



# Redstone Science Fiction

September '11

#16



Cheryl Rydbom

~

Jeff Cross

Redstone Science Fiction #16  
Cover Layout by Michael Ray  
Drawing by Wright Aviation Air (1960)

## **Redstone Science Fiction #16, September 2011**

### **Editor's Note**

[Michael Ray](#)

### **Fiction**

[The Jenny](#)

by Cheryl Rydbom

*Our Identity Crisis Contest Winner*

[The Day the Pod Landed](#)

by Jeff Cross

## **Editor's Note – September 2011**

*by Michael Ray*

Thanks for dropping by Redstone SF. We're excited to have two excellent stories to bring you this month.

Our [Identity Crisis Contest](#), guest-edited by Pushcart Prize-Winning author [Sarah Einstein](#), received numerous quality submissions, but everyone involved agreed that [The Jenny](#), written by newcomer Cheryl Rydbom, was the best story among a quality bunch. Its near-future of pervasive computing and control of our behavior is disturbing in its premise, but encouraging in its execution.

Our second story, [The Day the Pod Landed](#) by Jeff Cross, is a cool mix of corporate expansion, design, and mech warfare. It is simply a lot of fun.

We always have a great time working through our submissions, but as our exposure has grown, so has our slushpile. We have had the good fortune of adding an experienced editor to our staff, Mary Ann Locke. She has taken on the role of slushreader with a vengeance and we can't thank her enough.

We'll have an essay from Sarah Einstein this month as well, giving us her impressions from this year's contest experience.

Give these two stories a read. You'll be glad you did.

Your friend,  
Michael Ray  
Editor  
Redstone SF

## **The Jenny**

*by Cheryl Rydbom*

*Smile brightly and say, "Good morning. Welcome to Mo's Diner. I'm Jenny."*

I smile brightly and say, "Good morning. Welcome to Mo's Diner. I'm Jenny." My name is not Jenny. I pause.

*Take out your notepad and pencil. Smile again and say, "What would you like to drink?"*

Even though I do this a hundred times a day, six days a week, I wait for the instruction to pull out my notepad and pencil. Then I smile at the customers and say, "What would you like to drink?"

I diligently write down each order, as my earpiece dictates.

At higher-end establishments, the standardization of the wait staff even demands that handwriting be indistinguishable. Mo's isn't at that level, although Manny likes to think we are. Manny is our cook and manager, and threatens to file a reprimand if handwriting deviates from his expectations.

Three reprimands warrant a complaint. Three complaints and you're out. My handwriting has quickly changed to meet his expectations.

*Smile brightly and say, "I'll be right back with those drinks." You have thirty seconds to fill the order.*

I smile, briskly pivot to the soft drink dispenser and punch in the order. While those cups fill, I grab a round, plastic tray. Another Jenny moves up beside me, performing the same ritual. We don't speak. When my drinks are ready, I load them onto the tray in the proper order. One of my customers has ordered coffee, so I carefully and efficiently add a carafe to the tray.

Diligently, I follow each instruction from my earpiece, dispensing the drinks. I will suffer a reprimand if I anticipate the command. I am a mindless automaton. My earpiece is wired to the diner's A.I. It monitors customer's expressions, words and gestures, and determines the proper reaction for the wait staff to any situation.

*Return the tray, and check on table three. You have ten seconds.*

I return the tray and hurry over to table three.

*Smile brightly and ask, "Is there anything else I can get for you?"*

Table three has finished eating, so they take their handwritten ticket to the cash register so Manny can run their credit strips. I could have brought the reader to the table, but Manny thinks paying at the counter with an old fashioned, completely non-functional cash register is more authentic.

We get a lot of tourists. Mo's Diner is just outside the main subway station. They get off the train, step out onto the crowded streets of the city and decide they need something familiar before they can tackle our concrete jungle. We're friendly, clean, and courteous. Our A.I. compensates for every rude comment or gesture. In order to stay employed, the other Jennys and I don't have to do anything but follow directions and, of course, fit into the uniform.

We have to wear holoprojectors, specifically calibrated to the ideal height and weight of a Jenny. Well, a Mo's Jenny. That's how they can get around discrimination laws. Gender, age, race and ethnicity don't matter, that can be covered up by the projector. Sexual orientation, religious and political leanings are inconsequential, that's all handled by the A.I. It's height and weight that are the kickers. Mo's Jenny is 5'5", 120lbs. There is a little more wiggle room with body type, as the dress and its required undergarments can compensate for differences.

My first job in the city was with a fancy restaurant in the theater district. There, the wait staff were Tonyas and Phils. Tonya was 5'5", 115lbs. It was a great place to work. We were even allowed to anticipate the A.I. Unfortunately, I ate a little too well there, and lost my job when I hit 116lbs.

It took me two months to find the job at Mo's. After doing some research and learning that 5'5", 120lb was the ideal height and weight for a lot of positions, I gained 4 pounds, and finally found an opening.

