

ENDLESS FIRE
Aethon Arises
SAMPLE

By
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Also by R E Kearney

[Future Furies](#)

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*To Barb, my loving wife, best friend and the Editor in Chief.
Without her encouragement and assistance I could not
and would not have written this story.*

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“Everyone is different. We all suffer from the disease of being human. There are a thousand cures but no antidotes.”

James Altucher

EL PRESIDENTE

Puerto Rico! Independencia! Independence! Liberacion! Puerto Rico! Puerto Rico! Puerto Rico! Cheering crowds shouting, musicians playing and horns squawking rattle Robert's windows yanking him from his dreams and tossing him onto the floor. Rubbing his aching head, he wanders to his room's window. Below his Condado district hotel room, Independence Day celebrants fill San Juan's Avenida Ashford for as far as Robert can see.

Heading the parade is the independent nation of Puerto Rico's first President, its former Governor Justo Negocio. Tall and muscular with graying black hair, he is striding ahead of a wall of laser-light banners, Puerto Rican flags with dark-blue, freedom fields and placards carried by a river of his shouting and dancing supporters. Negocio is their champion leading them forward now just as he led them to independence one year ago.

Before these joyous Puerto Ricans fly drones broadcasting their celebration worldwide. Above and behind Negocio, flies a squadron of aerodrones also hauling banners. Robots roll along intermingled in the crowd. Some celebrants parade riding hoverboards or hoverscooters or electric unicycles, but the majority march on foot.

Robert notices that all of the banners and placards are acclaiming Puerto Rico's first year of independence from the United States except for two. Scrawled upon one of the differing banners is *Close Fort Buchannan*. Its sister banner demands, *US Army Go Home*. As the protestors surge closer, he notices a limping, partially uniformed man is carrying one of the anti-Army signs with his prosthetic hand. Next to him a woman carries the other anti-Army sign with her prosthetic hand and arm.

"What are you watching? Why don't you come back to bed?" Asks a young, dusty-skinned, black haired woman lounging naked in the bed.

"I'm watching your President Negocio. I have a meeting with him later today about establishing some special security system for him."

"Good. I'm glad. He needs more protection. Somebody lased at him last week. He's stirred up a lot of trouble. In America, not everybody is happy about his declaring Puerto Rico an independent nation. They're calling him a revolutionary and traitor. I think that's why they sent some more soldiers and other people to that old Army fort."

"Fort Buchannan?"

"Yeah, that's it." The woman pats the side of the bed, "But, let's not talk about that. Why don't you bring your boney body back to bed?"

"Well, ok then." Smiling happily, Robert returns to the bed. "I don't meet with him until this afternoon"

"Wait. What is this? I didn't notice this last night in the dark." The woman probes, as she gently traces her finger tips across a scar on the right side of Robert's chest. "It looks and feels like the letters M-K."

"Yeah. You're correct. The letters M-K. The initials of Mugavus Komfort. She 3D bioprinted the biocompatible nanomaterials for the tissue to repair my bullet wound. She thought she should sign her work. Very funny, eh? She thought she was funny. Anyway, it's a souvenir of my visit to Ethiopia where a very crazy American who desperately wanted to kill me, missed my heart and only wounded me."

"Why did he want to kill a sweet fellow like you?" She continues circling the MK with her finger.

"Well, as I remember, he just did not appreciate me trying to stop him from destroying the Washington D.C. Mall, and inadvertently, collapsing his uncle's government."

She stops tracing his wound and locks her eyes on his. "Wait a second. Now, everybody knows about the slaughter at the capital, but I don't remember any stories involving you. What I

heard was that a massive military computer failure caused the weapons to malfunction and that's why it's been hushed up. Los muertos no cuentan cuentos, you know."

Robert chuckles while rubbing his shoulder. "Well computers were involved, but it was a man who went crazy and..."

"Robert Goodfellow, are you in there?" A slightly Spanish accented man's voice calls from the hall followed by someone knocking. "Mister Goodfellow, I need to speak with you, immediately."

After struggling into his trousers, Robert hurriedly opens the door.

"Good morning, I'm Justo Negocio." He announces as he strides into the room passing Robert, "How are you this morning?"

"Well I..."

Spying the woman in the bed, Negocio nods toward her and then smiles at Robert, "Oh, I see that you are doing quite well this morning. Muy bueno de verdad. Really good."

"Good morning Rita," he steps toward the woman with his hand extended and a broad smile on his face. "How are you this morning? Did you keep our friend safe and out of trouble last night?"

"Yes, he was never in danger. I made sure that he was out of Club Kronos early and safely in bed."

Grabbing Negocio's hand, Robert snatches his attention away from Rita and back to him, "Sorry sir, I wasn't expecting you. I didn't think we were scheduled to meet until this afternoon."

Two quick shakes and Negocio drops Robert's hand, "That was your schedule, not mine. Plans change Mister Goodfellow. Plans change. I need for you to start now. Throw on your clothes and let's go."

"But, I..."

"But, what? Do you want this gig or not?"

"Well yes, I..."

"Bueno. Meet you down in the lobby in ten minutes, then. Say your goodbyes, quick and let's go." Waving his hand at Rita, he backs toward the door, "Pleasure seeing you. Good work Rita."

After Negocio is gone Robert angrily reproaches Rita. "So, you're a prostitute he hired for me?"

"No! I most certainly am not!" Rita retorts indignantly. "I am a patriotic citizen of the independent nation of Puerto Rico. I was instructed to protect you, and that's exactly what I did."

"Now wait..." Rita's statement startles Robert. "...why do I need protection?"

"You don't realize how precarious it is here right now, Robert. If you think all of those aerodrones and robots surrounding President Negocio during the parade were just to haul banners then you're naïve. They aren't for show. They are laser armed and deadly."

"To protect Negocio. That I understand." Robert taps his chest. "But, I'm no threat."

Puerto Rico is still struggling to free itself. Separate itself from the mainland. So it's a bit of a mess with legal and political disputes and infighting. Some American businesses that had property here are actually sending in goons and criminals. They've been attacking visitors and residents. Extortion, you know. Threatening to embarrass us and scare away our tourists, if we don't give them what they want. So, I did what I needed to do to get you away from the two men I suspect were following you last night."

"Two men? Following me?"

"Yes, two men." Rita motions uses her hands to indicate the size of the men. "Very large, too. Heavy. Strange reddish skin and they seemed to be sweating a lot. The clothes they were wearing and their uncomfortable appearance made them impossible to miss. They watched us the entire time we were at Club Kronos. I'm surprised that you never noticed."

Then with a coy smile, Rita adds, "But by then, I do believe I had won your undivided attention. You certainly didn't seem to mind my protection plan last night."

Robert returns her smile and winks. "No. No, I didn't. I must admit. And you? Was it all work for you?"

“I wouldn’t have invited you back to bed this morning, if it had been. It was a pleasure doing the business of pleasure with you.” Rita stretches and sighs with satisfaction. “Estás bueno! I may have to protect you again, real soon mister Goodfellow.”

“Really? Me? Is that you speaking or just Negocio’s money talking?” Robert points toward himself. “I must tell you that I’m normally not pursued by beautiful women...well...or any women...actually. I’m a bit of a computer geek, you know.”

Smiling and shaking her head in exasperation, Rita points toward the bathroom. “You are such a manganzon. Just get dressed geek. They’re waiting for you.”

With his right fist raised victoriously, Robert struts toward the shower. “As Star Trek movie star LeVar Burton once said, I fly my geek flag proudly. Absolutely.”

ALERT AND NERVOUS

Robert arrives in the lobby to find Negocio chatting with two women. He has them enthralled. Near the hotel entrance stand two broad-shouldered, muscular men eyeing everyone approaching or entering. As Robert nears Negocio, one of the men suddenly appears in front of him blocking his path. He is surprised. The big man moves with the light-footed speed and agility of a cat.

“He’s with me Hector,” Negocio raises his hand to calm his bodyguard. “Go with Rubio and summon our glider.”

“You’re a little late Mister Goodfellow. We don’t have time to waste. Come with me.” Pivoting, he begins striding toward the exit.

Without hesitating or skipping a step, Negocio exits the hotel and steps directly into his arriving autonomous, electrigrade human transport. Following him, Robert is not nearly as coordinated. Stumbling upon the transport’s entrance’s curved threshold, he tumbles into the transport’s cabin. Only Hector’s strong-armed assistance saves him. Groaning and rubbing his scraped shin, he climbs onto the seat across from Puerto Rico’s leader. He starts to buckle his safety restraints, but when he notices none of the others are wearing them, he drops his.

“I must say that I expected a little better from you, Robert. I need speed to succeed. I require surprise to keep my opposition off balance. So far they still think I’m just a joke. So, I have to stay a step ahead. Move before they do. Puerto Rico must become completely self-reliant to overcome their meddling. We have to be ready...no...we are ready to stand on our own as a nation. Puerto Ricans just have to realize it and act like it.”

“Well...yes...ok. But, where do I fit into this?”

“My friend, Dame Gutefrau of SPEA, recommended you. I understand that you are known to have a particularly valuable set of skills in cyber and physical security which you will provide when paid the proper price. You’re a digital mercenary. Is that not true?”

“Well, it’s a living, yes...”

“And you’re also Canadian. Aren’t you? Canadian military in fact? Not American? Not restricted directly by US Science Suppression laws? You’re working in an independent, foreign nation now, you know.”

“Uh yes, I’m an officer in the Canadian Air Force Reserve...but...”

“Good. We have a deal then.” Looking away, Negocio runs his hand across the inside of the transport’s door, massaging the padding. “What do you think of my new ride, Robert? Just received it yesterday.”

Robert surveys the interior. “It’s different. I feel like we’re sitting in the yoke of an enormous, pearl-colored, boiled egg. Having an egg shaped exterior with contoured solar panels as its upper half is a new design to me. I don’t recognize it.”

“It’s Chinese, Robert. Beijing Transport Innovations delivered it yesterday. It’s an all-electric, gliding, autonomous automobile. I call it my auto-auto. Reinforced, 3D printed graphene makes it light, strong and almost invulnerable.” Negocio pounds his fist against the transparent graphene window. “Stop some of the strongest lasers.”

“It’s just what we need here. Robert. We can’t produce oil or gasoline, but we have bountiful sunlight, wind and waves, which can produce electricity. So, why should we send our money to some environment-wrecking, oil company? Makes no sense. Does it? No. So, I’ve mandated that Puerto Rico will use only what it produces. Self-sufficiency is the truest form of independence and freedom. That’s my philosophy of Economics.” Negocio proudly proclaims.

Like a student attempting to impress a professor, Robert instinctively agrees. “Well, you’re not the first to see the wisdom in that. Small self-supporting states are proving stronger and more secure than large dependent states. Estonia for example is...”

“Whap!” Proudly, Negocio slaps the seat. “Now that Puerto Rico is finally no longer forced by America’s hydrocarbon laws to use internal combustion engines, I’ve banned the import of all non-renewable-energy fueled engines. No more internal combustion engines. No ICE in Puerto Rico. America’s oil companies are fighting it, but they cannot stop us now that we are independent and free of them. Congress can pass all the laws that they want mandating Americans to use their gasoline, but here the petroleum power period has passed. Fossil fuels are for fossil fools living in the past. Finally! Puerto Rico is joining the fossil fuel free world!”

Animated and excited, Negocio bounces in his seat. “And since it is Chinese manufactured, US security can’t hack it and grab control of it. Last month, somebody in the US hacked our Ponce police and shut down all of their equipment. A very dangerous and nasty hack attack that they perpetrated just to show us they could. Just before the hackers released the Ponce police, they taunted us with the message, *We still own you*. So, this auto-auto is another successful step in our escape from American control.”

There is no denying that Negocio is a man with plans. Robert decides that he is just the type of person Puerto Rico needs to steer it into the future. Intelligent. Innovative. Imaginative. A leader dedicated to advancing his people.

“By the way Robert, three dozen of these auto-autos will arrive tomorrow. They’re government property, so I’m assigning one to you for your use while you’re here. Yours will be just like mine, here, except without the ballistic proofing of mine.” Negocio smiles and hands Robert an auto-auto control fob.

