

RIVER

ANDREW SENDOR

RIVER WRIGHT

River Wright had always been a quiet kid with a mind that refused to rest—restless not from boredom, but from an uncontainable intellect. He saw patterns in noise, order in chaos, and his thoughts moved with a speed and precision that made even his teachers uneasy. His notebooks, frayed at the edges, were filled with sketches and stories that didn't read like inventions so much as warnings—maps of futures only River could see. While his classmates drowned themselves in endless VR loops and algorithm-fed chatter, River seemed to live elsewhere. His friends and peers noticed. They felt the pull of someone who seemed to be listening to a frequency just beyond their own.

He had a way of asking questions that made people lean closer. They weren't idle curiosities but sparks, striking against something hidden inside his listeners. *"What if truth is only what survives forgetting?" "Is it only a matter of time before machines will have the ability to dream?"* The words would hang in the air, alive with possibility. Instead of dismissing him, people found themselves circling back, wanting to hear more. His questions lingered like echoes—strange, luminous things that refused to fade. It wasn't only the questions that drew them in—it was the sense that River had already walked further down the path of the answer. By staying close, they hoped to glimpse what he'd seen.

There was something about the way River's mind moved—like a machine built for something the rest of the world hadn't caught up to yet. He absorbed everything—books, equations, systems of thought—and reassembled them into something uncanny.

And so, one afternoon, tucked away in a dim corner of the Cinnamon Lane High School library, River began writing what would become his first novel, as if the future had been waiting for him to write it down.

The Off Liners

By River Wright

JUNE SECOND, TWO THOUSAND THIRTY FOUR

There was no declaration, no turning point—just a slow, silent transfer of power. By the time anyone noticed, AI wasn't merely assisting human life, it was directing it. Careers were assigned through systemized work distribution, health was monitored and managed by predictive health governance, and daily operations proceeded under the optimized oversight of synthetic bureaucracy. Even relationships and emotional needs were filtered through the lens of algorithmic socialization, where connection was curated as efficiently as data. All of it operated behind layers of opaque deep learning models and behavioral algorithms few could understand—and no one seemed to really challenge. Humanoid robots, equipped with adaptive neural processors and biometric scanning capabilities, walked the streets—synthetic flawless skin, expressions minimal, their faces coldly symmetrical. Their voices were generated by emotion-mimicking voice synthesis engines, and though they sounded human, they lacked hesitation and emotional depth. Cities had grown sterile and unnaturally quiet, their soundscapes dominated by the ambient whir of autonomous service drones, self-balancing delivery automatons, and brightly colored transit pods. Human presence had become incidental. Sidewalks, once chaotic with chatter and movement, now echoed with the precise footsteps of machines executing daily maintenance tasks once handled by hands. Society had outsourced not only its labor but its spontaneity—daily life was dictated by algorithmic efficiency, optimized down to the minute.

TWO HANDS, ONE HEART

They saw where the world was heading—and they were afraid. Not of the machines themselves, but of the quiet surrender in human hearts. A certain percentage of society had given up the work of thinking, making, imagining. Fewer felt the spark that came from creating with their own hands, wrestling raw material into form, risking failure to discover something new. Curiosity—once the restless engine that drove civilizations—was dimming, and with it, the capacity to dream beyond what was already given.

PENCILISSA, LAMOND, ATLISSA & YOHIMBEE

Pencilissa radiated restless energy, her mind sparking with ideas faster than her hands could shape them. She saw the world as a puzzle in constant need of tinkering, scavenging beauty and function from scraps others ignored. A rusty salvaged hinge might become a part of a pulley system; a cracked lens, the seed of an invention. Her workbench was chaos to anyone else, but to her it was a living conversation. She even spoke to her tools, apologizing to hammers for dropping them, congratulating screwdrivers on “a job well done.” Beneath her quick wit and playful spirit was a quiet fury, the legacy of a father who told her she would never be enough. She turned that sting into fuel, a relentless drive to build, to prove—perhaps to him, but mostly to herself—that her hands could make worlds.

Lamond was patient and deliberate . He moved with the rhythm of the earth, slow but steady, attuned to cycles that echoed with meaning for him. His childhood was marked by discipline: long hours of jiu-jitsu training that could have led him to the Olympics, until the weight of expectation broke his will. He found peace instead in gardens, tending seedlings with the same reverence others reserved for prayers. Before planting, he hummed a single, unwavering note into the soil—an odd superstition, but to him, it stimulated the seeds. Dirt gathered in the lines of his palms like a second skin. Where Pencilissa improvised, Lamond trusted ritual; where others sought shortcuts, he trusted time. To him, every green shoot was proof that persistence could coax life from silence.

