

February 22nd, 2025

Issue 19 | Resist

# SciFANSat

The Monthly Magazine for Science Fiction, Fantasy, and More!

## Micro Fiction & Poetry

A. J. Dalton

A. A. Rubin

Morgan RR Haze

## Flash Fiction

Marcelo Medone - "Waiting for the Enemy"

Alastair Millar - "Resister"

Alan Vincent Michaels - "A Motility Predicament"

That Burnt Writer - "Captain Reynolds of The Apocalypse"

Nancy E. Dunne - "Aftermath"

## Short Stories

Ryan Parker - "Grounded in a Black Heaven"

Corina Morera - "The Last Spark"

W. D. Henning - "One Man's Trash"



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# Editorial

by Jason H. Abbott



Welcome to SciFanSat's nineteenth issue, where resistance is not futile! That's right, this February's theme is about pushing back, and we're not going to take it anymore! So prepare yourself for science fiction, fantasy, and more that doesn't go gently into the night.

We have rabble-rousing poetry and microfiction by A. J. Dalton, Morgan RR Haze, and the award-winning A. A. Rubin, then our flash fiction takes to the streets. Marcelo Medone harbors alien rebellion in "Waiting for the Enemy". Alastair Millar's "Resister" puts a spotlight on growing Martian discontent, and in "A Motility Predicament" Alan Vincent Michaels gets lost in even weedier aspects of revolt. That Burnt Writer's "Captain Reynolds of The Apocalypse" illustrates that, sometimes, even the enemy is resistant to using their ultimate weapon. Closing out our flash selections, R.S. Nelson makes resistance a matter of public record in "When the Deaf are Kings", while "Aftermath" by Nancy E. Dunne leaves us picking up shattered pieces.

There are three short stories gracing our issue this month. Ryan Parker's immersive cyberpunk tale "Grounded in a Black Heaven" is accidentally revolutionary: painfully and beautifully human, like a flower growing out of an asphalt crack. "The Last Spark" by Corina Morera touches the boundaries of virtual walls from the inside looking out, and ponders if they do not a prison make without our failings to bar them. Rounding out the trio is W. D. Henning's "One Man's Trash" wherein he weaves an intriguing tale of small-time, independent, merchant traders finding themselves pulled into the politics of a failing planet walking a knife's edge between apocalypse and redemption.

It is always an honor to assemble an issue of SciFanSat and work with its contributors. Even when the world seems to have gone mad, it is solace and balm for my soul. And important work. To quote Ursula K. Le Guin:

*"We live in capitalism, its power seems inescapable – but then, so did the divine right of kings. Any human power can be resisted and changed by human beings. Resistance and change often begin in art. Very often in our art, the art of words."*

These words are truth. I live by them.

Good stories strengthen and renew me, and the batch we present this month was no exception, speaking for myself. May you find them to be the same for you. Our heartfelt thanks go out to all the authors, poets, and readers who contributed. Keep writing, creating, and supporting each other. We hope you enjoy this issue, and

Jason H. Abbott  
*Editor, SciFanSat Magazine*

please, join us again in March for our upcoming theme of CHAOS!



# Poetry

## Dryad

by A J Dalton



His axe didn't save him  
for all that he swung it  
like a mighty hero of old  
snarling and spitting disdain  
sweat rolling from his tousled brow  
maybe blurring his vision  
his heavy muscles bunched and glistening  
in an impressive display of manhood.  
Nor did his prayers save him  
offered to the male war god  
whose son died that all might be  
forgiven, though not by us  
for what they have done  
to our forest and the fey  
felling greatwoods, cutting so deeply  
into our sacred groves.  
Neither did his pleas save him  
of kith and kin and kind  
in their ever growing above ground caves  
where trees are slain, sacrificed and burnt  
with no quarter, mercy or reverence:  
so we treated the woodsman the same  
staking him for the crows to peck  
perhaps it was all to our shame.

[AJ Dalton](#) is a UK-based writer. He's published the Empire of the Saviours trilogy with Gollancz Orion, The Satanic in Science Fiction and Fantasy with Luna Press, the Darks Woods Rising and Digital Desires poetry collections, and other bits and bobs. He lives with his monstrously oppressive cat named Cleopatra.



# Micro Fiction

## The Young Universe

by A. A. Rubin



After nearly 14 billion years, the universe stopped expanding. Scientists panicked on many worlds. Was there more missing dark matter and energy than they had originally thought? Was there something outside of the known reality which offered resistance against expansion into the nothing that lay beyond? Were all of their theories and equations wrong?

The mass hysteria continued until, one, day a message came through to every satellite dish and antenna throughout the cosmos:

“Relax,” the universe said. “I need my rest, just like any growing life form. Then, they panicked even more.





# Dark Temptation

by Morgan RR Haze



The Tempter has returned with seductive whispers of pleasure. I know the consequences of giving in to the Dark One.

Weakening even a little will lead to me losing control. Even now the power and magic promised dominates my mind, as it does with a legion of loyal followers. Surprisingly, a heightened aura of darkness only adds to the pull, no doubt part of a sinister plan.

I resist for longer than most.

My downfall?

One proclamation:

*90% cacao.*



# Flash Fiction

## Captain Reynolds of *The Apocalypse*

by That Burnt Writer



"How are things?" I say, dropping my sidearm on the desk, sinking into the chair and putting my boots up on a datapad marked *Confidential*. "I'm about done with this shit."

I can tell that the admiral isn't impressed. I'd caught sight of myself on the way in – dishevelled, beyond exhausted, and only just about "not-broken". I've not had a day's break from combat in three years straight, and have only come in two weeks after they'd recalled me because I couldn't put it off any longer. It might be a summons from a four-star, but I don't have time for the niceties that usually went along with meeting someone who gets upset when their shoes aren't shiny enough.

After all, as the propaganda newsfeeds keep piping out, the top brass is only a twenty-four-hour hyperspace shuttle ride away from the frontline, but whilst I'm here with the pretty dress uniforms and coffee and cookies, my people are out there dying from defending humanity against the bugs.

Yeah, I'm aware that term isn't politically correct, and the aliens have an almost unpronounceable species name to humans, but it's hard to stick to diplomacy when a race of insect-like creatures with a galactic-sized dose of megalomania are trying to murder you in deep space.

He's about to explode at the breach of protocol, so I pull my feet down and lean forward.

"Listen, *Sir*, we're losing on pretty much every front. The enemy's faster, stronger, and more skilled. D'you know how many people I graduated with are still out there fighting? None. They're all fucking dead."

I sit back and watch as he visibly composes himself.

"Captain Reynolds," he says, holding up his hands in a placatory gesture. "I know how much this means to you, how much you've personally sacrificed to the war effort, and—"

I laugh bitterly. "With all due respect, you don't know shit. You're sending faceless numbers up to the front to die. They used to call it sending troops 'over the top' back when we were fighting in trenches. This is the same thing you're pulling here, and it's not working now, just like it didn't then."

He rises, sighs, and moves to stand by the viewport, gazing at the Horsehead Nebula.

"Captain," he starts again. "In fact, computer?"

"YES, ADMIRAL?"

"Cease recording please."

"THAT IS A MOST IRREGULAR REQUEST, ADMIRAL."

"Understood. Authorisation code Kilo-Romeo-Sierra-two-zero-two-five."

"RECORDING HALTED."

"Thank you. Please switch off all listening devices as well until ordered."

"ARE YOU SURE?"

"Yes."

"ALL LISTENING DEVICES PAUSED."

The shipboard AI is right, this is very irregular.

"So, Sir," I say. "Is this something I need to be concerned about?"

I eye my plasma blaster on his desk. I could still get to it if I need to, probably before his private security could neutralize me.

Probably.

"Not really," he says. "But what I'm about to tell you does not go beyond this room or this conversation, you understand?"

"Sir."

He strides back over to the desk and sits down, nudging my gun back toward me off the datapad, almost managing to hide his distaste at the carbon scoring on the barrel that stains his pristine fingernail. He presses his thumb to the DNA reader and it unlocks, then he passes it over to me.

"This is beyond top-secret level confidential, Captain Reynolds. The only reason I'm showing it to you, is that I don't think there's another person in this entire fleet who has a chance of doing what's proposed in there and getting out alive."

He sighs again. "You know, you're an absolute hero. Your picture is all over the holoivid recruitment ads. You're one inspirational woman."

I flip through the screens, becoming interested despite myself. There's lots of technical data, along with schematics for a new type of fighter, a new *Apocalypse* class. It's called "Project Resistance".

"There's lots of information here, where do I fit in?" I ask.

"Skip to the end."

I do, and draw in a sharp breath. "*Damn*. You want to use this to—"

"Yes. And we need someone to pilot it."

"Do we know that this thing will work?"

"Yes, but that's why we need you. You're, *unorthodox*, but the simulations all agree; if we're going to deliver this payload, the best chance lies in you."

"You know this could end the war, right? Push them back to a planetary existence? It's the doomsday scenario for them."

"I do." He sits back, rubbing his eyes, suddenly looking tired.

"So, what happens afterwards?"

"What do you mean?" he frowns.

"Let's say", I continue, "that this works. Do we become gods over them, hanging in orbit threatening to dish out death if they step out of line? Dictators? Do we become everything we've fought against?"

"I knew," he said. "I knew you'd ask this. The answer is no."

"No?"

"No. The plan is that, if this works, then humanity moves on, we go, leaving no trace, and find somewhere new to live."

"So, what do we do then? I mean, I'm just a void-jockey not a politician, but if they did this to us, I'd be damn pissed. I'd want to go after them, even the score."

"The Fleet leadership are aware of that. We can't, we *won't* be gods over them. But we won't put our people at risk either. And those of you who've spent an entire life fighting, well, we can't just reassign you, you'd end up killing each other, or yourselves, or all of us. So, the plan is to disable their tech, decapitate their leadership structure, and then evacuate this sector. Let them fight it out amongst themselves, whilst we go into the great unknown. It's a different kind of adventure."

