

I.

Janus Revey sat within the austere two-room schoolhouse where he'd recently received his teaching commission. He could hear Emily, the girls' teacher, shuffling around in the adjoining room. Her shoes were in whispered conversations with the aching floorboards, bemoaning the young girls, aged six to fifteen, who would storm across its surface, fumbling for answers in arithmetic, literature, and the furthest thing from their mind in the wild environs they called home, etiquette.

One simply had to look through the warped glass window of the schoolhouse to view that dusty town, which presently, Janus was. His green eyes were trained on *Bolt-Hole's* breakneck construction. Its town's inhabitants tried to keep up with the breakneck speed of Western expansion. There may have been something more that encouraged their movements. He suspected they were also trying to get as far away from their cybernetic brethren to the north as possible.

In outposts such as *Bolt's Hole*, the robots, as well as their kith and kin, were viewed with a healthy mixture of suspicion and prejudice. Outsiders were given an equally wide berth; their motives couldn't be trusted. In large part, this is why Janus lied about living close to Bolt's Hole, a two-week journey by horse. Had the Westers embraced the technology widely used in the North—cities like New York, Boston, or Hartford—Janus' lie would have been ferreted out in short order. The Westers had their reasons to abhor technology, just as Janus had his reasons for his secrets. Both were entrenched and part of the fabric of their respective parties.

Janus was pulled from his reverie by a six-year old boy who stumbled into the room in a rush. Pale and toe-headed, he ran up the aisles of desks, and came to a stop at one with school books and a slate belted together.

"Forget something, Henry?" Janus smiled.

Henry nearly jumped out of his skin. His surprise made him drop the bundle and shatter his slate. "Mr. Revey," he stammered. "I'm--" he gulped and eyes filled with tears. "I forgot my school work," he managed before breaking into tears.

"Now, now," Janus stood and strode across the classroom with sure steps. He placed his sturdy hand on the boy's shoulder. "Don't you worry about that for a second. I have spares. No one needs to know about it."

Inconsolable, the boy continued crying.

"Henry," Janus said in a soothing voice. "*Henry.*"

The young boy removed his grubby hands from his pale blue eyes.

"It was an accident," Janus reassured the boy. "Hey. Would you like to see something?"

Henry shrugged uncertainly.

“Something neat?”

The boy nodded.

Janus unbuttoned his light suit coat and removed a handheld tape recorder from the inner pocket.

Henry’s eyes widened to saucers. A small gasp escaped his lips. “Is that from a--”

Janus held a finger to his lips. “It’s a secret. Can’t tell anyone, okay?”

Henry nodded vigorously. There was a look of longing in his eyes as the tape recorder was concealed once more.

“Now, get out of here,” Janus smiled. “I’ll clean up this mess.” As the boy ran out of the schoolhouse, he added, “And I’ll get you a new slate on Monday. Henry!”

The six-year old wheeled around.

“Remember,” Janus mimed locking his lips closed and throwing away the key. “This is between us.”

Henry broke into a broad grin and ran into the bright afternoon sun.

“You’re good with them,” a musical voice sounded from the doorway to the girl’s classroom.

Janus stood, jagged pieces of slate in his hands. “You saw that?” There was a note of wariness in her voice.

Emily McNulty leaned against the doorway. “Just the last part,” she tisked and broke into a wry grin. “You got Henry Rose to smile. Quite a feat.” She was a willowy woman with light brown hair put up into a loose bun. After an entire day of wrangling the boisterous girl’s of Bolt Hole, loose strands and flyaways encircled her hair in a halo. Her brown eyes regarded him kindly.

“It was nothing,” Janus dumped the broken slate board into the trash. “He was just happy I didn’t cane him for breaking a perfectly good slate.”

“You’re modest,” she pushed off from the frame. She folded her arms.

“I’m honest,” Janus met her eyes and flashed his most beguiling smile. “Emily McNulty. When are you going to accept my invitation to dinner?”

Color flushed into her high cheeks. She mumbled something unintelligible as she smoothed out her long floral print blouse and straightened the sash at her waist.

“What was that?” Janus grinned. He held a hand to his ear in exaggerated deafness.

“I said you’ll have to meet my father first.” She replied with her eyes on the floor, cheeks ablaze.

“Perfect. Leave it to me,” he smiled. “I’ll arrange everything.”

She smiled once more, and excused herself for the day.

Janus quit the schoolhouse shortly after Emily. Before returning to the room he rent at Mrs. Gamber’s boarding house. Plus, he liked to be seen strolling in town. It helped establish his unassuming presence and made it known he had money to spend.

He passed the blacksmith and tannery, and stepped into Bolt Hole's general store. It was a spacious floor plan with everything the town could possibly need. Bolts of exquisite fabrics shipped from the North. Luxury soaps and shampoos. Honey sourced from the local apiarist. Cheap candy to appease the children who had only two nickels to rub together, but an appetite that was endless. There were also the staples: barrels of potatoes, rice, and flour. Cornmeal and sugar.

A whispered word to the proprietor of the place, Mr. Henry Wagstaff, combined with a furtive sign of the hands, allowed you a visit into the back room behind the counter. Access was never granted if women or children were in the store. The utmost secrecy was required. Once beyond the thick green curtain, there was a host of items strictly prohibited in town. If Colum McNulty, Emily's father, and the town's political party boss, ever caught wind of what was going on beneath his nose there would be hell to pay. However, given that McNulty knew everything that happened in Bolt Hole, his palms were most likely greased to look the other way.

Wagstaff trailed behind Janus, wringing his hands nervously as Janus walked slowly among the waist height shelves. They were piled with various electronics sold, or stolen from, *The Machina* as they passed through town.

Portable televisions. Blown out speakers, and microphones missing their chords.

Janus' thin fingers inspected each piece. He lifted them to feel their weight, turned the knobs on the televisions to test if they worked or not. A record player caught his eye for a moment, but was quickly disappointed when he realized it was missing its needle.

"Are you looking for anything in particular?" Wagstaff asked in a dusty voice. He blinked his watery gray eyes, which kept flicking towards the closed curtain. His back was perpetually hunched; his head, cocked and waiting for the tinkle of the bell over the doorway in the main room.

Janus removed his portable recorder from his inner suit pocket. "You wouldn't have any batteries for this, would you?"

Wagstaff's eyes snapped to the sleek black object in Janus' hands. "That's quite a peace," his voice was tinged with awe. "May I?"

Janus' fingers curled around the recorder. "I'm sorry, but it's quite special to me."

"A gift?" Wagstaff sounded disappointed.

The school teacher nodded. "I know you're not going to break it, or anything. But, one can never be too careful."

"Understood," Wagstaff shuffled off, and removed a box from behind one of the shelves. He fumbled around and came back with a fresh package of double-A batteries. "These should do the trick."

Janus smiled. "That'll work perfectly," he extended his hand to receive the black market goods.

Wagstaff withdrew the package. "Please," his eyes grazed the floor. His voice became gravely, tinged with misery and desperation. "Nothing I get ever works," he explained. "If you wouldn't mind," he swallowed. "Just a moment. You could even hold it if you like."

Janus considered the shop keeper's desperation. "Oh, alright. After I depress this button, speak into the microphone." He held the device to the shop keeper's trembling lips, which seemed not to know whether to smile and frown.

Wagstaff cleared his throat.

"Go ahead," Janus prompted.

"Hello," the shopkeeper waved a hand at the recorder. "It's nice to--what I mean to say is. Oh, hello," he shrugged his shoulders, helplessly. When Janus clicked the stop button, Wagstaff looked at him, expectantly. "How was that?"

Janus rewound the tape and let the old man listen to his hollow voice through the machine.

Wagstaff grinned with pleasure. "That's marvelous."

"How much do I owe you for the batteries?"

The bell sounded outside of the curtain. Wagstaff snapped out of his reverie. "Nothing," he shuffled towards the curtain. "Those are on the house this time." He motioned towards a door that led to the alley rather than the main street. "Let yourself out. And, Janus?"

"Yes?" he paused, his hand on the brass doorknob.

"Thank you."

He held up and the package of batteries and nodded. "Likewise"

As Janus strolled by handsome shires and Percheron tied to brass hitching posts, and side-stepped the occasional carriage of the more affluent members of town, namely Boss McNulty's business associates, he quietly marveled at the lack of chrome and steel, which characterized The North. Gone was the smooth efficiency of the automatons walking hand-in-hand with their human neighbors. While there were youngsters about, Janus spotted Henry spinning a metal with his friends near the square, none flashed metallically in the sunlight.

He remembered with a smile the games of his youth. Countless rounds of kick-the-can, in which the person, or robot, who was 'it' would stand in the center of a circle with their eyes closed. A child from within the ring would tag, or 'kick the 'can' and resume their previous places. After opening their eyes, the person who was 'it' had one chance to guess who touched them, man or machine. If your guess was wrong, the circle would break up as everyone ran pell mell in every direction, and Janus, or whoever had been elected, would give chase to tag someone else. If one guessed properly, the person that initially 'kicked' you was 'it' immediately.

He often played with his best friend Rob; a robot he'd known since childhood. His family worked within the family estate; not as servants, but hired staff. Rob's father was the best valet in the county, while his mother's apple pies were widely acclaimed in state fair circles. Local housewives and patisseries constantly hounded them for the recipe. She would smile enigmatically, her eyes a friendly yellow, and shake her head.

Rob and him were as thick as thieves. They'd spend hours dreaming of the day they'd pack their bags and flee the North for uncharted territories.

