

Till Symon

Clone Designer

A Science Fiction Novel

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**Idiocy and Ignorance
are mankind's protection,
when truth and insight
render life unbearable.**

Conestar 64

Clark had put his pilot's seat in its reclining position. For the last 16 hours he had been in twilight sleep. On his forehead were two electrodes, barely noticeable, designed to induce this state of relaxation between sleep and wakefulness. It was the only means of getting through these long stretches of space where nothing much seemed to happen. Apart from the quiet whirring of the air-conditioning and the occasional short buzz of the steering nozzle which held the spacecraft on its prescribed course, the stillness and monotony could quickly drive anybody insane. Especially if you were travelling alone, like Clark. In twilight sleep you were oblivious to all of this. It was a kind of psycho-trip that switched off your perception of time and softly lulled your brain into a quiet dream world. Allsa had continuously tried to manipulate these systems. The Designers referred to them as Pops. Small coded messages that were designed to steer you subconsciously toward an Allsa product and were actually illegal. Allsa's biggest challenge every day was to justify the legality anew. But Clark's system was clean.

After all, as Clone Designer of the Semi Elite for ten years Clark had learned the Allsa Group's every subtlety. He knew exactly how to remove and clean them. Discounting any potential incident, the twilight sleep system shut itself off four hours before the destination in order to initiate the phase of reawakening. On a transit route you could use this phase to at least admire the approaching moon, planets and formats in the distance. Clark's route however, was far off the standard ones. It was a string of unintelligible coordinates that led him into the lightless void, toward a place whose very existence

could not be confirmed until he got there. He was so far removed from the main routes that he could no longer be located and was now left to his own devices. Even so, he remained at ease and passed the time listening to the tenors of Classical Opera. They were so majestic, sublime. Clark had always believed that this music, even in its time, had been purposely written for space travel. As he brought his seat back up to its vertical position, he ran mentally through every single word and phrase that Dave had told him. Dave had been the one to send him on this trip and yet, as he approached the destination there was still no sign of anything visible through the windshield. He almost dozed off again when Daisy, his flight control panel, spoke up.

»Clark, we're approaching the destination's area of identification«

»Can I see that a little better?«

The craft's windshield darkened and switched over to the Display Mode. Except for a vague silhouette one could make out but a single object through the outline markers. Clark raised his eyebrows.

»Is that it? That looks pretty ominous«

»The point of destination does not match any coordinates«

»True, but the station seems real enough.

Congratulations, Dave, you were right«

»The destination is hazardous. There is no match with Archive Data either«

»You mean this ruin isn't registered anywhere?«

»Not in the official archives. There are no other available sources«

»There are no details on the operating system?«

»Yes, but the data concerning the station's system can't be verified. Officially this station has been permanently shut down. However, the analysis shows some limited activity. Atmosphere and gravitational readings are normal, but unreliable. Toxic elements are unknown. Overall, hazardous«

»Are there any clues as to what happened here?«

»Processing of metallic resources«

Clark was relieved. It confirmed nicely what Dave had told him. He could even see some details about the station on the Display.

»An abandoned factory, where the last one out forgot to turn off the lights«

Daisy had the habit of commenting even on things that Clark said under his breath.

»Negative. The station was shut down completely 26 years and 2 days ago, and 4 years, 11 months and 8 days ago it was put on Stand By. But there was no more production«

»Interesting, after 20 years the factories are definitively scrapped, but why take them off the records completely? Strange. Someone's made themselves a hiding place here. That means he is here after all«

»Who would that be?«

»Mel Thomson, our missing Elite Designer«

»Negative, the station's system does not signal any organic life on board«

»I'll believe that when I see it. Why would the atmosphere be reactivated if nobody lives here?«

»The station has been officially abandoned. Therefore, the system can switch itself off at any time without prior warning. It should not be entered without a protective suit«

»No, there is someone living there, someone who needs to be kept alive. I'm going in like this«

The details became more distinct. In the station there was no light to be seen.