So, for sixteen hours a day, I'm a middle aged, red head that smiles brightly at customers and isn't allowed to speak or move unless directed by a behavior monitoring computer. The rest of the day I'm a twenty four year old artist, lost and alone in the most densely populated city in the world.

I came here to get exposure for my art. I had dreams of shows and sales. Having my own studio apartment that would encompass the top story of an old renovated building, where I could paint and draw inspiration from its rich history and its stunning view of the city. The studio apartment happened, but I share it with a Sue from another diner. It doesn't take up an entire floor, and its only view is of a back alley and the building beside ours. I have to paint on the fire escape. The Sue doesn't like the smell of paint thinner. Our building's A.I. unsatisfactorily, in my estimation not the Sue's, handled that disagreement. The Sue and I do not argue; the A.I. settles all conflicts with polite words and gestures.

At least I can look like myself in my apartment, even if I can't say or do anything that could generate an offense.

There are A.I.s for the street, A.I.s for the shopping market, and A.I.s for the bars. Some bars even require holoprojections. If they fill their quota for say, Marilyn Monroes or Grace Kellys, and that's the only projection you have, too bad.

I can't handle the bar scene. Random encounters based on what an A.I. tells you to say and do, while looking like someone else. There are no real connections. I've heard stories of people meeting at bars and ending up married. I don't even understand how that could happen. The whole culture of the megatropolis is one of passivity and politeness. Crime rate is at all time low and population is at an all time high.

\* \* \*

The Sue is standing in front of me, not speaking and looking a little bored. She even has the nerve to look away from me to study her manicure while the building's A.I. explains her latest complaint.

*Ms. Alisha Peterson, lease co-signatory for apartment three four zero one, has filed a complaint against the use of the fire escape in temperatures that drop below fifty degrees Fahrenheit and rise above seventy five degrees Fahrenheit. Use constitutes an unacceptable increase in energy consumption. Be advised that use of the building's fire escape will be restricted to emergencies when the air temperature is outside these parameters.*

What? Fury burns through me. The Sue and our building's A.I. have now conspired to keep me from painting? My art is the only reason I'm in this hell hole. I can't afford to live alone. It was hard enough to find this place.

*Smile graciously and say, "I agree to abide by the new restrictions."*

I purse my lips, but before I recite the line, I take a deep breath and manage a smile. Not all my actions and facial expressions are monitored in the apartment, but if there is potential conflict, it's best to obey the A.I.

I'm here because of my art, and now I can't paint. I can't afford studio fees. I can't afford the permits required to set up my easel in the park or near pedestrian thoroughfares.

In a fog of impotent fury, I nearly jostle some pedestrians on the way to Mo's. Hastily I check my pace, belatedly realizing that I've been ignoring warning messages from the street's A.I.

*Check pace. You are currently traveling at three point five miles per hour. Slow to three point zero miles per hour immediately or you will be fined. You are currently traveling at three point five...*

Mo's is quiet when I enter. I snatch my dress from the hook by the back entrance and duck into the ladies' room. The compression undergarments feel like a second skin, but pull on easily. Almost too easily. Once the dress is on with the buttons fastened, I access the diner's A.I.

“Check weight,” I command, in a low whisper.

*One hundred nineteen point five pounds. You are at the low end of the permitted range. Recommend higher caloric intake for the next two days. Any further deviation and your employment will be terminated.*

Just one more thing to worry about. I smack the wall with my open palm.

*Warning, gesture does not comply with Mo’s standards. Another such gesture will result in a reprimand.*

I frown into the mirror, then pull my hair back under the flesh colored net. It wouldn’t do for the customers to catch sight of a stray lock of brown hair while ginger Jenny smiles brightly and passes them a burger.

The restroom door opens and the other Jenny comes in. We don’t smile at each other. The diner’s A.I. and Manny do not approve of socialization even when the diner is closed. I flip on my holoprojector. Jenny’s careworn but friendly face stares back at me from the mirror. Fleeting, it feels more real than my own. I shudder.

I direct my anguish into scrubbing counters and polishing napkin dispensers. The other Jenny, seeing my ferocious cleaning, opts to wipe menus and wrap silverware rather than join me. As long as the restaurant is empty and I am cleaning, my A.I. won’t interfere.

Manny comes in after I’ve finished about half the tables. He throws his furry arm onto the back of the booth where I’m working. He isn’t required to wear a holoprojector since he’s considered skilled labor by the A.I.

“Comp tells me that you’re in danger of not meeting specs,” he says, tapping his ear, like I don’t know where the A.I. connection is. “Eat what you want for the next two days. For you, food will be half off. You’re a good worker Jenny. We’d hate to lose your services.”

