



The House of the Scorpion by Nancy Farmer

Subject: Cloning; Science fiction

Awards: Newbery Honor Book, Printz Honor Book, Ten Best Books for Young Adults

Book Lists: Gifted, Grade 6, Latin America, Middle School, Reluctant Readers

Props: Fake skin, tweezers



Matteo Alacran is the drug lord of a country called Opium and he is the ruler of the House of the Scorpion. Opium is named for its chief product—opium. It lies between the United States and what used to be Mexico. Over 100 years ago a piece of skin was taken from Matteo Alacran’s body, but he wasn’t dead. In fact, the piece of skin ensured that he would live forever. (*Hold up skin with tweezers*)

For the past 100 hundred years, every decade or so, a small portion of that skin was used to create life. (*Put skin down*) Living cells were developed in Petri dishes that divided and grew in incubators. The cells grew into small embryos that were implanted into the wombs of cows. Nine months later human beings—no clones—were born—no harvested from the cows. The clones were placed in a crib, a needle injected into their brain, and their intelligence blunted. They grew into slobbering, hideous creatures.

Matt was a clone. On his right foot was stamped the words, “Property of the Alacran Estate.” But he had been spared the needle. His intelligence had not been blunted. He had been allowed to grow up to become a normal 6-year-old boy. Well, perhaps normal is not completely true. He had lived a life of isolation. In those six years he had only met two humans, the doctor who visited once a month, and Celia. The doctor was a sour man who Matt didn’t like, but Celia cared, protected, and loved him. Celia and Matt lived in a small shack in the middle of the poppy fields of Opium. Although Celia left Matt alone during the day, she returned every night. She cooked dinner and they talked and laughed until bedtime.

Yes, it was an isolated existence, but Matt was safe and protected—and restless. While Celia was gone, he longed to go outside, to do anything. But the windows were nailed shut and the doors were locked. One day as the door closed and locked behind Celia, Matt was swept

with such an intense feeling of desolation, he thought he would die. He hugged himself, gasping with sobs as tears rolled down his cheeks. And then—and then—beyond the noise of his sobs, Matt heard a voice calling. It was clear and strong—a child’s voice. Matt ran to the window. The voice cried, “Hey, there’s a kid in here! Open the window, kid. What’s your name?”

Matt was terrified. He couldn’t squeeze out a single word. The children began to leave. Matt wanted to join them. He grabbed a big iron cooking pot, swung it, and smashed out the glass in the window. Matt shoved a chair to the opening, scrambled up, and jumped. A terrible pain lanced through Matt’s feet as he landed. He fell forward, and his hands and knees landed on the shards of glass. Matt stared with amazement at the blood dripping from his feet and hands. His knees sprouted rivulets of red. He wanted to throw up, but before he could, everything went black.

The children rushed him through the poppy fields to the Big House and onto a couch. Matt’s eyes opened as a fierce-looking man burst into the room. “You idiot!” roared the man, “You need a vet for this little beast!” The man whispered into the ear of one of the maids. As a look of horror crossed her face, she scooped up Matt and ran. She dumped him roughly onto the lawn and without a word, turned and fled back into the house.

This was the night that Matt learned he was a clone, not a human being, but a disgusting, repulsive clone. Staring up at the sky with the grass pressed against his back, Matt prayed for Celia to come and rescue him. But, he was beyond her help now. His isolated and safe world was lost. As a clone, Matt had been harvested, brought to life for one purpose. But, his brains had not been blunted. Was he different from the other mindless clones? Could he find a way to survive? Or was he doomed to share their fate? (*Hold up book*) *The House of the Scorpion* by Nancy Farmer.