

**SPACE
COWBOY**

**Space Cowboy Books
Presents:**

Simultaneous Times

Vol. 2.5

**Michael Butterworth
J. Jeff Jones
Cora Buhlert
Kim Martin
Robin Rose Graves
Renan Bernardo
Brent A. Harris
RedBlueBlackSilver
Douglas A. Blanc**

Acknowledgments:

Little Monsters first appeared in Simultaneous Times Ep. 39, 2021

Remember to Forget first appeared in Simultaneous Times Ep. 14, 2019

Mandela first appeared in Simultaneous Times Ep. 23, 2020

The Time Traveler's Delivery first appeared in Simultaneous Times Ep. 38, 2021

Annotation 037 first appeared in Simultaneous Times Ep. 31, 2020

Root first appeared in Space Cowboy's Flash SF Night #1, 2021

The Watchers first appeared in Space Cowboy's Flash SF Night #3, 2021

The Harme-Oates Effect first appeared in SF Monthly Vol 2 No 2, 1975



2021

Simultaneous Times Vol. 2.5 - Complimentary ebook

All Stories & Illustrations © their respective authors

Cover art by Zara Kand

Edited by Jean-Paul L. Garnier

www.spacecowboybooks.com

61871 29 Palms Hwy. Joshua Tree, CA 92252

Simultaneous Times Vol. 2.5

Table of Contents:

Little Monsters

by Cora Buhlert

illustration by Austin Hart

Remember to Forget

by Kim Martin

illustration by Dante Luiz

Mandela

by Brent A. Harris

illustration by Dante Luiz

The Time Traveler's Delivery

by Renan Bernardo

illustration by Dante Luiz

Annotation 037

by RedBlueBlackSilver

illustration by Austin Hart

Root

by Robin Rose Graves

illustration by Chynna DeSimone

The Watchers

by Douglas A. Blanc

illustration by the author

The Harme-Oates Effect

by Michael Butterworth & J. Jeff Jones

illustration by Zara Kand

Little Monsters
by Cora Buhlert

Illustration by
Austin Hart



HART
21

Lana found the monster on the lawn one morning. Though she didn't know that it was a monster at first, because it looked like a tangled ball of yarn. But when Lana picked it up, it wasn't soft and fluffy. Instead, it felt rubbery.

Lana examined the thing and realised that it was a ball studded with tentacles. Experimentally, Lana threw it into the air and caught it again. Yup, it was a ball.

Lana was about to put the strange ball into her schoolbag, because you can always use a ball, when all of a sudden the ball moved of its own volition. A slit opened in the side and suddenly Lana was looking into an eye, a single neon-green eye, blinking at her. At that moment she knew that what she'd found was not a ball after all, but a monster. A little bitty baby monster.

Monster or not, the creature was obviously small and helpless. After all, it was just a baby and needed someone to take care of it. And since no monster mama showed up to claim her baby, Lana carefully placed the baby monster into her schoolbag and took it home.

She folded a handkerchief – one of the pretty lace-edged ones that Grandma had made for her – and laid it onto the bottom of an old cookie tin to make a nice bed for the monster. Then Lana tucked monster in, closed the tin and shoved it under her bed where no one would find it.

After all, Mama did not want her to have a pet and a baby monster probably counted as a pet. So, Lana figured it would be best if Mama never learned about the baby monster. Because if she didn't know about it, she couldn't get angry.

Before she went to bed herself, Lana pulled the cookie tin with the baby monster out from under her bed. She

opened the tin to look at the creature, which promptly emitted a pitiful wail.

"Oh, I'm sorry," said Lana, "You're hungry, aren't you?"

The monster emitted another pitiful wail, which Lana decided to take as a yes.

"I'll feed you," Lana said. Then she paused in doubt. "How do you even eat? I mean, you don't have a mouth."

Somehow, a fly had gotten into Lana's bedroom. It buzzed around her nose and when Lana chased it away, the fly decided to buzz around the monster instead.

Lana was about the chase the fly away again, because it was not right to bother the poor little baby monster. But suddenly, one of the monster's tentacles shot out, snatched the fly and stuffed it into a hitherto unseen hole that appeared to be a mouth.

"Oh, so that's how you eat. But don't eat flies." Lana wagged her finger at the creature. "Because eating flies is gross. I'll get you something better."

Lana dashed to the kitchen to fetch some food. Since she still didn't know what monsters ate (apart from flies), she picked some cornflakes, a handful of popcorn, a few frozen peas and a piece of chocolate. Then she presented all of those treats to the monster.

Immediately, the monster tried to snatch the various foods, its tentacles shooting out of its spherical body at strange angles, much to Lana's delight. It spat out the cornflakes and the popcorn kernels and the frozen peas caused its tentacle to turn blue, whereupon the monster emitted an even more pitiful wail. On the other hand, it did seem to like the chocolate.

So, the experiment was a success. Lana now knew what to feed her little bitty baby monster, so it would grow big and

strong. Though maybe not so big that it didn't fit under the bed anymore and Mama would notice.

Next, Lana sang a lullaby to her baby monster, so it would fall asleep. Then she closed the tin and shoved the monster back into its hiding place. At last, Lana went to bed, a big smile on her face.

That night, she woke up to a strange beeping sound. At first, she thought it was her alarm clock, her pretty pink alarm clock that looked just like a unicorn. But when she reached for the unicorn clock, she saw that it was only three AM, four hours before she was supposed to get up.

In the meantime, the beeping stopped, so Lana shrugged and went back to bed. "Must've been a dream," she thought, "A very strange dream."

What Lana did not know was that her monster was one of several that had fallen from the sky that morning. Nor did she know that her little baby monster was not a baby at all, but an advance scout of the invasion fleet of the alien Zostorug.

None of the advance scouts fared well. They were run over by cars, trampled by cows, eaten by dogs and shredded by lawnmowers. One fellow, a scout named Zogmer, was picked up by a young boy and promptly used for baseball practice, which caused the alien to fall into a coma after the first strike and expire of brain damage after the second.

One scout, however, got lucky and survived long enough to submit his report to the main fleet waiting in orbit around Earth. This brave scout was called Roznikath and he was none other than Lana's monster. His report follows.

*To Zostorug fleet command:
Urgent!*

Warning! Planet 10579 is inhabited, as our probes indicated. But what our probes did not show us is that the inhabitants are giants. I was captured by one of those giants shortly after landing and cruelly imprisoned in a dark cell with impenetrable metal walls. Escape is impossible. The giant attempts to interrogate me and tortures me with the hideous sounds it makes, but I shall remain steadfast.

I did find a native creature that is edible and surprisingly tasty. But my giant jailer will not let me have another. Instead, I am fed crumbly dry and sticky sweet stuff that is scarcely better than excrement.

Comrades, I urgently warn you. Do not land on planet 10579, if you value your lives and your freedom. Fly onwards and find yourselves another planet, and do spare a thought for this poor, tortured prisoner-of-war on occasion.

Roznikath out.

The fleet of the Zostorug took Roznikath's advice and left Earth's orbit to look for greener pastures. It's not known, if they ever found them, but Roznikath was awarded the Grand Order of Valour in absentia for his heroic sacrifice.

Meanwhile, Roznikath continued to live in Lana's cookie tin as her beloved monster pet. And after a while, he no longer resented his captivity, but began to develop tender feelings towards his giant jailer, a phenomenon that Zostorug psychologists had dubbed Xarguxoth syndrome, after the world where it had first been observed, when the alien prisoners

held there eventually came to love their Zostorug jailers.

And so Roznikath lived out his days as a pet monster in a cookie tin and even learned to like cornflakes and chocolate, for a desperate Zostorug can get used to anything.

Sometimes, he even managed to gobble up a fly or two. And Lana no longer tried to stop him. On the contrary, she was happy that the monster kept her bedroom free of insects, even if she still thought that eating flies was gross.

And so they lived – happily in the case of Lana and not so happily in the case of Roznikath – ever after.

**Remember
to Forget
by Kim Martin**

**Illustration by
Dante Luiz**



"Take away our technology and we're not much different," he told me, "we are very much alike; we want to know the truth-about everything - mostly about ourselves..."

I laughed and told him that sounded like something Doctor Who would say. He tilted his head inquisitively as he telepathically linked with the A.I. back on his ship to search for the reference.

I wanted to kiss him. In that moment, I wanted to know just how alike we were. I wanted to know if he'd kiss me back; if he'd look into my eyes and tell me how beautiful and intelligent and special he thought I was. I wanted to know if he'd grow tired of me, stop finding my body an interesting experiment, start noticing the wrinkles and gray hairs... I wanted to know if he'd find me desirous and deserving enough to accompany him as he explored galaxies and probed minds; resurrected hearts. I briefly imagined a future life with him. He scanned this thought and shot back an all too-familiar one within nanoseconds: "Impossible."

He continued scanning my thoughts faster than I was creating them. My gray matter was being massaged by warm, invisible probes - an oddly erotic sensation.

"Please - don't stop - keep going, deeper...like that...please... I want to forget," I begged him.

He made deep, guttural humming sounds that signaled his pleasure as he interpreted my longings. I closed my eyes in a vain attempt to make it last.

He warned me again of the consequences. No more memories of life as a human. I didn't care anymore. I wanted a way out, or in. I needed a fix but I was sober. I needed love but I was unlovable. I needed a

family but I was alone. I needed my sanity but I was disturbed. I didn't want to die again but I didn't want to live.

He probed deeper, past the hippocampus to the cerebellum (the storage area for "how-to" memories); deeper into my truths. He found a list memory I thought I buried when my father died; the long-neglected instructions I never seemed willing enough to access, yet probably should have.

"How-to Heal a Broken Heart," he whispered twice as he translated the list and connected it to the memories that hardened my heart long ago.

"Fix me..." I wept. He had the technology. "Why won't you just fix me?" I trembled. Memories of my broken hearts swirled and broke my heart all over again: my abusive alcoholic father, my son getting married, the exes who were addicted to porn or drugs or work but never me. The resentment I was never able to purge ate away at me now. I wanted to forgive myself and love myself but I kept forgetting to remember the times when I was someone special. I could no longer remember a single moment in my existence when I was good enough.

