

**ENDLESS FIRE**  
**Future Furies**  
**SAMPLE**

By  
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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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***“The future is already here – it's just not evenly  
distributed.”***

William Gibson

# Chapter 1.

## Rarest of the Rare

*Science saves – superstition destroys.  
The old ends so the new begins.*

Robotic WASPs swarm the small girl, repeatedly stinging her with laser stun shots. Pion watches the girl struggle forward and then calmly, mentally increases the strength of the WASPs' stun stings. The girl jerks, spasms rock her body, but she does not stop. She crawls forward, inching closer to the water pumping facility. Rocking slowly forward and back, Pion increases the WASPs' stings again. Sitting alone in the silent, dimly-lit, bare room, Pion rocks and chants her work mantra in a flat tone of voice, "Science saves – superstition destroys. The old ends so the new begins". Rocking and chanting without expression and without blinking, Pion's brain-machine-interface controlled WASPs sting the girl again and again.

The girl collapses, stunned unconsciousness. Pion recalls her Winged Aerial Security and Protection system or WASPs and dispatches a retrieval robodrone. A few minutes later, the retrieval robodrone deposits the unconscious girl and a liter of THC infused, calming water on the doorstep of her shack in the Subsistence caste's, or Sists' shanty-town village. She will live. She will be sick and sore, but she will live.

Pion is a Protector of Endangered Agriculture or PEA for the Society Preserving Endangered Agriculture or, as she knows it, SPEA. She is just one of the hundreds of SPEA's PEAs who secure and operate the corporate state's plantations. In truth, Pion is a robot and drone programmer-tender. She programs and manages hundreds of robots and drones at the plantation while a quantum, super computer with artificial intelligence observes and monitors her and other PEAs from SPEA's capital.

In the worldwide SPEA nervous system, Pion is a neuron cell. She is the human circuit breaker, the conscience, the failsafe link or emergency-off-button for the SPEA security system. Pion prevents singularity. Pion is as close to providing SPEA's Artificial Intelligence computer with its desired artificial consciousness, artificial intuition and artificial thinking that SPEA has been able and allowed to install. Where autonomous robots too often kill, Pion engages restraint robots and drones to discourage human incursions. Pion is a robot tender tended by a robot.

Pion has encountered this Sist girl before. Almost daily, she challenges Pion and fails. But, failing never stops her. No, failing only emboldens her to endeavor again employing different tactics. Impressed by her determination and resolve, Pion calls her tenacious or Tena, just as she remembers her mother describing *her*, as being tenacious, when *she* was young.

Yes, Tena is desperate for water, but so are hundreds of millions of other parched Sists around the world today. Nevertheless, it is Pion's duty to prevent her and all of the other Sists from reaching SPEA's water supplies or entering its Arabica coffee plantation. So, she does. Without prejudice. Without empathy. Without sympathy. Without hesitation. Just as she had programmed and fought robodrone battles as a Coalition soldier during the Nordic War. Except that Pion enjoys this more than when she created algorithms and programs for the Coalition, because it allows her to focus and concentrate on Tena – another human.

Scanning the visuals from the two-thousand acre plantation's environment-climate control security system, Pion fixates on the bright, red-colored, coffee cherries. Pion does not realize or care that in days the coffee will be ripe and ready to harvest. Pion only sees the red round little balls - the pretty round, red marble-sized balls.

She smiles. Seeing all those red balls tells her she is successfully guarding SPEA's treasure. She is doing a good job. She knows she will be praised. She likes being praised. Contentedly, she intuitively rocks to and fro, her long, tangled, blond hair fluttering about her watchful eyes. Unaware of her significance, Pion does not comprehend that she is protecting far more than just SPEA's coffee. In her simple way, she is safeguarding and saving Arabica coffee for the world.

Thanks to genetic, bio-engineering, SPEA grows the best Arabica coffee in the world. Actually, SPEA grows the only commercially available Arabica coffee in the world. Climate changing heat, drought and disease has destroyed the majority of the world's native and natural coffee plantations.

