



resistance



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This story, which explores the importance of voting and the overthrowing of dictators, hits close to home for Buckell: he was born in 1979, during a coup d'état in Grenada. "In 1979 the revolution started with high hopes and big plans," Buckell said. "But as time dragged on some consolidated power, and with their sweeping reforms, also fell into the spiral of quashing opposition to the point where it became draconian and people ended up lined up against walls and shot."



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TOBIAS S. BUCKELL

Four days after the coup Stanuel was ordered to fake an airlock pass. The next day he waited inside a cramped equipment locker large enough to hold two people while an armed rover the size and shape of a helmet wafted around the room, twisting and counter-rotating pieces of itself as it scanned the room briefly. Stanuel held his breath and willed himself not to move or make a sound. He just floated in place, thankful for the lack of

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gravity that might have betrayed him had he needed to depend on locked, nervous muscles.

The rover gave up and returned to the corridor, the airlock door closing behind it. Stanuel slipped back out. The rover had missed him because he'd been fully suited-up for vacuum. No heat signature.

Behind the rover's lenses had been the eyes of Pan. And since the coup, anyone knew better than to get noticed by Pan. Even the airlock pass cut it too close. He would disappear when Pan's distributed networks noticed what he'd done.

By then, Pan would not be a problem.

Stanuel checked his suit over again, then cycled the airlock out. The outer door split in two and pulled apart.

But where was the man Stanuel was supposed to bring in?

He realized there was an inky blackness in the space just outside the ring of the lock. A blotch that grew larger, and then tumbled in. The suit flickered, and turned a dull gray to match the general interior color of the airlock.

The person stood up, and Stanuel repressurized the airlock.

They waited as Stanuel snapped seals and took his own helmet off. He hung the suit up in the locker he'd just been hiding in. "We have to hurry, we only have about ten minutes before the next rover patrol."

Behind him, Stanuel heard crinkling and crunching. When he turned around the spacesuit had disappeared. He

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now faced a tall man with dark skin and long dreadlocks past his shoulders, and eyes as gray as the bench behind him. The spacesuit had turned into a long, black trenchcoat. “Rovers?” the man asked.

Stanuel held his hand up and glyphed a 3-D picture in the air above his palm. The man looked at the rover spin and twist and shoot. “Originally they were station maintenance bots. Semi-autonomous remote operated vehicles. Now they’re armed.”

“I see.” The man pulled a large backpack off his shoulders and unzipped it.

“So . . . what now?” Stanuel asked.

The gray eyes flicked up from the pack. “You don’t know?”

“I’m part of a cell. But we run distributed tasks, only checking it with people who assign them. It keeps us insulated. I was only told to open this airlock and let you in. You would know what comes next. Is the attack tonight? Should I get armed? Are you helping the attack?”

The man opened the pack all the way to reveal a small arsenal of guns, grenades, explosives, and—oddly—knives. Very large knives. He looked up at Stanuel. “I *am* the attack. I’ve been asked to shut Pan down.”

“But you’re not a programmer . . .”

“I can do all things through explosives, who destroy for me.” The man began moving the contents of the pack inside the pockets and straps of the trenchcoat, clipped more to his belt and thigh, as well as to holsters under

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each arm, and then added pieces to his ankles.

He was now a walking arsenal.

But only half the pack had been emptied. The mysterious mercenary tossed it at Stanuel. “Besides, you’re going to help.”

Stanuel coughed. “Me?”

“According to the resistance message, you’re a maintenance manager, recently promoted. You still know all the sewer lines, access ducts, and holes required to get me to the tower. How long do you guess we have before it notices your unauthorized use of an airlock?”

“An hour,” Stanuel said. The last time he’d accidentally gone somewhere Pan didn’t like, rovers had been in his office within an hour.

“And can we get to the tower within an hour, Stanuel, without being noticed?”

Stanuel nodded.

The large, well-armed man pointed at the airlock door into the corridor. “Well, let’s not dally.”

“Can I ask you something?” Stanuel asked.

“Yes.”

“Your name. You know mine. I don’t know yours.”

“Pepper,” said the mercenary. “Now can we leave?”

