

BRAVE NEW WORLDS



SECOND EDITION

DYSTOPIAN STORIES BY
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BRAVE NEW WORLDS



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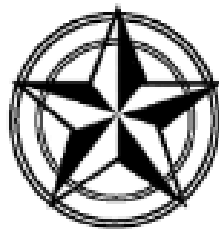
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BRAVE NEW WORLDS



DYSTOPIAN STORIES

EDITED BY JOHN JOSEPH ADAMS
SECOND EDITION

NIGHT SHADE BOOKS
SAN FRANCISCO

Just Do It

by Heather Lindsley

Sometimes the only warning is a flash of sun on the lens of a sniper's scope. Today I'm lucky enough to catch the mistake.

Funny, I think as I duck down behind the nearest parked car, I don't feel lucky.

The car is a tiny thing, an ultra enviro-friendly Honda Righteous painted an unambiguous green. Good for the planet, bad for cover. Ahead there's an H5 so massive and red I first take it for a fire truck. The selfish bastard parked illegally, blocking an alley, and for that I'm grateful.

I take a quick look at the roof of the building across the street before starting my dash to the Hummer. Halfway there a woman in plastic devil horns steps into my attempt to dodge her and her clipboard.

"Would-you-care-to-sign-our-petition-in-favor-of-the-effort-against-ending-the-Florida-blockade?" Damn, she's good. She sounds like she trained with a preBay auctioneer.

I feint left and dart right, putting her between me and the Shooter and countering, "I-already-signed-it-thanks!" so she won't follow. It's not the first lie I've told today, and it's not likely to be the last.

Temporarily safe behind the Hummer, I lean against the heavily tinted windows of the far back seat door, glad to be standing upright but panting and sweating and wishing I wasn't wearing the black jumpsuit I reserve for funerals and job interviews. Nanofiber, my ass—it can't even keep up with a little physical activity on a hot April day.

I start the long walk toward the front bumper, figuring I'll duck into the alley and continue on my way one block over. It seems like a good plan until another Shooter steps out of the alley.

This one has a pistol. I'd go cross-eyed if I tried to look down the barrel.

"Oh, come on," I say, backing away slowly. "Not the face."

He dips the barrel down a bit. I sigh and start pulling the zipper at the high neck of my jumpsuit in the same direction. I stop just shy of revealing cleavage—I'll get shot in the face before I give this punk an eyeful.

He shrugs and fires.

"You little bastard!" I yell at his retreating back as I pull out the dart out of my forehead. "I want your license number!"

Of course he doesn't bother to stop. They never do.

The itching starts almost immediately, and I reflexively reach up and touch the bump above my eyes. I know better than to scratch it, but I do anyway. The scratching releases a flood of chemicals that create a powerful and specific food craving. I brace myself.

French fries. French fries from the den of the evil clown, where they don't even pretend to use potatoes anymore. I hate those french fries, so golden and crispy on the outside, so moist and fluffy on the inside—

No no no no no, I do not want them.

I manage to get past the first shadow the clown casts on my route with relative calm, but by the second the itching is more intense and all I can imagine are french fries. Disgusting, nasty, tasty, delicious french fries.

This is not the way to walk into a job interview.

The site of my two o'clock appointment looms in the office tower ahead...right behind a third opportunity to relieve the craving. I keep moving, trying not to think about how well the diabetes-inducing corn syrupy sweet ketchup complements the blood pressure-raising salty savor of the fries.

I make a full circuit through the revolving doors of the office building before going back toward the object of my involuntary, chemically-enhanced desire.

The food odors pounce immediately and I can almost feel the molecules sticking to my clothes. Even if I turn around now I'll smell like fast food.

"Let's get this over with," I say unnecessarily to the credit scanner, staring it down until it greenlights my ability to pay for food I don't really want. None of the automat compartments contain fries, which is unusual, so I punch hard at a picture of french fries on the order panel. The dents in the panel tell me I'm not the only customer who feels antagonistic about buying food here.

It shouldn't take more than a minute or two for the fries to appear in a compartment, so when they don't I start pounding on the automat.

"Hey, hurry it up!" I yell, scratching furiously at the bump on my forehead.

The back door of the empty fry compartment slides open. An eye stares out at me.

"What?"

"Fries. I need fries."

"We're out of fries," the voice behind the automat says.

"How can you be out of fries? You've got Shooters out there making people crave the damned things!"

"That's why we're out."