"Think of it, Jan," Rob said to him one day. They sat in the kitchen with naps sprawled across the table. He pointed towards the West. "Everything is uncharted beyond this line. We could join the Machina, and preach the gospel."

Janus rolled his eyes. "The Machina? All they do is go around talking about how great it is for humans and robots to be friends!"

"But, we're friends," Rob replied in a high whisper. His programmed voice-drop hadn't been scheduled yet.

"Of *course* we are. That's why I don't think it's such a big deal. Everyone is nice around here," he answered around a bite of warm apple pie and melting vanilla ice cream. "Surely the Westers aren't *that* dense."

"What do you want to do in the future, then?"

Janus smiled. "We could be train robbers. Or—oh!—cowboys. Westers would never know what hit 'em."

Janus stumbled into the sheriff and scrambled his recollections. His smile was sad as he focused on the wiry man in front of him. With the aristocratic cast of his face, coupled with a no-nonsense disposition, Sheriff Thomas could have easily resided in the North without turning heads. He lacked the sun-burned face and overt prejudice towards the automated community. All the same, a bead of sweat trickled down his back as he thought of the tape recorder in his pocket.

"Better watch your step, School Teacher," the sheriff warned, good-naturedly. He picked up the school teacher's telescope cowboy hat and dusted it off with a grin. "Lost in your own thoughts, I take it?"

"Occupational hazard, I'm afraid," Janus smiled sheepishly.

"Well, you've got to keep an eye on your feet while your mind is wandering; you're liable to get hurt otherwise. Might be the business end of a quarter horse next time."

"I'll keep that in mind," Janus replaced his hat.

"How's Henry doing?" Thomas asked.

Janus made a clicking sound with his teeth. "He's a bit of a mind-wander, sir."

Thomas lowered the brim of his hat. "Got a bit of his mother in him."

"He's attentive when it counts." *And, a decent secret keeper*, he wished quietly.

The Sheriff leveled his brown eyes on Janus a moment. He seemed to be making up his mind about something, before he said, "You're a good thing for this town, School Teacher."

Janus touched the brim of his hat. "Thank you, sir."

"Better get along now," Thomas turned back towards his office. "Watch your step."

"Will do," Janus nodded. When the sheriff was gone from the shaded platform, he let out a sigh of relief. He buttoned his jacket, and quickened his step.

The fleeting recollections of his childhood friend left him quietly discomfited and forlorn. The sunlight was suddenly too bright. The laughter, grating. The dust found the crevices in his suit coat and trousers. More than anything, he wanted to return to the room he was renting in the town's boarding house, eat a simple meal—stew, most likely—and wash his face and mind of the sour feelings Bolt Hole engendered within him.

He moved mechanically, allowing his mind to wander far afield of the sun-baked hamlet he found himself in.

Years after day dreaming at the kitchen table with maps, Janus and Rob found themselves on a sleek black locomotive. It's true, the automobiles or airplanes would have been quicker, but their message of peace and harmony would have been drowned out by the sound of the turbines or the smell of exhaust.

"Just think," Rob grabbed his arm, excitedly. "Soon, our past will be behind us. We'll be out on the frontier trying to get people to understand that the superiority they feel towards us is misplaced."

Janus smiled laconically as he watched the last minute bustle of the emptying train station. "Us?" he teased his oldest and dearest friend.

"Yes, us. Like it or not, you're an honorary automaton, Jan. Everyone in this city is." The high-pitched voice of Rob's childhood had been replaced with a comforting bass line two years before. If he wasn't paying attention, Janus could often feel his friend's voice reverberating before he could digest its message.

He shielded the glare of flashing chrome from the parts of Rob's body that weren't covered with Wester-style clothes

Despite his feigned indifference, he was equally excited to disembark. True, when they'd initially dreamed of a means to escape their cultured upbringing, Janus thought they'd be stealing the train rather than buying tickets like respectable citizens. After threats of death or disassembly, they'd promised their mothers they would be upstanding representatives of the Machina faith. They'd adhere to the rules, and avoid squabbles with locals who weren't receptive to their messages of friendship. Despite their joyous smiles when the train's trucks began to roll, Janus could tell they were worried about troubling rumors that had begun circulating; stories of rogue members of the Machina; tales of violence.

It was said that some, having been bullied, beaten, or bludgeoned to their last byte, had become outlaws. Instead of proselytizing, they formed marauding parties and terrorized farmers and homesteaders. They mutilated cattle, destroyed crops, and, in some instances, murdered the citizens who had bullied them in the first place.

Janus and Rob knew their task wasn't without risk. Collective shock waves went through the North when journalists began reporting about martyred Machina recruits; boys no older than eighteen. Robots who were still in the alpha versions of their software.

Brimming with the confidence that only being seventeen could give, Janus waved one last time at his mother as she vanished from sight. He thumped Rob on the back and said, "C'mon. Let's go claim our cabin before someone else tries to horn in on it."

Rob's question turned him around. "You're sure about this, right?"

"Now don't go getting cold feet on me," he laughed. "This was your idea to begin with."

"I know," Rob's huckle sounded like a car engine that wouldn't turn. "We're in this together, though, right? Partners?"

Janus threw his arm around his friend's shoulder and squeezed. "Of course we are, buddy. Let's go teach those nameless heathens about the benefits of television and wireless internet."

I'm serious, Jan."

"Me, too," the smile faded. His voice became sincere. "We're partners, Rob. I'll have your back. You have mine."

The robot's eyes flashed a pleasant yellow.

Janus hid his embarrassment. He cleared his throat, and said. "Now, c'mon. Let's see if we can't get something to drink, yeah? Surely someone will look the other way for a pair of up-and-coming Machinas. Maybe a pint for me, and a glass of thick 10Wx40 for you..."

Janus wiped the dust and horse manure from his boots as he stepped into the empty parlor of his boardinghouse. The curtains were closed against the dying sun. It filled the room with a soft red blush. Lamps were already lit. He could smell the oil, and the dense smoke. Rather than risk a headache, he went to the kitchen and retrieved a bowl of stew and a half loaf of hard sourdough to mop up the grease.

Once in his bedroom, he locked the door with a chain and bolt he'd installed against unwelcome intruders. Janus sat on the corner of his bed and wolfed down the stew before the grease could congeal. When the bread was consumed, and the gristle picked clean from his teeth, he removed his hat and kicked off his boots.

Keys jangled in his hands as he removed them from his pocket. He pulled the steamer trunk the steamer trunk his mother had once so carefully packed before their train journey south and west. Once opened, he stared at a pile of neatly folded, heavily worn clothes. Many of the pieces had begun to fray. Most showed evidence of clumsy patchwork that became more sophisticated with time and practice. He removed the false top, and set

the box of clothes atop his bed. At the bottom of the trunk, various gadgets sat in organized piles.

Radio parts and antennas. Vacuum tubes and transistors. He removed the prize of his assorted collection: a working radio. At night, he'd plug in a pair of earbuds, and angle the antenna until it pulled the gossamer threads of Northern frequencies from the air. With it, he stayed abreast of the news; the actual news, not the propaganda churned out by the McNulty-backed newsprint, a rag unsuitable even for use in the communal outhouse.

Janus worked the antenna nimbly, twisting the radio's dials until he brought a radio announcer's voice to life.

"The time is currently six o'clock with weather rolling into the area around..."

He bent down and retrieved a small chip from the bottom of the trunk, as well as a photograph.

The chip was charred and split in two.

The photo was bathed in sepia tones. It showed Rob and him disembarking the train when they'd first arrived. Their arms were thrown around each other's shoulder. Janus' smile was about to erupt into laughter. Rob's eyes were on the middle distance, well away from the camera. His friend was neither smiling or frowning. It was if he was glimpsing their precarious future and didn't know how to react.

"Partners," Janus said in a whisper.

He placed the photograph in its cardboard sleeve and replaced it in its hiding place. He replaced the steamer's false top, and fastened the hidden locks to ensure his secret remained in place. The last thing he wanted was for the Boarding house owner to come in to tidy the room and find a cache of forbidden gadgets. Reasonably satisfied, he pushed the trunk under his bed, and sat at a small table facing his room's sole window. It overlooked the street, which was emptying of the errand-runners and children, and being replaced with the tougher elements: Boss McNulty's crowd; conmen, gamblers, and drinkers. All paraded in their usual camouflage: men pretending at respectability.

He opened the window and felt the evening breeze on his face. "Well, Rob," he spoke aloud to his departed friend. "The only way to get the tiger by the tail is say, '*Here, kitty, kitty,*' and get ready to hang on for dear life." After a moment of thought, coupled with rueful shake of his head, he picked up a quill, dipped it in ink, and began to write a letter of introduction to Boss Collum McNulty.

Dear Sir:

My name is Janus Revey of ————. I've recently taken the position of teacher at the local school house. My mentor, Mssr. Seabury of——— assured me it was due in large part to your recommendation to 'give me a shot' as I was the only applicant for the situation..

It would be an honor, therefore, if you'd allow me the honor to drop in some evening to thank you properly for your beneficence towards me. If it is not impolite, it would also be a welcome pleasure to speak to you concerning your daughter Emily, who I've had the honor to meet in her capacity as the instructor for the female children in town.

If this letter finds you in good health, and you are not opposed to a face-to-face meeting perhaps you can send a reply care of your daughter, or post it to the boardinghouse.

