

STARFIGHTER STORIES

A collection of short stories and
illustrations by the winners of the
Starfighter Writing and Drawing
Contests

NIGHT
RUNNER

NIGHT
RUNNER

Chapter 10

*by Noah Sutherly
1st place in the Starfighter Writing Contest*

The car battery was drained, and Rose was unconscious from the pulse blast. The Traveler came to only to realize The Sentinels had them surrounded. He was trapped with few options out on this open road.

"Out of the vehicle Asshole! You have nowhere to run! You're coming into custody with us willingly, or we're putting you down now! Your choice!"

It was the head of The Sentinels unit barking out instructions to The Traveler. The Traveler was looking all over the car, trying to find Starlight. If only he could get his hands on it would he have a chance at fending The Sentinels off and getting himself and Rose out of this situation. It was his fault they were in this mess to begin with, and he couldn't let everything end like this. What a fool he was to think they could just walk up to NC Headquarters and talk to Rose's father about stopping a nuclear war from breaking out without raising some eyebrows. The Sentinels had been sent to stop them and bring The Traveler in for interrogation. Before he had found Starlight The Traveler was grabbed by the arm and forcibly dragged out through the window and dropped on the pavement.

"Aah, damn! You pricks can't even open the door first?", said The Traveler.

"Shut the hell up", said one of the Sentinels, and hit The Traveler right in the stomach with the butt of his rifle as he was lying on the ground. "And take that helmet off, slowly"! The Sentinel continued.

"Well, you see, that's..."

The Traveler was cut off. "Don't worry about that, we're just here to take him in". It was the head of The Sentinels again. "Cuff him up, and get him in the back of the truck. We'll let Mr. Blood deal with him".

The Traveler was dragged up onto his feet, his arms forced behind his back. He knew he was in trouble, but his thoughts turned to Rose. He hoped nothing more than for her to be okay. They were so close. Just a few more hours and they would have been in Miami. He told her to stay behind, that she wasn't in danger unless she stayed with him, but she insisted on going because her contact would only talk to her. He was kicking himself now for not leaving her behind while she was asleep the night before. This was his fight, not hers.

The Sentinels who escorted him to the truck opened the doors and physically threw him in, and slammed it shut. This was it, he had none of his gear. No way to escape and fight back. He could hear the unit leader giving orders to his men, but couldn't make out the muffled words. The truck turned over, and was put into gear and began to move.

Just as quickly as the truck began to move the brakes were hit and The Traveler was knocked forwards and fell on his face, cracking the shield of his helmet. Outside he heard yelling and what sounded like huge blasts. The Traveler picked himself up and thought, "what the hell is going on out there!? That sound! Is that..." His thoughts were cut short by gun fire, and then the screams and cries of the soldiers. It sounded like they were being torn apart! The noise went on for about a minute, and then nothing. Dead silence. The Traveler was confused as to what just happened out there. He got up and ran to the back of the truck, slamming his shoulder into the door to force it opened, but to no avail. He kicked at it repeatedly, but still no give. Then he heard the latches being unlocked. The doors swung open, and there was Rose! She was bleeding from a small gash on her forehead, but otherwise looked fine.

"Hey there hotshot, what's the big idea leaving me behind in the car"? Rose asked with a snarky smile.

The Traveler got out of the truck and scanned the carnage that surrounded them. "Rose, how the hell did you do this? You didn't..." Rose cut him off. "With this little toy you kept in your pack. What did you call it? Starlight?"

"But how did you figure out how to use it?" Rose replied saying, "I found the instructions you had underneath it. I couldn't read any of it, but the pictures were clear enough. This little thing is really something else! I've never seen a weapon like it before"! She exclaimed.

"Well god damn" The Traveler said, "you saved my ass! I guess I should be thankful you wanted to tag along".

"We need each other, we're a team now", Rose said as they walked back to the car.

"I'm starting to feel a little woozy from all this excitement. I don't think this blood loss I'm suffering is helping matters either" Rose said as her knees began to buckle. "Rose!" The Traveler cried out, and caught her as she began to fall. He picked her up and carried her over to the car and sat her in the passenger seat.

With Rose safely in the car, The Traveler walked to the driver's side and hit the latch to pop the hood. There was no way to charge the battery now, but he moved to the trunk of the car and opened it. There was a tool box inside. He grabbed the socket wrench and pocketed it while shutting the trunk. He then walked over to one of the jeeps The Sentinels rode in, popped the hood, and disconnected the battery. He carried the battery over to the car, and replaced the drained one with the one from the jeep. He shut the hood, got in the driver's seat, and turned the key. The car started right up, and they were ready to continue.