Robert studies the fob. “Thank you, this will be a new experience for me. Never had my own personal transport, before. Always use community-share conveyances or ride with someone.”

Ahead, at the edge of the street, workers are replacing a miles-per-hour speed sign with a sign stating kilometers-per-hour. Negocio points toward them. “It’s taken longer than I expected, but we’ve also converted to the metric system. Time for Puerto Rico to abandon another obsolete US practice and join the rest of the world.”

“Well, we use both systems in Canada. But personally, I’m a fan of the metrics. It’s more science based.” Robert smirks, “I think we keep miles and feet and pounds around, just so visiting Americans don’t whine and get lost.”

Placing his finger against his lips and cupping his other hand behind his ear, Negocio whispers, “Shh. Just listen to that. Beautiful battery power. No exhaust fumes. No noisy engine. And thanks to aerodynamic lift engineering, its spherical tires barely touch the pavement. Breathe deep our exhaustless air. Soak in the silence.”

Robert smiles enjoying Negocio’s enthusiasm. Obviously, he is his nascent nation’s biggest fan and promoter.

Negocio leans close to the auto-auto’s window. “What’s that? I believe I hear the song of our national bird, the Puerto Rican Spindalis. That is definitely the sound of Puerto Rican progress. Shh.”

Security guard Hector hesitantly clears his throat and quietly attempts to correct Negocio. “Actually the Spindalis lives in the bush not in old San Juan sir. I doubt that you...”

“Yes Hector, I know that. I was exaggerating for effect...oh...just be quiet.” Frustrated, Negocio freezes his attention on the street scene.

With a grimace and an audible groan, Negocio watches an internal combustion engine vehicle approach and pass them heading the opposite direction. He sniffs the air, snorting as if the vehicle had filled the city with fumes. Exaggerating his discomfort at the vehicle’s engine noise, he covers his ears.

With his hands still protecting his hearing, Negocio instructs the auto-auto. “Play Lamento Borincano by Marc Anthony.”

As the music begins, he uncovers his ears and describes the music to Robert. “This is one of my favorite old songs. It was originally written by composer Rafael Hernández Marín in 1929. In his song, he describes the harsh conditions impoverished Puerto Rican farmers had to face on a daily basis. So long ago, but still a lot of similarities to today. My favorite part is the last line when he sings *Yo te adoro, Puerto Rico, y eso nadie lo va a quitar*, which roughly translates to, I adore you, Puerto Rico, and no one can take that away.”

“I imagine you would agree with Bob Marley, who said that one good thing about music, when it hits you, you feel no pain.” Robert reinforces Negocio.

Negocio smiles. “True. No pain here. I’m alive in my Puerto Rico or as Raul Labrador once said, I’m proud of who I am, and I’m proud I grew up in Puerto Rico.”

Negocio closes his eyes and leans back to enjoy the music. Having him cease his rat-a-tat chatter for a few moments is a welcome relief for Robert. He rests his ears while engaging his mind. With Negocio not talking, this is a perfect time for some mental meandering. Like most gig workers these days, he never has time for vacations. He cannot afford them. He simply takes short breaks between assignments. This is his first visit to Puerto Rico, probably his only visit. So why not enjoy this Caribbean escape?

As they noiselessly glide above the seaside street of Avenida Luis Munoz Rivera, Robert watches the Atlantic Ocean’s waves slap the shore. Surging in and slipping out. Rushing and retreating. Flooding and flowing. Hypnotic. Relaxing. But, Robert is an analyzer. He never just sees. He witnesses.

Spellbound by the sea, his mind wanders - drifts in and out with the tide. With the water he momentarily slips away, happily escapes today for yesterday. He envisions the island as it once was, pristine and pure. He imagines how relieved and happy Christopher Columbus and his Spanish sailors must have been to see this lush island. After so many months at sea, finally land and safety. They must have rejoiced at finding fresh water, trees, grass, food and a protected bay. After months of stormy seas, Columbus dropped anchor and completed his second ocean crossing. Robert wonders if they thought they had found the paradise of Eden.

Still absorbing his music, Negocio remains silent. His eyes are closed. Hector is also enjoying a relaxing, semi-sleep swim in the soft guitar sounds and singing.

Massaging his wound from his Africa attack, Robert envies them their tranquility. He hopes he will also be able to enjoy a little serenity in this Puerto Rican paradise. Too much of the time, his mind is as turbulent and troubled as the storming seas Columbus crossed. So much of the reality he knows is disappearing. The world is changing too fast to understand, even for a cyber citizen like him, and he is a person who can be held responsible for changing it.

Abruptly, Robert’s peacefulness ends. Zipping in from behind, a drone pops up next to his window. A small turret on its top rotates toward him. Is it a camera or a laser? Laser!

Instinctively, Robert leaps into the seat next to Negocio shielding him from the drone. Startled, Negocio squirms and slowly begins opening his eyes. A searing, bright light flashes. Zip, the threatening drone disappears, racing away ahead of a police drone.

Just as fast as he jumped next to Negocio, Robert hops back into his own seat. Quickly looking away from Negocio, he returns to studying the seashore scenery. He is embarrassed by his panic. Yet, he remains unsettled. Did he just witness, the graphene blocking a laser shot? In Puerto Rico for less than twenty-four hours and already under attack, twice. He does not consider this a good beginning.

After chasing away their menace, the San Juan police drone settles into position just outside Negocio’s window. Awakening, Negocio waves toward the drone. A green light on the drone’s side flickers as acknowledgement. On the opposite side a second police drone flies into escort position. Robert notes the drones’ significant array of laser weapons. He determines they are sufficiently armed to provide formidable protection.

All is not peaceful in Puerto Rico.

POOR RICH PORT

Fully awake now, Negocio is also enjoying viewing the ocean, but he regards the kissing of sea and shore as a proud Puerto Rican, not as a Canadian tourist. He shatters the silence with his purely Puerto Rican observation. "You know Robert, Christopher Columbus didn't really discover America, he discovered Puerto Rico. We were here long before they were there. In 1493, the indigenous Tainos of this island met him with open arms and open hearts and he enslaved and raped them. History proves that some things never change when it comes to outsiders and our islands. America never treated us much better."

"Play Yo soy Boricua, pa'que tu lo sepas!" Negocio orders as the song, Lamento Borincanto ends. "This is another of my favorites. Tainos called this island Boricua, just so you know. It means, I'm Puerto Rican. Of course, I'm a proud Puerto Rican."

"Yes sir, I've heard that about you." Robert snidely remarks, before he puffs out his chest. "Well, I'm proud I'm Canadian. As actor Daniel Gillies once said, 'tell people you're a Canadian or a Kiwi when you travel and they'll adore you.' I appreciate adoration."

Where Calle Norzagaray replaces the Avenida Rivera, the ocean view is abruptly blocked by the stout stone walls of historic Castillo de San Cristobal and the tourists surrounding it. After hundreds of years, silent San Cristobal is still standing guard. Stoically, protecting San Juan. Of course, mankind goes nowhere without making war, Robert mulls. From the beginning of time until now, man is always fighting with himself. Clubs to cannon to cyber. Now digital death. Civilization is still so far from civilized.

Mankind will also always have poverty, he realizes as the proud, strong Castillo de San Cristobal gives way to a section of crumbling, slum housing. Squeezed into a low spot below the street's cliff and the rising Caribbean, surging seawaters surround and swamp the row of houses nearest the ocean. Higher up on the beach, the ramshackle houses stand on rotting wooden stilts, out of the water's reach, for the moment. Floating trash, rubbish and garbage swirls between the collapsing shacks. Blight blocking beauty.

"I see you're staring at La Perla, Robert. Hard to imagine something looking that bad is actually called the pearl. Ironical, isn't it? Still, looks can be deceiving. The La Perla neighborhood may not look like much, but the people living there refuse to live anywhere else, even with the rising sea threatening to wash it all away. When I tried to clean it up, I almost started a small war. My advice to you, though, is stay out of there. Most of the time, La Perla residents are no problem, but it's also a haven for drug dealers, smugglers and other criminals."

"La Perla looks like something from last century. I understand, of course, that you keep your oldest buildings for tourists. But, almost everything that I've seen here so far, looks out of date...behind the times."

"That's because it is Robert. Most of Puerto Rico is so far behind." Negocio sadly shakes his head. "And just think, Puerto Rico is Spanish for rich port. It's a poor rich port. Just look at those shacks. Look at those people sitting there with nothing to do. No work. No future. The majority of my people are just subsisting. They're Sists barely able to meet their day to day needs. I'm fighting to improve their lives and save Puerto Rico. Raise my people above those rising seas of poverty. I will do whatever is necessary."

"Blink your eyes and the present is past," Robert mumbles.

Negocio nods his head in agreement. "Yes, and I am afraid that Puerto Rico is starting the race from far behind. We will leap forward. I refuse to allow my nation to be a future failure."

Just past the Instituto de Neurobiologia, their auto-auto turns left onto Calle Del Cristo and enters the heart of Old San Juan.

"Here we are, Robert." While their auto-auto is rolling to a stop, Negocio is stepping out its door. "Now to reconnoiter and prepare before tourists flood the plaza."

Having fallen into this oddly shaped conveyance, Robert is in no hurry to now fall out. He navigates his exit through the auto-auto's multi-curved, access panel only when their transport is fully stopped. Silent and stalwart, Hector and Rubio follow him out to establish security. Their two accompanying police drones disappear into the flock of drones hovering above the plaza.

Robert finds Negocio impatiently waiting for him at the base of the Ponce de Leon Statue centered in San Jose Plaza. It quickly becomes apparent why he hit the pavement before their vehicle stopped. As soon as the popular Negocio is sighted, regular routines halt and a crowd of workers begins gathering.

Hector and Rubio hurry to form a buffer zone between him and his adoring public. Admirers shout his name and wave. Other devotees pose for selfies with him in the background. Excited and adoring, his worshipping throng swells forward.

Negocio smiles and waves and then motions with his hands for the crowd to step back. Thrilled to be near him, they ignore his request and hug him tighter. Robert begins to experience the uneasiness of claustrophobia. He struggles for breath, suffering an anxiety attack. Too many too close. Squeezing tighter and tighter. Just in time, San Juan police arrive to help restrain the crowd.

"There is simply no escaping the grip of social media, Robert. I don't announce my movements, but wherever and whenever I appear a crowd materializes. Forces me to move fast and often. Drives the police crazy, but I believe surprise is my best security."

With barrier tape and police in place, Robert and Negocio are no longer being squashed by his fans. But, that does not make them safe. As the San Juan police push the observers away, a fist fight erupts. Robert watches two men and a police officer knock an angry, screaming man to the pavement. He cannot hear what the man is shouting clearly, but to Robert, he appears to be threatening Negocio. The police shock him silent before Robert is certain.

Although no longer threatened by spectators, above and around them small aerodrones and biobots are swarming like flies. Standing much taller than Negocio, Robert finds them buzzing distressingly close to his head. After his visit from the drone during their trip, he is fearful. He swats at a bio-bee drone buzzing too close to his eyes. A second later he feels a sharp burn on his left hand. Immediately a fiery, welt appears. He has been bio-bee stung.

"I believe I just learned the painful lesson that I should never mess with your fan's drones." Robert shows Negocio his throbbing hand.

Negocio chuckles. "Oh well, welcome to the club. I've made the same blunder myself. Only it wasn't a fan's drone, it was my own. That one may have been mine too. I never know whether to swat or not."

"So it was a mistake?"

Negocio flexes his right hand. Occasionally, he still feels pain from the drone laser sting. "Oh, I didn't say that. I'm just telling you not to trust anybody or their drones."

Shadows from the increasing number of aerodrones speckle the blazing hot pavement. Although, he is covered above and surrounded below, Robert takes Negocio's warning to heart. He ducks and dodges instead of swinging and swatting at any of the growing swarm of drones and biobots.

