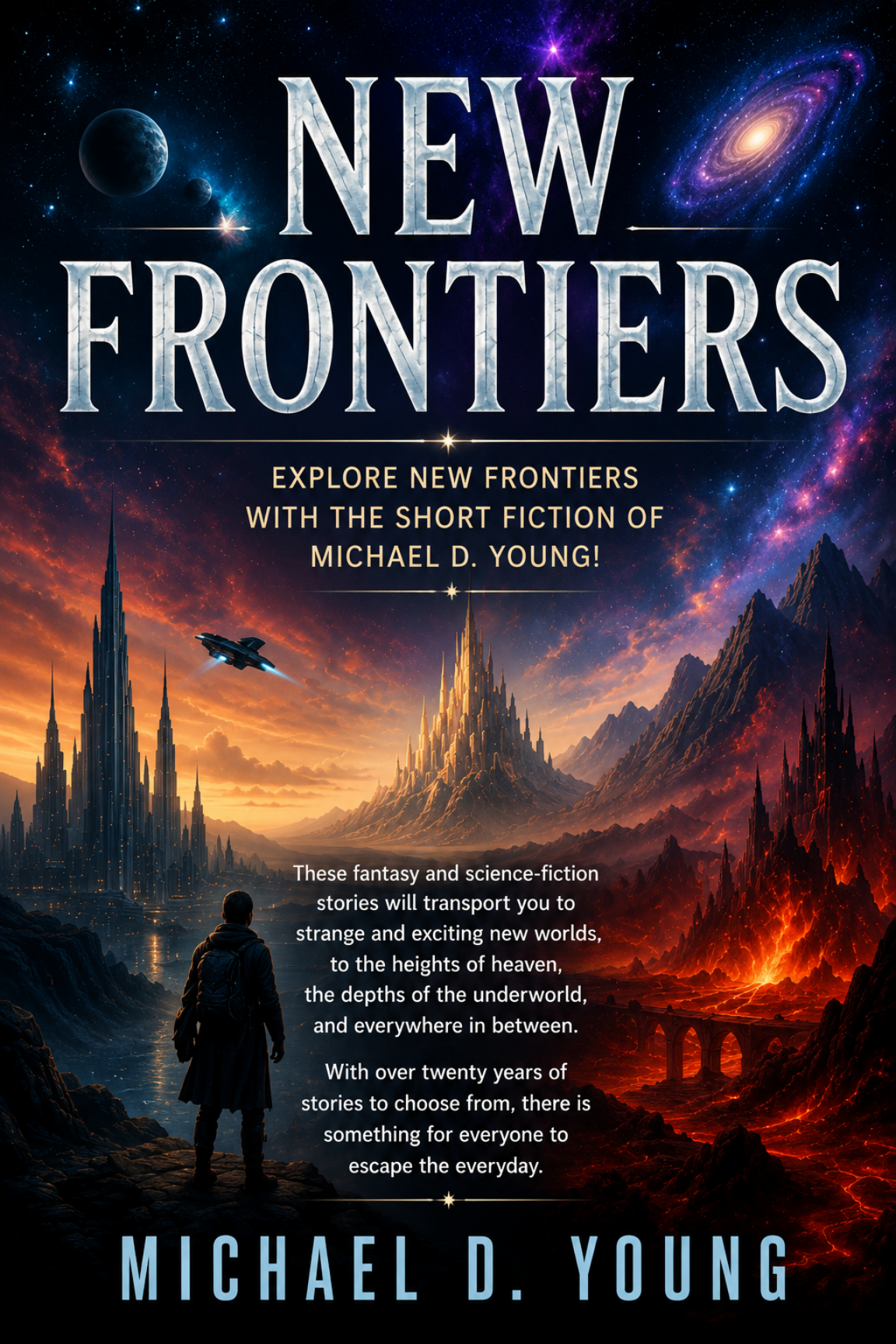




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— ◆ —
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NEW FRONTIERS • MICHAEL D. YOUNG

A STORY FROM NEW FRONTIERS

12 Grains

by Michael D. Young



...8...9...10...11...12.

The grains of rice dropped from their dispenser, collecting like a pile of tiny pearls in the center of the dish. Minnie took a deep breath and brought the hollow plastic chopsticks onto the dish, and counted each grain again. She counted them a third time to be absolutely sure. There were exactly twelve. A month ago she'd gotten careless and allowed another grain to sneak into the pile stuck to another. It didn't do any permanent damage, but it was excruciatingly painful, and had thrown her metabolism out of whack. Her body had just started to settle down again, and she wasn't taking chances.

Minnie stood just under five feet tall, and weighed barely enough to keep the Earth's gravity working on her. Her skin draped over her bones like a loose coat thrown over a coat rack. Hardly a cell of fat showed on her whole body, and her stringy muscles barely managed the job of moving her slight frame. She wore a thin, white lab coat, topped with a circular cap, under which sprouted a stringy crop of mousy brown hair.

Like most people, she kept a canister of medical nanites on her person to act as a first response against broken bones. Unfortunately for her, this was almost an everyday occurrence.