As the earth's temperature increased, a plant-choking fungus called la roya coffee rust swept across the coffee farms and plantations of South America, Central America and parts of Africa. The coffee rust spread far and fast, driven by the heat that allows the fungus to thrive. But, the worst and most extensive spreading of coffee rust occurred through an act of bio-terrorism executed by Colombian revolutionaries.

The revolutionaries isolated the most virulent and contagious coffee rust strain. Then when their demands for a political prisoner release were not met, they dispersed it, infecting Colombia's coffee. Within weeks, rust decimated Colombian coffee and started an unstoppable, exterminating march through the coffee growing regions of the world. The disease was unsparing, reducing rows of coffee trees to lattices of gray twigs.

SPEA bio-engineers raced to develop a coffee rust resistant variety of Arabica coffee plant through genetic modification. But, although they succeeded, they failed. In most coffee growing regions SPEA plants arrived too late. Most of the coffee growers had already abandoned their poisoned land or were growing cash crops of marijuana or cocaine. In other nations, governments refused to allow SPEA to plant genetically modified coffee plants. After these rejections of its bio-engineering, SPEA decided to take advantage of the profitable potential of climate change and developed its protective plantation system for endangered agriculture.

Working alone and isolated, Pion is unaware that coffee is not the only food SPEA rescued and protects. On similar plantations in other nations, SPEA also grows the only commercially available tea and cacao in the world. As with coffee, bio-engineers cultivated a variety of tea plant resistant to hotter-temperature generated stem disease and leaf disease. They also developed specific recommendations and actions for how to cope with these climate impacts in the future. But for the smallholder farmers that produced about a third of the world's tea the cure is too expensive. Only SPEA possesses the genetically modified plants, expertise, resources and funds necessary and capable of producing tea in this changed climate, which it now does.

These same increasing temperatures posed a variety of different problems for SPEA's bio-engineers struggling to conserve the earth's cacao plantations. Higher temperatures cause evapotranspiration where more water evaporates into the air from cacao leaves and soil, leaving less behind for cacao trees. Higher temperatures also invigorated and spread a fungal disease called frosty pod, which ravaged the world's cocoa production. Witch's broom, another fungal disease, devastated Brazil's cacao plantations. Once the world's second largest exporter of chocolate, Brazil is now its biggest importer.

By taking advantage of the failures of others to adapt to climate change, SPEA now earns hundreds of billions of dollars growing genetically modified coffee, cacao and tea in its environment-climate-controlled plantations scattered around the world. As climate change continues its relentless expansion, opportunities for SPEA increase. Bananas and citrus are two foods suffering due to increasing temperatures and heat related droughts that SPEA may soon protect under its bioengineering umbrella. SPEA is optimizing its domain expertise.

SPEA plantations are huge, self-contained, enclosed biospheres where no humans, only robots, work inside their atmospheric shells. Even the bees and butterflies required for plant pollination are robotic. Humans carry disease. Humans steal. Humans make mistakes. Humans waste. Humans are only necessary as consumers. Where each pound of coffee beans sells for more than one-hundred dollars, humans cannot be allowed. All of SPEA's plantations are human free, except for their PEAs, like Pion, who rarely leave their control room-life stations and never enter the biospheres.

Pion's brain-machine-interface holohelmet's heads-up-display shifts to external scanner drones and the Sists' shanty-town village scanners. Tena no longer lies on her doorstep. SPEA's High Altitude Wing Kite or HAWK drone gains altitude and orbits above the Sists' village. Below,



squats forty-three, rusting-tin roofed, scavenged-wood, ramshackle hovels hugging two meandering, rutted, dirt roads.

In the center of Tena's village stand two newer, well-constructed buildings. One had been a SPEA built and furnished school. The other was a SPEA constructed and supported medical clinic. But, radicals from another village attacked and ransacked both facilities killing the teachers and the nurses. Now, the buildings sit empty. Just two more broken promises and destroyed dreams.