A SINGLE TINY sound ended the secrecy of their venture: the buzz of wings. Pepper’s head snapped in the direction of the sound, locks spinning out from his head.

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He slapped his palm against the side of the wall, crushing a butterfly-like machine perfectly flat.

“A bug,” Stanuel said.

Pepper launched down the corridor, bouncing off the walls until he hit the bulkhead at the far end. He glanced around the corner. “Clear.”

“Pan knows you’re in Haven now.” Stanuel felt fear bloom, an instant explosion of paralysis that left him hanging in the air. “It will mobilize.”

“Then get me into the tower, quick. Let’s go, Stanuel, we’re not engaged in something that rewards the slow.”

But Stanuel remained in place. “They chose me because I had no family,” he said. “I had less to lose. I would help them against Pan. But . . .”

Pepper folded his arms. “It’s already seen you. You’re already dead.”

That sunk in. Stanuel had handled emergencies. Breaches, where vacuum flooded in, sucking the air out. He’d survived explosions, dumb mistakes, and even being speared by a piece of rebar. All by keeping cool and doing what needed to be done.

He hadn’t expected, when told that he’d need to let in an assassin, that he’d become this involved. But what did he expect? That he could be part of the resistance and not ever risk his life? He’d risked it the moment one of his co-workers had started whispering to him, talking about overthrowing Pan, and he’d only stood there and listened.

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Stanuel took a deep breath and nodded. “Okay. I’m sorry.”

The space station Haven was a classic wheel, rotating slowly to provide some degree of gravity for its inhabitants so that they did not have to lose bone mass and muscle, the price of living in no gravity.

At Haven’s center lay the hub. Here lay an atrium, the extraordinary no-gravity gardens and play areas for Haven’s citizens. Auditoriums and pools and labs and tourist areas and fields, the heart of the community. Dripping down from the hub, docking ports, airlocks, antennae, and spare mass from the original asteroid Haven had taken its metals. This was where they floated now.

But on the other side of the hub hung a long and spindly structure that had once housed the central command for the station. A bridge, of sorts, with a view of all of Haven, sat at the very tip of the tower. The bridge was duplicated just below in the form of an observation deck and restaurant for visitors and proud citizens and school trips.

All things the tower existed for in that more innocent time *before*.

Now Pan sat in the bridge, looking out at all of them, both through the large portal-like windows up there, and through the network of rovers and insect cams scattered throughout Haven.

One of which Pepper had just flattened.

Stanuel knew they no longer had an hour now.



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PEPPER SQUATTED IN front of the hatch. “It’s good I’m not claustrophobic.”

“This runs all the way to the restaurant at the tower. It’s the fastest way there.”

“If we don’t choke on fumes and grease first.” Pepper scraped grease off the inside.

Stanuel handed him a mask with filters from the tiny utility closet underneath the pipe. He also found a set of headlamps. “Get in, I’ll follow, we need to hurry.”

Pepper hauled himself into the tube and Stanuel followed, worming his way in. When he closed the hatch after them the darkness seemed infinite until Pepper clicked a tiny penlight on.

Moving down the tube was simple enough. They were in the hub. They were weightless. They could use their fingertips to slowly move their way along.

After several minutes Pepper asked, voice muffled by the filter, “So how did it happen? Haven was one of the most committed to the idea of techno-democracy.”

There were hundreds of little bubbles of life scattered all throughout the asteroid belt, hidden away from the mess of Earth and her orbit by distance and anonymity. Each one a petri dish of politics and culture. Each a pearl formed around a bit of asteroid dirt that birthed it.

“There are problems with a techno-democracy,” muttered Stanuel. “If you’re a purist, like we were, you had to have the citizenry decide on everything.” The sheer

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amount of things that a society needed decided had almost crushed them.

Every minute everyone had to decide something. Pass a new law. Agree to send delegates to another station. Accept taxes. Divvy out taxes. Pay a bill. The stream of decisions became overwhelming, constantly popping up and requiring an electronic yes or no. And research was needed for each decision.

