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Cli-Fi Short Story

Due: June 5<sup>th</sup>, 11:59pm

Uni Stu 3: Science of Cli-Fi

### The Paris Aftermath

How do you manage to feed a family when food and water are inaccessible? This question was much too familiar to Abby, a thirty-four-year-old mother of two with another on the way. Living in the desert was no easy task, but it sure was better than living in the ruins of cities like Los Angeles. At least there were less frequent acid rains when you were further from the oceans, and you had a stable and secure shelter to live in. At least you didn't have to constantly suffer the worst parts of the hurricanes.

By the time that everyone in the United States started to realize the severity of climate change, it was too late. Their lack of accordance with the Paris Agreement and a relaxation of pollution regulations for companies lead to unimaginable consequences for those "climate change deniers." That was something Abby never understood while in her childhood history courses; how could there have been such a culture of denial when they said 99% of scientists agreed that climate change was a real threat? Just the thought that maybe nearly every problem in her life could have been prevented baffled her.

"Mom! It worked! *The well worked!*" exclaimed John, the oldest of the four children, as he torpedoed into the minute cave on the side of a hill. His father, James, rushed in behind him with a pan that seemed to be dripping some sort of liquid- could it be? Was she really looking at a pan full of fresh water, water that they obtained entirely for free? For a couple of seconds she simply stood there, mystified. Unsure of this reality, she reached out and took a sip from the pan;

it was *real, non-acidic water*. A flurry of emotions rushed through her- happiness and excitement came first, followed by worry and fear. “Did anyone see you? Did *anyone* see you out there digging? Did you cover the well?” Abby demanded frantically.

“No, I don’t think so. It’s hidden from the main road, on the opposite side of the hill. I had nothing to cover it with though- what can I take? We don’t have any blankets to spare. Besides, they would be more obvious than a hole in the ground.” James brainstormed, but not for long. Without much of a chance to continue thinking, they heard the increasingly loud roar of a motorcycle approaching. They all rushed to drink the little water that was left in the pan, frenzied to get rid of the evidence. After throwing the pan under a blanket, they all hurried to pretend they were doing something else just in time as the motorcycle drove in and parked in the middle of their home.

The mere sound of engines instilled an abysmal fear in anyone living in that desert. Everyone knew that only the Messiahs, as they called themselves, had access to gasoline. They held a monopoly on everything in the desert, including food, water and homes. You lived where they wanted you to, you ate when they wanted you to, and there was nothing left for the commoners to do about it. The distance from the ocean made it impossible to fish for food, not that there were many fish left anyway due to the ocean’s toxic acidity. Animals were almost never spotted in the dry, desolate desert void of plants. Crops were impossible to grow and maintain because the acid rain had ruined any remnants of the soil’s fertility. That is what gave away the location of water; Abby noticed a rare, small cactus sprouting near their home, and concluded that the only way that could be possible was if there was a fresh water source below. Now they faced an important yet terrifying decision to make- should they disclose their newly

discovered water source to the Messiahs as they were supposed to, or should they risk their lives for a steady water source?

“It is a fine day out there, don’t you think?” the Messiah stated as he calmly dismounted his bike. The whole family simply stared back quietly and slowly nodded. “Cat’s got your tongue?” he mocked.

“No sir, we just weren’t expecting your visit today. We would have cleaned up a bit more had we known,” James anxiously explained as the Messiah slowly walked around, examining their cave.

The Messiah stopped in his tracks, and he looked up disapprovingly at James. Slowly, he paced over to where James was standing. “I own this dang place. I can come in whenever I please, and whenever I do it should always be well-kept unless you want to find yourself living outside.”

“I-I didn’t mean to upset you, sir. I sincerely apologize,” James pleaded as he fearfully took a step back while looking down. “We’ve just been so hungry lately, especially now that Abby’s expecting. We have not had much time or energy to clean up.”

“Is that a complaint I hear?” The Messiah questioned James, stepping in even closer to him. “You ungrateful brat. There are people out there dying without food or shelter, and here I am providing you with both.” James’ heart was now racing, and tiny beads of sweat began to appear on his forehead.

Abby pulled her kids in closer, hugging them tighter by the second. “Please, no. We are very grateful for everything you do for us, Messiah,” Abby pleaded. He turned around and paced towards her and the kids, glaring at the youngest as he began to tear up.

He squatted down to be at eye level with the now sobbing child. “Now James, look at what you caused. Your ungratefulness made your poor kid cry.” He turned his head to look at James, and slowly stood up and walked towards him. “You know what would *really* make him cry, though? If I were to ever find out that you were hiding something from me. Are you hiding anything from me, James?” He continued to pace towards him. “Anything at all?”

James’ light brown skin suddenly turned pale, his eyes wide open. His mouth opened, but he struggled to produce words for a little while. “No. No, sir, I am not hiding anything.” Abby was now sobbing and crouched down, hugging her kids intensely. Hugging all her kids at once was easy; the lack of a basic food and water supply stunted their growth, causing them all to be shorter than average and scrawny as can be. At least when she was their age there were still schools. The government still stood, along with currency, stores, and greenhouses designated for crop production using artificially produced soil. Despite extreme weather challenges, at least it was possible to live in a home you called your own and without hunger.

That all changed when she was twelve, the day that the United States tried to take over Canadian and Mexican land. The then-current president was intensely set on picking up the “Manifest Destiny” concept that had been abandoned so long before, but the sanctions that had been placed on the United States by countries all over the world for not complying with the Paris accord had depleted their economy and military. The states were left in such ruins that neither country wanted to rebuild the land. Canada and Mexico signed an agreement to not attempt to do so, and sealed their borders so that no Americans could enter their countries. People like the Messiahs now controlled all of the remaining greenhouses and water supplies in the land.