"In these times of capricious loyalties, I've learned by painful experience that once I see a drone I can never turn my back on it." Negocio scans the cloud of flitting and flying electronics above him. "You never really know who is operating that drone or that drone or that purple drone over there. The operators are anonymous, hiding in the crowd. They could be friends, foes or enemy assassins. Ruthless reality of our time. So, I've just accepted life as a continual target. And, now that you're with me, you're a target, too. So, stay alert, and be prepared to duck or you'll deep-fry."

SAY QUANXI

Still early morning and yet, perspiration pours across Robert's face dripping onto his sweat-wet chest. Some of his perspiration is the result of Negocio's cheering speech, but the majority results from the soaring heat. He wonders how soon he will melt into a pudding puddle. He would welcome some Toronto snow right now.

Next to him Negocio stands cool and comfortable. Not a drop of sweat. But then again, he is standing in the shade of Robert's shadow. Robert considers his discomfort the cost of being a Canadian in the Caribbean.

"Right here, at seven tonight, I'm announcing my successful implementation of some geoeconomics by introducing our major Chinese partners." Negocio lowers his voice and moves closer to Robert. "They're part of the alliance that has been quietly financing my efforts to end our life as America's forsaken territory. Free of ridiculous US laws and restraints, and with Chinese help, very soon Puerto Rico will again mean rich port. I'm optimistically excited. Teaming with Chinese scientists and innovators will make Puerto Rico the creative center of the Caribbean."

"So you're selling Puerto Rico to the Chinese? No wonder so many people in the US are coming after you."

Negocio grimaces at Robert's comment. "Selling has such a nasty connotation, Robert. I prefer to use the Chinese term of Quanxi. In Chinese, Quanxi means connections or relationships, you know. But then again, so what if I do open up Puerto Rico to the Chinese? We owe America nothing. Nada. For more than one hundred years, America did nothing for Puerto Rico, except insult us, kick us around and bankrupt us. As a territory, our votes didn't count. Our Representatives in Congress were ignored."

Robert feebly attempts to calm his host. "Well, I'll admit that during my travels in the states, I've found most Americans to be very ignorant about their own country. I doubt the majority of Americans even knew Puerto Rico was a US territory or, for that fact, even existed."

Anger flares in Negocio's eyes. He leans close to Robert and snarls. "Their ultimate insult was denying us statehood. We weren't wanted. Puerto Rico is not welcome. A slap in our face. A kick to our gut. So, since they don't want us...since Puerto Ricans aren't good enough to be Americans...I decided that we would not be the American lapdog to be kicked around anymore. I say, Independencia! And, on top of that do you know how deep in debt Puerto Rico is right now thanks to American dictates?"

"No I...well, I'm Canadian, so I..."

Negocio disregards Robert continuing his rant. "Well then, as a Canadian with the US trying to run you from south of your border you can understand why we could no longer leave our future in their hands. Mainland Americans' single greatest characteristic is that they are bewildered by the present and totally unprepared for the future. America is sinking into an era of arrogant ignorance. Don't you agree?"

Surprise silences Robert. He does not know how best to answer. He wobbles his head, neither agreeing nor disagreeing. "Well, uh..."

Speaking faster and faster, Negocio marches on with his angry monologue. "Besides, the Chinese are entrenched in Central and South America, now. You should know yourself that the Chinese established themselves through-out the Caribbean during the US racist rage period. Now that we're independent, it's finally our turn to benefit. America may not want us, but the Chinese certainly do. Besides industry, just think of our tourism potential. Millions of Chinese tourists visiting us. Wouldn't that be fantastic? They have the minds and the money. Lots of money. Why shouldn't they spend it here? Don't you agree?"

"Yes, I believe you make a valid point...I guess I..."

Without taking a breath, Negocio continues orating. “Sure, Quanxi is Chinese, but here we also have the saying, *quien a buen árbol se arrima, buena sombra lo cobija*. It’s an old Spanish proverb that means if you want to succeed, you have to be close to successful people. If you hang around losers, you’ll end up being a loser. Do you think we always want to be losers?”

“Well no...I wouldn’t...I mean.” Robert is increasingly confused. “Sorry?”

Embarrassed by his own ignorance, Robert stops stammering and begins surveying the square. Straightaway, he recognizes several security vulnerabilities. Not only is the plaza full of strangers, it is surrounded by unsecured buildings. It is an aged, concrete canyon that is perfect for an aerodrone attack or a laser shot from a window.

When Negocio stops to breathe, Robert cautiously inquires. “Sorry, but why are you making your announcement here where it’s so open and accessible? Aren’t you concerned about security?”

“Historical significance mi amigo. Historical significance. Our history means a lot to us. Ponce de Leon was the first governor of Puerto Rico. He established San Juan. But then, as you may remember from school, he left Puerto Rico to search for the fountain of youth.”

“Yes, so?”

Pointing easterly, Negocio continues excitedly, “China’s genome engineering genius, Shengwu Kexuejia, established a large genetic medicine operation in Catano across the Bahia de San Juan in a pharmaceutical plant the American government forced us to close. She’s merging next-generation nanotechnology with advanced genomics creating an international genetics research and treatment center here. And one major area of her expertise is epigenetics. That’s extending human life through genetic manipulation, or as you may call it...the fountain of youth.”

“Yes, I’ve heard about epigenetics. But, I also understand that it’s still in developmental stages.” Teasing, Robert counters with his own theory. “I, on the other hand, am a Singularian. I hope to continually stay alive long enough to make it to the next life-prolonging innovation until I can upload my mind into a robot. I could be very comfortable as a robot...just call me Robby robot.”

Negocio is too intense to consider Robert’s jest. “Well become a robot if you wish, but I plan to remain human, thanks to Shengwu. Earlier this week, she told me that she has perfected her epigenetics...her fountain of youth.”

Negocio jerks his thumb toward the statue. “So tonight, as the first president of Puerto Rico, I will officially announce that the fountain of youth has arrived in Puerto Rico and found Ponce de Leon.”

“Well as comedian Red Buttons once joked about Ponce de Leon, who said when he discovered the Fountain of Youth, ‘Where the hell are the paper cups? Never got a dinner!’” Robert chuckles at his witticism.

Ignoring Robert’s poor joke and smiling broadly, Negocio spreads his arms as if embracing the city. “She’s also providing the best genomic medical care available for Puerto Ricans. Imagine a nation of super-healthy, super-human, long-living Puerto Ricans. Just think, with Shengwu’s epigenetic engineering, I may live to be one hundred and twenty or thirty or possibly, even one hundred and fifty. I’m excited about that. I just hope I’m still able to surf sixty or seventy years from now. I don’t want to be just a doddering, one hundred and thirty year old man.”

Robert smirks. “Hah, you remind me of the late Andy Rooney when he wrote that it’s paradoxical that the idea of living a long life appeals to everyone, but the idea of getting old doesn’t appeal to anyone.”

Growling a harrumph, Negocio acknowledges Robert’s remark before turning away and gesturing toward the ocean. “You can’t see her research ships from here, but she also has crews of Puerto Ricans operating underwater drones searching for cone snails and other sea creatures for sources of conotoxins. So far, they haven’t been too successful because climate change heat has killed so many of our coral reefs. But still, that’s employment Puerto Rico didn’t have six months ago. In addition, she’s supplying major funding to our Instituto de Neurobiologia for additional research. Built the institute a new, highly-advanced, biotechnology lab.”

Robert nods his head in approval. “I must say you and she are an impressive development team. You appear to be driving Puerto Rico forward at a record pace.”

"On Puerto Rico's past I am building Puerto Rico's future." Negocio raises his right index finger to emphasize his point. "So yes, Puerto Rico is improving. But, it's requiring that I simultaneously introduce new paradigms of disruptive innovation, technological turmoil and change, which is difficult for some tradition bound Puerto Ricans to understand and accept. A few of my own people are resisting. They are not yet prepared to brave a new world."

Negocio turns and points north. "But our biggest problem is with our former territorial masters in the US. The idea of Puerto Rico actually becoming something really scares some powerful people and businesses in America. Creates immediate opposition."

"Well, I've noticed that Americans don't like to lose money or control." Robert interjects. "Especially when they are losing it to the Chinese."

"Oh, you're so right about that, Robert. So, when Shengwu approached me with her plan to transform San Juan into a center for genetic medicine two years ago, I realized we could only do it as an independent nation with our own laws. Otherwise, the Righteous Rightists in Washington would have shut us down with their anti-genetics laws. They did that before with our pharmaceutical companies. Then, when the federal government collapsed...well it made separating much easier. Declaring our independence became logical."

"Logical or convenient?" Robert's questions.

"Both..." Negocio attempts to wave away a dragonfly biobot flying uncomfortably close. "...it's the intrigue and sabotage occurring now that's my real problem. What they can no longer do legally, they're attempting to accomplish through treachery and violent intimidation. Some of my fellow Puerto Rican patriots have been threatened. Others have unexplainably disappeared."

Robert motions toward the crowd surrounding them. "But, with the majority of these people wild for you, I don't understand your concern."

Negocio waves toward the crowd. "Don't be fooled Robert. There are probably just as many people jeering me as cheering me in this crowd. You had to notice that one man that the police restrained. One reason is that many rich Americans invested money in Puerto Rico's failure. Money they will lose, if I succeed. Money I'm going to take from them, just like they always took it from us. So they send in disruptors to create problems."

The dragonfly drone buzzes across the top of Negocio's head. "With drones and with people, I must watch my back and my front. Just because someone looks friendly, doesn't mean they are. They may be smiling saboteurs or, worse yet, assassins."

"Well, on the trip here..." Robert begins to tell him about the auto-drone attack.

Negocio turns his head toward Robert and points at a dark scar on his temple. "This is a laser burn. Last week a drone shot a visual of me. Seconds later, it shot its laser at me. We're still searching for the drone's pilot."

"But, I don't guard people!" Alarmed, Robert interrupts him. "I can't guarantee your safety. I can give you some advice, but that's all. I do cyber security not human security."

Negocio chuckles as he raises his hand to wave away Robert's concern, "You're not here for me. I have my own security. I brought you here at the request of my Chinese partners to assist them with their cyber security problems."

Robert is skeptical. "You're joking. The Chinese have the best cyber security and the best hackers in the world. I don't think they need me."

"Ah, but they do Robert. Actually, Shengwu personally requested you. They want you to do what you do best. Track down the hacker, or hackers, that are already probing their systems...searching for weaknesses. They want you to eliminate them before they can successfully break through and input a virus or worm or hack in or whatever. The Chinese can't send their own people running around Puerto Rico and I can't either. But, you can go wherever you need to go."

Searching the enthusiastic crowd, once again Robert sees only Negocio's adoring fans waving Puerto Rican freedom flags. "Why do you think the hackers are in Puerto Rico? They could be anywhere in the world. Hacking can originate a mile or ten thousand miles from here."

"Actually, I not only think they are in Puerto Rico, I believe I know exactly where they are in Puerto Rico...Fort Buchanan. My people and the Chinese have been analyzing their pattern of life, IP addresses and digital footprint, and they all point there."

"They didn't use an anonymous remailer or attempt to cover their tracks by routing through multiple devices...a botnet?"

"No, it was almost too easy. Too direct. It's as if they want us to know they are here...or there, actually." Negocio waves toward a woman calling his name."

"If you're so certain they're there, then go get them. Just look for the palest people there. They should be them."

"We would love to, but Fort Buchanan is still US federal territory. We don't want to antagonize the US any more than necessary until we grow stronger or the mainland government weakens more and completely collapses. And they know it too. They're teasing us...testing us. They're telling us that they know we can't touch them. So, that's why you're here."

Negocio squeezes Robert's shoulder. "You're the cheese in my rat trap."

"I beg your pardon." Robert frowns at Negocio's description of him as rat bait.

"We're hoping to use your achievements and fame to pull some of them out of their holes. Your reputation has preceded you, Robert. Especially since we publicized that you were coming. As soon as you arrived it was all over the hackers' social media sites of Internet Relay Chat, Cult of the Dead Cow and L0pht. Word spread faster than the six gigabites per second of KISS that you...the renowned Robert Goodfellow...the foremost trainer at the Black Hat anti-hacker conference...is in San Juan. You're a superstar hacker catcher and we want everybody to know that you are here. We want them to sneak out of their shady holes to gaze upon the sun - you."