"Doesn't the head office coordinate this stuff?"

The eye blinks twice and the door slides shut.

It's 1:47, enough time to go back to the second place if I hurry. But I don't hurry. I pace in the street, muttering to myself like a lunatic. It's almost five minutes before I quit trying to control the craving and dash back the way I came.

I give the next credit scanner an especially dirty look, then yank open the one compartment with fries. I stop only to pump blobs of ketchup from the dispenser. On my way out I pass an old man scratching his arm as he raves through an open compartment, "How can you be out of fish sandwiches?!"

"Try the one on Third and Pine," I say around a mouthful of fries.

CraveTech's offices are both plush and haphazard, the combined result of a record-breaking IPO and the latest design fad: early dot-com retro. I arrive sweaty, greasy, nauseated, and thoroughly pissed off. I smile at the receptionist anyway, a fashionably sulky blonde boy seated in a vintage Aeron chair behind a desk made out of two sawhorses topped with an old door and a crystal vase.

"Alex Monroe. I have a two o'clock with Mr. Avery."

"Two o'clock?" he says pointedly. It's 2:02. "Have a seat. Something to drink while you're waiting?"

"Water please." I'll probably retain every ounce. Damn salty french fries. There are pills that reduce bloating, of course—they sell them out of the same automat—but I wouldn't hand over any more of my money.

I've just taken my first sip when a young man pops out of the office. He looks like a typical startup manager: handsome, well-dressed, and almost certainly in over his head.

"Ms. Monroe, welcome!" He bounds up to me, hand extended. During the handshake he nods toward my forehead. "Ah, I see you use our products!" He laughs heartily at his own joke. I laugh back. I want this job.

"It's a wonderful time to be in chemical advertising, Ms. Monroe," he says, shepherding me into his office. I notice he has a proper desk. "We have some exciting deals in the works. Exciting, exciting deals."

"Really?" I say, distracted by the fry-lump in my stomach.

"Oh, yes. Now that the Supreme Court has reversed most of those class action suits, Shooters don't have to be stealthy. We've had to discontinue the tobacco lines for the time being, but otherwise it's open season on consumers."

I make another effort to join in his laughter, and reaching toward the bump on my head add, "It certainly is effective."

"Indeed." He smiles like he loaded the dart himself. "So," he says, picking up my resume, "I see your background is in print."

"Yes, but I've done some work in fragrance influence, and I'm very interested in chemical advertising's potential."

"Well, it is a growing field, plenty of room for trailblazers, especially with campaigns as impressive as these." He sets my resume aside. "And of course we still have quite a lot of synergy with print." He pulls an inch-long Crave dart out of a drawer and drops it on the desk between us. I resist the urge to cringe at the sight of the wretched thing.

"What do you see?" he asks.

I want to say a menace, but instead I tap the delivery barrel and give the context-appropriate answer. "Unused ad space."

Suddenly he's a schoolmaster who has finally found a bright pupil in a classroom full of dunces.

"Exactly, Ms. Monroe. Exactly. No square millimeter wasted, that's what I say." He leans across the table and whispers conspiratorially, "We're looking at co-branding an AOL-Time-Warner-Starbucks Lattepalooza Crave with a Forever Fitness session discount."

"Wow."

"Yes. Coupons on the darts. How does that grab you?"

"Coupons."

"Tiny coupons, like the ones on swizzle sticks. Can't you just see it? You get Stuck, so you want the product, but you're also concerned about your weight. The coupon helps. The coupon tells you the provider cares about your concerns. It tells you they understand." He leans back in his chair, my cue to speak.

"Interesting. But I'd go log-in rebate rather than immediate discount. Same message, same coverage, easier on the bottom line."

He leans forward again. "I like the way you think, Ms. Monroe."

I hate meeting at Sandra's house—her cats are constantly trying to climb up on my lap, I suspect because they know I'm allergic to them. But Sandra is my best friend from college, and also my cell leader, so I usually end up here at least once a week.

"Whoa, right in the forehead," she says when she opens the door.

"Yeah, and that's an ugly one on your neck."

"That's a hickey."

"Oh, uh, sorry. Or congratulations, I guess."

"Eh," she shrugs, heading to the kitchen.

I follow. "Um, aren't you a little old to be getting those?"

"Maybe, but Liam's not too old to be giving them." Sandra has a taste for idealistic young revolutionaries.

She starts to make herbal tea, and I know enough not to ask for coffee instead.

