

Liquid Stranger

by Sean McCrae

Dedicated to all the Vapor Beings out there - 4/5/2024





Chapter 1 - Sticky Green

"For now, we can only drink Green?" Sarah asked the robot. She smiled as she slipped the foaming liquid.

"Yes, for now. We've prepared it for your enjoyment. I'm happy you like it. Do not drink the Blue," the robot said before it flew up into the sky.

"But mom, I like the Blue," Ellie, her young daughter stated.

Sarah shrugged, "If he said that we can't drink Blue, that means it isn't safe dear."

Ellie burst into tears. "But I don't like the Green! It makes me feel sick!" She protested.

Sarah wrapped her arms around her daughter in a loving embrace. "You saw what happened to the others Hun. We must listen to them now. Or else... We could end up like..." Sarah paused. She knew her young daughter's innocent eyes could never forget the vicious scene. "It will be okay dear. When he comes back, we'll ask him to make some more Blue. Just for you. Okay?" She kissed her daughter on the forehead. "We will make it. We can survive."

As the neon green liquid pooled on the floor, the hum of the alien ships outside grew louder. Sarah held Ellie close, her eyes scanning the dimly lit gas station for any sign of the robots' return. The air was thick with tension, and the only light came from the broken fountain machine and the eerie glow of the ships' beams.

Suddenly, a soft whirring sound approached, and a small robot, no larger than a breadbox, hovered into view. Its metallic surface reflected the green and blue lights, casting a dance of colors across the walls. "Sarah, Ellie," the robot's voice was surprisingly gentle, "I have returned as promised. The Blue you desire is not yet safe, but I have found a compromise." It extended a slender arm, offering a vial filled with a swirling, luminescent liquid. The color was a perfect blend of the Green they had to tolerate and the Blue that Ellie longed for. "This is a neutral solution, created just for you, Ellie. It will sustain you without harm. Please, take it as a token of our commitment to your survival."

Ellie's tears subsided as she reached for the vial, her eyes wide with wonder.

Sarah watched cautiously, but hope flickered in her heart. Perhaps they could survive this after all. "Thank you," Sarah whispered, her voice steady despite the chaos around them. "We will accept your gift."

As Ellie sipped the liquid, her smile returned, and the mother and daughter shared a moment of peace amidst the ruins. The robot hovered nearby, its sensors quietly whirring, as if standing guard over the small family.

The night was still young, and the challenges ahead were many, but for now, they had found a semblance of safety and a new ally in the darkness.



Chapter 2 - Red Zone

Sarah smiled. She was relieved that Ellie was content. It was hard enough raising a child before the fall. "Thank you so much," she said to the small robot, still staving off tears.

Ellie drank the rest of the vile and smiled. "This one was so good! Thanks Radio!" She came up with the name for the robot because the robot would sometimes play her songs to fall asleep to.

"You're welcome," Radio said, admiring the name she had given him. "You two are safe to sleep here. I'll guard you." His machine head spun around 360 degrees and cast out

a 100-yard lidar panoramic after he flew up into the air. He then created an infrared panoramic overlay and layered it over the lidar data. "I've created a baseline," Radio said, whirring while he levitated in the air. "Any hostiles will be summarily executed if they breach the perimeter." A device mysteriously retracted from his leg and cast a light red hue around the safety zone perimeter. Most, if not all people still alive knew what it meant to enter inside a red zone. And if they didn't, they'd find out in less than a fraction of a millisecond. There were no second chances.

The night air was still, broken only by the soft hum of Radio's systems.

Sarah tucked Ellie into an old, dusty blanket they had found, her mind racing with the day's events. The world had changed, and with it, the rules of survival. Radio's presence offered a semblance of security in a world where little remained.

As Ellie drifted to sleep, Sarah pondered their next move. They couldn't stay at the gas station forever. Supplies were running low, and the threat of the unknown loomed over them. But for tonight, they had a guardian, and that was more than they had yesterday.

Radio's sensors continued scanning the area, his processors working overtime to ensure that no harm would come to his charges. He was more than a machine; he was a beacon of hope, a reminder that even in the darkest times, there could be light.

Sarah finally allowed herself to close her eyes, the red hue of the safety zone a strange comfort. Tomorrow was uncertain, but tonight, they were alive, and that was enough.