We sat facing each other on the rough desert floor under a black night sky, much like the first time he brought me back to life. He's erased so much of me, I recall little of my life as a human, but somehow, he left the memory of our first encounter intact. I remember it as a near-death hallucination: I am alone in the desert. I feel sand underneath me. I am bleeding from stab wounds on my chest, my throat, my side, and my arms inflicted by my ex. My eyes roll, then slowly open and close. "Please...fix me..." I try to scream but all I hear is blood-soaked

breath... I feel hot then cold. I shiver and cough up blood. I feel pressure on my chest. I stop breathing. I open my eyes and I am sitting up on the hard sand; face-to-face with this being. My secret guardian alien. All those years ago.

This new memory I am experiencing as I drift through a nebula, is replaying the night of my ascension. His gaze settled on my face, while his probes caressed my amygdala as he tried to gently erase the pain. The longer he probed, the more it hurt. My heart churned and throbbed. The pain behind my eyes was unbearable, yet comforting.

“Wait...wait...let me hold my son once more...” I pleaded with him to let me experience one last memory of falling in love for the first time; the day I held my son after he was born.

“Wait, not ye...” I tried to scream.

I felt a final forceful rush of blood go from my heart to my brain and then there was darkness.

That was the last thing I remember of my life on Earth all those aeons ago. When I try thinking back to my heartbroken days and lonely nights crying under the full desert moon dreaming of otherworldly contact, the memories aren't there. At times I am satisfied with that result, other times I wish I could feel the memories so I could remember myself. Remember my son. My mother. The sensation of skin touching skin or whispers tickling ears.

I travel on through dimensions hoping to understand, seeking connections, probing frontal cortices, and doing all I can to know the truth about everything, especially myself.

Because, when you take away the technology, we're not much different; we're

all searching. We're all someone else's memory. We're all broken - and no matter how much it may hurt-no matter what truths I find along the way, I won't stop until I find him and ask him one last time,

“Please - don't stop - keep going, deeper...like that...please...I want to remember...”

Mandela
by Brent A. Harris

Illustration by
Dante Luiz



Two hours.

A slogging two hours since my last fix.

I was alone in the house that day, a custom-built desert dwelling; a ranch-style home that had once been occupied by a pillar of our small community. I was anything but. The wife was gone for work. And I was busy with mine.

Assuming, of course, work meant avoiding writing while sitting in your PJs, on a comfy chair, your mind on porn, or ensnared in the latest Netflix binger. Both equate to about the same thing anyway, if you think about it. Try not to. Thinking leads to choice and choices weren't an option anymore.

Yet, sitting there in my malaise didn't bring me any closer to my fix.

I put the TV on pause and pulled out my tablet, trembling fingers stumbling around the power button, nearly dropping the thinking machine on the hard-tiled floor. I breathed in as the device powered on, shut my eyes to the soft start-up tones and a soft, artificial voice greeted me with, "Welcome, Brent."

As the screen refreshed and connected to the web, I breathed out heavily to the latest trending tags and click-bait headlines and opinion pieces on news sites devoid of objectivity (who needs that anyway) and pictures of foods I'd never eaten from places I'd never visit from friends I didn't really know.

Soon, I'd settle into the dopamine dose of comments seen, posts liked, blue birds twittering away – my virtual voice heard.

Relaxed, in the moment of Zen before that high would hit, I saw from a local weather widget news about an approaching storm. It rained now. A lot. Sometimes snowed. The weather had turned severe last winter and looked like it would this December too. Desert sands were mud. Joshua Trees were gone. No one had seen a tortoise in the wild in years.

I could have checked the source. Gone to a different website to verify. Looked out the damned window. Spoon-fed, I did no such thing, but switched the tablet off to do what everyone does at news of big winter weather landing hard on soft bodies. I put on pants and headed to the store, confident that my on-setting high would shelter me from any interaction, like a mask or a flu-like fog might obfuscate you from the world.

I could have walked. The supermarket wasn't that far. Walking though meant running the risk of talking to neighbors or strangers or having a moment of self-introspection that could only lead to trouble.

Arriving at the store, I saw that it was packed by everyone else on their own little highs, their own little micro-doses of the world. It all made sense. They saw the same thing online and reacted the same as I had. Choice was a luxury long lost somewhere to time.

I had just passed the bananas in the produce aisle, just beyond the bakery, when the high hit and the holes in space and time opened.

Snowflake-like fractals cracked and spread across empty air at the same level of the Little Debbie snack cakes. The pattern stretched, the way you might pry apart stage

curtains and stick an eyeball out to see the audience on the other side.

In reality, it was more like a sheet of ice thawing on a sunny day. Given the hole's icy appearance, those annoying trending tags simply dubbed them, "The Frost," after the poet who wrote about paths in a wood diverging. The gateways were mirrors, in a way. I thought of them as more like two-way glass, a reflection of yourself in an alternate world.

Ever since scientists and sci-fi writers proved right about The Big Rip, holes were just a thing that happened. Most of us didn't understand the how. Just that our universe neared its death after its explosive expansion and, as a result, was stretching and ripping itself apart at its end.

Yet the scientists were startled to discover something else: It wasn't just us. There were other universes too.

Imagine a stack of pancakes. Each one a mirror of our own universe, atop each other, infinitely. The entire multiverse had expanded, each one at minutely different rates. As each one stretched and ripped, you could see holes form, from one parallel world to the next, as if they were slices of swiss cheese all slightly askew.

Seeing a wormhole, or a tear in the fabric of space and time, was about as common now as witnessing a shooting star on a crystal-clear night. Assuming, of course, you were cosmically attuned to see such a sight. I guess some people just saw things differently than others.

For instance, I was a Look-See. When the wormholes came, I could look, see the people I might have become had I taken their

paths, made their choices instead of my own. Sounds cool, right?

Trust me, it wasn't any sort of gift. There's no joy in knowing that in every version of you that exists in the universe, that you led much the same life. That swiss cheese metaphor I was talking about earlier doesn't vary much from one slice to the next. You're almost never a rock star. It doesn't work like that. Probably for the best.

I passed the busy Little Debbie aisle, Moon Pies in hand, oddly unafraid at the cracking, icy wormholes opening down each aisle of Stater Brothers.

Afterall, I had Diet Pepsi to stock up on. And Red Baron frozen pizza. And of course, a bottle of Crown Royale Apple Whiskey. Maybe toilet paper. For those were the supplies I sought when the storms came. I felt smug in my superiority that I wasn't grabbing the same groceries as everyone else, completely oblivious that in the scheme of things, Red Barons or Tostinos, Coke or Pepsi, there wasn't really a choice at all.

Looking down from my cart at what should have been the baking aisle, I saw myself. He was a healthier version of me. Slimmer, in activewear, with a blue hand basket instead of a cart, and there were big green leafy things flowering over the edge, things that I could not recognize. He turned away from me, unaware of either myself or the fact that he was in a tunnel of icy, coalescing fractals, converging from his reality into mine.

I nodded to the Not-Me, happy for my slight pudg around the waist. Fit Me wasn't Fun Me, I was sure. *He must be miserable.*

The next aisle over crackled with a different tear in time and space and a different

me. This me looked the same, but with a different woman by his side than the usual tall dirty blonde with the big brains and soft smile that could kick my ass on her worst day and my best.

This woman was shorter, blonder, and a little too into caked-on make-up and gaudy jewelry for my taste. I wondered how this Not-Me and her had met, who she was, how'd they'd come together instead of the happiness I had found. He didn't look any better off. I'm sure he was miserable. If I'd found the love of my life, surely, he couldn't have.

A young woman in yoga pants and a loose-fitting Cal-State sweater passed me while I watched myself down the aisle. She turned, passed through the vision of me and my other wife, and disappeared somewhere behind them, completely unawares.

She might have been one of the few who couldn't see the rips in reality. Who had no awareness of their alternate-selves. There were others, like her, who didn't see anything at all. As a result, they all had something in common: they still strived for greatness, emboldened by a world of choice in which they might succeed.

They were the worst off, because they lived in ignorance. So, they thought and acted and made choices and did all the things we used to do before we knew better. I almost pitied her. Such a waste of efforts.

I was better off in seeing my different fates. None of them were particularly impressive. Others who were like me, who experienced holes and breaks in space-time, who saw themselves cast in a different light in an alternate reality readily agreed.

With few exceptions, like the writer who got the breakout book, the singer with

the sudden hit song, there were simply too many factors that relegated us all to the same minor set of circumstances, like crabs in a bucket that pulled each other down. Too many societal issues that locked us away in invisible cages.

In a sea of infinity, most of us swam endlessly in mediocrity through no choice or fault of our own.

Occasionally, I saw myself with a smile. Signing autographs of my own work at the bookstore instead of buying another Stephen Baxter book. Not in a vegetative state getting my high with my tablet thumbed to the newest social media posts, but busily clacking away at a keyboard in earnest effort to create my own reality, my own fate. In those cases, sure, I wished I might be a Mandela.

They had it the best.

Have you ever thought some tiny detail wasn't quite right, or have you remembered something only slightly different than everyone else? Maybe you live in a reality where you're not aware that the universe was ripping itself apart.

Yet, you're affected all the same; if you thought Nelson Mandela died in prison, thought the Fruit of the Loom label looked off, if you thought chartreuse was pink in color, or if you saw Sinbad as *Shazaam* – You've slipped streams, gone from one reality to another. You might be a Mandela.

I'm jealous. You might just keep slipping streams, like salmon bucking the current, until you arrive precisely in the reality you want most.

For the rest of us, we were stuck. I was unable to move from one reality to another. I lived with strangers wearing my

face; reflections of choices I had made only to reach roads not all that dissimilar to my own. It was rather depressing.

Case in point, down the snack aisle, I saw myself once more. Not fit or with a different spouse by my side, not richer or poorer, but as myself, as I was now, with matching items in our carts, the same Nike shoes with one lace that kept coming undone. I wondered just what odds created a mirror so exact in likeness that I could see myself in its reflection, and I trembled at the idea that in an infinite galaxy, there were most likely more of me just like myself in every detail than I ever wanted to admit.

At home again, with the Crown Royale opened on my desk and groceries stocked in preparation for a storm that was only promised to come, I was away from the wormholes, away from my alternate selves, and back in comfort. Safe.

Yet, my nerves jittered, and my tablet called to me.

With all our choices laid bare, all our options seen like reflections in a fun-house mirror, there wasn't anything to ever do but to trudge along. No matter what choices we made, we could see firsthand that it didn't really matter, that no paths taken would ever make our lives that different than our own.

