

**BEST
SERVED
COLD**



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Best Served Cold by Christina Engela

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Best Served Cold

Nobody knew who started the War, or why. Nobody really cared anymore. It was all over so quickly – and anyway, it seemed so long ago now. More people had died in one single day than in all the human wars in recorded history put together – and that’s all it took: just one day.

Terrible ...isn’t it?

Life had gone on and on like it had for years and years, and then suddenly it started raining nukes – and within ten minutes, everything just turned to shit and ashes.

That the Earth hadn’t just turned to dust under the force of all the strikes and counter strikes was a miracle in itself. By the time it was over, much of the formerly so-called civilized world lay in ruins; smoking like it had had really good sex and gotten fucked hard, sideways.

With trembling hands, Jeffrey Kildare, president of the part of the world that had survived and rebuilt after that terrible cataclysm just twenty years before, perused a cache of archaic files on his desk in his plush air-conditioned office of – well, *Office*. It was all still so new that the furniture and even the carpet still carried the scent of the factories they came from. The office of Earth’s World President was situated in Earth’s new capital city – *Ki Acropolis*, which stood at the edge of the Mediterranean Sea, in what used to be a desert country called Egypt – and which was now neither a country of its own, nor a desert anymore. Surrounded on three sides by rolling green hills teeming with wildlife, the new city was a bastion of the fresh New Age of Peace – standing as the new center of all civilization on the planet.

The World-President’s office in the sprawling United Earth Council complex was oval-shaped, having been loosely modeled on what was once the most iconic seat of government of the old Earth that was – where ironically, the last American president to occupy it had become notorious worldwide for nuking – well, the *wrong* small country.

The stack of aged, dusty files that lay before Mr. Kildare were part of a cache of military designs and projects gathered from all over the world – the world from *before* the War – and which had been sealed up in a secret underground Swiss vault hidden beneath a mountain for the last twenty years – just in case all the peoples of Earth might one day need such things again. There they had lain – dormant – while the new Age of Peace rolled across the smashed, scorched, raw surface of the war-weary world, soothing its burns and healing its wounds. These files had been delivered to him just a day ago, freshly unearthed and pored over by shadowy state employees and intelligence officials, feverishly evaluated, filtered and collated. They contained designs considered feasible by the fledgling world government’s centralized defense and science ministries. Just now at the present moment, it seemed rather fortuitous that these plans were not simply destroyed instead – for now they were needed – *very badly* needed indeed!

All carried proposals requiring Mr. Kildare’s signature of approval. *Approval?* He was appalled!

Jeffrey Kildare, the World-President – a bald, middle-aged man in his early fifties, perspired profusely despite the air conditioning in his office. Despite all the years of peace and a hitherto easy tenure of just under a year out of four, he was already weary of the responsibilities of leading an entire world. Right now, what seemed to lie ahead of him, evoked images of what lay behind – and that’s what lay at the knot of nausea gnawing away at the pit of his stomach!

In the past two decades, Earth had become practically one nation – a nation of diverse races and cultures at peace with itself – a peace built upon millions being sick and tired of war, saddened beyond the bounds of grief of loss – and frightened out of their wits by the prospect of annihilation!

There hadn’t been any wars on Earth in just over twenty years. There was no active military left, just what could be described as a large labor force utilized mainly in the farming and industrial zones, with sub-divisions

performing emergency services, medical and rescue, and civilian police work. What had once been described as an 'air force' now flew crop dusters and performed rescue and relief operations during natural disasters and at sea. Likewise, a conglomerate UEC navy now enforced commercial trade and fishing regulations, rescued ships in trouble, and did little else. There were no more wars, no more warriors. The optimistic outlook was, that there never would be again. Jeffrey Kildare wasn't quite that optimistic.

A few experienced old soldiers still ran the top structures of the various essential services, trying to pass on their experience to the next generation of those drawn to uniforms of service. There was no more dedicated military industrial complex as it had been before. Through two decades of social engineering, war was seen now as the ultimate evil – fueled by humanity's greed, its love of violence and its love affair with hate and partisan segregation and persecution of the diversity which made up the very essence of humanity and human-ness.