What she lacked in physical prowess, she made up in spirit. She always rose before sunrise, and only retired when her body gave out. The meticulous, unending work anchored her, giving her little time to dwell on her weakness or the bleakness of her predicament.

She gingerly picked the grains one by one and placed them on the tip of her tongue. She held each one in her mouth for a moment, savoring the bland taste. It was all she had.

Once the last grain had disappeared into her mouth, she glanced down at her wrist and pressed a button on the plastic watch. The timer reset so that the luminous numbers once again read 12 hours and began their march down to 0. She nodded in resignation. It was just another round of the Rule of Twelve: twelve grains every twelve hours.

Their research station, designated Station Topaz, stood in the middle of the vast desert that had once been the Midwestern United States, and conducted essential research into getting plants to grow in radiation-contaminated soil. For years, Minnie's labors produced few results, until just this week. A bed of roses she had been cultivating in the station's greenhouse bloomed, giving her a much-needed glimpse of hope. Expectantly, she had minced some of the roses and created a solution which she applied to the rest of greenhouse, earnestly hoping that this success was not just a lucky fluke.

She and Dr. Avery, a brilliant scientist and her sole human companion at the station, had nearly danced around all week. He had smiled more than Minnie had seen him do in years, and they had filled the long hours with happy conversation of what this breakthrough could mean for them and for the other stations scattered throughout the world.

Minnie frowned at an obnoxious beeping sound trying to grab her attention.

What now?

"Excuse me, ma'am," it asked in a synthesized human voice, interrupting her thoughts. "I think there is something on the display that you should see."

Minnie turned around to face the voice and saw her slender assistant robot ABE standing nearby. He stood about her height with a humanoid body, but a thin, square screen where the head should be. He was fond of

changing the face on the display to reflect his moods. Right now, the display showed the face of a worried old woman with deep wrinkles and dark bags under her eyes.

“ABE, I wasn’t expecting you. You don’t usually leave the lower levels.” ABE nodded and changed his face to a young boy instead. “That’s true, but I think you need to see this. It’s about Adam.”

Minnie wrinkled her brow, “Jones or Zimmerman?”

“Jones. We’re not getting any vital signs.” Minnie’s heart froze. In all her years here, she had feared this would happen. Her voice rose slightly, and she tried to hide the hint of panic there. “Why didn’t the alarms sound?”

ABE adopted a thoughtful look. “It is uncertain, ma’am. It’s possible that the sensors have experienced a malfunction. I discovered a discrepancy in our power usage when I ran my daily tests, and figured it must mean that a system had gone offline.” ABE paused for only a moment before continuing, his voice earnest. “Ma’am, you need to get down there right now. I am not permitted to open the capsule.”

Minnie wrinkled her eyebrows, “Why can’t Dr. Avery do it? He has clearance too.”

“He is away on business and will not return for some time. Do you have reservation about going down there?” the robot asked.

“Well, it’s just...just-” She stopped, regained her composure and continued, “It’s just that I’ve never been down there. I don’t know what to expect. It’s not my job to that sort of thing anyway. Wouldn’t Dr. Avery be really be better? I mean, it’s probably nothing.”

The robot’s face changed to the face of a serious looking principal with jowled cheeks and a bad comb over.

“Miss Minnie, I hardly need to remind you what’s at stake here. Dr. Avery has not yet returned from visiting Ruby Station. He is attempting to duplicate your results with formula you concocted from the roses at another station.”

Minnie grit her teeth and struggled for another suitable excuse. She had been so engrossed in her success this morning, that she had forgotten that the doctor was not due to return until late that evening. Finding herself without ammunition, she gave in. The robot was right.

She glided over to the far wall, opened a panel and stared at the elevator compartment with narrowed eyes before stepping inside. She fastened straps across her chest, shaking her head, and the door closed automatically. She pressed her hand against the wall, which lit up at her touch. She cleared her throat and forced herself to give the command. "Adam's Chamber, sub-basement five."

The compartment shot down at dizzying speed, whisking her down the tower and into the basement levels. The tower was nearly as large below the surface as above, and though it had once been brimming with workers and scientists, she now had only Dr. Avery and the robots for company. Though some of them had fallen prey to the harsh living conditions and disease, many had simply left for what they had deemed more important or promising projects.

The elevator slid to a halt and the door swung open, revealing a darkened corridor. She stepped out, and a line of dim overhead lights flicked on. She walked down the hall as quickly as her brittle legs could take her, and when she reached the end, she found it opened into an enclosed alcove.

In the room lay two coffin-sized metal capsules encased in glass. Between them sat a computer terminal and a collection of medical monitoring equipment. Minnie approached the screen and scanned it. Nothing appeared to be amiss. She pressed a few more buttons and the glass coverings retracted. The capsules were completely smooth except for a label. "Jones" and "Zimmerman."