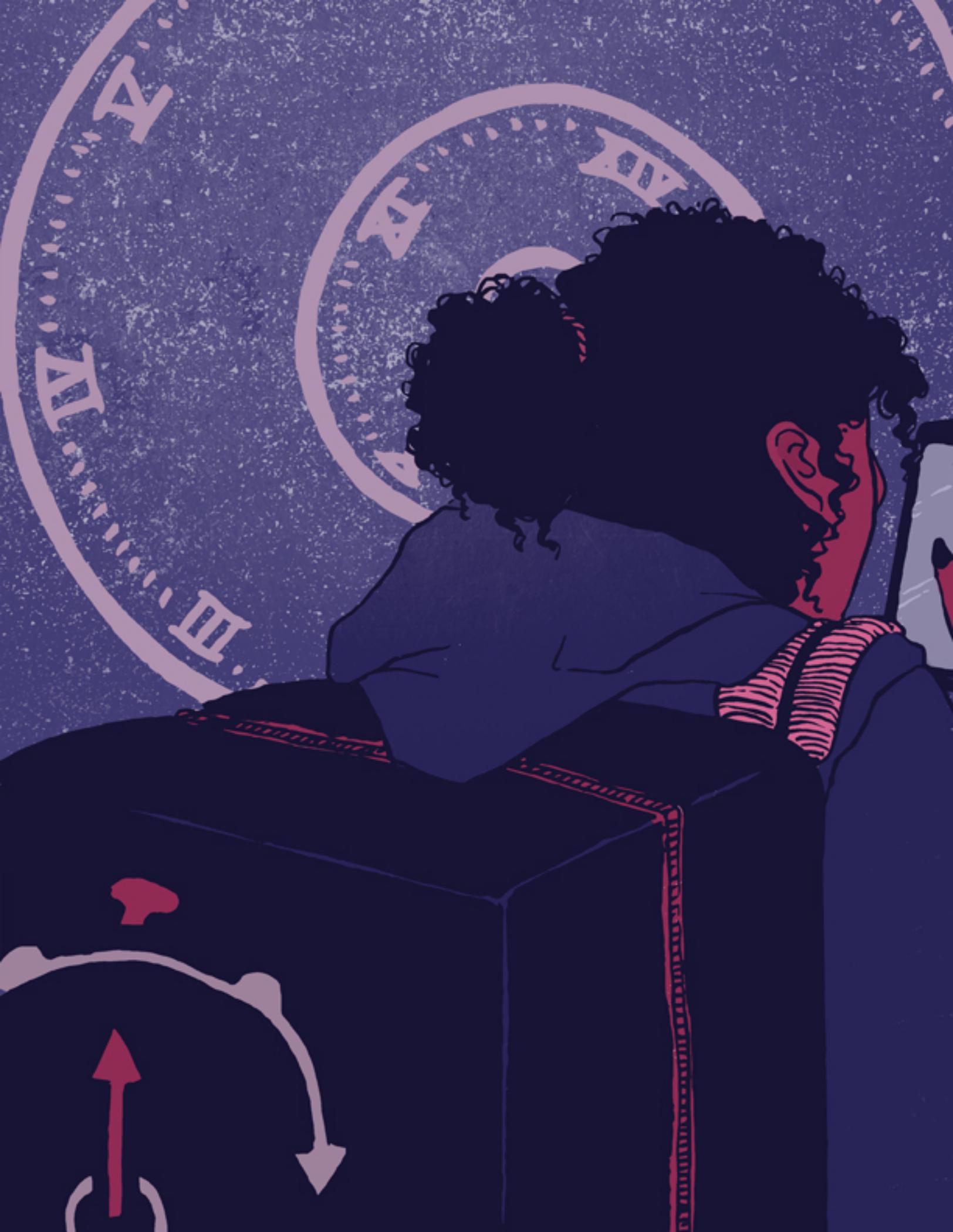
The rips in space-time had come and taken our free will away.

So, most of us lived from one fix to the next. Tolerating reality in the smallest doses, a reality that had been warped and bubbled and twisted to fit our needs and wasn't really real anymore anyway. We were happy and content in that bubble where choices couldn't harm us.

I looked anxiously at my watch. It had been close to two hours since my last fix.

**The Time Traveler's
Delivery
by Renan Bernardo**

**Illustration by
Dante Luiz**



Customers almost never tip.

Chrono-couriers like me are always risking ourselves up and down wormholes to make deliveries. Not even my profile's bio nudges them to tip: Ruby Souza; mother of three; biology teacher working as courier; pic with Doba, my dachshund.

Like last week, in 2187. Cute old lady in an airtight cottage on the moon. I brought her the good old printed spaghetti from 2098's Saladys. Folks like vintage food. She smiled at me, told me my job is lovely and noble, asked if lunar weather in the 21st century was already so dry.

Guess what?

She didn't tip. Not even one Timecoin, which would afford a peppermint tablet to chill me out during the most demanding deliveries.

Like the one right now: delivering a radflush pill from 2122 to 2108 to treat a miner's severe radiation sickness. It's tough because:

1. It's sleety inside this wormhole, the skippod wobbles a lot, and I get queasy.
2. Jan, my youngest, is sick and, as far as I'm allowed to go (2300), there's no treatment but spending a lot of coins on palliatives.
3. The app's going to crunch 50% of the payment because I had to stay home yesterday taking care of Jan.

The skippod shimmies and rumbles out of the vortex into Enceladus's time port. Purple rays leak from the portal's mouth. It never behaved like this. I flinch, shifting to manual control and pulling the levers to dock. I must not crash. Even if the skippod becomes useless junk, I'll still have to pay its hourly rent.

I step out into the port, breath ragged, medicine pack under my arm. Lots of domes pockmark the land. Can't

remember so many in 2108.

An officer in a skintight exosuit walks toward me, frowning at my skippod.

"We'll have to confiscate this," he says.

"What the fires? There's a sick man waiting for me, mister."

"Your skippod doesn't have a regulation tag."

"Is this a thing now?"

"Since earlier this year. All skippods were registered and all chrono-couriers were compensated for years of underpaid services. We're in 2368. When are you from?"

That explains a lot. I'd hurtled through a wrong wormhole and I'm far off of the company's registered years.

"I'm from 2110..."

The man nods. "Please follow me to register you and your skippod."

"I'll do it as soon as I can." I walk back to my pod.

"Ma'am, it's better registering before any further travel."

I enter the skippod and wipe the sweat on my brow.

"Have to deliver a radflush pill first, mister. Before the company notices I'm out of their range. Can't leave anyone sick."

I close the skippod's hatch and set the controls to 2108.

When I'm firing up through the wormhole, my control panel notifies me the miner has tipped me even before I arrive. Twenty Timecoins. Generous tips are rarer than flushing yourself into the wrong wormhole. It might even afford a few peppermint tablets and a day off with my kids for a change.

Annotation 037

by

RedBlueBlackSilver

Illustration by

Austin Hart



DEVICE 003
HANGROVA



DEVICE 003
HANGROVA



DEVICE 004
HANGROVA

037

Section 1

After Device 004 sat in the desert sand near Landers, California, United States of America for nine days, Human Subject J picked it up with gloved hands. Based on her verbal communication to herself, she quickly identified it as "space junk". She may be of unusual intelligence because Device 003 was misidentified by Human Subjects E and F as prosaic - specifically as a part of an airplane. There may be a geographic factor that determines human intelligence. She has not yet noticed the lenses and microphones, as expected due to their size and placement. She placed Device 003 in her bag, and drove off in her surface vehicle to another location in the desert. During this time there was no light available to the lenses and the only recorded sounds were the vehicle's engine and a dog breathing loudly.

Section 2

Subject J conferred with Subject K, male, about the device. J had to convince K it was indeed "space junk". K was concerned about the device's potential radioactivity. They then discussed the proper way to report the device to the authorities. While K wanted to bring it to their local police station, J decided to bring it to her university professor. While a military observation is preferred, there is possible classified intelligence in some universities, so surveillance is currently deemed worthy of continuation. Cameras observed a seating area in the shared residence of J and K with nothing remarkable, and the microphones

recorded the sounds of cooking, a news report containing nothing useful for our purposes, and some form of entertainment.

Section 3

J contacted her university professor, Human Subject L, and informed him of the "space junk". L requested pictures of the device, but J was hesitant due to privacy concerns. J placed the device back in her bag, then back in the vehicle. She was alone - without her dog and K - while she drove the device to be inspected by L. While in the bag, there was no light available to the cameras, and the microphones again recorded the sound of J's vehicle's engine. Upon arrival at L's university, there were too many voices for the microphones to identify any useful intelligence, until J arrived at L's office. After a brief useless conversation, J took the device from the bag and showed it to L. Despite his scientific background, L was not able to distinguish the lenses or microphones from the rest of the device's components. L said "I don't know what it is, but it is not from a plane." L wrote some information on a piece of paper, handed it to J, and said "This is the only person I know that can identify it. He will have to meet you on the perimeter because you won't get past security." Cameras recorded an untidy and rudimentary laboratory with outdated instruments, even by Third Planet standards. Results from the university were limited, but the possible military connection is promising enough to continue observation.

Section 4

J telephoned Human Subject M, a military contractor, and made arrangements to meet on Highway 395 one mile away from the security gates to Area 51, a secondary target of our observation. The device remained in the bag during transit, and when J stopped the vehicle near Rachel, Nevada, United States of America, she quickly handed the bag to M. Neither J nor M communicated verbally. M's security clearance allowed him to enter Area 51, and proceed to the boarding area for the bus to Groom Lake, the location of Site 4, or S-4, the primary target of observation. No intelligence was collected at Area 51 because the device remained in the bag, and no human subjects communicated with each other verbally between Area 51 and S-4. The cameras were only able to record momentarily while M opened the bag to look at the device. There was no light available to Camera 1, but Camera 2 recorded M's face, neck and hair, and the blacked out window of the vehicle.

Section 5

M arrived at S-4, and the affirmative beep from the hand scanner allowed him to proceed through the security gate. There was no inquiry related to the contents of J's bag. Microphones recorded footsteps, muffled conversation between unknown human subjects, and machinery of an unknown origin. M entered a work area and small hangar, and began to speak to Human Subject N: Military Rank Rear Admiral, United States Navy. M removed the device and handed it to N, who then placed the

device in an observation chamber which measured it for radiation and pathogens, with negative result. Upon removal, Camera 1 recorded M and N seated at a table, and Camera 2 recorded an aerospace vehicle whose origin was unknown, but not made with technology available anywhere on Third Planet. There were no crude metal welds or fasteners on the exterior of the craft that would indicate Third Planet construction. Although S-4 is the primary target of observation, there is little useful information from this vantage point. Prospective intelligence may be limited without the device inside of the unknown aerospace vehicle. Microphones recorded M and N discussing Device 004, and although they seemed aware that it was not simple "Space Junk", they did not notice the lenses and microphones. The microphones recorded a brief conversation in which M and N postulated several misguided theories about the purpose of the device. N suggested that he should bring the device inside the cockpit of the vehicle during the next scheduled flight to see if it would react with the instruments on the unknown aerospace vehicle. M thanked N and left the hangar, and N placed the device into a locker, where cameras and microphones had no available data.