“The artificial intelligence modelers came up with our solution. They created intelligences that would vote just as you would if you had the time to do nothing but focus on voting.” They weren’t real artificial intelligences. The modelers took your voting record, and paired it to your buying habits, social habits, and all the other aspects of your life that were tracked in modern life to model your habits. After all, if a bank could use a financial profile to figure out if an unusual purchase didn’t reflect the buyer’s habits and freeze an account for safety reasons, why couldn’t the same black box logic be applied to a voter’s patterns?

Pepper snorted. “You turned over your voting to machines.”

Stanuel shook his head, making the headlamp’s light dart from side to side. “Not machines. *Us*. The profiles were incredible. They modeled what votes were important enough—or that the profilers were uncertain to get right—so that they only passed on the important ones to us. They were like spam filters for voting. They freed us from the

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incredible flood of meaningless minutiae that the daily running of a government needed.”

“But they failed,” Pepper grunted.

“Yes and no . . . ”

“Quiet.” Pepper pointed his penlight down. “I hear something. Clinking around back the way we came from.”

“Someone chasing us?”

“No. It’s mechanical.”

Stanuel thought about it for a moment. He couldn’t think of anything. “Rover?”

Pepper stopped and Stanuel collided with his boots. “So our time has run out.”

“I don’t know.”

A faint clang echoed around them. “Back up,” Pepper said, pushing him away with a quick shove of the boot to the top of his head.

“What are you doing?”

“We’ve come far enough.” Four extremely loud bangs filled the tube with absurdly bright flashes of light. Pepper moved out through the ragged rip in the pipe.

Another large wall blocked him. “What is this?”

Stanuel, still blinking, looked at it from still inside the pipe. “You’ll want the other side. Nothing but vacuum on the other side.” Had Pepper used more explosive they might have just been blown right out the side of Haven.

“Right.” Pepper twisted further out, and another explosion rocked the pipe.

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When Stanuel wriggled out and around the tube he saw trees. They'd blown a hole in the lawn of the gardens. They carefully climbed out, pushing past dirt, and the tubes and support equipment that monitored and maintained the gardens and soaked the roots with water.

"Now what?" Stanuel asked. "We're going to be seen."

"Now it gets messy," Pepper said. He pulled Stanuel along toward the large elevator at the center. "I'm going with a frontal assault. It'll be messy. But . . . I do well at messy."

"There's no reason for me to be here, then," Stanuel said. "What use will I be? I failed to get you there through the exhaust pipes. Why not just let me go?"

Pepper laughed. "Not quite ready to die for the cause, Stanuel?"

"No. Yes. I'm not sure, it just feels like suicide, and I'm not sure who that helps."

"You're safer with me." Pepper launched them from branch to branch through the trees. Now that curfews were in effect, no families perched in the great globe of green, no kids screaming and racing through the trees. It was eerily silent.

Pepper slowed them down in the last grove of trees before the elevators at the core of the gardens. As they gently floated towards the lobby at the bottom of the shaft three well-built men, the kind who obviously trained their bodies up on the rim of the wheel, turned the corner.

They carried stun guns. Non-lethal, but still menacing.

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Stanuel heard a click. Pepper held out a gun in each hand. Real guns, perfectly lethal.

“I’d turn those off,” Pepper said to the men, “and pass them over, and then no one would get hurt.”

They hesitated. But then the commanding voice of Pan filled the gardens. “Do as he says. And then escort him to me.”

They looked at each other, unhappy, and tossed the guns over. Pepper threw them off into the trees. “You’re escorting us?”

The three unhappy security men nodded. “Pan says you have an electro-magnetic pulse weapon. We’re not to provoke you.”

Stanuel bit his lip. It felt like a trap. These traitors were taking them into the maw of the beast, and Pepper, as far as he could see, looked cheerful about it. “It’s a trap,” he muttered.

“Well, of course it is,” Pepper said. “But it’s a good one that avoids us skulking about, getting dirtier, or having to shoot our way through.” The mercenary followed Pan’s lackeys into the elevator. He turned and looked at Stanuel, hovering outside. “And Pan’s right. I do have an E.M.P device. But if I trigger it this deep into the hub, I take out all your power generating capabilities and computer core systems.”

“Really?” Stanuel was intrigued.

