

By Dave Coates

**T**he snow fell upon his shoulders like tiny silent butterflies, blanketing the earth and muting the usual noise that ruled the Factory. The skylights were open. Broken, rather, their small windows sooty from the fire that had swept the building a month before. The machines left were either in the beginning stages of rusting or covered in the grayish snow that cloaked the landscape. Wires and cables hung noisily from the ceiling, slapping together when the strong, spicy gusts of air pushed through. Stairs led up and downstairs into unseen blackened places, the many subbasements just beginning to rumble with heat. The Factory's outside paint was nearly gone; its once brick red now revealing the dark brown underneath, and the cream lettering chipped away, leaving pieces of letters that once announced the title of the huge building. The doors were gone, spitting blackness upon the sawdusty gravel in front of the edifice too warm to hold the snow. A dead tree and many dead bushes lined the outside walls.

Among this mechanical and natural carnage, the Man stood. A cigarette smoked almost down to the filter was clenched in his fist, smoldering amidst the quiet. His free hand was covered in bandages hiding scabs on his knuckles and palm. His moves were calculated; his hands (hand, actually, the cigarette hand stayed by his side) pressed into his woolen coat, grasping the small vial of black syrupy liquid in his gun holster. His gun nestled comfortably in the small of his back, between his waistband and his boxers. Drawing the vial from his holster, he tossed the black syrup in a bird-like swoop into one of the less rusted machines. He did this with such accuracy and grace that he never touched the inside of his wool coat. Now the waiting began.

Ever so softly, cranking noises began to rise from long-dead wires and gears in the mechanism, belching steam into the gray air. Finished with that task, the syrup started working its way into the floorboards, en route to the subbasements. It had done its job well. The syrup left upon the flat part of the machine shot tendrils onto a hammer, tightening around it, and from there dropped into a knot in the floorboards, seeking the quarters below.

The machine continued creaking. The wires around it, spiderweb-like small ones and octopus-sized larger ones, shook with tiny spasms, knocking the abandoned nests and shaky plaster from the walls. This particular

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machine was the nerve center of the Factory. Writhing and shifting, the wires suddenly snapped, locking around the machine and pulling it up from its bed of screws and sawdust. Now it stood tall, on tripod metal feet. The wires moved on, thrusting themselves into the reforming inner workings of the beast. Arms emerged, and they telescoped in and out like insane pistons. It reminded the Man of an old comic-book character, Doctor Octopus. They flailed about, looking for a stable beam to hold on to. *Like a newborn baby*, the Man thought fondly, *looking for food. Looking for a suitable table to pull up on.*

The Man flicked his cigarette butt into a quiet corner absent of sawdust. He had work to do. Wrenching the bandage from his hand, he flexed impassively as the scabs flew off with a loud crunch, the remainder of medical tape pulling at the hair on his hand. He flexed it again, disregarding the quiet whir of the soft organic alloy inside. His shirt and coat fell in tatters to his ankles as the insides of his anxious abs squirmed and struggled to escape the hot and humid interior of the coat. As if on cue, the machine in front of the Man found the fuses and flipped on the abandoned hanging orbs, silhouetting the Man in his true form now. His feet were mostly live, although intertwined with the new devices inhabiting his body. His legs were derelict and ignored by the

His **anxious** abs  
 squirmed as his shirt  
 and coat burst in **tatters** . . .

wires and metal parts all over the rest of his form. His upper body was covered with a living organism, one that was a metal alloy that hated flesh but was forced into an endless

mating ritual with it in order to survive. His neck and face were clean, save for wires in his eyes, giving him a broken and bewildered look.

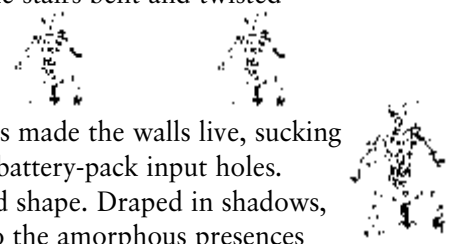
The Man had been in a car accident, thrown through the windshield, his back broken by a tree. He had lain there for hours, a day even, dead and rotting. He was discovered in an unnatural ball in a leaf-covered ditch, his face in muddy puddles left by the melting snow. The machine had found him, pulled itself upon him, and begun the laborious job of removing the limbs that were not needed. With just one small saw to work with, it was hard to finish the job in a day.

The New One moved submissively to the Man.

Extending its command wire into the New One, the Man gave it orders to go to the subbasements and harvest more New Ones, then to gather the precious black serum. Not syrup, *serum*. The New One shuffled into the blackness of the subbasement, and all noise abruptly ceased. Once again, the Factory was silent. But then, above the laborious whir of the internal breathing mechanisms and clockworks of the Man, came a roaring from the subbasements. The serum had reached his students.

