Telepathy," the guy said, tapping the brim of his cowboy hat and giving Jimmy a weird look. But then he grinned and said, "I'm just kidding. It's easy to tell, seen it before, lots. Drunkest kid in the bar, it's usually his birthday. Plus I heard your buddies talking about throwing a cake at you when I was walking in here. You better watch out for that. So, where you from?"

"Biggar," Jimmy said, wondering if people really talked this much in men's rooms in bars. They didn't in other men's bathrooms, in his experience.

"Ah," the cowboy said, and smiled. "Wheat country." Jimmy bristled. He felt guilty, not liking this guy, because of the oil money he almost surely had, but he couldn't help it. He finished up, and as he zipped up, the cowboy—still pissing into the trough—said with an exaggerated, almost ironic level of twang, "Happy trails, birthday boy!"

Jim nodded woozily and, rolling his eyes, wandered out.

* * *

Jim woke up in his bed the next morning. The air conditioner was on, he could hear it whining in the living room, sucking on the house battery, but that was all the way down the hall, and Jim's room was already hot with the morning sun.

He rubbed his head. It hurt, but less than he'd expected. His buddies must've dropped him off, but he couldn't remember. He could smell food, fake-bacon and eggs and good strong coffee down the hall.

There was something sticky in his hair, he realized as he brought his hand down from his temple. Pink cake icing? He strained to remember how that had gotten there, and failed.

His dad grinned at him when he came into the kitchen, and said "Happy birthday, Jim. Now you're a man. According to the law, anyways." He then turned back to the sizzling pan on the stove. "Oh, by the way, Bonnie called three times last night," his father said over his shoulder. "I told her you were out with the boys. I guess I was right, too: your eyes're pretty red." He flipped some of the bacon strips, and said, "You two have a fight or something? Because if you did, son, just apologize first. It makes things easier. Even if it's not your fault. Take it from me, women . . ."

"Naw," Jimmy said, and sat at his regular place at the kitchen table. His elbows dug into the thick plastic tablecloth. "Not a fight. She just . . . she wants us to move to Saskatoon. I don't like it. She asked me to go to university there with her," he said.

"Sounds like a good idea to me, Jim. A man who doesn't have an education, he isn't capable of much in this world. I wouldn't want to bet all my chips on that man, either. Look at me—I have a degree in agriscience, even an MA, and we still only

barely scrape by.”

Well, if you would actually plant a decent-paying crop this year, instead of trying to save the world . . . Jim didn’t say it, of course: they’d argued enough about his wild gourmet organic black corn crop the last time the subject had come up, and he was still convinced it wouldn’t pay like wheat. Who was gonna to pay two bucks and a half per ear for black corn in the shops? So he didn’t say anything, but he thought it *real* loud.

“It’s not like we’re married, Dad,” Jim protested. “And anyways, you know, I can learn what I need to. I noticed that most of the guys around here do fine without going to university,” he said.

“What, like old Ed Wishnowski did? Like Art Paulsen?” Jim winced to hear those names. The Paulsens had gone off the land just like the Wishnowskis, and Ed had even stopped calling Jim’s father from the Prince Albert penitentiary, where he’d landed up after the RCMP had figured out that he’d been the one to kill that Germinatrix fella. Their absences were jagged scars on the town, scars that still bled sometimes, and Jim felt them sharply, as if it were cut into his own flesh.

“Those guys were dinosaurs, son,” his father went on, fake bacon crackling in the pan behind him. “Nice fellas, mostly . . .” His voice trailed off—he’d been as shocked as anyone about the murder, the second killing in Biggar in a decade to make national news, and just as wrenching in its way as the one before it. His dad’s sympathy for his old friend had its limits.

“. . . but they were dinosaurs. Their land’s already owned by the company farms, and at the rate things are going, the whole province will be, in a decade at most. Would have been long ago if the government hadn’t gone RNDP after that scandal back when you were a kid . . .” Jim frowned at that. “Take it from me, you need to understand a lot more. You’ll need it more than I do, and I use it everyday. If you can’t listen to me, listen to her, would you? Go live with her in town for a while.”

“I don’t want to go to Saskatoon,” Jim said.

His father shook his head, saying, “Fine, fine. They’ve got extension classes, though. You can get a whole degree online, if you want. Better, some say, and cheaper, too. Let’s look into that.”

“Mmm, okay,” Jim mumbled, trying to show just how not-excited he was by the whole idea.

His father ignored his tone, and said, “But whatever you do, son, don’t hold her back. She wants to get out of Biggar for a while and learn a thing or two, or maybe get out of here for good, well, nobody should stop her. Things are changing around here, and you can’t stop it. You’ll have better luck spitting into the wind and willing it not to fly back and hit you in the face. Take it from me, son, I’ve tried.”

And then Jim’s old man turned back to the pan, and started flipping the rest of the bacon over piece by piece.

* * *

August 2029

The blond wheat was high and firm, hanging on through the hot, dry harshness and ferocity of the late prairie summer, the glaring sun in the sky above. The soil had gone almost desert-like, but the wheat had thrived, exulting in the aridity. Its DNA was a palimpsest, and with splice after splice, people in distant labs had written into it the power to survive countless things that would have destroyed normal crop in a heartbeat. That wheat survived everything the prairie could throw at it: hail, scorching sunlight, even drought.

When the rain did occasionally fall—never enough, by anyone's reckoning, but it did fall once in a while—the stalks fattened, and the wheat sequestered moisture inside those stalks.

When the angry young men and women in bandanas and gas masks came in their trucks and vans, and set their midnight and early morning fires, the stalks exploded, the juices inside them somehow dousing the flames. This wheat was adapted to beat every threat to modern agriculture: not just those of the land, but also of any human being who might oppose it. It swished and tossed gently, stubbornly, a living ocean of grain. It could overcome anything, survive things that even its sowers and reapers could never survive.

Through this great wild ocean moved small creatures, ones that did not feed on the wheat. Gophers, not many, but a few, dug through the earth, lived on bugs and swallowed down occasional worms, strange GM worms that gave them little sustenance, that made them hibernate out of season, and wake shivering in the freezing chill of winter, to perish. Birds, too, flew through, those that ate insects and smaller birds. Daddy-long-legs persisted, scuttling across the surfaces of the rare ponds and sloughs that still pooled near the great North and South Saskatchewan rivers, and, as always, mosquitoes buzzed through the air, hungrily searching for a source of sustenance.

But the age of teeming wildlife in and under the fields had mostly passed, giving way to an age of new, beautiful, and surreal life that shone in the sunlight, that gleamed and worked and obeyed. As they worked, they sang their own metallic songs, humming and whirring. They were beautiful machines, wide and loud and forceful, cleverly designed to do all the things that many machines had done a generation before, or in still further reaches of the past, that had been done with tool and beast and bare, rough-skinned hands and a back that learned to strain and to ache.

They sang the music of industry into the land, the song of taming the earth and summoning plenitude up out from its depths. They obeyed the men and women who had brought them to the plains and set them loose upon it, followed the maps that were fed them by distant cousins, machines that turned and spun in the heavens above, understood the tracings that human fingers plotted across their touch-screens, calculated coverage and doubled back on themselves to get the job done.