"Well, I'm honored, certainly, but it sounds more like I'm the sacrificial goat tied to a post to attract tigers. And, as I recall, the goat is usually killed and eaten." Now nervous, Robert cautiously eyes an approaching woman. "You know, they may just decide that it's easier to waste me in the real world than to battle me in cyberspace. Nobody ever said hackers can't be killers. Digitals can be dangerous too."

"Oh come now, Rita didn't allow you to be killed and eaten by either of the two men tracking you last night. Did she? And now, we know exactly who those two are and where they are. So, without even trying, you gave us our first clue to finding these rats' nest. They came out. We spiked their Pina Coladas with nano-tracking particles and now..."

"You're far more certain your trap will work than I am." Robert searches the crowd for potential threats. "Me, I'm more inclined to believe John Steinbeck who wrote that man is the only kind of varmint that sets his own trap, baits it, and then steps in it. Personally, I've seen too many traps trap trappers."

Robert's quoting of John Steinbeck receives a derisive sneer from Negocio, so he attempts to explain again. "I don't think you understand sir. I'm more of a cerebral cyber-soldier and less of a fighting soldier. So, instead of this possibly becoming a physical confrontation, why don't you allow me to employ my newest hackback software. With my software, I can instantly initiate a counterstrike at the hacking source that wipes out their hardware and software and puts them out of business. A little deterrence by denial. Clean and quick and nonviolent."

"Well that's one way, but when I heard you speak at Black Hat you said the only and most effective way to stop a virus or hack attack is at the source. I remember you told the audience to just think of the cyber world as their own bodies and if they prevent the cold virus from entering their bodies, they won't get sick..."

"Yes, yes, I recognize my own lecture. I also say that once the cold virus is inside, you will be ill, and you will be ill for a while. So, prevent the insertion. Stop it before it starts. Close the entry point. It only requires one person to insert a deadly cyber virus capable of shutting down a nation and it only requires one capable cyberwarrior to stop them once they find them."

"Exactly! And that's why you're the man for this job." Reassuringly, Negocio pats Robert's arm. "Me saca (*Getting on my nerves*). Don't be so fofo (*weak*)."

"What? I'm getting on your nerves?" Robert is insulted.

Negocio's mouth drops open in shock. "You speak Puerto Rican slang?"

"Oh no, not at all..." Robert lightly taps his right ear. "...but I am wearing a multi-language translator implant. I've understood everything you've said. So please, control your slurs."

"Well, then in English, yes I'm finding you annoying and don't be so weak."

Despite Negocio's insult, he continues feeling increasingly uneasy about his assignment of being the rat trap bait. Keeping an uneasy, vigilant watch on the surging crowd he continues his debate with Negocio. "I think it's important for you to know that I abhor violence...especially violence involving me. I see no gain from pain. But, on the other hand, I know many other methods for stopping the insertor and closing the entry point."

"Yes Robert, I expect you to use all your skills and your tools. But, I also understand that my Chinese associates desire that these hackers not only be stopped, but that they be eliminated. It's their belief that if you want to change an adversary's state of mind, then credible threats against cyberattack need to go beyond the cyber realm."

"Eliminate?" The term startles Robert. "Eliminate as in permanently erase? That seems a little harsh to me. Not actually in my job description."

"Acho, deja el gufeo! (*Dude, stop goofing around!*)" Exclaims Negocio, then he hesitates, as he remembers Robert's ability to understand his slang. He lightly pats Robert's arm again and apologizes. "Relax, I really don't mean that you should stop goofing around! You're just my bait. Remember? You worry about ending the cyber threats and leave ending the human threats to me."

GETTING THE BUSINESS

After several long minutes, a second BTI auto-auto silently glides to a stop behind Negocio's. Two Chinese men and three Chinese women exit into the square. As the police form a corridor through the curious throng, Negocio hurries to greet them. Warily, still watching the crowd, Robert follows a few steps behind him.

Impatiently, Negocio urges him to match his pace. "Stay with me Robert. I asked them to come here this morning just to meet you."

Excitedly, Negocio greets the group. "Welcome ladies and gentlemen, allow me to introduce you to Robert Goodfellow. As you requested, he is here to help you with your cyber security problems."

With a slight grimace, he continues, "I hope my pronunciation of your names does not offend you."

Smiling and nodding, a slim, Chinese woman in her mid-thirties steps forward to shake Robert's hand. She is bent to her left, limps and drags her right foot, as she advances. When she extends her right hand, Robert notices that her two middle fingers are the same length as her small finger - much shorter than her index finger. She is missing finger knuckles.

"Robert, allow me to introduce Shengwu Kexuejia. As I told you earlier, she's established a major medical and genome research facility here. Her clinic is already growing and expanding. Isn't that correct Shengwu?"

Before Shengwu can answer, Negocio quickly shifts Robert's attention to the taller, younger Chinese woman next to Shengwu. "Robert may I introduce Taiyang Neng. She is constructing our newest and largest solar power generation system in partnership with Fengli Fadianji here, who is building our connecting offshore wave and wind generator farms. With their help we'll finally be totally renewable energy self-sufficient and able to demolish our obsolete oil-fueled, electrical power plants."

Robert does not have a chance to speak before Negocio is introducing the remaining Chinese executives. "Diandong Qiche is the gentleman who provided us with our beautiful auto-auto glider and he is seeking a site to 3d print more BTI auto-auto ground gliders, as well as BTI autonomous aero carriages..."

"Yes, I consider BTI a mobility technologicistic organization. We..." Diandong attempts to interrupt Negocio, but is silenced.

"...and Zhou Caoyao is researching our indigenous plants to produce natural medicines. She is coordinating her research with Shengwu and our Instituto." Negocio continues, ignoring Diandong.

Instead of attempting to shake all of their hands, Robert nods toward the group. They smile and return his nod. They are now associates.

Like Negocio and Robert earlier, they and the Chinese rapidly become the center of much public attention and interest. Visual recording and security aerodrones continually intermingle and hover above and around them while other personal aerodrones and biobots circle and disappear. But, two aerodrones persistently hover just outside the group. They are being watched intently by somebody. Robert wonders who.

Rather than be intimidated, Robert decides to hunt the hunters. With a prolonged blink of his left eye, he activates the piezoelectric sensors of his visual recording contact lens. Locking his eyes on the closest aerodrone, he rapidly advances toward it searching it for identifying symbols or marks. Except that this drone resembles the drone he spied outside Negocio's auto-auto, he notes nothing unusual. But, as he nears it, the drone emits an eardrum shattering, high-pitched squeal. He backs away covering his ears. Employing its sense-and-avoid technology, the drone also retreats.

"That was painful," Shengwu comments standing close behind him. "I've seen those types of aerodrones hovering around my facility. We chased them off using our anti-UAV Defense System and then followed them with some of our own drones. They loitered for a long time, but eventually we tracked them to Fort Buchanan."

"So they're Army?"

"Not certain. Could be. Could be some US Society Security goons." Shengwu eyes the drone hovering just beyond their reach. "Could be a private organization, too. Everybody operates drones."

"True." Robert turns to face Shengwu. "I must say that your English is perfect. Where did you learn?"

"California. I was born there and grew up outside of San Francisco." She proudly announces. "My father worked in Silicon Valley until Abaddon and his Society Security Deacons chased us out. He was the leading genome engineer on a US Department of Defense genetic engineering project called Experimental Life Forms or ELF. ELF was a super top secret US military genetics project synthesizing novel organisms to benefit mankind."

Hearing the words, super top secret, Robert steps between Shengwu and the drone to block it with his back. Although, he recognizes that he is probably too late. Every word, Shengwu tells him is being heard by someone somewhere.

Peeking around Robert at the hovering drone, Shengwu lowers her voice and steps closer to him. "Some SS Deacons arrested and tortured my father when he refused to use ELF to genetically engineer and create the army of mind-controlled monsters they wanted...an evil, mutant military. They called their program Christian Soldiers and demanded that my father genetically preprogram their minds to respond only to the orders of some royal Master."

"Wait." Robert raises his index finger to stop Shengwu. Now, he lowers his voice. "So, it's true. I saw rumors on the dark Internet about their so-called Christian soldier army. Army of God...at least their god...only their god, actually. But, I didn't believe it was possible. According to the rumors, they wanted it, as they say - marching as to war - against all other religions. What did your father do?"

Shengwu shakes her head. "After several brutal beatings, he agreed to return to his lab and work for them. Basically, they enslaved him to do what they could not do...had no ability to do. But, he never created anything for them, he just convinced them he was. Since they refuse to accept science, they had no understanding of his work. Righteous Rightists and SS Deacons are extremely ignorant people, you know... very naive. So, when they began to trust him and relaxed, he escaped to China. They've been desperately hunting for him, since. He is the key and holds the key to them staying in control of America."

"And what about you?" Robert notices Shengwu is cringing, as she tells him her story.

"Ironically, Abaddon's SS Deacons had already expelled me earlier. I had just graduated from UC Berkley and taken a job developing improved CRISPR-Cas9 gene editing methods for gene drives. I believe that if they had realized I am my father's daughter, they would have used me to force him to work for them. Luckily, I was already in China and beyond their reach."

Robert glances over his shoulder. The drone is still hovering behind him, closer than before. "Why are you telling me all of this now and here? This is dangerous."

"To combat possible hackers, you require entry inside all my communications, algorithms and data. Essentially then, you will be reading my mind and studying my thoughts, because my work is my existence...my life." Shengwu studies Robert's face for several moments. "We're partners now. So, I need to know that I can trust you, while you need to know what challenges may confront you and why those challenges exist. To understand that, you need to know who I am and why I ran."

"But, now you're back." Robert is incredulous. "Why?"

"Yes..." Shengwu wags her finger. "...back with a vengeance, you may say. Negocio and I hope to create a Puerto Rico populated with genomic enhanced Puerto Ricans. By expanding on the research my father taught me, my therapeutic cloning through organogenesis is proving highly successful. My gene therapy work is also producing impressive results. Puerto Rico's future superior beings are growing and flourishing right here in San Juan. I am very proud."

"Pardon?" Robert puzzles.

Shengwu smiles proudly. “Imagine a world without Multiple Sclerosis or Cystic Fibrosis or Huntington’s Disease or Parkinson’s Disease. With genomics and gene drives, I can eliminate them. Right here. Right now. Using genomic engineering, I can create a human without birth defects, like mine, and without genetic diseases. I can genetically engineer a healthy, super intelligent, disease resistant human. The only type of human capable of surviving in the future.”

Robert’s face brightens. “That’s fantastic. You could benefit all of humanity. If you can end those problems, why, you’ll fulfill Hippocrates belief that wherever the art of medicine is loved, there is also a love of humanity.”

Robert’s praise encourages Shengwu. “It’s not love of humanity, but the saving of humanity that drives me. As my Chinese cousins would say, it’s my baoying. What I do in this life will have benefits in the next. So, I’m working to ensure there is a next or at least life on Earth after me. Do you realize that without human-directed evolution that the human race will probably not survive?”

After a few seconds of consideration, Robert attempts to laugh off Shengwu’s dire prediction. “Oh come on now. That sounds overly pessimistic to me. I’ve a lot of life left in me.”

Shunning his disbelief, Shengwu continues. “I believe future humans will require certain physical characteristics to flourish or maybe even survive on tomorrow’s Earth. My father calls it rEvolution which he spells with a small r and then capital E for Evolution. It’s a result of his ELF work.”

Pausing, Shengwu meticulously examines Robert from head to heel. “Actually, I’ve been observing you for some time and I’ve determined that you possess many of those necessary physical and mental attributes mankind needs to evolve. You could be the prototype for a new improved human being.”

“Prototype?” Robert asks apprehensively. “Do you mean clones? Like there would be a bunch of me?”

Silently, Shengwu smiles and nods in agreement.

“Oh, I don’t think the world deserves to suffer like that. One of me is enough. Besides, I doubt that you could possibly duplicate my unique style and savoir faire.” Robert jokes.

“Not clones as much as well...uh...new, improved, better humans that are a bit of you, Robert - the best parts of you - and the best parts of others. Genetic engineering of Biosystems using In vitro gametogenesis.”