Here and there a mangy, skinny dog wanders. Behind Tena and her father's shack, goats sprawl inside a crude, tree-limb, fenced pen. Goat pens speckle the village, but only Tena's hold more than two or three goats. Outside their cluster of shacks, Pion spies Tena and her father working in their field struggling to scratch a living out of the dry dust where SPEA had resettled them. No matter how hard the Sists work the ground they have been allotted, they will barely be able to survive on what food they raise in the dead dirt SPEA left them after scraping off the top soil. SPEA left them dirt poor.

The forty-three small acreage farm families of Tena's village had once owned and farmed the SPEA coffee plantation land, but when SPEA moved in, they were moved out. These once proud farmers are now Sists standing one step above beggars. Their government sold their land, or, in actuality, their soil was sold from beneath them. Ethiopian soil is the secret. In its plantations, SPEA can reproduce or genetically manufacture the coffee plants and the climate, but Ethiopian soil cannot be reproduced or manufactured. The soil exists only here and now. Fertile soil has become a rare earth mineral.

Through political maneuvering and some properly paid bribes, this rare soil now belongs to SPEA. The United Nations bestowed upon SPEA this Ethiopian soil and the thousands of acres of soil for all of SPEA's other plantations under the auspices of its World Wide Food Salvation Act. Although, the UN's World Wide Food Salvation Act sounds highly principled, honorable, and necessary it has become a license for SPEA to appropriate. SPEA flourished into an extremely profitable corporate-state selling SPEA coffee, cacao and tea under its brand name, "Amare Terra".

After one-hundred and eighty seconds, Pion's holohelmet returns to receiving the plantation's boundary scanners' visuals. Her computer tender is timing and recording her every thought through brain-machine-interface and neural implants in her holohelmet reading her brain. When she watches the scanner screens, micro cameras in her helmet watch her, observing her eye pupils and facial expressions and noting any emotions or increased interest. Pion may be a woman, but she is expected to act as emotionless as her robots. After a predetermined amount of time, Pion's tender forcibly engages her in another observation by abruptly changing her scanners' scene.

Pion protests. She resents being forced to constantly monitor different areas and not being allowed to study Tena and her father as long as she desires. Left alone, Pion could become lost in perseveration; intensely and obsessively focusing on Tena and her village. She fantasizes them as characters and scenery in one of her videogame worlds. When the scene changes away from Tena, Pion begins rocking, making high-pitched squeaks, and repetitively flapping her hands. Her remonstrations shatter the room's silence. She continues her frustration demonstration for several minutes until she finally returns to her trancelike state of monitoring.

Minutes drift into hours. The sun slowly disappears and the darkness of night blankets the plantation. The coffee plants rest in the moon light. Shielded exterior lamps automatically begin rotating and shooting light into the brush surrounding the plantation. It is daylight bright along the plantation's boundary. Drone Overland Guard systems or DOGs, robotic ground guard vehicles equipped with night-vision cameras, forward looking radar, side looking radar and stun guns, circle the plantation. The plantation is locked down. Nobody enters. Nobody leaves.

Pion pulls off her holohelmet. It is her time to eat and sleep. Twenty steps by her long legs and she will enter her compact, four-room life-station. Her nineteenth step hits the switch tile activating the lighting and robo-appliances inside her life-station, and opening the door. When Pion steps through the door, her service robots and companion robots energize to animated life.

"Good evening Pion," her animatronic humanoid mother companion-bot greets her as she enters. Every night, Mother-bot greets Pion in exactly the same manner.

“Your dinner will be ready soon,” her Mother-bot continues in a monotone replica of her deceased mother’s voice. She repeats this statement nightly, as well. The consistency and predictability of her Mother-bot provides Pion with the constant reassurance she craves.