We take the tea to the lumpy, cat-hair covered futon in the living room. "How'd the interview go?"

"Shaky start. Getting Stuck really threw me off. But I did manage to laugh at his jokes, and, sad to say, I'm more or less qualified."

"You do speak their language." Sandra likes to remind me that I've only recently stopped being part of the problem. "So where do things stand?" she asks.

"He said he only had one more interview, and he'd call to let me know by the end of the week."

"Did you pick up anything while you were there?"

"Not much about the next formulas. AOL-Time-Warner-Starbucks is definitely in now, but that's old news."

"But you think you can get access? The job's in the right division?"

"Close enough. Marketing's always looking over R&D's shoulder. It won't seem strange for me to be poking around."

"What should I tell our counter-formula development contact?"

"Well, assuming I get the job, and assuming I can start right away, three weeks. Maybe four. It'll depend on their security."

She seems satisfied with this answer. "What about Plan B? How's the Mata Hari routine working on our favorite evil genius?"

"He's not evil—he's just oblivious."

She raises an eyebrow at this. "Dangerously oblivious."

"Yes, I know." I concentrate on picking cat hair off my clothes. "It's going fine. Fourth date tonight. Expensive place. I should get going, actually." I rise and head for the door. She stops me and stares pointedly at my forehead.

"Alex, don't forget—he's the enemy." I consciously abort an eye-roll and substitute a smile.

"Dangerously oblivious genius equals enemy. Check." I give her a little wave as I step outside.

"Which restaurant are you going to?" Sandra asks from the doorway.

"Prima."

Her brow furrows. "Don't they serve real meat?"

"Oh yes—and I'll be ordering a steak," I say, taking a moment to enjoy her disapproving look.

"I'll have the porterhouse. Rare, please."

"Make that two," Tom says. "Mine medium."

"Very good," the server says. "I'll be back with the first course shortly." He gives us each a prim little four-star nod as he leaves.

I put my elbows on the white linen tablecloth and rest my chin on my interlaced fingers. "I'm not sure I can ever love a man who would ruin a perfectly good steak."

Tom leans into the candlelight, too. "And I'm not sure I can trust a woman who likes her meat nearly raw."

"I guess we'll just have to stay together for the sex."

"And the children." He raises his glass to his lips.

"I'm not having sex with children, you pervert."

He chokes on his wine and grabs his napkin. I have to give him points for not looking around to make sure we haven't been overheard.

"If I'd known you'd be shooting wine out of your nose I'd have suggested a Merlot," I say as innocently as I can manage.

"How," he coughs, "did I ever end up in such hazardous company?"

We met accidentally at a Better Living Through Chemistry Expo sponsored by Dow-DuPont-Bristol-Myers-Squibb-PepsiCo six weeks ago.

Actually, we met at a hotel bar during the expo.

I was running my report through my head, thinking about the companies that had the most bad news for humanity in the works. He sat down a couple of barstools away. We traded a little eye contact and a few shy smiles in the dim light.

"So which of these evil bastards are you representing?"

He laughed. "CraveTech."

"Ooh, a startup. Exciting."

"Yeah. What about you?"

"Me? I'm with an underground group whose goal is to liberate people from the tyranny of corporate chemical dependence."

"Huh. Underground, you said?"

"Yeah, we're not very good at that part." I was already starting to like his laugh, especially since it came so easily. "Actually, I freelance in marketing."

"Anything I might have seen?"

"Maybe the Junior Chemical Engineer campaign."

"Big Molecules for Little Hands."

"That's the one," I said, suddenly aware I was twisting a lock of my hair around my finger. I reached for my drink.

"Wasn't there a massive judgment against them in one of the last big class action suits?"

"No, that was Union-Pfizer's My First Exothermic Reaction. Ours were just repackaged Make Your Own Cologne! kits left over from the last Queer Eye reunion tour."

"Clever." He got up and closed the barstool gap between us.

"Despicable. So what do you do at CraveTech?"

"I run the place."

"That's funny," I said, laughing until he slid the nearest candle closer. I squinted at a face I almost recognized from the cover of Time-Newsweek.

"Where are your glasses?"

"Contacts tonight."

"You lose the glasses when you don't want to be recognized."

"Yeah, sort of a—"

"Reverse Clark Kent thing."

He smiled. "Yeah," and I could feel his geeky little heart reaching out for mine.

Tonight he's wearing his glasses. He looks cute in them.