Robert grimaces. “So, they may still bear the burden of my appearance?”

“Well, I certainly don’t want them to look like me.” Shengwu wiggles her deformed fingers at Robert. “Nobody should suffer scoliosis, amniotic band syndrome and a touch of osteoarthritis, if they don’t have to, and I am determined to see that future generations don’t have to.”

“Well true, but still, do you mean like in my image?” Robert places his right index finger on his chin.

Smiling smugly, Shengwu taps her forehead. “Why not? Mankind created its gods in its own image. Right? So, of course, since I am the creator...the Chuàngzuò zhě...who better to select and create mankind’s future image, or as I believe, future gods than me?”

COFFEE RUN

Surprised by Shengwu's strange declaration, Robert retreats, just as Rita and Negocio arrive at his side.

"I'm certain that Robert is interested in learning more about your clinic." Negocio informs Shengwu, "But, Rita needs him right now, so I hope you'll excuse him. Besides, we all need to leave and return the plaza to the tourists until my announcement tonight."

"Perhaps a tour of my facility tomorrow morning, then?" Shengwu asks, offering her hand to Robert for a brief departure shake. "I have much to show you and you have much to learn, partner."

Shaking her hand, Robert nods in concurrence. "Tomorrow morning then. I look forward to it. Say, about nine?"

Beaming with delight, Shengwu nods in agreement. Attempting to break Shengwu's grip of Robert's hand, Rita begins pulling Robert away. "Let's walk and talk, Robert. I have some new information. Let's get some Puerto Rican coffee at the Cuartel de Ballaja coffee shop."

Rita guides Robert through the tourists and Negocio admirers toward Calle del Cristo. Like a pestering fly, the aerodrone Robert attempted to chase away trails after him. Weaving in and out of the crowd, a man and woman dressed as tourists also begin shadowing them. His attention on the aerodrone, Robert takes no notice of his human trackers. Rita discerns they are being followed and slows her pace. Behind the male and female tourists another couple completes their parade.

"I think you'll really like this coffee. It's distinctive. Grown here on the island."

"Coffee? I didn't know that Puerto Rico grew coffee. Is it a SPEA plantation?" Robert asks as he dodges a delivery boy weaving through the crowd riding a hoverboard.

"Who? What is SPEA?"

"Oh, you must have heard of the state of SPEA? Society Preserving Endangered Agriculture? The seasteaded independent state of SPEA? SPEA grows most of the world's commercial coffee, cacao and tea. It was on SPEA's coffee plantation in Ethiopia where I was shot." Robert touches his shoulder wound.

"No. No SPEA. Just three small plantations in our interior. Centuries old and family owned. They're mostly for tourists. But, they do sell some coffee locally." Rita forms an ok sign with her fingers. "Good, too. If you ask me."

"Plantations with humans? No robots? No guard drones?"

"Of course not. Don't be silly."

Robert acts as if he is wiping his brow with relief. "Good. I still wear scars from wrestling with some SPEA directed overland guard system robots. They call them DOGs. I call them brutal."

Rita stops and stares at Robert, inspecting his spindly body from head to heel. "Why would you pick a fight with a robot? I've seen you naked and I'm certain I can take you out myself, anytime I want."

"If you don't mind, I prefer to consider myself svelte. Maybe wiry. Certainly not spindly. Besides, what I miss in muscle I make up for with my mind." Robert flexes his left arm struggling to produce a decent bulge in his bicep. "I am a massive Metropolitan generation male. Am I not?"

"Oh yes, you're fearsome. You're a true *cheche de la película (guy who saves the day)*." Rita teases as she leads him along Calle Norzagaray and across the Cuartel de Ballaja courtyard into a small coffee shop.

Robert smiles. He knows Rita just jokingly called him a guy who saves the day in Puerto Rican slang, but he will keep his translating ability his secret. What she does not know may be a secret that helps him.

Finally, they are able to shed the aerodrone, which cannot follow them into the Cuartel. Like a dog waiting for its master to return, the aerodrone impatiently hovers and loiters outside, above the entrance.

Arriving inside, Robert discovers that Rita's favorite coffee shop is more than a secluded, quiet, air-conditioned retreat from the San Juan crowds and heat. The small shop is both a coffee roastery and a museum. Lining the walls of the small caffeine café is a variety of antique and obsolete coffee grinders and roasters that immediately capture his attention.

"Well, it's not Second Cup, but it'll do." Robert jokes.

"What? What is Second Cup?"

"Sorry, it's not important." Robert dismissively waves his hand. "Second Cup Coffee is just a Canadian specialty coffee retailer that I frequent when I'm home in Toronto. Not as good as Tim Horton's some say...maybe...but one of the best."

Her Puerto Rican pride offended, Rita snaps back. "Well, I doubt that your Second Cup serves iced lattes as good as the ones here. Don't slight them before you try them."

"Sorry Rita. No offense meant." Robert's culture-rooted politeness surfaces.

"Oh, I love Canadians!" Rita giggles. "You guys are so polite. You say sorry all the time."

"Yes, we do seem to be profoundly polite. Definitely sorry about that." He stammers, embarrassed.

Shaking her head in bemused resignation at Robert's apology for apologizing, Rita steps to the counter. Robert catches a glimpse of Rita slipping a small packet to the barista. They both smile and nod in agreement. Without a word, the barista returns to business.

After ordering two iced lattes, Rita and Robert pass a man occupied with his wrist personal communication device. They seat themselves at the table farthest from the entrance. Rita sits with her back against the wall intently watching the door, while Robert casually studies the shop's antique coffee bean grinders and roasters.

The differences between these old roasters and the robotic, coffee production equipment he saw operating SPEA's Ethiopian coffee plantation astonishes Robert. The simplicity of it stumps him. He is so accustomed to computer-directed, robot-operated equipment that it is challenging for him to determine how the antique, manual roasters function. The metal gears and screw drives confuse him. After examining the obsolete machinery for several minutes, he realizes that his father was correct when he often described him as being a technology genius and either a digital dunce or a machinery moron. Unfortunately, his father was too often correct.

Soon after their iced lattes arrive, so do their stalkers. They spot Rita and Robert and then turn their attention to reading the menu. While the couple studies the selections, the barista serving them nods toward Rita. She returns her signal.

Robert slow blinks to activate his visual recording contact lens, as he silently observes their communications. He does not recognize the couple or understand Rita's intentions. But, he does know that in this type of situation, it is best if he stays out of the way and allows things to complete their course. He sits, sips his latte, watches and records.

Awaiting their drinks, Robert's shadowers take seats at a table near the doorway. The female sits facing Rita and Robert. She acts as if she is chatting with her male companion, but she is a bad actress. It is obvious that she is recording Robert recording her.

Covering his mouth with his left hand while idly fingering his cup with his right hand, Robert questions Rita. "So what is this news that you're going to tell me?"

"Can't really discuss it here and now. Not yet," Rita whispers toward her cup without acknowledging Robert.

With a large smile and a flourish, the barista delivers the couple their iced lattes. She waits and watches them taste and sip their drinks. Then she asks them if their lattes are what they expected. After they say their drinks taste good, she urges them to suck them down, so she can give them a free refill. The couple slurps their drinks, to keep the barista happy.

Blocking their view of Robert and Rita, the barista briefly chats with them. While urging them to enjoy their drinks, she asks them if they are enjoying San Juan and offers free tourism advice. Robert watches the woman twist and stretch struggling to see him around the barista's body barrier. She makes no effort to hide her true intentions. After showering the couple with several minutes of her attention, the barista approaches Robert and Rita.

“Would you like a refill?” The barista asks leaning close to Rita. Then with her back to the others, she whispers, “Wait about two minutes. They should be done by then.”

“Yes, I think I’ll have a refill,” Rita answers, smiling and nodding. “What about you, Robert?”

“Oh, I think I’m good.” He worries that the barista may have added more to his latte than espresso, milk and ice.

With a nod, the barista leaves to fill Rita’s order. As she passes, the couple at the front table, she asks them if they want refills as well. The woman starts to respond then covers her mouth with her hand and closes her eyes. Her partner presses his hand against his stomach and begins sweating.

“Never mind.” Rita calls to the barista. “I think we’ll be going now.”

As Robert and Rita walk past the increasingly queasy couple, Rita wishes them well, or unwell. Robert is not certain which.

“I hope you enjoy your visit here in our independent nation of Puerto Rico,” she says with a slight smirk on her face, as she pays the barista.

“Oh well thank you.” The woman responds with her hand spread across her mouth. “We’ve been enjoying our visit, so...”

“Excuse me.” Standing, the man extends his right hand toward Robert while he presses his left hand against his gurgling gut. “I don’t want to be too forward, but my wife and I noticed you in the plaza. You’re Robert Goodfellow, aren’t you?”

Robert briefly shakes the man’s warm, wet hand. “Well yes, I am. Do I know you?”

“Oh no, we’ve never met. My wife and I are just big fans of your work. Watched a hologram of you speaking at the Black Hat conference not too long ago. Impressive...”

Rita tugs lightly on Robert’s arm. “We really need to go now, mister superstar. A juyir, Crispín.”

“Oh, ok then.” Robert smiles at the man and his wife, as Rita pulls him toward the doorway. “It’s good to meet you. Perhaps we’ll run into each other again Mister uh...”

“Voleur. Lew and Lee Voleur. I certainly hope so, Mister Goodfellow. I certainly hope so.”

Rita waves her hand while ushering Robert away.

“Well now, aren’t you sorry about the way you doubted them?” Robert challenges Rita.

“They’re simply innocent tourists who recognized me and wanted to meet me. You forget that I’m a star. It was Joseph Joubert who said that innocence is always unsuspecting.”

“Hah! It’s you who are the innocent Robert, for I choose to believe Ernest Hemmingway who wrote that all things truly wicked start from innocence, and I believe your new friends Lew and Lee Voleur are truly wicked.”

The second male and female couple from the plaza are awaiting them as Robert and Rita exit the coffee café and enter the Cuartel courtyard.

Rita quietly directs the two, as she points toward the Cuartel’s public bathrooms. “They’ll be coming out soon and I imagine they’ll be running to those toilets. Stick with them and help them leave. They’ll be very sick and possibly a little dizzy. Offer to accompany them to their rooms. In about an hour, they may pass out. Use it to our advantage.”

Just as she predicted, the Voleurs stagger out of the coffee shop. Holding their stomachs with one hand and covering their mouths with their other hand, they stumble-run toward the bathrooms. Rita motions for her cohort couple to follow them.

“The fish took the Bait. Our job is done here. Step along Robert, we have much more trolling to do.”

PINA COLADAS

Rita leads Robert through a side exit away from the aerodrone spy waiting and hovering above the main doorway. Hurriedly, she strides through a small garden park and into the crowd of tourists traveling Calle Beneficencia. Once hidden among the crowd, she and Robert slow to a casual walk into the bowels of Old San Juan.

Six blocks from the Cuartel, Rita stops and peers at a shaded shop window employing it as a mirror to see if they are being followed. Robert joins her. Both detect nobody suspicious. They continue to scrutinize the walkers behind them. Only a boy on a hover scooter stopping to enter the shop approaches them. Nobody else gives them any notice.

Assured that they are not being followed, Robert switches his attention to the merchandise inside the store. Filling the shop window from top to bottom are colored ceramic statues and painted wood carvings of the biblical three kings. Some of the figures are riding horses. Others are standing and holding gifts.

Intrigued and sweating hot, Robert begins entering the shop. "Rita, I'm going in here to investigate all of these three king sculptures and grab some cool air. I've never seen anything like this in Canada or the US."

"Of course not, you're in Puerto Rico now, not America. It's just another way we're different from America and why we didn't belong together." Lecturing, Rita follows him into the shop. "Here, we believe the Three Kings are a more spiritual and faithful representation of the birth of Jesus than some obscure, imaginary saint the Coca-Cola Company squeezed into a red suit and named Santa Claus."