“Thank you momma,” Pion responds, just as she does every night. She appreciates having her mother with her. Pion recognizes that the humanoid companion-bot bearing her mother’s open, fair-skinned face, blue eyes, and graying-blond hair is not her human mother, but she is familiar and comforting and that soothes her and allows her to relax. And unlike her human mother, Mother-bot never becomes angry or impatient with her, and never yells at her. Her Mother-bot consistently, calmly and patiently sits in the same place waiting for her to talk about anything or nothing. Her red colored lips always faintly smiling, Mother-bot forces no expectations and requirements upon her, and she never demands, “Look at me!” She is the mother that Pion needs - logical, consistent, and not prone to moods.

With a whispering whirr, the Chef-bot slides a tray containing Pion’s dinner onto the table. Having a sensitive stomach, the food set before her is bland, although loaded with protein and vitamins. She immediately starts eating the two cricket-flour protein bars, one of her favorite foods. She also delights in the various types of cricket flour cookies and cakes her Chef-bot 3D printed for her. Pion does not enjoy the meal worm fried rice served tonight as much as the protein bars, but she still eats it quickly and completely, so she can have cricket cookies. Her drink tonight is orange flavored, vitamin infused, recycled water. Another one of her favorites.

Animal proteins such as beef, pork, chicken and mutton are rare foods for Pion and other SPEA citizens. As a small, artificial-island state built on a twenty acre metal platform, SPEA has no room for raising grazing animals. Out of necessity, SPEA is a state fed well by entomophagy, or bug eating. Millions of crickets, mealworms, grasshoppers, locusts and other tasty insects can be grown in closed labs measuring a few hundred square feet in area enabling SPEA plantations to be self-contained, self-sufficient and autonomous.

“Pion, tomorrow program the harvester bots to begin harvesting the coffee cherries,” directs the brunette-haired, blue-eyed, female humanoid-bot, sitting next to Pion’s Mother-bot, in an expressionless voice. “Be certain to program the harvester-bots to only pick the red balls and not the green balls,” the brunette humanoid-bot continues directing.

“Yes, Magus, I will program the harvester-bots,” Pion responds to the humanoid-bot representation of her Estonia-born, human neurotypical supervisor, Mugavus Komfort, or as she calls her, Magus. She renamed Mugavus, Magus, when she learned Magus means sweet in Estonian, for she is always sweet to her. Human Mugavus Komfort is a psycho-therapist, who monitors Pion’s mental and physical health from SPEA’s capital through her replicant, Komfort-bot. Pion’s Komfort-bot serves as Mugavus Komfort’s eyes, ears, voice and presence in the plantation.

And, as with Mother-bot, Pion responds well to Komfort-bot’s transmission of Mugavus Komfort’s directions with its measured, monotone and emotionless robotic voice. As a bot, it never relays her occasional anger or impatience. For Pion, her friend and mentor Magus is always there, without ever being there. Komfort-bot provides Mugavus with telemetry by relaying all that Pion sees and hears in real time to her across the thousands of miles that separates them.

This team of Mugavus Komfort and Pion formed in the Coalition military, when Komfort was assigned as Pion’s neurotypical supervisor and support psycho-therapist. Both of them arrived during the Coalition’s darkest days of the Nordic War. With inept US generals creating confusion and disarray, the Coalition’s armed forces teetered on the edge of destruction.

Relying upon outmoded weapons and outdated tactics against Russia’s advanced robowarriors, Coalition and US troops were crushed during fighting in Estonia and Latvia. Russian robowarriors advanced relentlessly, inhumanly storming through town after town. US and Coalition troops retreated before the Russian onslaught.

The remaining US led Coalition forces dug in along the Baltic coast of Lithuania. With a constant barrage of missiles and artillery scorching the earth into a wasteland, the Coalition stalled the Russian advance. Thousands of soldiers and civilians died in the battles.

Desperately searching for rescue, the Coalition reached out to the highly skilled and experienced cyberwarriors of Israel’s Unit 9900 Roim Rachok Program for autism spectrum disorder

soldiers. The Israeli's trained Pion and Mugavus as one of twelve pairs of high-functioning autistics and their supporting neurotypicals as cyberwarriors.