Up until shortly before the Big Nuke, there were so many small rogue states, fascist dictators and international terrorist groups with their own arsenals filled with nuclear, biological and chemical nightmares, that nobody really knew who to blame.

Some blamed the apocalypse on the aggressive acts of the increasingly confrontational Islamic Bloc as it grew more powerful. Some blamed it on the raging Christianist and white supremacist insanity that raged across the political landscape of the Western world until civilization finally collapsed into a range of devastating small regional wars lasting right up to what was almost the curtain-call for the human act.

Simultaneously, the Middle East ran red as religious fanatics there unleashed a final frenzy of hatred based on – ridiculously enough – an argument about whose god was more real than the other. In the end, the city of Jerusalem along with all the really insignificant sites people had killed each other over for generations, was wiped clean off the map by successive nuclear strikes from every side that decided if they couldn't have it, nobody else would.

The Big Nuke nearly wiped Humans off the face of the planet permanently. Brushing off the ashes, the surviving people of the Earth finally stood up, lynched a few politicians, war-criminals and clerics, and said firmly '*that's enough now, eh?*'

In the end, regardless of who fired the first shot, it generally takes two sides to make a war – and all sides suffer in war, whether the winners like to admit it, or not. Soon, the survivors stopped pointing fingers. Who could they blame? Who was left that they could put on trial? In the end virtually every nation on Earth had fired at least one shot, so they collectively shuffled their feet and considered themselves equally guilty – equal victims of their own Human nature, and ironically, Human stupidity as well.

In any event, most of the fanatical bastards who'd pressed the buttons, cried havoc and let slip the dogs of war – were already deservedly dead. Ironically, so were most of the idiots who'd elected them and egged them on.

In the aftermath, three quarters of North America and much of the former European Union were ruined radioactive wastelands. The air and water – that which was not already tainted by industrial toxins, was poisoned further by radiation and chemical contamination. This brought disruption to humanity's ability to produce foodstuffs, bringing famine and despair to those who'd survived.

The sudden power-vacuum at the top of the political food chain plunged the remainder of the world into chaos as smaller powers began to jostle for 'top-spot' regionally and globally. In the Far East, Japan took control of most of Asia, including all of what remained of China, and Hawaii and restored stability. That part of the world was quite peaceful, however – other parts were not so lucky.

In Africa, fierce competition between surviving African states, many ruled by feuding warlords, brought about the chaotic *African Wars* which lasted four more years before eventually petering out due to a chronic lack of

ammunition, food – and soldiers still able to continue spilling what human blood still remained there.

In the South, Brazil became the strongest voice for change, backed by the other South American nations. The British Isles having been virtually obliterated in the first wave of nuclear strikes, Australia and New Zealand formed a union with each other and kept largely to themselves for the next few years.

In Eastern Europe – which had fared better than the West, the remaining states whose government structures remained fairly intact, re-evaluated the corpse of the United Nations – in fact, they performed a very thorough autopsy.

As a co-operative body formed after the Second World War, it had gradually been subverted and ultimately perverted from a peace-keeping body intended to protect and develop the culture of human rights globally, into a political instrument as useless and meaningless as the caucus race in Wonderland. Countries with a poor or completely absent human rights ethic were allowed not only to remain members, but were also allowed to chair councils *on* matters of human rights, which resulted in a gradual but measurable degradation of human rights ethics globally. The ability of the body to police human rights violations, and its influence in the less civilized nations, waned.

The poor became increasingly enslaved to the rich – while the richest 1% of people on the planet – owners of the giant multinational corporations that wrung the other 99% of the world's population dry – bought politicians and moved them about like pieces on a chess board. All that had ended now, but far from being a death-knell to civilization, the cataclysm turned out to be the salvation of the world – or rather, for what was *left* of it. A new day had dawned for Humanity – and it hadn't been heralded by rising of the Sun, but by a mushroom cloud.