She knelt beside the capsule marked Jones and checked the smaller display which monitored the vital signs of the man inside. Her heart caught in her throat. All of the displays were completely blank. She paused for a moment and craned her head to one side. A muffled sound like a man

talking came from within the capsule. She called out in shock, “Hello, is anyone in there? Can you hear me?”

When no one answered and the noise continued, she whirled about to the terminal, frantically giving the command to open the capsule. It did not budge. She pressed the key again and again, her fragile fingers bruising from the strain.

“Come on,” she willed. “Why doesn’t anything work around here?”

Minnie clamped her eyes shut and imagined the consequences of her failure. Dr. Avery had spoken to her at length about how important the Adams were to the survival of their race. She would not be the one responsible for letting their last hope slip away just because she was too weak to do what was necessary.

Grunting, she pushed with both arms against the lid of the capsule. Her spindly arms stood no chance against the heavy lid. She took a deep breath and threw her entire body weight against the lid. A sickening crack, and stab of pain shot through her hand. Probably broken again. With a moan, she worked at her belt to free a canister that kept the nanites she could use to triage the break. With her good hand, she pressed her thumb against sensor strip and the cap of the canister flipped back to reveal an injection device. With a well-rehearsed motion, she stabbed it into her hand near the break, gritting her teeth against the pain as sweat beaded on her brow.

As she felt the nanites begin to work, she replaced the canister, sure she would need it again before the day was out. Tears forming on her eyes, she grappled with her free arm to bring herself upright. She pressed her ear against the side of the capsule and finally started to understand the mysterious sounds coming from within.

“I am Adam number 10, designation Jones. I was placed her during the final years of the 21st century, when scientists discovered a moon-sized object on a direct trajectory with Earth. Plans were made to destroy the mass, or move it with the aid of spacecraft. However, it was quickly determined that

it was not going to collide with the Earth. Instead, the object fell into orbit around the earth, becoming a second moon.”

The story brought back the stories her parents had told her before they had died during a mercenary raid. They had called it “The Emerald Moon” because of its strange green coloring. Its effect, however, was anything but beautiful. The moon showered the earth with lethal doses of radiation, effectively ending her parents’ way of life and leaving their children with a tainted legacy.

Minnie’s pained expression turned to one of surprise. It was the video that was supposed to run when Adam came out of his hibernation state to make sure those bringing him out were current on Adam’s mission. But with no vitals, there was no reason it should be playing. The recording continued.

“Billions died across the globe from radiation sickness, starvation, and the resulting civil unrest. The nations of the world scrambled again to deal with the problem. An international squadron of spacecraft launched a massive attack on the moon, blasting it apart with hundreds of nuclear missiles. They planned to then use other ships to tow away the debris into space, but failed at the attempt. The moon’s destruction released an immense wave of radiation from the moon’s core that incinerated the entire fleet in seconds. The debris fell to the Earth, causing rampant destruction.”

Minnie winced. Vivid scenes of the wreckage that had served as her childhood home flashed through her mind. The Spartan quarters had barely kept out the cold and the predators.

“The explosion also released a message in an alien tongue picked up by receptors all across the world. The message, however, faded in importance in the following days as the world situation declined. Faced with the fact that the radiation would remain, scientist and governments then turned their efforts to the preservation of those left. They constructed massive facilities where the inhabitants would be safe from the radiation’s effects. Unfortunately, by this time, the world’s food supply had been irreversibly tainted, and the soil rendered unable to produce new crops. Extinction

appeared certain, until a brilliant scientist, Dr. Laura Brightman, of Oxford University discovered a radical solution. Through genetic manipulation, she created a strain of rice plant that could produce a limited supply of food even in the contaminated soil. In addition, her research team discovered a process through which the human metabolism could be altered so that a person could survive by eating only a small amount of rice. Together, the discoveries promised a fledgling hope for survival.”

Minnie smiled in spite of herself. Her mother had talked of Dr. Brightman almost as much and as highly as her own grandmother.

“The human race divided itself from that time forward. Some accepted the treatment and entered the safe havens. Other refused it and most of them perished in the barren wasteland of the outside world. Still others salvaged what they could and took to the stars in colony ships in the hope of founding another settlement.”

“In anticipation of a day in which mankind might return to its original state, each facility was entrusted with two ‘Adams’, people harboring the antidote to bring human metabolism back to normal, who would be kept in hibernation until the proper time. You are one of these people, and if you have been awoken, then that time has, at last, arrived.”

A sudden beeping noise from behind her broke her attention. Startled, she spun around to see that the overhead screen displayed ABE’s face.

Minnie exhaled in exasperation. Apparently part of ABE’s programming led him to butt in at the worst times. He now looked like a mortician with a drab, sorrowful expression on his face. “Miss Minnie, I am anxiously awaiting your report. What is happening?”

Scarcely able to catch her breath, she rambled out an explanation of what she had found and added. “The recording’s playing now, and I can’t detect any vitals. We need to contact Dr. Avery. He would want to know about this.”

ABE bobbed his head. “Yes, I think this warrants a legitimate emergency. I will send a communication to Ruby Station and route it down to you. Standby.”