*Stand up straight. Smile and say, “Thank you very much, Manny. That is very generous.”*

I obey, though I really just want to flip him off. I can see the leer in his eyes. Subtle emphasis on words and phrases like “eat”, “want”, “good” and “services” aren’t registered by the A.I. Manny has figured out how to harass his wait staff without triggering its alarms. The A.I. even ignores his eyes as they roam up and down my masked body. I look the same as the other Jenny, the same as every other Jenny that has ever worked here.

“Good girl, Jenny,” he says, and squeezes my shoulder, his thumb sliding a fraction more than permitted.

*Reminder, the diner opens in twenty minutes. Resume cleaning.*

Customers are supposed to moderate their personalities, but within a booth, as long as they don't bother the other patrons, they are within their bounds to make a Jenny's life hell. After all, the customer is always right.

Some seem to take delight in straining our A.I.'s capacity for politeness. How rude, how bizarre can they act and still get a civil, respectful response? With those customers, I completely shut down. Only Jenny remains, and Jenny obeys whatever the A.I. says. She doesn't even hear the customers or see the customers. The A.I. hears and sees for her and tells her how to react.

Fortunately, I don't have any of those customers during breakfast. I make it through that crowd without having to flee to the restroom for one of my three permitted bathroom breaks. Bathroom breaks are the only solace allotted the Jennys. The morning routine cools my temper.

Lunch is a different story. Four businessmen in suits select one of my booths. Two aren't from the city. You can just tell. I obey my A.I., greeting them. They don't stick to the usual script, veering off almost immediately.

"Hey, beautiful, I'd like a coffee," says one of the locals, louder than necessary, but not loud enough to warrant a reprimand. He is obviously showing off for his guests.

"Thanks, Jenny, I'll have a coffee too," replies the other city dweller, in a polite, moderated tone.

The tourists also ask for coffee.

*Smile and fill the order. You have twenty seconds.*

Stupid as it sounds, the beautiful comment gets me. Jenny is not beautiful. Jenny is average, boring – plain even. Never beautiful. She's supposed to blend into the background, be part of the ambiance. Silly to get worked up over a non-endearament like that, but it just goes along with the whole day.

Way in the back of my head, in a place where it will never reach my face, I growl.

I deliver the coffee as directed. When the first local calls me beautiful a second time just as I'm placing his coffee on the table, I rotate his cup ten degrees. My heart skips a beat. Why in the world did I do that? I can't afford to lose this job.

*Smile and say, "Have you had a chance to look over the menu?"*

I blink once, then feel my mouth curve into a smile. A real smile. The man's cup is not at the optimal position for him to use the handle, and the A.I.'s missed it.

The other local, ever so slightly, raises one of his eyebrows at me.

Hastily, I return to the script, "Have you had a chance to look over the menu?" Inside, my heart races.



\* \* \*

The elation of having won a round, however minutely, burns away the last of my rage and gives me an idea. Maybe I'm not as impotent against my building's A.I. and the Sue as I'd first thought.

I can stretch and expand my talent rather than be confined by circumstances. I've spent so much time bemoaning the Sue and her dislike of acetone that I haven't worked around it, other than to shiver on the balcony with paints that don't react any better to the frigid winter than my exposed fingers do. That night, instead of spending my weekly budget on oils and canvas, I purchase charcoal pencils and a sketch pad. The week after, I buy watercolors, synthetic brushes and an inexpensive roll of paper.

A week after that, the Sue volunteers to pose for me. She relaxes in faux candlelight with a glass of cheap wine on the mound of pillows that decorate her bed, while I quickly capture the moment. Like me, the Sue had come to the city to pursue her dream. She'd hoped to be a model, but she is half an inch too tall by the current industry standards.

"I almost feel like a real model," she confesses, taking a sip of the vivid red.

I smile, without any prompting, and absently wonder what would happen if I add a dash of red paint to the charcoal likeness.

\* \* \*

I'm running late. After the late night sketching the Sue and incidentally helping her finish the wine, I have a headache and had barely registered the apartment A.I. when it pinged my wake up time.

*Check pace. You are currently traveling at three point three miles per hour. Slow to three point zero miles per hour immediately or you will be fined. You are currently traveling at three point three miles per hour...*

A fine would be worse than a reprimand at Mo's, so I slow to 3.0 mph. My legs keep surging forward, unable to maintain the pace while so anxious. Two long strides and then I catch myself and moderate my steps again.

As I do so, I brace for another burst of noise in my ear, but the voice stays silent. Emboldened, I take two more long strides, then adjust my pace back to 3.0. Nothing. Is this a way around the restriction? I try three paces, then four. At five long strides, I activate the warning message. Two steps at the accepted pace cancels the warning. It's an awkward gait, four long, two short, but I cover the distance between my apartment and the train station in far less time than usual.

I make it to work on time.

\* \* \*

The grocery store is a little crowded after my shift at Mo's a few nights later. The store's A.I. directs customers' movements if any part of the store gets too congested.