"Of course, the really exciting work is in BeMod," he says, slicing into his steak.

"BeMod?" This seems like a good time to play dumb.

"Behavior Modification. The current dart formulas can make you want to ingest something—food, smoke, whatever. That's easy."

"Easy for you," I say, raising my eyebrows toward the bump that's only just beginning to subside.

At least he has the grace to look embarrassed. "Yeah, uh, sorry about that. But once we ship the darts to the providers, it's pretty much out of CraveTech's hands. I get Stuck sometimes, too, you know."

I spell the word oblivious in my head over and over, until I lose the urge to punch him. It takes four this time, so I miss hearing yet another version of the "If It Wasn't CraveTech It Would Be Someone Else" speech.

"...anyway, it's all just using the chemistry of cravings," he's saying when I'm calm enough to tune back in. "The fact that you have to buy whatever it is you're craving is an indirect consequence."

"An awfully profitable indirect consequence." I stab at a carrot.

"Yes, but see, that's the thing: the next big leap in the field is to skip straight to the buying part. We've been doing some promising work with what happens to brain chemistry when avid consumers watch successful commercials."

"So you're trying to synthesize a drug that will make people go out and buy MaxWhite toothpaste."

"Or a pair of NeoNikes. Or an H5."

"Oh my God."

He unleashes his Boy Genius grin. "Yeah. Pretty cool, huh?"

I report for my first day at CraveTech two weeks later. No one mentions that I'm dating the CEO, so I assume it hasn't gotten out. Still, I make a point of flirting back—and being overheard—when the cute young thing from Amazon-FedEx-Kinko's makes her rounds.

I'd told Tom up front that I was applying for the job. He was encouraging, but made it clear he would keep his nose out of it and leave things to Avery. I never see Tom around the marketing department—he seems more interested in making things than selling them, which I find endearing. If only he weren't making such awful things.

I flop down on Sandra's futon, narrowly missing a cat.

She puts mugs of tea on the table while I fish an envelope out of my shoulder bag. When she sits down next to me I place the envelope in her hands.

"Information," I say, "and lots of it." She takes the data card out of the envelope and peers at it as if she can actually make sense of what it contains.

"This is all of them?"

"All the formulas set to come out over the next six months. I've included a release schedule so you'll know which ones will be hitting the street first."

"The counter-formula team is gonna love this."

"They'd better. That little card represents a month of my life spent smiling at banalities and pretending to care about other people's kids."

"So you're ready to quit." She sounds relieved.

"I'd love to, but I don't think I can just yet. I still haven't found anything about this BeMod stuff. Tom keeps going on about it, but as far as I can tell it hasn't surfaced in R&D."

"Isn't it weird that he seems so serious about BeMod but you can't find it at CraveTech?"

I laugh. "So you think he has some other lab where he's developing chemicals he can use to rule the world?"

"Maybe not rule the world...just make a shitload of money, which is close enough."

"You're serious, aren't you?"

She shifts uncomfortably on the futon. "It just seems like he's been awfully specific about this BeMod stuff, and it hasn't turned up where you'd expect it."

"So what are you suggesting?"

"I think it's time you broke up with him, and maybe quit CraveTech, too."

"But if this BeMod stuff is in development somewhere, we'll need to get our hands on it and start on a counter-formula as soon as we can."

"That's true."

"And how do we do that if I don't keep seeing him?"

The cell leader finally overcomes the college buddy. "Just be careful. Don't get too attached to him."

I pick up the data card, two gig worth of corporate espionage. "Does this seem like I'm too attached?"

I arrive at Tom's place in a foul mood. He doesn't notice. Dangerously oblivious.

We're still in the foyer when he starts in about BeMod.

"I read a fascinating study on endorphins today. Apparently you can stimulate—"

"Can we please talk about something other than biochemistry?" I drop my bag on the floor.

He looks surprised and a little hurt. "I'm sorry, I didn't realize I was boring you."

"You're not boring me." I reach for his hand as we head into the living room. "I just think we have more in common than an interest in BeMods and DC Comics." I haven't gotten around to telling him I prefer Marvel.

He stops and pulls me back toward him. "I love you."

"See, there you go—I love me, too. Something else we have in common."

"Oh for God's sake," he sighs, collapsing on his down-filled couch. "I'm trying to be serious."

"I know." I sit down next to him. "I'm sorry. I just need a little more time."

"Okay. A little more time," he says, kissing my forehead and then my neck.