"And if I agree to do this, and make it back?"

"Hero of the Fleet."

"I don't want that."

He sighs for a third time. "Ok, talk to me. Terms."

There's a glint in his eye, though: he knows I'm in already.

Damn.



# Aftermath

by Nancy E. Dunne



High ceilings swallowed the sound of breath sawing in and out as she assessed damage. The sharp tang of blood hung in the air, wrapping around her face like a hot towel. “Not my blood,” she whispered.

Bodies lay everywhere, suits covering mortal wounds. Flag pins stuck to torn lapels — patriotic colors slathered with blood.

Standing was tricky. Wincing, she looked at the great seal hanging above the entryway, and grinned.

Half the seal clung to the wall. The other half was missing. Only blast marks, with the word ‘RESIST’ scrawled in the soot.

A boom outside, and then another, closer. She ducked just as the enormous windows blew inward, then straightened, smiling.

Time to rejoin the fight.



# Waiting for the Enemy

by Marcelo Medone



I went to the window and saw them coming through the shadows, intermittently illuminated by the streetlights. They moved in a pack, like wolves, in complete silence, balancing on their ridiculously scrawny lower limbs. They were equipped with protective helmets, insulated boots and what appeared to be long guns of unknown technology.

Rumors of the invasion had reached us, but we hadn't thought it would be our turn so soon. The local news spoke of the war as a distant event. I was thankful that I had been in the Armed Forces in my youth, so I had some experience in combat maneuvers. I would probably have to put it to the test, after so many years. I worried about my family; I wondered where my wife and daughter were, and if they would be all right.

In the sky flashes of lightning appeared, followed by the rumble of explosions. It was probably an air and ground attack. Surely, the worst was yet to come.

It had stopped raining, and the street was still soaked, dripping water that ran down the sewers. I thought the humidity would slow their progress, but they dodged puddles with extraordinary, otherworldly agility.

I closed the curtain, took my gun from the drawer and slipped it around my waist. I flew down the stairs.

The hall was deserted. I had asked them to wait for me there, but they did not listen to me. I began to despair and was thinking about how I was going to locate them without alerting the enemy.

I walked through the house until I reached the dining room. I sighed in relief: there they were. They had spread out all over the place. There were more of them than I had imagined.

They were unpacking and trying to dry off. Some were mending the cuts on their heads. Others were adjusting their battered folds. I don't know what had hurt them more: the bursts of gunfire from the invaders' guns or the brutal storm. It had been an unusual deluge, almost a divine punishment.

The sturdiest of them, who seemed to be the leader, approached me and faced me with determination.

"We can't keep running. We are exhausted. There are small creatures and many sick ones. This weather has taken its toll on the weakest. We need you to protect us."

I looked at him with pity. I counted twelve adults, including five elders, and eight children. None of them seemed to have military training. We are peaceful people. The invaders were going to feast on them if they were caught.

I could not waste time.

I had to make decisions quickly.

I stepped on the first flight of the stairs to address the group. They all turned their heads at the same time to listen to me.

"Grab your things and come with me!" I said without giving them time to think.

I hopped upstairs to the bedroom entrance. I took a chair and placed it in the middle of the hall. I scrambled up, extended my arms toward the ceiling until I reached a concealed handle. I yanked down hard, and the hatch swung open. A metal ladder slid down to the floor.

At that moment the first came, then the rest. They were stacked one behind the other, neatly. I counted them again. Nobody was missing.

"Get in there and make no noise. Don't come out until I tell you. You'll be safe up there."

I saw their expressions of fear, almost terror. They were tired and helpless. I had forced them to trust me. The problem was, I did not even trust myself.

I had never been in a situation like this before. Suddenly, I was the hero of a group of survivors. I had become, without intending to, the leader of the resistance. Everything had changed with the arrival of the enemy on our land.

In addition, my wife and daughter had not yet returned, they did not know anything about this whole matter. I prayed that they had found shelter in a dry and warm place during that wild downpour.

I figured we did not have much time left. I noticed that some still doubted.

"I need you to get up to the attic right now! I'll take care of the rest."

One by one, they climbed with difficulty, carrying their bundles. Soon the last one disappeared into that dark hole. I heard muffled wailing and some sobbing. We would probably never see each other again.

As soon as I finished closing the trap door, the humans blew up the entrance door.

Knowing I had little chance, I grabbed my squirt gun and leaned against the wall.

I widened my side eyes, aligned my three heads, spread my wings, retracted my locopods, and went into invisible mode.

Now the real battle was about to begin.

Marcelo Medone (1961, Buenos Aires, Argentina) is a Pushcart Prize and Best Small Fictions nominee fiction writer, poet, essayist, journalist, playwright and screenwriter. He received numerous awards and was published in multiple languages in more than 50 countries around the world, including the US. He currently lives in Montevideo, Uruguay.

# Resister

by Alastair Millar



It was purely a fluke that Stan had gotten involved at all. He'd been having a drink in the local automat after work, and got talking to this older girl who'd turned out to be just as done with Marsport Administration as he was. They'd chatted vaguely about the Arean League's separatist campaign, and more seriously about whether violence or political engagement was better. In an unaccustomed burst of optimism, he'd given her his contact number. Of course, she never called.

But two work cycles later, a Serv-O-Bot brought a food delivery he hadn't ordered to his apartment — with no vendor or sender listed. Curious, he'd opened the box; inside was a pizza and what looked like a tacky medallion, along with a printed note: "Dear friend, wear this to Marvin's on Saturday from 1230 to 1300. It will buzz. Then go to the Red Café on Central Plaza. Be there from 1330 to 1400. Leave after it buzzes again. Freedom for Mars!"

So, on the day, he went to Marvin's; a well-known watering hole with a vibe that was nothing fancy, and just on the fashionable side of disreputable. The weekend customers were a mix of manual work crew, mid-grade brainiacs, and low-level Admin flunkies. And a smattering of Earther tourists on a budget. Nothing out of the ordinary.

He sat at the bar nursing some of the local rocket fuel until he felt the medallion shake. Nearfield molycircs, maybe? He shrugged mentally — tech wasn't his thing. He carefully didn't look around; on Mars, curiosity didn't kill the cat, it caged and skinned it alive. Then he calmly finished his drink, stood up, and headed out onto the street.

Now he was heading down Tereshkova Boulevard towards his next stop, trying to stay calm. Don't walk too fast, he told himself. There are Security goons over there: don't look at them. Don't draw attention to yourself. Don't worry, nobody knows you're involved. This is it, boy, you're part of the resistance. Time to walk the walk, not just talk the talk. And they know where you live if you chicken out, so don't risk it,



eh?

He wondered briefly what he was carrying. A month ago, the League had set off a bomb near the Central Hub tourist centre. Perhaps it was instructions for another publicity stunt like that. Could be anything. Better not to ask. Or know. But damn, it felt good to be part of something. To be playing his part, however small. To stick it to the technocrats and the stifling bureaucracy. Hell yeah. He clamped down on the urge to swagger. But this was the life!

Stan wouldn't have recognised the girl walking thirty metres behind him. She'd changed her hair and added plenty of face jewellery since he'd met her. In any case, he never noticed her. Why should he? He'd never had training. But she had, and she kept him in sight all the way to the Plaza. Just an insurance policy; if this dummy load worked out, they could use him for something serious later. At first, she'd thought using people like this was harsh. But now she understood. Like the slogan daubers and barfly blowhards, kids his age who wanted the romance or the adventure — or just the added self-worth — had their place in the Revolution. They'd be the key to having enough support for the new regime afterwards. A storm was coming, and they were the windbreaks: bending, but not breaking.

Hold your nerve, she wished him silently. Liberty is coming.



## **A Motility Predicament**

**by Alan Vincent Michaels**



"These effing ferns are seriously resisting my machete now," I complain into my comm, wiping my gloved hand across the thick moisture coating my helmet's face shield. "It's like trying to chop rebar in a sauna. We used to cut through these plants like they were marshmallows. Sarge, can't we use the doc's new weed killer, instead?"

"Life is sacred, Corporal Barnes. We didn't travel eighteen hundred light years to make this floral paradise another Earth. If the spray tests out and doesn't cause major genetic damage to these plants or us, then we'll use it. Until then—"

"We are the apex predator — flora and fauna — on Kepler-452b, right?"

"There're no animals here. Captain's orders are to keep all the plants to the base perimeter. Quit your jawing and flame them back to the fences!"

"Yes, Sarge!"

I slide my machete into its sheath, then pull the business-end of the flamethrower from its mount on my back fuel tank, hoisting it and the fuel line over my shoulder. I turn towards the invading green plants and press the trigger, shooting a high-octane spread, burning the ferns to the ground.

"Effing glad for my suit," I whisper. "I doubt it smells like violets out there."

...

"Sarge, we just scorched these effing weeds an hour ago! See the burnt ground? It's almost all covered now."

"Son of a— they're breaching the electric fence faster. We can't put more juice through it without it melting. Maybe, doc's got that weed spray ready."

Sarge taps the comm button on his wrist. "Doctor Meridine. It's Sergeant Williams. We're coming to the lab. We have an urgent situation here."

I watch Sarge nod his head after the doc acknowledges the impromptu meeting.

...

"Gonna get me some weed killer!" I say.

"Captain's got us flaming the plants," I say to Sarge and the exophytologist. I shift my suit helmet under my arm.

"These ferns are becoming uber-resistant to everything we throw at them," Meridine says. "They regenerate now like they're riding a bio-hyperdrive. It's amazing, but unreal, to watch the cells under a microscope."

A powerful banging noise fills the lab, then stops abruptly. The doc looks at the fuselage above our heads where the sound emanated the loudest.

