Lines of Death, Circles of Life

By TS Gallows

Farmers read science fiction, too. If a fictitious flying saucer has an airtight hatch scavenged from a collapsed Harvestore silo, an agricultural sci-fi enthusiast can tell you if that makes sense. Three generations of Amish farmers let three generations of “English” farmers distract them from bible study with science fiction. If an elder church elder ever caught them, an unheeded admonishment would lead to some serious shunning. Even stories about other worlds are of this world. And yet, without science fiction an Amish farmer would never have built a flying saucer, and our world would be for the worse.

The Amish flying saucer had no three-dimensional guidance imagery nor autonomic controls. Two polished wooden handles protruded from the counsel, and bathysphere-strong silo portals gave the pilot a view. A buggy bench pegged to the platform had seatbelts for the unlikely event of an upside-down maneuver. The bio-computer operating the complex controls ran on alfalfa and virtually any other available plant-fuel.

Mandy’s mother suggested driving out to see the circles one Wisconsin summer night at the supper table. She had a hard time of it because Mandy’s father was on one of his organic farmer tirades: “That Cyrus Chalmer talks like he’s the Steve Jobs of the agricultural world with his Macro Growth double-speak, but he’s a snake in the grass! Today he told the press that pollen from organic crops endanger his creations.”

“The man has a pea brain,” Mother said, patting her husband’s arm. “But I’m trying to talk to your daughter.”

“Oh. Sorry.” Father leaned back and tucked his thumbs under his overall bib.

Mother handed Mandy the folded paper. “It’s a long way out there, but it’s worth it.” She nodded solemnly. “Seeing the circles will put you into a super-spiritual headspace, don’t you know.” Mother held Mandy’s hands. “Cheer you up and all that, now.” She got up and made busy dishing up blackberry cobbler and homemade ice cream for Mandy and her older brothers.

Father rolled his eyes, but he loved so much the kooky woman he got talking to about science fiction that time in Madison when he attended a composting seminar. That weekend changed more in his life than his farming.

No local farm girl would have found enough sci-fi t-shirts for him to wear a different one every day. He loved getting teased about them at the general store. And she had their dining room decorated with framed sci-fi movie posters. To enhance the collection, father spent hundreds for an autographed picture of her favorite author, holding his cat. Into the frame, Father carved the saying she often quoted: “Animals make us human.”

“The circles look beautiful, I’ll give you that,” he said supportively. Father slid the keys to his truck across the table to Mandy. “Stick to the backroads.”

“You know she’s taking Zack with her,” said Matt, the oldest brother who just finished his first year of ag and literature at University of Wisconsin – Eau Claire. The blondest member of the Solem family came by his muscular body honestly, hefting hay bales running for days on end, starting each day with eight eggs and a loaf of whole-grain bread, baked in coffee cans and baring the signature lines of the cookware.

“Zack’s a good guy,” said Mark the middle kid. “His family has helped our family and shared books since Grandpa’s day.” He jabbed Matt in the ribs, and then he held his hands up to fend off Matt’s inevitable reprisal. “Go easy. My fist was set on stun. Ouch!”

“Now boys,” said mother, flipping a thick braid over her shoulder. Would you rather have her running around with some fast-talking city-slicker from Black River Falls?” She giggled at her comment, having grown up in Madison, the Berkeley of the Midwest, and knowing that, in comparison, their county seat hardly rated den of iniquity status. “That time Mandy spent in Kansas City gave her a wake-up call. I trust her anywhere she goes, in the truck or online.” She patted her daughter’s hand. “Run along now, but don’t stay out super late. I’ll get the chickens come sunup, but you can’t sleep in for long. We have plenty of pickles left to harvest, and the bigger they get the less they pay.”

Father leaned over and kissed his wife. “Ah, Maggie, you could manage a farm on the moon.”

“Thank you, Michael.” She kissed him back and leaned in for a long hug. “And you could quote chapter and verse from Heinlein’s *the Moon is a Harsh Mistress*. Mm.”

Finishing her last bite of the blackberries she picked before supper, Mandy grabbed the keys and went to the door.  “Uff da!” she said, taking her pack down from the hook. “Thank you, Mother and Father, and get a room.”

Her brothers laughed. “Disgusting, aren’t they?” said Matt.

Mandy and Zack followed the back roads for a practical reason. Even though she had driven the big truck since her feet could reach the blocked pedals, helping bring in the hay, Mandy would not legally drive until next summer. The rural mindset sets differently. Even if a county sheriff did pull her over, he would give her a pass if nothing looked suspicious.

Taking the last turn on her mother’s neatly printed directions, off a blacktop county highway to a gravel township road, Mandy slammed the brake, and the truck slid on the crushed shale. “Did you see that?”

“What?” asked Zachariah, turning to look at her from under his black brim.

“I saw eyes.” Arm across the seatback, Mandy peered over her shoulder, reversing the truck around the turn, stealing glances through the windshield while her headlights swept back across the pasture, slowing to a stop when they shone upon the whitetails, at least twenty of them, frozen amid-chew.

“Ah,” said Zack. “Hirsch.”

“Yes, deer,” she agreed. Mandy knew enough Pennsylvania German that Zack sprinkled words from his family language into their conversations. He spoke English well. Over the years, her family and his had taught each other.

“So pretty.”

“Ya, they are.” Zack took his hat off and set it on the dashboard.

They stared at the deer. The deer stared back, ranging in size from big racks to little spots. Then Mandy put the truck into drive and left the herd to eat in peace. The moon rose above the trees, quarter past full, and then the roadway climbed. At the top of the hill, Mandy pulled over onto the shoulder and shut the truck down. “Wow,” she said.

“Ya.” Zack exhaled.

Patterning out from a center axis, the crop circles decorated a rich green forty of timothy with crescents and spheres. Since Zack started his rumspringa, he and Mandy had spent many other nights in the truck, parked somewhere like this, high and sandy where the mosquitoes would not find them.

“You’ve had some trouble, Mandy,” he had said one night in June. “If I were of a mind to do something forboton, what would you recommend?”

Mandy looked at her friend since childhood, wondering at how he considered her an expert on trouble. Upon reflection, however, it made sense. “The time I drank all that Leinenkugel with my school friends from Augusta messed up my life. I don’t remember stealing the iPhone from the Walmart in Eau Claire. It made mother so sad when the judge ordered me to stay at the girls’ home in Kansas. She says you can heal your mind with good food and prayer, and she spent a lot of money on a lawyer to keep them from putting me on medications.”

“That was not gut for you.” Zack nodded. “So I should not take up the bottle?”

“It makes you feel sick the next day.” She shook her head, remembering her morning in juvenile detention. “Just horrible.”

“What about drugs?” He smiled. “The ones for recreation?”

“I know about that from the other girls in Kansas City. Drugs make you feel super good but, when you run out, you feel awful. Some of them had attempted suicide.”

“Oh.” Zack looked shocked. He put his hat on his lap and studied it. “What about cigarettes?”

“Forget about trying to kill yourself. They’ll do it for you.”

“Even just for rumspringa?”

“It’s super hard to quit.”

“What does that leave?” He looked frustrated.

“Reading sci-fi.”

“Nein,” he said, like one of Mandy’s school friends would say Not! “Grossdaddi read me Jules Verne when I was too little to work.” He shook his head. “I just finished *the Martian*. Is there nothing else you can recommend?”

She took her phone off the dashboard. “Googling.” Then she slid over closer to him. “And cuddling.”

“And kissing?” he asked suspiciously.

“Yuck! Just cuddling.” Mandy moved a little closer.

“Okay. Cuddling sounds gut.” He put his arm over her shoulder. “What’s Googling?”

And they spent many a night of Zack’s rumspringa summer, his do whatever you like rite of passage, googling and snuggling. That’s not all they did, but you have to consider their age, and their youthful urges. They took turns flying Mandy’s drone.

Once, Zack took Mandy’s place in a competition. Wing Deer let the farm kids who bought drones from them fly factory drones remotely, online for free. Although he mistargeted both his coordinates, he got points for perfect parallelism. Zack scored fifth out of thirty!

One of the oldest mountain chains on Earth, weathered by water, wind, and lichen, the ancient peaks of Wisconsin shed enough alluvium to fill farmland into the spaces between them. Back in the day, Mandy’s grandparents watched *Hee Haw* with the faces distractingly ghosted by the rocky hills. They had to pick up the heavy bakelite handset several times before they found nobody else talking on the party line. Now farmers have cell phones and satellite television. With just a few taps on a screen, Mandy brought up the Wikipedia page on crop circles with pictures. “Pretty, aren’t they?”

“I want to look at *these* circles,” said Zack, sure she would know how he meant.

Mandy reached behind the seat for her backpack and took out the drone, unfolding the arms and placing it on the seat next to her behind the steering wheel. “I read you like a book,” she said, flipping the switch on.

Green with yellow logo and writing that said Wing Deer, the drone rose when Zack tapped Mandy’s phone twice. Sensing the obstruction above, the RC helicopter stopped short of the headliner, and Zack maneuvered the drone out the window and down to the field. There he let it hover just across the fence-line while he set it to skim mode, an agricultural option. The drone dropped and took off at full speed.

Like holding a songbook for two at church, Zack held the phone so Mandy could watch. Brushing the tallest plants, the view tilted from side to side. Sitting in the truck, they leaned from side to side. The drone reached the first circle fast. Then Zack dropped it right in and skimmed the bottom of the circle. After a few times around, Zack ducked into a straight column that took him to the next circle, and he went around that orb in the other direction.

“Wow!” said Mandy. “This is like a skate park for lazy farm kids.”

“Nein.” Zack rubbed his arm. “A skate park for tired farm kids.”

“Ya!”

They took turns exploring the shapes and connecting lines like a maze, hugging the ground and tilting around the circles to go as fast as they could. Sometimes they popped up out of a circle and raced across the rich green of the field, brushing shaggy caterpillar-like timothy tops then dropping into another circle. You might think they wished they had another drone, one for each of them, but they liked it like that.

“Look at how all the plants have bent over,” Mandy said, peering at the screen as she handed the phone back to Zack.

“Ya. I noticed that. Bent just so.”

“They’re broken.”

“Nein. Bent but not creased,” said Zack, keeping the drone in place and magnifying the image. “See how green the top side where they bent! Like the green of a baby plant.”

“Oh. Like a growth spurt made one side grow longer.”

“Ya. And that pushed it over.” Suddenly the view unzoomed and turned, showing Father’s Ford parked uphill on the roadside, and the image grew as the drone flew toward it. Zack groaned. “There goes the battery.” He opened his door and stepped out of the truck to make it easier for Mandy’s toy to come “home.”