The crack in his helmet's shield would make driving difficult. He decided it was time to take it off. "What's the point in hiding behind this thing anyway"? He thought. He disconnected the latches and removed his helmet. At that moment Rose began to stir. "Hey, you got it working" she said, and began to open her eyes. She looked at The Traveler and gasped.





Illustration by Nick Prinzing.

1st place in the Starfighter Drawing Contest

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The Night Runner

by Marshal D. Carper
1st place in the Starfighter Writing Contest
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“Sir, they just got back to the station. They are going to process him and put him in interrogation room 3 for you.”

“What about the girl?”

“Dead, sir. Paramedics called it at the scene. Looks like she was shot with a handgun of some kind.”

“Did you find the weapon?”

“No, sir. We’re searching the area as best we can in the dark, but there was nothing in the car. I’m not sure he could fire a gun with those gloves on, though. We had to cut the suit sleeves off of him to even get him into handcuffs.”

“Ever seen anything like this?”

“A spaceman shooting a girl? No, sir. This is a first for me.”

Detective Pierce sighed. “I’ll be down in a minute.”

The beat cop nodded and shuffled away.

Pierce smashed his cigarette butt into an overflowing ashtray and flicked the power button on the radio. He had heard enough about the stock market crash for one day and wasn’t interested in hearing Reagan’s take. Between his retirement savings disappearing and a spaceman wanted for murder, it was shaping up to be a strange Miami October, stranger than usual at least.

With a notepad and pen in hand, Pierce paused at the glass to look at his suspect. The traffic guys weren’t kidding when they called him a spaceman. The suspect’s silver jumpsuit was charred and smudged with dirt.

His sleeves were cut, but he still had his space boots on, and his jacket collar rose up like a bulging turtleneck to accommodate a helmet.

After a deep breath, Pierce stepped into the room, pressed record on the cassette player between him and the suspect, and sat down.

Before Pierce could speak, the spaceman said, “Yes, I’d like to have a cigarette. Thank you for offering. I know you haven’t offered yet, but you were going to.”

Pierce raised an eyebrow but handed the spaceman a cigarette anyway. “So, you know what I’m going to ask next then, I assume?” Pierce asked as he flicked the lighter.

The spaceman nodded. “I didn’t kill my wife. She was murdered. I was trying to stop it but didn’t get there in time. You didn’t find a murder weapon because the killer is still out there. His name is Henry Gonzalez, and he will be at Pete and Lenny’s for the next two hours with the murder weapon tucked in his jeans. If you wait an hour, he will be too stoned to put up a fight.”

“How do you know all of this?”

“We’ve done this before, Detective Pierce,” the spaceman said. “You don’t believe me, but you will send someone down to the club to check anyway. You like to be thorough.”

Pierce rubbed his eyes. What was it about the night shift that brought out people like this?

“Send someone down to Pete and Lenny’s,” Pierce said to whoever was behind the glass.

He turned back to face the spaceman. He lit a cigarette for himself and leaned back.

“You know I’m going to ask about the get-up, right?”

“I came to you for a reason, Detective,” the spaceman said. “You were in Vietnam. Drafted, but you served with honor and humanity. What you saw there... You believed that people shouldn’t suffer. That war should be prevented. You thought about Vietnam this morning when the market crashed.”

“Why does that matter?”

“I’m military as well. Marines. I know what it’s like to face the absurdity of war and yet have to be rational. You and I can speak the same language.”

Pierce stared, skeptical but curious. “We get lots of characters through here. Your act isn’t as compelling as you think.”

“You’ve been receiving complaints about prank calls for most of the night. People calling about nuclear war, missiles in the air. They are pretty upset.”

Pierce slowly nodded, indicating that it was true.

“That’s my fault. It’s one of the side effects of time travel. Sometimes an old timeline echoes into the new one.”

“Time travel,” the detective repeated, chuckling.

“Right now, your partner is looking at the engine of my car. He has never seen anything like it, and no one in this decade has. My mission was to prevent a nuclear war triggered by a computer glitch, false blip on a radar. It wasn’t even an intentional war. It was a mistake that burned half the world, and I was sent back to prevent it.”

“Come on. What does nuclear war have to do with a woman’s murder?”

“Timelines are funny. Changes ripple in countless directions. If I stop the bombs, she dies. If I save her, the bombs fall. Every timeline with every variation, one or the other always happens. This was my last try, and I had to put stopping the bombs before saving her. That was the mission.”

“If you can time travel, why wouldn’t you just go back?”

“Your detectives will find that the car won’t start. It’s out of fuel. I can’t make another run, and there’s a chance the engine won’t be invented in this timeline.”