The survivors – a diverse lot of human beings, realized – for once – that they would have to put aside their petty differences in order to continue to *be* survivors. The surviving nations united politically to face the

unprecedented emergency before them. They formed an alliance which became the United Earth Council, which according to treaty stipulations (updated on an annual basis) had a built-in lifespan of twenty years, during which control of the Council would change annually, rotating between its founders, at the end of which the UEC would fall away – and be replaced by the Terran Federation. The old world had passed away, and the new – well, the world had *other* problems now.

Virtually everyone had been displaced and was on a more-or-less equal footing. There were no more borders, no more states, no more armies, no more foreigners – no immigrants, legal or otherwise – only districts, neighbors and people. The dictates of this new paradigm were simple yet profound and far-reaching:

With so many millions dead, there would be plenty of room for people to breathe and live in. Without borders or controlling military territorial forces, there would be no more disputes over territories. Without competing military-industrial complexes for politicians to satisfy – and without weapons and soldiers to fight them – there would be no war. Without the concept of '*foreigner*', all people could be neighbors to each other. Without the notion that one individual person was somehow 'better' or 'more deserving' – or 'lesser' than another – or 'didn't belong there', the world could only be a better place! It was a grand design, a bold change in thinking, the ultimate social engineering experiment! ...all it took was a global war and near-annihilation of the species to achieve!

At the start of the first decade under the United Earth Council, Earth faced some pretty dire problems. With fertile farming ground at an extreme premium due to radiation poisoning and a near-scarcity of minerals and fossil fuels, Earth turned outwards, to space, to feed its people. It did so by expanding the already established scientific colonies on the Moon to become *Lunafarm*, and on Mars (*Marsfarm*). It wasn't until three of four years into that first decade, before these two young colonies were able to provide food for a struggling, hungry world.

This period saw leaps in development of space technology needed to ship vast quantities of food along the trade-routes between Mars and Luna and

mother Earth. By the turn of the second decade under the UEC transitional government, the world was well on the way to slow eventual recovery. Oh yes, the planet Earth was now a very different place indeed! Humanity had survived the final terror of self-destruction – *this time* – but the world as it was – and humanity along with it – was changed forever!

...But so had the rules of the game.

President Kildare had hoped to never have ‘war’ written next to his name in the history books, but the news he’d received five minutes ago had just torpedoed that sentiment.

Within living memory, Humans had almost wiped themselves out of existence with their own fiendish weapons – *which they no longer had* – and these were *aliens*, for god’s sakes – with obviously superior technology! If they were hostile, they were in serious trouble! All indications were that they represented a new threat, maybe even bigger than anything faced by Humankind before! A threat worse than even self-annihilation!

In peace, people label leaders as self-serving, corrupt – or at best, uninteresting. In war, they remember leaders as either great – or incompetent – or as monsters who sent millions to their deaths over something as ordinary as theoretical possession of the dirt people walked on.

Gathering his thoughts again, Mr. Kildare reopened the top file. Inside that one, there were plans and details of a smallish versatile space-destroyer, just larger than the smallest of the space freighters that ferried food and supplies between the planets. No real problem there. Another plan, in contrast, was of a warship so huge it could set a wealthy world economy back trillions for twenty years or more, to say nothing of what ruin it would inflict on a struggling one! Somebody had once said ‘*It’s only money*’ and now the President saw the true meaning of those words. Money was nothing but a *tool* that would play a role to ensure the continued survival of the human race. It was oil to grease the machinery of survival!

The President flipped through the plans, then looked at them more closely. Once the subject of academic, moral and political revile, now they held the promise of salvation. The irony struck him like a freight train.

“*Expensive!*” one line of opposition went. “*Huge! Preposterous!*” went another. The concerns raised in numerous meetings held round the clock over the last 48 hours were all valid. “*Possible*”, the scientists and engineers in charge of research and industrial resources responded. “*Necessary?*” The military strategists asked, “*Ethical?*” “*Dangerous! Potent!*” both sides of the issue argued with conviction, seeing both the advantages and the risks. “*Consequences?*” they pondered. The question stood, silent and demanding, like the blinking cursor at the end of a command prompt.