But today, they roared down the highway into town. They roared by the hundreds, engines shouting out the measured rage of their owners. Faint clouds of whitish exhaust—mostly steam, but other gases, too—streamed up into the air behind the convoy of these machines, billowing clouds that marked their passage. They swarmed around the great hauling trucks, the many-wheeled behemoths driven by machines, their cousins, until soon, the road into the city was theirs alone.

* * *

Anyone who didn't know better might have imagined that some kind of economic summit was happening in Regina, at least at first. Thousands of voices hummed and buzzed, between the chants, and music blasted from immense speakers that someone had rigged to a generator on the back of their truck.

On the steps to the Provincial Legislature, the Hutterites had gathered together, the men in their black hats and pants set off by their plain white shirts, and the women in their polkadot black-and-white headscarves and long skirts. They stood hand-in-hand forming two long lines, one for the men and the other for women and children, swaying together and praying into the noise.

On the other side of the stairs, a teeming mass of young people stood in curious solidarity with them, clad in jeans and gas masks and bandanas, with their hair shaved off, or braided, or sticking straight up. These protesters roared together in one voice, waving signs above their heads.

A pair of actors towered above, costumed in cartoon-like outfits depicting the

archetypes that lay at the heart of this battle of documents and laws and policies: a hayseed farmer brawling with an ultra-modern, gadget-encrusted businessman. They tottered around on immense stilts, dueling with giant, fake plastic stalks of wheat, one natural and the other garishly, unmistakably mutant. The farmer, recovering from a near-spill, dramatically seized the businessman's GM stalk and, one in each hand, beat the businessman dramatically with them both until, gadgets and suits and all, he tumbled to the earth.

The crowd cheered as the farmer bowed and performed an awkward victory dance on his stilts. Everyone hissed and booed as the businessman got back up and snatched back the stalk of mutant wheat. Big-bellied men and wide-hipped women in old, stained mesh caps shouted encouragement and catcalls, and more than one of them looked just enough like Ed Wishnowski to set Jim's mind running back over the last few years.

But it wasn't just farm families who'd turned out. There was a group of Cree folks all dressed up, and dancing like at a pow-wow under a sign that read, "For The Spirit of the Land." They danced their fancy-dances through hoops wearing feathers and beads and bones, and danced the dances of wild creatures that had been killed off by the mutant wheat and the worsening pesticides: the ailing prairie dog and the honeybee among them. Glancing over at the pair of older men in jeans and T-shirts who beat the drum and sang mournful, angry songs into their microphones, Jimmy marveled: after all the shit they'd been put through, these people still showed up for protests, still were peaceful, still had hope. He wasn't sure whether to admire them or call them crazy.

There were hordes of what looked like middle class city people there, too, families with kids sitting on blankets and lawn chairs, as if they were out on a picnic. Past them wandered young people armed with cameras and cellphones held overhead, streaming video of the protest live to the internet for all the world to see.

Jim sat on his little Honda motorbike, gaping at the scene, searching for his father and Bonnie in the crowd, but he couldn't see them anywhere. He glanced at his phone again and cursed. He'd come to the wrong damned spot. Not that it was his fault—the roads were crammed with people, lots of them from out-of-province. But there, on the Blueberry screen, he could see his own father shouting into a megaphone, right in front of the Growers' Alliance branch office. A man in a black business suit tried to yank the megaphone from his hands, and his father grabbed it back, shoving the man away at the same time.

"You see? You see what these bastards want? They want to silence us! We don't matter to them! Nothing matters to them but money!"

A voice-over cut in on the online feed, though Jim couldn't hear it over the cheering of the crowd around him. The farmer had vanquished the businessman with his plastic wheat-stalk again. When he glanced down again at the Blueberry's screen, his father had been replaced by other people rioting elsewhere, police beating them with sticks. The captions read PROTESTS IN DELHI, TOKYO, LONDON, BANGKOK.

Suddenly, from the rooftops nearby, a booming voice overpowered all the other noise.

"This is your one and only warning. This protest is an illegal terrorist activity. Disperse now, or there will be consequences. You have one minute to begin dispersing."

Jim sucked in a breath, shaking his head. Bonnie was out there, somewhere. He knew where his father was, but finding her would be like looking for a needle in a haystack. He tried calling her again, but she didn't answer. Maybe she'd gone to the office, too? He slid the Blueberry into his pocket and drove up the street, just as much of the crowd sat on the ground and started to sing. There they squatted, on the concrete, all of them singing in unison, over and over, "All we are saying . . . is give

wheat a chance.”

Jim shook his head and tore off down an alleyway, hoping that the way would be clear one or two blocks off the main road, clear enough for him to get close enough to walk the rest of the way.

He could still hear them all singing when the police response began. Police response, that was what they'd been calling it all day on the news, in all those other cities. He pushed the bike harder; it revved loudly and roared along the concrete. Clouds of whitish gas wafted though the alleys, and Jim held his breath as best he could, pulled his shirt up over his face and wishing he'd put on his helmet. Sons of bitches.

He turned around a corner, and the first thing he heard was the bang of a tear gas canister being fired. He squinted, and saw the canister land against the chest of an old man with his hands up, a balding, harmless old man holding up a sign that said, “OPEN SOURCE GM, NOW!” Jim winced as the old man dropped the sign and fell to the ground, coughing. All around him, cops in gas masks were clubbing struggling protesters and binding their wrists with plastic zip-ties as they rolled on the ground, coughing and struggling. He stopped his bike, pulled the old man up by his arms.

“You okay?” he shouted, between coughs.

The old man looked up at him through bloodshot eyes, hacking and hacking, and finally shook his head.

“Come on, get on,” Jim said, and pulled the old man to his feet. The old guy climbed onto his bike, and held onto him around the waist as Jim drove back the way he'd come. A few blocks away, where ambulances were already waiting, he dropped the old man off and turned to go.

“Hey, don't go back there, buddy,” said the lady doctor who was helping the old man to a bench and into a respiration mask. “You're just gonna end up here, but hurt. Bad. I know, I've seen it before. Better to wait . . .”

Jim looked closely and realized they weren't city hospital at all. They were protesters, too, but well-equipped ones.

He shrugged and fished his helmet out from under the seat and put it on, hoping it might keep some of the gas out. As he sped toward the Growers' Alliance Office, he could hear this sound, even over the bike, an immense, grinding, whirring sound. Big fans, he realized, wind-tunnel fans, maybe. They had started blowing, somewhere nearby, and the tear gas drifted off, though some of it had leaked into his helmet and stung his eyes. He pulled over to the sidewalk just before he reached the crowd. Coughing, he pulled off his helmet. Goddamn his father, goddamn Bonnie, why'd they have to get mixed up in all this? He hadn't wanted to come at all; he'd only made the trip down to make sure they were safe. And now what could he do?