The New One moved cautiously to the immense creaking Giant. The Giant's tongue lolled in its bear-trap jaws as its giant VidCam eyes adjusted to the light. Its joints were railroad ties with huge ball bearings attached. Its bent, golf-club fingers scratched the open mesh floor, and its octopus wire legs whipped wildly, brushing the New One.

The New One released the Giant's attachments from the rusted and burned wall. Small rat machines scurried around the Giant's base, attracted by the odd purring sounds escaping from the Giant's throat. The New One pointed up the stairs, and the Giant understood: *See the Master!* As it moved to the main floor, the Giant trembled as the stairs bent and twisted under its weight.



The cell-phone aliens made the walls live, sucking up the serum into their battery-pack input holes. Beneath them lay an odd shape. Draped in shadows, the shape reached out to the amorphous presences floating just above its head. The serum hadn't gotten to this unfortunate creature. It had had but a tiny taste, before the cell phones and drills had grabbed the serum all for themselves, leaving the creature to drown in dust. The New One ambled over to the shape, then engulfed it in spare wires, lashing it to his back. The drills and cell phones then lined up in an orderly fashion on the stairs to see their Master. Two more to go. Just two more levels. The New One uttered a metallic piston sigh, then lumbered on.

The subbasement was cold, quiet. Meat hooks hung nakedly under the damp globes of light. Some twisted in the breeze let in by the New One; others stayed put, as if sleeping. Some of the quiet butterflies from upstairs had filtered down and were sweeping through the door. The New One scanned the room, seeing nothing until the door shut behind him. A snake-humanoid stuck to the door like a clump of mud, held fast to the frame by small, multicolored wires. It hung in a Christlike stance: arms out, legs together. The New One pried the wires off the door, shoving the thing up the stairs, continuing on to the final basement.

The quiet was pierced by the excitement of the smaller ones. Their alloy hooves and thumping pistons shook the platform that the Man was standing on. He held sway over all his congregation, grooming them and readying them for the “Final Final,” as he used to say in his mortal days. He lit his cigarette, acting as a human. The machine inside was alerted when he took the first drag. It made the Man spit it out. Who knows what this might do to the sweet, rubber-coated wires inside him? He surveyed the floor, watching with satisfaction as the Giant pulled at the railing, wrenching it from the floor. This was a welcome development. The Man waved the Giant to the corner to wait. That’s what this was all about: waiting.



The last basement was alive with eyes that lurked upon the ceiling and with rats that had lost their hair to vain monsters eager to deny the feral beauty of the mammal for the robotic allure of their own. In the corner, a shape rolled. Heat scanners inside the New One’s head registered a full reading—there were no pistons, no wires. This was not AI: Artificial Intelligence, nor AL: Artificial Life. This was HL: Human Life.

Carl flicked his dirty paws at his face, expecting to bat away a rat or roach. Instead he encountered, in his blind, drunken daze, something hard. Something that didn’t react and jump at the first sign of movement. He struggled hard to pull himself over the porcelain basin of consciousness; he had to. Something could be wrong out there on his face, and, as the sole resident of this abode, he had to kick out the varmints, couldn’t have any pests living on him without his consent. He’d already had enough viruses. He

didn’t need some big angry bug with an armored back poking around his eyes. He’d been down here since Saturday, and he wasn’t about to get ousted by some bug. He moved his vodka bottle tenderly, as not to tip it over, and groped for Milo, his trusty steed.

The New One stood in the doorway, his bandsaw

heart creaking and whirring, searching the floor for other HLs—but there were none. He extended his wires to the smallish creatures on the floor, signaling them to move upon whatever it was next to the man. The wires found the critters, and they knew what they had to do. They found Milo.

Milo slept his quiet sleep, snorting at the tufts of grass that lined the interior of his German shepherd brain. If the things carrying him were rats, he’d be up and barking by now, but the things were video cameras with telephone legs, hydraulic hindquarters, piston hearts, and rat-fur crowns. He would soon be a member of their orchestra.