Warm Regards,
Janus Revey

He chuckled quietly to himself as he held the letter to the heat of the lamp to speed the ink's drying. A stray thought made the smile expand further.

Rob looking over his shoulder reading a similar letter of introduction to a girl in the North.

"What's so funny?" he asked as Rob's warm chemical breath tickled the nape of his neck.

"I just didn't think it possible," Rob managed through his engine-turning laughter.

"Alright, alright," he set down his Waterman fountain pen, and pushed the letter towards the center of the kitchen table. With a mischievous glint in his eyes "You'd better enlighten me about what's so damned funny before I twist your girl."

"Take it easy," his friend chortled.

"Well, what is it?"

"Sometimes you sound more like a robot than I do."

Janus tipped his chair as he launched himself at his friend. The pair laughed as they wrestled on the kitchen floor.

"Don't let the Freedom fighters of the Industrial Revolution hear you say that!" Janus tried to get Rob into a headlock. "It took 'em years to get everyone to take you guys seriously. Poor little robots," he pretended to pout. "Sad, misunderstood robots."

Janus lunged again. Their laughter bounced off the kitchen walls.

Rob held up his metallic hands, articulated fingers splayed, as if Janus had a fun. He bent down a picked up his dented hat from the floor and knocked the dust free against his leg. As he replaced it atop his chrome-plated head, tipping it at a rakish angle, he said, "You're right." Rob extended his hand and helped Janus from the floor.

Janus smoothed his disheveled hair back, smiled, and allowed Rob to help him to his feet. "Truce?"

Rob nodded. "When you're right, you're right. Robots have feelings, too."

"There you go," Janus righted his chair and sat back down. He took a huge breath and picked up his Waterman to finish his letter. Before he could set nib to paper, Rob added, "It's not your fault that you have the emotional capacity of a Frigidaire."

He bolted from the room with Janus hot at his riveted heels.

Janus placed the letter in an envelope and sealed it. Moths slipped in through the open window and congregated around the soft glow of the lamp.

The following morning, Janus arose before the sun. He washed his face with a damp rag from a basin of water left outside of his doorway by the proprietor. Given that it was a Tuesday, He and Emily would take their students on a field trip somewhere in town. A couple of weeks ago, they'd gone to the confectioner's shop and watched Mr. Seabury make taffy while his wife plied the children with fresh baked cookies with large chunks of chocolate. Before that, they'd visited the town jail. Henry held on to his father's hand as he led them on a short, yet impressive tour of the two cells. The children were thoroughly impressed. Sheriff Thomas made them promise, "Not to turn out like those Machina desperados, you hear? Tricking god-fearing humans to abandon their kin for the kinks and cogs of automation." The peacekeeper remembered the age of his audience and softened his tone: "Be good. Listen to your mothers. Stay away from machines."

Last Tuesday, Emily's father insisted they pair take the children on a *truly* educational excursion.

"He wants us to take them to the black smith." Her eyebrows were knit in concern.

Janus straightened. A twitch of his eyebrow and a hardening in his voice were the only physical signs that betrayed his inner turmoil. "What do *you* think, Emily? Do you think that's wise?"

"It doesn't matter if I disagree or not," she strode towards the window. "If my father says we must, we must."

He sank into one of the desks in his empty classroom. "He's not my father," his voice was dangerously quiet.

"You've been here long enough to understand, Mr. Revey."

"Don't call me that," he snapped.

"Suit yourself, *Janus*," Emily's dress made a swift pirouette as she turned. Her face was pale with suppressed anger. "You know that he owns this town. This school. The outposts around it. If he says 'Visit the blacksmith, that's what we do.'"

“That man is a *butcher!*” Janus slammed his clenched fist on the desktop. “I will *not* subject children to those unspeakable horrors, Emily. I won’t. I don’t care if the Machina are the most despicable villains imaginable; our students shouldn’t have to watch their dismembered corpses melted down for reuse! It’s barbaric!” He leapt out of the seat and paced the length of his small classroom. With each circuit, he avoided the corner where Emily stood staring. Each foot forward kept himself from wondering if he’d said too much; had revealed himself as a Machina sympathizer, or a ‘Calque.’

A whisper approached Janus; fabric moved across the meticulously swept floorboards. He took a steady breath and let it out of his flared nostrils. Whatever vitriol she spewed upon him, whatever nasty epithet assigned, he would readily forgive as long as she didn’t report his treacherous feelings to her father. When he turned, he was surprised to see her eyes shimmering with unfallen tears.

She placed a smooth hand on his cheek as a faint smile turned the corners of her mouth. The brief moment passed between them. Her hand dropped and smile curdled as the reality of their position set in. “Even if I agreed with you, Janus,” she answered in a tender voice, “My father is not to be trifled with. He told the blacksmith to expect us there at two. We shall be there at two. You’re agreed?”

His shoulders slumped. With his eyes downcast, he nodded resignedly. He allowed his acquiescence to overwhelm him, lest he consider the reasons she had not turned him in to the proper authorities. The warmth of her hand could not affect his judgement; he had his reasons to be in Bolt’s Hole. Emily McNulty could not be one of them.

They went to the smithy later that day.

While Henry remained fixed to Henry’s side, the other boys and girls moved the dark shop with something akin to wonder as they moved their Tobias Clearwater’s darkened shop.

Surprisingly scrawny for a man of his profession, he was sparrow-chested beneath his leather apron and spindle-legged. His arms possessed the only muscle that hadn’t been burned off in the heat of the forge and the hammer-strike of cross peen against fiery metal; they were twin tree trunks grafted onto his slight body. His sable walrus moustache twitched with delight as the children moved through the detritus of his workspace.

“Watch yourself around the forge!” he called in a booming voice that belied the rest of his body. “You’ll melt your skin right off.”

One or two of Janus and Emily’s students jumped at his words. All nodded in the sway of this death-dealing magician. They’d been convinced of his power almost immediately. Just inside of the cave-like door to his shop, Clearwater had welded a fallen Machina into a terrible scarecrow of sorts. It’s arms were extended as if to grab the first person it came across. He’d adhered two razor-sharp mandibles to the unfortunate machine’s mouth, leaving it looking monstrous and evil.

Janus' stomach turned as he thought of the poor boy's mother back home. Was she expecting a letter any day? Word from her proselytizing son who was cut down bringing news of peace and harmony. He stepped closer and saw the robot's chest riddled with buckshot. The fatal bullet ran through its chest, allowing him a clear view of Clearwater, who was observing him a twinkling smile.

"We brought him down a month ago," the blacksmith smiled. Sooty crow's deer gathered around his eyes. "He was with a couple of others. Humans," a stream of spit landed on the dusty ground. "McNulty let the others go. They weren't worth the bullets."

"Ow!" Henry cried.

Janus startled. He let go of the young boy's hand, unsure of how long he'd been holding it.

Clearwater was about to say something when a clatter sounded from somewhere within his shop. "Be careful, now!" he scurried off. "Some of this stuff is expensive."

He looked across the shop and met Emily's pensive gaze. It may have been his imagination, but her eyes seemed to contain the same sorrow from their empty classroom earlier in the day. Henry's fingers tightened against his hand.

Janus watched the sheriff's son as he stared at his friends. Some had found a pile of scraps. They were putting robotic jawbones over their own, as they changed their voice into an approximation of the dreaded machines.

"I am a robot," one of the younger boys droned. "Do what I say, or I will destroy."

Another boy wore, what looked like, a hollow furnace over his chest. He beat it in a war-like gong, and laughed. "I have come to murder your family!"

Janus shook his head.

These were the people he and Rob had come to reach. He held fast to little Henry's hands and averted his eyes while his anger burned like Clearwater's forge.

II.

The long anticipated dinner happened a few days after their trip to the blacksmith's. He'd received the letter at his room in the boarding house. The paper was a rich cream color, sealed with red wax.

Janus carefully opened the envelope with and removed a thick piece of vellum. The invitation requested his presence for dinner the following evening. After refreshments, Collum McNulty promised drinks and a one-on-one conversation to discuss Janus and Emily's future together.

He placed the envelope on top of his writing desk and removed an object wrapped in a red handkerchief from the top left hand drawer. Moving to the corner of his bed, he sat and unwrapped the parcel.

He stared at the revolver with grim determination.

"It won't be tomorrow," he said aloud. Janus knew that despite the promise of intimate conversation, McNulty would have his men close at hand. Even *if* Emily's description included nothing but glowing praise, Janus was a stranger; new in town with suspect motives. His suspicions were largely confirmed when he arrived at the McNulty residence the following evening.

Two of the aptly nicknamed "McNulty Men" answered the door in dark, charcoal-colored suits. Their side holsters were impossible to miss. A fact not lost on both men. They had matching smug expressions as they roughly patted Janus down for concealed weapons. After turning him around, they grunted what could have been interpreted as an apology, and dismissed themselves to the corners of the main entrance hall, where they watched Janus straighten his seersucker suit, suspiciously.

He removed his hat and placed it on a rack, as Emily flowed into the room wearing a light summer dress. She smiled as she approached, before checking her enthusiasm at the sight of her father's body guards.

"Did you have trouble finding the place?" she asked.

"None whatsoever," he replied.

This wasn't the first time he'd visited the McNulty residence. He'd surveilled it countless times since arriving in town months before. In the cover of darkness, he would walk the perimeter after Boss McNulty and his men left for their nightly Machina patrols. They'd chase down rumors of the raiders whereabouts, stories Janus had sometimes perpetuated himself; a carefully cast off remark here, a piece of gossip there. Receptive ears and loose lips ensured the story would always reach its intended target; the hero of the people. Their kind benefactor, Boss Collum McNulty.