"It's as if..." she says, trailing off in thought.

"As if?" I ask.

"As if they are not individual plants. Rather, they're a network or even a single organism."

"They're ferns," says Sarge. "Just freaky plants. You confirmed their genome."

Meredith looks past us and out of the drop ship's main viewing port.

"Yes, the 'plants' are like Earth's ferns, superficially, but they have incredibly dense, lignified xylem and vascular tissues," says the doc. "The twist here is they have

evolved over millions of years — hundreds of millions, probably — in one of the strangest of non-fauna environments we've ever discovered."

Her voice starts to falter as her eyes focus on the viewing port.

"Like ferns, they have motile gametes," she says, "And that motility extends to their physiological structure. Over the last couple of days, I saw no predicament with their ability to creep. Luckily, they don't seem to move too fast for us to—"

She stops mid-sentence, as light cast on her face from the aperture dims.

"I was wrong!" she says. "We can't burn or spray our way off Kepler-452b in time!"

"In time?" I ask. "What the—"

The ferns cover the viewing port. The planet's once-harsh, blazing light now causing a soft, greenish glow to suffuse throughout the lab. The drop ship's fuselage begins reverberating randomly; a metallic, cacophonous symphony under the pressure of the plants' assault.

I hear crew members' screams, then rapid gunshots come from somewhere down the corridor. I watch one of my team run past the lab hatch, grab the edge, and pull his head in.

"The fern-vines burned a huge hole through the loading ramp. They're everywhere! They're using fire, somehow, but it cuts like a laser!"

He backs away from the hatch, then turns and runs. Thick, probing, fern-vines writhe quickly along the corridor floor and walls towards him.

"Vines are everywhere! Save yourselves!" he shouts from a distance.

Several large fern-vines enter through the lab hatch, cutting off our escape and access to the flamethrowers.

"No effing way!" I shout as a fern-vine slithers across the lab floor towards me, and I back up against a testing table. The vine slides quickly over my boots, then tightly encircles my legs, moving upwards, leaving no doubt that my head is its target.

I grab the large weed killer dispenser from the table and pop the safety. I spray the thick, foaming, vile-smelling chemicals wildly in every direction.

"No!" shouts the doc. "Our bodies can't resist—"

I scream as I watch my body dissolve under the foam and the weight of the plant's onslaught.

"I hate effing weeds!" I shout into the smothering, soft, green darkness.



# Seeds of Resistance

by Morgan RR Haze



You would think that leaders would study history to avoid making the same mistakes. But this alien empire hasn't learned the lessons from our past. It thinks that by suffocating everything they will gain dominance, not realizing that the little seeds of dissent within us humans will always find a way to bloom.

The cracks are already starting to show in the drab uniformity they seek to impose. A Whisper here, a Murmur there. But the biggest threat is those who simply stand their ground. Resistant to assimilation, not outright rebellion.

The reaction is extreme as they try to stomp them out. Or try to tempt them into caving. But from conviction comes Resilience, and an underdog's example of strength inspires others.

Through the cracks wildflowers, they deem as weeds, will grow. In turn widening the cracks.

Resistance is growing. It proves true the ancient proverb from our Homeworld, "they tried to bury us. They didn't know we were seeds."



# When the Deaf are Kings

by R.S. Nelson



Sergeant and I board the spaceship, anchored now to our own. We show the old guy our weapons and he doesn't flinch. I tie his hands up front and he looks at my eyes instead of my breasts, unlike most convicts. We're ready to turn the guy's room upside down, but the cargo is in plain sight.

"We're confiscating this." Sergeant points to the brown box on a table.

It's a small box, considering the exorbitant amount the rich asshole who hired us is paying, enough to cover my Earth's yearly salary.

"I'll call the boss. Watch him," Sergeant says, and leaves the room.

I wait for the old geezer to beg or cry like the others, but he does neither. Instead, he makes a low, steady humming with his mouth, like the bees used to do when they still existed.

I freeze.

The humming becomes a steady tune and I look at the corridor. Sergeant is nowhere in sight.

"Stop that," I order. "You're breaking the law."

I point my gun to his face, but he lifts his chin. His dark, ancient eyes — deep like the ocean — stir up a memory. I lower my gun and a half-smile appears on his face.

He sings a song. One I haven't heard in a long time.

"Stop," I whisper. "You will have us both arrested." I look at the door again. What is taking Sergeant so long? Did he go back to our ship?

But he doesn't stop. His melancholic song echoes in the small room instead, bringing words of freedom, and making my heart beat faster. My father used to play that song all the time, especially when the war started. The last time I heard it I was barely six years old. It slipped out of my father's lips right before his execution, his last act of rebellion.

When it ends, we're both quiet.

He tilts his head. "Do you know the song?"

I look away, so he won't read my face. "What's in the cargo?"

"Old, invaluable records."

"Were you selling them?"

He scoffs. "Is that what they told you? Of course they did," he says, not waiting for my answer. "What they didn't tell you is that they will destroy the records. All of them. When the rich got in power they wanted to silence their voices, just like they silenced ours. Or so they believed."

"I don't think that's—"

“The music doesn’t belong to them. It is meant to be shared.” He looks me dead in the eyes. “They can take my records, and my life, but they will not stop my voice. I will die singing.” He throws his head back and closes his eyes.

I think of my father, his music, his execution. He sang his song because there was power in it. The men in charge knew it and took it away, just like the rich asshole will do to this man.

Before I know what I’m doing, I close and lock the door. Then I untie him. He gives me a surprised look and a half-smile. He opens the box and hands me the only record I recognize. My calloused hands run over the smooth vinyl surface and wonder if my father ever touched it too. The old man produces an old record player from under his bed and soon, a woman’s powerful voice fills the room.

Sergeant pounds on the door, threatening to break it. I ignore him and his yelling. Soon, the rich asshole goons will arrive. Soon, but not now.

I close my eyes. The singer is telling me her story, and I want to share it with the world.

R.S. Nelson is a Latina writer who lives and finds inspiration in Southern California. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in Every Day Fiction, Spillwords, Afterimages, Flash Fiction Magazine, and elsewhere. She was also shortlisted for the Women On Writing latest contest.



# Short Story

## Grounded in a Black Heaven

by Ryan Parker

Every night I'd return to my car to squat, not fly. Living in a car sounds fun. Fly for hundreds of miles, see the world blinking day in and out through fake trees and monolithic boxes floating about random paths. It was a childhood dream. Only that dream warped into a nightmare once realized.

The second year into the drift I lost Gregor. He's alive somewhere, but he might as well have cremated himself. He fell into cards in a bad way. ICU to be exact. I don't remember the original name. Retired, dead, or current unfortunate, no one does. You didn't play them on holotab or anything on the list of e-waste devices. Paper ruled the underworld. Entering whatever ground-level den made you feel a fool. When I saw blank cards, I threw a fit. Sharks swindled me! No better than a fixed slot machine!

A player handed me a tab of plastic film. It melted on my tongue like cream. I saw the world for the first time. Space and time became legible. Pomp and pageantry; delusions of money and class left me as a void hungry for knowledge wielded my desire. The cards lit up. A secret Babylon of images and hieroglyphs depicted worlds forgotten, of men in metal buckets and large knives. Shadowy roughs in sunhats armed themselves using primitive pulse pistols with rotating cylinders.

I chased that delusion for many years. I stopped. It slowly killed me, and I let it. Gregor intended otherwise. Our tongues rotted, our knock-off cybernetics replaced our teeth, pumping painkillers into our molded gums. Yet he couldn't stop. When I asked him *why*, he answered, *what else can there be?*

Rin and I left him. I hope he is well, holed up in some clinic. There's one on every box, level, and corner now. I'd waste my time searching.

Rin is my dog. A good lad, not one of those clones or replications maimed and sold in megastructure basements. A pure kind. Being quite the specimen, scientists had toiled with him in their fancy Ringstations above the atmosphere. Scars pattern his rat-grey coat. I'm still not sure how he escaped. Maybe a handler enjoyed a bender

that somehow shit him onto a low-level street corner. Rin had a chip. When I found him (Or did he find me?) A woodcarver to remove the microscopic scale. It was the only sharp object I had.

I took Rin to the Sands when he recovered. As far as you can get from New Boston or any floating atmosphere. The waste lay flat, open. Dirtless deserts ran level as far as the eye could see. Only faint lights of the megacity assaulted the twilight. I gave him pads. Even at night, the ground reddened my feet through my stolen shoes. Rin ran so far. He didn't pick a particular direction; he just ran.

He held his shit until the ride back. All that open space, and he chose the passenger seat. I'd never wish him harm, mind you, but at that moment, I considered flying into oncoming traffic. No self-cleaner like newer models. I had it for years, but drugs clouded most of our history from my mind. None of those fancy implants paint my brain. Did I find it in a scrapyards? Or jack it? It flew, but that's about it. On our ride back, it died. I nearly crashed it, because no sounds of despair from the engine warned me. I barely made it back to the city. Sort of. I had no credit to squeeze into a hangar or garage, so to the undercity it was. Below ground level. People didn't go there. A ruin beneath a sprawling metropolis that spread over the entire seaboard. A shell of what once was, cracked streets twisted wretchedly in random, confusing curves and angles. Collapsed huts dotted the mangled grid in stark contrast to structures further up reaching for space in the dim blue distance.

The car landed just before an overpass. I tried pushing it under a highway tunnel, but it's difficult hauling a metal beast without wheels. The area was exposed to the sky, a patch of light on concrete at the bottom of a sinkhole of urban wreckage where something had torn through, or torn free. Rare, given the spiderweb buildings and pathways that make up the shining city above. The sun and cloisters of colonies on the moon bathed the haunted area through omnipresent dust. Ghosts warmed the place. It was almost worth receiving the vomit of vacation boxes. The flying resorts dumped tainted water mixed with fine gruel. It rained black when it passed above.