He felt it, then, a terror and a paranoia deeper than he'd ever felt. He was going to go to prison for life, he was sure of it. It was bizarre. He looked around, confused at the sudden fear, so uncharacteristic of him. Was it a drug in the tear gas? Fucking bastards!

“HERE COME THE REINFORCEMENTS!” a voice screamed over an immense loudspeaker he couldn't even see through the tear gas. It didn't sound like a cop, though; Jim thought maybe he recognized the voice, though he couldn't be sure. “CLEAR THE WAY!”

Then he saw them. Farm machines, hundreds of them, were rolling down the street, and the crowd crushed to the sides of the road, making room for their progress.

Again that half-familiar voice roared through the loudspeaker: “GAS THAT, YOU BASTARDS!”

The machines rolled up the stairs and smashed through the front door of the office. Molotov cocktails sailed through the air and through the office's front doors, and flames burst to life inside the building, smoke pouring out the windows. The machines, powerful and obedient, plowed though the brick of the front wall, shredding

the floor, threshing everything that they found inside. Burning paper took to the air, and the protesters screamed and roared, proud of their resistance, of having finally struck back, for once, even if it maybe was too late for it to matter. Their cheering continued, even as new tear gas canisters were launched into the crowd.

Then came a loud thud, and a groan over the loudspeaker, and Jim, coughing, his eyes stinging from the gas of a canister that landed nearby, fell to his knees, wondering whether his father or Bonnie, at least, might've have had the sense to run away.

* * *

"Who's here to see Curtis Oleksyn?"

Jim rose to his feet, motorcycle helmet in hand, and went over to sit at the table that the guard indicated. His old man was walked in a few minutes later, in a pale-hospital-green jumpsuit.

"Hiya, Jimmy. How's it going?" he smiled, his eyes still rheumy and glazed, though it had been a few weeks since the riot.

Jim didn't meet his father's gaze, not right away. First, he let out the kind of long sigh his dad had always let out when he was disappointed, when he was about to say, "Look, Jimmy, I love you, but . . ."

When he finally did look at his father, Jim quipped, "Nice outfit."

"They choose this color to keep us calm. Like in hospitals and old folks' homes. It's all psychology, and—"

"Look, Dad, we're gonna get you out of here," Jim interrupted, not interested in his father's lecture. "It's been weeks already, and the lawyer says that technically, since none of your machines were involved in the assault, and since nobody can demonstrate you knew about their being used until it happened, you weren't in on the violent assault. You were part of what was supposed to be a peaceful protest, and the anti-terrorism laws have been reformed enough that you can't be put away for nothing anymore." He paused.

His father was still sharp enough to ask, "But?"

Jim lowered his voice. "But when they came out to the farm, to look for evidence that you were in on the machine plot, Dad . . . you infringed on some patents, on the IP for all that patented wheat DNA of theirs. Whoever gave you those seeds, he broke his contract with them, and if you tell them who did it, then by the sound of it, they'll probably lessen the charge from patent infringement for the furthering of bioterrorism to something like malicious behavior toward a corporate intellectual property—kind of like vandalism, that lawyer said. You're old enough that they'll let you out on parole in a few months, as long as you agree to cooperate and stop . . ."

Jim's father shook his head. "I'm not going to give any names. They shouldn't have even had the right to come out to the farm. My experiments have nothing to do with . . ."

"Dammit, Dad, this isn't twenty fourteen anymore, okay?" His father muttered something about nineteen eighty-four, but Jim ignored him. "You can barely hold yourself up!" he snarled, hitting the table with his fist.

"Hey," the guard said. "Watch it."

"All right, all right, it's okay," Jim's father said to the guard. "Jimmy, don't you lose it. I'm not turning anyone else in to these bastards. They can't prove I was doing anything malicious. They know that terrorism charge is all bullshit. Everyone knows. They're just waiting for me to crack, they think I'm just a dumb farmer. But I'm not gonna—"

"Well, if you're *not* a dumb farmer, then what the hell are you? Tell me that!" Jim growled.

His father sat back in the chair.

"Jim, listen, if you're not backing me on this, that's fine. You and me, we have different

priorities. But what are you doing here, if you aren't going to listen to me? I don't—"Dad, I'm signing a contract with the Alliance."

"What?" His father breathed in sharply, and a dry, hacking cough took him over. Jim wanted to reach around, thump his back and help him cough up whatever it was that was inside him, but he wasn't allowed, and he knew it.

"I know how you feel about it, and I'm not crazy about it either, but I have no other choice . . ."

His dad gulped, and shook his head. "No, son, you *always* have a . . ."

"Dad, Bonnie's pregnant. She told me today." As he said that, Jimmy instantly regretted it. He hadn't wanted to tell his father that way. To use it as a weapon, a way to force some sense into the old man. He'd wanted to tell him after they let him out, but . . .

He sighed again. It was too late now, he supposed, so he pressed on:

"She's moving in with me at the house, finishing her degree online. Baby's due in late March. The lawyer told me about that other option they gave you, besides turning in whoever gave you the seeds: he said that they'd be able to talk the company into dropping all charges, long as I sign that exclusive contract, and don't let you onto the property anymore. You need to be somewhere closer to a proper hospital anyway, Dad. You can't sit in jail like this. I can see what it's doing to you. I'm doing this. I have to do this."

"The land isn't yours yet, son," his father said softly.

Jim reached into his back pocket and pulled some folded up papers out. Not looking at his father's eyes—avoiding them like his life depended on it—he spread them out across the table, and put a black pen in the middle of the papers. Not just the papers for the land near Biggar, but the test plots up North, too. Jim's father stared at those papers, scanning them quickly. Then he looked at Jimmy in surprise.

"Yeah, they know about those test plots you set up, up north, Dad. They know stuff I had no idea about. And they say you have to sign those over, too," Jimmy said, trying to sound hard. "And they get to dig the land, take samples, and keep what they find there."

His mother had passed on when he was too little to remember, so Jim couldn't remember ever seeing tears in his father's eyes before that day.

"Don't . . ." his father said softly, on the verge of tears. "Jimmy, please," he said, and Jim felt his own heart breaking.

There were tears in Jim's own eyes, too, and he thought of Ed, the only other man he'd ever known who'd been locked up. Poor Ed, who had lost it in the pen up in Prince Albert, and jumped headfirst into the prison's old-fashioned thresher while it was running, one so old it didn't have an AI system on it to shut it down when it happened. The thought terrified Jim. He bit his teeth together, but it didn't make looking at his broken old man any easier. He didn't know how to fight his tears off. He pushed the papers across the table and bit the inside of his cheek, watched his dad stare at them, back hunched like an old man, older than his body was, ancient as the land itself. He swallowed hard.

"Dad, I'm sorry, but it's the only way."

* * *

September 2030

For ages, the harvest had naturally come around this time, and kids had always missed a couple of weeks of school every fall around this time because of it. Now, though, the harvest had been coming later every year, as if the summers had gotten

so hot they needed longer to give way to fall and winter.