Just before sunrise, Sarah's body exploded with fear. Adrenaline surged through her veins as she grasped for Ellie after the boom. Before Sarah could take another breath, a second shockwave hit, rattling her bones.

Radio struck at lightning speed. An unlucky man breached the red-hued perimeter. Radio moved faster than the speed of light with a technology unknown to mankind. He'd teleported behind the unfortunate invader and cerebral burned his skull into a mess of melted bone and charred blood.

Radio quickly looted the invader's pockets and backpack and dropped off a knife and compass next to Sarah. "Show her how to use the blade," he said. "She must learn."

"It's not even light outside yet," Sarah said, still trembling from the sonic booms. The wind blew the scent of volcanized bone and flesh across her face and she gagged.

Radio's head turned side-to-side in a confused gesture. "I thought you liked that matter. You took a breath of the intruder's lifeforce."

Sarah coughed again after breathing in the terrible scent. "Radio! How do you not understand we were never like this! No one likes melted flesh and death!"

Radio looked at Sarah, even more confused. "But you do. People do. We watched you for eternity and all you do is kill everything around you. That's why... That's why we are helping you. The planet must be restored before all of the other creatures perish from humanity's actions."

"You always say that!" Sarah exclaimed. "We never did anything! We were just living our lives!"

"That's the problem. Not doing anything is still a choice. Not doing anything is how we got to this point."

Ellie stirred from her slumber and yawned. She'd grown accustomed to sonic booms in the middle of the night. "But Mom, we inherit the consequences," the child said. She'd heard it from Radio many times before, yet her young mind didn't quite grasp the totality of the phrase.

"It's okay. Go back to sleep Ellie. The sun will be back soon. Tomorrow is a new day." Sarah laid back down and closed her eyes without saying another word.

"You two are safe," Radio said. "I love you." He glanced at Ellie's and saw her react with a smile as she lay cuddled with her mother.

"I love you too," young Ellie whispered.



Chapter 3 - True North

As dawn's first light crept over the horizon, the world outside the red hue began to stir. The gas station, a relic of a time now past, stood as a silent witness to the new day.

Sarah, with Ellie by her side, rose to face the challenges ahead. The knife and compass lay next to them, symbols of survival in this altered world.

Radio, their guardian, had become more than a protector; he was a teacher, a source of wisdom from a world beyond their understanding. His words, though sometimes harsh, were a reminder of the delicate balance they now tread.

"Today, we learn to navigate," Radio announced as he descended from his watchful perch. "The compass will guide your path, and the blade will protect it."

Sarah picked up the compass, its needle swinging freely before settling on a steady direction. She showed Ellie how to hold it, explaining how the cardinal points can guide them to safety or to new horizons.

The blade was a heavier lesson, its edge glinting in the morning light. Sarah taught Ellie the responsibility that came with such a tool, the weight of decisions that could mean life or death.

Ellie listened, her young eyes wide with the gravity of their situation.

As the day wore on, they practiced. Radio watched, his sensors ever alert for danger, but also admiring their practice. They were survivors, fighters, and perhaps, the seeds of a new beginning.

The sun climbed higher, casting long shadows across the abandoned pumps and the overgrown lot. In the distance, the ruins of the old world loomed, a reminder of what was lost. But here, in this small oasis of safety, there was hope.

Sarah and Ellie, with Radio's guidance, prepared for the journey ahead. They would travel light, but they carried with them the strength of their bond and the knowledge that they were not alone.

And as the stars began to appear, one by one, they knew that tomorrow would bring another step towards a future they would shape with their own hands. As the sun set, painting the sky with streaks of orange and purple, they settled in for another night.

The red hue of the safe zone flickered softly, a beacon in the encroaching darkness.

"We will make it," Sarah whispered to Ellie, her voice a mix of determination and comfort. "Together."



Chapter 4 - Liquid Intent

Sarah and Ellie slept peacefully after the long day of training. Radio stood guard over them, a ruthless sentinel protecting them at any cost. Ellie woke up at dawn. "I'm thirsty mom," she said, tugging at her mother's arm.

Sarah woke up and yawned. "I think the fountain machine is out of green." She glanced up at Radio. "Can you help us?" she asked.