His two-story Tudor style home was built just outside of town. A tall barrier encircled their spacious backyard, which was planted with a number of cypress trees and

shrubs. The front was an improbable verdant green; some of the only grass in town, watered meticulously by the McNulty gardener, a man rumored to possess the talent to draw water from stone, and then to plant a garden nourished from said water. Hyperbole at best, the man's talent was still on obvious display.

Janus would watch from the hills, carefully hidden. Sometimes, he would see Emily in her open bedroom window, upstairs. She would sit for hours at her desk, reading or writing. The McNulty triplets were always annoyingly active, making closer inspection of the place nearly impossible.

Emily led him to the dining room where her father stood at the seat of honor at their large dining room table. It was covered with a thick tablecloth and set with their finest china. White tapered candles glowed invitingly, despite the chill emanating from her father's inscrutable blue eyes, as he sized Janus Revey up. It was only a moment before the cold calculation was replaced with an inviting smile, as the man stood to greet his guest.

Had Janus not seen the man in passing once before, he would not have fit the picture he had in his mind. A man of his stature, and corruption, should have been hirsute and portly. His hair should have been longer, unkempt, rather than the close-cropped black hair, graying at the temples. He was lean like his daughter, and wore crisp trousers, and white button-down, with sleeves rolled up to the elbows. Silver cufflinks fastened them in place, while a square of green silk sat in his front pocket. He stood and extended his hand towards Janus. "You must be Mr. Revey. I've heard a lot about you," he smiled at his daughter. "You've made quite an impression."

"Daddy," she muttered, before making a quick exit from the dining room under the pretext of checking on their dinner's progress.

Before he could reply, raucous laughter filled the room, and the walls began to shake. The McNulty triplets spilled into the room, carried by sturdy four-year old legs and the fortitude possessed by young boys.

"Boys," Collum greeted them in a clipped tone.

Their laughter ceased immediately.

"Good evening, daddy," they replied in unison.

"These wild young things are my sons," McNulty said after they'd taken their seats. The blonde one is Balor, the redhead, Bes, and the Conand at the end there takes after their mother and Emily."

"Hello, sir," they nodded towards Janus. Their eyes were eager and full of questions. With seeming impossible restraint, they held their tongues, and kept their hands in their laps.

"Please, sit Mr. Revey."

Janus glanced at the bodyguards in the corner of the room. He was surprised to see they'd doubled in the short time since his arrival. There was one in each corner, staring at him, openly.

Emily returned to the dining room, and took her seat opposite the boys. There was an empty chair between her and Janus. They made light conversation until the food was carried in beneath silver trays: Lamb chops with mint sauce, green beans, and mashed potatoes swimming in butter and chives.

With napkins settled on their laps, and conversation flowing freely, McNulty cleared his throat. "So, tell me a little more about yourself, Mr. Revey."

"Janus, please," he plastered on a false smile. There was a part of him that couldn't believe he was trading pleasantries with this monster.

"Do you have an area of study you prefer, Mr. Revey?"

Janus ignored the slight, and finished chewing his food. "I've always been fond of literature and history."

Collum McNulty gestured towards his three sons with the tines of his fork. "I've tried to impress upon my boys the importance of history and our place within it, but they're too concerned with dirtying the knees of their trousers with grass stains and mud."

"There's time for both," he winked at the boys.

"What made you decide to embrace the profession? A strapping young man like yourself; I'm sure you could have made your fortunes in any number of fields."

"It was an instructor I had in my youth."

"Oh?" McNulty placed a lamb chop on his plate. "Are you from around here?"

"A small town not far from here," he answered abstractly. Those kinds of lies were easy to track. He moved on with his yarn to avoid further questions. "This instructor of mine used to go on about the bonds of brotherhood between robots and humans."

Emily coughed as she choked on a green bean. The triplets eyes darted towards his father who glared at Janus from the other end of the table.

"Of course," Janus added with a rueful smile, "to believe what my instructor espoused, is the fastest way to a gibbet imaginable. It's one of the reasons I decided to teach; to correct the lies others told about the robot menace."

The tension leaked from the room almost immediately.

"Did your teacher get in trouble?" Balor wondered excitedly. "That's sadism!"

"*Sedition*," Emily corrected, quietly. Her eyes were riveted to Janus who tried to reassure her that this was merely an act.

Janus continued. "When the town sheriff heard what he was teaching, he was executed in the town square," he winked at Collum, who settled into his chair.

"Jokes aside," McNulty leveled his gaze upon Janus, "no matter how *tasteless*," the word was crisp and cold. "What is it that *you* believe?"

"That the rise of machines in the North are a threat against the way we live. They steal our jobs, insinuate themselves amongst god-fearing citizens, and reformat their hapless brains with the lie that all are created equal," he answered smoothly, allowing a

false not of fervor to creep in for theatricality. "It's a disgrace."

McNulty studied the school teacher's face for a moment before he nodded his approval. "Take note, boys," he looked at his three sons. "That is the truth you should hold to your heart. These *robots*," he grimaced. "Are not your friends. They parade around the countryside talking out of both sides of their mouth."

"The Machina, daddy?" Balor spoke with his mouth full of masticated green beans.

"Aye, the Machina," he agreed. "They pretend to proselytize, but they're only trying to fool the good Wester citizens. "Once they let their guard down, they butcher them; woman and children, alive. Mr. Revey may have taken a jab at humor earlier, but it is not a laughing matter. You should always have your guards up. They'll do the same with their *firewalls*."

Bres shoved a piece of steak into his mouth and chewed contemplatively. "When do we get to come with you, daddy?"

"Go where?"

"When you go out huntin' the machines," Bres answered for his brother. Conand nodded his head energetically.

Janus exchanged a furtive glance towards Emily. She was looking at her father expectantly. A hint of fear was etched on her brow.

"Not for a few years," he answered. "It can get dangerous out there. They're trained killers, they are. Merciless."

Revey's hand tightened around his knife.

"Do you have something to add, School Teacher?" McNulty asked. His gaze went from Janus' white-knuckled grip to his eyes, which he drained of anger.

"Your father's right," he answered in a pained voice. "I've lost a couple of friends who would go out on the same patrols."

"The Machina gunned them down?" Conand's eyes widened.

"If only," he shook his head, and wiped his mouth with the cloth napkin at the side of his plate. "That would have been the kind thing to do. No, they butchered them. When the search team found their--"

"All right," Emily stood abruptly. Her eyes glittered and cheeks were flushed with strong emotion. "I think that's enough of this talk. We needn't give the boys nightmares."

"Aw," Bres tossed his fork onto his plate. "It was just gettin' good, though."

"Regardless," Emily sniffed. "Perhaps father and Mr. Revey would like to continue their conversation in a more appropriate setting?"

Collum McNulty nodded judiciously. Once to his daughter, and then to his men. "Perhaps, Emily is right. Mr. Revey, would you like to join me for an after dinner drink downstairs?"

"Downstairs?" Janus' voice creased with surprise. "I didn't know you had a basement."

McNulty tilted his head. "Why would you? We've never had the pleasure of your company?"

Janus cast about quickly for an explanation. "It's a rarity to find a residence with a basement in the desert."

"Well," Collum flashed a charming smile that didn't reach his eyes. "I'm sure we all have one or two surprises tucked up our sleeves. Come," he stood. "Join me."

He motioned for his men to wait at

The first thing that stymied Janus were the three sets of locks that secured the basement door closed. The first was a bolt that slid into the ceiling, well out of reach of his sons. The second thing that nearly made him swallow his own tongue was the light switch at the top of the darkened stair well.

A small smile was tucked in the corners of Collum McNulty's mouth as he descended each stair with a self-satisfied swagger. Janus watched the light reflect off of the man's balding pate.

He turned his head, and said, "What you're about to see is a family secret. If you're interested in my daughter, it's one you will keep, as well." When the pair stepped into the room, Janus was struck with its sumptuousness.

The floor was covered in lush red carpet. Mahogany furniture absorbed the light, as a fire blazed merrily in a six-foot wide hearth. A plush leather sofa sat in the room's center, while waist-high dark counters circled the walls. Atop their surface, Janus eyes widened at the sight of an expensive stereo, a small flatscreen television, and an automatic coffee maker.

Still smiling, Collum sauntered to a chrome-plated tray placed on a coffee table in the center of the room near the sofa, and picked up a glass decanter. He picked up a snifter, and held the glass in the palm of his hand. With a raised eyebrow, he asked, "Brandy?"

"No, thank you," Janus declined.

"A teetotaler?" Collum's eyebrow went higher still, coupled with a note of surprise in his voice.

"Not necessarily," he shook his head. "I lost the taste for it in the brashness of youth." The lie wasn't entirely true. He'd only recently soured on alcohol after a fatal fight with Rob in the throes of intoxication.

Collum poured a generous helping into his own cup, and replaced the glass stopper on the bottle. "A man who doesn't drink has secrets to keep," he answered slowly. "Do *you* have secrets to keep, Mr. Revey?"

Janus shrugged. "Only this one," he motioned to the forbidden technology cavalierly inhabiting the home of the town's most influential patron. "Would you mind explaining what you're doing with all of this, sir. I thought technology was against the law in Bolt's Hole. A law *you* enacted, if I understood correctly."