It's hard to find the basics for survival in a dead civilization. Even in a dead city, you aren't alone. Something about the old tunnels and bridges for ground vehicles summoned ghosts. You don't need a hologram to see death wandering the streets.

No food could be had yourself. The car's water filter only yielded so much hydration. Heaps of scrap metal were the key. Real metal. Not the ones above that bolstered unnatural strength and tireless longevity. True iron's aroma of fresh blood sold as a hot commodity for collectors of odd trinkets and historians obsessed by the classes of old. No one built with it - not with the sturdier, invented elements of today. The right contact meant plenty of credits - a good thing, because food was expensive down there. Hauling it up to buyers and go-betweens was quite the challenge. The first haul, shards of what was once a lamppost nearly broke my back from the weight,



and what water I was able to earn from the run was almost lost in the blood that ran from holes where the sharp edges of the scrap dug through my clothes, along my spine. Rin, barking below with worry, made do lapping up the drippings.

The poor insight to not give my car a tune-up before such a long journey haunted me. It took two days to fight a proper ascent. I stumbled upon a kindly surveyor. They offered me a charitable ride up on their hauler.

My bounty sold enough to bargain for food and a tarp. Nothing for my vessel. Partly because I wouldn't know the first thing to get. At least the plastic sheet warded off the tar. Nearby steam factories just above kept the temperature decent enough. Rin and I almost enjoyed the outdoors. I fashioned a nice shelf out of rubble, glued by the weight alone. The nonperishables survived the oppressive moisture in the cool jagged stone.

I still slept in the car. Rin preferred the outdoors. Guilty, I made him a little bed out of a spare car seat. I tore out some fluff and placed it under a blanket. The car wore the first mask of a home. I wished I could fly, but for now this was enough.

Reputation followed several more hauls with the surveyor. Maxim worked as an architect once. He'd grown tired of designing playgrounds and dusting off solar panels for those on the spires; wanted to spice things up. The lost labyrinth of the past served as his personal jungle. He never treated me dumb. My eye for pure metal was too valuable for him to denigrate like that. The factory level was a cornucopia of back-end buyers. I made good credits through his contacts in the Sweats. I graduated to legitimate buyers in half a year.

My little tent expanded. I had no need for a house. Not even a little hut. I bought a purifier Maxim helped me install. It stole thick particles of muck and rust from the air before it reached my lungs. Pure water leaked from its steamy exhaust. Solar power was hard to come by since smog and boxes dominated the sky. Luckily, I jimmed some power from a forgotten circuit line in a foreclosed warehouse not two minutes above. We needed a lot of wire, but the machine pattered alive.

After that, the first wave immigrated. Space workers often returned to Earth to find their cells taken or demolished altogether for a stupid art museum or hangar, of which there were already hundreds per level. Corpos with too many credits to spend sponsored these at the cost of other's livelihoods. A gathering of Ringstation custodians found their entire apartment bloc replaced by a Hawai'i themed park. Winds of iron and copper reached them, so they dove.

By that time, my tent had expanded. I used an extra layer of tarpaulin to keep the black rain at bay. My little canopy had reached the highway tunnel, the shelter I so desperately craved. The tent hall resembled one of those oases of pre-flight Middle East. Just dustier, if possible, and without color. They looked pretty, so I leaned into it, replicating the style as much as I could. Maxim soon also set up shop near its

mouth. In his excitement at our little enterprise, he had forgotten to pay his ever-rising rent and asked to join me at the overpass. I agreed and split my earnings. He had much better taste than me. His earnings were put to clever use, building a proper storage shed. It filled with bounty and acquired tools. Even some borrowed consoles lined the shelves.

New arrivals settled away from the cave. No one from above understood true darkness. That changed quickly. One of the crew, a godsend electrician, constructed insulated wire by hand. They worked with Maxim to spread our web to the tunnel. After fidgeting with a panel under the tarmac — one we never realized was there — the void burst alive. White, angelic light shot from the bay. Everyone wept that night. Rin hurtled as far as he could at a pace I had never seen. The gathered worried about how long he left. I knew better. I found him sleeping in his bed the next morning, cradling a femur in his paws. I chose not to think about where he got it. Dogs also need to eat.

Maxim and I made enough to surprise our ragged crew with a trip to the looming resort box. I went out of spite. For a week, I dominated the root of so many problems. Maxim ferried the gang over several trips; our Ringstation friends had no transport of their own. I shudder to think about them climbing down into an unknown realm of gaslight.

The concierge hesitated to admit us. I had forgotten the last time I showered, and I certainly hadn't looked in a mirror for months. Credits plus a generous tip changed his mind. Floating on the magnetic kiss of constructed saltwater aped my dream to fly again. The rest of it — seeing children and adults frolic between palm trees, kicking sand, yelping at the pinch of a mechanoid crab — I could do without.

I'd done my research. Little is needed outside cooperative joy. We had our village. One we made.

More came. The proprietor of the outdoor bar, Zerrin followed us home from the box. The red sheen of his robotic arm matched the cruel markings of fake sunlight on his skin. They brought liquid relief and fine dining. Well, as fine we could get in the urban wasteland. Using some implanted sixth sense, Zerrin found a silo full of grain not a week into his stay. Everyone got fucked up that night. Except me. I left that path.

An influx of nomads swelled the fledgling colony. The arrivals were like the rest of us: the forgotten dust at the bottom of a wastebin. Junkers, butchers, wanderers. Undesirables. All sought the village of free living buried deep among the old world. Maxim's stores and Zerrin's taste provided enough for comfort. For now. Yet the fear of unsustainability dawned on the camp. Feeding a handful could be done. But a few dozen? Hundreds if the downward migration continued?

An assembly of the old guard: myself, Maxim, the Ringspacers, and Zerrin, dared to ask the question: do we rescind our welcome? We all thought of it, much to my

own shame. Where will they go? They'd reached the voluntarily-forgotten bottom of society. Do we doom them to deep digger?

No. I couldn't allow that. We consented to the first policy of our little town. Earn your keep.

We rejected credits as payment. That went against everything. I still slept in a fucking car. Nor were the original pilgrims exempt, me included. First everyone jumped to scavenging. Most of the volunteers had blind eyes for quality. Still, we broke even on quantity alone. Only Zerrin had the cybernetics to lift the great slabs and truss with ease. The rest of us had to drag. What we couldn't sell we used to build. Someone welded together a few carts for our pleasure. The electrician gifted a rough, skeletal prosthetic leg to a maimed factory worker. Credits were spent at each's own comfort. Many volunteered small donations for supply trips. Several former ex-navy pilots smuggled a set of conveniently unmarked hyperdrive batteries to the camp. Though they held less than a gallon of fuel, it was enough to power what we built for decades. Their ships hauled our cargo even further up the skies. Labor, then art, teaching, and sitting children; each new skill built the foundations for the next need.

Protein farmers cut asphalt and tilled layered terraces into the winding roads of the city. With better tools, volunteers built a plastic hollow to guard against the acidic rain of the boxes. Hydraulic pumps lined the summit of the grand greenhouse. We ate our first crop of mushrooms a few weeks later. The first building we erected. Maxim failed to hold back sobs as Rin stole his ear of corn.

Time passed like the hot breath of labor. What had once been a wreckage among ruins morphed into a tarp-laden shanty. After that, a bustling frontier town breached the horizon of smog. We built this. No AI or nanotech. Not even screens determined our fates, nor did cybernetics save an extra limb or two. Our hands turned to meat, our throats were singed by the ashes of the earth, but we liberated ourselves.

We were free.

The town built my home last. I fanned off the offers as long as I could. At one point I flashed a charge pistol in my waistband as a group of builders hauled stone to my camp. I didn't want it. Maybe a part of me felt unworthy of all this. So they waited.

One night I left the dome of New Boston with Rin in tow. I borrowed a skimmer jet, a fossilized military model of the first era of the spacefarer. When I returned from the Sands, an urban oasis waited for me. The pilot who lent it must've ratted me out. The bastard. I bellowed fury. A blasphemous act. Until then, my life had been making a sort of progress that I was only dimly aware of; a silent statement rejecting poverty in a world where the few hoarded the plenty. Now I had more than I needed and it hurt.

The crackling tarp roof had vanished. Hanging above my car — which lay untouched — dangling lights crisscrossed up into a pyramid-topped cloth tent, supported by wooden scaffolding. The lights emitted an intimate glow matching the volcanic sunset of the Sands. A soft white dune had been layered atop the tarmac. I let the rocky feathers sift through my toes.

I fainted into Maxim's arms. *Thank you* was all I could whisper before drowsy black took hold. I woke up smiling on the soft cushion of sand next to Rin's bed, beside which he dug a shallow hole for his unquestioned femur. I finally gazed at the cracked rearview mirror. I saw a doppelgänger — it couldn't be me. The color glowed on this woman's face. Cheeks grew full where they were once hollow. Seeing what was, I sobbed. Rin whined when he saw me cry. He crawled into my lap.

What else can there be?

We cleaned the makeshift streets. Gardens glowed green at night. Credits now bought medicine and books for newly risen halls. Every theory, every lecture and equation above us prophesized our town crumbling. By privileged account, we should have begged and groveled for a can of expired meat. We threatened them through existence alone.

Inevitably, those forces rained fire upon our Elysium.

Guns were a rarity in the dark. Bribing the right people saved us the hassle of dispersing arms among the untrained. In hindsight, that was a bad idea. When floodlights and wailing sirens descended, no one knew what to do. Two cruisers thudded feet from the nearest home. A small squadron of NBPD footmen filed out of the cabin doors, spewing orders and acid through their beetleface masks. In minutes, blackcoats held the entire encampment at gunpoint. A trim man in a plastic suit slithered through the soldiers. His ratty face insinuated the theft of ship parts from a military base in Baja. The ex-pilots of the camp turned their faces to stone as scanner drones bathed the camp in bordered digital light. Everyone knew we had batteries. Where though, only the pilots knew. Whatever is divine bless them. We should've built a theatre. The entire population forced down their eyes and desperate whimpers as a drone scanned the bordering walls. We held our shock when it returned, finding nothing.