Carl opened the eye that wasn’t swollen shut. The other one was puffy and oozed something the consistency of water. He felt around the cold concrete floor, wanting Milo’s spiny fur to be waiting for him, but he found nothing. He sat up, his back uttering a few cracks of surprise as he did so. He found his vodka and held it close to the fluff lining of his bomber jacket. He was on his knees now, anticipating the smell of Honduran cigars and the labored breathing through an oxygen mask that preceded the arrival of his associate, Mr. Huang. He lifted his other hand and felt his waistline: the service pistol was there, along with a full clip. That was a good thing—that is, if he had time to pull it before Huang put a wire around his neck and choked the life out of him. He blinked hard and got some night vision in his good eye, then looked to the crates of cash and heroin that he had taken such measures to attain and hold on to; they were still there. But Milo was the current problem. He listened intently for Milo’s breathing and heard none. He concentrated harder, not wanting to have to use his flashlight. Still, nothing. He waited a few moments longer and was about to leave when he heard it: the cocking of the hammer on a gun. He wasted no time.

The Man stood on high, his pulpit shaking under the weight of his parts. The machine inside him had a purpose here—a meeting of sorts. But the human part left in the Man also knew that it needed to be here. Both had pressing engagements that they could not afford to miss. The New One would be the last to arrive, after corralling the Disciples. A skittering of metallic paws was heard from the stairwell. Then a dog appeared, being carried aloft by the little ones. This would do nicely as a symphony piece. Both the

The giant’s **tongue** lolled in its **beartrap** jaws, its **VidCam eyes focusing . . .**




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machine and the human inside snickered in delight.

The noise Carl heard had been a gun—two, actually. But they were not being used as weapons; they were legs on a cat that had had the misfortune of hopping into the Man's Lincoln just before he left his house. It used them as spring-loaded supports, and they were working out just fine until Carl pulled out his weapon and fired. The pipe sinews went lax as the cat stopped living, its legs clanking upon the cement floor.

The New One watched as the HL shot the cat-thing. It squealed in a high-pitched tone, then collapsed in a ball against the stairs. This was getting ridiculous. The New One approached the man, making sure not to make noise. The smallish noise it did make was masked by the man's panting. It moved to the side of his face and extended its antenna. The needles in it spiked out. Swinging with all its might, it struck the man's back, connecting nicely. The man shot back, compacted into an almost lowercase *n* shape. Smoothly the New One continued its assault, bringing an arm down on the man's head, knocking him out. It scooped him up and began its trek back up the stairs. More ratlings followed, their excited squeaks reaching a fervor of anticipation.

The Man stood on the landing like some insane general who, after a massacre, puts on the dead soldiers' clothes and jewelry. His right eye was spattered across his pockmarked face. (A wayward wire had sneaked up through his brain and poked the eye out from behind—all by accident, of course.) His back was sagging and aching as much as a machine can ache. What was left of his skin was flaking off, showing the wire-mesh muscle beneath it. The creaking from below was getting louder. The New One had arrived.



The dog was propped up by the ratlings and VidCams. Its dying muscles twitched as the last drop of life drained out of them. The Man looked upon the New One, then sniffed deeply, alerting the CPU inside him that it was time to begin. It blinked to life, and the range of the Man's control was extended and intensified.

More machines began to rumble. They could not rise, though, for the serum had not graced their shells. Yet.

The Man flung his hands into the air, and an antenna telescoped from the back of a ratling. It hopped up on Milo's torso, perching upon his head, ready to commence. The Man nodded at the ratling as it began to sweetly play an alien tune that made the other machines stand at attention. When Milo's muscles contracted, the tune was pulled sharply upwards, giving the melody a bouncy lilt.

Carl awoke with a start, his head filled with both a buzz and a mad melody played on an instrument that he could not identify. He lifted his head from the sawdusty floor and peered around the hall. He released a small cough. The music stopped at once. The Man looked in his direction, and the rest of the machines rolled and walked over to him.

"What's going on here? Mr. Huang? What is this?!" Carl yelled, and the ratlings fled into the shadows.

The Man walked to the top of the staircase. "Carl! How are we? Please! Allow me to explain!" His Asian accent could be detected under the whir-  
chirp of an American drawl. "My symphony is assembled. Soon we shall begin to swell with the sound of one hundred violins and an infinite assembly of flutes, basses, drums, violas, trumpets—we'll have them all! The HLs may run and try to hide, but our cars will always be faster, our VidCams' all-seeing eyes ubiquitous! And yet, we are missing one key element that will unlock this wonder: we need serum to activate our symphony.

Which is where *you* come in, Carl. All you have to do is roll over and allow us to borrow something that you can afford to share. For you see, Carl, even with all our technology, we have yet to perfect the one thing key to our takeover. So just curl up into a nice little ball, and let us sneak our wires into your back and use your spine to its fullest extent. I would gladly supply the spine myself, but alas! My host needs my back and the fluids therein so that it can remain erect." The vitriol spilled like a meniscus over a glass.