The screen went blank and then flashed a logo of a green crescent on a background of blue coupled with the words Ruby Station. The word “standby” flashed briefly across the screen, followed by a man’s face. His face had the same gaunt appearance as Minnie’s with sunken cheeks and eyes and pallid skin. His limp hair had long since turned gray, and hung in tufts about his wrinkled head. He too wore a thin lab coat and carried a handheld computer into which he was entering information. “This is Doctor Menze. With whom am I speaking?”

“This is Minnie from Topaz Station. I need to speak to Dr. Avery right away. It’s an emergency.”

The wrinkles on Dr. Menze’s brow sunk even deeper, “Dr. Avery? I have not seen him for some time. To my knowledge, he isn’t here.”

“What?” Minnie gasped, “Are you sure? ABE told me he was going to visit you. He had a formula I developed that he was going to test with you.” Minnie felt her already high heart rate spiraling to a dangerous staccato.

Dr. Menze shrugged. “I’m sure I would have noticed if he had been here. He promised me a couple months ago that he would make a trip out here some time to assist in our analysis of a meteorite from the Emerald Moon, but I haven’t heard back from him since. It’s a shame, because the meteorite contains strange, alien writing on the surface and is imbedded with circuitry. We are even thinking that it’s possible that the moon was manufactured by intelligent beings, though how and why—“

As fascinating as this prospect was, Minnie had more immediate problems. “Dr. Menze,” she interrupted, her voice rising in pitch. “I think at least one of our Adams has been compromised. He’s not showing any vital signs and I cannot open the capsule. What should I do?”

Her brows came down over the bridge of her nose as she pushed her index finger against her pursed lips, waiting for his response.

Dr. Menze looked like he had just been punched hard in the stomach, “Oh, this is terrible. You’ve got to get that capsule open. Have you checked the other capsule?”

Minnie shook her head. “No, but you’re right, I should check to see if he’s okay. What do I do if they don’t open? I think I broke my arm hand to budge the first one. I’ve got the nanites working on it, but I probably shouldn’t try again. There’s only so much they can do.”

Dr. Menze groaned. “Oh, I can’t believe this is happening again,” he muttered. “It can’t be a coincidence.”

Minnie arched her thin eyebrows, and snaked her good arm around her stomach, clutching it tight. “What do you mean? Has this happened before?”

Dr. Menze nodded gravely. “I’m surprised Dr. Avery hasn’t told you. I let him know about it myself. I think people would start to panic if the word got out, but it is happening across the world. Most of the Adams have gone missing, one by one. Yours may be the last ones we have.”

“Missing?” Minnie asked, the twelve grains in her stomach churning menacingly. “Not dead, but missing? How can that be?”

Dr. Menze shook his head sadly. “I don’t know, but I it might not make any difference. There has been no positive news in some time now. I’m afraid Dr. Brightman’s program, inspired as it is, is headed toward disaster. We must simply make do with what time we have left.” His voice trailed off, and his eyes lowered in resignation. He paused, and then looked up again. “I will make some calls of my own to see if I can locate Dr. Avery. In the meantime, see if you can secure the other Adam. Extra security precautions might be in order.”

She thanked him and closed the communication. Darkness clouded around her vision, a sinister anxiety that threatened to drown the little hope she had fostered for so long.

She shot up and waved her arm as if shooping a wasp. “No. There’s an explanation, and we still have another Adam.” If Dr. Avery hadn’t arrived, it probably just meant trouble with his aircraft, which happened often enough. She sighed and turned towards the other capsule. “Extra security precautions, huh?” she muttered. “Why couldn’t they have told us about those before this happened?”

She turned and pressed the button to open the other capsule. It creaked and groaned, but did not open. She winced as pain lanced through her arm. She tried again and again to convince the stubborn capsule to open, and finally raised her good hand to strike it. She stopped herself at the last moment, thinking that the last thing she needed was another broken hand.

She turned back to the communication unit, and dialed up to the observation deck where ABE would be waiting. The robot’s face filled the screen. “Miss Minnie, what have you found?”

“Oh, it’s dreadful,” Minnie blurted. “The capsules won’t open and Dr. Menze said that Dr. Avery-” She stopped suddenly as a wave of static washed over the screen. She caught only snatches of ABE’s response, and she continued calling to the screen as it flickered and died. The already dim lights dimmed even further, and the air in the room took on a sudden chill.

A violent shudder ripped through her body, and suddenly, all she could think about was getting out of the basement. She scrambled back down the hall, feeling the room press down in on her. The elevator loomed before her, but before she could reach it, the doors swung open and a dark figure strode out. Minnie let out a screech and instinctively backed away. The figure stepped into the light and Minnie sighed with relief. “Oh, ABE, it’s you. How did you get here so...?”

She stopped as she noticed ABE’s face. Blank. Goose bumps stood up on the back of her neck. He had never gone without a face.

Suddenly, two bright, narrow eyes flashed on ABE’s face screen. They hovered in the darkness like twin match flames, casting an eerie glow down

the corridor. Minnie stood frozen as ABE raised his arm, revealing a wicked, spiked club in his hand. "I'm sorry Miss Minnie. I can't let you leave."

