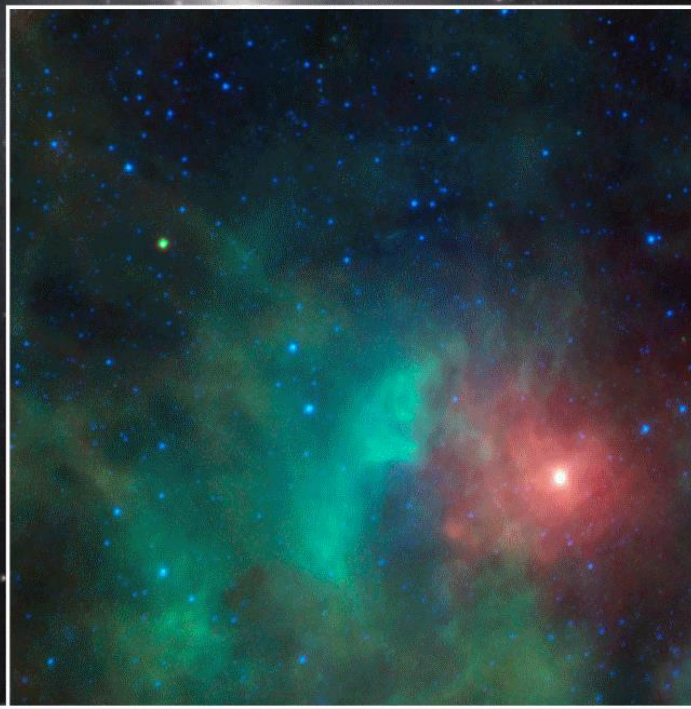


... Logbox



S. C. E s t o n

A short story

Logbox

A short story

by

S.C. Eston

Thank you for reading my story.

- Steve

This is a work of fiction. All the characters, organizations and events portrayed in this book are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

LOGBOX

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. Logbox

Not working...

[noise]

...don't really understand how...

Did...

[noise]

...break it?

I...no! What are you...

[noise]

...I was just teasing.

Anedia, just take it back.

[silence]

Hello?

...

...like this.

See, Nethu. Just here. Press. Not too hard and only once. You'll have to be careful.

You have large fingers.

Devices like this one are old. You can't find them any longer. Not even in the Low Lands. Or so I've heard. Too heavy. Poor sound quality. But they work well. The design is good. Simple, you know. Easy to fix and replicate. I saw it for the first time in one of the Twelve Museums of Old. Yes, I fixed that one too.

So...so while we're here, it will have to do.

I like it.

You like it? Good.

But you should keep it. It is yours.

No, it's yours. Really is. You need a distraction.

Okay, just to be safe, keep it close to your mouth, just so, see? When you talk, I mean. Talk into it and it will record everything you say.

And when you are done, just another button. Right here...

#

This thing...the recording diary I am holding, the one you are listening to. It was a gift.

I don't know why Anedia gave it away.

"A present," she said. "Just for you."

She was so excited I couldn't say no. I didn't want it. I still don't. Don't want to use it either.

But here I am.

Anedia, she deserved to keep it. It took her so long to salvage all the parts and even longer to put it together and get it working. Since she came, she has been working on this.

How long has it been since she arrived?

Anedia would know. She keeps track of time. Three years? Maybe four? It feels like she arrived yesterday. The days before she came are hazy, all the same, as of another time.

She found the casing at the entrance of shaft B41. It was tipped on its side, half covered in the dirt, for anyone to find. But no one did. No one was looking for it, except Anedia.

The instant she found it, she knew what it was.

“Do you know what this little treasure is?” she asked me.

I had no idea. I didn’t care. Seriously, at that time on that day, I didn’t even want to talk to her. I found her zest as annoying as anything could be. I didn’t get it. The only thing worse was her crystalline voice. I remember thinking: She is new. Like the rest of us, she will simmer, deteriorate, and die inside.

“It is a diary box,” she said. “Do you think they will let me keep it?”

I didn’t think they would, but what did I know? Not much, it seems.

She was dedicated to it. It was her project. Every moment she had, she worked on the metallic black box, adding to it, testing it, connecting wires, tightening screws. After and before the daily work shift, during lunch, forfeiting food sometimes, before going to sleep, before all of us were awake. Even in the tunnels she had it on her, attached to her suit belt. She was always on alert for that missing piece, that component that would bring her one step closer to making it work.