Farmers had taken to grumbling more about “the warming” and “the damned sunspots on top of it,” since the cycle had come back around to hotter. Altogether things were going to be even tighter, that year. They’d need more luck than usual, to avoid the thing that terrified them, the unspoken fear that spread among them like a crop blight—that maybe, this time, the corporate farms would be the only ones to make it through the next few years. The huge berries on the modified wheat were strong, less sensitive to the parching of late summer, but the relentless heat meant that harvest finally had to come earlier anyway. It had come to pass that harvest no longer started when the Farmers’ Almanac suggested; instead, recommended harvest dates would be issued by the Grower’s Alliance, with alerts sent out automatically to every contracted seed-purchaser on file.

There was a time when harvest had been damned hard work. The first week of harvest every year had always been a documentarian’s dream, all community pulling-together and sweat and smiles and things going swimmingly. Nobody had ever worn watches, because nobody’d ever needed to know what time it was. But the endless, constant work had always taken a toll on people, and soon everyone had taken to driving from one plot to the next in a haze of exhaustion; after a week or so, everyone had just wanted it to be over for the year.

Things had changed in the last decade or so. Harvest still took about two or three weeks, even when everyone pooled their automation, because the different machines needed to be synched up to work together. That, no matter how smart the machines were, was always a pain in the ass at first, given all the proprietary interface software for every brand of machine. Since everything always had to be done at top speed, this was a problem.

Automation had made things easier, to be sure: it wasn’t backbreaking labor anymore, and things got done a lot faster, too. Crops were harvested at a rate of about one property a day, until all the local farms were done. Still, there was something missing, people realized, watching everyone’s machines drive onto the property, and work, and then drive off again. It was lonely sitting there for a day and watching robots do everything, supervising their interactions and punching into the router to check their guidance code interactions.

And so people did what they’d been doing in other areas of their lives, more and more lately: they started going back to a version of the old ways. They made plans online, using apps that structured group messaging and other apps that calculated the shortest route between the full set of farms using geomapping data. They showed up riding on their autocombines and AI-piloted threshers. They brought food, and stuff for the kids to do, and growlers of home-brewed beer, and board games, and they spent that time together, just for the company. It cut the loneliness in a way that social network status updates and even video chats never could. In the space of just a few years, from vague memories of what their grandparents had said about harvest time, they’d collectively reinvented the culture that had been swiftly jettisoned less than a decade earlier, and it made them feel human again, in a way they hadn’t expected.

The Oleksyn place’s turn came on day ten of the harvest. Tim Hutton from down the way was older, but stubborn, and worked side by side with Jim and Mike and Pat Creighton, who was from Biggar but was living in Regina these days. Bonnie didn’t like monitoring the machines, not when she was watching little Angie, but it hardly mattered given how many other people had shown up. Kristi Miller, the brunette girl who’d had the shoulders of a football player since eighth grade, showed up, too. Hadn’t she moved away someplace?

But here she was, and she brought along a guy that Jim couldn’t, in a million

years, have imagined was Kristi's boyfriend. When Jim looked at him, he wondered where the hell this guy had come from. He was a tall, thin guy who didn't look like the sort of person to help with a harvest. His long red hair done up in dreadlocks, which Bonnie complimented, smiling, and he was wearing this wide, long white shirt that went all the way down to his knees, over these weird cotton blue pants and leather sandals. To top it all off, he had on a leather bracelet covered in little seashells. He had freckles and big wide sunglasses on, too, and some kind of huge shoulder bag made of a patchwork of colorful cotton, slung over one shoulder.

In other words, for Biggar, he looked like someone who'd stepped out of another world. Yet when he took off his sunglasses, suddenly he looked familiar. "Don't I know you?" Jim asked.

"You ought to, all the answers you copied off me over the years, Jim," the guy said.

"Devin?" he said, shocked. That skinny redheaded kid who'd always said, "*Don't copy!*" in that whiny, nasal voice? This was him? "Didn't you move down East?"

"Ha, yeah," Devin said. "Further East than you think. I live in India now, bro."

Bro. Jim could barely believe his ears. Devin had been brilliant, all A-pluses, and had ended up studying some kind of big-shot stuff at some fancy East Coast university, maybe down in the States now that Jim thought about it. And here he was, looking like some hippie who'd time-warped in from seventy years ago, and using slang most of them had ditched in high school . . . and yet he looked so comfortable in his own skin.

"What are you *doing* here?" Jim asked.

"I'm here to help," he smiled, and fished into his carry bag. "Your old man contacted me online a week ago, and I was visiting friends in Saskatoon anyway, so I figured I'd drive up and take a crack at something he'd wanted me to try to do years ago, when I couldn't make it out here. He said that your combine was on the fritz?"

"Seriously?" Jim wasn't sure if he was more shocked to see Devin again after all these years, or at how Devin looked, or at the news that his dad had been in touch with the guy . . . for years now, no less.

Devin nodded. "I've cooked up a little app to help organize your various machines so that they stay in quadrants defined by the program. We just have to set up a couple of signal points, and control them dynamically, so that they're more efficient. There'll be less redundancy, and the program will run it all for us in realtime. No more manually adjusting on the fly."

Jim nodded. "That's gonna work on an old Deere like ours? The interface, she's a bit . . . unwieldy. And doesn't like to talk to the Greenes, you know. . . ."

"Oh, I know," Devin said. "That's why I'm going to install the same open-source alternate firmware on everything. I won't delete the original systems, of course—you need that for service and warranty—but we'll set the machine up with a boot selection option. That way, you can link it up to the dish you have on your roof and get the AI upgrades whenever you want, *and* it can talk wirelessly to any other machine within range that's running any version of Agnix code."

Jim gave him a mystified look, but it sounded good. He'd gotten sick of programming them using the Deere's crappy interface, only to have to reprogram them or run them manually, sitting on them for hours as they went this way, then that way, then this way, then off to dump the load from their hoppers. It was probably something you could pay a lot of money to have set up for you, but this was for free.

"How's that Agnix business work? You doing us a special favor by giving this to us free? I mean, how do you make a living . . . ?"

Devin laughed. "We developed the software on a grant from the Vandana Foundation, where I was working until a week ago, in a village near Mumbai." When he caught Jim's questioning look, he added, "You know, uh, 'Bombay'?" he said, making scare quotes with his fingers. "In India. Anyway, we already got paid, programming

that code, and they're happy to have it all downloadable for free. That was why they had us build it in the first place. That's Open Source, Jim. Not everything's about money and Taylorist misery these days, though I guess around here it's maybe hard to see that. And yeah, it works with Deere machines, at least, anything made in the last six or seven years or so. With a little tweaking . . ."

Jim nodded, wondering who Taylor was, and dubious about Devin's Open Source evangelism. He knew enough about Linux to figure it wasn't all about money mainly because there was no real money in it. Still, it was pretty hilarious that the kid who had always told him, "*Don't copy!*" was now giving away *copies* of everything he did for free online.

He went back to wondering how in the hell Devin knew his father, but the distractions of harvest made him set the question aside for the moment. He didn't want to pry, anyway. So he just smiled, and shook Devin's hand, and welcomed him onto the Oleksyn farm.