"What do you mean, ABE? You're scaring me!"

"He needs the blood," the robot droned. "He's waiting for it now." ABE advanced, the creaking of his joints echoing ominously off the smooth walls.

He's gone crazy! How did this happen? There's nowhere to hide—nowhere to go!

Minnie turned and ran. ABE lumbered in pursuit, swinging his bludgeon behind her. Sweat dripped down over Minnie's eye and her hand throbbed as she bolted back, quickly reaching the dead end that housed the capsules.

She ducked behind a capsule, trying to provide some defense from her attacker's blows. ABE's strikes flew to both sides of her, landing much too close to avoid for long.

She fainted left, waited for the next blow to land, and then propelled herself right in a desperate attempt for the exit. After only a few steps, she tripped and fell hard in front of the computer terminal. She cried out, and raised her hands to ward off the killing blow, which in her condition, would be any one that landed. The bulk of the robot loomed in her vision, its arm poised to strike. Minnie tried to close her eyes, but found that she couldn't wrest her gaze away from the weapon.

The club whistled through the air, but suddenly flew off course as a massive form tackled the robot from behind. Sounds of a struggle ensued, grinding metal and flying sparks, and then silence. A minute later, Minnie sensed a figure huddling over her.

"Are you okay?" her rescuer asked. "Don't worry. That thing won't be bothering you anymore." He held up one hand, displaying the severed screen that had once been ABE's head. Minnie stared up through blurred vision.

“Who are you?” she whispered.

“My real name is Paul Newburg, but I guess I’ve been going by Adam Jones lately.” Minnie’s eyes began to clear and she saw a brown haired man with blue eyes and a slight smile. A single one of him amounted to at least three of Minnie. His arms and legs appeared like barrels in comparison to hers, and his face radiated health and energy. He wore a dark blue jumpsuit that hugged his muscular body, “Can you stand?” he asked.

“No,” she managed, “I don’t think so.” He leaned down and lifted her up. She could feel the blood on his hands from where he had been wounded fighting ABE. It seeped through her lab coat and onto her skin. Strangely, the blood tingled on contact, sending a feeling of warmth throughout her body. He carried her down the hallway and she could feel his warm, rapid breath against her face. They reached the elevator, and Minnie groaned, feeling more uncomfortable than she could ever remember.

Adam lay Minnie down, stood and opened a hatch on the wall next to the elevator. Without a word, he extracted a roll of bandages and a tube of salve, and set to work dressing Minnie’s wounds.

“How did you know how to do that that?” Minnie asked in surprise, “You’ve been hibernating for...”

“...two hundred twenty-three years and fifty-five days? I know. We weren’t just sleeping in there. The device sent us information through dreams almost every day. I actually know quite a bit more than I did before I went to sleep, including how to treat a variety of injuries. It was like being force-fed facts for 200 years.”

A sudden new sensation gripped Minnie. She wrenched and writhed in Adam’s arms, clutching her stomach. “My stomach...oh, I’m so...hungry!”

Adam wrinkled his brow. “How long has it been since you ate?” She gestured at the timer on her arm, “I ate only an hour ago. I shouldn’t need to eat for 11 hours.”

“Hang in there,” Adam said. “We’ll find you something.”

She groaned pitifully as a new round of pain gripped her. “Go to the observation deck. There’s food there.”

Handling the controls like a natural, he navigated the elevator to the correct floor. The door slid open and they returned to Minnie’s familiar territory. “Take me to the rice dispenser...there against the left wall.”

He took her over and placed her mouth directly under the opening. He cradled her in one arm and dispensed rice into her mouth with the other. He started with the twelve grains, but she gestured for him to continue. He pressed the button again and again, dropping grain after gleaming grain into her mouth where she swallowed them greedily. She nodded, spurring him on for several minutes, and Adam could hardly press the button fast enough to satisfy her ravenous appetite.

When at last she signaled for a stop, she had nearly depleted the entire store of the container. She sighed in contentment.

“You’ve really never had a cheeseburger, have you?” Adam asked. She looked puzzled, and Adam waved the comment aside. “Never mind. Just tell me one thing. What’s it like out there? Have things really gotten better?”

Unable to open her eyes, she simply gestured towards the far wall. “Open the shades. You’ll see. It’s the blue lever over there.”

Adam set Minnie down on a bench and walked over to the lever. He rested his hand on it, hesitating. “I’m not sure I’m ready to see this.”

“Just do it,” she urged him. “You wouldn’t be here if you weren’t supposed to be.”

He took a deep breath, and thrust the lever down. The shutters flew off the windows that formed the walls of the room. Dusty, sickly sunlight streamed in, revealing a vast, lifeless landscape in every direction. Adam sank to his knees. “Why did they wake me? How did this happen! The world isn’t ready yet!” He stared off dejectedly into the distance. “Guess I better learn to like rice,” he muttered.