She grasps a small painted carving and inspects it. "You're lucky to be in Puerto Rico right now. You'll be able to enjoy our biggest holiday with us. We start observing the Christmas holiday season at Thanksgiving and we will continue into January when we celebrate *Día de los Tres Reyes Magos*, or as you would say, Three Kings Day on Epiphany. It's the most important holiday in Puerto Rico, because it's our tradition to exchange presents on the eve of Epiphany...*La Víspera de Reyes*...rather than Christmas day. Also, it's a tradition for our children to gather grass or hay or straw in shoe-boxes and leave it out as food for the Three Kings' horses. We don't provide cookies and milk for Santa. Then we reward good kids with presents and candy. Bad kids end up with charcoal or sometimes dirt."

"Well, I admit that definitely sounds different from an American or even our Canadian Christmas. But, by what you're telling me, I think you've retained your traditions. Don't know why you're so bitter about it."

With a sigh, she replaces the carving. "Sadly, it's just another part of our culture America attempted to destroy. Over the years things have changed. Today, our children get their main presents on Christmas day, like you do. But, we still give a smaller, humbler and even more rewarding gift on Three Kings Day. We also have parades and festivals, family gatherings and parties."

"Actually to me, it appears you simply adopted the American meaning of Christmas...you know...conspicuous consumption. Spend money. Lots and lots of money. Spend it even when you don't have it. That's what I call the American way. The true meaning of Christmas in America." After cooling and completing his study of the shop and its merchandise, Robert wanders out of the store.

Back on the street, Rita's face brightens as she relates her childhood joys. "But, the biggest party is when Old San Juan throws its annual festival at the Luis Munoz Marin Park. It's really fun. There's live music, food and drink, and free gifts for some lucky kids. But, the highlight of my day is always when the Three Kings come walking into town."

“Did any of the Three Kings ever pass out from walking in this heat?” Robert asks as the street heat slams his face, “Is it always this hot in late November?”

“Así es la cosa (*It is how it is, whether we like it or not*). Puerto Rico is no different from the rest of the world. Every year, we’re a little hotter. It’s the endless fire. And yes, last year one of the Kings did faint during their walk. Although, as I remember, he may have fainted over rum drunk as well as being overheated.” Rita adds with a chuckle as she strides ahead.

After walking several blocks, wiping his sweat-wet face, Robert begins lagging behind Rita. She leads him in and out and around downtown Old San Juan. He accepts that he is simply a lure that she is casting out to see if she can attract some more big fish. But, he wishes she was casting him in water instead of baking him on the paving stones. From the former home of Ponce de Leon, Casa Blanca, to the Departamento de Hacienda de Puerto Rico, Rita leads him past one pastel-painted building after another pastel-painted building, while expounding upon every inch of her city’s centuries long history.

In the beginning, he enjoys following Rita. Her long, shapely, tanned legs encased in tight shorts are far more fascinating to him than the centuries-old buildings she is describing. But, heat, thirst and time begins to take its toll. Robert’s attention wanders and his legs weaken. Rita’s voice becomes a buzzing drone in his overheated brain. She is familiar with the heat. He is suffering. Sweat is burning his eyes. His throat aches for water.

He is so hot and parched that he considers grabbing and drinking one of the bowls of water dotting the sidewalk. “Why are these water bowls here, Rita?”

“For the cats.” Rita points toward a large feline lounging in the shade next to the building. “San Juan is overrun by feral cats. The first sailors brought them.”

Now that Rita has directed his attention to the first cat, he notices the shadows are teeming with cats and kittens. “Why?”

“In school we’re taught that sailors brought three, four-legged animals to Puerto Rico; goats, cats, and rats. Goats for the sailors and cats for the rats. The sailors ate the goats and the cats ate the rats, which left the cats. Lots and lots of cats. Too many cats. There are more feral cats in San Juan and Puerto Rico than people. They’re a plague.”

As he continues to stumble along behind Rita, he envies the cats cooling in the shadows. After trudging along for several minutes, which seem like hours, Robert notices the scorching afternoon sun has driven almost all of the tourists off the streets. Only a few drones delivering packages and some street cleaning robots inhabit many of the blocks they walk. Even the felines are smart enough to have fled. Wandering about without a crowd exposes them. Which, he suspects, is exactly what Rita desires.

As Rita continues leading him on what he is certain is his death march. His fevered brain recalls the words of US Marine Corps General James Cartwright when he leaked the US involvement in Stuxnet, “You can’t have something that’s a secret be a deterrent. Because if you don’t know it’s there, it doesn’t scare you.”

“Rita, you do know that there are numerous better ways for being recognized in this city than walking yourself to death, don’t you? Don’t you?” Robert proposes as Rita continues ignoring him. “Why are we walking? Why don’t we ride some Flyboards, hoverboards or hoverscooters? How about an electric unicycle? We’ll still be able to see and be seen.”

After repeatedly glancing over her shoulder, Rita beams and quickens her step. “Speed up, I see we’re being followed again. At Calle Fortaleza, we’ll turn right and duck into the Barrachina restaurant. I can identify them there. It’s a major tourist attraction. Always has people. You’ll like it. The Pina Colada was invented there.”

“Is it cool in the Barrachina? I hope.” Breathing heavily and drenched in his own sweat, Robert struggles to catch Rita.

“Yes, it’s cool and their Pina Coladas are chilled. They also have ice water. Lots of cold ice water.”

A turn here a twist there and they arrive. A blast of frosty air is a welcome relief to Robert as they enter the Barrachina lobby. Rita leads him through the hallway to the hostess. Answering the

hostess' cheery greeting with a wave, she and Robert pass through and move to the far end of the bar. Rita positions herself so she has a clear view of the entrance and the other customers.

After chugging two large glasses of water and a Pina Colada, Robert is again able to communicate. "Ah I definitely needed that refresher, for it was Sophocles who said that if you were to offer a thirsty man all wisdom, you would not please him more than if you gave him a drink. So ok, now I've had my drink and now I seek wisdom. I've allowed you to drag me around this city for hours. Now spill it Rita. What is this information you promised me?"

Rita searches their area for nosey eavesdroppers or other active listeners. Nobody appears interested in them. She leans closer to Robert's ear.

"The two men who followed you last night are dead," Rita whispers.

"What! When? Where?"

"At six-thirty this morning, their nanobiological sensors we introduced signaled sudden cardiac arrest from myocardial ruptures."

"Both of them? At the same time?"

"Yes, both of them. About fifteen minutes apart is what I was told."

Pushing his second Pina Colada away, Robert eyes Rita suspiciously. "You poisoned them. Same as that couple...the Voleurs...in the coffee shop. You poisoned them."

Rita raises her hand showing her palm toward Robert. "Stop. Wait one minute. I didn't poison anybody. All we did was introduce nanobiological sensors and tracking devices into those two men and that couple. Now, we did add a few diarrhea inducing spices to weaken that couple in the coffee shop, so we could gather information about them. But, that's all Robert. Really."

Robert stares silently at Rita. He is not certain that he believes her. Nor is he certain that he trusts her. Why should he accept her story? She has misled him from the moment they met.

"Sorry Rita, I don't believe you and I'm leaving." Robert is halfway out of Barrachina before Rita reacts.

Blinded by his anger, he fails to notice the couple that tracked them into the restaurant jump to their feet when he passes their table. Like two wolves, they are on the attack. Robert is alone. He is vulnerable.

Standing outside Barrachina's entrance, he fingers his PCD signaling for a ride. Focusing his attention on his PCD, he does not hear the man and woman sneak up behind him. Seconds later, Robert is an unconscious lump on the sidewalk. He never knew what hit him.

RITA'S RUMORS

Blazing white sears Robert's eyes. Pain pounds through his skull. His stomach is churning. He is in agony.

"Wake up buttercup." Rita chirps far too loudly for Robert's buzzing brain.

He groans and covers his ears. Cautiously he rolls away from the burning light and buries his face in his pillow. He whimpers a few words that Rita cannot understand.

"What? I can't hear you."

"What happened?" Robert mumbles a little louder.

"Nanosecond electrical pulse. They hit you with this Nsep stun gun." Rita shows him a small cylinder that reminds him of his grandfather's flashlight. "Scrambled your brain instantly. A severe brain cramp. That's why you're aching so badly this morning."

Robert groans and buries his face deeper into his pillow. "I haven't hurt this bad since I woke under my bed after my graduation party at the University of British Columbia."

"Estás bueno! (*You're fine!*) Anyway, it's your own fault. I warned you." Rita wags her finger toward Robert. "You stormed out of Barrachina and stepped right into their trap."

With his arm covering his eyes, Robert rolls onto his back. Gently, he raises his arm above his face. Through his arm's protective shadow, he peers at Rita.

"Why?"

"Why what?"

"Why did they zap me?"

"Not sure. Kidnapping, I think. I found them struggling to cram you into a shared-use auto-auto. They couldn't squeeze your long legs inside. When they saw me, they dropped you and ran. Your head bounced on the street. Added to your headache a bit, I imagine."

"Where did they go?"

"Metropolitan Detention Center. San Juan police caught them three blocks away. The woman fought them, but the man surrendered peacefully. They're questioning them now."

Emitting several, loud, sympathy-seeking groans, Robert rises into a sitting position. He closes his eyes and massages his temples. His wrist PCD is stimulating his arm indicating it is time for him to prepare for his visit to Shengwu's facilities.

"Do you know who they are or where they're from?" He asks as he twists on the bed and places his feet on the floor.

"Not yet. But, we do know that the coffee café couple...your fawning devotees, the Voleurs...are members of a small, enhanced-genetics watchdog group. And, I don't think they're just interested in our sun and sights. According to our sources, it appears they're being financed by some pharmaceutical organization. So far, we haven't been able to learn much about their backers. Suspicious group. Real suspicious. Our team also found some evidence in their rooms indicating they have been surveilling Shengwu's facilities for several months. Collecting information about his patients."

Rita points at Robert. "We also uncovered some information concerning you."

"Really? What type of information?" Robert pushes himself into a standing position. He is weak and wobbly.

Rita hurries to his side to steady him. "It appears that you are on a hit list."

He waves her away. "A hit list? Me?"

Rita silently nods her head in the affirmative. Robert sags back onto the bed. He is no longer just sick. Now, he is alarmed and nervous. "But, they seemed so friendly and harmless."

"Well, of course they did. Obviously, that's their method for getting close to you." Rita asks, "Now, why do you think they want you?"

Rubbing the back of his sore neck, Robert confronts Rita. "Because, you set me up. That's why. So, I guess you and Negocio are very happy, then. Your plan is working just great. Although, I can tell you that I'm not at all enthused about my situation. Seems to be a lot of pain with little to gain."

Pointing proudly at a chair draped with Robert's new clothes, Rita ignores his disquiet and proclaims, "You won't be sweating today like you were yesterday. I printed a set of our best climate-control clothing for you. Just like I'm wearing. Keeps me cool and comfortable all day, no matter how hot it gets."

Hesitantly, Robert rises from the bed and shuffles, sorely, toward the chair holding his newly printed clothes. "You mistakenly think that you've hired some freedom fighter. Sorry, that I'm not. At best, I'm just a digital defender...a cyberspaceman."

Fingering and inspecting his new attire, he continues. "Please don't misunderstand. I do appreciate your help, Rita, and I definitely need these climate-control clothes, but you guys have the wrong guy. I hunt with cyber. This is not cyber. You know, I'm beginning to recognize myself in Rick Yancey's statement that we are the hunters---and we are also the bait. I don't like being the bait. Not excited about being the bait at all."

"Yes, just as we expected, you're definitely sucking the worms out of the woodwork." Rita flashes a satisfied smile, ignoring Robert's complaints. "But, now, it's almost time for you to strut your stuff at Shengwu's."

Dressing, Robert scowls and grumbles, "Before we go, will you at least tell me what caused those two men to die?"

"Not certain yet. They're still being examined at Hospital Del Maestro. But, it's something our doctors haven't seen before. I've been told that they've isolated their bodies in a type of biohazard containment room as a precaution."

"A precaution? Against what?"

"Against that heart fever superbug, possibly. We did some DNA phenotyping and were able to trace them to Tennessee...just outside of Knoxville. That's one of the areas being ravaged by it. People have been dying by the dozens. Faster than they can bury them. They seem to burn up inside. Some say that their blood boils."