While Mandy got the drone put away, Zack found video clips of other enigmatic field circles from around the world. “We should post the video from the drone!” said Mandy.

“Okay, but don’t say where you live.”

“Okay.”

Zack googled mountain goats, something Mandy searched on another google/snuggle night. That led him to footage of ibex in the Middle East climbing up sheer cliff walls, their sharp hooves and flexible soles allowing them to chisel their way up the rock walls with ease.

“Do you think Noah could do that?”

“Noo,” he said, stretching the “o” out the way they do up there. “But he has taken to climbing the fruit trees by my grossdaddi’s shop.”

“That serves your grandfather right.” Mandy leaned forward out of Zack’s arm to look him in the eye. “He’s the one who gave you that varmint.”

“Don’t call him that. Grossdaddi trained my goat so well. Noah is a good helper when I work in the woods. Carries my tools, my water and my food.”

“I wouldn’t trust him with my food if I were you.”

Zack shook his head. “He does whatever I tell him. The way Grossdaddi trained him, every time he gave him food as a reward, he held it in something of my clothing.”

“That’s why he loves you so much?”

Zack arched an eyebrow. “And why he loves you so much, too.”

“Oh. Oh yeah. Awe! It’s nice to be loved.” Mandy laughed. She slept well that night.

Day after day, Matt, Mark and Mandy crouched their way down the rows, filling burlap bags as fast as they could and racing each other across the field. Lying face-down, Father and Mother rode the old-fashioned “creeper” across the field, steering it by foot while it plodded along above the rows. They picked with a flurry of fingers, filling the sacks beside them.

Whenever they filled the truck with bags and father took a load to town, the boys used the picking machine and Mandy and her mother caught up the chores, feeding animals and tending the garden. Once when he came back, Mandy saw father stop his truck along the road, shaking his head and walking up and down the stretch of shriveled brown weeds in the ditch outside the fence that bordered the pickle field.

“What’s wrong, Father?” Mandy asked, seeing the look on his face is they fixed to rejoin the boys picking.

“First I’ve heard about it in Wisconsin. We’ve got some agricultural vandalism going on.”

“What?" said Mandy.

With that huge hat tied under her chin, Mother nodded knowingly. “People spray herbicide along the fence line of organic farms, some kind of a sick tagging joke, ya know.”

“I stopped them...” Father trailed off before he rephrased his words. “With our farm they only sprayed as far as a few fence posts, and then they stopped.” He scratched his chin. “Strange stuff, whatever it is. The stretch they treated, you can see pollen clumping up to the dead plants like they attract it.”

The Solems had a quarter, quarter section (forty acres) in organic cucumbers, and the family picked every last one of them. The afternoon they finished made everybody happy. The little organic pickling cucumbers fetched the first payday of the harvest season for the family. Mandy would get some money in the bank, had some in her pocket, and she cleaned the slate on what mother spent when Mandy came home. Father always told Mandy to be happy with her flip phone because it looked like a *Star Trek* communicator. Mother officially declared that hogwash, and she ponied up the money for it and a drone, a bundle offered at the phone store. Having Mandy home, made Mother so happy!

After they put the last sack of pickles into the truck, Mandy went the other way from the pickle field, cutting through the woods that border her family’s farm and Zack’s. Truth is most of the Burkholder’s farm stood tall. Zack’s grandfather had brokered deals to acquire a strip of four forties from four farmers, creating by the Department of Agriculture’s reckoning one of the ten worst farms in Wisconsin. A chain of five tall and treacherously rocky hills prevented the previous owners from harvesting the oak, maple and cherry, even the birch at the bottoms. But Zack’s grandfather wrestled, rolled and downslid enough wood from his forest to supply the buggy shop he built on his farm’s only meadow, the place Mandy expected to find Zack.

While Zack and his grandfather worked in the shop, off in the woods somewhere Zack’s father selectively harvested and planted the crop that his father, Levi Burkholder, discovered after he figured out how to travel their land. Out rummage cropping for berries one morning, he found the highest paying forage food in the Wisconsin hills. Wisconsin ginseng commands an international market and, like his father Levi did before him, Amos Burkholder traveled the woods with his goat harnesses wrapped around his hands to give him a boost when scaling up to where the other farmers only wished they could go.

In the distance Mandy had begun to hear a rapid, loud pounding sound coming from where she was going. The craggy trail that Maggie hiked dropped steeply into ferns, then climbed back to berries. The blueberry bushes had only pointy little green leaves on their branches anymore, but their big brothers the huckleberries gave up easy plucks. A seasoned picker, Mandy ate as many blackberries, without getting a scratch. All the while, the pounding grew louder.

When at last Mandy could see sunlight through the trees, the deer trail turned sharply to follow the meadow perimeter, level as the meadow but hidden from the meadow, before trailing on along its rugged way. Turning off on the short farm trail that led into the meadow, Mandy put her hand on a trunk of the same birch she put her hands on as a little girl, a pealing giant, split at the base and towering twain. She ducked under a branch that just lately got in her way.

There in the meadow stood the sawyer’s shop that no outsider ever saw, not even other Amish. Buggy customers did not pass beyond the shadows of the farmyard that faced the same township road as Mandy’s farm, a tiny territory won from the forest by axe, saw and a bridgework driveway of brace and beam. The farmhouse and outbuildings stood between and atop the unbreakable striped rocks peculiar to this location. Just beyond all that, a respectably unmechanized green painted work building stood on a choice rectangle of level ground, devoted to assembly and meeting with customers.

Grossdaddi came down to the house for meals and family times. Since his beloved spouse passed, he seemed to prefer sleeping with the heavy rotational vibration of the saw-shop’s wooden flywheel, shafts and gears. When Mandy’s grandfather, Perry Solem, sold forty acres of his farm to Zack’s grandfather, he had a keen interest in buggies. Together they rode behind a draft horse wearing blinders to the bank in Augusta, and talk came easily. Perry had a Jules Verne paperback in his back pocket, and it fell behind the seat. When Levi Burkholder found it, it pulled him in like a tractor beam. He got hooked.

Levi and Perry talked about sci-fi, mechanization and other curiosities with a relish that made them friends for life. To raise a barn the Amish call on the men of their community to bring many hands to make the work lighter. But, when Grossdaddi built his shop, he got Grandpa to help him with scaffolding, welder and crane. And thanks to science fiction, when the gray skinned man came to the shop asking Levi for help, Grossdaddi knew what to say.

Mandy stepped into the light of the meadow and looked to the towering building, its sails turning slowly in the afternoon breeze. On a windy day, the main shaft would animate the lumbering giant flywheel beneath the shop’s floor, spinning the stationery rubber wheel riding against its edge and, in reverse to the way a steam piston turns a railroad wheel, it would compel the long strip of saw blade to reciprocate rapidly for precise rips that turned seasoned logs into beams and boards.

When she looked at the windmill, Mandy thought nothing of any of that. She looked at Zack and his father outside the shop. Zack had a mallet in each hand, and he alternately swung them, driving two thick pegs into a heavy wooden framework. He hit the oversized shafts of wood hard, and his muscles rippled. When he sent the last peg home, Zack turned to his father. By his posture, Zack looked upset, and as she came closer Mandy could hear him raising his voice to his elder: “Grossdaddi has lost his mind. How will we ever get this big thing out through our woods?”

“Don’t you worry about that, Zachariah. Grossdaddi thinks different from other people, but he always knows what he’s doing.”

“But what he has me doing, it doesn’t make sense.”  Zack held up his two wooden mallets, one in each hand. “Why do I have to drive two pegs at once?”

“That be the question.” Zack’s father looked at Mandy walking up. “Here’s your friend.” He took the mallets from Zack and set them on the round center beam of the pod shaped framework.

Likely because the elder and the younger had such intensity in their voices, their goats did not notice Mandy until Amos looked at her. The tan, older goat casually bleated a greeting. Noah, white with black spots, made goat noises in rapid succession and repeatedly jumped straight up, high. He ran up to her, his tail a flutter, and Mandy rubbed his cheek until he hopped backwards to stand next to Zack again. Scanning their faces Mandy said “Hi” to Zack and his father with the same word.

“He’s all yours,” Zack’s father told her cheerfully. “Have fun, Zack.”

“Thank you Daed,” said Zack.

“Rumspringa carefully.”

“I will.” Zack took his hat off and bowed slightly. “Come Noah.” Noah ran out in front of them, and Zack grabbed his reigns as they dragged by through the grass.

“Are you okay?” Mandy asked, after they made their way back to the deer trail. The whole cuddling thing, they were the same age. She figured it as her own rumspringa. All the sadness that came and went this year, much of it for no identifiable reason, she took comfort in taking Zack’s hand for a moment.

“Grossdaddi has taught me so much about wood and tools, but I see no value in driving two pegs at the same time.” Zack stopped and tugged the reigns. “Here, let me put your pack on Noah’s back.”

“Good idea.” Mandy slid her pack off her shoulder. “Hi Noah,” she said crouching to pet him, working his floppy ears like milking a cow.

Zack looked at her inquiringly. “Are we going to the general store?”

“I got paid today. We can have whatever you want.”

It was tough going. They did not help each other up, working through to the other edge of the Burkholder’s woods. It was so much easier to take turns holding Noah’s leather tack for balance and some extra power. The trail rose and fell, at times steeply. Mandy wondered why the deer bothered putting a trail through such tough country. But as long as they had gone to all that trouble, by apples and sea-salt licks over the years, her family had paid the toll. Mandy watched Noah clatter up and down the smooth rocks with the lines that crossed them like pinstriping, and then she watched her own young strong legs, raising a foot up high to stand on a hold, stretching way down to reach the next rock.

After they slid down the road cut and jumped long across the ditch, Mandy activated the drone. She set it to follow Noah, recording all the extra jumps the goat worked in to make the walk fun for him, and they walked fast. People walk fast in the country.

They passed a boggy stretch of woods and a pasture with twenty sleepy black spotted holsteins, coming to a field of corn. It was hot. Walking quietly, they could hear the squeak of the corn growing in the hot sun. Farmers used to say knee high by the Fourth of July, but these tall stalks already had full ears, and the holiday came and went not much more than a week ago.

The phone in his hand, Zack jumped the ditch and stood at the fence, guiding the drone to fly down one of the long straight spaces between rows of corn. Mandy watched the phone with him, seeing the leaves slap aside as it flew all the way down to the end of the row. Then he rotated the drone one-hundred-eighty degrees, and they could see the spot on the screen, the red of Mandy’s blouse.