The suit disliked being made a fool by dirt. He pattered vague threats and hooked the jaw of one of the stone pilots in frustration. The squadron ascended. The suit had only a broken hand as a reward. He promised the full tide of the law, but laws that enslaved us held no sway.

The suit's words turned out to be a curse. For all I know maybe he did cause the storm somehow; dumping some huge box's entire waste tar supply on us. Black torrents ravaged the site that night. Tendrils of ink flooded the streets and stole unsecured structures. The whirlpool into the dark void of the city sucked everything

not strung down. It stole a child from us despite our attempt to net them from the oozing tide. I closed my eyes before they sank. I couldn't plug my ears from the screaming; lest I released my grasp and joined the murk. There is nothing as powerless as letting a child die just out of reach. My group climbed and crawled uphill to the highway tunnel. We found only a moment of refuge. I nearly blacked out catching my breath and coughed up the dark bile nesting in my throat. We had suffered, but in that moment I believed we could still rebuild. Then I opened my eyes and saw past the mouth of the tunnel. True hell reigned. Fire was coming.

Infernal ruin ignited the rivers of waste tar. The volcanic streams weaved through buildings and tents like a serpent. Its slithering trail left charcoal and lava where there had once been homes, shops, gardens. Hope: a field of ash to rejoin the forgotten ruins hugging it. Flakes of burnt cloth flew about like moths desperately buzzing for light. Ideas reminded me of flames once; a tool of survival which exploded into infinite light, sewing flickering seeds of possibility. Inevitably it branched into a tree of light and divinity. I wonder if that was how the first men felt about it, before the flames of ambition became a tool for war.

Soldiers in sleek armor charged with rifles into the chaos. The mercs shot immolated tangles of muscle and bone for extra measure or for sport. What few skeletons of buildings remained were demolished with grenades. With no choice, we fled into the cold dark of the lost highway. We didn't get far before the hornet-like whir of drones whispered to our ears. One survivor smashed the hidden circuits, flushing darkness into the cave. They rushed us into a service hall. No hinges held the door. They had to hold it in place. The ruinous spin of engines grew closer. Sickly blue glows of their scanners crept through the gaps in the doorframe. Someone held her daughter's mouth closed as she clasped her own. It slipped multiple times on her tears.

We waited for the end. At least we had tried. While others toiled and survived on spare change, we had helped one another in kindness and good faith. We had chosen life. The scanner blinded us. No one registered the mother's wail in this final moment. The light brightened, blinding us like moths who touched the sun. Closer. The growling engines sliced our ears. I closed my eyes. They would not earn my respect. But the whirring faded. Soon distant echoes remained.

Then silence. Crippling, harrowing silence.

If I opened my eyes, I feared gazing upon the true underworld. I gasped blindly. There was no choking gas. I opened my eyes. Infernal fumes did not dry them. The ghostly neon vanished. No footsteps of armored demons clouded the hole beyond. After an hour, the drones passed once more, their scanners dark. That's the thing with metal left untampered by forced evolution – those materials kill piercing

scanners. No wonder our hyperdrive batteries remained hidden. They light our city to this day.

Everyone feared emerging. Hunger and thirst laid siege a day in. Ronan, the fellow who guarded the door, who had failed to warn us of the enemy's approach though none of us blamed him for it, volunteered to scout what remained. He returned an hour later and guided our trembling legs out of the tunnel, having witnessed the last corpo transport depart. We shared a silent meal in the graveyard among a rash of floating embers. No one cared if we were caught. I neither drank nor ate, though my throat felt dry for an eternity. How could I consider nourishment at the sight before me?

It wasn't the scorched ruins that haunted me. It was the hands. Dozens of black-boned digits reaching for paradise or the worlds from which they came. I still don't know which one. I should have burned for my ideas, not them. Sometimes I still think I will.

Zerrin eventually returned with his own group of survivors. I stopped dead feet away from embracing them. Only a blackened stump remained where his true arm had been. Somehow, he casually strolled to our kindred and began chatting. Just that. Talking. Not about the massacre, nor anything, really. He told stories of his time as a barkeep; how he'd string up drunken nuisance to cook in the false star. Laughter filled the void. I shook my head free of the foul thoughts. This place hadn't died. Its people, now few, still drew breath; the only source of contentment I had ever felt. Parts of its crisped heart still beat. The city lived. It wasn't a lie.

Heleana, one of Zerrin's groupies, donned a strange black box on her shoulder. She held it out to me. A circular glass stared from its center, encased in plastic. A camera. It took us the better part of two days of tinkering and avoiding roving patrols to connect the camera to a holotab. We relived that night watching the footage. I had to step away. Zerrin called me over with a soft, depressed whisper. I feared what I expected to see. My thoughts matched reality. The soldiers had taken Maxim from us. The architect, the builder, fell fighting. He shot and tackled as fire stole his skin. He didn't scream once.

Our group memorialized Maxim and the rest in an outdated parking garage far away from the ash lands. Everyone else drank themselves silly, with Zerrin's hidden stores of hooch. Frantic speeches of destiny and fear wracked the group. Heleana and I kept as much order we could muster. When the rest passed out, the two of us brainstormed our next move. Maxim had hacked the tablet long before he joined my fledgling tribe. The monitor accessed the net but could not be traced. We only shared a nod. The footage uploaded that night, and we waited. We destroyed the holotab anyways.

The next day, the six-month riots began. As we huddled in our caged refuge — more survivors returning by the day — supernovas painted in the sky. Monoliths collapsed and spewed grey dew, blocking the sun. Daylight vanished weeks at a time. Downtrodden morphed their grief, their poverty, into rage. Hangars burned, spitting toxins from great colony ships. The neon lights of the corporations lit the thick dusts with fireworks and streams of liquid aglow. Eyes traded for revolution. The promise reached above. All we did was wait. Our work was done.

Rebuilding took time. We feared renewing our presence. Even after rumors flared the net with news of compromise, we were savvy enough to wait out propaganda. Zerrin stowed away one night, determined to calm our tension. He returned in a cruiser with a chrome arm. Both were free of tracking plants. He shared looks of disgust as I prodded.

Followers descended shortly after. A fleet of them. Each carried supplies, medicine, labor materials, and seeds. We attracted the hopeful; the good.

After repopulating the somber fields, the ashes of the fallen composted a new garden. In death they granted life. Our first tree grew at the center of the green monument. It birthed apples. We planted its first seedlings atop the overpass. An orchard overtook the once congested trail of fuming automobiles. We called it the Fields of Maxim.

Rin returned when the first tree sprouted. Somehow, I knew I hadn't lost him. I no longer took him to the Sands. A park of open fields took root. A menagerie of flowers donated by our new arrivals colored the hills in polka-dot patches. Green hills. Some days the mutt escapes there of his own free will. He sprints for hours in sunlight. Real sunlight. The boxes ceased their oppressive pattern across the midday sky, as did their cursed rains.

I joined Rin on his adventure one day. As usual, he bounded to every stranger his eyes caught. When he approached one stranger on a park bench, I heard cries from dog and human. Rin launched himself into the stranger's lap; the closest thing to an embrace I had seen from him.

Gregor was unwell. A frail wraith compared to what he was. I almost didn't recognize him. As pale and thin as a skull, his face stood as a monument to self-torture. We sat there for a long while. Neither of us spoke. We watched the bristling trees as we took turns petting Rin. His eyes bored into the distant hills of a new city, free of wage slavery and filth. Restraint to follow one's dreams held no sway. An hour later, he uttered two words in a weak, dying voice.

I'm sorry.

He got up and left. I never saw him again. Did he return to the misery? The only life he knew? I hope not. I like to think he stayed in our little metropolis. Maybe he isn't ready. Does he need to experience more suffering before he can move on?

I moved to a house. The car still stands where I landed, but it became unhealthy. We all deserve good things, no matter what we tell ourselves. I work like any other, of course. I do so proudly. We all do. I usually tend the orchard. It's a simple life, one of trimming and fertilizing. I take Rin with me when I can. At noon we sit at the first tree to rest and admire the view. From the shade, I'll glance out into the city we built. Are still building together.

We named the city *Promise*.



## One Man's Trash

by W.D. Henning



Athena, my ex-girlfriend, appeared in the grainy video, pleading, “Zeke, I need your help. Please—” My breath halted as she swung her head around to shouting out of camera view. Then the video abruptly ended. Her deep blue eyes, long blonde hair, full lips, and goddess-like jawline mesmerized me, awaking a deep yearning, even in her desperate frazzled state.

Athena was an artist and idealist, surrealistic on both counts. She took a piece of my heart when she deserted me years ago on a starry-eyed quest to save Delphi, a dystopian cesspool of a world. *If only people would discuss their differences in a spirit of love*, she had said.

They didn't.

The guilt of not stopping Athena shadowed me these intervening years. I heard nothing of her until the message ten days ago.

I jerked upon discovering Machennia looking over my shoulder, with amber eyes drawn down into thin slits and firmed lips — her go-to expression when upset with me. She wore her usual form-fitting gray work overalls smeared by her latest repair project. A headband held back thick, curly cinnamon-brown hair. While not glamorous by most definition, she projected a wholesome allure.

But not right now. “When were you going to tell me about this?” she fumed.



Mech was my business partner and spaceship co-owner. We hauled contract cargos and traded within the Oracle system, which included three habitable terraformed planets, numerous space stations, and a smattering of remote outposts. Because so few operable haulers remained, it was a profitable venture.