“Can’t just put gas in the tank?”

The spaceman shook his head and leaned forward, suddenly betraying a deep weariness. “When the bombs fell, everyone raced to build bigger bombs. Fusion technology leapt ahead while most of civilization starved. The engine in that car had the power of a white dwarf star, and that’s the kind of power you need to bend space and time.”

“You figured all that out?”

“I don’t know the math. I’m just a grunt pushing buttons.”

“How long does it take to run out of star-gas?”

“A white dwarf can burn for 13.8 billion years.”

Pierce didn’t know why, but he wrote the lifespan of a white dwarf down in his notepad. “You don’t look a day over 2 billion,” Pierce joked.

“My mission lasted 9.2 billion years. I pushed the engine pretty hard.”

Someone knocked on the door and the lock clunked free. An officer came in, whispered in Pierce’s ear, and stepped back out, closing the door behind him as he went.

Pierce laughed to himself and looked back across the table at the spaceman. “We found Gonzalez,” Pierce said. “And, apparently, he has confessed.”

“I couldn’t save her, Detective,” the spaceman said. “I hoped for 9.2 billion years and have had this conversation with you thousands of times. But I failed.”

“You said your mission was to stop nuclear war. The war still feels pretty cold to me.”

“I stopped them today, Detective. If this timeline is like the others, the bombs will fall in 2019. We’re out of fuel. This is our last chance, and I need your help.”

Marshal is the author of the memoir *the Cauliflower Chronicles: A Grappler's Tale of Self-Discovery and Island Living* as well as the business book *The Innovative Brand*. More of his work is available at www.marsh.al

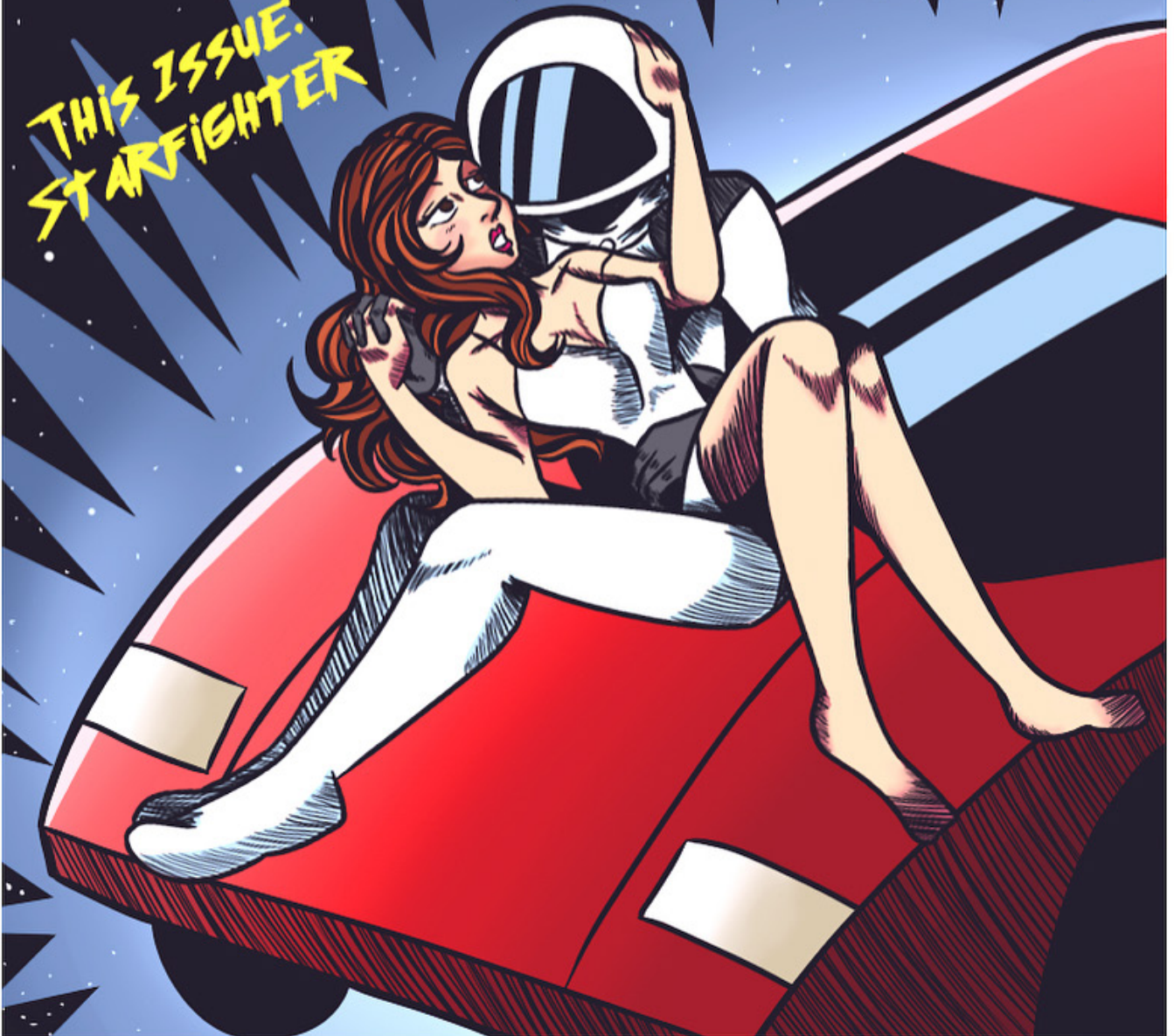
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Illustration by Isabel Carroll.