Zack handed Mandy the phone and, before she could start the drone back to them, he slapped the top of the fence post. “Noah, up!” he said, and his goat jumped up, teetering on top of the post with one foot out on the barbed wire for balance.

“That's amazing!” Mandy fumbled with her phone.

“Watch this. Noah. Run!” And Zack’s goat jumped from the post, running into the cornfield between the rows where the drone went. Mandy got a promising video by flying the drone toward the goat, Noah pumping his knees with all his heart, his happy bearded face coming close, and then she flew the drone up and barely over Noah’s head.

“Noah,” Zack yelled. “Come!” And Mandy’s phone recorded the goat rushing out from under the drone and hurrying ahead down the vertical green tunnel to get back to the fence line first. Zack tied Mandy’s pack on tight, but it flopped back and forth all the way there.

Mandy took Zack’s hand after they jumped across the ditch. Looking up, she saw Denise Anderson’s brother’s car speeding away in the other direction. What a relief she did not see Denise in the car, Denise, the cheerleader who makes such a point of friendliness and then mutters “Dirtball” as she walks away.

At the general store they bought too many snacks, but going into that store made Mandy feel good. The smells. The shadowy lighting. A huge room full of earliest memories. All the years and generations of farmers walking the floors of the mercantile exchange, looking in display cases, sorting through galvanized bins and asking questions about hook-pole access merchandise up above had laid a gentle depression into the wooden floors the way the deer shaped the floor of the forest.

They sat on the wide front steps and ate hot cheese curds with cold ice cream. Noah ate feed pellets. Then they walked home, more slowly now, along dandelion-like orange hawkweed flowers on spindly stiff stalks and fuzzy milkweeds with ripe pods. Mandy pulled at the flowered top of a tall grass plant and chewed the tender end that hid inside the sleeve of the next leaf. They stopped, leaning over the railing of a small bridge to look at the native brook trout flashing in the sunlight. Here and there, bugs skated across the clear water.

“Do you know what makes somebody attractive?” Mandy asked, looking down at their reflections – Mandy, tan from working outdoors, hair sun-bleached, Zack with dark hair, the shadow of a beard that he must keep shaven until marriage, and the light skin of a man who works indoors. “At the halfway house they told me what makes somebody look attractive.”

“Being blond?” he asked, looking at her reflection.

“That’s what makes me smart,” she said, pushing his shoulder.

“Oh. Is that what makes you smarter, being blond?” He held out a handful of his dark hair from under his hat, both of them looking at it in the reflection. “Now I know why I have so much trouble with my three r’s.” (Amish believe studies should stay confined to the three r’s: reading, writing and ’rithmetic.)

“It’s being average, like average size ears, nose and mouth.”

“Average?”

“Average.” Mandy made a “u” shape with her thumb and finger, pointing at her eyes. “Eyes look attractive when from middle to middle is half as wide as your face. She turned the point of her fingers ninety degrees. “People think someone looks good when from the eyes to the mouth is one third of the face.” Mandy shrugged. “Because if everything looks average to us, nothing looks bad.”

“That’s it?"

“Nothing too big. Nothing too little.” Mandy saw Zack checking himself out in the reflection, wondering. “That’s what they say. Whatever. You look good.”

“Not good like you. You’re too pretty.”

“Well.” She turned to look directly at him. “You’re too handsome.”

“So we’re both too average?” Zack took Mandy’s hand and led them on down county road X. When next he spoke, his voice had a sad sound. “When black hair started growing out of my face, the black dog came out with it.” He frowned. “I keep thinking is this all there is to life? Building buggies for some rich farmer from Ohio?”

“Last week I wondered something like that about picking pickles. Am I going to spend the rest of my life supplying city-folk with condiments?”

“Right. That’s what I mean. And for what? Death makes life so hard. Your grandparents passed when we were little kids, and I still feel bad about that.”

“Me too.” Mandy nodded. “Grossmamma was just last summer. I miss her more.”

“Ya,” said Zack softly. “Grossdaddi casts his eyes down, even when work is done.” Involuntarily he sobbed the last few words. “He lives for the hereafter,” Zack managed to say. He turned his head.

“The hereafter?” Mandy rubbed the tears out of her eyes. She reached down and ruffled Noah’s ears. “I’ve already done so much bad stuff in my life. Someday I’ll be in line at the pearly gates waiting to talk my way in, and I’ll look at the lady behind me: ‘It looks like you only have a couple of items. You can go ahead of me.’”

Zack looked at her questioningly.

“Like at the grocery store. Somebody has a lot of groceries to buy and they tell you go ahead because you just have an orange Nehi.”

He laughed then he looked at her. “Sorry you feel bad sometimes too.” They walked a while. “Say Mandy. You always talk about science fiction. Do you think it’s better than fantasy?”

“It depends on what mood I’m in.” She frowned. “Last time I went to town I thought I bought a good fantasy book, but I got cheated.”

Zack looked concerned. “How so?”

“I showed it to my father, and he said there was nothing there. It was just a fantasy.”

Zack stopped and stared at her. Then he shook his head. “Okay then. I’ll be careful for that one.”

“Good.”

“Don’t buy fantasy books that are only a fantasy.” He reached down to pet the goat walking at his side, and then he stepped apart.

“That’s what I’m telling you.” She jabbed him in the ribs. “You dirtball.”

“Ya. That be me. Dirtball like thee.”

“But seriously. A lot of the original *Star Trek* was fantasy. They never explained how beaming people up worked. They just did it.”

“True.”

“And the starship ran on dilithium crystals. What is that? Dilithium is a gas.”

“That’s not scientific.” Zack had seen episodes of the old sci-fi show on Mandy’s phone, and he read a few off pulp paper, paper that came from Wisconsin.

“And *Star Wars*, nobody ever said much about what those ships ran on.

“Ya.” Zack looked excited. “That agrees with what your father and my daed say about James Bond stories.” He had read Ian Fleming, and he shared their opinion.

“I know, I know. James Bond movies are science fiction, and the science makes sense.”

“Ya.”

She held a finger up in front of his face. “But, in the end, you don’t care about the science if the story is fun. And *Star Wars* is fun.”

“Jetpacks and cars that go underwater are fun.”

“They are.”

“Grossdaddi says science fiction gets people into a way of thinking that leads to better technology.”

“Yeah. Like Elon Musk must have read some science fiction.”

Zack nodded his agreement. “Or Mr. Musk read James Bond.” Mandy had told him about the electric car manufacturer who wanted to build cities on Mars. “And Cyrus Chalmer at Macro Growth must have read sci-fi too, what with all his seed science.”

The night of her first saucer sighting, Mandy went to bed at nine-thirty like her mother said to, but how could she sleep? It was still light out. In a bush somewhere a whippoorwill said its name over and over, loud, jarring, whistly and totally inappropriate for bedtime. Finally, the flightless bird stopped its change-less song, but that failed to cheer Mandy up.

After supper she logged on to a drone club event. Mandy knew some of the other players from posts and messages when she visited the drone club social media, always using a boy’s name and a cartoon for her picture. The drones all came on-line at the same time and got points for staying in formation between turns. Mandy nailed the accuracy points, electronically connecting two GPS coordinates, and placed second. That would improve her ranking in the club. Like Facebook, she knew everybody looked at her numbers when they messaged.

Mandy learned in Kansas City that depression gripped a lot of teenage girls, even more than boys. They said girls do social media, and boys play video games. With the drone club, Mandy was doing both. Mostly she kept her time with her phone down to what she agreed to with her parents. But she left operating her drone with her phone out of her tally, maybe some of the on-line drone time, too. It had started to feel vaguely yuck. At last the dusk turned to dark, and Mandy finally thought she would escape it all.

The family worked so hard lately. Picking apples and canning kept Mother busy all day. Father had beans to harvest, and where did that leave Mandy? Bringing in the hay with her brothers. More than half her life now, Mandy spent so much of her summers holding the wheel of a big antique of a hot truck, back and forth across the field all day long. And now they had more fields!

The whippoorwill went back to its repetitious song from a noticeably different location, new bush, old song. Eventually it stopped. And then it got light out again. WT... Mandy went to her window and looked out with dismay. Ordinarily people consider it exciting, even magical, to look out the window and see the northern lights, and they would have considered all the darn fireflies beautiful, too. But Mandy was in a mood, and she wanted to get some sleep.

Instead of going back to bed, she put on jeans and a Packer shirt, slipped into her shoes and climbed out her window onto the roof. Mandy had her pack hanging off her shoulder, unfolding her drone as she went. She might as well get some pictures. Turning her phone sideways, she piloted down the roof and off the edge. The kitchen looked dark. All around the house she saw fireflies on the grass and bushes. Through a gap in the drapes, around the front of the house, Mandy could see Father, Mother and Matt watching television.

Mandy signaled the drone back to hover facing out in front of her, the phone showing the rippling curtain of colors behind it. The whippoorwill played its one-hit-wonder again. “You and the rooster,” she muttered. “Like the front and back cover to *Mother Night*.” Staring at the view on her tiny screen, at first Mandy did not see the flying saucer coming toward her with the northern lights as a backdrop. From a distance it blended. Up close, motionless, rim touching the drip edge of the roof, it looked silver, glowing with pulsing vibrancy.

On top something moved. The light around the saucer diminished, and a hatch swung open. Instead of an alien, Zack poked his head out. “Mandy. You have to come with me for a ride. Like in the books!”

Most people would need a conversation between the invitation and getting into a saucer, a long one, too. But she had read so much sci-fi, she took it in stride. Mandy landed the drone beside herself, putting it and her phone into her pack. She rubbed her eyes. “Where did you get that?”

“I made it.” Then he looked conflicted. “Grossdaddi helped.” Zack ducked down and said something. The saucer floated up the roof, stopping at Mandy's feet. He held out his hand. “Come on.”

Mandy picked up her backpack. Putting a hand under her chin, she looked toward her window, then back. “I can’t stay out late.”

“I know.” He beckoned to her. “Come on. It’s so much fun!”

Mandy peeked into the hatch. It was big in there. “What’s going on with Noah,” she asked, coming down the ladder. Zack’s goat wore a leather harness, strapped around his chest and his waist, a heavier version of the one he wore in the woods. Straps from the harness buckled up to the ceiling and to the beam-work at opposite crooks of the saucer, the round keel, a laminate outer-ring, pieced and pegged at the joints, where hand-shaped ribs radiated up and down, solidifying the crafts squashed spherical shape. The little goat stood behind the bench on an array of wooden peddles that connected by dull metal linkages to all the wood bounded octants of the ship’s metallic inner skin. Noah’s eyes sparkled with pleasure.