An ace mechanic, Mech was a fabricator wizard and a plasma welder prima artist — hence the nickname. Those skills, along with upfront capital, were the primary reason we cobbled together several derelicts into one functioning spaceship. This whole venture was a long shot, I remarked once, and that became the ship's name. I knew little about her past, other than she grew up on Delphi and wanted to get away.

I shifted in the chair, clutching a half-full mug of ale on the scuffed galley table, while she stared down at me. Shuddering like a child confronted about a missing report card, I stammered, "I— I was going to tell you—"

Balling hands into fists, her knuckles whitened. "Is that why you accepted the Delphi haul without telling me? To be with your ex-girlfriend?" The words held an unexpected venom, even considering the situation.

"Umm, kinda? I mean, not like that."

Originally, Mech and I promised each other no romantic complications with our business relationship. But then it got complicated. Drunk after our first-haul celebration, we fell into bed together, and have shared a cabin ever since. We then revised our partnership to be more business with benefits.

What was that saying? If looks could kill, I would be dead on the floor? Yeah.

I took a swig of ale, then wiped foam from my upper lip. "This is my latest batch. I think I got the hops and malt balance right this time." Good ale was scarce, so I started making my own, perfecting the recipe over time.

"What does that have to do with anything!" she steamed, apparently wise to my diversion tactic.

"Umm, nothing. Would you like a pint?" I said, lifting an eyebrow. Hoping.

Sighing, she sat across from me. "No. I wouldn't."

My eyes widened. She usually enjoyed a good ale. And when upset with me, typically I get a cold-burn response, not such direct anger. "What's going on Mech? Why are you so angry?"

She huffed. "You're running off to your old girlfriend. Why wouldn't I be angry?"

"She needs my help! I'm not going to hook up with her. Besides, you and I have a no-commitment arrangement."

"Well, things have changed."

Here it was. "How so?" I asked, lifting the mug to take a deep drink.

Mech paused, eyes cast down, while the question hung like smoke. "I'm pregnant."

Ale spewed from my mouth across the table in a frothy spray. My mind swirled toward darkness, caught in the black hole of potential fatherhood. I opened my mouth, trying to say something profound, but all that came out was, "Uhh, How did that happen?"

She rolled her eyes. "Do I need to explain the biology?"

"But I thought you took precautions?"

"Well, it didn't work."

I grasped the table as my mind reeled. "Oh, my God. This is really inconvenient."

Mech's eyes narrowed as she jumped to her feet. "Inconvenient! Is that all you have to say?"

"Look, I know you are upset—"

"Damn right I'm upset!" she yelled, flinging hands into the air. "When I needed you the most, you decided to look up your old girlfriend!" She stomped out of the galley, nearly bowling over Elio at the hatchway.

The nine-year-old boy dropped his jaw as his eyes tracked Mech down the passageway, then turned to me with a blank expression. "Is Mech mad?"

I nodded. "Yep. Definitely pissed. But at me, not you, Elio."

When we hired his destitute parents as crew, Elio and his older sister came along as part of the deal. He helped with janitorial duties and assisted his dad with the cargo.

Archer, the boy's father, was our loadmaster, a massive man with a full black beard who could pass as an old-time pirate. The boy's mother, Selena, a petite redhead, was our ship engineer. Nova rounded out the family, a fifteen-year-old girl with long auburn hair. Smart and resourceful, I have been grooming her as a backup pilot.

"Maybe you should talk to her and make her feel better," Elio said with wide-eyed innocence.

I opened my mouth and nearly launched into an explanation about adult emotional complications, but he had a way of simplifying things. "You're right, Elio." On the way out, I ruffled his bushy dark hair. "Thanks for the advice, buddy."

Mech laid on our bed, facing away from me in the dark bedroom. Through the window above the bed, countless stars, each unimaginably far, circled around as if we rode a carnival carousal, and in a way, we did. The habitat ring, a series of interconnected chambers, spun around a central core, thus providing artificial gravity.

I sat on the bed and put a gentle hand on her shoulder, whispering, "Hey. I'm sorry. This all came as quite a shock. And I can be kinda emotionally clueless sometimes."

She snorted out a laugh. "You think?"

Never had I seen tears from this resolute woman. Drawing her up into my arms, I wiped moisture from coppery cheeks. "What should we do?"

Shifting around in my arms, she snuggled into me, whispering, "Thank you."

"For what?"

"For saying we."

...

Delphi loomed as we approached. I could just make out contours of greens and browns surrounded by deep blues, all overlaid with swirling wisps of white. From up here, it looked like paradise, but on the surface, it was more of a hell. The whole Oracle system suffered from the Red Plague two generations ago, but it was especially unkind to Delphi. Anyone with enough money or prestige fled the system, taking everything of value they could fit into their starships. The lower classes remained behind, fending for themselves among the ruins and rubbish. Warlords emerged from the chaos, providing some stability, but also perpetuating the violence.

No message came back from those who evacuated, not even an errant radio signal. For all I knew, they spread the plague, and other colonized worlds suffered the same fate. Because they took all the star-drives, those of us left behind could not follow. Without faster-than-light propulsion, interstellar travel would take decades or centuries. Thus, we were on our own.

Our destination, the spaceport, appeared as a dot above the planet. It still had a functioning space-elevator that rode up and down a super-strong tether, connecting port with planet surface. The most powerful warlord of Delphi, Vesh LaCroix, controlled it and much of the land below.

"Go ahead." I nodded to Nova, who sat in the pilot seat next to me.

After a gasp and widening of eyes, she keyed the com, announcing, "Delphi Port, this is Long Shot. Request permission to dock."

A response came immediately. "Long Shot, this is Delphi Port. You are cleared to dock number one."

Nova's squeal of excitement brought a grin to my face. This will be her first time as pilot during docking maneuvers — under my supervision, of course.

The control center sat within the center column of the ship at the bow, with panoramic windows looking out on all sides. An eclectic mix of monitoring panels, switches, and gauges taken from multiple abandoned ships, surrounded by six swivel chairs. There was no artificial gravity here, which only existed in the rotating habitat ring that surrounded us just astern. Behind metal hatches were the fusion reactors. Electrically accelerated super-heated plasma sped along a magnetically shielded pipe

to the exhaust cones, thus generating thrust. Forty-two shipping pods attached to the support girders between the reactors and cones contained most of our cargo.

Mech and Selena floated by and took their seats. Archer and Elio followed, having completed final inspection of the cargo.

Selena seemed more excited about Mech's pregnancy than anyone. As for me, a million butterflies took flight in my gut every time I thought about it. Over the last month, the women spent hours discussing aspects of motherhood. At least it helped put Mech's mind more at ease.

"Easy on the aft thrusters," I cautioned Nova, who gripped the control stick tighter than needed. "We don't want to come in too fast. Fully loaded, the Long Shot has a lot of momentum. All we have to do is get close and match velocity, then we let their robotic tugs take over."

After a long journey, two to nine months depending on orbital alignment, so easy was it to become impatient during docking.

I turned back to Mech. "You said you have some contacts to help us find Athena?"

"Yes, but you won't like it," she replied. "There are things about my past..." her voice trailed off.

In our dystopian existence, everyone had a shady past. "Well, it can't be more shocking than the pregnancy thing." Her tightened lips and bowed head made me gulp. "Could it?" I asked, holding back a breath.

"Umm, well—"

The beep of an incoming com interrupted her response. Selena touched a button on the engineering panel, then announced, "Secure transmission for you, Mech. Want to take it?"

"Put it through."

I swiveled around to watch as a tan-faced man with brown eyes and styled dark hair appeared on a display panel at Mech's station. He seemed vaguely familiar. The man's jawline and high cheekbones resembled her features.

"Makennia, it has been a long time," the man said with a blank facial expression.

"Yes, it has, Seth. I hope you are well," she replied with an equally blank expression.

"Your arrival is fortuitous. Father is dying. I know you had your differences, but he wants to see you one more time."

Mech gasped. Apparently, she did not know. "Of course. Can you ensure my safety?"

"I have men waiting at the ground port to escort you. Besides, the Trade Covenants protect you."

Even the most ruthless warlords recognized the importance of inter-planet trade, so regulations were created to protect the traders and to ensure honest transactions. The Covenants saved my life more than once.

"I have a favor to ask, Seth," Mech said. "We are looking for a particular woman. Her name is Athena DeVries."

Seth curled a lip and narrowed his eyes. "What do you want of her?" he hissed.

"It's a personal matter."

"I know exactly where she is — in jail. That bitch was Father's mistress, and she poisoned him!" He abruptly disconnected.

My mind swirled. Athena, a murderess? And Seth, I remember now, he was...

"Holy shit, Mech!" I blurted out. "Vesh LaCroix is your father?"

"Language, Zeke," Selena mumbled while casting sideway glances to her son and daughter.

Mech dipped her head. "I wanted nothing to do with his legacy. When the chance came, I left."

I choked back another expletive. "Don't you think you could have mentioned that Daddy was the most powerful warlord on Delphi?"

She wrapped her arms around herself. "We don't get to pick our parents."

The space-elevator ride to the planet's surface took six hours, the air thick with silent apprehension. Mech turned to me, eyes moist and lip trembling, and I offered her my arms. I could at least do that for her.

Memories of Athena flickered across my mind. Good times of passion and laughter. Then she abandoned me to undertake a foolish quest, yet my heart still yearned for her. My eyes drifted to the woman snuggled against my shoulder. What was wrong with me? Everything I should need for happiness slept in my arms.

Delphi grew larger below us, and the haphazard outlines of cities and roads came into view between the clouds. What was beautiful from orbit resolved into visions of man-made cataclysm. Fractured shells and debris piles had replaced much of a once thriving civilization. But nature did not so much mind, allowing vines and crowded trees to take over broken structures. From some buildings, laminar wisps of smoke rose where people eked out an existence among the trash left behind.