McNulty moved to the corner of the room and lifted the needle on a record player. A Chopin nocturne drifted through the machine's speakers. "Look, Mr. Revey. Most people are fools. If you allow them a modicum of convenience—that coffee pot, for example—eventually, the urge for similar conveniences—the radio, the television, the automobile—will overwhelm their straw-filled heads. Eventually, they will stumble upon automation, and soon, we'll have robots walking the streets. They'll rise up; convince everyone to turn on their masters. It would be a bloodbath.

Janus kept his face blank, though traces of his anger found itself in the redness of his ears. "Absolute power corrupts absolutely?" He replied, blithely.

Collum snapped his fingers. "Exactly! I might make a piece of toast in a toaster, but I wouldn't let the toaster tell me what to do." He settled onto the leather couch and sighed deeply. Crossing his legs, he looked at Janus and said, "Socrates once said, 'To find yourself, think for yourself. I know there's no risk of myself being corrupted by these machines. My people, though,' he took a drink from his brandy and shook his head, sadly. "My people are sheep. Give them a little, and they demand a lot."

"Hence the ban on technology."

Collum nodded. "You're a smart young man. Emily has chosen wisely."

Janus sighed. "Aren't you worried what would happen if the town's people found out what's down here? I mean, I know it's not Socrates, but Nathaniel Hawthorne once said, 'No man can, for any considerable time, wear one face to himself, and another to the multitude, without finally getting bewildered as to which one is true.' With all due respect, you tell them one thing, but live by your own set of principles."

McNulty looked at Janus shrewdly. "No one is allowed down here but me, my boy. Emily knows about it; the triplets don't. Not yet, at least. So, in answer to your question, Revey, how on earth would they find out? The only way that would be possible is if someone *talked*."

"As you said earlier," Janus smiled. "I'm interested in your daughter, sir. I'll honor the silence assuming she may one day honor me with her hand."

"Cheers to that," McNulty held up his glass towards Janus.

The school teacher nodded. He reminded himself not to be lulled by this man's charm. Prior to tonight, the last time he'd seen McNulty, he was astride a black stallion, surrounded by his gun-wielding men. Their bullets whizzed through the darkened night, concealing his and Rob's identity from the men. Their muzzle flashes were the only light available as they fled in terror with the smell of cordite and racing hooves filling his nostrils and ears.

"I should get back upstairs," Revey turned to leave.

"What about yourself?" Collum wondered aloud.

"Excuse me, sir?" Janus managed the word without vomiting.

"Which face is yours, and which to the multitude?"

Janus broke into a disarming smile. He lightly pinched his cheek and answered, "Just the one," with a small laugh. "Makes things easy."

McNulty smiled pleasantly and nodded.

When Janus turned towards the stairs once more, the smile died from his lips and his face became as expressionless as stone. He thought he could feel McNulty's shrewd eyes on his back as he made his way back to Emily.

III.

Later that same evening after leaving Emily with a chaste kiss on her extended hand, Janus excused himself. He walked through the twilight town and watched the lights within windows going out one by one. The shops were shuttered against the boisterous laughter and loud piano music streaming from the town saloon. As he passed, a glowing ember caught his eye across the street; Sheriff Thomas smoked a cigarette with quiet vigilance, weighing the pros and cons of maintaining his watch on the bar, or retiring to his home to relieve the sitter and stand in the doorway of Henry's bedroom, engaging in a more intimate vigil over his slumbering son.

Janus lifted his hat from his head and waved to the law man. Sheriff discarded his cigarette and nodded before letting out a sigh and locking his office for the night. "Stay out of trouble, School Teacher." His voice was pillowed by the night; intimate by dint of the hour and the deserted quality of the street.

"Always do!" his teeth flashed in the moonlight. Gravel crunched with each footfall. His heart began to thrum in his chest with nervous anticipation.

When he got back to the boardinghouse, he looked over his shoulder to make sure he was alone. A faint melody of energetically played piano keys from around the bar, all was quiet. Given his prior scouting missions around the McNulty estate, he knew he had a couple of hours before Collum and his men would mount their horses and search in ever widening circuits for wandering Machina.

Rather than run the risk of being caught by the proprietor after hours—there was a strict curfew—Janus had packed a change of clothes in the horse's saddle bag. He unhitched the creature and led it at a slow pace around the corner. He changed into a dark pair of trousers and a coarse black poncho and cinched a holster around his leg above the knee. After he'd slipped his hands into a pair of leather gloves, he replaced his flat-topped hat. His horse gratefully accepted a pair of sugar cubes before Janus led him stealthily through the town alleys to avoid detection.

Once outside of town, Janus mounted his horse and clicked his tongue quietly, applying the heels of his boots to the animal's flank. They took off at a trot until they were clear of the town's silhouette against the mountains behind it before opening up into a gallop.

The brisk air whistled past his face. He allowed himself a small smile, enjoying the rhythm of movement, the freedom from the claustrophobia and suspicions Bolt's Hole engendered within him.

"I don't care where we are," Rob stepped away from a brown horse with a white nose. "I'm not going to ride that thing."

"How else will you get around?" Janus laughed, dismounting a smooth motion.

"Tell you what we'll do," Rob's eyed flared a merry yellow. "You can hitch your horse to a wagon and drive me around in style."

Janus clutched his stomach as he laughed, merrily. "I'm not dragging your happy ass, anywhere. You're going to get a horse, and you'll ride." His face lost its mirth. "Do you have any idea where you are, Rob? Do you know what they'll do to you down here if they find a human carting around a machine like they were royalty."

"I didn't think of that," Rob admitted.

"It's lucky I'm around," he pushed his friend's shoulder. "Who else would save your bolted ass?"

"Yeah, yeah," his gentle push left Janus splayed on the ground. "I need a bigger horse, than. One who's back I won't break the moment I sit down."

The tip of Janus' nose grew numb in the desert air. The sensation brought him back to his senses. He wasn't sure how long he hadn't been paying attention. By the same measure, he couldn't be sure that he hadn't been followed by one of McNulty's patrols.

For a moment, he thought he heard the soft whinny of a horse nearby. In the distance, a coyote's melancholy whine scratched against the night. He discounted as he cautiously approached the mouth of a cave. A small fire lit the walls in dancing light and shadow.

His breath quickened as a twig snapped directly behind him. In the time it took him to spin and draw his revolver, his mystery guest had already drawn theirs. A shotgun's muzzle was pressed against his forehead.

"Drop it," the stranger's voice warned.

The revolver clattered at his feet. He spread his fingers wide and held up his hands. "How long have you been following me?" His voice was resigned, chased with annoyance.

"About a mile," the voice replied with satisfaction. "You should pay more attention when you're sneaking out of town."

"I thought I was."

"You thought wrong, Mr. Revey." The cold muzzle dug into his soft skin.

"Cut that out," Janus smacked the gun away from his head. "And, quit calling me 'Mr. Revey.' You know I hate that, Turk."

A hulking robot stepped into a swath of moonlight. Over seven-feet tall, it was covered in a black ponch and large bowler. Belts of ammunition cross-crossed his chest. Janus' face pressed against the cartridge as he was pulled into a monstrous bearing. Turk tapped his head, smashing the crown of his hat towards his ears. Like Rob, his eyes flowed a pleasant yellow when amused, which they flashed now, as his metallic jaw pulled back into a robotic grin. Replacing the shotgun into a holster strapped to his back, Turk motioned towards the glowing cave.

“Come inside,” Turk insisted as his eyes scanned the darkened horizon. “The patrols may not be far behind.”

Janus accepted the invitation eager to get out of the cold.

The Machina’s cave was cluttered with the fallen weapons left behind by the human patrols. At first, they’d tried traditional guns, but the ammunition didn’t always penetrate the robot’s metallic skin. Some favored aluminum, while others preferred thick layers of tungsten to protect their mechanized organs. As the Westers learned their weaknesses, they fell back on anachronistic weaponry: lances and halberds, maces and bludgeons. When Turk wasn’t playfully threatening his Calque colleagues with double-barrel shotguns, he preferred a large battle axe a local deputy had dropped in a town one hundred miles east of Bolt’s Hole.

The others huddled around the fire or stood talking in hushed metallic whispers. Janus saw young Praukhauser, an over-eager Bostonian, rubbing his hands against the chill. He wore a bandage around his head, as his flaxen hair jutted at shark angles. Blood had seeped through the bandage. Mills didn’t look any better. Within the dim light, he sported two black eyes. His bare chest was wound tightly with dirty rags.

“What happened to everyone?” Janus sat on an apple crate that was pulled up to an overturned barrel. Turk opened a magnetic travel chess board and set up the pieces with his articulated fingers. The index was rusted with what looked like blood.

“We’ve gotten a lot of resistance from the locals,” Turk replied. He moved a small black pawn forward and nodded towards Janus eagerly.

Janus moved his knight forward. “What *kind* of resistance?”

“The usual,” Turk shrugged. He moved a bishop to the center of the board. “No one wants to hear what we have to say.”

“Are you just *saying* it?” his eyes flicked to his human counterparts gathered round the fire. “It looks like you’ve seen a lot of action.”

“We’ve seen our fair share,” Turk moved his bishop and took one of the school teacher’s pawns.