Allsa

It was one of those typically hideous factories, of which there were thousands built in space. Most of them of course belonged to the Allsa Group. They had been set up in 24-hour rotations in order to break the monotony for the people working there. Exceptional use of energy was made through solar power, the extreme temperatures and the vacuum of space being free of charge. Most production sites were also built in space in order to prevent espionage. Allsa's greatest threat by far were the myriad organizations of Individualists who made up a mere eight percent of the human population. After the last global economic crisis the Individualists gained their autonomy. They formed their own government, elected their president, set up self-sustaining resorts and made laws. For the remaining 92% of Industrialists they were a backward and inferior class of people. A kind of sect with an outdated world view that sees evil in all progress. Clark had his own philosophy, and although he managed to conceal it most of the time, it would often surface in his cynical remarks. He belonged to the best Clone Designers around, and could take numerous liberties because people could simply not do without him. He relished this aspect of things and was constantly stirring up the pecking order. While almost any other Industrialist would have dreamed of rising to the ranks of the Elite Standing, Clark refused the status, despite its

promise of immortality and countless other privileges. For once you made it into the Elite, there was no way back. Granted, the highest paid jobs were no longer an option for Clark, but he only wanted projects that were at least halfway transparent and for which he could take responsibility. A lot of what went on in Allsa's covert operations was highly suspect and always a source of speculation. And so he left things up to himself, Dr. Clark Seli Ashton, for the Semi Elite always had the option of leaving any given venture, which was precisely what Clark opted for five years ago when he went to work for Clonedake Share. It was one of the few remaining important firms that were not yet under the auspices of the Allsa Group, the most powerful corporation in the universe and one whose influence left very few untouched. There was at least one thing that all corporations had in common. They all had consumer apathy to contend with. People could afford almost anything, but it was access to outer space that was still reserved for the privileged few. As a Semi Elite and due to his constant reassignment to different posts, Clark's I.D. bore the letters SL: Space Licence. Thanks to his numerous licences Clark could afford his own spacecraft, a Conestar Ecolight II. Conestar actually belonged to the Allsa Group, but he didn't care. The constant disputes between the Individualists and the Industrialists only amused him. Live your own life and you realize that the truth lies somewhere in the middle, on a spectrum whose two extremes remain hidden from our view. That's how you keep the consumer occupied. The search for truth can be like the unveiling of a new range of products. For this reason Allsa took to attacking competitors' products and rousing public sentiment, a public whose consumer hysteria bordered on the religious and was fundamental to their sense of self. Inevitably one of the Individualist

organizations would come to find out that the vilified product was likewise the work of the Allsa Group, channeled through bogus companies with the sole purpose of igniting hostilities between consumers. And these fools took the bait. Allsa thought it could string them along forever. Then it happened. - The greatest global economic crisis in history. Accusations abounded instantly. Allsa declared that it was the Individualists who, through a meticulous manipulation of the markets, had created a vast economic network aimed at destabilizing the consumer. It was high time that somebody rid mankind of these ethnic minorities whose sole purpose in life was to hinder progress and prosperity. Integration, was what Allsa termed the forced relocation of the resorts. They almost succeeded, since the World Committee, keepers of the constitution, were made up largely of those loyal to Allsa. However, of the 75% of votes required to amend the constitution, the World Committee only came up with 68%.

This had a profound impact. Many defected to the Individualist's camp, amongst whom were numerous specialists from the Semi Elite. At that point Clark was still with Allsa, in part because he wanted to continue studying the structures and projects of the company and simply because he felt quite at home there. Besides, the political wrangling didn't interest him in the least. At the age of 62, he was still very young and the best way to ruin his life, he thought, was with politics.

He simply shrugged it off.

Allsa began liquidating many businesses, letting them waste away and drift into bankruptcy. All it took was one shareholder who was not in line with company policy.

Clark found it amusing, the way Allsa had its finger in every pie, even in government bodies where it detected problems that didn't exist, only to offer the use of an Allsa product as a remedy.

How people became anxious and sought advice, out of fear of making a bad purchase and a social blunder. How Chief Designer Dr. Broke Eli Castello made himself into a cult figure, so that with the aid of his charisma and wise counsel he might generously bestow upon the people an identity which he himself had stripped them of. That 91% of 70 billion people now functioned as a kind of pliable biological mass in a food chain otherwise known as an economy, to be kept constantly hungry and, if possible, sterile and germ-free.