* * *

At lunchtime, Bonnie and her cousin Trisha had somehow managed to get baby Angie to sleep *and* have the table laid out with all kinds of things: thick burgers stuffed with big fat patties and tomatoes and lettuce, potato chips with natural flavors, huge bowls of salad. She and Jim hoped desperately that people wouldn't eat it all, as it had been most of their grocery budget for the week. Signing on with the Alliance hadn't helped their income as much as Jim had imagined it would for all those years, though at least they were growing wheat, and not fuel-corn like so many other independents had been pushed into growing when the land analysis results came up mandating it, and they learned that their seed contracts and insurance agreements and mortgages all hinged on them honoring the results of the analysis.

Of course, the others understood their situation. Most of them had been through something like it themselves. Looking around the house, with all its furniture from the late nineties, the conservative wallpaper and the old-fashioned boxy TV—not even hi-def, it was so old—and the hand-me-down stroller and little baby Angie in hand-me-down clothes . . . it was obvious that this was a young, struggling couple's little home; and besides, nobody had forgotten what had happened on the Oleksyn farm. Everyone ate modestly, and a lot of the conversation focused on Devin, on his travels in Asia, and his development work.

Jim was surprised to hear about the farmers' riots out there, so much bloodier and so much more brutally suppressed than anything that had happened in Canada. How it was the WTO and trade agreements and corporate bribery, and even a few well-meaning but ignorant NGOs that were doing the same thing there that the government and the Growers' Alliance had done in Canada. Devin told the story of a tragedy, of people being victimized and driven off their land, driven to suicide, by the very systems and institutions that had been supposed to protect them, and make life better for them, and help them pass a future of some kind on to their children.

But Devin also told them that it was so bad that people refused to accept it. They'd built places where people could learn to fight back: places he called sanghas, where you could live and learn to code farm machine AI or splice DNA or modify epigenetic markers for a few years. Where you could help build a future where machines and huge corporations didn't just run everything into the ground. When Devin and Bonnie talked about gene-coding, Jim got lost, couldn't follow the conversation at all, even though he'd heard his father use these same words a thousand times before. Bonnie was still working on her master's degree in biotech, but she never talked about that stuff with him, and watching her with Angie in her lap, so intent on the conversation, Jim felt the slightest pang of jealousy. Devin was listening to her, understanding everything she was saying, laughing at what he guessed must be jokes

about retrotransposons and polypeptide chains, whatever those were.

After lunch, they all worked on through the afternoon, some of the machines running manually, some by remote control, with Devin upgrading as many of them as he could, and by the time the sun was coming down, everything was done but a little hay-baling. Angie was curled up in Trisha's arms and cooing happily by the time the day's work was done, so Bonnie joined Jim in seeing everyone off. Then they went into the house.

"Hi there, wife of my life," he mumbled with a dull smile.

"Sweetie, how are you?" Bonnie said. She went over to him, led him over to the kitchen table. His elbows dug into the plastic tablecloth when he sat.

"Tired," he said.

"You hungry?"

"Nah. I'll eat tomorrow morning," he mumbled. He turned in his seat, pulled off one running shoe, then the other.

"I'm gonna get Angie to sleep, and then I'll be right with you, okay?" Normally, it was Jim's job to rock the baby and sing her to sleep, and he loved to watch the little one drift off, he really did . . . but today, he was just too burnt-out to do it. Bonnie knew that, and she touched his cheek, her fingers catching on the pale stubble.

"Thanks, honey," he said with a nod. Then he headed to the bathroom. He was too tired to take a shower, but he had to. Bonnie would die if he lay down in their bed covered in all that dust and dirt. He stepped into the shower, turned on the water, and fell asleep for a second as the hot water poured down onto him.

A few minutes later, he was in bed, a little more awake—showers always woke him up—and Bonnie came in.

"Baby, you're so tired. Are you okay? You need something?"

"No," he said quietly, his eyes almost shut. When he squinted like that, Bonnie still looked like the day he married her. He wanted to ask if she wished sometimes he was smart like Devin, but he didn't have the energy to put the question right, so he left it alone.

"Come here," she said, sitting down on the other side of the bed. He tried to roll toward her, but only moved a little and groaned from the stiffness.

She laughed, and put her lips on his. She kissed him for a minute, two minutes. He didn't feel so bad anymore. She was still the prettiest woman anywhere around Biggar.

Then: "Oh, baby, I forgot, your father called."

"What'd he say?" Jim asked softly.

"He wanted to know how the harvest went."

She looked at him, and he could see that she was thinking that she shouldn't have told him. Maybe it was because he was so tired, or maybe he just ought to have been sleeping. But it didn't matter, whatever it was that set him off, it had happened already and then he was in her arms, shaking and sobbing, and then she was telling him things that his father had said, that it was okay, that he was fine, that he understood, that he missed Jim and wished he would call when the work was done. Things that probably his father hadn't *actually* said, but *would* have, if he'd seen Jim like this, crying in his young, tired wife's arms.

* * *

October 2031

A lone gopher crouched just off the highway, beside one of the entrances to its burrow. Anxious at having sensed something approaching, it sniffed the air for anything beyond the familiar, endless off-gassing of the field that had begun following a visit by mechanical sprayers weeks before. Then it sensed a faint rumbling in the

distance, somewhere far off down the highway.

The gopher relaxed, perking its head up, and it turned slowly. It had lived in this spot all its life, long enough to understand that the enormous, rattling machines that roared past generally posed it no threat. As one of those machines approached, the gopher watched it, incapable of imagining that something else might be looking back at it.

But something was . . . or rather, Jim was. When he saw the animal, he was momentarily startled. They were so rare down south these days that the relocation project had shut down a year or two back. How many more of them could there be here? Was the poor little guy all alone?

Though he'd only briefly glimpsed it, the image of that little gopher remained with him, strangely haunting. He found himself thinking back over childhood winters: back in those days, these fields would've been ankle-deep in snow, as far as the eye could see, the houses nestled in it and their chimneys belching white fumes upward. The gophers would've been hibernating in their burrows for months already by now.

And yet this one remained, tenaciously clinging to this changed land, enduring the world's ruination: the warping of the seasons and the internal rhythms of its own life; the diminishing sustenance of the vegetation that grew in the area; the binding chemicals that were sprayed onto the topsoil after the harvest, to hold it in place until the snows finally did come, if they did. The poor little creature survived it all, somehow.

Jim found himself turning toward the back seat, to look at his daughter, Angie. For some reason he was unsettled by what he saw there, too: Bonnie was feeding their little girl apple juice from a silicon sippy-bag, while Angie clung to her stuffed pony doll.

"I just saw a gopher," he said, in a voice that sounded strange even to him.

Or, rather, only to him, for Bonnie simply replied, "Oh yeah?" She was busy, didn't notice the way Jim looked, as if he'd seen a ghost.