Atlassa carried a quiet mysticism, her light blue eyes hinting at unseen worlds. Her first breath of life occurred on a cruise ship in the Coral Sea near the coast of Queensland, Australia. Her stoic and nomadic mother never stayed in one place, she grew up belonging to no single land. Silence was her first language, and when she did speak, her words were often poetic and not necessarily easy to understand. Coding entered her life in third grade through her brother Zeus, and soon she saw in its syntax what others could not: patterns that mirrored the invisible harmonies she sensed in the world. By age fourteen she was contributing to projects at the University of Quicktime, designing algorithms that revealed hidden structures in medical scans. To Atlassa, data was not cold or mechanical—it was a whisper of the unseen, proof that order pulsed beneath chaos. She lived between mysticism and mathematics, reading both with equal devotion.

Yohimbee was the group's anchor, though he never claimed the role. Two years spent volunteering at a veterinary hospital had trained him to act with steadiness, to move toward pain rather than away from it. His laugh came easily, but behind it lay the quiet gravity of losing his

mother too young, a grief that shaped his resolve. He carried with him strange talismans: a fox-fur hat stitched by his grandfather, a heavy crystal sphere that seemed to hum faintly in his hands, and a knife worn smooth from years at his side. He swore he dreamed in the voices of animals—once insisting a stray cat had saved him with whispered advice. People followed him without needing to be asked; he carried an authority that came not from force, but from the certainty that when things broke, he would hold.

SHEEPBALLS MOUNTAINS

The Off Liners, as they came to call themselves, committed an act that, in their world, bordered on heresy: they cashed out their futures. College savings, once sacred and untouchable, were emptied without hesitation. Yohimbee, who had been secretly trading cryptocurrencies since he was ten, liquidated all his crypto holdings. The numbers on his screen dissolved into USD currency, and with a final flick of his thumb he locked his phone for good. “Might as well put it into something that breathes,” he said.

Their combined funds—quite large for a band of teenagers—were used to purchase a forgotten property at the edge of Couchville, a town whose windows were more plywood than glass. Wild roses strangled the fences, brambles gnawed at the soil, and at the center of it all stood a 19th-century barn with three arched doorways and siding curling away in earthy red strips, its roofline tilted like a weary sentinel facing the Sheepballs Mountains. The purchase was finalized in a dim county office where the clerk barely raised his head. Minutes later they stepped into the crisp air, official documents in hand, the

sky a hard blue above them. None of them spoke. Their silence was taut, charged, as though they'd stolen back something the world had already decided wasn't theirs to claim.

THE FLUMZY'S

That night they hauled their sleeping bags into the barn loft, the old boards creaking under every step as though the place resented their weight. The air was thick with the scent of hay and damp wood, dust whirling in the glow of Lamond's fire as he coaxed it alive in a rusted metal drum. Sparks leapt into the dark, snapping sharp like warnings. Atlassa laid out oat milk and ginger snap cookies in careful order on a crate, while Pencilissa moved through the rafters, tapping beams, testing nails, muttering under her breath as if the barn itself might answer.

Outside, the Sheepballs Mountains smoldered in a last wash of tangerine light. Coyotes howled, their cries threading across the valley like a signal meant only for them. Yohimbee sat cross-legged in the loft, fox hat low, crystal sphere heavy in his lap. He didn't raise his voice; the words came like an oath carried on smoke: "This place will change us." His friends glanced at him, half unsettled, half compelled, as though he had spoken aloud what each of them already felt.

By dawn the barn lay still, but the silence was uneasy. Dust shimmered like suspended ash in a blade of sunlight cutting through the warped siding. Lamond stirred first, stepping out into the cold where his breath fogged in the pale air. After exiting the front entry

he noticed a small rusted metal sign that read “The Flumzy’s,” which appeared to be the name of one of the previous owners. They instantly decided to name their property just that.

Pencilissa emerged next, sweater wrapped tight, her eyes sweeping the crooked fenceposts and undulating hills as though she were sketching blueprints in her mind, seeing not ruin but hidden structures waiting to be revealed. Yohimbee lingered apart, his crystal sphere cradled by his side, watching the sun climb the ridge. The world seemed to pause around him: no birdcall, no insect hum, only the faint prickle of static in the air. For an instant it felt as though the land itself were watching, measuring them, weighing whether to accept or resist what they were about to build.

WORK

They fell into their tasks almost instinctively, as if the land itself had whispered directions to them. Each found a role that carried the weight of both necessity and identity.

They claimed the place piece by piece. Lamond staked out a patch of soil, turning earth with worn garden tools, humming low notes into the dirt before dropping seeds as if the ground itself was listening. Pencilissa started sketching plans for pulley systems throughout the barn, transforming decay into an elaborate puzzle. Yohimbee stacked wood, sharpened tools, and repaired doors with the reverence of someone building not just shelter, but endurance itself.