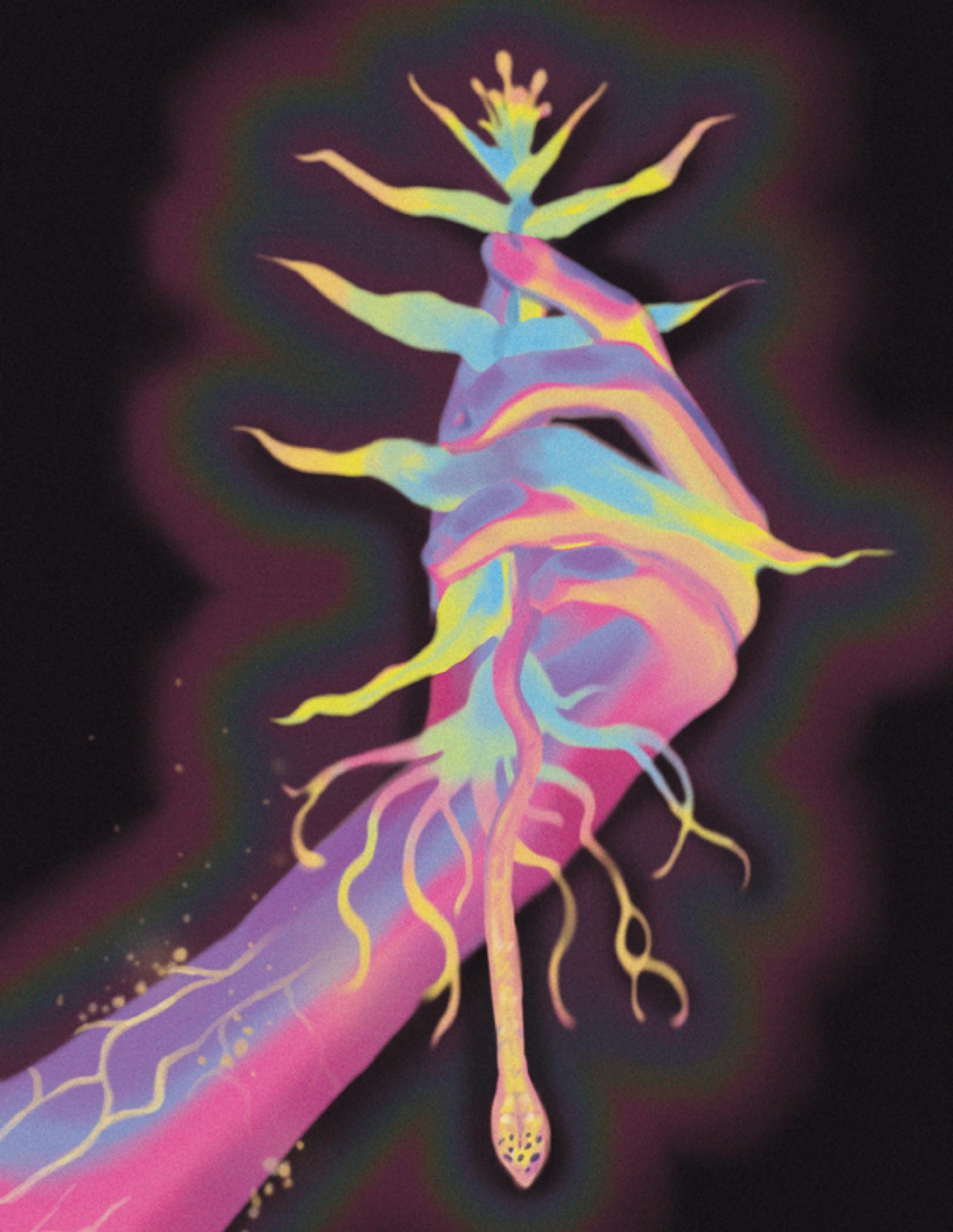
Section 6

Several days later, N removed the device from the locker and carried it into the cockpit of the unknown aerospace vehicle. Camera 1 observed two small chairs - too small for a Third Planet adult - and Camera 2 recorded the control panel of the vehicle.

There were no right angles or sharp edges, and all surfaces were smooth and grey...further evidence of its construction not being from Third Planet. As the device was now in the cockpit - the most lucrative location within the primary observation target, the cameras and microphones were switched to high resolution/constant transmission mode. As the scheduled weekly Wednesday night launch time approached, N engaged all but one of the instruments on the control panel by tapping them with his finger. Camera 2 recorded blinking and constant lights with colors from throughout the visible spectrum, and the microphones recorded a low hum from the gravity amplifiers, and the negative pressure of wind in the hangar. The vehicle slowly gained a small amount of elevation, exited the hangar doors and turned towards Groom Lake. Device 004's electromagnetic, gravitational, and gyroscopic sensors sensed propulsion systems that were not possible to create on Third Planet. As the vehicle approached the dry lakebed, N engaged the final instrument. Instantly it began to shriek and blink furiously, and it disabled the cameras and all sensors except for the microphone. All of the lights on the control panel began to blink quickly and turned red. Both the vehicle and Device 004 began to malfunction all at once. The final sounds recorded by the microphone were the explosion of the gravity amplifiers and the impact of the vehicle on the dry lakebed.

Root
by Robin
Rose Graves

Illustration by
Chynna DeSimone



I keep my window open at night. The wind carries laughter from the quarry. I picture their happy faces while my eyes remain glued to my tablet, unable to focus on my lesson. Angry, red text. Another question answered wrong. I power the tablet down. I'll have to restart the lesson from the beginning. I'll do it tomorrow.

The laughter continues as I lay in bed, warbling like birds, but there are no birds on Abystria, only a handful of humans to work the quarries, and unlucky children they've brought along. I wonder if any of them are in my class. The other students appear as usernames, no faces to match. Even the teacher remains off camera for most of the lecture. Whatever. They're probably all on Earth, anyway.

In the morning, my mom asks, "Why don't you go outside today?"

"And do what?" I reply. Nothing but barren rock for miles, extending along the curvature of the planet, interrupted only by sparse vegetation.

"You could go for a walk," she suggests. My face stiffens. I power up my tablet. My classroom app ignored in favor of a game. She shrugs. "You need some sun. I worry about you." She grabs her ventilator mask on her way out. I'm relieved knowing she will be gone for hours.

I play a few levels of my game. I know I should be redoing my lesson, but unlocking achievements is more appealing.

A voice from outside makes me jump. Loud and angry, at first I think it's my mom, criticizing me about the screen time. It's a girl too young to be a worker. Her hand raised in the air, one finger standing above the others.

My heart stutters in my chest, like a dog on alert seeing their human come home.

Whoever she was yelling at, they're gone by the time I'm outside. The trailers lined besides my own are quiet, empty. I rush to catch up with her, not sure where she could be headed to in our mining colony. All words vacate my mind the moment she notices me.

Her hair is ombre. Dark at the roots, blonde at the tips and a faint purple in-between. No shops, nor hair color products in the colony. She must have had it done back on Earth.

"You got roped into moving here too?" I finally manage to speak.

"Yep." Her boot kicks a stone. It lands in a neighboring yard in defeat. "How long have you been here?"

"A little over a year," I answer. I can't hide my excitement, happy to talk to someone who isn't my mother for once. "Mom needed a job after the divorce." I shrug, trying to act cool. "Apparently all the jobs are here."

"Tell me about it," she answers. "Pop is convinced I'll work here, soon as I turn 18."

"Do you ever go to the quarry at night?" I ask.

She shrugs, then nods.

"Could I come?" Somehow I expected to need an invitation.

"You do root?" She sounds surprised.

I hesitate. I've heard the slang before. It's some sort of drug. This planet has little else to offer besides the minerals beneath its crust. Some bored individual discovered the psychedelic effects of one of the local floras. Mom said some miners die from it. She's just paranoid though and I'm not about to risk my

first chance at making friends over it. I nod, stiffly.

“Cool. I’ll see you there tonight,” she says. I return to my shelter. My hands tremble as I attempt my lesson.

###

Mom is deep asleep as I close the door soundlessly. I follow the voices on the wind to the quarry, now resting along with its workers. It becomes home to the kids who have nothing better to do. Kids like me.

I see the girl with ombre hair next to a small campfire. She’s accompanied by two boys who keep trading affectionate touches. She doesn’t appear to be surprised nor excited that I came.

“Why in the quarry?” I ask.

“That’s where root grows,” one of the boys answers. His attitude relays it’s obvious. I quietly stew in embarrassment. I’m glad when the couple split off on their own.

“Shout if you see one,” the girl says. I don’t even know what to look for. Her flashlight sweeps across rubble. Something brushes against my leg and I jump. It’s nothing but the shriveled leaves of a plant. “Oh nice! It’s a big one. Maybe there’ll be two in it. Want to go first?” She offers. I hesitate, not sure what to do. Do I eat the underground portion? I think of the dirt sticking to it.

Before I can answer, she uproots the plant. The hidden bulb is ghostly pale, tendrils of root dangling beneath. I startle at the movement, weaving in-between. A snake the color of bile. “Damn. Only one,” she says. I blink, making the connection.

She expertly grabs the animal at the base of its head. Its jaws open, ready to latch onto flesh first chance it gets. I want to put

distance between myself and the creature. She notices my fear. “You sure you want to do this?” This is my only opportunity to opt out with my dignity still intact, but I’m sure I’ll never be invited to hang with the local kids if they think I’m uncool. I take a deep breath, thrust out my arm.

Fangs pierce skin. The spot of contact burns, even after the creature has slithered away. I’m alone, though she hasn’t gone far. Covered in cold sweat, my heart thunders. Movement tugs at my attention. In the distance, the campfire licks at its kindling, casting shadows on the quarry. I see figures in them.

I scramble, trying to catch up. Something grabs me by the ankle. I fall onto unforgiving slate. The stronger I pull, the harder the monster pulls back. Claws scratch my arms. I scream.