"Yeah. Strange," Jim said, leaving it at that. There was no point in talking about it: they had before, dozens of times, and always ended up at the same place. Angie would grow up in a different world than they'd known, and they had to do their best to prepare her for it. Jim pushed himself to set the thought aside in the way people do, the way people always have done.

Dinner with Dad, he thought, turning to look back at the road for a moment, to take in the plume of dust that had risen behind them. He turned himself around to take the wheel, staring at the familiar houses along the road into the city. Not that he didn't trust the self-driving system . . . he knew it was top of the line, and Laliberte had installed it for him himself, but it gave him something to focus on. It was just his nerves: this was the first dinner they'd had with his father in months, now that he thought about it. Bonnie had suggested they go out to this little organic restaurant-and-spa place by the river called the Berry Barn, but the old man had told her he was just too tired. He'd asked if they couldn't just pick him up, go have a picnic at a nearby park instead.

That was just his way, Jim decided. He'd grown up farming, and not on an especially successful farm. A man learned to make do with peanut butter sandwiches, even when someone wanted to order him a fancy dinner. Too bad, though, Bonnie had taken Jim's dad to Berry Barn the summer before, and he'd loved it. The organic food, the massages, watching little Angie play in the skin-treatment mud, everything.

Jim kicked himself for not having gone along that time. His old man had gotten over the contracts and everything long before then, as much as anyone could ever get over losing his life's work. Jim still pretended he hadn't, but not because of his old

man. It was because of his memories of his father's sadness, in that jumpsuit, in that room. It was the hard lump inside him that throbbed and burned when he thought back to that day, that made him pretend his father had never forgiven him.

As the truck pulled onto the street where his old man lived, just down the street from that Ukrainian Orthodox church, Jim's phone rang from the back seat, where Bonnie had been using it to play a song for Angie.

"Can you get that, hon?" he said, turning the steering wheel slowly to follow the curve in the street. The voices of kids cycling past filled the cab as Bonnie lifted the phone and, without looking to see who it was, said, "Hello?"

From the corner of his eye, Jim saw her make a face and look at the phone quizzically. "Hello? We're almost . . . oh my God! Jim!" she grabbed him with her free hand. "We're coming, Curtis! We're coming! Hang on!"

Jim's gut dropped suddenly, and he said, "Dad?" His foot slammed on the gas, and Angie started crying as he sped up the street to his father's apartment building.

"What is it, Bonnie?" he said as he pulled into the parking lot.

She had her hand over her mouth, tears in her eyes, but she managed to say, "Something's wrong . . ."

He jumped out of the truck and slammed the door behind him, running for the front door of the apartment building. He fished in his pockets for the spare key his father had given him, until Bonnie had the truck's window open, Angie in one arm, holding the keyring out the window and shouting, "Here, Jim! It's here!"

Jim rushed back to the truck and grabbed the keys before running back to the door as she struggled to get out of the truck with Angie in her arms. In a single jump, he was up the front steps, and he unlocked the door and hurried up the inside stairs to his father's apartment door.

It was open a crack.

Jim pushed the door open and rushed across the living room, knocking over a tall, skinny tea table by accident. The kettle that had been sitting on it slammed against the wall, bounced back onto the floor and the tea inside it went all over the carpet, near where his father lay, crosseyed from the pain and moaning softly, his cell phone on the floor beside him. The screen was still lit up from when he had called Bonnie.

"Dad!" he yelled and his father tried to answer him, but only a soft groan came out of his mouth. "Dad! Stay still! Keep breathing!" he yelled and he turned his head back and called over his shoulder, "Bonnie! Bonnie! Call 9-1-1!"

"Oh my God!" she yelled, and he heard her fumbling with her purse, heard little Angie start crying, heard the beep of Bonnie's netphone connecting, and his father groaned, and moved his head, and he was on the floor by his computer desk, where the chair had toppled over, and Jim felt sick because his father had said he would stop his all-nighters, had promised to stop it and just go for a damned walk once in a while. The damned wheat. The genetic scan readouts were just as unreadable to him now as they'd ever been, but he recognized them by sight.

"Jesus, Dad, no! Stay still. Don't try to get up. Help is coming."

"My . . ." he said, and that was all he could get out, but he moved one arm, flicked a finger toward the computer desk.

Jim stared, mouth open. "No, Dad! It's not worth your life! Stay still!"

"Take," his father groaned.

"Fine, fine," he shouted. "Now just stay still." He knelt down beside his father and held his hand, and the old man's grip was still good, so Jim felt a little hope in that, but only a little.

"Curtis," Bonnie said from behind Jim's back. "They're on their way. Hang on, please hang on," she said.

"Don't come," his dad said, glancing at the door. "Take . . ." he whispered again,

faintly.

“Okay, okay, I promise,” Jim said, and he realized that he felt like *he* couldn’t breathe, either.

It only took the paramedics a few minutes to arrive, and then they shoved Jim out of the way. A few more minutes later, his father was being wheeled out into the ambulance and Jim was leaning on the wall of his old man’s living room, his wife crying harder than he’d ever seen her cry before, and he still felt like he couldn’t breathe.

* * *

He hadn’t stopped feeling that way, either, not even hours later, after the surgery, when they were back at his father’s apartment.

Bonnie was feeding Angie in the kitchen, and Jim had just finished cleaning up the spilled tea and the pieces of the teapot. He hadn’t wanted to come back, but his father had woosily insisted, after he’d woken up from the surgery, saying, “If those bastards get my data, it’ll all have been for nothing . . .” Finally, he’d returned because the doctor had said that calming his father was important, and might help his chances of recovering from the surgery.

Jim wondered what difference it made, as he looked up at the computer on the desk. It was still running through some kind of simulation, and Jim couldn’t decide whether to smash it to a million pieces, or load it into the truck.

Bonnie came into the room and saw him sitting on the scruffy old carpet, looking up at the computer. She knelt beside him, put a hand on his shoulder, and said, “It’s not his fault.”

Jim sighed long and low, and stared into her coffee-black eyes. “Not his fault? Whose fault is it, then? Who never let up? Still got wheat growing in the kitchen in a grow-light box, for Christ’s sake. And this program—he was working himself to death.”

“Nearly. We should get back to the hospital. Load up the computer and files, and I’ll bring the plant out and get him some spare pajamas for the hospital.”

“Now, Bonnie, I don’t know about that. If we take this stuff out to the farm, they could . . .” He lowered his voice. “We could lose the land. They could charge *us* with industrial terrorism, too,” he whispered.

She looked him in the eye, hard and long without saying a word, holding in something she seemed about to say, until Angie whimpered in the kitchen. Then Bonnie stood up, and walked back to their little girl, and left Jim sitting on the floor, thinking. He couldn’t leave these things here, though. He knew that well enough. He’d promised. His father had taught him what promises were, had shown him on those long drives through dark blizzard-swept nights what it meant to find a way, somehow, even if the mapper failed.