How they steadily molded this biological mass, as if nursing a colony of bacteria designed to decompose a corpse, then have it passed off the world over as a fragrant essence. As a Clone Designer, Clark mixed genetic cocktails on a daily basis, that were then injected into the masses as a vaccine, with the aim of manipulating the olfactory system to such an extent, that every last person would find the odor pleasant, refined and soothing all at once. In fact, the consumer was not even to be capable of survival in the absence of this smell.

In theory this would not have been a problem, but the constitution forbade it. Invariably for Clark, at some point these refined odors would revert back to the stench of a corpse, and it was then that Clark would change projects anew. For the 8% of Individualists who had established a life of their own on a distant Format, this stench passed them by. Clark belonged to the 1% of Semi Elites and Elites who had the freedom of smelling what

they chose to smell, but at a considerable cost, having to subject themselves increasingly to the will of their corporation. Though this was really a matter of pride, when you were not one of those who lived in this world but who helped manufacture it, granting yourself some freedom in the process. Clark was resigned to the fact that his wife had left him, converted to the ultra-conservative Individualists and spent the last 40 years on a Format on which, only 12 years ago his daughter Patricia had been born. No, it was better this way, he thought, because Patricia would grow up with fragrances that were last detected on Earth some 1000 years ago. No one who knew the reality of the present stench would have allowed their child to grow up in its midst.

Clark saw the ever more raging economic war like a swarm of fish shaken up in a fish tank. As the stench at Allsa got the better of him, he made the switch to Clondake Share. In the eyes of his former superior Castello, a wily strategist, he was a spineless traitor. Castello respected Clark's skills but this respect quickly degenerated into a genuine mutual hatred. Clonedake was the best option for Clark, it was a firm with years of tradition, had made history and was widely respected. Castello didn't dare touch the firm, at least not yet. There was a real danger that he could lose his public image as a humanitarian if he did. Clonedake had always been a thorn in his side and by far his greatest threat.

Five years had now passed and the only thing that Clark missed about Allsa were a couple of old friends, with whom he was fast losing touch. Otherwise things were running smoothly. Clark's position at Clonedake consisted of some basic work in Dhymatik Computers. He intended to secure two more contracts for himself

and then quit the business completely and start something new. He didn't have a clear idea as to what that was yet. He was simply following a golden rule: Quit while you're ahead. Then, things suddenly took a turn for the worse. Top Designers were pulled off the job, Designers who were actually needed. The atmosphere between co-workers became more distant. Nobody made jokes anymore and Clark especially had been known for his dry sense of humor. He could do jokes in deadpan that only insiders understood. Outsiders would stand there confused as his colleagues would burst into laughter. But nobody seemed in the mood for it anymore. Clonedake's shares kept falling. This was exactly what Allsa wanted, and Castello used it at once to play to the cheering masses.

»It is never enough. We want it all. We are the strongest. We are here for you. With your quality awareness you have reached new heights. Because you are smart, because you understand. We thank you for this and we will show our appreciation by rewarding you with new and improved products. You have earned them. We are one. We are Allsa!«

And again, the swarm of fish were roused in their tanks. But this time Clark couldn't shrug it off. Until now there was still something called free enterprise, but it looked as if Allsa was going to make this too a one-horse race. They began taking over every single business they could get their hands on, soaking them all up like a sponge. It would take years for the World Committee to deal with the barrage of antitrust cases and by the time they did the plaintiffs would no longer be around. The trick was easy. Allsa repeatedly removed those members of the World Committee who were most exposed to the criticism that

they were instruments of Allsa's policies. These members would then give up their seats. Allsa would cynically justify this with an accusation taken straight from the Individualist's book, namely that the World Committee was riddled with Allsa loyalists. This in turn caused a deadlock in the proceedings and all legal activities ground to a halt. Countless independent firms stood with their backs to the wall. The World Committee now demanded that the vacated seats be once again filled, and the pendulum began to swing back. In order to get the legal proceedings moving again the stricken firms had no choice now but to approve every seat that was presented. The seats were reoccupied naturally by Allsa people who, in a surprising shift, allowed all the lawsuits to proceed in order to generously come to the rescue of all those whose very existence was threatened. Of course it wasn't about the firms. Allsa's aim was a radical reform of the constitution. Impelled by the delusions of Chief Designer Dr. Broke Eli Castello. Rumors began to spread in his own ranks and many Designers, normally so poised, began to panic.