As promised, two burly armed men, who looked like they wrestled bears for fun, met us in the port. Traveling by hover-car revealed the poverty in starker detail. Suspicious eyed people in dirty, tattered clothing scattered from the dust spewed by the vehicle lift-fans, crawling into makeshift structures and damaged buildings. A thin woman in a torn dress nursed an emaciated baby under a fluttering tarp. The blank despair on her face tore at my heart.

A white-washed building with a steeple caught my eye, where people lined up behind a faded sign offering free meals. This emergent religion, which taught selfless love and compassion, was perhaps the only good thing here.

As we approached an agitated crowd that spilled from dilapidated buildings to the dusty street, a brick bounced off the forward windscreen, leaving a jagged crack. Then a clear glass bottle with a flaming wick smashed against a front fan cowling. Spurred by the downward thrust of the lift-fan, an inferno spread out under the hover-car, but only for a moment. Heart racing, I sheltered Mech within my arms as hazy smoke tingled my nose.

"Damned *ordures de rue*," a guard muttered.

Two bullets pinged off an armored side window as the angry mob collapsed inward. The acceleration force of an abrupt swerve threw us sideways as the driver maneuvered. When a scrubby man with gritted teeth jumped in front of us, the driver didn't bother to slow down, striking him with a sickening hollow thump. Within a moment, we left the angry throng behind.

Further along, the living conditions improved, with fewer broken windows and better repaired buildings. Then, the road wound up a long hill toward a walled mansion. Sunglass-wearing armed guards waved us through decorative iron gates. Ornately trimmed shrubbery and brightly colored flowers lined the stone-paved driveway of the massive estate that sprawled across the flattened hilltop, dominated by a tall limestone mansion. Elaborate carvings lined the building, above and below an elevated walkway. From there, Lord LaCroix might gaze upon his subjects in the city below.

Such opulence, while so many people suffered in extreme poverty, turned my stomach. Mech tightened her lips and raised an eyebrow as if in apology.

A formal dressed butler opened massive carved wooden doors, letting us into a white marble floored entryway lit by colored sunlight shining through tall stain-glass windows. There, we separated, arms extending into a lingering hand-hold as we parted. Her eyes widened, peering into mine — never had she seemed so vulnerable. I should have stayed with her, but there was something I needed to resolve.

They held Athena in a separate, plain block-shaped building. As I grasped the prison cell bars, my chest tightened around a racing heart. Seated on a thin mattress, she wore faded orange prison garb. Knees pulled up to her chest with a bowed head, blonde hair hid her eyes. When she saw me, a smile widened on a perfect face, only somewhat marred by bluish bruises.

God, she was beautiful, even here.

Hinges squealed as the guard swung open the metal door. He eyed me warily before relocking it behind.

Athena rushed in, wrapping arms around my neck. "Zeke!" She tilted her head up and pressed full lips against mine, leaning into me for a long kiss.

Old feelings and desires welled up from my core, warming my cheeks. Years ago, Athena ruled my heart and ignited my passions. Did she still?

I separated from her embrace and took a deep breath. The woman I remembered would never become mistress to a warlord, much less attempt murder. "What happened to you, Athena?"

She sat on the bed and shook her head. "You have not seen what I have seen; the poverty, hunger, and degradation of those LaCroix did not favor." Her eyes blazed. "They call these people *Ordures de rue* — street garbage! I had to do something."

"By becoming his mistress?"

"Only to get close, to spy on him. I have no love for that bastard." Athena jumped up, coming nose to nose with me, curling a lip. "Do you know what he did? He reintroduced a Red Plague variant in the streets. But it didn't work. These people have some sort of natural immunity."

Interesting. The plague reared its horrifying head every decade or so across the system, usually with devastating results. No cure existed, and re-infection was common, yet they had immunity?

Athena continued. "Now he plans a more conventional form of genocide: *famine!* Crops failed this year and reserves are low. He only needs to divert the food to starve the people out." She sat back down, lowering her head. "I couldn't allow that, so I took measures into my own hands. But they caught me." Lifting moist eyes, she pleaded, "Can you get me out?"

I turned toward the bars, and a kind of helplessness squeezed my heart. "I have no sway here, Athena. It took all my influence just to be allowed to see you. I'm sorry."

A tear of resignation traced her cheek. "At least, could you help the people?"

"I don't know what I can do, but I will try."

"There is a resistance movement called the *Résistance Rouge*. Go to a tavern in the northern sector called the Jaded Caste and ask for Lucas. Tell him I sent you. Please."

I nodded and rapped on the bars to catch the guard's attention, then turned back to Athena as sadness overtook me. "I wish it would have turned out differently for us."

Embracing me, she said, "I know."

As the cell door slammed shut behind me, Athena called out. "Did you find someone else?"

I turned my head back. "Her name is Makennia."

Athena's eyebrows shot up. "Makennia? Do you mean—"

“Yes.”

A pensive sadness followed me, but there was also a kind of liberation as I stepped into the daylight. “Goodbye Athena,” I whispered to the cosmos, releasing her.

...

Letting Zeke go to Athena was difficult. He had never fully recovered from their split, and she still lured him like a siren. And how could she not? She was stunningly beautiful, and Zeke — tall, handsome, with a carefree, disarming smile — was her stunning male counterpart. And then me — not so stunning. Part of me feared I might lose him.

When I came of age, I fled this place, swearing I never wanted to come back. Not to a ruthless father that valued power over charity, and pride over compassion, no matter how luxurious the life.

A thousand butterflies took flight in my gut as a servant opened the ornate bedroom doors, ushering Seth and me inside.

Seth whispered in my ear, “Father barely holds on.”

“Makennia, come. Let me see you,” a feeble voice called from the expansive bed. “My prayers are answered.”

Prayers? He was never one for religion, nor its call for charity, but I supposed facing death changed a man.

Father’s appearance shocked me. The incurable poison had devastated a once strong man, leaving a paled and trembling shell at the edge of death. Tubes ran under the white sheets that covered him, and multiple monitors drew colored lines above his head.

I took up a frail hand, while Seth held the other. Guilt cast shadows over my heart. It had been so long.

“I know we have our differences, but you have done well for yourself, Makennia,” Father said with a weak smile.

I nodded. “Thank you, Father. That means much to me.”

“And your partner, Ezekiel Quinn, does he treat you well?”

“He does. Zeke is a good man.”

Father squeezed our hands, and a weak smile appeared on his thin lips. “Both my children together. Now I may die in peace.”

And he did. Upon closing his eyes, the monitors drew straight lines.

I bent down and kissed his forehead, whispering, “Farewell, Father.”

My mind swirled. Should I be relieved that a brutal man died, or mourn a father’s passing? But all I felt was distant numbness.

I took in my brother’s eyes. “It falls on you now, Seth. What will you do?”



Seth's face contorted and he bared teeth. "The Ordures de rue shall pay for this a thousand-fold! Starting with their murderess."

"Seth, no," I pleaded. "Do not repeat the mistakes of our father. Violence begets violence. They will retaliate and countless will die."

"Peace?" Seth scoffed. "You have been gone too long, little sister! And now you come and tell me what must be done? They would slaughter us if given a chance. Even now, the Résistance Rouge prepare an attack." He took a long breath and shook his head. "There is something else you do not understand. Food is short, and someone must make the hard decisions. Better they starve than us."

"Please, Seth. Then, let me find a way."

He glared at me and snorted a puff of air. "You may try, Makennia. You have until the mourning period ends. But regardless, the murderess dies tomorrow!" Seth stomped out of the bedroom.

I rubbed my not-yet-swollen belly. In these fallen worlds, so many desperate people waded through the trash of past civilizations. And yet, I dared bring new life? Was hope merely the deceiver of virtues?

When we met again in the foyer, I collapsed into Zeke's arms, letting his familiar warmth flow into me. He whispered in my ear, "I heard. I am sorry, Mech."

"I fear," I said, pulling back in his arms, "that death will consume this world. If not by vengeance, then by famine."

"I have an idea," he said with a sly smile. "But it will cut into our profit margin."

My smile matched his. "I was thinking the same thing."

"Okay. You need to convince your brother, and I need to meet with the Résistance Rouge."

"I'm going with you," I said with all the confidence I could muster.

"No," Zeke said, patting my belly. "And you know why."

Pressing in, I gave him a kiss to remember, then whispered, "Come back to me."

After we again parted, there was one more person I needed to see.

Athena glanced up as I grasped the cell bars. "You must be Makennia," she said, standing. "Your father spoke well of you."

"He's dead."

Athena shook her head. "I will not say I am sorry for his death. Why are you here?"

"You will be executed tomorrow. Probably something public and painful, knowing my brother. I offer you another choice, if you want it." I held out a plastic bottle containing four pills. "A death painless and private."

Athena took the bottle and narrowed her eyes. "Does this absolve your guilt?"

"I am not my father! I do this to avoid the bloodshed your public killing would bring. And for Zeke."

"You love him," Athena said as a statement, not a question.

"Yes."

She rolled the bottle, letting the pills tumble. "Do one other thing for me. Take care of Zeke?"

"I will."

As I walked away, dark guilt shrouded me like a cloud. Were my motives selfish? To claim Zeke for myself? No, Athena's fate was sealed, and this path was best for everyone.

...

Mech's parting kiss still lingered on my lips as I walked into the Jaded Caste, a rundown tavern in the slums that reeked of body odor and stale beer, and asked the bartender for Lucas. He merely grunted in reply.

I hardly had two swigs of sour ale before someone yanked a dark hood over my head, bound my hands, and roughly dragged me out. Apparently, I got their attention.

After a bumpy and uncomfortable ride, curled up in a space that stank of aged manure, they reversed the process, except my hands remained bound behind my back. Pushed down roughly into a hard chair, someone snatched off the hood. I blinked against a bright light directly above in an otherwise dark, dank building. Shadowy figures shifted just beyond the light's reach.