“I’ll show you.” Zack closed the hatch and spun the wheel. “Up, up, up, Noah!”

The goat jumped nimbly from pedal to pedal, and rods and levers moved about the cabin. Out through the round windows, Mandy saw the farmyard drop out of sight, and the saucer ascended into the northern lights. Mandy felt no sensation of movement.

“Uff da,” Mandy said, stepping off the ladder, a hand to her mouth. Zack stepped around her on the catwalk. “We better sit down.” He went to the bench seat and fastened himself in with a belt. Mandy followed and sat next to him. “Click it or ticket,” she said, buckling her seatbelt and leaning back.

“Where do you want to go?” he asked.

Looking to her left, Mandy could see Lake Superior, shrouded in aurora. In front Lake Michigan spread wide. Mandy could even see across it from up here. The Moon shined on the water invitingly. Mandy pointed.

Zack pointed in the same direction. “Yon, Noah,” he said.

Mandy heard a clatter of hooves, and they moved silently forward. The towns speckled the twilit terrain as they drifted across Wisconsin, across Green Bay. The lake glistened below them. Before long they passed over Huron. To the right Mandy saw historic Lake Erie, and she pointed that way.

Zack stretched his arm out next to hers and pointed. “Yon!” But by the noise back there, Noah had already started the turn.

Mandy thought about all the lights from the towns around the once fatally polluted lake. “This reminds me of what my history teacher taught us.”

“What’s that?”

“You can remember the Great Lakes by remembering they have homes around them.” She ticked the names off on her fingers. “Huron, Ontario, Michigan, Erie and Superior. The first letters spell homes!”

“We just study the three r’s. That makes history a rumspringa thing. But okay.”

“Take a walk on the wild side.” Mandy giggled.

Zack laughed. She had played him the song one night, singing “Hey boy. Take a walk on the rumspringa.”

Mandy pointed east across the geographically horizontal body of water. “Out there, to the left, we will find the Niagara River.”

Making a pony tail with a hair tie, Mandy thought about her kooky history teacher from Milwaukee. Miss Danowski would be proud that Mandy learned so well. Such a nice teacher, she played music for the kids and talked about science fiction, wearing long skirts and Birkenstocks, talked like she was from “She-cah-go.” Mandy liked this lady, approaching retirement with the spirit of a kid. Mandy thought Miss Danowski was cool, even though Mandy would never dress like her. Well, the educator did wear jeans now and then, and she had some nice tops. When they passed in the hall, they stopped and discussed science fiction. It got to where Mandy liked talking to her about everything, like friends do. Mandy opened up about her legal troubles after Miss Danowski told her about the failed relationship that prompted her to move across the state, about the teacher’s lounge gossip about that. Mandy felt like they helped each other.

“Down Noah,” said Zack, and, with the music of Noah’s percussion performance and all those happy non-ba-a-ah sounds he made, they dropped to a high drone level. Mandy saw rooves and water tanks with umbrella shaped tops. Trees grew up along with the buildings, showing more leaves than roofing. Here and there, Mandy glimpsed through to green yards. “That’s Buffalo, New York,” she told Zack. “They get a lot of snow, too.”

“Okay. That’s a city. Tell me next time, so I can go around.”

“Okay.”

They continued up the river, past small towns and big farms. The river widened. Then the river split, spreading wide the tremendous volume of excess from the largest concentration of fresh water in the world, the Great Lakes, flowing on to Lake Ontario and eventually to the sea.

“Stay to the right,” she told him excitedly. “And get low.”

They sped along, almost touching the water, like the drone skimming across the timothy field, but this was them going so much farther and faster. “How is this?” he asked.

“Perfect. Wait for it,” said Mandy. “Wait for it.” And they flew out across the thundering American Falls.

“Gott in Himmel,” Zack said, putting his hat over his heart. “Danka.” He looked at Mandy. “You u-scared me,” he said, making fun of the way Mandy expressed her fears to him when they were little.

“Shut up. Hey, turn us around and come back.”

Zack gave the command and with a quick spin and an unfelt thrust, they looked into the giant wall of water “Let’s sit here for a while,” he said. He leaned into Mandy on the bench, and she leaned back. Mandy had chips and jerky left over from the trip to the general store. While they snacked, they listened to the falls, like rain on the metal roof of the saucer.

“Isn’t this romantic!” Mandy said.

“Is that what it is?”

“I think so.” Mandy sighed. “So your grandfather helped you make this just so you could ride around?”

“No. Every time I go up, I have to do one work for him.”

“What kind of work?”

“I don’t know yet.” Zack looked back over his shoulder. “But Noah does. Noah, get to work!”

They went up fast, and still Mandy felt no sensation of movement. They angled west away from the river, by south, crossing Lake Erie into what Mandy guessed as Pennsylvania, crossing towns and farmlands, crossing mountains.

“What’s going on?” Mandy asked nervously as they suddenly dropped. She looked around. “Is this thing safe?”

“It’s fine,” Zack said with confidence in his voice, but Mandy heard some nervousness there, too.

They plummeted from the sky, and the four bottom octants began to glow. Through the portals Mandy saw trees whizzing by, and she felt it when they hit the ground, did not feel it when the saucer spun. It bounced and spun again.

“Be of good cheer, Mandy.” Zack held her hand. “Grossdaddi told me that Noah pilots for us because goats concentrate better than humans, and they hear the voice of heaven better.”

“But what is he doing, now?”

“Ya. What is he doing?”

Still spinning, the saucer bounced again and again. Then rising it abruptly stopped spinning – no recoil. Below they saw a geometrical pattern bent into a rapeseed field. Somewhere on the edge of the field a farmer waved a pitchfork at them, running their way.

“Take Mandy home, Noah!” After a considerable geographic blur, Mandy saw the roof over her kitchen and her bedroom window with some curtains blowing out of it. “Uff da!” Mandy sat there before she undid her belt. She climbed the ladder slowly, shaking her head all the way up. “Uff da,” she said again as she walked up her roof, pausing at the window to wave good-bye. Mandy felt good.

The boys got to helping Father, and that left Mandy and Mother with more barnyard chores. Except for squirting a little to the kittens, rearing up to catch it in their mouths, licking the misses off each other, except for that, Mandy barely endured milking the cows. Her hands felt so weak when she stopped, even after doing it for so many days. She and mother brought in the garden. It got to where in her sleep Mandy saw beans hanging and Ball jars boiling.

They picked all but the hearty things that could endure the coming frost out there with the scarecrow. More than once Mandy asked Mother to stop talking, and she took it okay. Mandy knew Temple Grandin had revolutionized the treatment of farm animals, “Animals make us human” and all that, but she had heard it so many times. When she had so much work to do, and you put on top of that a heavy load of praise for the organic life, Mandy felt like she would fall right over if she tried to chew a stick of gum.

Today, Mandy had an easier time of it, walking the fence with wire, pliers, nails, hammer and Mark. They did some good. Fixed a big hole up toward the sandpit. Mark was on about Tolkein: *Hobit*, *Rings*, *Salmarilian* and even *Rover Random*. Mandy listened and learned.

Across the giant sand gorge eroded into the hill, Mandy saw a buggy parked outside the farmhouse, parked next to Mother’s Suburu wagon. As they walked closer, Mandy knew the buggy as Zack’s grossdaddi’s because of the features he included into his personal package. For example, although they work well, none of his usual customers would ever order a buggy with retractable running boards, nor the mechanical turn signal, brightly colored light blue. Inside, the buggy had cupholders.

“Maybe Zack’s here,” said Mandy.

“Cool! I like old Zachariah.” Mark lifted his wide-brimmed black headwear with two hands. “This hat he gave me is the best I’ve ever had.”

Mandy smiled at him. “It makes you look cool.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Not kidding. It does. C’mon.” They ran the last of the way to the door, clattering the steps.

“Wash your hands,” said Mother from the stove.

“Okay.” Mandy got to the sink before Mark. “Hello, everybody,” she said, settling into an open seat.

“Hello Pumpkin.” Mother kissed the top of her head. “Brother Burkholder, would you say grace?” She put her hands together and bent her head.

“I would be delighted,” he said with that mellow tone of his. Clearly enunciating, keeping to a reasonable length, he prayed with German words that everybody assuredly imagined had the right spirit for blessing a meal.

While everybody passed the food around, chicken, corn on the cob, potatoes, salad, bread, butter, jam, honey, beans, beets, cauliflower, wild asparagus and all the other stuff, Father talked about farming with his neighbor and then about Phillip Jose Farmer. Mother talked to Matt about the swiss chard, kale and chives left in the garden and *Downsizing*. Mandy looked over at the picture of Heinlein and his cat with the 4H ribbons on the wall around it, Mandy’s for her chickens and the boys’ for their goat, and she thought about Zack.

“I guess he’s not here,” said Mark from across the table. He had hung his hat on the back of his chair. “Wait. Tell Zack I said ‘Hi.’ I just heard his grandpa say you’re going over to help them.”

While they drove out on the sandy ruts of the drive, Mandy made polite conversation with her neighbor about cucumbers and zucchinis. After the horse pulled them out onto the township road, he glanced her way, tugging the reins to set an easy pace. His white shirt, his trousers, looked neat and clean. His untrimmed beard he had combed out. Looking at him, Mandy remembered the time some cross country travelers made camp in his woods off County X. He went right over and talked to them, said he liked to know the people in his neighborhood. By the time those young explorers hit the road, they had helped each other and become friends.

“Did you like riding the saucer?”

Mandy put a hand to the side of her face. She did not expect that question. “Yes. I liked it very much.”

“Zachariah did not tell you, but he needs you to help him fly it.”

“Really? He’s got Noah. All he needs to do is point.”

“There are times that it takes two people.” He looked at her pleadingly. “There is important work to do. You can fly around to explore, but those circle’s renew God’s purpose for that farmland, and it inspires the farmlands around it to live in kind.” He smiled serenely. “You are the agents of God’s mercy.”

Mandy had a deep respect for Levi Burkholder. Growing up within two families tightly knit into one, Mandy had two grandfathers. Now he was her only one, her grossdaddi. However, his words sounded like some of Mother’s Dolly Parton twanged Oprah spirituality, spoken in an Amish dialect. “Is that a teaching of your church?” she asked.

“Well…” He reached under his hat to scratch his head. “I learned that another place than the bible.”

Mandy tried to talk tactfully. “You can’t drive a car, but flying saucers are okay?”

“Forbidding us to own a car keeps us from the big metropoleis, with all the fast food, fast women and fast clocks.” He gestured off cityward somewhere. “So I never fly into them.”