Maybe this gadget is what kept her going. Kept her smiling. Anedia, she has it hard. Most women do, but she is younger than most.

What will she do now? Start another project?

It is a strange thing. I didn’t want to befriend her. I don’t know how it happened.

And now I have this box.

#

I am Nethu.

I used to be a salvager from the clans of the Red Streets, on the western fringe of the Low Lands, along the Black Metallic Sea.

I’m starting with my origins, but I doubt this box will ever be found. In the unlikely event it is, I doubt whoever hears this will have heard of the Red Streets.

Let me be honest. I killed.

Many a time and a time too many.

I...survived, one could say, but I feel no pride in mouthing it out loud.

My home was located in the remnants of an old brick building, a place of grandeur. Or it would have been, if its construction were completed, giving it the shape it was meant to have. The creator had vision, I'll give him that. It should have been a tall tower, hundreds of floors, challenging even the Pillars in stature. Not really, but you see what I mean.

In reality, it was only the shadow of something notable.

I hated it.

The building was abandoned for unknown reasons. Not that anyone had time to care. My parents chose the place because it offered shelter and some measure of security. About this, they were right. It had ten solid floors, the top of which didn't have a roof. Many walls were in shambles. An easy spot to defend, easy to disappear into.

There were six in my family, and I was the youngest. Our parents were taken when I was twelve. My mother was the glue holding us together. Shortly after the taking, my two brothers left, swearing not to meet the same fate. That left Unie and me behind.

Unie, sister dear, how I miss you.

I had not expected the feeling to be that strong. It's an exposed gash that will just not heal.

Unie, she was the toughest. She taught me everything. How to navigate the Black Metallic Sea to hunt for salvage, how to steal and trade for food and clothes and sometimes even lodging when we would leave on a recovery trip for weeks on end. She showed me how to network and build ties with the other clans, how to choose alliances. She knew how to read the clouds, predict storms and the next arrivals. It was a special gift. She would look at the sky and see what no one could and predict the drop zone.

Maybe she heard it on the wind. That is what she liked to say. She said a great many things. Most of which I don't remember.

One I do.

"Do not be blind," she used to murmur in my ear while we waited for the next drop, hidden behind an old crushed bed, or the broken panel of a walk-way, or any other unusable debris. "This place is just a pit, a large pit of trash. Everything here thrown away by those above."

I never believed her when she talked about the Black Metallic Sea that way. For me, the place was a realm of treasures. I loved that part of my life. The only part I have fond memories of. From the Red Streets, it's not possible to glimpse the Floating City. I used to dream of it as drifting on clouds, some kind of paradise, a place where I would one day travel.

Now, I know Unie was right.

Our destiny was inevitable.

Unie was taken when I was sixteen. I was taken at twenty-four. After Unie left, I tried hard to forge better alliances, to find people I could trust. It worked for a while.

But the day came when I was betrayed. Same as my parents, same as my sister.

It always ends this way in the Red Streets. It is a hard life, without surprises, without unknowns. That is why my brothers tried to escape. They knew how it would end for our family. They didn't make it as far as I did. But who can blame them for trying?

Although nobody knew where those taken went, some facts existed. When the Legion came, it always had an exact number of troopers, one perfect hundred of them, dressed in metal armour, with rifles, not afraid to use them. Most often, they wanted twenty of us. It didn't matter too much which twenty. Experience taught us that the

sooner we provided them with the required quota, the sooner they would leave. Meaning fewer casualties.

So, alliances. It always came back to alliances. They chose who would be sacrificed away.

Like I said, I killed one too many. I don't remember who, or why, or for what. But for it I was ensnared and bound and put with a group of thirty in the mud of the plaza.

Thirty, because that gave the Legion enough to choose from, in case they didn't approve of some.

But that time, luck was not with me, with none of us. The Legion took all thirty.

There is only one more memory I'd like to share about that part of my life, and it is the glimpse I stole of the Floating City. Or Prominence, as Anedia calls it.

I will never forget the view. It was from a lift. An elevator going up. I could tell because of the clouds, receding below. We were all piled up, one on top of the other, bound, incapable of moving. I was not supposed to awaken.