Radio's servos whirred as he buzzed around. "I will check for you," he said before vanishing into the rising sun.

Sarah looked at Ellie and shrugged. "Let's wait for him to get back hun. We need his blessing. It's not safe to drink anything in this foresaken world without his guidance. You saw what happened to--" she stopped herself. "Just give him time dear. Well survive."

Ellie had grown used to waiting for things, yet she still became impatient when she was thirsty. She stood up and held the compass, the seemingly magic device, until the needle pointed North. She looked at the rising sun and the compass. "What is E and W mommy?" she asked. "I remember N is for North."

Sarah smiled. She was happy that Ellie was eager to learn. "E stands for East, dear. And W, for West."

Ellie glanced towards the sun and back at the compass.

"The sun always comes up in the East and goes down in the West Ellie."

"That is so cool! So it does work!" Ellie exclaimed.

"Head West," Radio said after he magically appeared next to them. "Due West for three miles. Stay off of the roads. There is an abandoned trailer with some green to get you guys through," he concluded disappearing.

Ellie shook her head, disappointed he didn't bring them anything. "Why does Radio act so different in the daytime Mommy?" she asked.

Sarah shrugged and put her hands on her hips. "I'm not sure babe. There are things that we may never know about him. But at least he is helping us. At least he loves us," Sarah paused. "Let's head West and find that drink. C'mon."



Chapter 5 - Plastic Parts

The morning sun cast a warm glow over the desolate landscape, its rays piercing through the remnants of a world once bustling with life.

Sarah and Ellie set out westward, their steps cautious but determined.

The compass in Ellie's hand was their anchor, a beacon of direction in the chaos that surrounded them. As they navigated through the ruins, Ellie's curiosity never waned. "Mommy, why is the sky green?" she asked, her gaze upward.

“I think it is the ships, dear. Or... the earth's magnetic field is weakening,” Sarah replied, her voice tinged with a mix of wonder and sorrow. “Everything has changed. Even the sky.”

Ellie nodded, accepting this new reality with the resilience only a child could muster. They continued on, the compass leading them through the wilderness, away from the dangers that lurked on the main roads.

Hours passed, and the abandoned trailer came into view, just as Radio had promised. It was a small haven, untouched by the turmoil that had swept across the land. Inside, they found cans of the green liquid, enough to sustain them for days.

As they rested, Ellie played with a small toy she found among the rubble—a reminder of the life that had been.

Sarah watched her daughter, her heart heavy with the weight of their situation, but also filled with a fierce love and a vow to protect her at all costs.

Radio returned as the sun began to set, his form silhouetted against the dimming light. “You are safe,” he reassured them. “And you will continue to be, as long as I am here.”

Sarah nodded, her gratitude evident. “We owe you our lives, Radio,” she said.

The robot’s lights flickered, a sign of acknowledgment. “It is my purpose,” he replied. “To protect, to guide, and to ensure the future.”

As night fell, they settled in, the trailer a temporary sanctuary in a world of uncertainty. But with each other, and with Radio’s unwavering vigilance, they found strength to face the days ahead.



Chapter 6 - A Fire in the Sky

Ellie woke up in the middle of the night to a shockwave that rattled her skull. She was scared, but she'd grown up dealing with strange blasts for her entire life. The inside of the musty trailer was dark, but a red glow shined in through a broken window.

Surprisingly, Sarah slept through the commotion.

Ellie stood up and looked for Radio. She knew he was likely involved with whatever was going on. She walked over to the broken window and the floor creaked beneath her. To her amazement, there was a fire in the sky. She'd never seen anything like it before. Looking directly at it hurt her eyes and she ducked under the window sill. "Mommy! Wake up! Something is happening!" she screamed.

Sarah jumped up from her slumber and ran over to Ellie. She grabbed her daughter and held her tight in her arms, shielding her from whatever was going on in the sky. Strangely, there was no sound, only an extreme heat from the strange energy radiating in the sky. "It'll be okay hun. We are safe. The fire... It's in the sky. It won't come down. It would've already by now. We are fine."

Ellie closed her eyes and prayed. She knew something huge was happening.

"It's... It's receding!" Sarah shouted with joy. "Look baby," she said to Ellie.