Janus noticed a piece of leather encircling Turk’s neck. He leaned across the barrel and pulled it from beneath the robots poncho. It was threaded with at least ten severed ears. “Jesus *Christ*, Turk,” Janus stood and stepped away from the behemoth, aghast. “I thought we were *against* violence. Isn’t that we came down here to begin with? If Rob knew—”

“Where *is* Rob, huh?” Turk stood, angrily. He poked his thick index finger against Janus’ chest. “And, what exactly have *you* been doing in that town for so long? We could have pulled up stakes months ago, but you keep telling us to, ‘Hold off. Hold off, I’m almost there, I’m almost there’ Do you think we’re stupid?” his booming voice rose. “Do you think we don’t know what’s going on? Of *course* we do! You want vengeance. You want them to

pay for what they did to your friend. But, what? That's more *acceptable* because you're human, and we're not?" He yanked at the necklace, and said, "I'll *tell* you what I'm against, Revey. I'm *against* having my head stove in by some backwater yokel who hates the sight of me because I'm made of metal. So, yes," he sat back down and fixed the pieces that had fallen from the chess board. "I will fight back. I will not go quietly."

Janus' shoulders slumped. "The ears, though."

"I also will *not* pretend that I'm not starting to enjoy it. We came here for peace. If all they want is blood, I can give 'em that, too."

He stood there for a moment and felt the eyes of Praukhauser and Mills looking towards Turk and himself. The other robots in the corner had stopped talking, as well.

"I'm sorry about your friend, Janus. I am," Turk said in a quiet voice. "But, it's not safe for us here, anymore. We're a good fifteen miles from the nearest town, but their patrols widen each night." He shook his head. "We're moving on in a week; two at most. If you can't avenge your friend within that time, we're leaving without you."

Janus was half dead with fatigue as his body rocked with the rhythm of his horse as it neared the northern boundary of the Bolt's Hole. Having not paid attention, he hadn't properly prepared himself to block out the sight he steadfastly ignored every time he left the outpost's limits. They began as figures against the horizon, darkened forms with outstretched arms. Tattered cloaks snapped in the wind. Their bodies were bullet ridden; some twisted. All were decapitated, and welded to individual poles, secured in place with rebar and a half-ton ball of concrete buried underground to prevent the Machina from retrieving the bodies of their fallen comrades. In truth, once they were mutilated to this extent, the Scarechromes—the town's nickname for the robotic corpses—were beyond repair.

He dismounted his horse and was ashamed to welcome the warmth emanating from one of the bodies. Along with the removal of their heads, they'd been gutted completely. Within the frames where their innards once moved with smooth efficiency, fires burned throughout the night. Janus' clouded breath came in short bursts. He held his gloved hands to the fire as a single tear rolled down his head.

"Before I leave this town," he looked up at the body towering above him, "I'm going to get your head, Rob. Do you hear me? I promise you that. Even if I'm killed in the process."

Janus' horse nickered behind him.

When he turned, he nearly collapsed with surprise. "Emily!" he moved towards her hurriedly. "What are you doing out so late?"

Emily clutched an afghan around her shoulders and cinched it against her chest with shivering hands. "I couldn't sleep."

He furrowed his brow as he examined his pocket watch. "It's nearly three in the

morning. How did you even manage to get out of the house without your father's men stopping you?"

"Mr. Revey, I may be a school teacher, but I was once a young girl. A girl who got into about as much trouble as my little brothers."

He smiled, yet his shoulders remained tense.

She shrugged. "What are *you* doing up? And, dressed so strangely."

He drew a gentle hand down his horse's muzzle. "I've been plagued by nightmares, lately," he replied, honestly. "I go out riding to clear my head."

"How did you end up here?" she moved towards him. She wore a thick pair of coarse pants, and a sturdy pair of shoes.

"I couldn't tell you," his voice grew quiet.

She put one of her delicate hands against the horse's soft mane and the other flat against Janus' face. "You're not as accomplished a liar as you think you are, Mr. Revey." When he opened his mouth to object, she smiled. "I know. You don't like to be called that." She leaned in closer with a mischievous smile turning the corners of her lips. "Can I tell you something that *I* cannot abide? Being told a bunch of tall tales by the man I love."

Janus nodded without speaking. With a backward glance towards the Scarechrome that used to Rob, he helped Emily onto the back of his horse, and led from the ground. "Let's leave this place," his voice was choked with sadness, once more. "It reminds me of things I'd rather not dwell on at this hour of the night."

"I mean it," Emily's voice grew determined. "There's something you haven't told me, and I demand to know."

"Emily," he sighed. "I'm tired, and courtship or no, it would still raise eyebrows to have you and I return together in the wee hours of the morning. There's bound to be some old codger with a weak bladder who happens to look out of their bedroom window at *just* the right time. I'd have a lot to explain to your father," he paused, and met her gaze. "I'd rather explain myself to *you*."

"He wouldn't understand?" she whispered.

Janus shook his head slowly without breaking eye contact. "Now, walk home the way you came, as quietly as before," he grinned. "I'll meet you at the brook behind the schoolhouse at one o'clock this afternoon. I'll explain everything."

She slipped from the horse. Standing in front of him, the crown of her head met the level of his chin. With her hand on his chest, her lips whispered against his stubbled cheek.

"Goodnight, Mr. Revey."

"It's Janus."

"It'll be Janus after one o'clock." She arched an eyebrow, turned, and disappeared into the darkness just before dawn.

Satisfied that Emily had truly taken his leave, he led Juno into the alley he'd used to leave the town. Sunlight like dull silver began to leak into the seams of the sky. Having first believed his eyes were adjusting to the totality of darkness before dawn, he quickened his pace towards the boardinghouse. Alone, he would have an easier time explaining his twilight wandering—he would use the same flimsy excuse he plies of Emily—but, it was easier to avoid such excuses, lest the townsfolk piece together that his insomnia only struck early Saturday mornings.

He put his holster and gun in Juno's saddlebag and laid his folded poncho on top to conceal their presence. Questions would naturally arise as to why a school teacher would need a gun. With his secret safely in place, and the first streaks of gold and tangerine kissing the sky, he hitched his horse, and scratched her ears. "They'll feed you before long, Junicorn," he stroked her nose affectionately. Dead on his feet, he scrawled a note to push his breakfast until eleven o'clock, as opposed to the usual eight, and slipped into bed before the first rooster crowed, and the phlegmy coughs of fellow lodgers began to sound.

Late Sunday morning, Janus took a chance at the the General store being open, despite it being the Sabbath. Technically, it's doors remained shuttered, but Janus knew that old Wagstaff was usually inside, safely ensconced in the privacy of his green curtained room. A nervous smile greeted him after having knocked on the large shop window and pressed his face to the glass with his hand held to shield the sun. So unexpected was Janus' rapping, Wagstaff came out of his black market gallery with white headphones stuck in his ears. The chord trailed to his ample waist.

When Wagstaff hastily unlocked the door and ushered him inside, Janus drew the window shade, and said, "Our conversation is already in stereo," with a smile and a tisking wag of his finger."

"What's that, now?" Wagstaff's eyes watered with confusion and rheumatism. His shirt was unbuttoned and untucked.

Janus plucked an earbud from the shop owner's left ear and said, "You might want to put those away," he grinned wider. "There's no point in having a secret market if it's not secret, yeah?"

"Oh, heavens!" Wagstaff yanked the headphones off and hastily shoved them into the pocket of his coat. "Thank you," he continued to Janus' nod. "What can I do for you?" he shuffled behind the counter. "I'm not open, but would never turn away another techie." He lifted the green curtain and indicated for Janus to follow.

"I'm not actually looking for that today."

"Oh?" Wagstaff let the fabric spill from his fingers. "Batteries? Cassette tapes?"

"I'm all set," he turned the general inventory. "I'm wondering if you could set me up with a picnic basket."

"You and the McNulty girl," Wagstaff offered a treacly smile. "Having a romantic picnic today," he disappeared down an aisle and returned with a basket in hand."

“Word gets around fast,” Janus replied irritability.

“Love gets around faster.”

The school teacher grimaced at their cobbled together aphorism. “I suppose,” his eyes continued searching. “Silverware? Glasses? Do you have any food or drinks lying around?”

Wagstaff’s voice carried as he disappeared into the bowels of the store. “Your first two requests won’t be a problem,” he shuffled to the counter and placed two sets of dinnerware on top of it, as well as a pair of metal cups. “You’re out of luck with the food, though. The butcher shop’s closed as well as the eatery in town. Strict church-goers,” he smiled shyly. “You won’t find them puttering around their shops on a Sunday morning. But,” he snapped his fingers, eyes alight. “Give me a minute.”

In the shop owner’s absence Janus dumped the silverware and cups into his wicker basket. Wagstaff reappeared a couple of minutes later. In his hands he held a bundled handkerchief. “Nothing much,” he smiled. “A roll of summer sausage, a block of cheese, and a small loaf of black bread. I put a little extra in there, too. No peeking, though.”

Janus began to object.

“Not a word,” Wagstaff warned. He shoved the food from his personal stores into Revey’s basket. “You’re one of my most loyal customers, and you haven’t said a word about my *side project*.”

“Will you at least let me pay you?” Janus laughed.

“Of course,” Wagstaff’s lopsided mouth broke into a grin exposing the man’s yellowed teeth. “Not today, though. Call me a heathen if you must, but I do follow *some* decorum.” He pushed Janus towards the door. “Pay me tomorrow, okay? And, Janus?”

Janus stopped at the door expecting a warning about the trifling with McNulty’s daughter. “Yes?” he replied, back tensed.

“You’ll have to tell me what you think of the summer sausage. I made it myself.”

Janus tipped his hat. “Thanks, again.”