That ship in particular was supposed to be the Atom Bomb of the new space age. The World President groaned inwardly – that’s what he was afraid of. No, *afraid* didn’t do it justice... *petrified*? Yes, he found the thought utterly terrifying ... And *if* it worked... *if*... he would probably be remembered as “The Man Who Destroyed The World As We Know It – Again”. And once had been enough, after all.

Taking out his pen, for better or worse, President Jeffrey Kildare hoped fervently that they still had enough time.

* * *

At the time in Earth’s history when the Big Nuke devastated the planet, a small colony had already been growing on the Moon – inhabited by a few thousand people, mostly scientists and industrialists, with enough room to also cater for a small tourist industry. Not that there was much of a view on the Moon – except to look at the Earth. Apparently, people liked to see the moon up close, and the trip was shorter and less inconvenient than the year-long round-trip to Mars – where another colony had been established a little earlier.

Unlike the Martian Colony – which had predated the Third World War by only a matter of years, and was still run by the local colonists like an

independent entity, Luna Colony was run by a multinational co-operative of states under the banner of the UN. Mars had declared Martian independence from Earth as soon as news of the turmoil on Earth reached them. Not that there was anyone down there who actually heard them, but it was the principle of the thing, nonetheless. Yes, the governments and people of Earth had a lot more critical things on their minds at the time – and considering the mess Earth had been in at the time, there was no attempt to stop them. Survival had been more important – a top priority.

After the War, when Earth had to rebuild and find a way to feed the billions of displaced refugees – Mars was only too happy for a chance to re-establish commerce with the home world. Food was survival – and with arable and fertile land being at a premium on the recently devastated Earth, food was also big business. Expanding the already impressive agricultural capacity of the Mars into a series of gigantic domed farming facilities was only the beginning – and that was enough of a challenge as it was.

The Marsfarm Installations as they were known had grown since that time. Now, under miles of domed farmland, a large variety of fruits, vegetables, grains and meat, fish and poultry were tended by automated systems and cared for by an army of workers, supervisors and scientists. By this time, the total crop yield from Mars was also augmented by the newer, smaller installation on the Moon, called Lunafarm.

Mars profited and grew wealthy in the process – and while the Marsfarm complex produced the raw materials, surrounding factories processed the produce, packaged it, and sent it in shipping containers to the Mars Dock in orbit, where it was loaded into the holds of waiting space freighters making regular, almost continuous shuttle-runs between Mars and Earth.

One of these small freighters, known colloquially as loderunners, was currently docked with Mars Dock, surrounded by a swarm of small loading shuttles. These loderunners were relatively basic – and since they were basically long-haul vehicles solely designed to ferry cargo back and forth without having to land on either Earth or Mars, they were relatively simple and cheap to manufacture. Ships like these could carry ten standard six–

meter shipping containers that were sealed individually against the vacuum of space, and attached externally to the underside of their space-frames.

Naturally, these loderunners weren't much to look at, but because of their vital role in feeding a hungry world, a lot of people appreciated them – especially their pilots. The drive and fuel module was situated right at the back – with a maneuvering thruster module near the front, just behind the small crew module. Inside, on the flight deck, the pilot relaxed and smiled to herself.

Although she was strapped into her seat in the relatively small flight deck, Alex felt very much at home. She was surrounded by all the controls, displays and instrument panels necessary for operating the ship. It was a little cramped sometimes, feeling often more like a cockpit than a flight deck, but it *was* the kind of place that kids daydreamed about!

Below the flight deck was a small toilet facility, a small berth to sleep in, and not much else – which made her reasonably certain that the ship had been designed by a man! The shuttles were just finishing up, the last container had just been moved into place and the latches had secured it automatically. Alex activated the locks and checked the cargo manifest – which was all in the green.

Alex Nikolls, 32, was an experienced freighter pilot. She'd first joined Vacjammers LLC, around three years previously – just after leaving the Air Force in fact. More or less. Although 'leaving' was a bit of an understatement, she felt – for reasons she'd go into later. Vacjammers was just one of many private companies contracted to the UN to transport the precious cargo between Mars and Earth.