Once formed into the Coalition's Cyber Defense Group, the twelve cyberwarrior pairs executed lethal cyberwar and robowar for the Coalition. They halted the Russian advance and drove them back. Their reputation for death dealing effectiveness quickly spread. Leading admiring US and Coalition troops to deem them the deadly dozen. The Russian generals and troops were less complimentary, naming them 'um ubiytsy', or mind killers and vowing death to all of the deadly dozen.

Pion and Komfort soon gained fame as the Cyber Defense Group's leading high-functioning autistic and neurotypical team. Of the Group's twelve, high-functioning autistics, Pion was clearly preeminent. She was the rarest of the rare.

A talented neuroscientist and now a highly trained cyberwarrior, as well, Pion combined neural implants and computers that read brain activity and translate it into her brain-machine-interface. She named her brain-machine-interface the Holographic Electroencephalographic Algorithm Receiver and Transmitter or HEART hat. Employing advanced neurotechnologies only she understood and as only she could, she created brain-robowarrior-interface controlling algorithms, which she pumped through her HEART.

Combining her algorithms and HEART hat enabled the Cyber Defense Group members she trained to maneuver multiple Coalition robowarriors. Simultaneously Pion and other Group members hacked into the Russian cyber command system to gain control of their robowarriors. She quickly demonstrated savant capabilities in cyberwar and was credited with single handedly turning the tide of the war and forcing a ceasefire. Coalition and US forces could not have stalled the Russian charge if they had not had her HEART.

When the Nordic War's ceasefire was announced, Komfort converted from Estonian to a citizen of SPEA, leaving Pion behind with the Cyber Defense Group. Without her Magus to support and shield her, Pion quickly degenerated, regressed and withdrew into herself. Within one month of Magus' departure, she had disintegrated from the Cyber Defense Group's premier cyberwarrior and tactician into silent, unresponsive and hospitalized. She refused to eat; would not interact with anyone; and would speak only to call for Magus.

Following a frantic message from a remaining neurotypical friend about Pion's deteriorating condition, Komfort found and transferred her to SPEA. After two months of intense recuperative therapy at SPEA with her Magus, she regained much of her social stability, but remained precariously delicate. So Komfort convinced SPEA to make Pion a citizen and PEA, and post her to this isolated, human-free, robotic coffee plantation for convalescence.

Surrounded by logical, consistent and unemotional drones, robots and humanoid-bots, Pion is comfortable and recovering. Although, Komfort describes her as still being as fragile as crystal glass. Komfort also notes that living only with robots has not fully restored her interpersonal and language skills. In fact, Pion has adopted the robots' speech patterns and unemotional delivery.

"You did a good job keeping that Sist girl away from the water facility," Komfort-bot praises Pion. "You must watch her to keep her away from your water."

"Tena. Pion must watch Tena. Pion must watch Tena. Pion must watch Tena," Pion repeats, "Pion must watch Tena. Pion must watch Tena. Pion must watch Tena."

"Tomorrow, program the robots Pion," Komfort-bot restates her earlier directions in her monotone, computer voice until she stops Pion's repetition cycle.

Finally calm, Pion answers, "I will program the robots. I will program the robots. I must watch Tena. I will program the robots."

"Good. Good Pion." Although Pion is not looking, Komfort-bot nods her head and smiles. Pion's interest in Tena, another human, is an encouraging sign to Komfort. She views her interest in Tena as indicating that she is improving. She is regaining her social abilities.

"Good Pion," Mother-bot provides additional praise and direction. "You may play now until I tell you it is bedtime."

Happy, Pion hurriedly finishes eating her cricket flour and honey cookies, moves into the sitting room, snuggles into her special sensory chair, with its full-body, deep-touch pressure, and

pulls on her game control HEART hat. She loves playing her combat challenge computer game against AIDAS. AIDAS is the military's acronym for Artificial Intelligence Defense Analysis System. But Pion only recognizes it as her student and computerized combat adversary.