Mandy scratched her chin, thinking about all the crop circles she looked at on her phone with Zack. Passing the far edge of the pickle field, yellow plants holding the dirt until next spring, the road began to go up steeply. Levi flicked his reigns. Ahead she could see the Burkholder’s mailbox, unpainted metal, set to the height the government asked for. “Hmm,” she mused. “Come to think of it, I’ve never seen pictures of the circles in city parks.”

“But wouldn’t it be gut to spin some down upon Central Park one fine morning?”

Mandy laughed. “That it would.”

“You are a good-hearted person, Mandy.” The kindly old man patted her arm, then a look came over his face. “Okay, I have to confess, I am a jack-Amish. My church has strict rules, and I do not keep them all.”

Mandy nodded knowingly. “Reading science fiction and fantasy.”

“Ya. You know about that one. The other thing, I google.” With the reigns loose in the crooks of his thumbs, he held his hands up, palms open. “If I think of something I wish to know, I enjoin someone to look it up for me.” He frowned. “Reading, writing and ’rithmatic, the three r’s,” he said sadly. “There is so much more that be gut to know, don’t you know, so you can make wise plans.” He chuckled. “Like spelling, for one. ’Rithmatic starts with an “a” for heaven’s sake.”

“And thers’s a silent “w” on writing.”

“Oh. There is?” His eyes widened in amazement. “I’ll have to get somebody to google that for me. No. Just joshing you.”

Mandy wiped her eyes. “Oh, Grossdaddi! You say some funny things.”

“And you have reared yourself a fine wit.”

His horse turned into the shade of his drive, and the gravelly crunch of hooves changed to defined clunks on wood. The buggy drove on the bridgework past the house and other farmyard buildings that stood between and atop the unbreakable rocks of his land. As they rolled by the red trimmed assembly shop, to the uneducated eye the wooden trussed driveway ended, but trotting into the drifts of leaves you could still hear hooves on wood. Levi snapped his reigns to encourage his horse onward.

Ahead, green leaves fluttering in the breeze, two poplar trees stood side by side like a roadblock on the narrow road to the meadow. As they approached (Mandy always liked this part) the trees pivoted over to the side on the hidden hinge, a heavy carpentry-work hewn from water resistant cedar. Going by, Mandy looked down at the exposed irrigation lines that fed the bonzaied and barreled roots.

“I believe in living simply,” he explained. “This life keeps me healthy and happy. But the important reason I stay in the church, the Amish be my spiritual family, something important to have.”

Mandy looked out the window thinking. “I guess it makes me happy, going to church on Sunday. And it makes me feel good when Father reads from the bible.”

“Just so.” He nodded. “Even your father had to decide some church matters for himself.”

“Like what?”

“Like what one of his ministers said about goats having the devil in them.” He looked exasperated. “Goats be the most sure-footed animal a farmer can have and smart like horses and dogs. Their coats make good yarn.” He paused before he made his final pronouncement. “Goats be gut!”

Mandy thought about how gently her father attended to the goats on her farm. “Father loves animals.”

“Ya. Your mother, with her ‘Animals make us human.’ Your father adds to that: ‘Be super-human with animals, and you make them human, too.’”

Mandy tuned that last part out, she heard it so many times before firsthand. “Do you think my father would mind me riding the saucer?”

“He knows you do it.”

“Really?”

The horse led their buggy into the sunlight of the meadow, and Mandy saw Zack and Noah standing between the shop and the saucer. As Mandy looked, Noah’s eyes locked onto hers and he jumped to Zack’s height.

“I trained him to Zack’s scent, but he likes you just as much.”

“Uh.” Mandy looked off to the side. “I pet him a lot.”

Levi drove his buggy in a bit of a circle, pulling up alongside his grandson with Mandy’s door facing that way. “Stop now,” he called to the horse sweetly, putting just enough tension into his reigns to make his words easy to follow.

Stepping down off the running board, Mandy turned to close the door. “Thank you.”

“I go back to the farm and take the tack off my horse.” He smiled at her. “Fly carefully. No more UFO sightings at Niagara Falls.”

“I promise.” She waved.

Zack locked the hatch and buckled Noah in, giving his little white beard a tug.”

“Ba-a-ah,” Noah said affectionately.

“Up, up, up!” Zack replied, making his way to the helm. “Where do you want to go,” he asked, buckling in next to Mandy.

“Well…” Mandy adjusted her seat belt. “One time my history teacher told us about a man who looked down on Rome, and…”

“Rome? I read about that in the bible.” He raised his arm to point. “Which way?”

“Wait. Wait.” Mandy put a hand on Zack’s chest. “That man looked down on Rome and thought about all the people there. And he thought about all the people in other cities, in all the world. And it made him feel small and meaningless.”

“That’s sad.” Zack nodded gravely. “Maybe that’s why my people say not to go into the cities.”

“Maybe partly.” Mandy moved her hand to Zack’s arm. “My teacher’s point was, way back then he felt overwhelmed by thinking about that.” She held her hands up. “Only one-hundred-million people lived on Earth then. Now there’s seven billion.”

“Oh, so many!” Zack shook his head. “Maybe I don’t want history for rumspringa anymore.”

“It’s okay. My teacher said that like snowflakes, no two people are the same.”

“Snowflakes are different?”

“I can show you pictures. They are. Anyway, she said that if not for all the people before me, my unique set of gifts and interests would never have come to earth.” Mandy patted Zack’s arm. “If there weren’t seven billion people, you and me would have never happened.” She reached out and tapped one of the wooden levers that stuck out of the dashboard. “So, thinking of that, can we go up into space and look down?”

Zack pushed his hat back and smiled. “Ya. But only for about ten minutes.”

“Okay.” Mandy reached up and pointed. “Yon, yon, yon, Noah.”

And in a Kansas City second they were there.

“Noah does what you say.”

“Ba-a-ah,” said Noah from behind them.

Mandy inhaled and let it out slowly, looking at the great lakes beneath scattered white fluffs. To the west browns and greys showed through. Mandy took another deep breath and exhaled. “The last part of what my teacher said, she was right.”

“Ya. What’s that?”

“That man in Rome. Or us today. You can always go up high somewhere and think about how many people there are. “

“So we feel bad.” Zack wrinkled his forehead.

“No. Think about all the people, then think about how you’re the only one like you. Then…anything’s possible.” She took another deep breath.

“Ya.” Now Zack took a lungful, and he looked down at the marbled planet we call home. “That is gut.” He laughed. “I think I might be more different than most.”

“I’ll say.”

In the Solem/Burkholder neck of the woods, dinner refers to what other people call lunch. Mandy still had supper to attend. Tomorrow, school would start back up. Why push it with a ten-minute supply of oxygen that will not get mechanically replenished until they reenter the atmosphere? Mandy pointed toward the floor. “Down, down, down!” she said. And the reassuring sound of Noah dancing on the peddles filled the saucer.

They still had a work to do. Mandy took it for somewhere in England. The saucer spun some spots, and it tipped up on one side, spinning eccentrically. Speeding away they viewed a pattern of circles and crescents.

Mandy made good jokes and sci-fi references at breakfast. She felt good. Mandy watched the school bus coming up from behind the hill at the Burkholder’s driveway, like a second sunrise. Mandy thought she might have some fun in school this year.

“Welcome back,” said the bus-driver. Turned out he said it to everybody, but it sounded nice, like he meant it. A few kids said “Hi” to her as she walked down the aisle to sit in the middle somewhere, this time next to a girl she knew a little from 4H.

They talked about chickens, but then Mandy let the conversation drop. She looked out the window and thought about how good it made her feel to go into space. Funny, there were stories about saucer sightings in town back in the nineties that Mandy never took seriously, until now. The bus stopped in front of Denise Anderson hobby farm and she got on the bus, walking the aisle like the red carpet. She paused to look at Mandy, putting a finger to her lip. Whatever.

Mandy watched the mailboxes going by, some of them steel posted high-end, others embellished to look like semi-trucks, barns or fish. She thought about how no two mailboxes were the same. She looked at the fields they passed, mostly gleaned clean. Some farms still had hay-bails in the field. Others had giant round bails. An Amish farm they passed had shocks of hay, cut at the base and stood up into livestock food teepees, the only kind of shocks an Amish will ever get.

“That reminds me,” said Denise Anderson from the back of the bus. She spoke up loudly enough that Mandy knew who was talking. “My brother saw Mandy Solem holding hands with an Amish boy.” The students in front turned around to look at Mandy and quickly looked back.

Maybe rumors travel faster in big city high schools, but word got around soon enough. By lunchtime Mandy noticed pointing and whispering going on in the hall. She met her new lab partner for biology, and the girl silently looked away. That was Heather Sorenson, Denise’s best friend. At the end of the day, Mandy saw Miss Danowski coming at the other end of the hall. Mandy went out the side door.

All the way home Mandy pretended to read her algebra book, doing her best to hold it together. Could she ever live this down? How could Denise be so mean? Whose business was it if she saw Zack? The bus turned down her road, and Mandy remembered that her family had only chores on the list today. It would work out if she got home late. By the time she passed the Burkholder’s driveway, she had made up her mind. When Mandy stepped off the bus at her drive, she waited a moment, watching the bus shrink into its dust.

Then she went the other direction to see Zack. He was her friend! Maybe they could take a flight. That would help her sort out her thoughts. The afternoon sun felt warm on her back. Mandy thought about what she almost did, walked up to the front of the bus and asked the driver to let her off at the first driveway, right there on the Burkholder hill. Not unusual, getting off at another farm to help with chores or just to visit. It happened.

Why should she care about what people think, that everybody on the bus knew it was an Amish farm? Who cares what Denise’s brother saw? Mandy saw him doing a lot more than that with Denise’s best friend Heather in the bleachers – a football player with a cheerleader, big surprise there. The Mandy Solem handholding scandal had a lot less to do with the act than with who had the other hand.

What if Zack was a dirt ball? If his parents ran the tractor dealership in town like Denice’s did, he could have a farm with nothing but horses, getting it done with hay and firewood from Mandy’s father. Robert Sanchez, the nice kid who lives near the Anderson stables, could clean Zack’s barn instead.

As she rounded the corner at the next drive, Mandy tapped the Burkholder’s rusting mailbox. Uncomplicated, this private postal box did the job. Mandy thought about Zack, happy with the basics and a caring friend. He looked at usual things from an unusual perspective, got her to think that way, too. “If Zack’s a dirtball,” Mandy said to herself. “Then I’m a dirtball.”