*Please have your satchel ready. You have twenty seconds to make your selection.*

I swear inaudibly, frustrated that I have so little time to choose a tomato. I frown down at the display. I hate being rushed. All the tomatoes look the same from this angle. Twenty seconds isn't long enough to choose. My fingers dance in the air, as I try to find a discernible difference. Under my breath, I ask myself, "Which one? Which one?"

*Top right bin, third from left on the top row.*

I snatch up the described tomato. It's perfect. I move on to apples. My shopping trip takes half as long as usual with the unexpected assistance from the A.I.

\* \* \*

Unsurprisingly, the diner doesn't change much as I slowly learn to work with or around the system. Manny is still tolerably creepy and the other Jennys and I just pass wordlessly by. The one notable difference is that Mo's has attracted a new regular customer.

It probably takes a month before I realize it. He comes in at the same time, the same day every week, but unlike his first visit, sitting in the booth with his colleagues, he generally sits at the counter alone. When I finally notice, the A.I. confirms that he's eaten at Mo's four times and always orders coffee, although his food selection varies.

He doesn't say much, just watches the restaurant around him while he eats in silence. Initially, I don't always wait on him, but when I do, he always searches my face, Jenny's face, with a scrutinizing intensity, like he's looking for something.

When I'd first recognized him, I'd been afraid that he planned to report my tiny rebellion. It had been his friend's cup that I'd set down askew, but as weeks pass, I toss that theory out as absurd. I grow curious, and more often than not, voluntarily wait on him.

I start watching him. He is younger than Jenny, but older than me. He doesn't wear a holoprojector. That much is obvious from the small differences in his appearance, like a hair cut one week or a careless shave the next. He always wears a suit, a moderately expensive suit that shows that he is successful, but not so much so that he shouldn't be eating at Mo's.

His eyes don't miss much. He is always watching.

\* \* \*

*Smile brightly and say, "Good morning. Welcome to Mo's Diner. I'm Jenny."*

I smile at our regular – my regular, and repeat the greeting. My regular gives me a small smile and says, “Hi, Jenny.”

We follow the script, and as usual, he orders coffee.

*Smile and fill the order. You have twenty seconds.*

As I pour the coffee, he looks up at me, with an almost embarrassed smile and says, “Thanks, beautiful.”

My heart races, and my cheeks flush under the holoprojection. He’s talking to me. I blink once, and made an impromptu decision. I set the carafe down to wipe a fictional spill up from under his cup. After a quick swipe with the rag, I put the cup back down in a slightly sub-optimal position.

We exchange a look. His eyes twinkle. My lips curve into a smile, an instant before the A.I. directs me to do so.

My mouth continues to parrot the A.I.s words, but for the rest of the meal, if he calls me beautiful, I shift a cup or a utensil just slightly out of position. The A.I. doesn’t have to prompt me to smile for the rest of the day.

A long week passes before my regular returns. When he does, he ends up in the other Jenny’s section before I can direct him to a spot in mine. Passing by, I overhear him call her beautiful, and I feel unaccountably hurt and replaced. I remind myself that Jennys are identical, and he wouldn’t be able to tell us apart. Shouldn’t be able to. Maybe he actually thinks Jenny is beautiful.

“Excuse me, Jenny?” his soft voice asks, as I bustle by the counter to turn in another order.

*Turn, smile brightly and say, “Yes, sir? Can I get you something?”*

I follow the instructions. Our eyes meet.

“Coffee, please,” he says, holding up his cup. His Jenny is taking an order at another table.

*Smile and fill the cup. You have twenty seconds.*

“Thanks, Jenny,” he says, as I pour the beverage. Even without the endearment, I rotate the cup sub-optimally.

He smiles.

\* \* \*

A shock of cold wind hits me as I leave Mo's after a particularly brutal shift. I welcome it with a smile, finally feeling alive after the long hours of being Jenny. I shake out my hair, letting it dance as it soaks up the chill. At least the night can blow away some of the day's stagnation.

"Jenny?" a vaguely familiar voice calls.

I almost answer, but remember, at the last minute, that I'm not actually Jenny, especially not in paint splattered street clothes and not with dark hair. Surely, they are calling someone else. I turn toward my neighborhood to start the long walk home. I'd found a tube of the most brilliant cerulean water color at the art supply warehouse, but it means walking instead of taking the train.

Footsteps sound behind me, moving slightly faster than the approved pedestrian speed.

*Recommend stepping to the right. Foot traffic moving up from behind at an unmoderated pace. Maintain current speed. You are traveling at three point zero miles per hour.*

Ragged breathing accompanies the footsteps, and I sidestep, as suggested, to give the person room to get by. There must be an emergency to warrant the guaranteed fine. As the pedestrian comes up beside me, the quick steps abruptly adjust to my moderated pace.

"Jenny?"

Startled, I look up into the face of my regular. He smiles at me and I stumble to a halt on the uneven pavement. Other pedestrians flow around us.

*Resume pace. Loitering is not permitted here. Resume pace. Loitering...*

"I thought maybe you'd like to," his smile becomes self-deprecating, "get a cup of coffee with me." He gestures to a coffee shop, just a little further down the block.