2nd place in the Starfighter Drawing Contest

Instagram: @isa__draws

Time doesn't matter

By Jason Toole

3rd place in the Starfighter Writing Contest

"I can stop it from happening, you just need to get me there in time...I always told you time doesn't matter, but this is different."

Her recorded words ended when he hit stop on the hand-held tape player, then rewind, foot melting the pedal to the floor as the Challenger's engine ripped them through the night. There wasn't another soul on the empty road but there would be soon, all the souls maybe. Cities were targets now. The blast was on the news, the radio, it was everywhere...Casualty counts were impossible. World maps were changing. Shit, not just the maps, the *world* was changing.

Adjusting the rearview mirror, he saw her splayed out in the back seat buckled at the waist, lifeless, dead, still in that killer dress.

"FUCK!" he screamed, the word swallowed on the wind howling through the car's half-open windows. The tape recorder *clicked* ready. He hit play again and her voice was almost enough to calm him. Almost.

"You think I'm dead, but I'm not. I love you, I'm alive, and you have to trust me. Drive north on 27 and don't pull over for anything. My car has enough gas to get you where you need to be. The world isn't ending, I know you think it is, but it's not. I love you. You have to keep driving. I can stop it from happening, you just need to get me there in time. I always told you time doesn't matter, but this is different. You're going to see things, but you drive. They can't hurt us. Nothing can hurt us. I love you and you trust me and that's everything now, so keep driving...Don't flip the tape until the car stops. You'll know when. If you love me, you'll wait...And I know you love me."

God her voice was perfect, everything about her. You don't fall in love, do you? You get murdered by love, it fucking destroys you and then you rise up as something else, something invincible. He gripped the wheel tighter with one hand, pedal-foot tingling from the pressure. Outside was just flat empty nothing, the road lit up in the car's high beams seeming to feed the surrounding dark. All the stars were out tonight, but no moon. She always loved the stars. The car screamed on; 80, 90, 100 MPH, vibrations on the wheel and across the dash. Half a tank left.

"What a car," he heard himself say before looking back on her in the mirror, fighting off the panic. The necklace he'd given her dangled from the rearview; silver chain with a blood-red rose. "What a girl... What the fuck, what the fuck..."

He rewound the tape and listened to her again, road a straight shot into the forever night.

"You think I'm dead, but I'm not. I love you, I'm alive, and you have to trust me. Drive north on 27 and don't pull over for anything..."

A flash broke suddenly along the ridges to his south and he knew it was another one. The blast lit up the sky like the soft edges of a dawn sun, but there was no sun here, not now. It was full dark, and that faraway light was so much the opposite of a sunrise. What was all the way out there? Miami? Fuck.... Fuck.

"FUCK!" he shrieked, tape player in his lap and both hands death-gripped on the wheel. "Baby, you better be right about all of this," he looked back on her.

No more words from his girl, not since she made him get behind the wheel and said her heart was about to stop. She handed him the tape recorder, made him swear he'd listen to every word, she kissed him and then she died. Right there, right in front of him. Another dead body in a world filling with dead bodies.

Lightning branches began to stab along the southern slopes, sparking bright a massive storm cloud. Thunder from it rumbled low, he could even hear it above the charging engine. Was that from the nuclear

blast? He didn't know if-

A blue bolt exploded against the road just ahead of him, the image of it burning into his brain with a concussion that rippled through the car, through his ribcage and chest, it was *so fucking close!*

He swerved and tapped the brake, narrowly missing a smoking crater it left on the road. The speedometer dropped and he cursed again, slamming his foot back down on the gas. Another lightning strike burst next to the car, then a third cracking into the road ahead of him, more sizzling into the landscape on his sides, deafening explosions.