She walked past the farmhouse quickly, hoping to get out to the sawyering-shop without stopping to talk to his mother. Mandy walked through the woods, already thinking of something funny to say to Zack. Nobody was in the meadow. Mandy knocked on the door to the shop, but no voice called back. Nobody came to open it. Mandy heard a scratching at the door and a familiar “Ba-a-ah.”

“Noah!” Mandy opened the door and he skipped out, happily scurrying around. “Where’d everybody go, Noah?”

Noah walked around the side of the shop behind the wind wheel, and Mandy followed him. There behind the shop stood Zack’s saucer with a ladder leaning against it. “Zack!” she called. Still calling, Mandy climbed the ladder and stepped onto the saucer, looking toward the open hatch. Mandy got the faintest whimsical notion about taking a joy ride. It did not occur to her that a goat could climb a ladder. But when Noah ran by her and jumped through the hatch, it was on.

Mandy only said “Up” once, thinking to fly low, look down on her world.  They flew out across the woods, angling toward the stop sign where the township road met with County X. Coming from the direction of the general store, Mandy saw a car that she recognized. Mrs. Danowski drove an old Ford Bronco, black, like that one. When it went by, Mandy saw the bumper sticker about thanking a teacher. What was she doing out here?

“Follow that car,” Mandy said, pointing down at the old 4x4.

Noah answered with a bah and a clatter, and the saucer turned on County X, tilting downward. “Whoa!” Mandy pushed herself back into her seat and fastened her belt. She glanced back at Noah, and he looked so excited, happy to go with her on this joyride. “Go straight! And go down.”  Mandy was glad she had her belt on when the saucer tipped down farther. The car turned into a driveway, and Mandy thought she would take a closer unnoticed look at what her teacher was doing. She pointed. “Turn and go down.” The saucer tipped more steeply and went faster.

Mandy heard it, an unusual sound to Noah’s steps. As she turned around to look at him, he slid sideways, despite his frantic foot movements, and Mandy saw her worst nightmare. The saucer went upside down, and Noah landed loudly against the portal handle. It took him a while to stand up. He said “Ba-a-ah,” like she had never heard him say it.

Mandy locked her legs under the bench and undid her belt. She held tight hanging off the wooden latticework, moving hand over hand. At least chopping wood and toting feedbags had given her strong arms. Finally, Mandy pulled herself up onto the underside of the catwalk, and she looked down through one of the portals. They had come to a stop above the driveway, behind the Bronco. “Here goes nothing,” Mandy muttered, hanging off the edge of the catwalk and letting herself drop.

Noah came to her immediately rubbing his cheek against her side. Mandy petted him down his back a few times. “Sorry, buddy. Maybe this is stressing you out.”

“Ba-a-ah,” he agreed.

“Okay. Let’s see what we can do.” Mandy crouched down to turn the wheel that locked the portal, and after a few spins it fell open, almost pulling Mandy through. “Yikes!” Mandy leaned over to look down, and then she muttered the word under her breath. People in the movies jump that far, and maybe she could if she really had to, but it was a long way. Mandy stood up and paced around. Mandy looked at the block of glowing metal at the center of the saucer that connected to the linkages, wondering which peddle she could push by hand to make the saucer turn over or go down to the ground, She tried her phone. When her call went through, she heard Matt’s voice. He could not hear Mandy.

Mandy crouched in front of the hatch again, cupping her hands around her mouth. “Miss Danowski! Miss Danowski!” She called as loudly as she could. The wind shifted and Mandy heard music from the little house below them, “Burkenstock rock,” no doubt. (The Beatles, Donovan and the like, her teacher’s favorite music genre.)

Mandy flew her drone carefully, mindful to keep it line of sight to her phone. After she rammed the front door a few times, she got to use the speaker feature for her first time: “Miss Danowski, it’s Mandy Solem. I’m above you in a piece of farm equipment that broke down. Could I trouble you to ask my father for help?” After Mandy gave her the directions, her teacher hurried off in her Bronco. Mandy was glad her teacher came from the city and did not know much about farm equipment.

Finally, Miss Danowski’s Bronco came back down the drive followed by the big truck that her family used to haul firewood and gather hay. The doors opened. Stepping out, Mandy’s father looked up at her with a hand flat above his eyes. Then he climbed onto the back of the tuck and Matt helped him set up his tallest step ladder, sliding the bottoms of the legs around on the truck to get it under the hatch.

With a roll of rope over his shoulder, Father climbed up. Below him, Matt stood next to the ladder, holding it tight. Mandy started to reach a leg through the hatch to climb down, but Father gestured with a finger. “Stay there, Mandy.” He climbed up another step and the top of his head entered the saucer. “Hi, Noah,” he said, stroking Zack’s pet when he came near. “Look at you. The tip broke off your horn.”

“It did?” Mandy had not noticed.

Father tied up around the hatch hinge and let the rope drop to hang alongside the ladder. He looked at Mandy for a moment before he started his downward climb. “Give us a minute,” he said over his shoulder. When he got off the bottom step, Matt folded the center braces, and the two of them laid the ladder down flat on the truck. Then they pulled the saucer down to the truck bed with the rope and tied it there. Mandy heard Father talk with Miss Danowski about what the round floating farm equipment did. Then he got into the truck with Matt and started the motor. Noah leaned against Mandy, trembling.

Legally, the saucer exceeded wide load limits, but the widest part sat high enough to clear all the fence posts between there and home. At the farmyard, Father and Matt untied the load and pulled it off the truck to hover over grass. “Okay. Jump down now Mandy,” Father called up to her. “Not you, Noah. Stay.”

Noah watched anxiously while Mandy jumped to the ground. When she stood up, everybody was there — Mother, Father, Matt, Mark, Zack’s parents and his grandfather. Mandy found it hard to look at any of them, especially Zack. When she saw Zack holding Noah’s saucer harnesses, her heart fell. What was she thinking?

Father shook his head at her and then he tied the saucer down. Matt slid the folded ladder up into the saucer, leaning it against the catwalk up inside it. Then Mother climbed up.

Father took the harness set from Zack and made a general announcement. “This will take some focus to get it right. Zack, Mark will help you get Noah harnessed, and Amos and Matt and I will each fasten a strap.”

Mark went to the ladder. “We can do it,” he said cheerfully.

“It’s going to get tricky,” Father cautioned. “We can drag this thing all over the south forty, but, the way the saucer redirects gravity, we can’t turn it over manually. Noah has to do it. And you’ll have to hold him upside down to get him harnessed.” He looked at Zack again. “Will he let you do that?”

Zack took his hat off. “I think he will.” Grossddadi standing near him nodded.

“Okay. Let’s do it.” Father started toward the ladder, but his wife came down it and stood in front of him.

“Before you go in there, I have something to say.”

“Okay.”

Mother turned to face Mandy. “I know you already feel bad. But you have shown total disrespect for a privilege even Tom Swift never had. And what about poor Noah?”

“Ba-a-ah.” He looked down at them from the hatch, considering the ladder.

“No, stay Noah. Mandy, look at him staring at you.”

Mandy looked, and then she hung her head.

“You see that. He loves you. Can you see that?”

Mandy rubbed her eyes. “Yes.”

“And he trusts you. Just like I want to trust you.” She shook her head slowly. “Young lady you give me no choice, ya know. No more flying for you. You’re grounded! Go to your room.”

“Sorry Noah. Sorry Zack.” Mandy had to go inside and let them sort it out. Had to go upstairs and cry.

Long painful weeks went by. Mandy had to go to bed at eight-thirty. At least with start of fall come near, the sun and the wippoorwill let her be. With the moon off shining some place on the other side of the planet, she had nothing to blame for keeping her awake. But tonight she could not sleep. To think, the last time they saucered up, Mandy thought the sadness might go away for good.

Since Denise Anderson’s announcement on the bus, raising a hand with a question or any other unnecessary class participation looked like looking for trouble. She steered clear of Miss Danowski in case she had something to straighten Mandy out about, like everybody else. Mostly Mandy felt ashamed she lied to her hallway sci-fi friend.

Things did not feel any too fine at home, either. Already they had to bring in the firewood they cut last winter. Mandy and her brothers visited so many backwoods, Matt in the truck stacking against the side-gates, Mark and Mandy handing up armloads of wood they piled last winter. If they saw the round white “puffball” mushrooms, they had to root around and get them all. Mother sold them at the farmers’ market along with her jams and jellies.

Mandy’s family delivered face-cords of seasoned firewood to customers in town, stacked to an exact size, loose enough that a squirrel can run through a space, tight enough that the cat can’t chase it through. Mandy had to let the boys deliver it alone, stay behind to clean the chicken coops, shovel the barn and fun stuff like that. She was grounded. No going home with a friend after school, as if anybody would have her. No phone. No drone. She did not feel that happy with her life. Another night, Mandy just lay there with her face buried in her pillow. So depressed!

“Ting” Mandy heard something at her window, a bat maybe. Too late for a bird. Then more loudly she heard a “Clack.” She went to her window, and Zack waved up at her from the yard. Annoyed, she climbed out on the roof in her nightgown to see what he wanted.

“What are you doing here? You could break a window doing that.”

Zack took his hat off and held it to his chest, thick long hair combed. “I missed you.” He smiled as if he had something weird to say, but he held back. “I missed you.” The way he said it, how could she stay mad?

“Awe shucks. Me?” Mandy did the sad puppy dog. Then she nodded solemnly. “I missed you, too.”

“How things go for you?” he asked, inarticulated by the moment.

“Ooh. Okay, I guess.” Mandy sat on the roof, hanging her legs over the gutter. “No. Things go rotten for me.”

“They do?” He took the news hard, putting his hat back on and clutching his chin.

“Denise Anderson made fun of me on the bus. And now kids look away when they go by me in the hall.” She thought a bit more. “Oh yeah. And my biology lab-partner acts like I’m useless as tits on a boar.”

“That’s pretty useless,” Zack commiserated. “I’m sorry. Sounds like you hurt.” Zack shook his head. Then his expression changed. “I have some news.”

“Ooh?” Noticing herself sounding like her mom, Mandy went for it all the way. “I want to know, doncha know?”

“‘Doncha?’ And someday you will go to college.”

“Ya. Doncha know?”

“So deerich, Mandy.”

“Ya. I am silly.”

“You’re getting happier.”

“It’s all your fault. What’s the news?”

“Grossdaddi told me to tell you we have a work to do.”

”Does that mean what I think it means?”

“Ya. Your mom will let you, now.” He looked down. “But you’re still grounded.”

“Wow!” Mandy stood and stretched her arms over her head, and now she noticed the Milky Way, wide and white, like most people never see it. “More circles?”