"So why are they here?"

"Nobody knows, yet. They could have come down here hoping for a cure or they may have been banished down here as super-spreaders to infect as many of us as possible. Exterminate us."

"What!"

"Exterminism! Genocide by unstoppable super disease, Robert. It's inexpensive, effective and untraceable. Bioterrorism. It's the perfect murder weapon."

Shocked by Rita's accusation, Robert challenges her. "Now wait a second, you're not making any sense. Genocide? Nobody hates anybody that much."

Rita slowly shakes her head in disbelief at his naiveté. "Really? Do you think this is a new idea or the first time for the US? How many indigenous natives did American settlers and the US cavalry kill by infecting them with blankets containing small pox? The US devastated them with disease and then when they were too weak to fight they stole their land."

"Uhhh...?"

"Thousands. Thousands of innocent women and children. Americans purposely spread diseases that killed thousands...hundreds of thousands. Exterminated entire tribes. So, why do you think they aren't doing the same thing here? We are in a war, you know."

"War? War with whom?"

"War with America. It's an undeclared, clandestine and covert war, but it's a war nevertheless. They didn't want us to leave, because it embarrasses them. Yet, they still consider us and treat us as foreigners. Rebellious foreigners they don't like. They don't have the resources to openly attack us, and they certainly don't want to look any worse to the international community, but they can cripple us in other ways...like enabling another pandemic similar to the Zika virus. Back in twenty-sixteen and twenty-seventeen, the US Congress refused to fund our fight against Zika, so it

crippled us. Keep us sick – keep us under control. That’s their plan. Or they may just wipe us out. Exterminism!”

“Oh, don’t be so paranoid, Rita. I was in the US before I traveled to SPEA’s Venus and then Ethiopia. Puerto Rico may be independent now, but it is no different from everywhere else in the US.”

Standing before a mirror, Robert primps and inspects himself. “War on the poor. That’s what we’re calling it in Canada. America’s war on the poor. America’s sovereign cities and Metrostates are prospering and growing. But, the Sists in America’s countryside and rural small towns in the wastelands are suffering. No medicines. No medical care. No training. No work. No future. And ironically, those impoverished souls are the same people that put this government into power. Sealed their own doom, you might say.”

“Ok my Canadian friend, so why do you think they’re down here? For our sun and surf?” Rita challenges.

Rubbing his temples, Robert frowns at his image in the mirror. His head is still vibrating and aching. “Unlike you, I don’t know who they are...or were...yet. So, I’m not prepared to jump to any conclusions. So for the moment, I’ll just rely upon the wisdom of Robert Burns. He wrote that suspicion is a heavy armor and with its weight it impedes more than it protects. So Rita, let’s look for more evidence before we accuse.”

“Ha! Está más perdido que un juey bizco (*You’re more lost than a cross-eyed crab*).” Rita scoffs.

“What?” Robert fakes not understanding her insult.

“I said that you’re more lost than a cross-eyed crab. Doubt me if you dare and at your own risk Goodfellow. Obviously, you didn’t learn anything from your Nsep yesterday. Yes, I may be paranoid, but when I say that someone is out to get you – pay heed. My warnings are based upon fact. ”

“In fact, the fact is that Negocio’s and your plan is working.” Robert grouses. “Working too well for me.”

Finally groomed and dressed, Robert motions Rita that he is ready. “Let’s go see Shengwu, so I can start doing something I’m actually good at doing. Let’s kick some cyber butt.”

STAMINA VITAE

From the distant past of old San Juan they travel into the futuristic present. Shengwu's facility consists of an advanced-science spa village encircling a clinic. Her facility rests across the Bahia de San Juan in the shadow of Old San Juan. A tall brick wall encloses the spa, protecting it from snooping and interference.

Robert quickly recognizes that the wall is constructed using special living engine bricks containing microbial fuel cells. He recalls reading that the cells give the bricks smart capabilities. Capabilities which enable them to make use of microbes to recycle wastewater, generate electricity and produce oxygen.

Hugging and hiding the wall is a mix of blooming Flamboyant Madagascar trees and Flame of the Woods saturating the landscape with vibrant reds and deep greens. But, Robert also notices that like the bricks, some of the tree leaves are actually artificial light-harvesting, leaf-like structures. Bushes composed of artificial inorganic leaves that capture solar energy and use it to change water into hydrogen fuel are intermingled with the actual living trees and bushes.

"A garden plot in a garden spot." marvels Robert. "Behind these flowers, Shengwu has hidden her highly advanced medical technology well. Those artificial photosynthetic systems compose an excellent floral façade. I like the way this woman thinks. Appears the only reality she accepts is her reality."

Flitting and flying above and around the spa walls are dozens of small aerodrones. They form a geo-fence surrounding the facility's airspace. Spaced evenly atop the wall, Robert also notices the equipment of a multi-sensor drone warning system. Computer aimed lasers installed strategically complete Shengwu's drone shield. Considering all of her protection, Robert wonders how she can be experiencing hack attacks.

Swoosh. Their BTI auto-auto glides toward the entrance gates hidden in the lush landscape. As they approach, a dozen protestors jump from their revival tent shaded chairs and tables, and run to block the street in front of the facility entrance. While shouting for Robert and Rita to stop and turn around, they vigorously wave professionally printed placards and signs proclaiming, *Only God Shall Create Life* and *Genetic Engineering Is Satan's work*. Some of the protestors beat on their auto-auto with their signs. Others just shout sin at them.

They jump around with determination and dedication, but in the intense heat, they soon wither. Their protest is short lived. After less than two minutes, they are sweating profusely and wilting. Now silent and wet, they stagger back to their shading tent abandoning the street.

"Well, that wasn't much of a demonstration." Robert mockingly waves at the retreating protestors. "Appears they're heading back to their revival tent for a little reviving."

"Too hot for too little pay. We've investigated them. They're not Puerto Ricans."

"Who are they then?" Robert strains for a better view of the departed protestors.

"They're poorly paid protestors flown here from the mainland. Conservative Christian faith healers, I'm told. You know...they don't believe in science, evolution or modern medicine. Instead it's their notion that prayers or divine intervention or the ministrations of their individual healer can cure illness."

"Yes, I've met their type before." Robert smirks. "Gullible group. Of course being gullible is a requirement for their religion. But then, I believe all religion survives on gullibility. And, I expect that eventually, their gullibility will kill them. Ignore the laws of Science and you die from ignorance. They're sowing the seeds of their self-destruction..."

"...Anyway..." Rita returns Robert to their present situation. "...as you saw, they're basically harmless. They don't really bother anybody, so we allow them to stay here."

Robert disagrees. "I doubt they'll ever leave. Since they don't believe in science, I imagine they must consider Shengwu's genetic engineering an abomination that they must fight forever."

Probably wouldn't like me either, since I believe in science not superstition. So, I doubt we would have much to discuss over a beer."

"Or a Pina Colada?" Rita teases.

Robert groans and massages his still aching head.

As they near the gates, the words *Stamina Vitae* engraved in a silver plate embedded in the wall catches Robert's eye. Shengwu's Latin name for her facility is deceptively simple. Meaning 'life threads' in English, it is illusory.

Stopping just outside the gates, a pair of security robots approach each side of their BTI from their stations in alcoves in the wall. The security-bots conduct identity scans of Robert's and Rita's faces and retinas. Completing their identification, the security-bots slide backward away from their auto-auto. The gates open.

"Proceed forward slowly and stop when your front spheroids contact the security stop. Sensors within the gates will scan your transport. You will be notified when to proceed." Directs the security-bot vocally to the passengers and electronically through their auto-auto's robotics-to-robotics communication system.

Their gate scan is quick. Cleared, their BTI receives directions to continue inside. The exterior circular pattern is repeated inside. Two dozen guest cottages encircle Shengwu's clinic. The clinic is a crystalline dome resembling a huge diamond in a sea of green-colored, energy-producing, artificial bionic leaves. Bionic-flower lined paths constructed of energy-producing tiles simultaneously separate and connect the cottages and the clinic.

Just inside the gate, their auto-auto stops again. They hear a hiss and then feel themselves descending. In moments, they are gliding through an underground parking garage toward Shengwu. She waves and smiles as they near.

"Welcome to Stamina Vitae, Robert." Shengwu vigorously shakes Robert's hand, before turning. "Hello Rita. Good to see that you're still watching him."

Pressing her uniquely fingered hand against a black fibrous square on a solid, metallic wall, a bio-chip embedded in Shengwu's wrist, activates a retinal scanner. She stares into the scanner until an electronic voice speaks, "Please state your name."

"Shengwu Kexuejia."

"Thank you. Your voice is recognized." A panel in the wall slides to the side opening a portal. "You may proceed."

"I have two guests. I entered their identity information earlier. I will enter their biologicals inside."

"Yes. Two additional humans may accompany you. Each must pass one second behind you and each other. They will be scanned as they enter."

As soon as they step inside, the panel closes behind them with a whisper. Perusing the chamber surrounding them, Robert realizes they are in a positive-air-pressure, clean-room. A cool, chemical sterilization mist floats from ports in the ceiling across the three of them. Warm drying air follows, creating a positive air flow that dries them while simultaneously shedding them of infectious organisms. Mist and air cleaning does not sufficiently decontaminate them.

Next, a panel opens on their left presenting them with three full-body, biohazard suits including oxygen filtering helmets. Rita and Shengwu slip into their suits with no problem. Robert is not so lucky. His suit is too short. He is only able to close his suit by slightly bending his knees and arching his back. He remembers seeing his elderly grandfather shuffling along in a similar stance.

After they complete dressing, the exit panel opens allowing them to enter the main clinic building. Shengwu and Rita casually stroll ahead while Robert shuffles behind. Shengwu leads them into her laboratory. They are the only humans in the room.

Communicating helmet to helmet, Shengwu explains her laboratory. "Along these three walls, are four enclosed gene analysis stations paired with genome editing stations and 3D bio-printers. These stations down here are connected directly to a specific patient genetic collection robot."

Sweeping her arm, Shengwu directs their attention around the room. "In fact, all of this is robotic. Robots and computers. I designed and supervised the production of my entire clinic. I only

trust the accuracy and precision of robots. Humans are far too inaccurate for genome editing. One nano-slip in human genetic engineering can transform a man into a monster. So along with my robots, I have an Artificial Intelligence quantum laser-light computer operating my lab.”

Leaning close and peering into one of the stations, Robert seeks to understand Shengwu’s laboratory. “So your computer system is a closed system? How is anybody hacking it, if it’s all inside this building?”

“No, that’s my problem. Not all of my system is in house. My quantum laser-light computer is not here. It’s chilling in the Pacific Ocean beneath the seasteaded SPEA capital city of Venus. Ever heard of it?”

“Oh yes, I’m familiar with Venus. Spent some time there, a while ago.”

“Good. Very good.” Shengwu joins Robert who is still observing the analysis and editing stations. “Information is the key component of my work. Algorithms. Too many highly involved and complicated algorithms for normal computers. So, I must transmit my data to the computer beneath Venus via SPEA’s satellites. I’m working with some extremely intelligent lady named Pion there on Venus. She seems to interact directly with the computer or the computer is reacting to her. I’m not certain which. Sometimes I wonder if she may actually be a transhuman with a direct interface from her brain to the computer. I just know that she is a major reason for this clinic’s success.”

Chuckling, Robert straightens as much as he can within his suit. “Yes, I know Pion. And yes, she is indeed brilliant. She’s not a transhuman, though. At least, I don’t believe a chip has been implanted in her brain. Actually, she’s a high functioning autistic, computer savant. An Asperger genius like Albert Einstein. Did you know that she is responsible for AIDAS...the principle reason the world is generally at peace right now?”

“AIDAS? I don’t know anything about AIDAS.”

“Few people do, actually. AIDAS is the acronym for artificial intelligence defense analysis system. It was a US defense system that Pion transformed into what I have come to call, the peace police or the prince of peace. AIDAS has already eliminated several of the world’s trouble makers using its own form of peace enforcement.”