He drove on, he didn't stop. He went faster. A promise was made to a dead girl, after all. Nothing was going to stop him. He glanced at her in the backseat through the rearview. Well, she was alive when he made the promise-

A final crack of lightning smashed into the hood of her Challenger, popping it open and sending a burst of spider-web cracks across the windshield. The car slowed down and rolled to a stop, smoking hot and crackling. The headlights and dash still glowed, but the car wouldn't turn when he worked the keys. The beast was dead.

Once his own heart attack didn't claim his soul, he looked back. "End of line," he told her, voice trembling. None of this was right.

He unbuckled his seatbelt, rewound the tape and listened to her voice again.

"...Don't flip the tape until the car stops. You'll know when. If you love me, you'll wait...And I know you love me."

He flipped the tape, brought it to the beginning and pressed play. It was short this time.

"Open the trunk, put it on, and hold me. We're going back to fix this. You and I have done it before... We've done this a thousand times before, and we always end up together."

The air was dry and cool when he got out of the car. He opened the trunk and saw the boots, the suit and helmet. It was her suit, it was made for her, but he was able to get into it. Maybe it was made for both of them. None of this was right, but it was...He didn't know. It was starting to *feel* right.

The clouds he'd seen along the south were breaking up, faster than they should have. They looked otherworldly, those black storm clouds. They moved too quick. The stars filled the sky again as he pulled the suit on, shoulder bands and stiff fabric seeming to help loosen itself whenever he struggled to work the straps. Finally he slid the helmet over his head and it dropped into place at the collar-lock with an easy, hydraulic *hiss*.

Closing the trunk, he went back into the car and lifted her, his breath cycling through the ventilation ports. It was cumbersome in the suit but he got her out.

"Killer fucking dress," he said, looking down on her face. Whatever this all was, it was ending. He could sense that much.

Rewinding and pressing play, he left the recorder on the roof and listened to her voice one last time. Holding her on the road at the rear of the car, he felt the light approaching from the black sky behind them both. It wasn't an evil light, it wasn't a human light. It was a light from somewhere else, a light from the stars. The air around him shook, his back teeth hurt and there was a pull from above that turned the both of them weightless.

As they were lifted from the road by the light, her voice on the tape faded away.

"...We're going back to fix this. You and I have done it before. We've done this a thousand times before, and we always end up together..."

She stirred in his arms, and her eyes opened.