Sighing, he lifted the computer—just the main box, the size of a large Blueberry unit—and unplugged it from the monitors and keyboard plate before shoving it into his pocket. Then he gathered all the notebooks and file folders he could find in the living room, and checked the bedroom. Bonnie was in there, Angie on one hip, shoving pajamas into a cotton shopping bag on top of the dresser. The room was a mess: the bedsheet looked like it hadn’t been changed in weeks, and the smell of stale sweat was hanging in the air, and canned vegetable soup. Something about seeing Bonnie in there like that, and looking at the bed his father had brought out from the farm, the bed where the old man had slept so many years alone, made Jim wonder how things might have turned out if his mother had lived, if that truck hadn’t spun out of control on the ice that winter night so long ago. He felt a pang for his father, but it didn’t really diminish his anger.

Bonnie came into the room behind him, pulling her black shawl over her best green blouse, and touched him on the shoulder. “That everything?”

“I think so,” he said softly.

"Good. We can stop back for the wheat after we go to the hospital," she said.

He turned and looked at her anxiously. "Bonnie, we definitely can't take that out to the farm, you know what they'll . . ."

"We're not going to. I have a friend in the city, someone who knows your dad and me online, and she says we can leave it with her. We're meeting her here later tonight."

Jim considered this. How had this woman known his father? Internet friends? "All right, honey," he said. "Let's go see him again, tell him everything is safe so he can get a good night's rest."

As they left the house, Jim saw the light switch off inside a car up the street. He paused, staring, but nobody got out of the car. He stood there for a moment, just watching it, and he could've sworn he felt someone watching him. The hairs on the back of his neck stood up. Then he said, "Bonnie?"

"Mmm?"

"You'd better call that friend of yours right now. I'm going to go in and get as much of it as I can fit into the truck here, and if she can't meet us at the hospital, then I'll take it to her tonight, after it's dark. Better not leave anything, even just for an hour," he said, looking back at the car he'd seen.

She followed his gaze up the street.

"Okay," she said with a nod, flicking at her phone's screen with her thumb, and then raising it up to her ear.

* * *

November 2032

The streets were long in the dark of late afternoon. From far away, the naked trees looked like they were reaching their branches up, arms bent to try and catch the last drops of rain before the late snow came, for it was supposed to come unusually late this year. Here and there, a lone dark pine in someone's front yard spread its apron out around itself, settling down for a long, quiet rest.

In Saskatoon, cars drove themselves down roads without a sound, as if the machines within them were both cautious and courteous all at once. In snow-clogged parking lots outside the city's restaurants and shopping malls, people were already blowing warm air into their cupped hands and walking quickly to their vehicles, to hurry home to warm rooms that they, lucky souls, were able to return to.

Despite all that had changed, things were so much like they'd always been. The world had kept on going, ever onward. If you lived in the city, you might never have known the cataclysms that had come and gone out on the prairie, the way the landscape had shifted and the way everything had been transformed. In the city, it was just another winter coming on, same as the last one, and the one before that.

* * *

Jim's dad's place smelled like an old man's house. It smelled like onion soup, and when he caught sight of his dad, sitting behind the little kitchen table, the sight half-shocked him. Where had all those wrinkles come from?

"Oh, Angie, look at you!" Jim's father Curtis said, in a voice that no longer sounded like his own. "Come on to Grandpa," he said softly, and Angie tottered over to him. She ran into his long, spindly arms and gave him a big hug. She had a smile on her face that Curtis thought nobody else in the world had ever seen, that was only for him and for her. She beamed and declared, "It's Grampa!" in her loudest, clearest voice. It came out sounding more like *gampaw*.

The things the doctor had said a week earlier still hung dark in Jim's mind. His legs were weak, and a spinning sensation had come, off and on, inside his head.

Bonnie looked into Jim's eyes and squeezed his hand. Words like *long*, *difficult recovery* and *long-term prognosis isn't good* are not words for someone's child to hear in a long white hallway, and as soon as one has heard them, one begins to carry them around like heavy stones within oneself. Bonnie hadn't cried, not right then. She'd been through all this before, with her own father a few years after her parents' divorce, when his broken liver had been replaced by something that had needed replacing again a few years later.

Cheap, government-subsidized prosthetics just went bad sometimes. It wasn't the kind of thing that surprised anyone except people standing in hallways, in hospital rooms, listening to doctors, looking at their dying fathers. Jim wanted to fall apart so he wouldn't have to think about this, but he couldn't. He didn't know how to fall apart anymore. He'd known his dad had been older than his buddies' fathers as a kid, but he'd never thought this far ahead, never thought about, in the end, what it would *mean*.

"Hi, Dad," he said, his voice a little shaky, and he put his arms around the old man, and squeezed softly, carefully.

"Hi, Jimmy," Curtis said, and smiled, and when Jim stopped hugging him and stepped back, his eyes were saying something that might have been *It's okay*, or maybe, *What the hell did you expect, son?*

Jim looked out the window, away into the pale November sky, as Bonnie leaned in and hugged Curtis.

"Dada?"

Angie was looking up into Jim's face from her grandfather's lap. Her pretty little brown eyes, her dark hair cut in a bob, they didn't go with the concerned frown on her face.

"Hi Angie!" he said with a smile he must have struggled to put on his face, and waved.

"Hi Gampaw!" she repeated gleefully, and turned to look up into the old man's face one more time. "What's new?"

He nodded at her and answered, a little quieter, "Nothing much, sweetie." Then he closed his eyes for a second. Jim recognized that expression on his face, though he couldn't remember from when. But he knew that this was what his father did when he was being hit by pain.

Jim gritted his teeth, hard, and looked at Bonnie.

She knew. She was the one who knew him better than anyone, knew that he couldn't say anything, and she was the one who protected him, or wanted to.

"Curtis," Bonnie said, reaching down and touching his hand. "You okay?"

"Yeah," Jim's dad said, not opening his eyes for a moment. "Give me a second."

When he opened his eyes again, she sat down beside him and said, "We've been making some big strides lately, cracking the epigenetic lock. You were on the right track. Devin, he said that the people with the Vandana Group . . . they realized that they'd been barking up the wrong tree. Because of your results, Curtis," she said, squeezing his wrinkled, thick-veined old hand. "I'm proud of you. They changed course, and they've already cracked the codes for the first few versions. They say it's only a matter of a year or two till they've cracked the whole encryption algorithm, and then maybe we can design a universal pollen that cracks all the codes."

Jim's father's eyes lit up at those words, *Universal pollen*, and he bounced Angie on his knee softly. "That wouldn't be enough," he said. "They're going to catch on, and rework the whole algorithm, and then you're back to square one. You're going to have to pirate the mods, and . . ." He stopped, letting his leg go still, and inhaled laboriously before going on, ". . . and then retool them. Some of them can't be introduced to any natural wheat as they are, you know . . ."

"I know. They've taken all of that into account. . . ."

"And you know they're going to sue you like crazy. Sue everyone they can. Anyone involved. Thank God I'll be dead before then," he said, glancing at Angie squirming in his lap.

"Dad," Jim said sternly, scooping up Angie. "She doesn't need to hear that." He knew Angie couldn't understand what he was saying, but he didn't want him thinking like that, talking like that. Everyone said that a negative attitude never helped someone through a major health crisis. "And if we can get another implant, a decent one, and it stays functional. . . ."