“Nein. Something else.” Zack furrowed his brow. “He sounded worried.”

“Your grossdaddi. He’s pretty smart.” Mandy sat down again, hanging her legs off the edge. “But how did he know enough to make a flying saucer?”

“He didn’t.”

“Then…”

“An alien landed his saucer in the meadow. Not like *Mars Attacks*. A nice alien. Half his saucer was missing.”

Mandy’s eyes widened in amazement. “Was he in a battle with evil aliens?”

“No.” Zack smiled. “Nobody told him how tall Wisconsin hills can get.”

“Oh.” Mandy smiled, too, also proud of her state.

“He broke one of Grossdaddi’s rocks by holding his hand a special way over one of the lines. A sheet of metal split out of it that can make strong siding for a saucer, and the metal has the power to alter gravity.”

Mandy wrinkled her forehead. “An unknown element?” she asked, wondering if Zack would get her meaning.

“No. It’s an…” Zack paused for a minute, preparing himself to say the word. “…an agglomeration of metals with a special quality none of them have alone.” Zack’s face showed a hint of pride. “You can’t make that combination. It happens with super-extraordinary heat and pressure.” He shrugged. “It’s rare.”

Mandy’s eyes narrowed. “How rare?”

“Our farm is the only place in this solar system.”

“Wow!”

“I know.” Zack tipped his hat back. “Grossdaddi and your grandfather fixed the saucer with new framing and pounded metal out on it to furbish it anew”

Mandy’s jaw dropped. “My grandfather?”

“Perry Solem.” Zack nodded. “The alien saw a tiny cancer in him.”

“Hmm.” Mandy scratched her head. “That’s when he started growing organic.”

“Ya. The alien offered to pay them with gold.”

“How much?”

“We shall never know. Grossdaddi asked to learn how to split the rocks and make his own flying saucers as payment.”

“Grossdaddi is smart!”

“But he can never learn to operate a saucer. The alien said humans cannot stay with one thought long enough.”

“Oh?”

“But they figured a way to make it work.”

“Noah!”

“Ya. Noah. And he loves the saucer metal.”

Mandy laughed, picturing her gangly friend hopping the pedals. “What gets me. He knows what he’s doing.”

“Ya! You can see him looking out the ports.” Zack took off his hat and reached behind his neck to grasp a leather cord, pulling it up over his head. A round piece of metal at the end of it popped out of his shirt, glowing with a subtle light. “This is a piece of saucerium for you to keep with you, make you feel like looking from up high.”

He stepped forward and reached it up to Mandy, touching her fingers. She held it in her hand, and the metal felt comforting in her palm. Dots of light began to float around it. “What the…”

“Put it away now. Lightning bugs always come to it in the summer, and even though it be late in the year, there they be.” He smiled. “Not just Noah. All animals like it.”

Mandy put the cord around her neck and dropped the pendent behind her nightgown, cupping it with her hand through the fabric. “Thank you.”

“I should go.”

“Heck.” Mandy stood and blew her friend a kiss, something she had never done before, to anybody. “It’s so good to see you.”

“That girl who was mean to you. She rides the bus?”

“Yes. But when she turns sixteen, she’ll be driving her own car. You watch.”

“Mm.” Zack nodded. “I won’t get a buggy until I’m eighteen.”

“Well.” Mandy smiled. “A flying saucer should do for you in the meantime.”

“It will do for the both of us. Sleep well, Mandy.”

Sitting on the bus, keeping her eyes to herself, Mandy pulled the metal pendant out of her blouse and looked at it more closely. Smoothed and shaped by the peen of a hammer, it resembled a saucer.

It was a warm morning, high forties, and Zack and the news had cheered her up. But Mandy knew she still had another intolerable day ahead to endure. She soaked up the good feeling from the pendent to help her through the inevitable slop to come.

When the bus stopped for Denise Anderson, Mandy kept her eyes on the pendent. She feared the worst when the important cheerleader stopped by her seat.

“What is that?” Denise asked.

“Ah… It’s a… a good luck charm.” Mandy held it up for her to see.

Denise looked so unsure in her expensive outfit. “Can… can I touch it?”

“Uh. Okay.”

“It feels…” Denise looked at Mandy. “…nice.”

“Yeah. It does.”

Denise’s eyes widened. “I have treated you so mean.” She shook her head. “I’m sorry.”

“Wow.” Mandy returned her gaze. “Thank you for saying that.”

“It feels good to say it. I guess I was jealous. Daddy knocks himself out trying to make things organic like your father tells him to.” She sighed. “And it’s good he does.” She bent down and gave Mandy a hug, and then she started back down the aisle. “I’ve been mean to my horse, too,” Mandy heard her saying. “And I’m mean to Robert Sanchez. Oh. There he is. Roberto, I have to say something to you.”

Uff da. Mandy looked back at her pendent. Totally unexpected, the conversation had a feeling of rightness to it. And now, of all things, she liked Denise. Mandy looked up and noticed all the faces looking at her, looking friendly. WT…

Things got even nuttier when they lined up with the other buses in front of the school. Mandy always walked across the grass, not the walkway, on her way to the front steps. She liked the feel of it under her feet. And that’s what the saucer landed on, right in front of her, spinning a circle into the lawn.

Zack flung the hatch open and climbed out onto the glowing metal. He stood at the edge reaching down. “Come with me, Mandy. We have a work to do.”

Mandy looked around at all the smiling people. Miss Danowski pulling into the side drive made eye contact with her, and she waved. “Go on!” somebody said. It sounded like Denise. Mandy reached up and held Zack’s hands. His strong muscles lifted her off her feet, and many other hands made the work lighter.

Once Mandy belted in, it took a while to catch her breath. She just lived through the big moment in a high school movie. Mandy looked back at Noah. He and his tail looked happy! “Ba-a-ah,” she said to him.

“Ba-a-ah!”

Mandy looked down at the center striped state highway, the only way to get to these parts before the interstate came through by Tomah. They would come to County X by the general store and turn south. Instead they angled southeast right there and approached her farm from behind. As they came down toward the woods, Mandy could see her barn and her house. Mandy sat down and buckled up before the saucer dropped through a small opening in the trees, landing in front of a building she recognized.

Many times over the years, she had asked Father about the long low barn, windowless and padlocked on the road that went into the woods from behind the farmyard. He always made some joke or other.

Today, when they landed in front of it, the long wooden doors were open, and Mandy saw three other flying saucers parked inside. Matt and Mark had a ladder against one and their goat stood atop it. Zack’s parents had just leaned a ladder against one and the tan goat Amos used in the hills stood watching them. Zack’s mother smiled and gave Mandy a little wave. In her long blue dress and her white bonnet, she looked vibrant. Jumping down from Zack’s saucer, Mandy walked to where her parents and her father’s goat, Isaac, busied themselves about the third craft.

“Welcome to our private airport,” said Father.

Then she got a good look at her mother. Mandy was in such a good mood, she almost teased her about the Princess Leia battle uniform. Mandy was glad she did not.

“Mandy Marie Solem,” she said. “Let’s get things straight right from the start.”

“Yes Mother.”

“You are here because we need your help. If you do one thing that does not help…” She gestured with her thumb. “Back on the ground. Do you understand?”

“Yes Mother.”

“Good.” She handed Mandy her drone and her phone, bundled with bailing wire. “How do you like my Carrie Fisher suit.”

“It’s so cool!”

“I know. Isn’t it?” She struck a pose.

“Ya. The braid makes it, you know.”

“It does, doesn’t it. Don’t forget to compliment your father. He’s Hans Solo.”

“Oh Yeah. Now I see it.”

“You didn’t see it?”

“Dad’s blond. I… Hi, Father. I mean, hi, Hans Solo.”

“Thank you.” Father smiled, but he had a serious look to follow it up. He handed her one of the safety harnesses he kept for work on high roofs. “Put this on. It has a short lead. Tie it tight.”

She took the red set of straps from him. “Okay. What for?”

“Zachariah will need you to tip the saucer up or down a half turn.”

Mandy felt a bump on her rear. “Noah!” When she turned around, he looked so happy. Mandy got down on her knees and hugged his excitedly wiggling body, and Noah stopped wiggling. He just relaxed into Mandy’s arms, and they visited that way for a spell. She leaned back. “Your horn is all better.”

Mother gave the goat a few strokes. “It’s longer than the other one now.”

“Is that bad?”

“I’m trying to figure it out.” She looked at Mandy thoughtfully. “It’s the left one. Ordinarily, I’d say that’s his sensitive side. Except it’s so close to his brain, ya know, maybe this is the logical horn.”

Mandy stood up. “Oh… well…”

“Just joshin’ ya!” She smirked. “Doncha know?”

Mandy giggled. “I donch.”

“Friends and family,” said Levi Burkholder. “Or should I just say family?” He smiled. “Gather around. “Okay, now. Thank you.” He looked at Mandy. “Welcome back. Put that harness on before you forget.”

“Okay.” Mandy stepped into the safety-garb and pulled it up, fastening it in front with a click. She liked the way it looked with her white blouse and blue jeans.

“Mandy, I told you that making crop circles is an act of God’s mercy.”

“Yes.” Mandy looked at everybody else looking at her, and that felt fine. “I remember.”

“Zack will explain it, but now it comes time for us to mete God’s strictness.” He nodded at her. “This is important. Do the very best you can, now.” A murmur of voices expressed agreement.

“I will.” Mandy had a lump in her throat, and she could hardly get the words out. But she meant them.

“Okay, now. Amos, Michel, do you have any instructions.”

“Nein.”

“Well, not to beat a dead horse, we’ve been over it so many times,” said Michael. “We know that large formations of black unmarked drones spray an advanced polencide along fence-lines of organic farms. But we have no idea when they will do it next.” He patted his goat. “Judging by the way Isaac’s acting, it will happen today.”

Mandy raised her hand. “Do the drones take turns spraying a stretch of fence-line, then back away to let the next drone in.”

“That’s right, Mandy.” He looked at her questioningly.

Mandy did not notice. She had her phone out, googling something.

“Okay,” Father said. “Then let’s get ready to launch.”

Nobody heard the old Ford Bronco coming up from the farmyard until it pulled up behind Father’s pick up. Miss Danowski unfolded her tall body from her car, wearing a pair of Osh-Gosh overalls and a western shirt with the snaps. She looked good, too, speaking to the large gathering quite bravely: “Hello everybody.” (Having sat through her classes, Mandy could tell her teacher was a skosh nervous.) “You have quite a few swamp gas accumulating machines,” she said, pointing at the saucers with a knowing look.

“Uh. It’s the season,” Mr. Solem said awkwardly.