Atlassa set up at a scarred desk by the window, the glow of her laptop reflecting off jars of drying herbs and squirrel bones. She began

writing small programs to track soil moisture, air pressure, and seasonal behaviors of local insects and mammals. At first, the scripts were simple—numbers logged neatly into files—but soon they shifted. Lines of code she hadn't written corrected themselves, as though the machine anticipated her intent. Once, she returned to find a log entry that predicted rainfall hours before the storm arrived, typed in her own terse style but at a time she hadn't touched the keys. She rubbed her eyes, told herself it was fatigue, and pushed on. Still, the anomaly lingered, quiet and unnerving, like a whisper coded into the air around them.

Every so often, each of them paused—mid-step, mid-thought—as if listening for something just beyond the edge of hearing. It wasn't a sound, exactly, but a prickling awareness in the back of the mind, subtle and inexplicable, like a thought that didn't belong to them. Then, with a faint shiver, they moved on with their work.

By dusk, the barn no longer felt like a ruin. The soil was marked with rows, the rafters stood straighter, the tools gleamed with readiness. And yet beneath the sound of hammering, digging, and typing, there was something else—an almost imperceptible hum, as if the land itself had awakened with them.

POISON CLOVER

Lamond rose with a prickling itch that refused to fade. When he stepped out of the barn, the chill of the morning only sharpened the sensation. He looked down—his arms and ankles were mottled with angry red bumps, rising fast. A sick dread settled in his stomach.

Without thinking, he sprinted to the patch of ground where he'd been pulling weeds the day before. Yohimbee followed, drawn by some instinct that something was wrong.

Lamond's breaths came ragged as he clawed at his sleeves, scratching the burning skin. Yohimbee scanned the tangled plants, eyes narrowing. Among the greenery, too many leaves bore the same signature shape: four jagged leaflets with serrated edges. For a moment, he swore he saw the leaves shift, almost tremble, as though savoring the harm they had caused.

"These aren't weeds," Yohimbee muttered, voice tight. "This is Poison Clover. It was engineered to choke out the Webbed-foot Beetles. You shouldn't have touched it."

Lamond froze, horror sinking in. The ground seemed to sway beneath him. He stumbled back into the barn, panic rising as he stripped off his clothes. In a cracked mirror, his reflection warped with swelling—the rash had already crept across his chest, his face, even his eyelids. His skin throbbed, hot and raw.

Pencilissa heard his strangled cry and hurried to the door. One look at him made her gasp—his face barely recognizable beneath the spreading welts. Fighting her own fear, she thought of her cousin, Sarojini Bajwa, a dermatology resident at St. Joaquin's Hospital. She dialed quickly, voice trembling as she explained.

Sarojini's answer was calm, clinical: urushiol oil, the toxin in the clover, was responsible. A corticosteroid—Fluocinonide—could contain the damage. Relief was possible, but distance stood in their way: the hospital was eighteen miles out.

The silence that followed was heavy. Lamond shivered, clutching his blistered skin, breath shallow with panic. They all knew what a hospital visit meant: exposure, records, the system tightening its grip.

Yohimbee stood in the doorway, the morning light catching on the blade at his belt. His decision came without words. He would go. The thought of Lamond's body surrendering further to the poison was unbearable. And so, in the thickening heat of the day, he clenched his teeth and reached for his bike, the journey already pressing down on him like a weight he could not put aside.

FLUOCINONIDE

It was already 97 degrees with heavy humidity when Yohimbee set off on his bike for Mathachusets Falls. Halfway there, he stopped to drink—only to find his bottle nearly empty. A hairline crack traced the base.

The heat pressed in. His legs slowed. Up ahead, a narrow stream flashed in the sun. He crouched at the bank, recalling a YouTuber's warning: even the clearest water could carry parasites. His throat ached anyway. A strange, almost comforting word bloomed in his mind—drink. It felt like his own thought, but arrived fully formed, as if it had been sitting there, waiting for him to notice. He hesitated, then cupped the cold, clear water in his hands and drank. Relief rushed through him, but unease stayed—not from the water itself, but from how easily the thought had undone him, as though his will had never been entirely his.

Yohimbee saddled back on his bike and rode fast. Eventually, he pulled into town, quickly met with Sarojini and got the Fluocinonide, and continued with his cycling journey toward home.

Upon his arrival to the barn, he found Lamond writhing in pain in his bed. Yohimbee gave him the medication. This calmed Lamond. Within a few hours, the itching started to subside and Lamond saw a potential end to this wretched situation.