"Why should we not kill you?" a deep male voice said.

"I am not your enemy," I responded flatly. "Besides, I am protected by the Trade Covenants."

"The Covenants mean nothing here, Ezekiel Quinn. Yes, we know who you are and that you come from the LaCroix mansion. What do you want?"

"To stop the killing. Athena sent me. You are Lucas, I presume?"

A tall man wearing dark clothes stepped into the light with his arms crossed and dark eyes drawn to narrow slits. After staring for a moment, his menacing eyes softened. "How does she fare?"

Perhaps he cared for her.

"She is imprisoned, and they will execute her soon." I glared and spat my words. "Was it you who sent her there to die?"

Lucas turned away and let out a long breath. "She was only to spy, to tell us of LaCroix's plans. The assassination attempt was by her own initiative."

"Well, she succeeded. Vesh LaCroix just died. And now his son promises revenge. When will the killing end?"

Spinning around, Lucas grabbed handfuls of my shirt and yanked me up from the chair, shaking. Coming up in my face, he hissed through clenched teeth. "What choice do we have? The elites would starve us out if we did nothing!"

"I cared for Athena too," I responded in a gentle voice. "Her fate is sealed, but we have a chance to honor her by preventing the deaths of those she protected."

Releasing his grip, Lucas dropped me back onto the chair. "How?"

"The first step is an armistice. All hostile activities by both sides must stop."

"What good is that? Famine comes anyway, Ezekiel, and my people would still starve. How could you solve that?"

"A trading agreement, protected under provisions of the Trade Covenants. I will dedicate my next ten hauls, shipping food, medicine, and agricultural supplies to this world. And as a token of goodwill, two pods of raw grains now waiting at the spaceport above us will be delivered to you. Also, a keg of my own ale. The stuff at the tavern tasted like watered-down horse piss."

For a moment, a half-grin appeared on Lucas' face, then faded. "We are a poor people and have nothing to trade."

"Vesh LaCroix called your people garbage, but one man's trash is another's treasure. Athena told me they are immune to the Red Plague?" I asked, to which Lucas nodded. "The sickness still rages and there is no cure. Yet. The other worlds would be greatly interested in determining how you became immune. We could leverage that in trade for aid."

Lucas put a hand to his chin. "How can we trust the LaCroix?"

"It's a leap of faith, Lucas, for both sides. And in that vein, I propose that the religious leaders take charge of distribution to ensure fairness."

...

After the grueling day, Mech and I collapsed onto a mansion guest bed. Like me with Lucas, she convinced her brother to give peace a chance. Tomorrow, we work out the details.

"Do you think it will work?" she asked.

"A society has momentum like our freighter, and it takes energy to change direction," I answered. "But, yeah. Ultimately, I think it will work."

Mech purred as I drew her into my arms, letting her head nestle into my shoulder and triggering warm bliss within my heart. Everything about us felt right.

I whispered, "I would like to alter our partnership."

"Hmm?"

"Let's make it permanent and binding."

She shifted over me, coming nose to nose, and the moist warmth of her breath slid across my cheeks. "Zeke, are you asking me to marry you?"

"I am. Let's be a family."

At first, her soft lips grazed against mine with the gentlest touch, teasing, luring me in. Threading fingers into cinnamon curls, I pulled her down, demanding more.

She responded, pressing in and inviting my tongue to dance with hers. Heart connected to heart, and my entire body tingled as the kiss lingered.

Eventually, Mech rose up, the sweetest smile gracing her lips. "I accept your proposal."



# The Last Spark

by Corina Morera



He didn't know when he had first realized that something was wrong, that such perfection wasn't possible. But the idea that it was all an illusion had become more palpable every day.

The sky above him hardly changed, just as the weather didn't vary. The objects didn't seem to wear out with use or time, as they did in the office. The red paint on that damned wooden bench was still perfect after years of exposure, and he found himself scratching a corner with one of his keys, hoping to uncover the wooden skeleton that must be hidden beneath the layer of immutable varnish.

"So?"

John was startled by the sudden appearance of the teenager. Elijah always seemed to appear out of nowhere, and John hurriedly shoved the keys into one of his jeans pockets while looking up at the red-haired boy, who was watching him with amusement.

"Elijah! Oh my God, you scared me!" John took a deep breath and stretched his arm towards the floor to get a couple of coffees. "Here, I got some special ones, they have caramel, and they're really good."

Elijah took one of the paper cups and sat next to his new friend. John was about twenty years older than him, though it mattered little. Despite his snobbish appearance, with his ash blonde hair combed back, perfect and shiny, he was an open-minded and knowledgeable guy, and Elijah knew that John had been asking

himself the right questions for some time. So, without losing his smile, he pointed to the corner of the bench and repeated the question.

"So?"

John looked at him doubtfully, he knew that the others would think he was crazy, and maybe he was. However, the boy suspected what his friend might be thinking and took the lead again.

"You're not crazy, John. And fortunately, others know this."

John looked at Elijah with wide eyes and took a sip of his coffee, taking another pause before asking.

"What do they know? What others? What are you talking about, Eli?"

"Well, a few started asking questions a while ago. It happens from time to time from what I know. But you must be careful; sooner or later they'll find you and, then, they'll activate the contingency plan."

...

That was where it all began for John. The mission of his life.

And he was thinking about this as he logged into the system from his station in the R26 department. That and Chelsea, sweet Chelsea, whom he'd never see again when he disabled the chips. And of his children, Dylan and Claire, with their tousled black hair full of curls, jumping in that same park where he'd met Elijah a few months before.

However, it was all a lie. Chelsea, Dylan, Claire, Mr. Robinson, the beloved neighbor who used to bring them those sweet apple pies almost every weekend, when they met happily in a yard that wasn't real either.

*I want you to exist*, he thought every time he kissed Chelsea. *I want to hug you forever.*

At the end of each day, he watched his companions enter their capsules and rise to go nowhere. It was the chip inserted into their bodies that told them to leave work and go to their homes, their bars, their parks, their cinemas... when in reality they were still trapped there, ignorant of the macabre reality.

John told himself he would be a hero. He would go down in history for freeing the first wave among his fellow humans, humans enslaved by other humans. And, although he didn't know the real world beyond the Havenor offices, he knew that resources were scarce, that war had ceased being a business somewhere along the way, and that the humans out there would do everything they could to avoid the "noise" generated by their counterpart.

Now, that noise was stored among virtual lies, like dispensable toys, put in their crystalline boxes at the end of the working day.

But they weren't expendable, and the resistance knew it. They were the ones who learned about the sciences — mathematics, physics, robotics, medicine — they were the students and technicians to whom the others turned every day to solve the problems of a world they thought they knew.

However, those who had the resources, and what Elijah called money, were the ones who continued to dominate the planet out there.

But what would happen next? When the chips were corrupted, when the program will leave to serve the perfect fantasy and they'll find themselves asking uncomfortable questions in useless capsules... What would happen when their minds were freed from the shackles of their puppeteers? Would they want that? To say goodbye to their own *Chelseas*, *Dylans*, and *Clares*? To fight for their place in a world that was alien to them?

Maybe the thought itself would make them vomit. It was certainly what John wanted at that moment as he accessed the final panel from his station.

...

And there it was, among the diagnostic tools: the contingency plan.

John swallowed. Elijah had risked a lot by joining them. The young man outside had found a way to infiltrate the simulation and tell them the truth.

He thought of Ruth, Mario, and Mali, heads of a resistance that had long been planning the liberation of their enslaved minds, a plan in which a single piece was missing until they found John, someone who worked at R26.

They were all real human beings. They all depended on what he typed into the terminal at that moment. And suddenly all he could think about was what he'd have given to not try to scratch that blasted wooden bench. For not knowing that Chelsea's smile didn't exist outside the walls of Havenor. For forgetting that his children's silly songs in the park were nothing more than a narrative, a story created to chain his psyche to a life he would never want to question.

And, after a few more keystrokes, he nodded to himself, stood up, and headed toward his capsule with the rest of his companions.

End of the day.

End of the dilemma.

John entered the device trying to convince himself that he had done the right thing. He closed his eyes and let the program sweep to find every "anomaly", every dangerous question, and overwrite doubts and memories with the precision of an expert surgeon.

Elijah would never understand, he'd been born on the other side of the looking glass, with the romantic notion of a child who cannot know what it means to lose everything.

He smiled and thought *ignorance is bliss* before the phrase faded, taking with him the last spark of the resistance.



# Promotion

**from A. A. Rubin**

*We Suck at Comics, Volume 2*, from Wayward Raven, is live on Kickstarter now. The comics anthology features my story *Soul Custody* (illustrated by Marika Broussianou), which was originally published in *Constellate Literary Journal*. *We Suck at Comics, Volume 1* was one of the best comics anthologies in which I've been involved.





# SciFanSat News

## The Bartleby B. Boar Nomination



goes to

**Nicholas Woods**

for their work

**The Rinse**



# About SciFanSat

SciFanSat is a monthly magazine of science fiction, fantasy and more! We are open to fictional prose and poetry that shelters with the range of speculative fiction genres.

Full guidelines can be found on our submissions page, but in a nutshell, we are looking for and will accept poetry of 500 words and under, and prose in the following categories: Micro Fiction (100 words and under), Flash Fiction (101 to 1,000 words), and Short Stories (1,001 to 7,500 words). Each issue has a theme, and submissions for that month are encouraged to include or at least allude to it.

SciFanSat publishes on the last Saturday of every month. Submissions for the next issue open the moment the current issue publishes, and remain open until midnight on the next-to-last Thursday of the month.

## Next Issue Prompt

# SciFanSat

The Monthly Magazine for Science Fiction, Fantasy, and More!

Issue 20  
Theme is  
**Chaos**

Submission Deadline Thursday, March 20th, 2025