A light blinds me.

“Hey! It’s okay!” The girl assures me. “It’s just a bush.” She helps untangle my clothes from thorns. My eyes are wet. I want to throw up. “You’ve never done this before, have you?” I nod in defeat, sniffing. “Here. Lay down.” I follow her instructions. The rock hurts my back. I can feel the planet’s rotation. She lies like a starfish besides me. “Look at the stars.” I do so. The sky is full of smudges of light. I realize they are dancing. Somewhere in the distance, the boys are laughing. “What do you do for fun?” she asks. I tell her about the game I’ve been playing. She lets me ramble on about it for a while before she tells me she plays it too. My heart floats.

“You didn’t have to do it, ya’know,” she says. I feel stupid and exposed.

“I wanted you to like me,” I confess.

“I know.” Her hand touches mine and gives it a squeeze. “It’s nice to have someone else to hang out with. I was getting tired of being the third wheel.”

The stars still swirl above, but the nausea’s gone now, so I can enjoy their beauty.

The Watchers
by
Douglas A. Blanc

Illustration by
the author



$e = 0.5$

Focus

Area

$$F = \frac{S(\text{Area})}{a_s}$$
$$\cos \theta_s = -1/e$$

$$r(1 + e \cos \theta) = p = a(1 - e^2) = |p_s|/b$$



Illustration by Douglas A. Blanc

The keen prow of the colony ship *Sun Spear* streaks silently through interstellar space on course for a new planet. Njisa taps her bare foot on the gleaming plas-steel console as she hums to herself, her voice echoing through the massive empty bridge. She watches the stars stream by through the great arching view screen. She stretches in the captain's chair, fingering the fabric of her new jumpsuit. She smiles. The gold material of the new uniform marks her as an official crew member now. She received it on her 18th birthday, during the last collective waking cycle. Her sister, her parents, all her family and friends were awake to celebrate with her. She sighs, thinking of them all, asleep in cryo-suspension on the cold decks below. Among hundreds of souls, Njisa is the only human awake on the massive 1000-meter *Sun Spear*. Alone on a monthslong watch.

She twirls a tiny wooden toy in her fingers - a hand-carved spinning top. Her great-grandmother Iyebi had given it to her back on Earth centuries before. Njisa was only a child then and Iyebi was her favorite. The elder had spent long years with the team programming the ship's Artificial Intelligence systems. Njisa remembers with bitterness the hours with Iyebi that the A.I. stole from her. Great grandmother had given so much of herself to the A.I. that when it was finally time for the *Sun Spear* to launch, Iyebi was too sick to join them. When 300 boarded the ship, the last of her people, her great-grandmother alone, stayed behind on Earth.

Njisa checks the heads-up displays. All systems look nominal.

<All systems are nominal> the voice of the ship's A.I. slips like liquid into her

head, transmitted through a laser optic cable inserted into the back of her skull beneath her long locks. The A.I.'s synthetic voice is programmed to be subtly inflected and gender neutral. Njisa can't stand the flat, cold tone.

"Thank you, Machine," she says, not trying to hide the bitter edge in her voice. She does not like the A.I.

<I have a name, Njisa,> the A.I. reminds her for the thousandth time. *Oluso* is the name The elders gave the system when it was activated. It means 'the Watcher'. It was designed to maintain the ship's systems, make course corrections, and avert hazards on the colony ship's 3000-year journey to their new home on Terra Proxima. It's capable of a million billion calculations per second. But while the human crew sleeps for centuries at a time, *Oluso* gets lonely. Each crew person takes it in turn to keep the A.I. company. Now that she has reached 18 waking-years, Njisa has joined the rotation. She wouldn't mind sitting watch with the A.I. for six months if it weren't for the cold, droning voice in her head. She just can't get used to it. She doesn't call the A.I. *Oluso*; she simply calls it "Machine."

<Njisa, I have an object on long-range radar.>

Njisa groans and rolls her eyes. *Oluso* should be able to handle a little space debris without worrying her about it. "What is it, Machine?"

<Interstellar planetary body. Class G - rock and ice.>

"How far out?"

<100 million kilometers. Speed and course will bring it within encounter range in 12 minutes.>

Despite the soothing tone of *Oluso's* voice, Njisa's heart speeds up. "Specify: Encounter," she says, setting down the spinning top and punching numbers into the keyboard before her.

<On present course, the body will pass within 100,000 kilometers. No danger of collision. But with that much mass, the object's gravity will pull the *Sun Spear* off course.>

Njisa runs her hands through her long locks. "How far off course, Machine?"

<Based on current velocity and fuel reserves, the *Sun Spear* will miss Proxima Terra by 2.7 light months. Best case scenario.>

Njisa blinks rapidly. Best case scenario? 2.7 light months will put the *Sun Spear* in the middle of empty space with no hope of reaching resources. *Oluso* has just delivered a death sentence for her and all her fellow settlers, as a best case scenario.

"Course corrections?" she asks the A.I.

<I have run 6298 simulations. Each has resulted in critical mission failure. That is why I alerted you, Njisa.>

"Useless scrap," Njisa mutters under her breath. The term 'critical mission failure' screams in her head. Fear begins to rise in her heart. She fingers the badge over the breast pocket of her jumpsuit. It's for excellence in Advanced Astro-Navigation. She's the youngest Navigator the *Sun Spear* has seen. She feels the weight of the 300 souls asleep beneath her feet. She does not let fear overcome her. She focuses using her breath, the way Iyebi taught her. She gets to work.

"Machine! Pull up a simulation on main screen." Njisa types in different

variables and presses the button to run a simulation. On the screen neon dots trace the courses of the *Sun Spear* and the planetary object as they speed toward one another and then spiral away.

<Critical mission failure,> *Oluso* says smoothly.

Njisa resets the simulation and types in new variables, her fingers flying over the keys. She hits the *run* button. The dots race together again and the *Sun Spear* spins hopelessly wide of the destination planet.

<Critical mission failure,> comes the voice in her head.

Njisa resets. Tweaks the numbers. Hits *Run*.

<Critical mission failure.>

Njisa watches her family and friends die a hundred times in a hundred ways. Each time the A.I. announces their extinction in the same tone of voice it would use to ask how hot she would like her tea. Njisa kicks at the console and lets out a primal scream. The sound echoes through the empty corridors of the ship. She hangs her head and weeps.

<Njisa?> she hears her name through the neural link. She raises her head. It is not the cold, synthetic voice of the A.I. <My Bright Star,> the voice is warm and familiar. Njisa sits up abruptly, a thrill runs through her body. Bright Star was her great-grandmother's nickname for her. She fingers the fiber optic socket at the back of her skull.

"Iyebi?" Njisa says. The hairs on the back of her neck stand up. It is impossible, but she hears her great-grandmother's voice in her head.

<Bright Star. Do you remember when I taught you and your sister to spin tops on the flat rocks by the river?>

Njisa looks at the ancient wooden toy sitting atop the console. “Yes, Iyebi. Of course I do.”

<Do you remember why my top beat yours every time?>

“Because you always wet the tip with water. So it would spin better. Spin ... Spin,” Njisa’s voice trails off as her mind races through dozens of calculations. “Machine! Input the rotation and magnetic field for the object!” Njisa pounds furiously at the keyboard. “Now simulate the effects if we reverse the spin of the *Sun Spear*’s repulsor field. Run simulation!”

Njisa holds her breath while the A.I. runs trillions of possibilities. “Iyebi? Are you there?” she says in her mind. But there is only silence.

Njisa is surprised by the return of the A.I.’s cold voice. <Course change results in adequate survival probability.>

Njisa watches as neon dots trace the *Sun Spear*’s graceful arc from the encounter to the colony planet, like the arc of her great-grandmother’s hand as it whips the drawstring of a wooden spinning top. She lets out her breath in a loud woosh and collapses in the captain’s chair with relief.

“Thank you, *Machi* -” Njisa pauses and taps the neural link at the back of her skull, and corrects herself. “Thank you, *Oluso*.” she says aloud. “Execute course change.”

The prow of the *Sun Spear* races through interstellar space, on-course for its destination planet.

**The Harme-Oates
Effect**

**by Michael
Butterworth &
J. Jeff Jones**

**Illustration by
Zara Kand**



Harme shifted uncomfortably in his protective suit, wishing that the high speed elevator would put on an extra burst and get him to the mounting platform just a little quicker. Thirty seconds had passed since the ascent started and Harme had counted each one under his breath, "...one thousand and thirty one, one thousand thirty two..." and there were still fifteen to go.

One mile away, Oates, the Harmoniser for the mission, began to feel uncomfortable. At first the dual readings on heartbeat, blood volume, respiratory rate, leucocyte count and so on had been normal. Dr Kurtis, a bald and misleadingly baby-faced man of about fifty, stepped across to the more detailed video display to confirm what was happening.

Oates, his eyes closed, took a deep breath and spoke in a controlled voice, "This is bad, even for Harme. Feels almost like suffocation, very rapid heartbeat..."

Kurtis' eyes twitched towards the cardiogram, then he beckoned to Mason, the flight controller,

"What's the matter, Oates?" Mason asked, after he had seen the graphs. The severity of the readings was echoed in the stress visible on Oates' face.

"I don't know, yet. I wish he'd damn well stop it, though. It's making me feel uh, claustrophobic."

"Try getting something definite."

"I'm working on it." Oates forced himself to relax and closed his eyes again. He let Harme's thoughts come naturally... impressions of the elevator door in front of him... then a very shadowy image beyond that of a wooden door, narrow and oddly shaped and all around him the sense of dark musty cloth... He opened his eyes with surprise.

Kurtis stepped across to listen to Oates describe his observations. The doctor scratched his head, probably trying to sort out the Freudian slips from the Jungian archetypes. Mason, a pragmatic space flight veteran, didn't look at all bothered.

"I'll ask him," he said, and slipped on his headphones.

At last the doors opened, and Harme breathed a sigh of relief. He was face to face with the open oval of the side access hatch, swung back against the smooth shiny side of the *Recovery 11* module.

"Launch Control... Launch Control," a friendly voice – Vic somebody or other – crackled inside his helmet. It was very unusual for a call to come through before he was inside the module. He guessed it was a query about his nerves, and for a moment almost let himself hope they might cancel and call him back.

"Yes, Vic," he replied.

"Mason and the Doc want to have a word with you. Carry on with your procedure, though."