"It's going to be okay!" Ellie looked up at the sky and watched the bright red energy compress, energy waves shrinking in strange pulse. "Whoa! What is happening Mommy?" she asked.

"I... I don't know babe. We will have to ask Radio when he comes back."

They watched in wonder as the energy disappeared before their eyes, leaving behind only an intense heatwave in the dark sky.

"That was your government. Or... what is left of it. You'd think they would've accepted peace by now. Instead, they launch nuclear devices above your heads. Futile, really. We simply capture the energy and utilize it to our benefit. That's why we are here. Well, one of the reasons at least."

"So they were going to just kill us tonight?" Sarah asked. "Yep. Almost one-trillion degrees inside the center of a nuclear blast. You'd have simply evaporated. Both of you, and hundreds of others in the area. But we're here to protect you. The innocent," Radio paused. "Sadly, we couldn't save everyone in the beginning," Radio paused. "It... Wouldn't have worked out anyway," he concluded with a touch of sadness on his robot face.

"The... The consequences," Ellie said. She was young, but she accepted the fact that the world would never be what it was like when her mother grew up. To her, it was just life.

"Rest," Radio said. "There will be no more disturbances tonight. When the sun rises, there is someone I'd like you to meet. That is, if you are interested in companionship..."

"NO!" Sarah shouted. "Never again! Not after what happened last time. That isn't an option."

"We don't need anyone else Radio. We have you. We are a family," Ellie said with a smile.

Radio's servos whirred and he smiled at them both. "Cancel that thought. I understand. Get some rest. I love you both."

The night's silence returned, a stark contrast to the chaos that had just unfolded.

Sarah and Ellie, reassured by Radio's presence, settled back into their makeshift beds. The trailer, with its creaky floors and musty air, felt like a fortress against the unknown dangers outside.



Chapter 7 - Green Respite

As the first light of dawn peeked through the cracks in the walls, Sarah and Ellie awoke to a new day, one that promised no less uncertainty than the last, but also carried a glimmer of hope. They had survived another night, and with Radio's protection, they felt a sense of security that had been scarce since the world changed.

Radio, ever watchful, prepared for the day ahead. "Today, we explore," he announced, his voice devoid of the sadness from the night before. "There are places

untouched by conflict, pockets of peace. It is time you see what remains of beauty in this world.”

Sarah and Ellie exchanged a look of cautious optimism. The idea of seeing something beautiful was a distant memory, a luxury from another life. Yet, the possibility sparked a curiosity within them, a desire to remember what it felt like to witness the simple grace of nature.

They packed their few belongings, the compass and knife always within reach. Radio led the way, his sensors scanning the environment for any sign of danger. The journey was quiet, the only sounds were the crunch of their footsteps and the occasional chirp of a bird, a reminder that life persisted in the smallest of forms.

After hours of walking, they arrived at a clearing. Before them lay a field of wildflowers, a riot of colors swaying gently in the breeze. The sight took their breath away. It was a stark contrast to the charred forests and neon skies they had grown accustomed to.

Ellie ran into the field, laughing, the sound a melody that Sarah hadn't realized she missed.

Radio hovered nearby, a silent guardian over this moment of pure joy.

“This,” Sarah whispered, tears welling in her eyes, “this is what we're fighting for.”

They spent the day in the field, a brief respite from their survivalist existence. Radio quizzed Ellie and Sarah on physics, biology, chemistry, and electrical engineering. As the sun began to set, painting the sky in hues of orange and pink, they knew they had to return to the reality of their situation. But for a moment, they had lived. Truly lived.

As they made their way back to the trailer, the image of the wildflowers etched in their minds, they carried with them the knowledge that beauty, though rare, was not yet extinct in their world.



Chapter 8 - Magic Moments

Sarah woke up to Radio quizzing Ellie on some basic arithmetics.

"Good morning Mommy. Two plus two is four," Ellie stated proudly.

"Nice baby," Sarah said as she yawned.

"She is getting very good," Radio said.

"Yeah she is," Sarah responded.

"Mommy, why do we have to drink the Green? I want some more Blue. It is so much better. I don't want Green anymore." Ellie asked like Sarah knew the answer.