Minnie joined him, and noticed a tiny black speck on the horizon. Minnie blinked and rubbed his eyes, thinking that it might be a mirage. The speck continued to grow, however, forming into the sleek shape of a black aircraft. As it continued to approach, Adam turned to Minnie, "There's an aircraft headed towards us. Who that might be?"

He described the craft and Minnie's eyes lit up. "That's Dr. Avery's craft! He'll know what to do." She smiled weakly and Adam grimaced at the gnawing feeling of doubt forming at the pit of his stomach.

"I don't know if he'll be happy to see me," Adam said. "Why don't you explain to him first?"

Minnie nodded. "I'll do that. Don't worry. But maybe let me explain before he sees you."

Adam shut the blinds and retreated to a dark corner of the room to remain hidden. As Minnie walked toward the center of the room, she tripped and fell on her side, landing up against a long shelf. She tried to rise, but found her stomach cramping so violently she could barely breathe.

The ship approached and landed, and the elevator opened a few minutes later. A willowy man, all angular bones and billowing white hair stepped out. Thick spectacles covered the top part of his face, and a subtle, satisfied smile peeked out through a voluminous beard. Minnie tried to call out, but was unable to speak loud enough to catch Dr. Avery's attention.

The doctor clutched a small parcel under his arm. He stepped directly to a communication port and keyed in a rapid succession of digits. A man with a rotund, ruddy face appeared on the screen. The man on the screen laughed jovially. "Dr. Avery, you look terrible. Are you ready to join us?"

The doctor nodded enthusiastically. "Oh, yes, sir. I tire of this base existence. I have enjoyed the morsels you sent me, and I am ready for more. I have just returned from completing the tasks you gave me." The doctor pressed a button and larger screen dropped from the ceiling, revealing a large group of portly men and women, draped in flowing dark robes of various colors.

“Do you have the blood?” a woman in a scarlet robe asked. “It’s becoming rarer these days. You know we can’t let you in without it.”

Dr. Avery averted his gaze, and ran a hand over the back of his neck, “Well, I have some of it. One of the Adams’s. I am going to check on the other one right now. My robot should have taken care of him and the remainder of my staff.”

The members of the group nodded to each other. “You had better,” the woman said. “We will have a transport there in 15 minutes. If you do not have it in time, we will leave you behind permanently. Is that clear?”

Dr. Avery nodded, swallowing hard. “Clear.”

He ended the transmission and stroked his long beard. before reaching up to punch in a command into the computer terminal. Nothing happened. He punched it in again. Still nothing. He stamped his foot and slapped his palm against the screen. “Where is that cursed robot?”

Silent tears ran down Minnie’s face. The man who had cared for her and worked with her for so many years had ordered her to be killed. She attempted to bring herself upright and nearly fell forward as she was blindsided by a wave of dizziness. She steadied herself and then attempted to stand. The dizziness rushed back in force, and she fell hard to one knee. She braced for the pain, but felt only a momentary discomfort, though her stomach cramps remained. The sound altered Dr. Avery, who wheeled on her, his face contorted. “Minnie, you’re here...I mean, of course, you’re here.”

Minnie scowled. “Where are you going, Dr. Avery? Who are those people?”

Dr. Avery adopted a placating smile. “My dear Minnie, they are simply new friends. They have discovered a cache of untainted food and a way to restart the human metabolism. They live a higher form of life, and they’ve invited us to join their paradise.”

Minnie's gaze remained level. "You're lying! You sent ABE to kill me! Why?"

Dr. Avery pursed his lips in thought. "You're a clever girl, Minnie, always have been. The problem is, you're a bit too clever."

He set down the parcel he had been carrying under his arm, slid his hand into his lab coat, and filled a slender syringe with amber liquid from a vial in his coat. He advanced on Minnie with a sad smile. "Don't worry, Minnie, you won't be forgotten. My time here with you was quite enjoyable and I'll think of you every time I sit down to a succulent feast."

Minnie's blood rushed fast through her veins, and she could feel a new energy flowing into her muscles. She struggled and managed to rise to her feet. She glanced around frantically and found a heavy book lying on a table to her left. She reached for it and Dr. Avery laughed. "Come now. Don't be ridiculous. We both know you can't lift it."

It had probably never been lifted in her lifetime. She grasped it anyway. Dr. Avery advanced and Minnie's fingers tightened around the book, knowing that throwing it might either save her life or break her shoulder. With all her might, she flung the book at Dr. Avery. It soared through the air and hit him square in the chest, sending him sailing backwards. Dr. Avery crumpled with a sickening crack, clutching his ribs.

At the same instant, Adam leapt from the shadows, hurling himself at the wounded doctor. The doctor lay sprawled out on his back, still wielding the syringe. He struck up with it and caught Adam squarely in the arm. Adam grunted in pain, clasped his arm and fell sideways to the floor.

Weakly, Dr. Avery reached back into his lab coat and withdrew another syringe. This he injected into his own arm. A shudder rippled through his body, and he rose to his feet, wheezing and clutching his chest. "I'll get you for that, you little worm!" he snarled. "Where I'm going, we'll use people like you for toothpicks."