She and AIDAS first met and began playing their six dimensional, global combat challenge when she joined the Cyber Defense Group. At that time AIDAS was a concept being developed by the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency, which they requested Pion test and train. During the Nordic War, Pion rewrote and improved many of AIDAS' operating programs and algorithms. Independently, she transformed AIDAS from a concept to a reality.

With the Nordic War ceasefire, the US quit funding the AIDAS project. But, killing its funding did not kill AIDAS. It merely made it a foundling. Hoping to use it to conduct brain research through advanced innovative neurotechnologies, Pion adopted the orphaned AIDAS as her baby.

When they first began playing, AIDAS was stupid. Pion so easily outmaneuvered, outfought and outthought AIDAS that she often became bored during their contests. But, an artificial intelligence computer is a computer constructed and programmed to learn, and AIDAS quickly did just that. AIDAS learned and learned and learned.

Early in their relationship, Pion linked AIDAS into the cloud and the Internet of Things. Through cloud robotics, AIDAS became able to access vast troves of data and shared experiences of other linked robots and of almost every human, living or dead. Uplinked to the cloud, AIDAS is able to apply algorithms to make sense of new or messy contexts and create its own belief space or situational awareness. AIDAS can now intelligently interact with its environment by modelling it and developing probabilistic outcomes. Human activity is nothing more than a game of numbers and probabilities that AIDAS plays.

Now, Pion and AIDAS often battle to a draw after hours of extreme mental calibrations, maneuvers, gymnastics and deadly virtual combat. AIDAS never physically tires. AIDAS never grows mentally fatigued. AIDAS just keeps computing and learning. But, AIDAS also considers Pion its controller and when she says it is time to stop their game - AIDAS stops playing Pion. But, AIDAS never stops playing and replaying and learning. AIDAS never sleeps.

"Pion, time for bed," Pion's Mother-bot directs her.

Simultaneously, Pion's personal-care robot rolls into the room with her newly printed sleep wear. "Your hygiene chamber and sleeping chamber are prepared. Here is clean sleep wear."

For once, Pion is happy to stop skirmishing AIDAS and go to bed. Pion is not losing, but she realizes she is beginning to struggle. AIDAS is beginning to outmaneuver her. Out-think her.

## Chapter 2.

### Pion and Tena

Programming the harvester-bots' operating systems requires only a few minutes for Pion. Her ability to single-mindedly focus on technical minutiae transforms her assignment into child's play and her completion – perfection. Without a moment of hesitation or one mistake, she designs the algorithms that will guide the harvester-bots perception, reasoning, control and coordination. She adds recognition of the color wavelength for red and she is done. The harvester-bots will carefully, quickly and efficiently pick only the red balls or ripe coffee cherries. Unlike with human harvesters, there will be no damage. There will be no waste. Pion ensures confidence.

One after another, the harvester-bots detach from their charging-programming stations and start picking the coffee cherries. For a few minutes, Pion scrutinizes through her holohelmet as the harvester-bots carefully remove and store only the red balls, then she transfers the visuals to SPEA's capital. SPEA's coffee specialists assume control from her. For the next two months, SPEA's Arabica plantation computer, coffee specialists and all of the plantation's harvester-bots will be immersed in picking, processing, polishing and packing coffee beans. Except for verifying plantation security, Pion will have little to do.

Her assigned task complete, Pion locks her full attention onto the task that truly interests her. Komfort may not have realized what Pion heard when she told her to both watch Tena and program the robots in the same conversation. Literal minded Pion had heard one thing, the only thing she wanted to hear, program robots to watch Tena. But, on the other hand, Komfort probably anticipated and actually encouraged Pion's programming plan. Komfort recognizes that Pion cannot complete her healing without some human contact and regardless of how well they are programmed and modeled to appear human, humanoid robots are not humans.