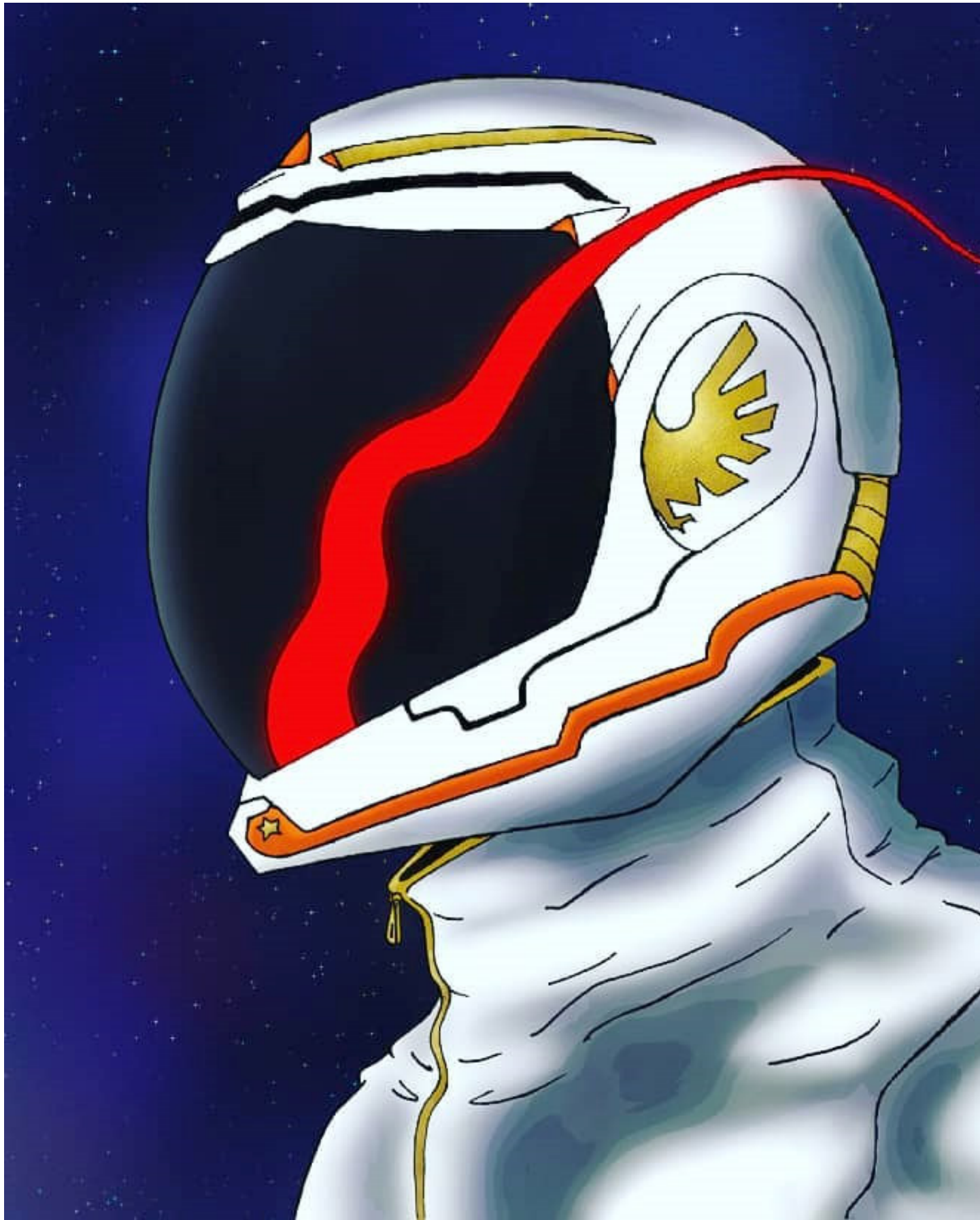




Illustration by Samantha Rubio.
3rd place in the Starfighter Drawing Contest
Instagram: @samrubio._.artist

Fallen starfighter

by Gabriel Herselin

Honorable mention in the Starfighter Writing Contest

My name is Timesquadron sergeant Kolenz. At least, that's how my teammates call me. My real name is Devin, thirty-six years old, and I'm not like you.

Since the fall of humanity, other people from other galaxies had understood that they could leave their lives hidden behind the distance between us and them. And it wasn't with good feelings about earthlings. Some guys who was considered like fools thought aliens were among us. It was a joke that travelled between TV-show and elite, but no one could imagine it was true. The question wasn't when earthling will meet extra-terrestrials, but if we believed or not to extra-terrestrials.

I don't know why I said all these words. Now that I've discovered Earth for the first time, I know it wasn't the good century where I could ask that.

In my short life in spaceships, I fought a lot of time against warriors from outer space and outlaw from Earth. However, the planet of my grandparents knew a harder fate and more diseases than me in my job. I see it every time.

Ruins everywhere, robbery, war, death. A usual life for eighties' earthlings. Yes, you've well heard. You in your nice life, you thought that eighties was a time of tension, but globalization and open-minded people too.

Actually, my eyes see it again. I'm walking in a deserted factory in USA. A military factory. Humans are ever clever to make weapons, we take advantage again nowadays. We've received the power of death herself, who must be happy since a few millenniums to welcome such young men and women. I've ever helped her. I don't know how many times. The last time, it was an old guy, who kept his rifle pointed at me. With my bullet, I saved him from this nuclear winter, but I killed a man. Again.

Nuclear. You didn't know when I wanted to talk about that. Me too. Please, wait a few minutes. I'm too busy to tell you this story.

Looters. They are three. Probably guys of the region, who have known that this factory was derelict. The taller is wearing a camo shirt and an old jeans, the two other look like urban fighters. They were in another side of the factory, a side where weapons slept quietly. Do I have the time to fight them? My digital watch is useless during this decade, but I stole a little watch when I was in the former city. If I fight these three hecklers, maybe I'll be injured by the future radioactive cloud which might come in two hours. But I know that the three guys had a car. To find oil is actually hard. When I look these wankers and their dirty hands, a feeling deep inside me says that I found three former lucky guys. Former, cause their smiling fate will end at the second where I'll shoot them.

I'm surprised. They want me to talk; they want me to say where I found my white suit came out of a Sci-fi movie. Is this hope, or only curiosity? Maybe they "believe" in extra-terrestrials. "I'm sorry" I say. I don't want to waste my time with them. With my holographic projector, I create myself a fake doppelganger, as real as good special effects. Caught off guard by my magic trick, they empty their magazines on my light creation. I'm a coward, I know. I shoot one, two times. Every bullet find a target, but one. He's afraid by me, as I'm afraid by humans living before the nuclear winter. I don't want to kill him, I just ask him where his car is. He's honest and show me a road behind the trees. My fist was nicer than my gun. He'll sleep a half-hour, and will wake up when he'll heard the most terrifying sound of his life.