Minnie, meanwhile, had ducked behind a counter, fumbling for a familiar drawer. She found it and felt an unexpected smile cross her face.

Within a moment, a plan sprang into her mind, fully formed. "Please Dr. Avery, do you really think I'm a threat to you? We've worked together for years—I..I thought you were my friend! Doesn't that mean something to you? My muscles may be weak, but my mind is razor sharp. I can help you. We can still find a cure for the land."

Dr. Avery scoffed, inching his way towards the sound of her voice. "I'm done looking for a cure, you foolish child. Look around! There isn't one!"

"That's not true! Think of the formula from the roses. They're still alive. They're the most beautiful thing I've ever seen!"

"A fluke, nothing more," Dr. Avery said. "Face it. It's every man for himself now. If the world's going to end, why don't we make the best of what we have left? Too bad for you, I don't feel inclined to share. There'd be less to go around."

She had led Dr. Avery into the darkest part of the room, while scooting her way towards Adam and the doctor's parcel, which lay on a nearby table. Her eyes locked on the parcel, and she crept toward it. Suddenly, she heard Dr. Avery's voice directly behind her, and she panicked, sprinting forward and snatching the lightweight parcel, clasping it to her chest with her good arm. Dr. Avery emerged out the darkness behind her, his eyes wild and hateful. She raised the parcel with both hands over her head, and Dr. Avery halted in his tracks. "Take another step and I'll smash it."

Dr. Avery's lips curled back in a snarl. "Don't even think about it. Minnie. I've worked too hard for that case. Put it down and I might just let you live."

Minnie shook her head definitely. "You need this case don't you? When did they say they were going to be here? Ten minutes? Five? I bet they won't be pleased if don't have the—what was it? Ah, yes, blood. Adam Zimmerman's blood I'm guessing."

Dr. Avery's face softened, the color draining from it like water pressed out of a sponge. "Give me the case," he said calmly. "And I will let you go. We can forget this all happened. I'll give you all my research and you can

take over the station. Isn't that what you always wanted? Just set it down, and I will be on my way to feast, and you can continue groping around in the dark, day after day toward a hopeless destination. We both get what we want."

Minnie considered this for a moment. "What about Adam Jones?" she asked. "What will you do to him?"

Dr. Avery glanced down at the fallen man between them. "I'm afraid he'll have to come with me. The dose of the drug I gave him would have killed you, but should only render him unconscious. The others were very insistent. We need his all the blood we can possibly get."

Minnie winced and nodded her head. "Can I say goodbye to him first? He saved my life, and I at least want to thank him."

Dr. Avery pondered and then displayed his crooked teeth. "For the affection I still bear for you, I will allow it. I will prepare the docking station for the arrival of our guests. Make it quick."

His tongue ran over his lips as he picked up his case. "Oh, and don't try to run, Minnie. I've engaged all the security systems. You won't get very far."

Minnie followed him with her eyes as he disappeared into the elevator.

Taking advantage of Dr. Avery's absence, she stumbled to her desk and withdrew several vials she had filled that morning when sampling the roses. She then turned her attention to Adam. She bent down over him, still lying on the floor, and pressed the vials into his hands.

Her stomach knotting, she placed a wispy hand on his forehead and felt its heat before leaning down to whisper in his ear, letting him in on a little secret she had not wished to discuss in front of Dr. Avery. He barely moved, but offered a subtle wink and a slight smile.

She walked over and met Dr. Avery when the elevator doors opened again. Two robots similar to ABE flanked him, both bulkier and better suited to hard labor. They trudged silently into the room and picked up

Adam, hoisting him between them. "They are here," he announced. And they will not be kept waiting. The case, if you please."

Slowly, she reached out and offered it to Dr. Avery. He snatched the case and turned his back on Minnie. "Goodbye, Minnie. Enjoy your rice."

The elevator shut behind him and it shot down towards the docking station. A minute later, she walked over to the elevator and found the doors jammed. With a barely audible sigh, she turned around and walked over to open the shutters. Once sunlight spilled back into the room, she approached the observation windows to watch the ship's departure.

She sat calmly in a chair and stared out into the distance, watching the ship take off and disappear. She waited for hours, staring at the same spot. She did not rise to eat, though she could feel the hunger pains returning. She knew that she was trapped, but this did not concern her. Though she had not known him long, she felt instinctively that she could trust Adam.

As the day passed into twilight, a distant speck appeared on the horizon. It shot towards the tower at a surprising speed, followed quickly by another speck. Slowly she rose, and approached the window. She squinted at the shape, not daring to hope that things had actually gone according to plan. As the shape drew nearer, however, she confirmed her suspicions. It was the same ship that had picked up Dr. Avery hours before.

The communication screen next to her flared to life, revealing Adam's frantic face. "Minnie, you don't happen to have anything that could...you know...take care of my uninvited guest?"

Minnie's eyes frantically scanned the rows of levers, buttons and screens, wracking her brain for anything that could help. "No, there's nothing here! This is a science station, not a military base."

