

The Culling

by Den Warren

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"You know Accura, you'd think that in the year 2216, garbage wouldn't stink anymore," Mark said.

Accura wasn't really paying attention. He saw a figure moving around in the early hours. He just shook his head in disapproval. A guy who was clearly a clone walked by them as they collected the garbage for the City. You could just tell a clone when you saw them. Clones were just too perfect looking. They did not have individualism or creativity. It was like they were trying to hide something sinister in all that perfection. Besides, why was this clone, or anyone else, out so early in the morning?

"Hey Mark," Accura said, under his breath, "maybe that guy over there will come over here and show us how dumping this crap is supposed to be done. I ought to say something to him."

Mark said, "No, Accura. Bad idea. You want to get in trouble with the Sensitivity Compliance Officers?"

"Well. . .I hate the SCOs and the clones. They can all just to take a flying. . ."

"Why? They never asked to be born? Just like you and me."

"Why hate them!?! They take all of the decent jobs! Because of them, none of us non-engineered are ever treated like anything other than like this freakin' garbage!" Accura slammed the aluminum garbage can into the side of the truck. Neighborhood dogs started barking. The can had a big gash in it. "What the hell?! You'd think we were the ones who were some kind of damn freaks or something!"

Mark said, "To the clones, we are some kind of freaks. The clones are raised to make things better, and we need the people. We don't have to do all of the high-stress work anymore. By the way, did you get the message on the PID last night about the clone recall by the UCA?"

The news had come over the Public Information Devices that the Universal Cloning Authority was going to cull one of their clone cultivar series. Each series could mean hundreds of healthy individuals would have to be exterminated. Those of the series who were being rejected, were only rejected because they had potential susceptibility to certain viral infections. This mass annihilation of humans was not unprecedented. In fact, it was not all that uncommon. But the UCA did not make a habit out of airing their dirty business in public, so it was

unusual that this information was being leaked to the public. The information probably was leaked by an anonymous concerned objector.

Clone adults were raised and conditioned to serve mankind. Since clones were created for the betterment of man, the common accepted thinking among clones, was that some of them must forfeit their lives for the betterment of humanity. The idea of terminating their lives was not thought of as reprehensible, but in fact, their duty. Obeying the UCA's operating procedures had become like a religion to the clones. Those of this most recently condemned, but yet to be culled series, were girls of about ten years old. About five hundred girls, all identical looking, shared the same DNA, and were considered deficient.

Now after a decade of "feeding them out", the children were scheduled to be culled. It was widely thought that these defective individuals would be rounded up from their private nurturing contractor, and pushed into a very large grinder, their young bodies to be processed into animal feed protein.

Mark said, "Don't you think that's horrible that they are making clones report to the UCA for extermination, just because they are susceptible to some disease they might never get anyhow?"

"You kill me," Accura said. "Do you really think the clones are making the world so perfect? Who is to say what is right or wrong? You know what your problem is? You are too nice."

"What's really wrong with being nice? Don't you feel a little sorry for those people?"

"Just because you are 'nice', does not mean you are 'good'. And no, those clones are just artificial. We are the real people. We do the work. We end up handling the problems, or at least living with the problems caused by their stupid ideas. We sweat and bleed and die. Don't you ever forget it. The clones should have never been given the vote. Now there are so many of them, they vote how they are told to vote, by the UCA, and never lose an election! The damn UCA has way too much power!"

Clones were given the right to vote in the Clone Suffrage Amendment to the Constitution, after a long campaign portraying the clones as a downtrodden minority.

Mark couldn't forget about Accura's comment about his excessive niceness, which, in those days, could be thought of as a derogatory slam. Mark wondered if he was really too nice? Should being too nice even be possible? Then he started fretting over the fact that he was being overly sensitive about the comment.

Mark did not hate his garbage disposal job, although the hours and working conditions were less than ideal. To be honest, he hated working with temperamental Accura with a passion. But the job did pay fairly well.

But what if he had the same opinion as Accura and didn't like slinging garbage cans? What if he hated getting up so early in the morning and smelling rotting garbage as much as Accura did his? He considered that he may one day get

tired of the dead-end job. "Okay Accura, I'll give it to you that it does seem a little unfair that you can't even apply for a better job."