Carl turned this concept over and over in his mind. Before he could stop himself, he retrieved his service pistol and fired it into the good eye of the Man. He was knocked back, but did not flinch. A VidCam rose over his head as the Man resumed his bemused smile. The VidCam focused on Carl.

Carl fired off a few wild shots into the audience, hitting some, but not enough to matter. Then he dropped his gun and bolted for the door. Pumping his legs up and down, Carl ran at a feverish pace to escape before this incomprehensible plot could be put into motion. He was stopped by wire snakes that grabbed his legs and dropped him to the floor. They covered his back and held him fast, while ratlings sneaked from their hiding places and began the process of placing the wires into his brain and forcing his compliance. A small unicycle buzz saw hopped on his back. Carl didn't

**A wayward wire  
sneaked  
through his brain,**

poking his **eye** out from behind.

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## Everything Worth Having

(continued from page 6)

I didn't skate that day. I just rode my bike a couple of blocks away, and spent most of the morning leaning against a tree, reading a book, and squinting toward our building.

I saw our car pull into the drive. A while later Daddy came out and sat on the concrete stairs out front.

I got up, picked up my bike, and straddled it. "He's good at everything," I whispered, my heart pounding. Then I put my feet back on the pedals and went forward, toward home, toward him.

That was the last hour of my life that I had never heard the word *lymphoma*. It was the last little bit of time before I knew anything about chemotherapy or radiation. This was before Daddy got skinny, and before I ever woke up crying in my sleep.

Daddy was sitting on the third step from the bottom, and the first thing I noticed was that his shirt was moving.

I got closer. Something was alive in his left shirt pocket. Something was wriggling over his heart.

He smiled at me, and I felt my chin quivering. I shook my head over and over. "No," I whispered. "No."

"Alyssa, listen," he said quietly. "You love animals. You shouldn't be afraid to have a pet."

"They're dangerous," I said.

Mama came out then and sat down next to Daddy. Daddy looked at her and then back at me. "They wouldn't be dangerous if you didn't love them, Alyssa," he said. "That's just how it works. Everything worth having is risky."

My throat hurt. "I promised Virginia I wouldn't let her die," I reminded them.

"Honey," Mama said softly, "you can only

promise to care, and you did. You cared an awful lot, and Virginia felt that."

The baby bunny just sort of lurched up then and stuck her little pink nose right up over the edge of

Daddy's pocket. I had never seen a rabbit that small and sweet. I lowered my bike to the grass. My feet automatically moved toward Daddy, and my fingers stretched out all by themselves.

"Her mother was accidentally killed by one of the mowers where our crew was working yesterday afternoon," Daddy told me. "I guess you're her only hope. You'll need to feed her with an eyedropper until she

gets bigger."

I sat down knee to knee with Daddy, elbow to elbow, still shaking my head, trying not to want the baby bunny so much. But my hands must have already been cradled, because Daddy took her out of his pocket and she fit right into them. I rubbed her under my neck and she nuzzled me back.

That was when my rabbit was only a baby, the first afternoon I had her. It was also the afternoon

of our long talk, when I began longing for my father not to be sick and to be good at everything again. Now Daddy is fighting back against the cancer with all his strength. And now my rabbit, Trixie Marie, is big, and every day for all these seven months I've loved her with all my heart. I've been loving that hard for 218 days so far, to be exact.

I leaned against Daddy that first afternoon and whispered into Trixie Marie's ear. "For a minute there," I told her, "you looked just like a heart-beat." ★

"Everything  
**worth** having  
is **risky** . . . You can only  
promise **to care**."

## Zoo Age

(continued from page 30)

even feel it.

The army of identical drill presses and band saws, blinking silently with anticipation, looked heavenwards at the Man, who was now strung up by the cooling pipes and wires, reminiscent of a queen bee encased in wax, ready to lay her eggs. All sounds were muted, the whirl of electricity blanketing them. Carl's spine was being duplicated at blinding speed, the fluid once inside it being poured into the finished spines.

The Man raised his arms, and the ratling began playing the first tremulous notes of the symphony. The sweet, bouncy melody that had first been produced was now dark and brooding. Night was falling all over the world for those civilized enough to have electricity. Cars turned against their owners, slamming on the brakes when enough speed was built up to throw the driver through the windshield. Hair dryers plugged themselves in and hopped into showers to join their shocked owners. Belligerent blenders, troubled television sets, lugubrious lamps, crotchety clocks, and whatever else was sick of being plugged in and never appreciated—all turned on their thankless owners. The Zoo Age had begun. ★



I finally got up the  
**courage**

to look <sup>up</sup> *tumor* in  
the dictionary.