It's so easy to kiss him back.

The next time I go to Sandra's, she has a data card for me.

"What's this?"

"A press release. It says CraveTech is voluntarily recalling all darts because internal studies have shown them to trigger heart attacks and strokes in a small but substantial segment of the population. We need you to send it out from the CraveTech network."

I hand the card back to her. "The media will figure out it's bogus."

"Not before the stock plummets. We're set up to trigger a small drop, and the release will do the rest."

"You know I won't be able to go back there after I send it. They'll trace it to me."

"I know." I stare hard at her. She doesn't flinch.

"And I'll have to break up with Tom."

"You need to do that anyway, Alex. It's been almost six months. That's too long. It's longer than you've dated anyone for real."

"Sandra, sending this press release is just throwing a brick through a window. It's meaningless in the long run. They'll replace the window. The stock price will readjust."

"But it will slow them down."

"Sandra, if it isn't CraveTech, it'll be..."

"What?"

"Nothing." I take the card.

"You'll send the release?"

"I'll send it."

I put the few personal items that decorated my cubicle in a gym bag. I never had a picture of Tom on my desk. That would have been indiscreet.

The press release glows on my work station, one twitch away from every major news outlet and the most incendiary of the minor ones. If I had a picture of Tom, I might have stared at it for a while, maybe even whispered Sorry to it.

But I don't, so I just flick Send.

I've come to break up with him. "You're early," he says when he greets me at the door. "I've planned something special." I follow him out to the deck.

"For what?"

"Our six-month anniversary." There's a cloth-covered table and dining chairs, a silver champagne bucket on a stand. "In another twenty minutes there'll be a sunset, too." He says this like he paid for it. "But, you know," he looks oddly apologetic, "you're early."

"Tom, I'm sorry...we're not going to have a six-month anniversary."

I expect anything from him but the crooked Boy Genius smile I love so much. "This isn't about the press release, is it?"

I sit, a little inelegantly in my surprise.

"What press release?"

He laughs. "This conversation will probably be less awkward if I just tell you I had all your CraveTech e-mails routed to me before they went out."

Ah.

"I was a little surprised that you actually sent it, but I do understand. I appreciate your beliefs. I love you for them—I want you to know that." He pours us each a glass of champagne. "And besides, you really helped me out with those counter-formulas."

I pick up my glass then set it down again. "Helped you out?"

"Absolutely. My people made a couple of tweaks, though. Your group's design wasn't very cost effective at the ten thousand unit level."

"Wait, wait, wait. You're going to manufacture our counter-formulas?"

"Oh, yes. The marketing campaign has been in development at a subsidiary company for weeks now. And the profit projections—Alex, you wouldn't believe it. Apparently people really, really hate the craving darts." Oh, my oblivious darling. "They'll pay twice the cost of the actual food just to make the cravings go away."

"But they won't have to. We'll be giving away the counter-formula for free."

"Funny thing about that—the research shows people would rather pay a couple of bucks to get the antidote from a familiar, trusted source than from a pack of anarchists with a habit of blowing up buses."

"Blowing up buses? What're you—"

"Oh, it's a little something we're planning for the fourth quarter. Disinformation campaign. It's ready for implementation now, but we think everyone will be more inclined to actively hate you during the holidays."

"Hate me?" I stand up and start backing toward the door.

"Well, not you, your group. They'll love you, Alex. You'll be managing my charitable organizations, giving away money to worthy causes right and left. People love that. And they'll love me. People love CEOs whose wives do that kind of stuff."

"Wives?" He brings out a pistol and fires a dart into my neck. I pull out the dart and drop it on the ground.

"What was in that thing?"

He answers my question with a question as he pops open a little black velvet box.

"Alex, will you marry me?"

"Tom, you sneaky little—" I say, lost between admiration and horror. "Will I marry you?"

Of course I will.

Tom Jr. has a hard time waking up in the morning. He gets it from me, not his father, who is always up before the crack of dawn, especially since the BeMod wide dispersal aerosol went into production.

"Tommy, wake up!" I call out toward his room. There's only a muffled grumbling in response.

I walk up to his doorway. “Really, Tommy, it’s time to get going. You’ll be late for school.”

He rolls over, groaning, but doesn’t make a move to get up. I unholster my parenting gun and shift the round in the chamber from Go to Bed to Wake Up.

“Get up, Tommy,” I say as I draw a bead on his sleep-tousled head. “I’m not going to tell you again.”