Sarah smiled, happy that Radio was hovering near them. "You know not to push it, Ellie. We listen to what Radio says. If he says it is safe, it's safe. That's just how it is dear."

Ellie batted her eyes at the cute robot and asked, "Can you bring us some Blue, Radio?"

Radio whipped around the room a few times and responded, "We will see young Ellie. For now, Green is best. And... Yellow. If you can find Yellow, savor it. Every drop is imperative. I haven't scanned for a few days, but I don't think you will find any Blue around here."

Ellie started to pout.

"It's okay baby. We can make it. We can survive on Green for now. There will be more Blue again one day babe," Sarah said, placing her hand on Ellie's shoulder.

"But it makes me sleepy Mom. I don't like feeling like a zombie," Ellie whined.

"Babe, that's only for the first few minutes. Then it wears off, Hun."

"Radio, can you fix it for me? Like the other night?"

Radio grinned. "Is that what you wish for today?" Radio asked.

Ellie shrugged, "I... I guess so. I just don't like the Green making me sick."

Radio flew down next to the open can and scanned it with his gas spectrometer. It only took a second for him to isolate the exact atomic composition of the Green liquid. "I'll tell you what young Ellie, if you can guess how I can change the liquid, you won't have to use up a wish here."

Sarah smiled. She thought she knew how Radio worked his magic, but she kept quiet. She did not want to spoil their little game.

"Umm... I don't... I don't know," Ellie paused. There was an awkward silence.

"Think of what I taught you, Ellie," Radio said.

"Umm..." Ellie paused. She did not want to give the incorrect answer. "It takes something to make something?"

Both Radio and Sarah chuckled. "I'll give ya that," Radio replied. "Nothing is free."

Radio and the metal can disappeared for a few seconds, then returned in a flash of white light. "For you, my dear. For science." Radio presented the can of Blue liquid.

"Oh my God! Blue! Yay!!!" Ellie cheered.

Sarah had her own feelings about the mysterious robot. Why was it that only sometimes he would help them, then others, he wouldn't? She wondered where he would disappear off to and what he did there. She figured that he went inside one of the alien ships, but there didn't appear to be any doors. She'd asked him many times, but he only laughed at her. He'd never answer her question.

"Thank you so much Radio," Sarah said, a little jealous that she was unable to comfort her daughter on her own.

Radio winked at her. "Resources are thin, but we can manage. Count this as a gift for her doing well in her studies. Education is so very important in this new world."

Ellie chugged down the blue liquid and burped. It was by far her favorite.

"I'm glad you enjoyed it, Ellie. Today is going to be a little tough. There are a couple of things I need you two to get for me. There is a cave to the South. About ten miles. It is at the base of a swamp. Use the compass to guide you. I'll tell you more when you get there. If you can do this for me, I can guarantee your safety for at least a few more weeks."

Sarah looked at the ground and shook her head. So much had happened around her that she didn't understand, yet she sometimes wondered if what Radio said was entirely

true. Could they survive without him? Then she thought about how much Ellie loved him. In a strange way, they were indeed a family. Last, she considered the fate of the others that refused to heed his warnings. But it was a new age. A new time. And he was their guardian. "We'll do it," Sarah said, forcing a smile.



Chapter 9 - Glowing Growth

As the sun rose higher, Sarah and Ellie prepared for their journey to the south. The compass, their steadfast guide, pointed unwaveringly towards their destination. With Radio's instructions echoing in their minds, they set out, the weight of their task heavy on their shoulders.

The swamp was a place of eerie beauty, with moss-draped trees and the distant calls of unseen creatures. As they approached the cave, a sense of foreboding filled the air. Radio had been clear – this was important for their survival.

"I see you've made it," Radio said after suddenly appearing above them. "We've been busy today."

"What is inside this cave, Radio?" Sarah asked. The idea of the entering the dark cave made her nervous.

"You will know when you see it. There are glowing crystals inside. Grab the big ones and leave the smaller ones to grow."

"Are you serious? Crystals?" Sarah asked.

"Yes. Don't touch them with your hand either. They will burn you. And potentially shatter. You... You don't want that to happen. Trust me," Radio said.

"What do we use to pick them up then?" Sarah asked.

"Anything but your skin. Plastic, leather, cloth. Do not use metal."