Things at Clondake were not looking good for Clark. At once he decided to create his own firm. To help him carry out his contracts he could only think of one man. Mel Thomsen. Since the days when Clark worked for Allsa, Clark had lost touch with him. It was a tacit rule between friends who worked for competing firms that they should not keep in touch, since it might infringe on the rules of confidentiality. But Mel would stop whatever he was doing and agree to the project, of that he was certain. They had always gotten along perfectly and had always come up with the right ideas at the right time.

But Clark's attempt to contact Mel ended in disappointment. Mel Thomsen was no longer with Allsa. He and his daughter had vanished four years ago. His inquiries met with a strained silence. People said he had wanted to change his life. Clark had almost written him off, thinking that he might well have secluded himself on a distant Format somewhere, when a man named Dave contacted him from one of the resorts, saying he had urgent and important news.

Conestar 64

»He's here, I'm sure of it«

Clark reached for his gear belt. He could hardly wait to get into the station. As he tried to decipher the lettering on the entrance, dimly visible by the light of the stars, the station itself suddenly spoke up and introduced itself.

»You have entered the identification area of Conestar 64, of Conestar Limited. Please identify yourself«

Clark had to laugh. He wasn't used to discussing matters with pieces of scrap metal and didn't take the question very seriously.

»Eh, yes, Conestar 64, this is the alien from Orion«

»Please switch on your transponder«

»Or else?«

Clark recalled one of his ground rules: Don't argue with machines. This was obviously some kind of residual glitch in the circuits that hadn't been put to rest. Only Daisy seemed to take it seriously.

»This is unacceptable. Abandoned stations should always be open«

»I don't think anybody cares. Will you please let this station know that we would very much like to enter? Gate 1 would do fine«

Nothing moved, and then it spoke again.

»For entry your identification and code are required«

In cases of emergency, there were four mini-torpedoes on board. Casually Clark tapped his display and pulled Gate into his sights.

»This is the alien from Orion and here's my code«

A short discharge and a faint flash of light, and Gate 1 was open. Behind it was an airlock.

»Daisy, can we access the outer airlock from here?«

»No, only manually«

»Then send out the bot«

Three minutes later the airlock was open and Clark flew in.

»Atmospheric readings are normal, the airlock is unstable however, due to the shot at the entrance door. Very risky«, Daisy reported.

»Space is never without its risks. I'll put on the protective suit and go out. Keep the systems on stand-by, Daisy.

Have the bot establish radio control and send it after me«

The light inside the airlock was dim. As the door closed behind him, Clark switched off the motors.

»Gravitational and atmospheric readings are normal«, Daisy confirmed.

The hatchways opened up and Clark slowly climbed the steps. He then opened the inner door and entered the station. The air was musty and smelled of sulphur. His footsteps echoed through the high-ceiling, gray-green room, from which three passageways led to the first production halls. It was one of those typically dreary looking factory floors, designed solely for its functionality. But never before had Clark seen such a

station devoid of any human activity. In the faint glow of the emergency light it all looked unreal. In the distance Clark could hear the humming of the gravitational and airconditioning units. One could feel their vibrations throughout the entire station. All of the Conestar stations were built alike. Three entrances arranged in a star-shape, leading through an endless maze of production rooms, warehouses, offices, switch rooms and corridors into the central unit, where the main control room and power sources were situated. Daisy was constantly monitoring Clark.

»Your vital signs are fine, only a slight increase in pulse«
»The air in here is like the inside of a coal mine«
Clark moved slowly into the first passageway.
»Hello, is anybody there?... Mel, are you there?«
He pointed his flash light across the walls.
»It's too dark in here. Daisy, can you make out any kind of switchboard?«
»20 meters to your right there's a sector block«

Clark switched on the lights. Before him stood the first production room. Everything looked in order, as if any second the station supervisors and bots would come out to resume work.