"How?" I ask, trailing off. I glance down at myself, double checking that I look like me.

"You have the most beautiful smile," he says. Then he holds out his hand, "I'm Mike."

I smile shyly, clasp his hand and say, "I'm Jessica."

## **The End**

*Like most of the population of Huntsville, Alabama, Cheryl Rydbom is an engineer, specifically a software engineer, married to another programmer. She's currently taking a leave of absence to stay home with their twins. Now she writes to maintain her sanity in the midst of toddler tempers and poopy diapers. Her story, "Sun Kissed", will soon be published as part of Silverland Press' YA paranormal anthology.*

## **The Day the Pod Landed**

*by Jeff Cross*

Sofia stands among the coffee trees. She holds samples for her new marketing campaign.

“Mother?” Her call echoes in the valley.

Sofia scans the samples for flaws. Her mother often complains that the money spent to send her daughter to University has been wasted on trivial matters – advertising, marketing, and graphic design. Every night she asks when Sofia will grow up and learn the business of the farm. Sofia never answers. She dreams of the day she will leave the coffee plantation for good. Until then, she practices her craft.

The coffee trees are flowering. She pulls out her camera to photograph the blossoms. She daydreams about her days at University.

A sound of thunder breaks her concentration. A huge shape tears through the clouds. It is a market expansion pod, an expeditionary unit from one of the great northern conglomerates. Flames flare as engines slow its descent, searing the surrounding forest. The pod lands. Sofia’s heart begins to race. Perhaps she does not need to leave the plantation after all. The life she wants may have found her.

Tremors shake the earth. Buildings in the village topple over. Blasts of hot air roll across the land in its wake. The bells in the village church ring in alarm, but the sound is lost in the roaring wind.

Hatches open all over the pod. The expansion troops stream out. Everyone in the village has heard of the hardsuited warriors, the elite agents encased in suits of metal four meters tall. The reports have not done justice to the truth. They come in enormous variety. Some roll out on jet powered skates, rocket launchers at the ready. Some cling to jet powered gliders, missiles bristling on their shoulders. And still more run on foot, huge machine guns in their hands.

The army, stationed in the village to fend off the local rebel threat, speeds out to confront the pod before it can take root. Army hoverjeeps stop fifty yards from where Sofia stands, the mock-ups and one sheet forgotten in her hands. Soldiers leap out and deploy instant foxholes. One soldier sets up a machine gun on a tripod. Another feeds a belt of ammunition into its side while a third erects a quick wall of carbon nanofiber in front of it. Others pull self-propelled grenade launchers from weapon cases and strap on riot helmets and bullet proof vests.

Comparing these small men to the onrushing metal-suited giants is comical. Sofia almost laughs.

Two hardsuits burst through the green edge of the forest and into the fields, the wheels in their metal feet propelling them across the flat ground like race cars on a straight track. One has great Gatling guns slung under each arm. It extends its arms and the black gun barrels spin. Orange

fire spits across the fields as tracers burn a path to the helpless militia. Men are torn to pieces as they leap for cover. A hoverjeep explodes.

The machine gun team huddles below their barricade and targets the advancing enemy. Sofia can hear the plinking sound of the bullets bouncing off the hardsuits like pebbles. A mech with a rocket launcher on its shoulder spins its glowing blue eyes to target the machine gunners. It fires, a blast of smoke exiting the back of the tube, the rocket flying from the front too fast to follow. The soldiers' position erupts in a blast of flame and dirt. There is nothing left but a black hole in the field.

The remaining soldiers break, running for the village. They are screaming as they pass Sofia, who still has not moved.

The hardsuits race in pursuit. The tracers from the Gatling guns sear through the hot air, cutting down the retreating men like crops in a harvest. The pursuit brings the hardsuits within ten yards of Sofia's position. She can see the details of the machines, their marks and insignia. They bear a logo of a stylized red star from which a great bird of prey is emerging.

The logo is brilliant, she thinks. If their branding is this good it is no wonder they are looking for expansion opportunities this far south. Sofia wonders if they have dominated their local rivals through the sheer force of style alone. The lines of their machines are beautiful. She craves the chance to get near one, no, to pilot one. From what she read at University, the interfaces are simple enough that a common factory worker can pilot one like a veteran.

\* \* \*

After the altogether brief resistance is over, the pod sets about its work. The first stage involves the clear cutting of the surrounding forest. Sofia sits at the table and listens to her mother's bitter curses. The plantation has been burned. Sofia thinks it was unintentional, just a fire that grew out of control and spread along the wind, but she says nothing. Her mother drinks and raves about the pod and the mechs and end of the village.

The next night, Sofia hears the factories deploy. She races out into the dark. Blinding light blazes from the pod. It separates like an egg cut lengthwise, unfolding to reveal smaller pods nested within like a Russian *matryoshka* doll. They lift out on white plumes of smoke and jet to what must be assigned positions. Lowering in place, these smaller pods open like *matryoshka* themselves, expanding as tubes, halls and walkways begin to link the structures.