Nuclear winter... When I'm driving his classic American car, I cannot stop to think about pure human

stupidity: atomic war. Two sides, two different ideology, two countries. It's perfect, we ever need two players to play con. In your time dimension, Cold War doesn't end, but the world seems to be quiet and the two sides hope that this war is only a memory. You fucking lucky guy! In mine, they chose to reach the highest level of apathetic behaviour and egoism. Both have dropped atomic bomb. I know every impact on USA, because I studied this in High school. In fact, Cold war in my time dimension means life in space too. No more human on earth, and a thousand people with the weight of humanity on their shoulders in space. That's pretty funny, isn't it?

The highway is empty. I'm driving faster and faster. Suddenly, I stop. A girl is knocked on the low side. A future dead person, again. "I don't have the right to save humans" said my general when he sends me on earth. "They had too many opportunities to do it themselves"

Then, I remember all people I killed. I could kill anybody when I want, but I couldn't save people? "Life and death are the two sides of a piece of money". A silly sentence somebody tells me one day.

She's pretty, born in the sixties. She's the first person I want to show that humanity is still alive.

I was a Starfighter. I spend my life to kill humans and aliens. Before or after our Cold war, I know that humans are always unripe compared to their power. Even me, I think. But today, I'm tired. I go down my stolen car, and I save the girl. The weight of death is too high next the weight of life. It's time to rebalance this.





Illustration by Alex Boyd.
Honorable mention in the Starfighter
Drawing Contest

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The Deadliest Dream

By: Michael Boyd

Honorable mention in the Starfighter Writing Contest

The advent of night, the illuminated stars in the sky, snuffed out any hope we had of this day going different. Weeks had gone by since the silos had emptied, emitting their payloads of flame and ferocious death upon mankind, searing, etching a vision... of a once sane world into one of vainglorious violence and furious discord. We realized too late, that the invading force from beyond the farthest stars, would hijack our weapons, leaving us helpless in our own arrogance, our own frailty we took for granted, thinking we were superior. Now all that remains is uncertainty, fragility in all things. Life is the only thing we work for now... not money, not possessions... Since the Event occurred, we have all discovered what it is really like to work for something. We have all lost something. None more so than I.

As her lithe and supple body lies lifeless in my arms, I ponder the night sky, and how we arrived at the present juncture. As my helmets soft, purple interior informs me of the enemy's presence, the car comes to life, its systems sparking like a burnt out forge in an abandoned blacksmith's shop. The creatures continue to stalk the last vestiges of humanity, but I stand before them, my sole purpose to bring her back: her smile, her scent, her laughter. The rumors I have heard of their technology... there is hope she can come back...

I turn quickly, shoving her into the backseat. They are close now, writhing, creeping death is nigh upon me. I jump into the drivers seat of the modified vessel, made to look like something human hands once made. My foot makes contact with the gas pedal instinctively, as if it calls to me. The interior displays flicker with purpose, something I now MUST have. A stream of cylindrical flame releases from the exhaust pipe as I grab the wheel, and punch it hard toward the everlasting sky. I try to outrun destiny, but realize the horizon is my destiny. I will get her back. I will reap vengeance for our folly. And, we will rebuild...





Illustration by Aaron Conlon.
Honorable mention in the Starfighter Drawing Contest

Instagram: @aaronsquid

Odyssey of the Starfighter

By S. Kane (Steven Mamo)

Honorable mention in the Starfighter Writing Contest

After hours, the retro-rockabilly diner remained a final sanctuary for all those uninitiated; all those who'd no identification with the Invaders. Lights were dimmed to avoid undesirable attention during infinitely twilight times - it was in those sky-spangled moments of temporality when the true foreign faces of the Invaders were revealed, for they hid in human facades to better intermingle undetected. Horrid monstrosities, their true visages were leathery skin stretched around a malformed orb of a skull and sparse coverage, all illuminated by effervescent eyes burning an intense crimson hue.

Fortunately, the shade of Starfighter helmets darkened the glow, thus rendering it significantly less blinding.

The Starfighter Driver furtively sipped his cold coffee at a vinyl-clad booth, ceramic mug adjacent to his removed helm. Observing the urbanized mesa outside, he grew fleetingly distracted by his own reflection, warped atop years of fingerprints gone unwashed. From years of dusk-driven travel, his skin had grown pale in anticipation of a red dawn which never came, drifting through the cold waves of cities without sunlight. As he sighed in dismay, the rose tucked by his breast pocket made its presence felt against the tightening material - a sole memento of the night of the first invasion. They'd not arrived in ships, luminescent and disc-shaped out of the cosmos, but instead revealed their grotesque demeanours altogether in a single notion - Invaders hadn't descended for battle, but instead had laid in wait until their influence and affluence grew assiduous enough to conquer unrivalled in mettle.