Janus retrieved a quilt from a trunk in the school house. Occasionally, his students would take their lunches near the brook as he pointed out the birds and plants around them. He’d also borrowed a clean slate from Henry’s desk—the one he’d given the boy a week before—to serve as a plate. Both Janus and Wagstaff had forgotten something to eat off of.

He laid out the accoutrements of picnicking, but remained true to his word; he did not open the handkerchiefed bundle. Janus set it beside the basket in the center of the blanket and laid back. Relaxed by the sound of water, susurrations of leaves overhead, and the delicious sunshine, he dozed off waiting for Emily to arrive.

When he awoke, Janus was in the North. The walls were painted a stark white, and

Rob sat at a sparse table staring at a battery. "What're you doing?" Janus asked the first line of the recurring dream by heart. He grabbed an extra chair at the table his friend was sitting and spun it. He laid his arms against the backrest.

"Trying to convince you to come with me," Rob answered without lifting his head. "One last time."

For a moment, Rob's face flickered. Transposed against it, Janus saw the image of a coffee maker. He closed his eyes. When he opened them, Rob's usual face was restored. "All I'd do is bugger it up," Janus protested. "Why do you need me along?"

"This battery," he picked it up from the table and tossed it lightly in his metallic palm. "Is this what makes me unique? Can all of my qualities—all I have to offer—be reduced to this Duracell?"

Janus sighed. "You're not a battery."

"What about you, Jan? Could I figure out what makes you tick if I ripped out your heart? Maybe it's your brain that makes you special? What about your hands? Is the ditchdigger only as good as the trenches he clears? Is the robot only as good as the master he used to serve?"

He rolled his eyes. "Of course not."

We all want to do something special; to be recognized. Not for the ditch we've dug, or the cogs we've cogged—"That doesn't even make sense," Janus muttered)—but by our nuts and bolts. Not this," he held the battery close to Janus's face. "Not this," he pressed the other to his Janus' chest. "But this," he gestured between them. "The relationships we've formed. Our friendship. That's why I'm asking you to give up your ridiculous dreams of train robbing," he gave his engine-turning smile, "Come with me. Join the Machina. Let's tell people what makes our friendship tick, yeah? Let's make them understand that we have the capacity to more than ditch diggers and Maytags. If we look past the surface, true companionship is possible.

Janus shifted in his chair and cleared his throat. "Okay."

"Yeah?" Rob's socket eyes brightened.

He nodded. "I'll come."

Janus was startled awake by Emily's soft laughter.

"Is this what you've made of yourself today?" she chortled. "A quick bite and a catnap." She wore a blue gingham dress and a white blouse.

He stared at her a moment, uncomprehending.

"Are you alright?" Emily placed her hand against his clammy forehead. "You're quite pale."

"I'm sorry," he removed her hand and held it in his own. "I've been dreaming."

"A nightmare?" The note of concern hadn't left her voice.

"No," he shook his head. "It's one of my favorite dreams. It still makes me sad, though."

Emily removed her hand from Janus' face and placed them in her lap. After biting her lip, she asked, "Is it about your friend? That robot they strung up just outside of town?"

"Yes." There was no point in lying if he had any intention of sharing his life with this woman. "I thought I was better at keeping things close to the vest."

She looked at a ladybug as it crawled along the ridge of her thumb. "Were you there when it happened?"

He shook his head. "We had a fight; stupid really. Given a couple of hours, I would have found him and apologized."

"But, when you found him—"

"He was already gone."

A beat of silence passed between them.

She took a deep breath, as if she were about to dive underwater. "My father had something to do with it, didn't he?"

"Why would you ask something like that?"

"I know my father," she replied, darkly.

Janus pushed himself up onto his elbows. "What about your father?"

"I know about the machines he keeps in the basement," she smiled.

"You really are something, aren't you?" he chuckled, despite the gravity of the conversation. "How'd you figure it out?"

"Take your pick," she shrugged. "The constant light beneath the basement door; kerosene lamps don't burn as bright or clean. The music," she paused. "Unless he's learned how to play Chopin flawlessly—and, I mean multi-instrumentals, simultaneously—he has to have a record player down there. I'm not an idiot, Mr. Revey."

"What'd I tell you about that name?"

"Just a little while longer," she stood and walked towards the brook. With her back towards Janus, she said, "My father's gadgets are a the least of my concerns compared to the things he's done." She turned her head a degree; her face, in profile, regarded him, mournfully. "He probably didn't even blink when he murdered your friend."

"Tell me what he's done, Emily." He could feel his anger boiling in the pit of his stomach.

"Are you going to kill him?" She asked in an off-handed way. "Sometimes, I think about doing it myself."

The words came on the back of a sigh. "I don't know, yet."

She returned to the blanket, and began their story. "My father tells people that I'm a first-generation Wester; that I was born not too far from here. He claims to have come into port somewhere in the Carolinas around the time of the Industrial Revolution. After he got on his feet, he set out west to make his fortunes and to escape the menace of robotic enslavement.

"That's not true?"

“No.” She pursed her lips. “He’s told the story to me enough over the years that he thinks I take it as gospel.”

He held out his hand, palm up, as if to say, “Continue.”

“My first first memories were of the North. I was probably three at the time? My mother was pregnant with the triplets. My father worked at a factory near our apartment. I was usually left to my own devices, which generally meant playing in the concrete backyard while my mother napped.

‘One afternoon, a clunky old robot came up to the fence and watched me play for awhile. After watching me play for a little while, he called me over. Of course, I came running. He handed me a small feather. I was delighted.

‘Each day, that kind old rustbucket came back; He called himself Arkwright. I came to look forward to that magical noon hour when my mother would nap and I’d be gifted with the most marvelous objects a young child could hope for. Feathers. Colored bits of fabric. Lengths of string.’

“One afternoon, Arkwright clambered up the alleyway, and took his usual position at the fence post. I could sense his presence before I turned.” Her clouded tears as her voice began to tremble. “He was always so...*kind*.”

Janus rubbed her back in slow circles.

An oriole called overhead.

“The last gift he gave me that day was a snail shell. It fit perfectly in the palm of my hand. As I traced its spiral ridges with my finger, I heard my father growl, “Get away from her you sonuvabitch!”

“I didn’t understand. He was supposed to be at work...”

“What happened?” Janus asked, and immediately grimaced an apology. *Sorry* he mouthed.

“When he saw Arkwright at the fenceline, it was the excuse he needed to lash out...I’m not sure where he got the pipe,” she slammed, “but it came done on Arkwright’s back before I had a chance to flinch.” She shook her head rapidly as if to rid herself of the memories. “I was holding my fists together like this,” she demonstrated. “Tight little balls as my father lifted the pipe and struck him, again, and again, and again.’

“I could smell the smoke coming out of Arkwright’s head. As I stood there, shaking, my dad knelt in front of me. His mouth was moving, but all I could see was the robot’s eyes after my father’s first blow. That *look*,” she wept. “Those questions: ‘What have I done? What’s happening?’ Before the pipe came down on Arkwright’s head, he looked at me, and I could tell he wasn’t angry. He didn’t beg or plead for his life. If anything, he looked sad. For *me*. His eyes said, ‘You poor, poor girl. I’m sorry you have to see this...’

“My father shook me violently so I’d pay attention and to, ‘Quit looking at that filthy pile of trash!’ He grabbed my chin and moved my head from side to side. He grabbed my arms, and kept asking, ‘Did it touch you? Did it—I said stop that crying now! Stop it!’

I wanted to tell him that it wasn't a *thing*. It wasn't trash. He was Arkwright, and he used to be my friend.'

"When he opened my hands to check for any marks, he saw the blood. I tried to tell him it was the snail's shell that cut me, but he wouldn't listen." She shook her head. "After that, things start to blur. We had to leave town, immediately. They were after him for murder, so we disappeared; hopped a train and headed west. My mother died in labor. My father buried his past and started fresh. Eventually, he'd amassed enough of a fortune to start this town, and put everyone in his pocket while doing it."

"Wow," Janus laid his arm across Emily's shoulder and squeezed. "I'm sorry you had to watch a friend get murdered right in front of you." He took her hand.

"You've done the same."

"I didn't," he admitted. He could feel his heartbeat hammering in his chest. Nervously, he admitted, "Rob and I got into an argument the night he died; I was tired of being a Calque to his Machina. No one was listening in the town we were trying to reach, and I'd had enough. I wanted to go home.'

"We were staying in a nearby cave a few miles out. That's where we all stay," he explained. "There's a giant network; we're never in the same place at once. That would be too dangerous. It had been a rough day, and—I'm not sure why—but, I was done. I wanted to get blitzed, and hop a train the first thing in the morning, so I convinced a barkeep to sell me a bottle of whiskey and was well on my way.'

"Rob found me later, drunk off my—well," he cleared his throat. "I wasn't in good shape, to say the least; far from the best of company. We got into it. He called me a lazy coward. I called him a bucket of bolts. He said I couldn't commit to anything. I told him he was wasting his time. 'No one out here gives a damn,' I yelled, 'and I'm starting to feel the same way!' He told me to 'Go to tell,' and I told him a, 'Bleeping, bloopity-bloop.'

"I've heard curse words before. You can tell me what he said."

"That's the thing," he replied. "I didn't say anything. It doesn't *mean* anything. I was just trying to be an ass." His breath caught in the back of his throat. "My best friend in the world, and the last thing I said to him was nonsense.'