The call for workers goes out soon after. Want ads drift through the village, but no one can remember seeing anyone leave them. Interviews are to begin at 9 in the morning. The pay is spectacular. The benefits are extensive. But Sofia is not a factory worker.

The men Sofia's mother hired to rebuild the plantation call to say they cannot come. They call the next day to say the same. The day after, Sofia's mother shouts at them, and they do not call again.

Sofia sees these men walking in the village a week later. They wear T-shirts with that beautiful logo, and they are flush with money, for it is their first payday. That night, the factories churn, and new buildings float out from the pod. The next day, a new shopping district opens along a new Main Street that runs in a line from the pod complex to the village.

The men of the factories are the first to take their families there, for they know what kind of wonders the stores will offer. They return to the village at midday, dressed in fashionable new clothes, their arms full of cutting edge electronics and magical toys. The people of the village see these and rush down Main Street to see for themselves. They crowd into the cool climate-controlled stores and sample the strange packaged delights in the cafeterias. Sofia is among them.

Some of the stores are not yet open. On the doors of these stores Sofia sees that more flyers have been posted. More “help wanted” ads. While Sofia loves the design and respects the wording – whoever has written these is talented – she is not a shopkeeper.

Over the next week Sofia watches the people of the village walk up the hill to the pod city each morning, and then return home each night. By the end of the week, new apartment complexes have arisen between the stores and the factories. Most families spend the weekend moving into their new homes. Sofia and her mother remain in the house near the burned plantation. At night she hears music from the new cafes and she stares out her window at the pristine white walls of the new buildings under the glare of the new lights.

On Monday morning of the third week since the pod landed, the Company interviews for executives. Monday is the last day Sofia spends in her mother’s home.

\* \* \*

The Company’s nerve center is inside the pod. The glass paneled doors open on an efficient lobby with clean lines and prominent displays of Company branding. Young executives dressed in the Company’s business clothing brand filter through check points and into the heart of the facility. Sofia watches them. She realizes that they are her kind of people, that here, she will fit in.

Black uniformed Company grunts check her through. “Interviews are down the hall, conference room at the end. Check in with the girl out front.”

Sofia strolls down the hall. The other village residents draw looks of scorn and distaste from the Company people. Sofia does not dress or act like a villager, and the Company regulars – the ones that had loaded up on the pod and soared off to this backwater – pass Sofia without a glance.

The Girl Out Front turns out to be a woman approximately thirty five years of age who wears a suit that is not so fashionable as to intimidate her superiors inside the room. She takes Sofia’s CV and assigns her to wait in a chair nearby while the team finishes another interview.

Sofia will recall the interview as one of the most enjoyable conversations of her life. She has the opportunity to demonstrate her prowess with brands and marketing, yes, but she also has the chance to demonstrate how she is one of them. She prompts them with questions about their background and their feelings on certain famous ad campaigns. When one of her interviewers answers, she focuses on them like there is no one else in the room.

She leaves with four things: a salaried position in marketing; a lunch date with Bradley Erikson, Senior Executive Vice President of Marketing; a lease on an apartment close to the pod; and the knowledge that Bridget Lundberg, Vice President for Market Defense, doesn't know how to do her job. The Company sends a car to her mother's house to collect Sofia's things.

Executive lunches become a fixture on her agenda after that. Topics range from the trends current in New York or Milan to Sofia's insistence on spending her free time in the hardsuit simulators, or, in the case of her latest lunch with Bradley, to the threat posed by the competition.

"The Californians -"

"Chinese," Bradley says.

"Chinese, same difference, right?" She smiles at him. It is the Californians, but raising that point isn't going to help her standing with him. It doesn't really matter, anyway. "They're gunning for us down here. I mean, you can see it in their campaign." She indicates the scans set out on the table. "And Brad, I just don't think we're at all prepared."

Bradley leans back, frowning. He has a look that she envies, comprised of expensive shirts and suits that have just enough wrinkles to seem thrown together but not unkempt. A little part of her hates him because his look is so practiced, so a part of him, that it is effortless. He has a sharpened sense of fashion and not one concern that wearing the wrong item might cause someone, even for a moment, to place him among the lower classes.

"So what do we do about it?" he says, then looks up as the waiter, a boy who had worked on the plantation before the pod landed, arrives with their food. Two plates, each bearing a hamburger, topped with a variety of seasonal vegetables, served on a toasted bun. His lips pull back from his teeth in disgust. He turns to the waiter, but before he can say anything, Sofia speaks up.

"Do we look to you," she says to the waiter, "like the kind of people who eat *buns*?"

The boy turns a shade of crimson. Across the table, Bradley Erikson snorts in approval.

He appoints Sofia as his Special Liaison for Local Market Defense the next day. Bridget Lundberg welcomes her to the department with a smile made out of knives.