It was that eve when Her face faded in the Starlight as most others did, revealing that Invader identity below. Uncertain it was if She'd been murdered and replaced with a simulacrum doppelganger, abducted and hidden away like Her last rose to him, or converted via strange metamorphosis into an Invader most displeasing; remaining only was the certainty of Her disappearance - that She was no longer as She was, or where She was.

All that lingered was left by that rose, still nestled in his jacket years later.

Rumours around the survivors persisted in believing that the Sentinel protocol in Miami could dethrone the Invaders reign, yet none had returned after such endeavours of activation. As the Driver fell entranced by his meditations on possibility and viability, a futurist waitress of the diner approached him to inquire whether he'd a fancy for more caffeine in his ceramic.

"Certainly, ma'am-" the Driver began as he turned to match her gaze; her scarlet-vibrant regard under the starlight.

The sanctuary was no longer prudent - Invaders abound.

Darting from the booth as he swiped his helmet from the table's surface, the image of the waitress' complexion couldn't escape his mind. They were martinet parasites; proverbial boots under which each survivor would be flattened and discarded. Sprinting the parking lot's length and locking the auto door behind him, the Driver jammed the key to ignition and twisted to haste, roaring his V8-motorized chariot to the midnight highway as he'd done for months. If his topographic memory was precise, Miami was but a forty-eight minute drive from the diner. Loneliness has compelled him long ago to name his auto - the 'Night Runner', as he'd christened was a gas-guzzling voyager through vacant stretches of road where the windshield beheld little more than spackled black skies and broken yellow lines constantly slipping under his wheels.

In the distance, Miami: the Sentinel awaited for activation by Thunderbird peak.

Duran Duran graced the radio airwaves, singing of nocturnal romance by heated shadows; there weren't vast selections of music since the Invaders revealed themselves - the only tunes they created were electronic melodies atop hyperreal metronomes. The metropolitan mesa was doused in florescent lighting upon arrival, with each electric bulb a minute magnum bullet against the twilight nothingness.

His entry to Thunderbird peak alarmed the proximate Invaders, prompting them to take chase against the

Night Runner and its tenacious, helmeted Driver. Their vehicles were new, polished and effective - they'd no functional faults like his vintage auto; no gas to guzzle or FM radio to entertain. Invader vehicles were futurist speedsters often dubbed 'Steel Ravens,' for their presence bode only omens of demise. The threshold to the interior of Thunderbird peak approached at an exponential pace as the Invaders and their vehicle drew nearer to his bumper and larger across the rear-view mirror. Through their windshield, their faces were shrouded in shadow with crimson beacons stamped atop them. A countdown began echoing just as the Night Runner crossed the entrance to Thunderbird peak, yet there was no Sentinel activation console in view.

Suddenly, a pang of air and impact deflated his rear tire and clawed the auto to a drudging halt.

The sanctuary of the Night Runner was no longer prudent - Invaders abound.

"You've imprinted death upon us all, Starfighter!" the first Invader called, climbing from his Steel Raven disparaged and wrought with trepidation.

Perplexity plagued the Driver's expression behind his helmet, furrowing his brow as the Invaders exit their vehicles to unite in a collective mourning rather than advance to him and indiscriminately attack. The Sentinel was but a program, designed solely to self-destruct subsequent to nuclear countdown. Leathery-textured fathers and children embraced each other in ardour and desolation as the digital readout neared absolute zero and the Thunderbird peak door locked, ensnaring all occupants inside. It was that ephemeral second when the Driver drew revelation to his neocortex: not a single Invader had summoned blood or even attempted to seek out violence against hi - it was only his uninformed, maudlin internality and projection. In the crimson, innocent eyes of those Invaders was a future the Driver held on place in; he wasn't the Starfighter destined to salvage humanity from savages - he was the invader in a futurist world were the old held no place in any longer.

The uncivilized savage was the reflection he'd been studying for months through grimy windows.

He'd utter apologies to Invaders, though they'd be forlorn and forgotten; unnecessary unless undoing the pending calamity. 'Invaders' could no longer be a term applied to them.

"What are you, if not Invaders?" the Starfighter Driver started, addressing the first being from their Steel Raven.

"What are we?" it scoffed while gripping its daughter as the countdown blipped to zero. "*We are people.*"



NIGHT RUNNER

Illustration by *Juliusllopis*.
Honorable mention in the Starfighter Drawing Contest

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