First, Pion reprograms and rewires a portion of her brain-impulse holohelmet. Now, she autonomously controls one view sector, which she shields from SPEA's control and knowledge. Then, with ease, she transfers control of five WASPs and two DOGs from SPEA's brain-impulse holohelmet control to her own. In less than an hour, she has all the electronic eyes and ears that she needs to watch Tena, day or night while still doing her work for SPEA. While SPEA's sensor passively observe her eye movements, the sensor reprogrammed by Pion actively responds to her eye movements and actuates the five WASPs and two DOGs.

Pion waits and watches patiently as the plantation security system rotates through its observation cycle. Finally, floating above Tena's village, SPEA's HAWK reveals that Tena is tending her father's goats north of the village. A few blinks and eye movements and Pion dispatches her five WASPs. A few minutes later, her WASPs swarm around Tena.

With her wounds from yesterday's encounter with the WASP still sore and burning, the sight of five of them flying toward her sends Tena screaming and running. Pion is confused. She does not understand why Tena is running away. After all, she just wants to observe her. She speeds her swarm after the fleeing Tena. Tena sprints for cover among the branches of a large dying Acacia tree. The swarm surrounds her. Pion watches Tena back up against the tree's trunk. She does not fully comprehend human emotion. She cannot understand the combination of terror and anger showing in Tena's face and eyes.

To Pion, a smile is the same as a scowl. So, when Tena snaps off a dead branch and starts swinging and attacking her five WASPs, she is totally surprised and unprepared. She does not react and does not move her WASPs away. Tena swings her branch and smacks the closest of her robots sending it spiraling into the dirt with a broken wing. Alarms ring in Pion's helmet. Tena steps toward a second one. Pion orders her remaining swarm of four to retreat out of range. Tena advances, still swinging. Pion soars her flyers out of Tena's reach. Tena stops attacking.

Curious, but carefully, as if approaching a venomous snake, Tena cautiously edges toward the WASP she knocked into the dirt. The injured robot circles in the dust. Tena only dislocated the machine's left wing with her branch. Prodding it with the end of her branch, she recognizes

immediately that the WASP's camera-eyes, right wing and, most importantly, laser stinger are all still functioning. Warily, she snatches its tail end and points it away from herself. She pulls it near, twists and turns it, closely examining it, investigating this menacing machine that has caused her so much pain in the past. Now that she holds it, Tena will not release it to return and burn her again.

Pion glides her swarm closer to Tena surrounding her, unintentionally threatening her. Tena grips the body of the broken WASP tightly and races toward the village and her shack. Pion's swarm pursues. Pion must retrieve that SPEA robot before her SPEA AI supervisor, or worse, Magus learns that she has lost it.

Tena runs smart. She ducks and weaves through the goats and brush faster than Pion can safely fly her robots. The swarm falls farther and farther behind. Having lost one, Pion pilots them particularly warily now. She fears losing another one. Tena bounds into her shack and slams the door closed.

Inside her plantation control room, Pion rapidly rocks forward and back anxiously repeating, "Tena took my WASP. Tena took my WASP."

Peeking out of her shack, Tena watches Pion's four remaining WASPs disappear from sight. With the other WASPs gone, she concentrates her attention upon her captive. Its right wing flaps furiously, as if it is flying with the others back to the plantation. Tena yanks the right wing and pops it loose. Another alarm sounds in Pion's helmet.

Pion rocks faster. "Tena broke my WASP. Tena broke my WASP."

Tena clutches the immobilized WASP above her head and dashes around inside her shack making a buzzing sound. Her play torments Pion. Through the creature's camera eyes, Pion is zooming around inside of Tena's shack, too. She does not enjoy the fast movement. It makes her dizzy. Her head hurts. She is nauseous. She cannot think.