A week later, the Californians invade.

\* \* \*



The invasion starts with an airdrop. Their pod hanging in the sky, the Californian hardsuits jump from the hatches, chutes unfurling, rockets firing. They float through the early morning sky wreaking havoc on the factory district below.

The pod's defenses are not caught unaware. Sofia had expected the move and, on her order, the suits stationed around the perimeter open fire. M2139 anti-aircraft guns thunder from their positions behind the lines. Blasts of flak flower in the sky, shredding the 'chutes of hapless hardsuited warriors, sending them tumbling from the sky. Their impact craters will mark the land for years.

Sofia watches the invasion unfold from the monitors in her office. She is in early, like most days. In before everyone else, out long after the last person has left. "I like people with your background," Bradley had told her. "Hungry, committed. Willing to do what is necessary." That hunger means that there is no lag in launching the counterattack.

Klaxons sound in the pod, marshaling the hardsuit pilots to their launch bays. Sofia calls up Bradley.

"Seen it," he says. "Home office says it's just a feint, nothing to worry about."

"A lot of suits up there."

Bradley yawns. "I know you'll take care of it." A thought brightens his face. "Hey, you want to take a platoon out to scout, lead from the front? Make some use of all that simulator time?"

Hell yes, is what she thinks. "If you think it's okay," is what she says.

"Absolutely," he says. "Everybody's got their first time. A little campaign like this is perfect for you. Impress the folks back home."

She nods. Back home...the corporate offices...promotion to global marketing.

"Take a couple of the attorneys with you. Niles and Jacobs, maybe."

"But they report to Bridget," she says.

Bradley scoffs at the notion. "Yeah, on paper."

She smiles in spite of the seriousness of the situation. "I'll call in once I see more," she says.

"Great. Take care out there, Soph," he says, and disconnects.

Ten minutes later, Sofia stands with Niles and Jacobs at the hatches. Niles' hardsuit carries two Maxim heavy Gatling guns under each arm, huge spinning barrels that extend out a meter below the hands. Jacobs grabs two PPSH autoguns, one in each hand. He has an ampulomet on his back

for long range artillery. Sofia considers the weapon rack and selects a P-TRD anti-suit rifle. She has a combat knife strapped to the suit's leg.

"Ready," she calls over the comm. The hatch opens. The three suits drop into a crouch and their heel-jets fire, rocketing them forward like speed skaters.

The forces clash on a line that runs between the new town and the old, bulging here and there as the Californians push in or are thrown back. Overall the defenders have the better of it. She looks at them, resplendent in their uniformity, a message of strength and style repeated down the line without fail. The attackers' suits have an almost primitive look, as if they'd been assembled in separate garages willy-nilly, with no thought to the overall consistency of their appearance. They are all strange angles and riotous colors. But then, after all, they are a co-op.

Front reports show one alarming detail: in the sector near Main Street an enemy force has pushed through the line and is slashing straight toward the main power production centers. Sofia calls for reinforcements and skates off with her two prosecutors following close behind.

Their team jets down Main Street, cutting over through an alley between a coffee shop (all product blended from a mix of imported Indonesian beans stored in Company warehouses for months) and a clothing store from the Company's collegiate brand. As they approach the end of the alley, Sofia watches three Company suits dash down the street in front of her. There is a tearing sound, as if the air is being split open, and one of the suits falls backwards across the mouth of the alley, a great hole melted in its chest.

The sound again, two more times. There are two explosions on the far side.

"Boys, you still with me?" Sofia asks.

"Right behind you boss," Niles says. Jacobs grunts an assent.

"Loop back through the head office and come around from the gennys. Radio me before you make your move."

"Affirmative. You okay here?"

Niles' concern is touching. Maybe he'll swing a promotion out of this, if he survives. Hell, if he survives and the general counsel doesn't, maybe Niles will get one hell of a battlefield promotion. And that, in turn, will make the somewhat ordinary attorney from Intellectual Property Enforcement more than a bit attractive. It will solidify her path to the home office. Sofia checks the P-TRD and crouches close to the corner of the alley as the two men skate off to set up their assault.

More Company hardsuits come barreling down the street in front of her. Again and again that tearing sound cuts through the day and they fall, one after the other. Once she sees a pink beam hit a hardsuit square in the chest. It explodes. An energy weapon, then.

“In position,” Niles’ voice crackles over the radio.

“Same,” says Jacobs.

“On my mark. Three. Two. One. Mark!”

From far down the street she hears the thump-thump-thump of Jacobs’ ampulomet as it lobs its globular ammunition into the air, and the answering whoosh as the globes shatter, spraying liquid fire in all directions. Then Niles’ twin Maxims roar to life. She thinks she can hear the barrels spinning from here.

Sofia steps out from the alley. Flames are everywhere. Shops burn and asphalt melts from the heat of napalm from Jacobs’ artillery. Her screens flash and then dim as they compensate for the light. Niles and Jacobs are out from hiding, skating in a pincer movement to hem in their foe, guns blazing.