"Seems unfair? You're not even scratching the surface, garbage man."

Mark said, "I don't care what you say. The clones don't have it so good. What do you think? Those recalled clones just show up to the UCA and show their ID and then all by themselves, just hop into the grinder?"

"I don't really care. The only reason they kill some of them is to make the rest of them look more valuable. Otherwise, why would they admit to the public that they turned out a bad batch? It's all politics. We really screwed up when we left the clones totally take over. As far as I am concerned, they can recall all of them."

Mark thought; That will never happen. The clones would always be around now. A huge segment of the population was now clones. Society was totally controlled by clones and would collapse if they were not around. There was no unified opposition among the poorly educated freely conceived individuals (FCI). Now many of the thoroughly indoctrinated, freely conceived individuals, even considered their own DNA to be "junk". This public opinion was a result of "top scholars", although FCIs themselves, were at the forefront of proclaiming FCI DNA to be junk. Oddly enough, those scholars did not fight their way to the front of the line to hop into the grinder.

After work, Mark went home to his podmates and asked the other men and women of his pod at the dinner table if he was too nice. They were sitting around the table. This time of day was the worst for Mark. He could just feel all of the bad chemistry that was going on among the pod members in the house. Mark thought that enjoining with a pod would be a liberating experience. Not tied down to one spouse, like the backwards old days. But all this freedom turned out to be slavery in disguise. A fellow podmate was always unhappy with him for whatever reason.

"Oh that is ridiculous", Sven said. "How can someone be too nice?"

"Yea," Sheila said, "That makes no sense. Don't be such a wimp."

"You worry too much," Torrie added. "Your dinner is going to get cold."

Mark thought; Great, now I am too nice and worry too much.

Bond just sat there eating his soup. The others in the pod were tired of him just freeloading off of them. Some of the podsters were contemplating getting a dispersal order placed on him, but it had to be a unanimous decision and Torrie was holding out. It had been two years since Bond had a job. Bond's contribution to the twenty third century quasi-family model, was that he was trying to change his work status to "totally disabled" so he could collect money from the government without working.

Mark hated his pod and wanted to leave. Mark thought; at least his pod had not produced any children. Most pods didn't produce children because having freely conceived children carried a stigma. Whether or not he was the biological parent, leaving a pod that had littered the planet with freely conceived children was

seen as even more careless and irresponsible. The societal expectation was that the pod would abort their mongrel, non-engineered children.

The worldwide birthrate had been declining for more than a century. About 150 years before, Japan had led the way in mass production of lab-grown humans. This was an attempt to keep their country from falling apart because of a shortage of people. The robotic and android projects were inadequate. So the focus was on biological solutions, but two main problems arose; Their lack of using available genetic engineering was seen as careless because of the future waste of medical resources. Also Japan made little provision for nurturing their crop of people who turned out to be of worse than subhuman in character and behavior. The UCA was formed to improve these practices, but even after so many generations of trial and error, they still had no solid answer for the character issue other than termination of individuals.

Mark had some faint memories of how his more traditional family seemed almost normal for a few of his earliest years as a child. His family fell apart after his father left his mother for the pod lifestyle, but even Mark's brief family experience was a lot better than the mess he was living in now during his adult life.

It was no accident that Mark's parents gave him a Christian name. They tried to give him an unheard of, post modern era Christian upbringing. There were no known examples for Mark's parents to reference their experience with Bible living. Mark's grandparents were not Christians, and his parents did not know any Christians. So Mark's parents didn't really know what they were doing. They kept looking at the Christian Bible on their PIDs but instead of receiving the Savior and personally changing spiritually, which is the main message of the Bible, they instead tried to follow a form of godliness.

Christianity was not banned anymore. But a hundred years earlier, Christianity took much of the blame by the agnostic authorities for all of the social ills the global citizens could imagine.

Also, the relentless violent Caliphate was such a world problem that the "Enlightened Ones", the ones who called all of the worldwide shots, decided it would be more fair and expedient just to ban all religions. But by now, much like the period of cannibalism, there was no need to ban something that all but a few radical extremists wanted to be involved with anymore. People were far too distracted by popular culture to give due consideration to something as deep as theology.