“Are you sure about that, James? Should I ask your wife? Your kids?” The Messiah continued. “I promise- I’m not hiding anything,” James stated as confidently as he possibly could

given the circumstances, standing up straighter as he spoke. Internally, fear consumed him, but he knew he had to do whatever he could to keep his family alive. Abby's face was as pale as it could possibly be, and she knew. She knew the effort that James was making was useless. She knew that the Messiah already knew exactly what he was hiding. The timing was too perfect; the questions too precise. Not once before had he asked whether they were hiding something before. It could not possibly be a coincidence that he started asking the second they struck water. At this point she was no longer worried about a steady water supply; she now feared for her husband's and her family's lives, including her own.

She knew James' intentions were good, but was it worth it? Was a plentiful water supply worth dying for, when they knew that they would get enough water to survive anyway, despite its scarcity? During this split moment she had to make the most difficult decision of her life; would she defend her husband's statement knowing that the Messiah knew the truth and would likely murder them all, or should she speak up to at least try to save her children? Would speaking up actually save them? What would happen to James if she did?

She took too long, though; the Messiah immediately pulled out a gun and placed a bullet between his eyes. He watched calmly as James slowly fell to the cold, rocky ground. Without turning around, he asked nonchalantly, "So you now have two options: would someone like to spread a little honesty, or would someone like to volunteer themselves to go next?"

At this point the kids were all crying uncontrollably, and Abby could not take her tear-filled eyes away from James' body. "We found fresh water," she helplessly whispered. "It's right around the hill, opposite from the road."

"Thank you for your honesty, Abby. You just saved everyone else's lives. But John...he's 15, right?" He asked Abby. She feebly nodded, eyes closed with her head facing down as tears

streamed down her cheeks. “He’s coming with me. I am going to need some help carrying all this water back home. I’d say goodbye if I were you.” She hugged John as tightly as she humanly could for a mere second before the Messiah yanked him away from her.

John looked back at his pregnant mother and sibling in tears, knowing that this would likely be the last time he ever encountered them. Not only had Abby and her family lost their one chance at an accessible water source, but they had also now lost two family members in the process. The Messiah paused at the entrance of the cave. He looked back and said, “Did you really expect me not to know?” He chuckled as he once again dragged John away.

Two days had passed, and none of the Messiahs had accepted their request for the usual portions of food and water that they would get on a daily basis. A horrifyingly potent hurricane had hit what used to be southern California, and the remnants of that storm rained down acid, forcing them to stay in their cave for the entire third day. On the fourth day, her youngest would no longer wake up. His breathing was faint, but the lack of an energy source and hydration was slowly killing him. Abby carried him to the nearest Messiah post, barely able to walk herself. She begged for water, and they refused; she was so dehydrated she could no longer cry.

A man named Sebastian stood by and watched this poor mother do everything in her power to keep her son alive. He knew that remaining a part of the Messiahs was by far his best shot at securing a food and water supply for the remainder of his life; however, he could no longer watch events such as these without intervening. He made the decision to help this family at the risk of losing his own life. He quietly slipped away from the crowd, loaded a couple of gasoline canisters into a car, and drove as fast as he could towards that malnourished woman.

“Get in! *Now!*” Sebastian exclaimed. Without thinking about it, she jumped into the car while still carrying her son. He drove off as fast as the car could go, knowing they would soon be

chasing after him. He knew of a small, empty cave on a hill away from the main road, so he drove directly there. No one lived or ventured far from the main road because they knew there was nothing the desert could offer them. Walking to the nearest Messiah post was also a lot easier if you were closer to the roads that lead you to them. It was almost nighttime, and he was sure that no one had seen him go towards that cave. He expected everyone to drive straight down the main road until they gave up and turned back. He also knew he couldn't afford to stay there long, however, just in case they decided to look.

He backed the car into the cave and turned the engine off. Abby wasn't sure whether to be thankful or scared, but quickly became appreciative once he pulled food and water from the back seat. "*Thank you!*" Abby exclaimed as she poured water into her son's mouth. After a few seconds, she stopped and looked at him intensely with one simple question: "Why? Why are you helping us?"

"I'm tired of being a Messiah," he replied calmly. "I don't want to do this to families, I don't want to be an accomplice to constant murder and deprivation. We are going to stay here until night falls, and then we will quietly slip away to the North. There has to be something better out there. There has to be another greenhouse ruled by less greedy groups. There has to be." She nodded in agreement and shared her food with Sebastian.

She couldn't help but think of all the destruction that increasingly wild climate had caused throughout her life. As a kid, she never thought that food accessibility could possibly become more complicated; clearly she was mistaken. As the years passed, surviving on earth just became more and more complicated. She constantly wondered how the people that had enough money to buy a ticket to live in the space station were. She wondered how different her life might have been had she been born rich, or if the world would have recognized the facts

presented by the most prominent scientists in the field as actually being factual. Sometimes these breaks from reality, wondering about what could have been, were her only escape from her current life. She never before had the means to escape the grip of the Messiahs before, though; this opportunity to explore the country and find a potentially better place to live gave her reason to dream.

“My name is Sebastian, by the way.” He stated.

“Abby. My name is Abby.” For the first time in many years, she finally felt a sense of hope for the future.