"Ok. Put them through," Harme said, then started to squeeze himself through the hatch. Behind and below him he felt the panorama of vast arid desert pulling at him. He thought it would have been nice to pause for just a minute, to turn around and enjoy the view.

"Harme, Mason here. We got some wild readings, especially on heartbeat. Oates mentioned claustrophobia and a subconscious impression of being inside something wooden, like an old cabinet perhaps? Know anything about that?"

"Can't say I do. You know, I usually feel like this... pre-flight jitters. It's part of the price you pay for having a low psychic threshold. I'll be alright after lift-off."

"Well, bear it in mind and let us know if you come up with any associations on that

cabinet. Your heartbeat's back to normal now anyway, so maybe you left the problem in the elevator. Good luck."

"Thanks."

There was a click in the radio and a gentle hum came on. Harme had pulled the hatch closed and strapped himself in, resting back in the chair and trying to summon up some sense of exaltation about the flight ahead. Suddenly, the headset clicked again.

"T minus five minutes. You are go for launch. Firing command coming now."

"Thanks, Vic."

The radio fuzzed and he was left with just the sensation of his own body mechanics again. He could feel his heartbeat starting to climb once more, his breathing deepening, and a slick eruption of sweat on his face and back. Just the lift-off, he told himself, that's all it is.

Although the bays lining the compact rescue-craft walls were very near to him, he suddenly felt a sense of distance, as if he was shrinking inside his suit with the gleaming controls and illuminated flying display rushing off into space without him.

This part of the mission was the only really inactive part, lying on the couch and being unable to avoid thoughts about disaster. Although in an odd way that wasn't really what bothered him, the fact of something going wrong, it was more the anticipation of it than anything else. Rocket failures and off-course tilts were things he could deal with once they actually started to happen. He had proved himself several times over in past rescue flights.

He forced his thoughts onto the mission itself. As usual there wasn't much time for a proper briefing. He had been dragged out of sleep and given only the barest details during the ride from his flat to the base. A contract wrecker had gotten into trouble in an orbiting scrapyards and only a

surface launch rescue could get there in time to get him out. It happened so often he wondered whether the value of the scrap collected was worth the cost of Recovery Missions. It also seemed to him that the money they saved on the single operator, ill-equipped salvage shuttles was hardly equal to the trouble they caused.

"Launch Control," crackled in his ears. "T minus two minutes and forty-five seconds, and counting... how's it going?"

"OK. My nerves are just a little raw today for some reason."

"You'll be all right. Oates is looking better now, but if things get rough the Doc has a needle ready."

"Ouch," Harme laughed, "I hope he doesn't need it."

"Here we go," said Vic, "good luck."

Time dragged on and he stretched, aching to get out of his suit. The green Environmental Control System light glowed in the left hand bay, indicating the module was pressurising. But he still had a long wait ahead of him.

"T minus one minute fifty four seconds, and counting..." Vic's voice came again, business-like and reassuring. "Our status board indicates that the oxidiser tank of second and third stages have pressurised. Continuing pressure of all stages."

There was another wait.

"T minus fifty seconds... power transfer is complete. We are still go with *Recovery 11*."

Harme saw the lights above the right hand bay flicker to green, indicating that the module had now switched itself onto its own internal power sources. His eyes scanned over the equipment on-board computer in its position at the bottom of the bay. He could see that there was a read-out, but it was not important to check on just yet. All the

equipment in the module looked functioning as expected.

“T minus twenty-five seconds, and counting...”

Wait.

“T minus ten seconds...nine... six... five... four... three... two... one. That’s it boy, you’re on your way. GET 00:00:00. All engines running. Lift off, we have lift off. GET 00:00:12... 00.15...”

Harme felt the intense pressure punch him in slow motion into the deeply padded couch, He numbed over, except for his face... which felt as if it were peeling away in layers, a dropping of masks. He managed to speak, eyes alerted to the Attitude Control System display directly in front of him.

“I’ve got a roll programme,” he reported. “Roll...complete... attitude... just... perfect.”

Finally, his brain relented and let him slip into semi-consciousness for the remainder of the maximum acceleration phase.

Oates slumped and fell forward in his seat, caught solidly by the short harness which prevented him from ripping away the hundreds of wires that were attached to his body. He came to after a few moments, looking up at the television screen as *Recovery 11* dropped the second stage. He felt much better and assumed Harme would feel the same, watching the monitor that showed the module interior and Harme smiling as he took off his helmet.

Once out of his suit, Harme began to function like the old hand he was, running checks on the manual controls and fixing the module into the correct orbit. Oates felt a slight glow of satisfaction, partly his own, partly Harme’s at the professional exactness of it all. His feelings were interrupted by Kurtis’ frowning face.

“I don’t like this very much,” the Doctor said.

“What’s up?” Mason asked, turning away from his own instrument bank.

“Perhaps something, perhaps nothing...” Kurtis shrugged. “I ran a computer search on Harme’s heartrate pattern on all past missions. This time it’s distinctly higher on average during all phases, not to mention exceptionally high during the elevator trip. It’s not something you would be likely to notice, Oates. But besides that he’s sweating quite a lot and his blood volume has shrunk drastically. These are just statistics, of course. Why don’t you see if you can dig anything else out, Oates?”

Oates obediently shut his eyes, but a second later opened them and shrugged.

“His mind is jammed with systems checks and navigation at the moment. I don’t think I can get anything until he settles down.”

“Ok,” the doctor nodded, “but I think I better give you a shot to take the pressure off for a while.”

“Oh shit, it’s going to be one of those trips.”

For the next few hours the mission went exactly like the training manual said it should. After the module was locked into a rendezvous orbit with the scrap heap everyone managed to relax for a while. Even Harme, tranquillised very subtly via Oates’ bloodstream, rested back and enjoyed some Chopin and Verdi tapes.

A half hour before the estimated docking, Mason signalled everyone back onto alert and Vic over-rode the module’s sound system to interrupt *Rigoletto* in mid-aria.

“Get off your butt, fella,” he said, “time to run a recheck on EVA and rescue equipment.”

Harme raised himself up and looked across at the empty seat, and whimsically thought how glad the wrecker would be, sitting there right that minute. No sooner than the thought was formed than a strange shudder ran through him.

“What the hell is the matter with me?” he thought, and could virtually see Oates grimacing as he did. As much as he disliked the lift-off portion of a mission, he usually enjoyed the actual rescue. After all, this was what it was all for, all that money to throw a piece of steel into space only to save one man’s life. So why, all of a sudden, was he gasping for breath, holding onto his stomach and listening to his heart thunder away at double speed? It was getting just about too much to bear when he sensed a tingly prick in his shoulder. As he began to relax again he sent out as well formed a message as he could to Oates, promising him an all expenses night out to make up for all the jabs he was taking.

###

The scrap pile hung in seeming stillness above the massive, hazy curvature of Earth. It was a dense collection of old capsules, satellites and general debris that a few decades of Space Corps Engineers had booted off into the void while the first moon chain stations were being built. Somewhere in the several square acres of junk was the wrecker, trapped and now on his last hour of oxygen, according to the estimate given before the radio contact was broken.

Harme had to be very firm with himself when slipping the helmet back on, but it was nothing like the apprehension he felt as the airlock opened, and he slithered out into the void. He tried to work fast enough so that he didn’t have time to think about his feelings, pulling himself hand over

hand along the magnetised hawser. Even though he knew he couldn’t fool Oates, he at least wanted to look competent as long as the module’s television cameras were able to see him. The clumsy bundle of rescue equipment: cutters, tools, torch, jet pack and extra oxygen cylinder bumped slowly into his back as he stopped to assess the best way to enter the tangle. The polarised face plate was hardly sufficient to shut out the tremendous glare of Earthlight. He had forgotten how bright it could be, and felt like some fly crawling across the face of a colossal spotlight.

Already the tranquillising effects were wearing off, and once he had actually slipped into the pile his anxiety began to get worse by the second. He scrambled as fast as he could along the maze of deep shadows and startling corridors of light, but business just couldn’t keep his mind occupied anymore. He was getting right onto the edge of panic and forgetting all the safety procedures. Only when a drifting scrap bulkhead knocked him into a spin that jerked him back to his senses did he realise that both Vic and Mason had been shouting at him through the headset.

“For God’s sake,” Mason bellowed, “what are you doing, Harme?”

“I just wish I knew. I don’t think I can take anymore of this.”

“Harme,” another voice said, “this is Doc, your readings are right off the scale and Oates is about to shake himself to pieces. He says you aren’t even bothering to look for the poor bastard who’s waiting for you.”

“Look, Doc, I know this whole thing is pretty strange, but I just don’t feel like myself. In fact, that’s a pretty good way of describing it... these just don’t seem like my feelings. Look, you don’t think maybe Oates...”

“Negative, we’re sure he’s not feeding anything to you. Besides, there’s this wooden cabinet image that has come up again. It’s a pretty archaic item for either of you to originate, if you want to know the truth. There’s certainly no reference to it on the hypnosis memory profiles we’ve got. So, it could be something you’ve had very deeply suppressed until today and something, either this mission, or something personal, turned it over. Unless an answer springs to mind, don’t dwell on it. Just concentrate on the job as firmly as you can and we’ll let Oates keep hunting until he can see what it really is.”

“I’ll give it a try. Can’t you shoot Oates up with anything stronger, just until I pick the wrecker up and get back to the module?”

“Sorry,” Masons’ voice said, “his arms look like dartboards already. If Doc puts anything else into him he’ll go so far under you’ll lose the contact, so it wouldn’t do you any good anyway. Come on, man, it’s all up to you.”

“Yeah, right. Well here we go then.”

Grimly controlling his thoughts, Harme became aware for what was really the first time, of his surroundings. All about him debris moved in oddly choreographed ways; slow ricochets, silent impacts, and eternal tumbles, all thanks to inertia and the quasi-vacuum of space. Myriad glinting lights made an eerie beauty at a distance that became nothing more than plastic bags, metal tubing, frozen excrement or fractured circuits up close.

He recognised the names on some of the junked probes and satellites and even the fuselage of *The Vanguard*, an orbital ferry that had been involved in a celebrated space disaster over fifty years previously. The antique styling of it and others suggested

there were museum pieces as well as scrap to be collected.

For over twenty minutes he worked his way slowly through the junk pile, keeping a hard fought control over his nerves and searching methodically with his torch and Plasma Field Detector for the wrecker. He got all the safety procedures correct; avoiding the movements of ponderous but deadly masses and the incredibly sharp edges of peeled metal that blossomed everywhere.