On my side, looking between the heads of two others, I saw what I knew to be the Floating City. I couldn't see the Low Lands, even less the Red Streets, but the Floating City, I could.

It stood on the horizon, on a plateau, so vast in scale as to be almost infinite. It was a sight to numb the mind. There were millions of lights, shining, mostly white but of all colors. The city took the shape of a series of towers, some tall, some short, some fat, some thin. I could easily imagine them being made completely of some shiny metal, or even glass, or maybe both. Below and all around, were clouds. Mostly those large puffy ones. It seemed like they were hugging the city. And while I was entranced with the view, a part of my mind could not forget that somewhere farther down, one would find the Low Lands.

I looked as long as I could, stretching my neck until it hurt. It took only minutes before I was discovered.

The next thing I remember is this cell.

#

Kirta was the destination.

A prison. A slave pit.

A series of tunnels. Some call it the Endless Mines.

I do not know where this place is. I just know it exists and that from now forward, it is the only place there is. The only place there will ever be. It does feel endless. I have walked a very small portion of it. The shafts are many, and I have yet to see the bottom of one.

There is no sky here. I yearn to breathe open air. The whole place is caverns, rocks, and dirt. I can't remember the warm feeling of sunrays prickling my skin. Or the color of natural light.

I have been here dozens of years. I must now be in my fifties, maybe early sixties. I feel like an old man but do not know my age any longer. I simply don't.

We are miners. Prisoners, yes, but mainly miners. From the ground we take out rare metals and raw materials. We are not told for whom or for what.

When trying to figure it out, I come back to the lift, to the vision of the Floating City. How it seemed to get lower and farther away. My mind cannot comprehend where the lift would have taken us.

We were going up, toward the skies. Yet here there are only tunnels and darkness.

My cell is a blank cavern, a small cavity, really, with a cot in a corner and a little basin sometimes filled with dirty water or bouillon. I don't know who dug it out, or how many lived here before me, or how many were imprisoned here.

Many, I imagine.

It doesn't matter.

This is an impossibly hard life. Harder than the Red Streets. My hands are covered in calluses and cuts. My skin has turned gray. I used to be quick and agile. I am now heavy and strong, my forearms as wide as my head. Strength and endurance are the required attributes here. If you want to live, and most of us do—stupid instinct—then you get stronger and bigger and tougher.

The more you can extract from the ground, the better you are treated.

Although I took a liking to this little gadget box, I tried to return it to Anedia again today. I pretended it was broken, but she was not fooled.

The last few days, something happened to her, again. Inside the mines, I stay as close to her as I can, as long as I can. It gives me something to do, a purpose of some kind.

But our cells are apart, and when the night periods come, she moves outside my reach and becomes easy prey.

#

About Anedia.

This place, it brings all of us down, to a robot state, crushing our hopes and our wills.

But not Anedia's.

Earlier I listened to my previous recordings and stumbled upon the section where I remembered thinking that Anedia would eventually deteriorate, simmer down, and die inside.

But she never did.

I do not understand it. She is small and young, weak, one could say. Defenseless might be a better word. Although she never complains, I know it is harder for her than most.

The sad tale is told in the marks on her body. The bruises. The way she limps or can't sit down properly. She takes everything stoically and always smiles when she first sees me at the start of a new day.

Or a fresh day. That is how she describes it. Fresh.

Seeing her treated that way is the only thing left capable of stirring any emotion in me.

It is painful.

Equally painful every single time.

She is from the Floating City. Or Prominence, as she calls it. She never said it, but there is her brown skin, marked by long hours in the sun. There is also something in her manner, the way she stands, her head high. A sophistication. I always imagined the people of the grand city to be weak and spoiled and arrogant. But Anedia tells a different story.

She has a sweetness about her. She is full of zest and positivity. She is caring. All things we don't see much of in this place. With reason.

Anedia has altered my perception of the people living in the Floating City. Maybe those living up there, those shitting on us, dumping their detritus and garbage on the Low Lands, are not all bad after all.

Anyway, Anedia doesn't deserve to be here. She may be the only one who doesn't.

Most of the workers have committed one crime or another. Those from the Red Streets are certainly guilty of some form of sin. Like I said before, I killed. I killed in the Red Streets, and I killed in Kirta.