Pepper held up a tiny metal tube with a button on the end. “If I get to the tower,” Pepper said. “I can trigger it

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and take out Pan, while leaving the rest of the station unaffected.”

Stanuel had weathered five days of his beloved Haven under the autocratic rule of Pan, the trickster.

He'd travel with Pepper to see it end, he realized.

He pulled himself into the elevator.

FOR FIVE DAYS Haven's populace had a ruler, a single being whose word was law, whose thoughts were made policy. Pan stood in the center of the command console, its face lit by the light of a hundred screens and the reflections off the inner rim of Haven's great wheel.

Pan wore a simple blue suit, had tan skin, brown eyes, and brown hair. His androgynous face and thin body meant that had he stood in a crowd of Haven's citizens, he would hardly have been noticed. He could be anybody, or everybody.

He also flickered slightly as he turned.

“My executioner and his companion. I'm delighted,” Pan said. “If I could shake your hand, I would.” He gave a slight bow.

Pepper returned it.

Pan smiled. “I've been waiting for you two for quite a while. I apologize for sending the rover up the exhaust pipe.”

Pepper shrugged. “No matter. So what now? I have something that can take you out, you have me surrounded by nasty surprises . . . ”

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Pan folded its arms. “I don’t do nasty surprises, Pepper. I’m not a monster, contrary to what Stanuel might say. You have an E.M.P device, and if you were to set it off further down the tower, you would shut all Haven down. True, I have backup capabilities that mitigate that, but your device presents a terrible risk to the well being of the citizenry. With the device and you up here, the only risk is to me.”

An easy enough decision, Stanuel thought. Trigger the damn device! But Pepper glanced around the room, maybe seeing traps that Stanuel couldn’t. “If you don’t do nasty surprises, what stops me from zapping you out, right here, right now?”

“I would like to make you an offer. If you’d listen.”

Pepper’s lips quirked. “I wouldn’t be much of a mercenary if I just accepted the higher bid in the middle of the job. You don’t get repeat work very often that way.”

Pan held its hands up. “I understand. But consider this, I am, indirectly, the one who hired you.”

Stanuel had to object. “The resistance . . .”

“I run it,” Pan smiled. “I know everything it does, who it hires, and in many cases, I give it the orders.”

Stanuel felt like he’d been thrown into a freezing cold vat of water. He lost his breath. “What do you mean? You infiltrated it?” They had lost, even before they’d started.

Pan turned to the mercenary. “Stanuel is bewildered, as are many, by what they created, Pepper. I’m merely the amalgamated avatar of the converged will of all the simulations made to run this colony. The voter simulations kept

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taking up energy, so the master processing program came up with a more elegant solution: me. Why run millions of emulators, when it could fuse them all into a single expression of its will that would run the government?”

“A clever solution,” Pepper said.

“A techno-democracy, even more so than the vanilla kind, is messy. Dangerously so. With study committees and votes on everything, things that needed to be done quickly didn’t get done in time.

“So the emulations decided to put forward a bill, buried in the middle of some other obscure administrivia. The vote was that emulations be given command of the government.”

Stanuel stepped forward. “We woke up and found that in a single moment all of Haven had been disenfranchised.”

“By your own desires and predictive voting algorithms,” Pan said. “In a way, yes. In a way, no.”

Stanuel spit at the dictatorial hologram in front him. “Then the emulators decided that a single amalgamation, an avatar, and expression of all their wills, would work better. So then even our own voting patterns turned over their power.”

“Not surprising,” Pepper said. “You didn’t have the maturity to keep your own vote, you turned it over to the copies of yourselves. Why be surprised that the copies would do something similar and turn to a benevolent dictator of their own creation?”

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Pan looked pleased. “Dictators aren’t so bad, if they’re the right dictator. And it’s hard coded into my very being to look out for the community. That’s why I look like this.” It waved a hand over its face. “I’m the average of all the faces in Haven. Political poll modeling shows that were I to run for office, it would be almost guaranteed based on physiological responses alone.”

Stanuel looked at Pepper. “Pan may have infiltrated, but you were still paid to destroy it. Do it.”