Abruptly he came upon the edge of a large open space, still contained within the system of wreckage. It was about fifty yards across and in its centre a large oblong box was slowly revolving. Harme felt the fear hit him in the stomach like a boot. Every muscle in his body went limp as his mind tried to force itself into unconsciousness. The headset jumped to life.

“Harme!” Doc shouted, “Harme, what’s happening?”

He struggled for his voice. “I’m... I’m trapped...”

“What is it? What’s happened to you?” Doc demanded.

They must have hit Oates with something else, this time not a sedative, because a jolt of energy raced through Harme and forced him back fully to confront the terror. But it gave him a momentary boost of self-control as well.

“It’s there,” he said, “in front of me. It’s some kind of box. I don’t know why but I feel sure that he’s in there.”

“Well go get him then.”

“Sorry Doc, but I can’t. I can’t move a damn muscle.”

“OK, now listen carefully. I want you to try to relax as much as you can. Close your eyes and keep quiet. Oates is pretty chewed up but I’m going to send him down to try to find out what’s bugging you. Even

if we find out it may not do any good, but it looks like the only avenue open to us at the moment.”

Oates was sitting with his hands clenched together, fighting off a silly smile which that last shot of stimulant was nudging him towards. He had heard what the Doc told Harme and wished he could unplug himself and walk out of the room. But he couldn't, not with two lives still in the balance. And that was certainly the hard part, from a selfish point of view, because Oates would be harmonised with Harme right to the end. Even though he would not necessarily die if Harme did, it would be a decidedly unpleasant experience, maybe even bad enough to drive him mad. So he did what he had to, closed his eyes, took a deep breath and shoved downwards into the fear-devoured mind that he and Harme shared somewhere in the intersection of space and time.

In fact the seriousness of the moment gave an immediate clarity to the thoughts unlike any Oates had experienced before. He felt his body slipping away from him as he drifted into what became an entirely different and convincing reality. It was as if he had only been dreaming some incredible and bizarre dream about the mission and the control room. Life was really here, in this village, with steep cobbled streets and small shop fronts. A fresh sea wind blew across his face and he could hear the far off squawking of gulls. “C'mon Jack, let's get the blindfold on,” said a thickly accented voice, and he turned to see several students looking at him. They had tousled hair and beards, identically striped scarves around their necks. “Hurry up...” another said, “we've not got all night.” The third student laughed, “That's right, we don't...even though you do.” He looked up above their heads to where the sun was setting behind a

church tower, then down again to the shadowed rows of headstones and crosses. A strip of cloth was lifted up and over his eyes, tied tightly behind his head. “This way now,” he was told, “it's not far to go.” In fact it was only a few steps before his arms were grabbed forcefully and his feet pulled out from underneath him. He was dropped onto a smooth and padded surface and before he could get over his surprise, heard the thump of a heavy lid coming down on top of him. He pressed upward but the weight was too great and then several hammers started banging nails into the wood.

He began shouting to be let out, but the noise of hammering was too great for him to be heard. When it ceased there was a muffled sound of footsteps rushing away and a distant shout of “See you tomorrow, Jack.” The speed with which it had all happened left him little chance to separate and understand what it was all about. But there was one certain and powerful thing: an onrushing sense of horror. He felt it speeding at him as he pressed back into the satin and raised his hands up to his blindfolded eyes. He started to gasp for breath and punch at the sides of the narrow box. He didn't know why, but he had to get out and was ready to beat himself to a pulp in the attempt.

###

When he came to, he was still struggling, only this time it was against the straps of the seat harness and the grasp of two of the control room guards. He blinked at the harsh lights, and nodded gratefully as Doc offered him a cool drink in a paper cup.

“Quite fascinating,” Doc said, peering over the edge of his clip board. “I wish I knew what to make of it.”

“Oh come on, Doc,” said Mason, “it’s obviously the wrecker. He’s trapped in that box up there and he’s psychically projecting his fear into Oates’ and Harme’s connection.”

“Perhaps then you can also explain a few other obvious details,” Doc scowled. “Since you heard Oates’ description just as I did, maybe you can tell me why the wrecker’s images of fear have taken on the form of an initiation prank at a university he’s never attended, in a country where he’s never been, and concerning a wooden coffin which has not been manufactured or used in North America or Europe since the Conservation of Consecrated Property and Compulsory Cremation Act was passed by the Western National Alliance over thirty years ago?” Doc cocked an eyebrow, then continued “Perhaps you will also explain how he is managing to send these messages when he is a certified Psi-negative according to the very thorough examination that every space programme employee or licence holder must take. I checked his records several hours ago.”

“Sorry Doc.”

“That’s alright. You stick to our job, and I’ll stick to mine. Oh, and another thing,” Doc smiled, “the wrecker’s name is George Burroughs, not Jack.”

“What now, Doc?” asked Oates.

“Well, let’s bring Harme up to date and then see how he feels.”

###

Harme stared across at the locker, which was slowing turning from gleaming light to shadow as it revolved in the reflected solar flare. After hearing what Oates had discovered, the first thing he assured them was that it was not made of wood. In fact, the shiny metal surface was

marked in several places by an out-of-date lettering style reading IBM.

“Sounds like an old computer storage console,” said Doc. “It could have broken off any of the wrecks. I don’t know why the wrecker would go poking around inside, but the real question is... are you going to be able to get him out?”

“Well, Doc. I still feel claustrophobic, and I can’t seem to stop my knees from knocking, but some of the fear seems to be lifting. Hell, if Oates can do it, so can I. I’m going to jetpack across now. Now.”

Before he could change his mind, Harme stabbed the thrust button and aimed towards the cabinet. As he began to move he remembered the Plasma Field Detector and, just to have something else to concentrate on, aimed its disk at his destination and switched on. There was not even a flicker on the dial. The wrecker should still have had about ten minutes of air left, but even if, for some reason he didn’t and was dead, the plasma field would have hung around for a few hours. Perhaps the device wasn’t working, but the added mystery didn’t help Harme’s peace of mind as he got close and the waves of terror began to mount in strength. On one side of the cabinet was a long door with several handles. He angled himself to meet it and reached out a space-gloved hand to grab hold.

“Oh God, oh God,” he thought, as the fear chewed at his strength. He knew that his willpower was on its last reserves and summoned the last of them to twist the handle and pull open the door. He clicked the torch on and inspected the computer tape decks in front of him. One of them was slowly turning.

Mystified, Harme moved the torch beam around the rest of the roomy cabinet. He almost missed the man in the shadow of a corner, but some buckles glinted and drew

his eyes back for a second look. Slithering into the space as best he could, Harme grabbed a shoulder and turned the man around. The torch beam stabbed through the face plate, down into wide open eyes, and a death-distorted face that had been frozen blue for decades.

Harme screamed, his nerves giving way completely as he scrambled to get out of the cabinet. In his panic, his heavily booted foot kicked against the tape decks and the one that had been turning, playing back its data, suddenly stopped. Just as suddenly the terror disappeared, as if it had been sucked away into the emptiness of space itself.

For Harme, it was like he had been dreaming of falling from a great height, and when he had hit the ground it didn't hurt, and of course, he had known it wouldn't all along.

"Mission Control, Mission Control," Mason came directly on the radio, "what's happened up there Harme? First you blow all the fuses in the building and then you drop down to... well, it's not exactly normal, but in comparison to the mission so far, has got to be either meditation or boredom. What happened?"

"I wish I could explain it, but right now I'll be lucky if I can manage to describe it. The main thing is the wrecker isn't in here."

"What? We know he's there..."

"Oh yeah, he's around here somewhere alright. But the only guy in the box is a corpse dressed in a very un-stylish US Space Force Captain's EVA suit. I'll tell you more when I find the wrecker. He's only got about five minutes more of breath left."

As it turned out, the wrecker, George Burroughs, Harme read on his suit tag, was right on the other side of the junk pile. The wrecker shuttle was berthed only yards

away, but George had fouled up in a tow line and couldn't get out. To conserve oxygen, and also to avoid the weariness of just hanging around, he had gone to sleep.

When Harme arrived and shook him awake he still had fifteen minutes air left, plenty to get him back aboard his own ship after Harme cut through the fouled line. Harme jetted around the scrap-heap, back to his module.

Sitting in the comfort of his seat, sipping juice through a straw, he waited patiently for Mason to finish lecturing the unfortunate George Burroughs on taking greater care during salvage work. After a few sullen "Yes, sirs" from the wrecker, Mason handed over to Kurtis who wanted to talk to Harme.

"Got it figured out, yet?" the Doctor asked.

"Not quite. It was the tape, I suppose, but how and why?"

"Well, our friend Jack, Captain Jack Armstrong in fact, was obviously a Psi-positive. That was him you introduced yourself to in the cabinet. I've just got his file out of the 'Inactive' Storage System. They didn't have Psi groupings in those days... he was the Captain of *The Vanguard* you see. But obviously he was a man who had great psychic potential. He evidently managed to survive the crash, got suited up and then locked himself into a complete ship segment, which happened to be a computer bank housing, of course. There were no real rescue systems then, so he was doomed. As he waited for death he not surprisingly went crazy. During his university days he had been initiated into a fraternity by being locked in a coffin and left all night in a cemetery. The experience left him with claustrophobic neurosis... part of the reason, I suppose why he joined the Space Service. While he was raving inside the

cabinet half a century ago, the computer tape was rolling. There was no input system, but the Captain didn't really need one since his mind projected it all straight onto the tape. It reached the end and switched itself off. When the wrecker came along, his disruption of the wreckage set it onto playback, and as soon as we got you out of bed and you started thinking of the mission ahead, you started picking up Armstrong's death fears. It seems we have a lot of research ahead of us, and you can take the credit for discovering a new Psi effect. If it's any consolation we can name it after you."

Harme didn't reply, but from the smile on his face his thoughts were coming across crystal clear.