“Wouldn’t marsh gas happen more in the Summer?”

Mandy’s Father scratched his chin. “Well…”

“Oh please! You’re using the marsh gas story all wrong. I googled it.” Her voice took on a higher, stressed tone. “The authorities told people in the sixties that the saucers were swamp gas. Nobody ever said the flying saucers they saw were farm implements collecting swamp gas.”

“Farm news doesn’t play in the cities,” Father said resourcefully. He caught her accent, so the overalls did not fool him.

“Yep… yep, yep, yep,” somebody mused quietly.

Miss Danowski looked close to tears. “Please! Level with me.” She pointed. “Those are flying saucers. I would so, so much love to go up in one.” She wiped her eyes.

Father put his hands in front of himself, readying to say something firm yet apologetic, but he looked unsure.

“Did you say you googled it?” asked Levi, who up until this point had stood apart and back from the conversation.

Miss Danowski looked at him, and Mandy saw her relax in an instant. Who wouldn’t feel better talking to Grossddadi? “Yes. I googled it. With my phone.”

“That’s good.” He nodded. “Gut to keep learning.”

She smiled. “Always.”

“We can take you up, doncha know,” said Levi. He walked to the end of the saucer-barn, and put his frame against a door, sliding it open on its squeaky wheels. “We’ll take mine out for a spin, if that will suit you.” He pointed at a more simply shaped saucer, coated with dust. “You would complete my team.”

Miss Danowski came over to get a closer look. “That would suit me just fine.” She shook his hand. “I’m Marjorie.”

He took his hat off with the other hand. “And I be Levi. Michael, can I enjoin upon you to take Amos and get my little friend Jules. I’ll stay here and take a broom to my sky-buggy. Oh, and another safety harness.”

“My pleasure,” father said. “Many hands make the work lighter.”

As he and Amos fixed to get into the truck, Mandy looked up from her phone. “Father! Could you bring the can of stove polish and a rag?”

“Uh. You need it right now?”

“Please! It’s in the tool shed right by the safety harnesses.”

He smiled and shook his head. “Okay. Easy enough.” He looked at Amos. “Women. Right?” Amos chuckled, but he diplomatically got into the truck without a word, and they drove around the Bronco and down the gravel roadway.

Mandy held her phone up to her mother. “I don’t know where, but I know when the drones will spray.”

Ten minutes before Mandy’s schedule predicted the first drone attack would happen, the saucers waited a mile above the Black River watershed. When the goats got the call, all five saucers would race to mete out strictness on malicious farm-drones. That was the plan. While she waited, Mandy rubbed stove polish on her drone with a rag, turning all of it, even the yellow lettering, black. After she set it to dry, she cautiously touched one of the handles that extended out from the console. “So how do these things work?”

“I wish I knew.” Zack reached up under his hat to scratch his head. “My daed told me when the time comes to take those handles in my hands, I will know what to do.”

Mandy slid a thumb under her red safety harness. “That’s about how much instruction I got for this thing.” She grimaced. “I’m nervous.”

Zack looked at her sympathetically. “Soon as we be flying, you’ll feel gut,” he told her. “I think Noah is a mite nervous, too.”

“You do?” Mandy looked back over her shoulders as the black and white goat jumped up, landing on three of the eight peddles, keeping one foot held up above the peddles. Out the portals Mandy saw the other four saucers streak off in distinctly different directions. Their flying saucer went down.

They floated but twenty feet above a rural road. A man in a black coverall and a black cap worked obliviously behind a Mercedes van. While Mandy watched, he unfolded a black drone (it was a Wing Deer, Mandy knew it) and he turned it on. Then he set it down on the shoulder with all the others, their rotors already spinning. He got into the passenger side of the van, and Mandy saw him open a laptop.

“Get ready, Zack.” She tapped his arm. “They’re about to take off.”

Zack stood in front of the consol. Reaching down he held the handles, and as he did, Mandy saw two implements fold out of the saucer’s outer rim.

“Now I get it!” Zack exclaimed. “These be saucer-mallets.” He swung the handles. Outside, glowing metal hammers swung up and down.

“Get ready,” Mandy whispered. “They’re coming.”

“Tell Noah where to go.”

Mandy looked over her shoulder at their caprid friend, holding her hand down behind her back. “Noah, stay!” She looked at Zack. “I think he has us in the right place.”

Zack took his hat off and put it on the consol. “Ya.” He rolled up his sleeves. “Look at all of them.”

“Ya. You remember this. They’re getting into formation.”

“Wing Deer competition.”

“Ya. But nobody places first this time. Get’m!”

Zack swung the handles of his mighty Amish Waldos, arcing them into the cluster of drones that had formed right below the front saucer rim. Just before the mallet could deal a blow, the intended targets moved out of reach, three rows dropping down in consecutive evasion. After the return swing, they moved back into formation. Zack tried it a few more times, and the same thing happened.

“The sensors on top are the most sensitive,” Mandy told him. “You know, for branches.” She looked down at the “drone master” in the van. He was obliviously smoking a cigarette and drinking a beer. “You have to swing from the side.”

“How do I do that?”

Mandy looked back at Noah, and she remembered what her father told her. “You don’t. Noah does.”

“What?”

“Noah!” said Mandy to the goat on the wooden eight-key. “Tip the saucer up.” She held her hand sideways to him with the fingers pointing down.

Nothing happened. “Ba-a-ah,” said Noah, and none to cheerfully. He looked afraid.

“Come on Noah. You can do it. Tip up.” She held her hand where he could see it more clearly.

Noah clicked two of the peddles and the airship tilted an eighth turn.

“One just headed out to the fence!” Zack shouted. Mandy looked at Noah. She looked at her safety harness, and she knew what to do. With her pack over her shoulder, she climbed the ladder and spun the wheel.

“Mandy,” Zack called as she climbed out onto the smooth outer skin. “What are you doing?

“It’s okay,” she yelled down, tying the rope to the hatch the way her father did. “I’ve got the harness.”

She walked out to the edge where she could see the van. It was high but not like the top of the hayloft. Going on one knee she took out her drone and powered it up, sending it at drop speed to the van. (The van’s door said Macro Growth.) When she flew into the malicious drone mantainer’s cigarette hand, Mandy’s ruse worked. He thought one of the contest entrants went crazy rogue, and he panicked.

Stabbing at his keyboard, he called the drones home. Mandy saw it all, saw the drones coming back on screen and going away at the same time. It was amazing. Without even thinking about it, Mandy knew just what to do. The drones fell with a crash when Mandy came in for another run, knocking the Old Style out of his hand and into the laptop. Mandy crawled down the hatch and Zack said “Up, up, up!”

The capsule was a tad chilly while they waited, looking down on rows of fluffy clouds, but Mandy did not notice, she felt so excited after that, like running a track meet. “This is the same place we waited last time, isn’t it?”

He nodded. “Just so.” He looked around at the windows, shaking his head.

“They must be waiting somewhere else,” Mandy speculated.

“Ya. Goats know best.”

Mandy took out her phone. Then she put it away. “I wish I could tell Father that van was from Macro Growth.”

Zack’s eyes narrowed. “Like Cyrus Chalmers, with the genetically enhanced seeds?”

“So he says. Enhanced should mean better.”

“I hope he’s not lying. He’s too old for rumspringa.”

Mother and Zack’s mom packed sandwiches for them. Mandy crawled out with a cup of the feed that they sent for Noah, standing on the beam alongside the peddles. “He has a saucer on his side,” Mandy exclaimed, stroking the white shape within a black shape.

“Meant to tell you that.”

“Oh Noah,” she said sweetly stroking his muzzle with both hands. “You were meant for this!”

“Ya, Noah,” Zack said affectionately, walking out to stand on the other side. “Chosen.” He kneeled and petted his friend.

Mandy looked closer at her beam. “There’s a place for tying off here.” She felt the climbing rope coiled off her side. “I think I know what Father meant this harness for.”

Zack tipped his hat back a moment, looking at the ring in the beam. “Ya.”

“Let’s get ready.” She reached over and squeezed Zack’s hand. “Be sure to buckle up.”

He smiled. “Tie up tight.”

They still had some time until the next meet, and Mandy used it talking to Noah, giving him some comfort. “Don’t be u-scared,” she whispered.

They came down fast, and this time Mandy recognized the location, looking down at a van parked behind the bushes outside Denise Anderson’s drive. They farmed organically. Denise’s father did do some mowing and plowing. Father respected that. Mandy felt her stomach tighten. She checked her knot. “You see this rope, Noah,” she murmered, tracing her finger down its length.

Noah’s eyes followed her.

She slid her hand down his strap. “You see your tack. We’re safe.” Noah smiled. For sure Mandy saw it. “Tilt up!”

Noah’s weight went into his harness, and Mandy hung with him. She hung right side up. He hung sideways, and she tucked her hands under him and made it easier. Zack shattered the formation with rapid alternating blows. Then he looked at the van.

Zack would never mortify some city slicker who drives the van for a diabolical genetic engineer by malleting his windshield in. But pounding dents like you would get from zucchini sized hail into the roof of his van, that seemed like the thing to do at the time. Zack turned and smiled at Mandy. “We know how to do this now.”

“We do. Up, up, up, Noah. Let’s do it again.”

Come Thanksgiving, Father added more extensions to his table for food than guests. Along with the usual turkey, ham and bratwurst, they had homemade tofurkey from organic, heirloom soy, something Miss Danowski cooked up that Levi enjoined the platter back for a few times. You can imagine how many fixins it takes to set four main courses right.

Mother said the prayer: “Thank you for a good harvest, thank you we can come together, thank you Wing Deer ran out of drones, and thank you that the circles we made on the Macro Growth factory roof made it cave in slowly so that no people or animals, like they’d have any, got hurt. She prayed a lot more stuff, enough that Mandy felt herself getting impatient. She held her pendant and remembered, she was the only woman like her in the world. Then everybody said amen and dug in.

Mother seated Mandy next to Marjorie. (They had got on a first name basis now.) Marjorie leaned over and whispered. “What do you think of Grandfather Levi?”

“He’s funny, he’s smart and… yes, for sure now, he’s wise. Why?”

“Well.” She blushed. “We’re courting.”

“Really?” Mandy looked at her adult friend, thinking about what a city girl she was. “Can you live without electric lights and running water?”

“It’s an adjustment, but Levi says I can have a phone. I think he will want me to google for him when we sit by the fire. Maybe I can play him some Dylan.” She grinned like a little girl. “And I get to ride around in a flying saucer.”

“Hmm.” Mandy looked over at Zack, and he waved at her. “Good point.”