Now Mark was absorbed into this dysfunctional pod. If he left the pod, he would be financially ruined, since the others would likely get to keep all the possessions. Although he hated the podhouse and the pod, those who openly rejected the pod lifestyle were accused of being "haters" or "insane" on top of losing all their possessions.

Yet, there was a little ember of something going on deep within his consciousness. Mark wondered how could he think about his own petty situation when there were going to be hundreds of ten year olds sent to the grinder? In what universe could this mass extermination be acceptable? When did evil itself

become irrelevant? It was too horrible to be real. No one seemed to care. It was like, if you couldn't see them, then it supposedly didn't happen. If the clone children died, so what? They would just make more. Was the rest of society like Accura? Believing that the clones were some kind of synthetic humans who were "recyclable"?

The next day, Mark started his routine all over again. Early each morning, while the traffic was low, they were out picking up trash in some neighborhood of the city.

Accura was not one to talk in the morning, but he said, "Hey! Look over there! That guy going through that trash, throwing crap all over. That's that same guy. I bet he's a clone. I'm gonna go bust him." Accura started running down the street to get at the scavenger before his scavenging was detected.

Mark just stood there watching the scene. It was bound to play out this way sooner or later. Accura, who was a lot bigger than the scavenger pounced on the man who realized it too late. Then he started punching the unsuspecting forager in the face. You filthy clone! I'm gonna tear you a new one. . ." He slammed the clone's face into the sidewalk.

The clone was nearly knocked unconscious. But he was able to raise his arms and block the incessant onslaught. Wham! The much smaller, badly beaten hunter-gatherer landed a vicious unexpected blow onto Accura's face, jolting his head back. Accura was laid out with one punch. He fell back and his head hit with a "thud".

"Oh no!" Mark said, as he ran to the scene. He looked at Accura. "Hey! C'mon! Snap out of it!" Mark shook Accura and there was no response. Mark checked Accura's pulse. Nothing. "Are you kidding me?! He's. . .He's dead!" Either the punch or the fall onto the concrete had done in Accura.

"I didn't mean to. . ." Blood was running down his face.

"You killed my partner with one shot. You're a clone, right?"

"Um. . .yeah."

"Now you're gonna get culled, clonie. I'm reporting you."

"I didn't mean to. . ."

"Yea, I know, that's what you said already. You can't get away with hitting and killing humans like that."

The clone grabbed Mark by the front of his shirt. Their noses were almost touching. "I AM A HUMAN!"

"Okay, already. . .you can put me down now."

"No, you stupid garbage man! I was minding my own business, and this idiot attacked me! If you think I'm going to answer for his pointless death. . . you're just wrong!"

Mark couldn't believe the strength of the enraged clone. "Okay, okay."

The clone set Mark back down on his feet. "Why do you people hate us so much?"

"Umm. . .I guess I really don't hate you."

"Well, what did I do wrong?"

"Nothing. I guess I would have done the same thing. That is, if I had super strength."

"It's all his fault! It's not fair! You know I will end up being culled over this. They have been looking for me. The only thing I ever did wrong was try to do things my own way. They will make an example out of me for the other clones if they catch me."

Mark hung his head. He wondered what he would think about himself ten years from this moment. Was this all there was to life? Just to do your work and mind your own business, then quietly die off? Would he look back and see himself as a guilty non-involved bystander? What about honor? Virtue? Did he love his life so much that he would protect it, even at the cost of an unfair clone execution? Mark's decision was, "No!"

"Huh?" the clone said.

"I mean, no, you are not going to get culled. I am not going to let anyone cull you. You are a free man now. Your name is Accura."

"I don't get it."

"That's his name." Mark pointed at the lifeless body. "You will take the place of my partner, at least for now, and then we will both get out of this place. I am going to hide you, Okay, New Accura?"

"Accura 2.0?"

"Yea, Okay. Looks like you can fit into Accura's clothes."

"I. . .don't know what to say. I never thought an FCI would actually risk himself to help me. I don't understand."

"Maybe I don't either."

Accura 2.0 put on the fuchsia garbage collector colored jumpsuit. There was a lot of extra material hanging all over.

Mark said, "You seem to be taking off a few pounds, Accura."