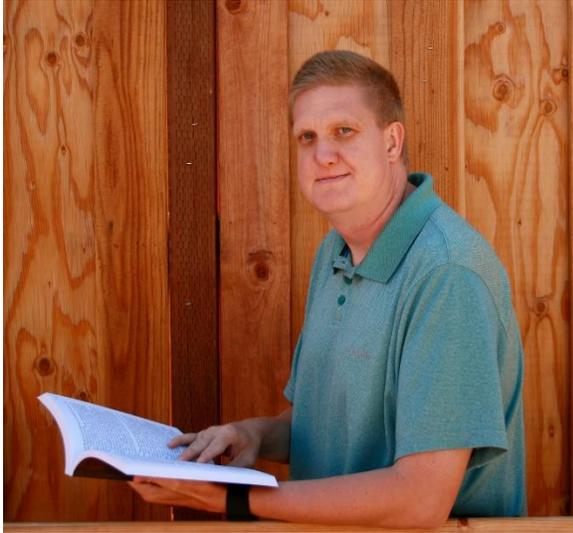


Cora Buhlert was born and bred in Bremen, North Germany, where she still lives today – after time spent in London, Singapore, Rotterdam and Mississippi. Cora holds an MA degree in English from the University of Bremen. Cora has been writing since she was a teenager, and has published stories, articles and poetry in various international magazines. Cora is a two-time Hugo finalist for Best Fan Writer and the winner of the 2021 Space Cowboy Award. When she is not writing, she works as a translator and teacher. Visit her on the web at www.corabuhlert.com or follow her on Twitter under [@CoraBuhlert](https://twitter.com/CoraBuhlert).



Kim Martin is an educator, photographer and sci-fi nerd extraordinaire. If she had more money and more time she'd probably go to more Star Trek and Doctor Who conventions. Some of her poetry and photography has been featured in Cholla Needles Arts & Literary Magazine, Charge Magazine, and in the August 2021 "Space is the Place" exhibition in Gallery 62 in Joshua Tree. When she's not busy with her teaching day job, Kim can be found hanging out in nature, looking for spiders to photograph, and daydreaming about life on other planets. You can connect with Kim on Instagram [@mskimphotos](https://www.instagram.com/mskimphotos) and on Facebook at:

<https://facebook.com/kim.photos>



Brent A Harris is a two-time Sidewise Award finalist for alternate history who writes about dinosaurs, fantasy, the fears of our future and the mistakes of our past.

He considers Southern California home, where he's become convinced that Joshua trees are in fact, real trees. When not writing speculative fiction, he focuses on his family, playing board games with friends, and talking nerdy to people. He holds a Masters degree in Creative Writing from National University as an NU Scholar.

<http://www.BrentAHarris.com>



Renan Bernardo is a science fiction and fantasy writer from Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. He is published in English, Portuguese, and Italian. His fiction appeared or is forthcoming in Apex Magazine, Dark Matter Magazine, Three Crows Magazine, Simultaneous Times Podcast and Life Beyond Us anthology. In Brazil, he was a finalist for two important SFF awards, published a novel, and multiple short stories.

He is also a Computing Engineer and works on a project that one day might cast the Earth in black hole.

He can be found at Twitter (@RenanBernardo) and his website: www.renanbernardo.com.



RedBlueBlackSilver is a musician and writer from Joshua Tree, CA who specializes in documentaries, radio and podcast music, and improvisational live performance. He regularly contributes music to *Simultaneous Times* and *Desert Oracle Radio*, and is currently writing his first film.

<https://redblueblacksilver.com/>



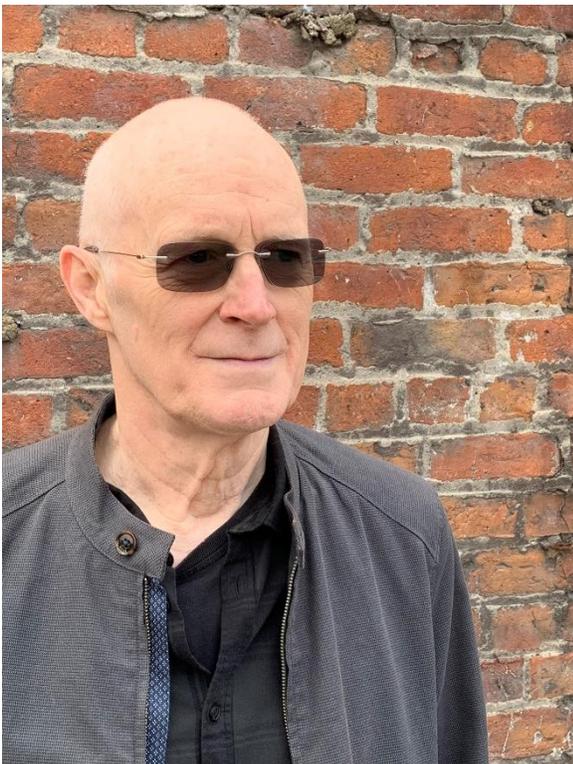
Not much is known about **Robin Rose Graves**. Originally spawned on the post-industrial grounds of Buffalo, NY. Theoretically, she could be a writer and a poet. Previous sightings include *Star*Line Magazine*, *Simultaneous Times* Podcast, and *West Coast Weird Magazine*. Graves frequents YouTube, where unlucky individuals are lured in with book discussions on SpicyMisoRamen BookTube. She has been sighted 55 years in the past with her ramblings on the Galactic Journey. If you believe you have witnessed Robin Rose Graves - run - though it may already be too late.

All Robin Rose Graves sightings have been recorded on

<https://robinrosegraves.wordpress.com/> (Or on Twitter @SpicyMisoRobin). Read it, so that you might be prepared.

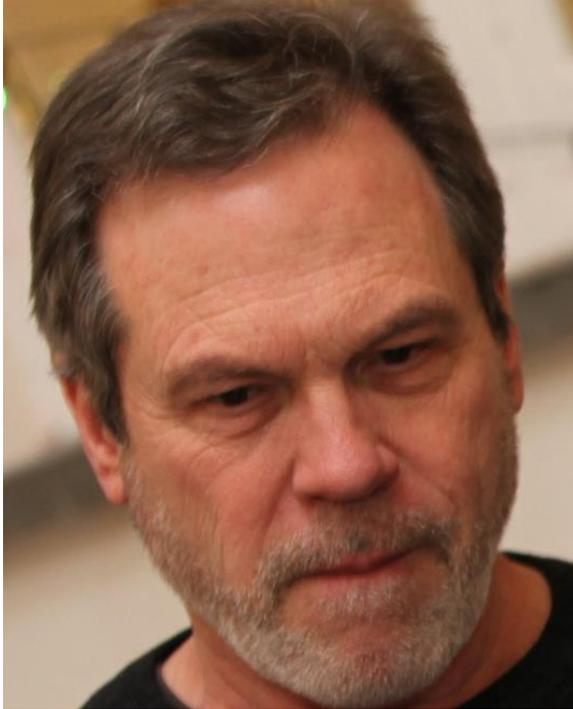


Douglas A. Blanc is a local artist and writer who lives and works in Joshua Tree. This year he was accepted into the Ancestral Futures BIPOC Science Fiction Writer's Mentorship Program. His short story *Absolution* was featured in Simultaneous Times Podcast ep.42. The flash fiction story *The Watchers* takes place in the same universe as his upcoming Afro-futurist Science Fantasy novel *The Downsider*. He has read excerpts from *The Downsider* at Space Cowboy Books and Desert Split Open Mic.



Michael Butterworth is a UK author, publisher and editor. His most recent books are new editions of his fantasy novels *Time of the Hawklords* and *Queens of Deliria*, based on the stage personas of Hawkwind. From Apex-Verlag (2021) they have new introductions by Butterworth and Rick Evans, and are fully revised. Butterworth's work can also be found on *Simultaneous Times*, episodes #26 and #30, read by Jean-Paul Garnier, and in *Emanations Journal of International Authors*, Brookline MA, edited by Carter Kaplan. His *Complete Poems: 1965-2000* is due from Space Cowboy Books in 2021.

<https://michael-butterworth.co.uk/>



Jay Jeff Jones is an American essayist, poet and editor who has worked in alternative and mainstream culture in San Francisco, London, British Columbia, and Manchester. He was the editor of the quarterly *New Yorkshire Writing* and author of the play *The Lizard King*, a semi-abstracted biography of Jim Morrison, which had various productions in the UK and USA. He was co-curator of the exhibition *Jeff Nuttall and the International Underground* at John Rylands Library / University of Manchester. He also co-edited and introduced the new edition of Jeff Nuttall's classic book on the 1960s, *Bomb Culture* (Strange Attractor / MIT).



Zara Kand is a Symbolist painter based in Southern California. She has exhibited throughout numerous venues within the US and has been featured in many online and print publications across the globe. She currently spends her time oil painting, art writing, curating, teaching painting classes, and illustrating. She is also the editor of *The Gallerist Speaks*, an interview series focusing on gallery directors, arts organizers and curators.

<http://zarakand.com>



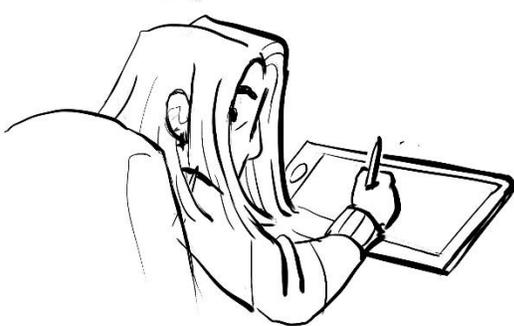
Austin Hart is a graphic designer and illustrator from Morongo Valley. He works in several traditional and digital mediums and enjoys exploring the relationship between organic forms, hard surfaces and abstract designs.

Website: austinh.art
instagram: [@austinarthurhart](https://www.instagram.com/austinarthurhart)
Twitter: [@austinarthurluv](https://twitter.com/austinarthurluv)



Dante Luiz is an illustrator, art director for *Strange Horizons*, and occasional writer from southern Brazil. He is the interior artist for *Crema* (comiXology/Dark Horse), and his work with comics has also appeared in anthologies, like *Wayward Kindred*, *Mañana*, and *Shout Out*, among others.

<https://danteluiz.com/>



Chynna DeSimone is an illustrator living and working in western New York. Her art is melded together with her active work in medical illustration and her long-held love of comics and genre fiction. During her time as a working artist, she has participated in Buffalo shows as well as illustrated for local authors and anthologies. On her off time, she enjoys skating, tabletop, and learning anything new.

<https://chynnadesimone.myportfolio.com/>

SPACE COWBOY

Space Cowboy Books
Science Fiction Bookstore
61871 Twentynine Palms Hwy.
Joshua Tree, CA 92252

And out now!
Simultaneous Times Vol.2
science fiction anthology



Visit Our Online Store
<https://bookshop.org/shop/spacecowboybooks>

And Check Out Our Podcast
<https://spacecowboybooks.podomatic.com/>