PARASITE

Two nights later, a sharp pain wrenched Yohimbee awake. It was sudden and violent, as if something inside him was tearing loose. Sweating, he staggered toward the bathroom outside, bare feet sliding on splintered floorboards.

Halfway down the narrow stairs, his vision blurred. He missed a step. The world flipped—wood, sky, ground—and then his back slammed into a thorny rosebush, his elbow smacking against a jagged rock. He lay stunned, breath caught, the smell of crushed leaves in his nose. Blood slid down his arm. His shirt hung in tatters. Then the second wave hit. He hauled himself upright, legs shaking, clothes pricked with thorns. By the time he reached the bathroom, bile was rising. He collapsed to his knees and vomited until his vision blurred again. The night passed in fever and shivering, curled on the cold floor, surrounded by the metallic scent of blood and the faint, green sting of thorns.

In the morning, Lamond and Atlassa urged him to go to the hospital. He refused. Stepping into a clinic would mean stepping back into the system—and once inside, you never fully came out.

PICKLED WATERMELON RIND

By November, frost crackled underfoot, each step through the leaves sounding like porcelain breaking. Daylight was shrinking; the last window for crops was closing fast.

Inside, Lamond and Atlassa were sitting at the long walnut table organizing the dozens of jars of pickled vegetables they had recently made. Rows of glass jars gleamed in the angled morning light—pickled cabbage, cauliflower, jalapeños, ramps, even pickled watermelon rind—each tinted by Atlassa’s experimental spice blends.

She reached for the far end of the table, a silent request for the jar of pickled okra. Without warning, Lamond tossed it across the room. The jar cut through the air with the weight of something destined to shatter. Light slithered across its curves as it sailed over the other jars of pickled vegetables. Lamond noticed something strange—not just the impossible stillness of the jar, but the air itself shifting. A faint hum trembled through the floorboards. The tiny hairs on his arms stood up. Across the room, a pulse of something not entirely Atlassa’s own rippled through her chest, like an invisible hand had reached inside and steadied her breath. Her pupils widened, her breath stilled, and a quiet tension gripped her limbs as though her entire being had narrowed to that jar.

Then—impossibly—it stopped. Suspended mid-air, a bead of brine rolled slowly down the glass. After a long, uncanny moment, the jar drifted backward, reversing its path without a touch, and came to rest in front of Lamond as if it had never left his hand. Silence held the kitchen. Lamond turned the jar slowly in his hands, searching for some logic. Across from him, Atlassa stood still, her face unreadable, as though the air itself had obeyed her will.

The image replayed in his mind—not only the defiance of physics, but the flicker in her eyes, sharp and strange, as if a hidden part of her had switched on.

When she finally spoke, it was to tell him how she could do this. He promised to keep her secret. Still, unease settled in his stomach. Whatever force had stopped that jar wasn't magic—it was something deeper, something engineered into her very being.

SLIPPERY TRUTHS

For four days, Atlassa avoided Lamond's eyes at breakfast, her hands always busy with some unnecessary task. The memory of the jar hung between them like static in the air. She had told him part of the truth, but not all of it, and the weight of what she withheld was wearing her down.

On Thursday, she sent word for the others to meet her at the well at exactly three forty in the afternoon. Yohimbee arrived first. Lately, he'd noticed her slipping away alone, lingering at the edge of the property, and he'd convinced himself she might be leaving—

returning home and abandoning their life here. The thought disappointed him, though he told himself he would respect her choice.

The others gathered under an overcast sky, clouds hanging low and heavy. The air felt close, almost metallic, as if the storm above was holding its breath. They sat in a square on the grass, knees nearly touching, each watching the others for some unspoken cue. Atlassa began slowly, haltingly. Her fingers tightened on the sleeve of her canary yellow sweater. Words came in fragments, breaking apart before they could form. Yohimbee cut in. He met her cool blue eyes without blinking. “You don’t have to explain,” he said. “We already know. You’re one of us.”

The interruption broke something loose inside her. Her shoulders dropped; her breath came heavy. She looked from face to face, searching for any sign of doubt, before tears welled and streamed down her cheeks. Lamond’s expression held quiet understanding. Pencilissa’s remained puzzled, her brow furrowed in the dim light.

Atlassa steadied herself. For a long moment, she hesitated—her gaze moving from Yohimbee to Lamond, then back again—before finally speaking. “I’m just... relieved to know you’re BCI kids too.

No one answered right away, but the silence quickly morphed from charged hesitation to low, crawling weirdness. Pencilissa’s eyes didn’t leave Atlassa. Her voice, when it came, was quieter than usual. “Then tell us what you...”

Atlassa blinked in rapid-fire succession, as if trying to push her thoughts back

*Brain-Computer Interfaces (BCIs)

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