Accura 2.0 held out some of the baggyness of his baggy suit and looked at it.

Mark said, "Let's put this body into the truck. Hurry up! Traffic's coming!"

They hastily hoisted Accura 1.0's stripped down body into the back of the truck. Mark pushed the big button and the compactor pushed the body in the truck and out of sight, while the early morning Transit Worm passed by. The Transit Worm was a hovercraft train used for public transportation.

Mark never knew it would feel so good to do something that he knew was right. He felt totally liberated, like a new man. He decided he was going to do more to help clones. Much more.

Then Mark said, "You know where that series is? The clone series that is going to get culled?"

"Why?"

"Because, Number Two, we're going to go rescue them."

"What? You can't go there. They have to be culled."

"Not this time. I ask again, can you get us there?"

"Us?"

"Yes, stupid. You killed my partner, now you have to fill in for him."

"No, I don't live there anymore, but I know I can find it, if you can get me the series number. It's a big place out in the country, away from all of the cities."

Mark asked, "So where do you live?"

"I live with a group of outlaw clones on a farm."

"So why is it against the law for you to live on the farm? What did you do?"

"It's not the farm. We're slaves. I have a girlfriend at the farm. Another clone. She's pregnant. She was supposed to be infertile, but. . .I don't know. If the UCA found her with an unauthorized pregnancy, they would haul her off. You people know nothing of what we go through. If I started to show symptoms of a viral infection, I would get hauled off. I'm not letting my woman get culled, so we took off. The UCA owns us. If we are caught after an escape, even once, they will just take us straight to the grinder. "

"I. . .I never thought of that. That is totally wrong. Sorry."

There was an awkward silence.

Mark asked Accura 2.0, "Hello?! How do we find the building the clone rejects are at?!"

"The buildings are numbered by clone series."

Mark pulled out his PID. "Looks like according to this article, we want building F34C. Get in."

"We can't go there."

"Why?! "

"Because. . . that is the female side."

"Look, I don't plan on asking permission to go into the female side, or permission to do anything. You people aren't much for initiative or imagination, are you? Now shut up and get in."

It started getting light out as they drove the garbage truck to the UCA campus. They started seeing some more traffic as people made their way to work.

Mark looked over his new friend and said, "Man! Accura sure did a number on your face." He handed 2.0 a filthy shop towel.

Accura 2.0 was touching his face lightly.

Mark said, "That is going to leave some scars."

"We'll get caught," 2.0 said.

"Maybe, but try to be a little more positive. You clones are raised for one job and you can't even conceive of doing anything but that. You gotta open up your mind a little. You know they need refuse service at the UCA too."

"You mean, garbage pickup?"

Mark said, "First we gotta get rid of this load. This looks like a good place." Checking to see if there was any traffic, Mark stopped the truck in the middle of a street. He got out and raised the compactor so he could dump the entire load. The back of the truck slowly raised up like a dump truck. Ton upon ton of compacted garbage tumbled out onto the street, leaving a thick wall of trash. He saw one of Accura 1.0's legs sticking out of the heap as the trash tumbled out, but decided at this point, he was "all in" and it really wouldn't matter if the body was found. Mark got back into the cab and pulled the truck forward, then he went to the back again so he could continue dumping. Accura 2.0 looked out at the rear view side mirror and couldn't believe what was going on.

A car came up behind the mountain of trash and stopped. There was not enough clearance on the road to get around the mess.

Mark casually hopped back in and pulled away. "So how far is this place?"

"About a four hour drive."

"We got plenty of gas. Maybe."

"What about enough gas to get back?"

"There may not be any gettin' back."

On the way to the UCA, Mark asked 2.0, so what's your real name?"

2.0 sighed. "I don't use it anymore, but my given name is Edgar 413 M12A".

"Wow. You don't look like an Edgar 413 to me. More like an Edgar 414."

"Yea, I get that a lot," Edgar said.

Mark smirked. "I didn't see that coming."

"Why? Are you surprised that I can make a joke?"

"Honestly. . .yes. So, how can you guys tell each other apart? And yes, you really do all look the same."

"Well, it really isn't as hard as you people make it out to be. We have variations in head shape, moles, freckles, eyebrow curl, hair whorl; stuff like that.

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