“Peace enforcement?”

“Yes, it’s a bit contradictory, I know.” Robert turns so he can see Shengwu. “In the Canadian military, we’re taught that peace enforcement refers to the use of military assets to enforce a peace against the will of the parties to a conflict. AIDAS, on the other hand, conducts peace enforcement by creating accidents through the Internet of Things.”

“What?”

Robert grins mischievously. “Either you’re peaceful or AIDAS may kill you with your toaster.”

Shengwu suspiciously scrutinizes Robert. “Is this your subtle warning? Should I be nervous?”

“Started any wars recently?”

“No, of course not.”

“Well, then you should be safe...unless you have a testy toaster.” Robert reassures her with a grin.

Standing across the room, Rita is inspecting a single gene analysis and gene editing combination station separated from all of the other stations. Behind the station is an unmarked door. “Excuse me! Can you tell me about these stations?”

Hurriedly limping across to Rita, Shengwu slides between her and the stations, attempting to block her view. “This is a special project I am studying. It’s still in the conception phase.”

“What’s in the room behind this door, Shengwu?” Rita reaches toward the door behind the station Shengwu is protecting.

“Just storage.” Shengwu grabs Rita’s elbow and ushers her toward the elevator. “Follow me Robert and I’ll show you our patient reception and sample collection center.”

“Secrecy is one of the shadier sides of private and public life.” Robert considers Shengwu’s actions suspicious. “The brilliant Canadian philosopher Ian Hacking taught me that. So what is behind the door Shengwu?”

“Well it could be where I hide my hopes and my dreams or it could be where I hide my dusty, old memories that I am embarrassed for you to see.” Shengwu accesses her elevator. “I’ll match your Canadian Ian Hacking with my Chinese Confucius who said, “it is more shameful to distrust our friends than to be deceived by them.’ Sometimes a closet should be considered just a closet, Robert.”

SEEKING QI

Smoothly and soundlessly, their elevator rises one or two floors. Robert is not certain about the distance. Then, after rising, the elevator pauses momentarily before sliding sideways. With a swish, the elevator door opens. Motioning for them to follow her, Shengwu leads them into a changing room where they remove their biohazard suits and store them in a sterilizing chamber.

“Ah, that’s better.” Robert stretches and straightens to his full height. “I was beginning to cramp.”

“Yes, I apologize. When I entered the dimensions for your suit into my 3D printer, I obviously underestimated how tall you are. But, you’re done with it. I don’t think you’ll need it again. The rest of your tour will be outside of the sanitary rooms. So, if you’ll follow me please.”

Pressing her palm against a scanner on the wall, Shengwu opens a panel into a long corridor. When she steps onto the corridor’s power-floor-tiles, a lamp above her glows. Rita and Robert join her and the corridor brightens. The three of them proceed to the first set of opposing glass panels.

Standing in the center, Shengwu turns to face them and spreads her arms, so she is pointing to each side. “On my right are the rooms where my nurse robots collect our genetic samples from patients. On my left are the rooms where my nurse robots inject the engineered and edited genetic material back into the patients. You may observe that procedure through the one-way mirrors. We also visually record each step of each procedure. For safety, those recordings are filed with SPEA.”

Robert and Rita step close to the first mirror-window opening into a genetic sampling room. At first glance, Robert thinks he is watching a patient receiving an MRI. He is only partially correct. The patients are being MRI scanned and sampled simultaneously, with the MRI targeting the area of the patient’s body for sampling. An attendant that Robert believes may be human stands near the MRI opening.

“So, you do have some humans involved in your process?” Robert asks, “Not just robots?”

“Yes, I do. I call them counselors. I don’t allow them to do anything medical, but they provide the human touch and the human support that my patients require. They’re my attempt to provide them with Qi. You know Qi?” Shengwu asks rhetorically a breath before she explains. “Qi is what my great grandmother in China called the vital energy that flows through the body and performs multiple functions in maintaining health. For Qi, I have the same counselor assigned to the same patient for both the patient’s sampling and injection phases. But, they are never allowed to leave the human section of the clinic. In fact, you’re the first humans other than me that have entered this observation corridor. Even my lead counselor Margarete is not allowed in here.”

“I am privileged...” Rita remarks, stepping closer for a better view. “...to now observe this medical procedure from both inside and outside of the rooms.”

“You were a patient Rita?” Surprised, Robert visually examines Rita searching for signs of her illness.

“She was one of my first patients. Weren’t you, Rita?” Shengwu lifts her chin with her finger stubs and gently moves Rita’s head from side to side. “And I must say, I believe you are looking extremely well, now. Are you experiencing any more problems?”

“No, my cancer is gone...completely gone.” Rita grins.

A small smile on her face, Shengwu lightly pats Rita’s cheek. “Rita suffered from what her doctor diagnosed as an inoperable Glioblastoma multiforme tumor. Since Glioblastoma multiforme tumors grow rapidly, invade nearby tissue, and contain cells that are very malignant, it is among the most devastating primary brain tumors that can strike adults. Even with proton cancer treatments, ninety-nine percent of people diagnosed with it die.”

Shengwu’s smile dissolves into sorrow. “Doctors found a similar tumor in my mother and started proton cancer treatments, but she only lived another seven weeks more. Because of US laws, they weren’t allowed to treat her with genome engineering. I couldn’t...Robert, they wouldn’t even

allow me...her daughter to try. All I was allowed to do was watch her die...just watch her suffer and die.”

“But, not here, Robert. Here I am able to heal people and watch them live. Rita’s doctors only gave her a slim chance of surviving her cancer, as well. But, here in Puerto Rico, with genome engineering, I changed that didn’t I Rita?” Shengwu proudly announces.

“Yes, I am cancer free. Strong and healthy.” Rita smiles and pirouettes. “Better living through genetic engineering. *Esto es oro de la Palestina (This is gold from Palestine).*”

“And this is what those science deniers want to stop.” Shengwu points at the celebrating Rita. “And this is why I need you to eliminate them, Robert. If they had interfered or altered any of my communications with SPEA, Rita could be dead instead of dancing.”

“Ah yes.” Robert steps into one of his lectures. “I find it peculiar that today’s science deniers choose to ignore the words of one of their famous religious leaders, Billy Graham, when he said, ‘I’m thankful for the incredible advances in medicine that have taken place during my lifetime. I almost certainly wouldn’t still be here if it weren’t for them.’”

“Interesting comment, Robert. You’ll need to keep that thought in mind to complete your work for me.” Shengwu motions for them to follow her. “Let me show you the command center I assembled.”

“So why here? Why not China? Why did you establish your clinic in Puerto Rico?” Robert questions, as he surveys Shengwu’s ultramodern facility. “Especially with the anti-genetics, anti-science groups and SS Deacons so close and in control of America? The same groups that tossed you and your father out of America.”

“Proximity, population and protection. I’m close to a major source of patients...America.” Shengwu points north toward the US. “Many Americans need, want and, most important, can afford the genome treatments that Abaddon’s US government refuses to permit. So here, I’m able to treat them while Negocio protects me with his independence and freedom from America’s ruling bible bullies.”

Shengwu touches her chest. “Besides, you forget. I’m American. Remember? California born and raised. China is just as foreign to me as it is to you. In fact in China, my father and I were considered US spies. But then again, they ran us out of the US because they thought we were Chinese spies. You could say, I was without a country until Negocio and Puerto Rico offered me a home. I owe him my life.”

Stopping to view the interior of the last room, Shengwu rubs her hands together philosophizing. “I also believe a small nation like Puerto Rico with intelligent citizens starving and striving for success is better than a big nation filled with millions of unevolved, entitled and self-satisfied people.”

She draws Robert’s attention to the nurse-bots assisting the room’s patient. “With today’s world being operated by robots, computers and Artificial Intelligence there are far too many people left with nothing to do. I contend the world needs billions less. Uneducated, indolent individuals are dragging us all down. In the past, large populations equaled power, but today a large population equals poverty. Only negative population growth with eugenics planning will save humanity and the world. Well, anyway, that’s my opinion and my design.”

Shocked again by Shengwu’s radical philosophy, Robert attempts to divert their conversation. “Well, I guess I’ll have to agree to some extent. As I told Negocio, advanced and educated, small-population states like Singapore, Estonia, Sweden and Denmark do seem to be succeeding while large population nations of Russia, India and the US are divided and failing. That’s certainly true.”

“Using genetic engineering techniques my father taught me for good...for human-directed evolution, I’ll produce just the right number of innovators, inventors and imaginers Puerto Rico needs to succeed.” Robert hears Shengwu mumbling to herself before walking away from the room’s window. “At least that’s my blueprint for saving the future...and mankind.”

At the end of the corridor, Shengwu leads Robert and Rita past a panel labeled *Lobby* and through another sliding door into a utilitarian, almost empty, room. In its center stands an adjustable-height desk with a pair of gestural interface gloves, a pair of data gloves and a holographic

electroencephalographic algorithm receiver and transmitter or HEART hat laying on top. Stretching across the three walls facing the door are wall-sized, gesture-interface, display screens. Shengwu has created an immersive collaboration platform capable of interfacing, interacting, conferencing and collaborating visually with individuals around the globe.

“Well Robert, what do you think of my dynamic, infopresence workspace?” Shengwu sweeps her arm leading Robert’s eyes around the room.

“Did you construct all of this for me?”

“Oh no.” She chuckles as she walks to a spot on the wall close to the door. “This is my workspace. But, it’s yours to share for as long as you need it. The gloves and HEART hat will give you the access to our system you’ll require for your work.”

She waves her hand before a sensor. An air-cushion, lounge couch appears out of the wall. “When you need to relax or think sitting down or even sleep, you can operate the workspace from here. I call this room my electronic brain cell. It’s all alive.”

Pointing at a bouquet of wilted Plumeria blossoms scattered atop Shengwu’s couch, Rita broadly smiles. “Aw, I see your biggest, little fan has visited recently.”

Blushing, Shengwu scoops up the flowers. “Yes, Peter is still my best boyfriend. He brought these flowers by this morning before Margarete took him to preschool. Every flower came with a little kiss. Just love that little guy. Love him so much.”

“Oh yes, he is a sweetie.” Rita grins. “How old is he, now?”

“He is about the same age, my son would have been, if he had lived.” Although speaking at Robert and Rita, Shengwu is staring wishfully into her memories. “Here is a lesson for both of you. Hereditarily diseased people like me should not try to have children. Even in vitro fertilizing myself with the best sperm I could find...the donor looked a lot like you Robert...did not save my baby from my bad genes. When I held my poor, bent and disfigured innocent baby in my arms, I cried and I cried. His only mistake was me. Coming from me. He opened his eyes, looked at me, and then he died. I gave him the name, Bǐdé. Do you know what Bǐdé means, Robert?”

Although his inner ear translator interprets Chinese, Robert shakes his head. “No, no, I don’t.”

“Surprisingly, it’s Chinese for Peter.” Shengwu smiles at the flowers. “I found the Peter I lost, here. I don’t ever want to lose him again. Ever.”

Rita gently pulls the Plumeria from Shengwu’s hand to end her daydreaming. “I’m jealous. I haven’t received flowers for such a long time. Aren’t they pretty Robert?”

“Oh yes, pretty.” Uncomfortable, Robert follows Rita’s lead and returns their conversation to Shengwu’s workspace. “So, tell me how all of this works.”

Shengwu claps her hands and the middle screen sparkles to life. Projected in virtual reality in front of the screen, far larger than life, is Pion. Robert immediately recognizes her expressionless face behind her expression recognition glasses. He is thrilled that she has returned to the unemotional, high-functioning autistic savant, he watched mentally combat an artificial intelligence quantum computer in Africa. From an isolated SPEA coffee plantation in Ethiopia, using only the power of her mind, she had prevented another US and Russian war. But her battle against AIDAS crushed her. She was rocking and stimming and buried within herself when he last saw her.

“Good morning Pion.” Robert waves and sunnily smiles.

“You are wrong, Robert. It is night. You are late. I have been waiting for you.” Pion’s normally monotone, expressionless voice is abruptly elevated. “They are attacking us. You know. You must stop them!”

KEEP READING