

# **Only I See the Dots**

**By Nicholas Stillman**

A free sample

© 2015 Nicholas Stillman

Get free short stories monthly at [stillmancifi.com](http://stillmancifi.com)

“Wayne, you asshole,” Alex said.

Alex already started talking to himself in the cockpit of Wayne's junkyard rocket. Even the flight instruments and screens dimmed, leaving him secluded. The damn battery died after eight straight hours of trying to take off again. Wayne said that wouldn't happen. He said plenty of things, like how the start-up procedure would work automatically again after landing.

Of course, nothing worked again after Alex landed the rocket on the other side of Earth. Now, he'd remain stuck here, probably for life. “A simple test flight,” Wayne had said. “You've got to do these things to get noticed around here,” he said. “Don't worry, it always takes off again with the exact same procedure,” the asshole said.

The sun, also an asshole, bit him through the windshield. If only it had a volume knob. Alex winced and glanced outside the cockpit again. The rocky landscape looked blander than baldness, bland as a pan. At least the navigation system had worked. As Wayne planned, the rocket glided on its automated landing gear to stop alongside a big river. Scraggly yet blooming apple trees embraced the riverbank, their exposed roots sopping what they could. And good for them because Alex's rations would only last a day or two. He hoped apples contained every vitamin and mineral needed by man.

He'd have to forage and eventually consume all the fruit on the green strip. Then, Alex will hop onto starvation road, and Wayne will have screwed him over that much more. Rocket travel could get you around the globe faster than a jet from the old days. But if a part breaks down, then forget about ever getting back. Few communities had repair shops or replacement parts after the Sky War.

A strange community lived here, armored figures who glinted in the sun but did nothing else. At least the metallic humanoids showed no interest in eating the apples. They just sat, crouched, stood, and lied in the river. Alex presumed all that plate mail heated them, so everyone relied on cooling techniques. But that hardly explained why most never budged in eight hours. Their stillness perturbed him. And what the hell did anyone need armor for in the rock barrens?

Alex gathered all the tools in the cockpit, crowbar included. A weapon may become necessary out there. While buckling on a hefty tool belt, he forgot about take-off programs for good and focused on his morning-to-afternoon malaise. It chilled him far worse than the armored weirdos outside.

Wayne, abetted by the whole community, may have exiled him. They concertedly sabotaged the rocket. Hell, the town had a whole squadron of abeyant rockets from yesteryear. Sacrificing one would make little difference. Folks would do almost anything to prune the herd, to keep everyone conformist.

And Alex let his foul mouth fly sometimes. He had also expressed some interest in computational studies and software, not just the junk and engines the rest of the community obsessed over. He'd always see grease and gears as baby toys. They probably flung him far just for

that.

People had learned too well. After the Sky War, the few philosophers left cried their hearts out to the 98 percent depopulated planet. Only tight-knit tribes get along, they proclaimed. Huge cities and worse, nations, engender conflict. People simply diverge too much in philosophical principals, financial system preferences, religiosity, and core values. A man's hundred billion neurons can never solidarize with the neural maze of his neighbor's. Only tribes and towns can harmonize, and just barely. And when a town grows too big, or when someone ripples the placid pond, the controversialist has to go. When whatever social birth control fails, you banish the excess.

Alex had always sensed they might choose him. Now twisting in the cockpit seat, he slung on his just-in-case satchel full of bottled water, rations, and shaving supplies. A pair of Wayne's overworn gloves sat on the control panel. They slid on easily. The sun had warmed them, as if having a first taste of what it wanted to bake and destroy. He'd probably never go barehanded again, because the bitty buttons in here wouldn't light up anymore. A world of big stupid rocks awaited instead.

The emergency lever for opening the cockpit jutted in his periphery all morning. Alex had tried to ignore it while overcorrecting every take-off sequence imaginable. Now, he yanked the lever and pushed up the glass dome overhead.

He clambered outside and took the aerodynamic rungs to the rocky flats below. He'd have to get used to climbing like a monkey. No more cushy chairs and dives into old-tech screens. Most of Earth's topsoil resettled into the oceans, browning the wrong shit and screwing up life everywhere. Alex already felt the arid rock pounding upward through his heels. Wayne would get some heavy glares if they ever met again.

Alex clung to that fantasy of returning home. He would stare holes though people, and he'd have handguns taped to his hands or such—something intimidating to scare the shit out of them.

Then, Alex remembered the vast ocean the rocket had soared over, and he dropped the idea. So much sea had sped by that the brown waves changed colors on the trip. He'd never unscrew himself from this remote block of Earth.

At least the afternoon seemed cooler than a rock barren might suggest. The breeze felt about right for his leather jacket. Yet, the metalheads dwelled in the sparkling river ahead, still cooling like armored lizards. Some accreted enough dried, caked-on bird droppings to form cruddy hats. They never moved or turned their oviform helmets as Alex approached. He'd have to befriend them to use this river and riparian orchard of theirs. He may even have to badger for information on neighboring communities that would accommodate him.

Most of all, Alex would have to refrain from asking, "What do you metal fuckers eat?"

He neared the closest robot man. It stood on its knees in the noisy meter-deep river. One metal-encased arm hung more submerged than the other, as if to attain a slanted pose that looked cool. Alex wondered how he'd explain himself. His community specialized in vehicles. And in plain view

sat a broken rocket used to banish him.

“Greetings,” Alex called over the jiggly noise of the water. It sounded like a billion keys clinking in the wind. The river looked limpid and clean, as typically happens when people leave one alone a few years.

The metal humanoid said and did nothing. But a synthetic voice did emit from its eyeless helmet.

“I uploaded my Whozer with a new Amp-Me. Find me on Lollicom, and don't forget to sign up on catbros. I'll only reply through Petbin now.”

Alex only understood half of the metal man's vernacular. But he dealt with this kind of asshole before. They hardly acknowledge the existence of others. People only serve as vessels for them. These types will babble about themselves without any concern for the poor pedestrian nice enough to listen.

“Good afternoon,” Alex said, trying to start over.

The metal humanoid replied, “Go fake one, Angela.”

Alex looked around. His toes twirled. He strolled to the next closest figure, who stood knee-deep in the river.

“Good day,” Alex said.

The robot spoke back with an identical voice to the first.

“Just uploading another Achoo page. Make sure you add me on Frogfind. You can see my chipmunx profile with SaveYour.”

“Right,” Alex said. “Anything else?”

“Go fake one, Angela,” the robot said.

Alex turned slowly and gazed at the empty sky. A flat rock landscape slept below it.