I am not going anywhere.

But Anedia did nothing, absolutely nothing, except be the daughter of an influential man. I don't understand mega-companies and large corporations. I know complex organizations control most of the power in the Floating City and major regions in the Low Lands. I know of money but have never used it, never had a use for it. But that is as far as my knowledge goes. It is already more than I care to know.

What I understand is survival. Salvage and trade.

Anedia was captured to force her father to consent to the merger of two corporations. He is a powerful man. He is also a despicable human being.

The bastard didn't back down.

Hello.

My previous entry is the story Anedia told me, or what I remember of it.

Let it be recorded that I believe her.

Okay, here it is.

See, it is still working. I took good care of it.

I'd like you to say a few words. This is your creation, and since you won't take it back, the least you can do is say a few words. Don't be modest and just say something, anything.

I don't know. You decide.

Say your name.

Sorry, I don't think I got that. Let me get closer. There. Try again.

Anedia.

See.

That was easy, wasn't it? Say a little more.

I...am dying.

[silence]

Hello.

[silence]

She is gone.

I keep listening to her voice. To the way she said her own name, different from the way I had been pronouncing it.

I keep listening to the casual way she admitted she was dying.

She was too young to go, but maybe it was best. I asked to be allowed to keep her company during her last days. They allowed it. They, who took advantage of her when she was around.

Decency, for once. It says a lot about her, if not about this place.

She was weak and sick but went in her sleep. I have no idea what sickness took her. I hope she didn't feel alone in the end. I hope she knew someone cared about her.

She loved me. So she said. She saw something in me that isn't there.

I loved her too, although I was not able to say it to her. One more regret. She felt like family, like a younger sister, a younger version of Unie.

It was the damn barrier that blocked me from talking. She was from the Floating City. Maybe she was too young to feel it. Maybe it is not the same for those above. I just know that for those of the Low Lands, the Red Streets, or anywhere else, it is not possible to bring that barrier down.

We look up, every day, and see what could be. We envy. We hate. We dream too, but mostly we hate.

I've made a lot of what could be called friends since my arrival in this place. Anedia is not the first to die. But she is the first I will truly miss.

#

Nothing is the same.

For the first time in a long while, I think. I have thoughts, and I can't control any of them. I'm thinking about escape...

Of all things: escape!

How ludicrous is that?

[laughter]

I can't stop the thoughts.

I think about Garadia, about the Low Lands.

Even the Red Streets.

Home.

Can I allow myself to think about it as home?

It doesn't end there.

I think about what I would do if I could return.

I would find the old brick tower. Make a bed there. Something small to start. Just a room or even the corner of a room. Maybe even use the same space that was mine before I left.

Then I would repair the place. Repaint. Rebuild.

I would need work. Something real. Something true. Something that could bring me stuff, stuff to trade.

There would be no cheating this time. I would play by the rules.

My brothers. I would search for their story, learn now what I should have known then.

More importantly, I would apologize. I would have many apologies to make.

It seems right.

[silence]

[laughter]

It is a dream.

These hopes are never to happen. Even if I was to return one day, I could not go back to the Red Streets. It is a strange thing that the mind tries so hard to forget the bad, to make it bearable. Even if my head does not remember the reality, my heart knows it hasn't changed.

Maybe I could look for Anedia's family? Or some of her friends? I always wanted to go to the Floating City. We all despise it, but we all want to walk its streets.

There have to be some people who would remember her, who would have cared for her. Not her father. But her mother, surely. I realize I don't even know if she had brothers, sisters...I could find them and give them this device.

Her voice is on it.

.. Epilogue

The recording stopped in disintegrating white noise.

The man looked down at the device on top of his desk. It was a box, grayish, showing marks of time and use, covered in scratches. It was not impressive, but it had survived where almost nothing else had.

“So this is it?” he asked, slowly spinning the drink in his hand. The transparent orange liquid swirled in circles, creating a miniature typhoon.

“It is,” said the woman sitting across from him, her legs crossed, her head high.

“Not what I had expected.”

The woman didn't say anything. Her black suit was impeccable. Her short hair was moist, making the red streak in it look as if it was ablaze. She had just returned from the latest sweep.

“How can you be certain this is the source?” he asked.