Sarah had an extra shirt in her backpack and pulled it out. "So, this will work?" she asked.

"Yep. That will be fine."

"Are they hot?" Ellie asked.

"No, but they can get extremely hot. The floor is damp. Don't drop them in the water."

"Is it like... Ummm... Potassium?" Ellie asked.

Radio smiled. He was stoked that young Ellie was learning chemistry. "Something like that," he said, before disappearing.

Inside the cave, the air was cool and damp. They found what Radio had sent them for: a cluster of glowing crystals, pulsing with a strange energy.

Sarah carefully gathered them with her shirt. Ellie held open the backpack and watched with wide eyes.

As they made their way back, they couldn't shake the feeling that they were part of something much larger than themselves.

Radio greeted them upon their return, his sensors flickering with what could only be described as pride. "You have done well," Radio said. "These crystals are key to maintaining the barrier that keeps us safe. Your courage ensures our protection." He quickly snatched up the crystals and vanished.

Sarah and Ellie exchanged a look of relief. "That was quick," Sarah said. They had succeeded, and for now, their safety was assured.

Sarah knew that the journey back to the trailer would not be possible to complete before dark. "We stay here tonight, Ellie."

As they stood at the cave's entrance, the stars above seemed to shine a little brighter, a silent testament to their small victory in a world of uncertainty.



Chapter 10 - Special Touch

"Do we have anything to drink?" Ellie asked.

"No Ellie. We have to wait. Radio said it's not safe. Even though it looks good, the water in this cave is not potable."

"Can we try to clean it somehow?" Ellie asked. "

No means no Ellie!" Sarah snapped. A memory flashed inside of her mind of a man's face melting off seconds after he took a drink of river water. She had to be stern with Ellie because the thought of that happening to her daughter was terrifying. "We can wait for Radio to come back. It won't kill you."

Ellie shrugged and sat down on the wet rocky cave floor.

"How about we go out and gather some firewood? It'll keep your mind off of being thirsty. I'll watch over you," Sarah said. She gripped her sheathed knife and smiled. She wasn't very experienced, but she was confident she could take down a predator if necessary.

They walked to the cave entrance and out into the swamp basin. Owls and chirps could be heard echoing through the marshlands.

"There isn't much wood here, Mommy," Ellie said.

"We will take what we can find babe. We just need enough for a little fire. Just for some light."

They continued walking through the marsh and came across a fallen tree. "Try to break off a few branches," Sarah instructed.

Ellie went to work and gathered a small prize of wood. As she walked back toward her mother, something sloshed around violently in the shallow water behind her. "Ahhh!" Ellie screamed.

Sarah instinctively drew her knife and shielded Ellie, but strangely, the noise stopped. "It's gone dear. We are--"

A large creature appeared inches from Sarah's face and gazed deeply into her eyes. It wrapped its tentacles around her hand, preventing her from striking with her blade.

Sarah screamed. She had never seen anything like it before.

Ellie watched in terror, but instead of cowering, she rushed up and kicked the creature, doing her best to protect her mother.

The creature wrapped a tentacle around Ellie's waist and lifted her up into the air.

"Stop!" Sarah pleaded, fearing for both her and her daughter's life.

But instead of attacking, the creature just looked at them, studying their bodies. Peering into their souls. Seconds turned to minutes and the creature continued on with its mysterious gaze. Then suddenly, it released its grasps and vanished into thin air.

Ellie struggled to stand up in the swampy terrain, her feet getting stuck in the muddy bottom. "What was that thing?" she asked.

"I don't know Ellie. But it let us live. I've never seen anything like it. Let's get the hell out of here. Grab the sticks before it comes back."

Ellie pulled herself together and grabbed the twigs. "That was the scariest thing I've ever seen," Ellie said.

"Hopefully, it leaves us alone," Sarah concluded.

They made their way back to the cave and started a campfire for the night. The encounter in the swamp was a stark reminder of the new realities Sarah and Ellie faced in this changed world. The mysterious creature, with its deep gaze and sudden disappearance, left them with more questions than answers. Yet, it also showed them that not all unknowns in this world were hostile. As they settled by the campfire, the warmth of the flames provided comfort and the promise of another day in the new world.