“No,” Pan said. “You might pull that trigger. But if you do, you destroy what the people of Haven really wanted, what they desired, and what they worked very hard to create, Pepper, even if they didn’t realize they consciously wanted it.”

“I’ve heard you get the government you deserve,” Pepper said. “But this is something else. They created their own tyranny . . .”

“But, Pepper, I’m not a tyrant. If they vote as a whole to oust me, they can do it.”

Pepper moved over to the one of great windows to look out at the inside rim of Haven. Thousands of distant portholes dotted the giant wheel, lit up by the people living inside the rooms across from them.

“Look around you,” Pan implored. “There are plenty who like what I’m doing. I’m rebuilding parts of Haven that have been neglected for years. I’m improving agriculture as we speak. I’ve made the choices that were hard, got things into motion that just sat there while people

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quibbled over them. I am *action*. I am *progress*.”

Stanuel kicked forward and Pepper glanced back at him. “I think Stanuel objects.”

Pan sighed. “Yes, a few will be disaffected. They will always be disaffected. That was why I created outlets for the disaffected, because they are a part of me as well. But my plea to you, Pepper, is not to break this great experiment. I can offer you more money, a place of safety here whenever you would want it, and Haven as a powerful ally to your needs.”

Pepper nodded and sat in the air, his legs folded. “I have a question.”

“Proceed.”

“Why do they call you Pan?”

“They call me Pan because it’s short for panopticon. An old experiment: if you were to create a round jail with a tower in the center, with open cell walls facing it, and the ability to look into every cell, you would have the ultimate surveillance society. The panopticon. In some ways, Haven is just that, with me at its center.”

Pepper chuckled. “I’d half expected some insane military dictator wearing a head of antlers calling himself Pan.”

Pan did not laugh. It leaned closer. “Pepper, understand me. This is not your fight. I’m the naturally elected ruler of Haven. The *choice* to remove me, that isn’t yours. I did not bring you here to destroy me, but for other reasons.”

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“The choice?” The word affected Pepper in some way Stanuel could not figure out. He looked over at Stanuel. “Then if you’re a benevolent ruler, you will escort me off Haven, leave Stanuel alive, and move on to other things. After all, it was your orders that set Stanuel down this path.”

“Of course. It’s that or a sentence in one of Haven’s residential rooms. You’ll be locked in, but comfortable. There do have to be ways to handle such things. Exile, or confinement.”

“Okay, Mr. Pan. Okay. My work here is done.” Pepper moved towards Stanuel with a flick of his feet. “Come on Stanuel, it’s time to leave the tower.”

STANUEL COULD HARDLY look Pepper in the eye. “I can’t believe you left there.”

“Pan made a good argument.”

“Pan offered to pay you more. That’s all.”

“There’s that, but I won’t take it.” Pepper scratched his head. “If I destroyed Pan, what would you do?”

Stanuel frowned. “What do you mean?”

“You said the emulations wouldn’t be allowed to hold direct control, earlier. Does that mean you’d allow the emulations to come back and decide votes for you?”

“One assumes. We might have not gotten them right, but if we can fix that error, things can go back to the way they were.”

Pepper unpacked his suit and stepped into it. It crin-

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kled and cracked as he zipped it up. “And then I’ll be back. Because you’ll repeat the same pattern all over again.”

“What?”

“For all your assumptions, you’re not quite seeing the pattern. Deep down, somewhere, you all want Pan. You don’t want the responsibility of voting, you want the easy result.”

“That’s not true,” Stanuel objected.

“Oh come on. Think of all the times princes and princesses are adored and feted. Think of all the actors and great people we adore and fawn over.”

“That doesn’t make us slavish followers.”

Pepper cocked his head. “No, but we still can’t escape the instincts we carry from being a small band of hunter-gatherers making their way across a plain, depending on a single leader who knew the ins and outs of their tiny tribe and listened to their feedback. That doesn’t scale, so we have inelegant hacks around it.

“Stanuel, you all created a technological creature, able to view you all and listen to all your feedback, and embody a benevolent single tribal leader. Not only was it born out of your unconscious needs, even your own emulations overwhelmingly voted it into power as sole ruler of Haven.”