She'd been in the Air Force before that – such as it was these days. Flying crop dusters on Earth was as close to aerial combat as real life could possibly take her in the world of her time – but it was better than nothing. Combat flight simulators were closer, but still just fiction. All the same, she had wished to be part of a real Air Force – just like the rest of her mostly male colleagues – who teased her often. You had to be a 'real man'

to be an air force pilot, or so the guys told her. And, as anybody could plainly see, Alex was no man. Not anymore. The surgery didn't come cheap – it wasn't completely covered by the UN's free medical service, but she'd managed it just four short years ago. It was finally all over – just like her military career. You had to be a 'real' man to fly a crop-duster too, apparently. Some things never change.

The Marsfarm lifeline project was a UN-controlled program that was generally run by civilian contractors. Out here in the black, Alex felt free, away from all the restrictions and regulations that governed the military life. At least out here, nobody questioned her gender. Nobody cared. And anyway, even a loderunner looked more glamorous than a crop duster! She chuckled, then stretched herself out and yawned. At least when she got back to the Orbital Docking Station in Earth orbit, she'd have three weeks of vacation leave ahead of her! Home, peace and quiet and some real sunshine for a change.

The com-link crackled over her earpiece.

"That's it, Cleopatra – full up!" The voice of her shuttle crew controller, Steven Scott said.

"Roger that, shuttle leader. Take care, now Steve!" Alex responded in a husky feminine voice.

"Okay – you're on your own! See you in three weeks, Alex – enjoy your time off!"

"Ciao, Steve!" Alex said, and switched channels. "Mars Control Central. This is Vacjammer LLC 122 Cleopatra confirming full load! We're ready to go!"

"Confirmed, Cleopatra. You have departure clearance." The control operator replied.

Great! Alex disengaged the docking clamps and prodded the reverse thrusters to back the loderunner away from the Mars Dock. Then, floating free, she engaged the main EM drive and set the ship in forward motion, turning her gently to point Cleopatra on course back to Earth. That's when she checked what was on the nav-sensor display and almost wished she hadn't! She felt a sudden sense of urgency to be very far away from there – a cluster of objects appeared to be on their way to Mars Dock at

inordinately high speed! She quickly reopened the channel to Mars Control Central.

“Central, this is 122 Cleopatra – I’m picking up more than twenty bogies headed directly for Mars! They’re moving real fast – it could be a meteor storm or something!”

A brief silence followed before Alex heard a reply.

“Roger, Cleopatra, we see ‘em! Best you get out of there – they’re headed straight for your location – probably plaster us good too! Emergency services are being alerted as we speak – thanks Alex!”

“Roger, Cleopatra out!” Alex replied. She’d been in space for most of the last three years or so, not counting a few months while she was rotated out for mandatory rest periods, so she knew the risks of interplanetary travel! If there were so many meteors coming her way and they told her to get out, she wasn’t one for argument! Cleopatra began to gain speed and left Mars and its orbital docking facility behind. She set a course that would veer slightly away from the path of the oncoming meteor storm, hoping that whatever happened on Mars as a result, it wouldn’t be too bad!

Alex settled back to try and enjoy the journey. Depending on the relative positions of Earth and Mars, it could take anything up to several days to make the journey one-way – which is why loderunners typically carried two pilots who operated in shifts – although it wasn’t mandatory... which is why Alex was alone on this trip. Vacjammer was run by a Scrooge who cut whatever corners he could to make as much profit out of every single trip as possible. This time of the year the distance was shorter, so with the EM drive nearly at full throttle, Alex’s last trip before her holiday was going to last around eight hours. Oh well, at least she still had a few books on her ‘to read’ pile.

It was while she had her eyes on the sensor display that she noticed something odd about the swarm of meteors. As they neared Mars, one of the objects appeared to have changed course to intercept her!

“Since when do meteors do *that*?” She wondered out loud as the distance between Cleopatra and the separated object on her display rapidly shrunk to zero.

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