A breeze rustled the leaves overhead. Dancing shadows danced across their blanket, their small center of the universe. She held his hand, patiently, waiting for him to continue. After several minutes passed, he could hear the patience in her voice—that soft grin—she said, "*Janus*."

He smiled, sadly. "I guess I have to finish the story now, don't I?"

She nodded.

"When I left the cave, it was the dead of night. I hopped on Juno and rode towards a point of light miles off. When I got closer, I could see a banner of smoke against the starlight. I dismounted, tied my horse to a tree, and went the rest of the way on foot. As

drunk as I was, I'd left my gun in the cave, or I would have probably done it right then and there."

"What did you see?" He could feel her muscles tense. The question was laced with fear and a trace of expectation.

"Your father," he answered bitterly. "Some of his men. They were laughing. Carrying on. They were—" he stopped, abruptly and sucked in a large breath to steady the nausea that threatened to ride his esophagus like a tide. "They were gutting him; ripping out his cogs, the camshafts, his power cells. One of those bastards had speared him through the heart, too. I could tell he was dead from where I was hiding."

"I doubled over and threw up. I'm not sure how I'd made it back to the cave, but the next morning, I cleaned myself up the best I could, and rode Juno to the outskirts of town. When I saw his body again, I almost threw up again. Someone had stolen his head after I'd stumbled away the night before."

"What'd you do after that?"

"I put out word to other Machinas in the area that I'd be staying for a while; until I sorted this mess out, and I could get some kind of justice for Rob."

Janus accepted Emily's weight against his shoulder. She smelled like soap; something fresh and piny. Beyond the brook, they watched as a young family took a stroll with their children. A stray dog, tagged along. It leapt up and tried to lick the one of the children's faces. Janus and Emily flashed far away smiles at the child's laughter.

"You know," Janus mused. "This place really isn't that bad if you look at it with one eye closed. You could almost believe it was peaceful."

"Not everyone is like my father," she answered resolutely. "I know you haven't asked, but I'll do what I can to help you. Whatever it takes." In a gesture reminiscent of the story she told of her father, she held his chin with her lean fingers, and directed his attention towards her. The difference was, it was the gentlest thing in the world; more Arkwright than the McNulty patriarch. "Do you hear me, Janus?"

"I do," he smiled. "Thank you." He leaned in and kissed her. When he pulled away, he released a sigh of relief, feeling unburdened. "Well," he rubbed his hands together, ravenously. "Are you ready to eat? Ol' Wagstaff sent along the finest in cured meats."

While Emily laughed, Janus untied the knotted handkerchief that held their spartan lunch. After cutting the meat into slices, the knife clacking dully against the slate, he picked up the wrapped block of cheese to repeat the process. What he saw beneath the parcel made him smile. The store owner had sent along an MP3 player. Wrapped around the small, beige rectangle were the earbuds Wagstaff was wearing earlier that day. He connected the plug to the headphone jack, and handed the right earpiece to Emily. He slid the left one into his own.

Connected by the secrets they shared, and a long white cable, they are their lunch, trading conspiratorial smiles as Chopin's *Raindrop Symphony* played in their ears.

IV.

Following their picnic, Janus and Emily shared a brief kiss and parted company. They promised they would find moments throughout the coming day at school to talk about their plans to bring down McNulty. He watched her leave, surprised at how bereft he felt as the distance between them grew. He shook his head, smiling, and said, "Would you look at that, Rob. I might actually be in love. Yeah, yeah," he chuckled. "Quit your laughing."

He gathered the remnants of their book into the basket, and headed towards the two-room schoolhouse to return the slate and blanket. When he opened the door, he was surprised to find the sheriff's son, Henry, seated at his desk. "It's a beautiful Sunday afternoon, Henry. I should talk to your father; surely you're breaking some kind of law."

Henry smiled. The boy stared at his hands. "I saw you outside with Ms. McNulty." Embarrassment crept into the boy's neck and ears. "I didn't want to disturb you."

Janus smiled. "Don't worry. I won't tell anyone, as long as you don't."

The boy nodded. "I'm a good secret keeper, remember?"

Janus lifted the lid of the chest and put the blanket away. "That you are, gatekeeper. That you are. So, what can I do for you? I assume you have a question for me if you're hanging around inside on a glorious day like this."

Henry fidgeted with his hands, once more. His blonde eyebrows furrowed as he wrestled his unspoken question into shape. "Where do you go at night, Mr. Revey?"

A chill slipped down Janus' spine. Despite having an answer in place if anyone ever questioned him about his nocturnal dalliances, he never thought it would be one of his students that caught him. "What do you mean?" he stalled for time.

"I saw you this morning," Henry replied, slowly. "I had a nightmare about my mother; when she died. I couldn't get back to sleep, so I went to the window. Sometimes, I like to look out at the town and imagine the world as entirely empty. All the windows are dark, and I'm the only one that's left." Surprised at the number of words he'd strung together, he blinked, nervously and went silent

"And you saw me and Juno?"

Henry nodded.

Janus pulled out his chair and sat down. "Sometimes, I can't sleep either, Henry. I called it the 'nowhere hour;' that time of night when no one is awake. When there's nowhere you'd rather be, but sleeping in bed, but dreams are impossible to hang on to. Whenever I find myself in the nowhere hour, I hop on Juno and ride until I make myself sleepy."

The boy's tongue flicked nervously across his lips. His smooth brow furrowed once more. "My bedroom looks out towards the Killing Fields, Mr. Revey." His voice was a whisper.

Janus' stomach bottomed out. The boy had seen him with Rob's body. He'd seen him talking to Emily.

Janus stood and began pacing. He held his hands behind his back as he considered what to do; what he should say. Finally, he looked towards Henry and made a fateful decision. "All right, gatekeeper. You're clearly quite clever. You've managed to keep my tape recorder a secret, so I'll put my trust in you again. Will you keep my secret. Now," he held up a finger to silence the boy's reply. "Before you answer, think about it for a moment. It's a serious obligation to hold another man's secret. I don't want to put you into a situation with your father by telling you something you might feel he has a right to know as the sheriff. Do you understand?"

Henry's pale blue eyes were troubled, but he nodded his understanding.

"What's your decision, then? I could either lie to you, or tell you the truth. Neither answer would be without consequence. On one hand, I could tell you a trifling tale; you would know it's a lie, but you could go about your day with a clean conscience. On the other hand, if I tell you the truth, you might not like what I say, but you'd be obligated to keep my secret, with all of its prickly truths. So," he released a breath and stood in front of Henry's desk. "Which will it be?"

"I'll have the truth."

Janus nodded. "I'm not from around here, Henry. I'm from the North. That robot—the one you saw me looking at this morning—used to be my best friend before he was murdered and strung up like a scarecrow."

"Does Ms. McNulty know, too?"

Janus nodded grimly.

"Why don't you go home?" Henry looked upset.

"I can't," he shrugged helplessly and renewed his pacing circuits of the small school room. "My friend deserved more than what he got. His mother—yes, robots have mother's, too—deserves to bury her boy."

Henry recalled his own mother. Her pale, bloodless cheeks as she lay in a wooden box with large coins over her eyes. She held a cluster of lilies that matched the color of her dress. Then, he imagined her fastened to a pole; her bright white dress dirty.

There was a nagging question he had yet to ask. Young Henry felt that once the door was opened, it could not be closed. He thought of the book *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* that his father read to him at night before bed. At one part, Huckleberry has to decide whether or not to write a letter to Ms. Watson explaining where Jim, her runaway slave, is. While he's writing it, he thinks about his friendship with the slave, and decides to tear up the letter and help Jim escape slavery for good. In his father's strong authoritative voice, he

read: *"I was a-trembling, because I'd got to decide, forever, betwixt two things, and I knowed it. I studied a minute, sort of holding my breath, and then says to myself: "All right then, I'll go to hell"—and tore it up. It was awful thoughts and awful words, but they was said. And I let them stay said; and never thought no more about reforming."*

Henry looked up at Janus and asked, "You're a Calque, Mr. Revey?"

Janus held the boy's gaze and nodded gravely.

"All right then," Henry replied, breathlessly. "I'll keep your secret."

"Well done, gatekeeper," Janus' shoulders sagged as he let out the breath he hadn't realized he was holding in. "I knew I wasn't wrong to put my faith in you."

There were several reasons why Janus Revey kept a wide berth from the saloon in Bolt's Hole. The first was both obvious and reasonable; namely, Janus hadn't had a drop since Rob's death. He blamed his inebriation for the argument that drove his friend from the cave the night he died. Feeling as he did, Janus thought if he started drinking again, he wouldn't be able to stop. He also thought that the whiskey would taste like he would be spilling his secrets all over the bar, and his cover would be blown. Third, was the design aesthetic of the bar.

Before concluding his relationship with alcohol was over, he visited the establishment over a month ago, when the bitterness of Rob's death was still a rough scratch at the back of his throat. The moment his eyes adjusted to the bar's dull gloom, he went blind with rage. He stumbled into the street, his fingers clutched at the button at his collar. Once undone, he took deep gulps of air as his brain caught up with his anger.

The heads.

The fallen Machina's heads.

They'd been repurposed as lamps and were set in the center of each circular table to light the saloon. Their open mouths were used as ashtrays for the patrons' cigars and cigarettes. Rob's decapitated head sat on the bar top. When Janus stepped in, the blacksmith had pushed the crown of his friend's head down to make a small flame shoot from its mouth to light the degenerate's hand-rolled cigarette.