“It is still transmitting,” answered the woman. “We don't know how to stop it.”

He nodded, impressed.

The message had traversed a few billion kilometers to reach them, halfway across the system, loud and clear, on a secret frequency. Not only that, but the box had been constructed from a wide array of disparate materials and pieces. It looked like a logbox, but it was a distress beacon.

Their scientists, with all their knowledge and equipment, had not been able to stop the signal.

Impressive indeed.

He took a sip and felt the satisfying burn as the liquid descended down his throat.

“You've analyzed the voice, I assume? Of the girl, and found it is the same as the one on the distress call?”

"We have, and it is."

"What is her name?" Names didn't stay easily with him.

"Anedia."

"Yes, right. And you didn't find her body?"

"No, we didn't." He heard regret there. "Based on the recording, it was to be expected. Her remains would have been dumped into space with other waste."

"Did you crawl the data-sphere?"

"We have, using her voice pattern. We found her. As stated by the recording, she is a Promient of pure blood. She was studying frequency engineering. The daughter of Daram, ex-director of the innovation department of Bio-Ex. Her disappearance was reported by her mother on the first day of the sixth season, cycle 2453. Strangely, the request for help was retracted a few days later, this time by her father. We know she wasn't found, so the father had other reasons for halting the search. The next season, the mother committed suicide by jumping off a tram on the northern fringes, falling through the clouds. A search party was sent to look for her, but the body was never recovered. The following cycle, 2454, an explosion hit one of Bio-Ex's labs in the X quadrant. Daram was one of the 121 casualties. He had no surviving kin, and his estate, as well as all his assets and data, passed on to Bio-Ex."

"The nature of the explosion?"

"Filed as accidental."

"Staged," he corrected.

He offered the woman a drink. She refused, as she had done a few minutes earlier. As she always did. He took a sip from his glass, savouring it, taking his time.

The whole matter was an incredible turn of events. They had been searching for the asteroid mines for years now, without luck. Just a season ago, he had been pressured to cancel the mission. The whole project was in jeopardy.

Then the distress call reached them. Out of nowhere. A single feminine voice asking for help, over and over.

"You realize," he said, nodding at the small object on the desk, "that we would never have found this place without help?"

"I do," admitted the woman. "I just wish you would have got here sooner."

"I know," admitted the man. His armada had answered, although not nearly as swiftly as he would have liked. Certainly not as quickly as the woman has responded. She was a loner. He had superiors to placate, politics to play. They had already discussed the matter, and she knew how grateful he was for her assistance. He wished he could also thank this Anedia personally. "How many were we able to free?"

"Five hundred and eleven. Half will recover with minor scars. A quarter are in especially bad shape. Of these, some have been altered or augmented. We suspect bio-experimentation. The other quarter are sick and weak, and some will probably not make it. We estimate the mine had over two thousand captives."

The result was devastating. So many lost, not even counting their own. Yet it provided the proof they needed. The project would continue now. There was no doubt about that. Funding would flow in. More flying crafts would be provided. Resources. Technologies made available. There would be no limit.

But the cost had been terribly high.

"We should talk again before you leave," he said. "Get some rest. Deserved rest."

The woman stood and stared through the sole window of the office. The man followed her gaze. Far away, in the dark of space, the remains of the asteroids could be seen. The explosion had been powerful and had almost taken down their craft. The repair bots were outside, fixing and patching. The grinding could be heard and felt through the floor. It would be several more days before they would be able to fly again.

"This was only one of many," she said. "It is said there are a thousand camps out there."

“One at a time,” he said. “It is the best we can do.”

But he didn’t feel the confidence he was trying to convey.

“We’ll talk before I leave,” she said, turning away.

As the doors opened to let her out, a thought came to him.

“And this man,” he said, “this Nethu, what about him?”

The woman stopped and turned his way. For the first time since her return, she gave him a tired but genuine smile.

“We found him. The device was hidden under his cot, behind a loose stone. He lives.”

About the Author



STEVE C. ESTON grew up in the small village of Trudel, in the province of New Brunswick in Canada. He is a manager in technology services for the federal government and currently lives in Fredericton with his wife, Leigh. For behind-the-scene info, excerpts and free short stories, you can visit him at: www.sceston.ca.

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