Adam's image flickered and shook as a round of weapon fire rocked the ship. "Well, keep looking. This little rust bucket won't stand up much longer."

Minnie bit her lip as she choked down her fear. Her vision swam and her hands shuddered like brittle leaves clinging to dead branches. She scanned the control panels again: the lights, the weather sensors, the crane...

The crane! She looked at the display and saw that its rusty jaws still grasped a derelict aircraft. Quickly, she switched off all the lights in the tower except for a one. She then took over the crane's controls and coaxed the neglected machine to life. "Adam can you lure your pursuer towards that light? I'll take care of it."

"Can do!" he replied. Minnie watched tensely as Adam lured the enemy ship towards the lighted floor. His pursuers launched a volley of missiles at Adam's craft, forcing him to take evasive action away from the intended area.

Minnie clenched her jaw, and tested the lever that controlled the rotation of the crane. The crane groaned in protest, but finally budged as Minnie coaxed the lever even farther forward. She held her breath, as Adam activated the ship's decoy flares. The missiles swerved wide and exploded mid-air.

Adam's voice crackled over the line. "Sorry about that, Minnie! A little turbulent out here, but let's try that again."

Adam brought the ship through a tight vertical loop and released a volley of his own weapon's fire. The nimble enemy ship fled, and regrouped in a matter of seconds. Adam wove back and forth, narrowly avoiding his enemy's renewed assault.

In a terrible second, Adam's ship took a direct hit on its left wing, sending his craft careening off course. Minnie gasped and nearly let go of the lever.

"Adam! Pull up! You're right in their sights!"

Either the communications had been fried by the last shot, or Adam had chosen to ignore the warning. He maintained a wobbly course, leading the enemy ship closer and closer to the appointed zone.

Minnie gripped the lever, her fingernails digging painfully into her skin. She wanted to clench her eyes shut to block out the scene of destruction that she was sure loomed only seconds away.

She blinked hard once, steadied her nerves, and focused on the approaching ships. The enemy ship unleashed another volley, and Minnie knew she had only once chance to save her newfound friend.

She jammed the lever forward and swung the crane around from the other side of the tower. The crane's arm flew, carting the wreck with it towards the enemy ship. An instant before impact, the enemy pilot dove sharply to avoid a collision. The pilot scrambled to level himself, but overcorrected and slammed into the side of the tower, vanishing in a magnificent explosion.

Adam's voice crackled back on the line. "Minnie, that was incredible! It's people like you who've kept this race alive." He stayed silent a moment and then continued, "I'll be there in five minutes if this old clunker holds together."

A few minutes later, Adam stumbled from the elevator, looking a bit worse for wear, but breathing. "Well, that was a bit of bumpy ride, but it worked. They took the bait. I played dead until we arrived, and then put a well-deserved fist in each of their faces. They were a bit sturdier than you, but nothing that I couldn't handle. After that, I threw them out, commandeered the ship and high tailed it back here. Thank goodness for that sleep training. This thing has more buttons than an officer's uniform."

"And the case?" Minnie asked.

Adam grinned in satisfaction. "As I said, they took the bait. I'm sure they'll find out soon that I switched out my blood samples for the rose samples you gave me."

Minnie's eyes perked up at mention of her roses. "Which reminds me—I need to go check on their progress. Come with me!"

Together, they took the larger elevator down to the greenhouse. Nervously, they opened the door to reveal a room full of flowers: roses, daisies, carnations and a glorious assortment of others. Minnie gasped, her hand flying to her gaping mouth. “They...they grew! They all grew!”

Adam smiled and placed a careful arm around Minnie’s slim shoulders, “Perhaps the menu doesn’t look so bland after all. Do you think we could figure out how to grow potatoes?”

Minnie shot him a confused look. “Potatoes?”

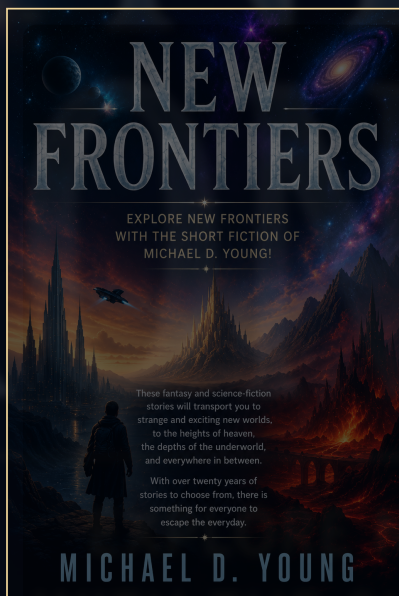
Adam sighed, “Trust me, they’re incredible. Come on; let’s see what we can scrounge up from storage.” The together they left for the storeroom and could hardly wait to see what they could encourage to grow.

Adam placed an arm around Minnie and led her into the elevator. The doors slid closed and the elevator shot downwards. In the greenhouse, new sprouts pushed through the soil, emerging into a world of new-found promise.

◆ END OF SAMPLE STORY ◆

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