His father sighed and looked at him, as if to say, *What chance do you think there is of that? For an old gene-hacker "terrorist" like me?* But instead, he turned to Bonnie and said, "I just wish I could help. So . . . you're still involved with the Vandana Group, then?"

"Yeah, but don't worry, I'm being careful," Bonnie reassured him. "They send me some analysis work, and I do it anonymously. And my thesis, it was directly relevant, so . . . under cover of *academic* rights, in Canada at least. . . ."

"Be careful, Bonnie," he said. "These bastards play hardball."

"Oh, so do I, Curtis," she said, patting him on the back of his hand. "We'll hang 'em with their own rope, I swear." Jim watched the two of them sitting there, and suddenly he understood why he'd ended up with her; he saw that tiny shard of whatever it was, deep down, that they shared in common, that made base pairs and epigenetic heredity and enzymes make sense to both of them, fascinating to both of them.

How strange to see the resemblance now, he thought, looking at the wrinkles that covered his father's face; not the resemblance of himself to his father, but to see how he'd chosen a woman with so much in common with the old man: the same stubbornness, the same wonder at science, the same brilliant kind of mind, intent on prying open the world and understanding its secrets . . . And intent on undoing the worst of what humankind was inflicting on itself.

How out of place those lines on his father's face seemed now. Jim wished them away, though he knew that wishing would do no damned good.

* * *

December 2033

Devin smiled calmly, dreadlocks dangling from his scalp like thick branches from some primordial bush.

"Bonnie around?" he asked.

Jim smiled at the monitor, sipping his tea. "You know, if I didn't know better. . . ."

"Aw hell, man, you know, Bonnie's gorgeous, but my own wife's more than enough trouble for me." In the background, his wife Asha cried, "Devin!" in mock horror, and their baby girl, Sanjita, mewled loudly.

"Hi, Asha!" Jim said, and then he looked at Devin again. "Sorry, Dev, she's not back from town yet. Mail run."

"Ah, well, could you tell her I called about Jenga?"

"Sorry?"

"It's about the Jenga allele project."

Jim nodded, hoping he could remember that. Funny name. He supposed it must be some kind of wordplay on the game: maybe something about pulling out genes and swapping out their locations, or something?

"Okay," he said, as he rubbed the pollinator wand onto the heads of the wheat stems carefully, gently. There were about forty stalks in the pot, which stood inside a

glassed-in grow-light chamber by their living room window.

“You know, we published another paper last week. Lots of responses so far on the society boards. It looks like we might be able to come up with a universal pollen,” Devin said. “Nothing’s certain yet, of course, but if it works . . . man, that’d mean we wouldn’t have to keep screwing around with this stuff every year.”

“Hmm,” Jim nodded, trying to remember what his father had said about universal pollen. “He’d be happy. That was what he wanted.”

“Well, we couldn’t have done it without his work. That’s why Bonnie gave him lead authorship on that paper. They tried to tell her it wasn’t allowed on a posthumous author, and some people thought she really deserved most of the credit anyway, but she *insisted*.”

“Is that right?” Jim said, taking another sip of tea. She hadn’t mentioned that, but it sounded exactly like something she would do. He didn’t know what to say about that, though, whether his father would approve, so he just said, “My girl, saving the world.”

“Hey, some of the credit’s yours, too. The files you two saved—his data ended up in the right hands. You did the right thing. You saved *years* of work that we were all depending on. . . .”

Devin paused, seemingly uncertain. He must have realized how awkward it was for Jim to hear about all this stuff, this secret life his father had shared with so many other people, that Jim had never been allowed into.

Jim just smiled at Devin and said, “If you should be thanking anyone, it’s Bonnie, because she wouldn’t let me trash it all.” Then he glanced out the window, out across the snow to the highway. That truck was there again, the one that parked out there for hours on end, on random days. “Fucking bastards. Germinatrix has a truck parked just off our land half the time now. Not close enough to call the cops, but almost. Prick just sits there with binoculars, a camera. Sat dish mounted on his truck, right out in the open. I think they hired him just to scare me. Into what, I don’t know. . . .”

“Damn. You could always come out to India,” Devin said, quietly. “You know, there’s a street named after your father, in Vandanatown. Oleksyn Road, no kidding.”

Jim laughed. “I know! Bonnie showed me the picture of the sign.”

Devin leaned a little closer to the screen, and said in a serious voice, “You’d be more than welcome here, you know.”

“Thanks, Dev, we’ll think about it,” Jim replied politely, though it sounded as likely as him sprouting dreadlocks himself.

“You tell Bonnie I called, okay?” Devin said. “Jenga.”

Jim nodded, repeating it back to him: “Jenga.” Then he smiled. “Talk to you later, hippie.”

“Okay, Farmer Oleksyn,” Devin said, and disconnected. The chat window went blank.

Jim went out onto their enclosed porch, lukewarm tea in hand, and just stood there looking out into the flatness for a long time. There were big grey clouds on the horizon, and he thought that maybe a blizzard was on the way. Setting the tea down he cupped his hands and blew warm air into them, and stood, waiting. He knew that soon, maybe ten minutes later, or maybe an hour, Bonnie would come home. He wasn’t worried. The truck’s driver AI had been upgraded recently, and was working perfectly: it was a good new one, because they’d come down in price again. He trusted it, and knew it would bring her back home to him.

He could see her in his mind’s eye. She’d drive past the parked surveillance truck, in the Chevy, and give the bastard the finger when she got out, with her beautiful pregnant belly showing even under her parka. When he came out to the truck to meet her, she would kiss him with her slightly parched lips, and hold Angie’s hand and they’d go inside while he, with his arms full of groceries, would look out at those dark clouds once more, to see if the blizzard was any closer.

He could smell it coming on, the storm: blinding snow, wind and cold rushing down and covering everything up. He felt something else inside him, too, heavy like a stone. He thought of his father, and looked back up to that sky, into what was on its way, and closed his eyes. The icy wind touched his face gently, the way he knew it had touched the faces of so many men before him. He had the strangest feeling well up inside him, from that heavy place. The feeling was almost like a wordless question, one that he knew probably would never really be answered. He stood there for a moment, squinting into the glaring white of the endless snowy prairie.

And far above, flakes of snow began to drift down slowly, unhurried at first as the chill breeze began to blow a little harder, a touch more icily. The blizzard wouldn't hurry, would not hit like a flood or an earthquake. Anyone who was looking would see it on its way, would know it was coming, and could plan for it. It was relentless, but it would come slow enough for people to prepare.

Only a few feet below the banks of snow collected on the ground, under the raging white and blindness that was to come, the earth would lay still, neither trembling nor dreaming, just waiting for spring, the new shoots, the melt that would come eventually as spring unlocked the whole world again.

As he stared out their window, he saw their truck appear in the distance, the headlights shining through the falling snow, coming down the road toward the Oleksyns' land, back home again.

Jim swallowed down the last of his hot tea, and reached for his coat.