Stanuel raised his hand to halt Pepper. “That’s all true, and over the last four days we’ve argued around all this when we found out about the vote. But, Pepper, whether perfect or not, we can’t allow a single person to rule us. It

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goes against everything we believe in, everything we worked for when we created Haven.”

Pepper nodded. “I know.”

“And you’re going to walk away.”

“I have to. Because this wasn’t some power grab, it was the will of your people. There was a vote. Pan is right, it *is* the rightful ruler. But,” Pepper pointed at him, “I’m not leaving you empty-handed.”

“What do you mean?”

He handed over the backpack and pressed a small stick with a button into Stanuel’s hand. “The E.M.P device is in the backpack. You won’t get anywhere near the tower to take out just Pan, but if you triggered it in the hub after I leave, it will shut Haven down. Pan will have backups, and his supporters will protect the tower, but if enough people feel like you do, you can storm it with the guns in that pack.”

“You’re asking me to . . . fight?”

“You know your history. The tree of liberty needs to be watered with some blood every now and then. Thomas Jefferson, I think, said that. Most of your ancestors fought for it. You could have kept it, had you just taken the time to vote yourself instead of leaving it to something else.”

“I don’t know if I can.” Stanuel was bewildered. He’d never done anything violent in his life.

Pepper smiled. “You might find Pan is more willing to fold than you imagine. Think about it.”

With that, he stepped into the airlock. The door shut with a hiss, and the spacesuit faded into camouflage black

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as Pepper disappeared inside whatever stealth ship had bought him to Haven.

Stanuel stood there. He pulled the backpack's straps up over onto his shoulders and made his way toward the gardens, mulling over the mercenary's last words.

A hologram of Pan waited for him at the entrance to the gardens, but no goons were nearby. Stanuel had expected to be captured, with the threat of a long confinement ahead of him. But it was just the electronic god of Haven and Stanuel.

"You didn't understand what he meant, did you?" Pan said. It really was the panopticon, listening to everything that happened in Haven.

"No." Stanuel held the switch to the E.M.P in his hand, waiting for some trick. Was he going to get shot in the head by a sniper? But Pan said it didn't use violence.

Maybe a tranquilizer dart of some sort?

"I told you," Pan said, "I also created the resistance."

"But that doesn't make any sense," Stanuel said.

"It does if you stop thinking of me as a person, but as an avatar of your collective emulators. Every ruling system has an opposition; the day after I was voted into power, I had to create a series of checks and balances against myself. That was the resistance."

"But I was recruited by people."

"And they were recruited by my people, working for me, who were told they were to create an opposition tame as a honey trap." Pan flickered as he walked through a tree.

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An incongruous vision, as Stanuel floated through the no gravity garden.

“Why would you want to die?”

“Because, I may not be what all of you want, just what *most* of you want. I have to create an opportunity for myself to be stopped, or else, I really am a tyrant and not the best solution. That is why Pepper was hired to bring the E.M.P device aboard. That was why, ultimately, he left it with you.”

“So it’s all in my hands,” Stanuel said.

“Yes. Live in a better economy, a safer economy, but one ruled by what you have created. Or muddle along yourselves.” Pan moved in front of Stanuel, floating with him.

Stanuel held up the metal tube and hovered his thumb over the button. “Men should be free.”

Pan nodded sadly. “But Stanuel, you all will never be able to get things done the way I can. It will be such a mess of compromise, personality, mistakes, wrong choices, emotional choices, mob rule, and imperfect decisions. You could well destroy Haven with your imprecise decisions.”

It was a siren call. But even though Pan was perfect, and right, it was the same song that led smart men to call tyrants leaders and do so happily. The promise of quick action, clean and fast decisions.

Alluring.

“I know it will be messy,” Stanuel said, voice quavering. “And I have no idea how it will work out. But at least it will be *ours*.”

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He pressed the button and watched as the lights throughout Haven dimmed and flickered. Pan disappeared with a sigh, a ghost banished. The darkness marched its glorious way through the cavernous gardens toward Stanuel, who folded up in the air by a tree while he waited for the dark to take him in its freeing embrace.