An enemy hardsuit crouches among the flames as a shop nearby explodes, sending a fireball high into the sky. The wreckage of dozens of Company suits lies scattered around it. Bullets trace their way up the street toward the enemy suit, but it sidesteps with ease. Its great white torso stained red in the light of the flame, it aims a long rifle and fires a beam of energy that takes Niles’ head off. His suit skids forward then slumps to a halt.

Sofia stares at the enemy machine. It is nothing like the ramshackle Californian suits that she has seen this day. It is beautiful, one of a kind, a prototype assembled with a craftsman’s care and possessing staggering power. There is huge power pack on its back, larger than any generator on Company suits. If it is not stopped – and stopped soon – it will destroy the complex, and with it, Sofia’s dream.

Jacobs sprints toward the enemy, firing his autoguns wildly, screaming incoherently over the comm. The pilot moves with liquid grace, dodging the incoming bullets before plunging a meter long heatsword into Jacobs’ chest. As his suit slides slowly off the blade and crumples to the ground, Sofia pulls the sights of her P-TRD anti-suit rifle up and fires a shot from behind straight into the power pack.

The shot tears through the pack and out through the chest of the beautiful machine. For a moment it stands motionless, still pointing its sword at the remains of Jacobs. Then a star blazes in its back where the shot entered, an explosion flowers outward in waves, and Sofia knows no more.

\* \* \*

Sofia awakes in the infirmary. She is not injured. She stands on her own and looks about. There is no one in the infirmary with her. She wants to go to her office; she has won a great victory, and that, if anything, will get her a promotion to the home office.

She exits the infirmary. To one side is a long hall leading to the lobby and the front entrance. To the other is the interview room, the place where her life really began, and the elevators up to the corporate offices.

There are guards lining the hall, and they will not allow anyone to pass further down toward the elevators. Sofia looks around and she sees that the only people on this side of the guards are people from the village. On the other side, Bradley stands amid other Company employees, the ones who came with the pod. He's with Bridget. He has his hand on her shoulder. She's smiling.

A representative from human resources steps through the cordon and approaches Sofia. She has a white sheet of paper in her hand. She extends the sheet to Sofia.

"For you," she says. Sofia takes the paper and the woman quickly moves back to the guards, passes through, and disappears behind them.

Sofia looks down and reads.

They are closing the expansion. The explosion from the enemy's prototype hardsuit damaged the pod's power supplies, and ravaged the commercial areas. Key industrial facilities were taken to half capacity, or worse. The cost to repair the pod city far outstrips the value the Company would realize from the market expansion. They are leaving. All employees from the village are being released, effective immediately.

The page lists the cost of the expedition and states that all payments, benefits and options otherwise due the villagers have been taken to satisfy the debt they owe to the Company, and that it will have no further dealings with any of them until such time as the debt is satisfied in full. They have ID printed each employee in order to track them if they go to other towns or seek to renege on their obligations to the Company.

Sofia looks up. She searches for Bradley, because this is a mistake. If the Company is going to leave, well, sure, she can understand that given the damage. But leave without her? They would not do that. She has proven herself. She speaks their language. She is one of them.

But he is gone. There is no one there but the advancing black wall of finely dressed guardsmen. The wall moves inexorably down the hall, pushing the flotsam of the village citizens before it into the lobby and out through the doors.

"I would move back, if I were you. It's gonna get hot here," the guard captain says. Sofia can hear a whirring sound that grows into a roar as the pod begins to fold back into itself. The outbuildings that could be salvaged lift up and fall back into the pod. The *matryoshka* is reassembling.

The villagers stumble away. Sofia goes with them. With a great blast of flame and smoke the pod lifts off the ground, shoots into the sky, and is gone.

They stand in the burned ground between the village and the bombed out remains of Main Street. It is only a husk now. The factories are gone or ruined, though the rivers of slime that poured from them still work their way toward the sea. The stores are shattered and empty.

A boy grabs her wrist. He motions with his chin toward the village, toward the line of people shuffling away from the ruins.

Sofia pulls away from him. She shakes her head. She bares her teeth in anger. He shrugs, and joins the procession.

Sofia falls to her knees in front of the scorched earth. She stares at it while they walk away, back to the lives they had before the pod the landed.

That is where the rebels find her, still kneeling before the ashes of her dream. Their leader dismounts from his hovercycle – a slick throwback model meant to echo a bygone era – and approaches her. With his red beret, long hair, and green fatigues he looks like an idealist from an old propaganda film. She cannot help but admire his style.

## **The End**

*Jeff Cross has been fascinated since grade school by tales of giant robots, space battleships, and fantastic journeys. Born and raised in Nashville, Tennessee, he now lives in the Washington, DC area with his wife, three children, and many pets. In between juggling family life and work, he is working on several short stories.*