»Clark, I'm sending the bot over to you now«, Daisy said. In the production room stood the packaging lines, partitioned by a labyrinth of aisles and high walls. Despite the lighting in the sector it was still hard to see into the passages. They were about 30 meters long and Clark directed his flash light into each one.

»Mel?... Mellie?...Mel, are you here? I have to speak with you«

Suddenly he thought he'd heard something and pointed his light in its direction.

»Is somebody here? Daisy, do you see anything?«

»No signs of life«

»Mel, I know you're here«

His voice echoed off the walls.

»Clark, something just moved in the aisles. I can't locate it precisely, but something is there. About 100 meters away, at 10 o'clock«

Again he heard something move. It was a short, soft whirring sound.

»That might just be an old bot that wasn't properly turned off, Daisy«

»No, I would register that. It's something else«

In a few quick strides Clark moved to the aisle where he thought he heard the noise issuing from, then directed his flash light into it.

»Mel, are you in here?... Mel?«

Again the whirring noise. This time louder and in shorter intervals.

»Where is it now, Daisy?«

»I can't pinpoint it exactly. It should be about 10 meters to your right«

Clark moved decisively toward it. It seemed to be the second aisle to his right. He was about to shine a light into the aisle when out came a strange vehicle on wheels and stopped right in front of him. Clark jumped.

»What on earth is this?«

Motionless, Clark stood before this contraption, the likes of which he had never seen before. It looked like a dung beetle on wheels, about one meter fifty long and eighty centimeters wide.

»Are you happy to see me?«

Clark recognized the voice.

»Mel Thomsen?«

Slowly the vehicle rolled up to within 10 centimeters of Clark and raised its insect-like head. Mel's voice sounded ashamed.

»A horrible sight, huh?«

»What...what happened to you?«

Confused, Clark looked around the production hall in all directions.

»Mel, where are you? Stop joking around with this thing and come out«

He looked up at the numerous gangways above and scanned every window in the control room. Why wasn't he showing himself? He thought he saw someone's shadow when he suddenly became aware that there were soft breathing sounds coming from the insect-like head before him. It was only then that Clark began to study him more closely, and saw that there were two small round camera lenses arranged like a pair of eyes.

Astounded, he slowly began to realize what he was he was looking at.

»I'm standing right in front of you, Clark, or rather, what's left of me. Look at this insect head. You see the two lenses? What do you see in them?«

Clark swallowed hard.

»A brain«

»No, not a brain, *my* brain. This vehicle embodies the high retention system«

Clark's horror turned into rage.

»By the looks of this revolting design, there is only one man who could have done this...«

»Indeed, only a Broke Castello could be this despicable. He gave me two gripping clamps and a pair of wheels to enable forward motion. I even have loudspeakers to talk through. Pretty generous, right?«

Clark sat down on an empty rack. Countless thoughts flooded his head at once. All the changes that Castello had sought to impose on the constitution were already underway. He was forcing them through and the scale of his ambitions were apparent in their sheer brutality.

»Why did he do this, and where is your body?«

»Why did you come here, and how did you find me?«

»That doesn't matter«

»Yes, it does matter. It's impossible to find this station.

And it's even less likely to suspect that I was here. I can't trust you. What do you want from me?«

Clark sighed. Over four years as a living being reduced to this tiny vehicle in total isolation and loneliness. Mel could see and speak, but he couldn't feel, smell or taste anything. How much hate and mistrust must have built up in his brain? How would he explain to him the momentous events that had occurred in the past few years?

»Ok, here's the deal. I quit the business. Clonedake is about to go bankrupt...«

Mel burst out.

»Stop it, you think I'm that stupid? The mighty Clonedake is going out of business. You want my daughter, just like Castello. You're just using a different tactic. I want you to get out of here«

»The World Committee has just adopted the first resolution. All the F.I.'s are to be privatized. The entire Allsa Group has now been merged. They now control every single Family Institute«

»So the bastards managed that as well?«

Clark sat down again. His voice levelled out.

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