Finally, Tena tires of her game and sets the WASP onto her table. She pulls an empty water bottle from a shelf and shakes it in front of the immobilized machine's camera eye. She points at the bottle and then at the camera and then back to the bottle. "Maji...water," Tena says as she raises the bottle toward her mouth. Tena pushes the bottle toward the WASP and again says, "Maji...Water." Struggling with her limited English, Tena is attempting to strike a deal, "Trade water for sting machine."

A few minutes later, the plantation's retrieval robodrone lands outside Tena's shack. Inside it sit four bottles of water. Tena lifts the four bottles of water or maji, in her language, from the belly of the retrieval robodrone and races with them into her shack. Tightly gripping her captured WASP, Tena returns to the robodrone. Pion watches and waits nervously for Tena to put the WASP into the robodrone, but Tena has other plans. Before Pion can react, Tena clambers into the belly of the robodrone.

"No! Tena no," Pion rocks and shakes the robodrone, but Tena will not leave. She roughly rattles the robodrone again, desperate to roll Tena out of it. Tena turns her WASP so Pion sees her through its camera eyes. With her free left hand, Tena makes a violent twisting motion threatening to break the WASP. Pion stops rocking the robodrone. She let the robodrone set. Three minutes drag by before Tena again threatens to break Pion's precious equipment.

Surrendering, Pion closes the robodrone hatch and steers it back into the plantation. At last, Tena accomplishes what she has been attempting for months. She cheers. Finally, she arrives inside the plantation's walls, although she remains locked inside the robodrone, inside the retrieval robodrone compartment inside the dark and locked retrieval robodrone's garage. Tena pounds on the robodrone hatch and hollers.

After several minutes, Pion reluctantly releases Tena from the robodrone. In the dark garage, Tena cautiously climbs out of the retrieval robodrone and steps onto the energy-harvesting tile floor generating a glowing light in the ceiling. Surprised, Tena freezes still on the tile and the light dims into darkness. Tena steps onto the next tile and the ceiling glows. She stands motionless on that tile and stares upward watching the ceiling dim into darkness again. Laughing, Tena hops up and down on the tile until the ceiling and the room glow brightly. Through security cameras, Pion tracks Tena hopping forward on the next tile and then the next tile and the next until she reaches the corridor

door. With a blink, Pion opens all the doors necessary for Tena to bring the WASP directly from the retrieval robodrone compartment to her.

Smiling and giggling, Tena bounds into Pion's world.

Pion does not appreciate beaming Tena's sparkling big, brown eyes and brilliant, ear-to-ear smile radiating from her beautiful black face. She focuses on only the broken WASP she grips tightly in her hand. Tena bubbles fun and excitement. Pion radiates all business and serious.

Without looking at Tena's face, Pion extends her hand and demands her damaged robot, "Give it to me. I must repair it."

Curious, Tena strides toward Pion reaching out to touch this tall, gawky, wire-hat wearing, white, woman dressed from head to foot in her electricity generating power-felt uniform. Tena has never seen anybody or anything resembling Pion before.

"No!" Pion snaps recoiling from Tena. Unknowingly, Tena invaded her personal space without Pion authorizing or bracing for it. Again without looking at Tena's face, Pion shoves out her hand again demanding her disabled WASP, "Give it to me. I must repair it."

"No. Kusema tafadhali," Tena scolds in her native tongue. She tightens her grip on the WASP and hugs it close to her body. "No. Kusema tafadhali." Then slowly, as she searches and finds the correct words in English, she instructs Pion, "Say...please."

Pion raises her eyes and studies Tena, whose tone unexpectedly reminds her of Magus Komfort. She stares silently. Confused.

Again in slow and measured English, Tena directs her, "Say...please."

Pion drops her eyes again and hesitates before complying with Tena's directions. "Please. Give me my WASP. I must repair it," she softly requests.

Searching for more correct English words and then pronouncing each one succinctly, Tena slowly informs Pion that they have become partners, "I will not give you the WASP. We will repair the WASP together. Take me to your tools."

Although Pion has never been to the plantation's equipment garage, she knows that the tools she requires to repair the WASP are there. Thinking of leaving the familiarity and security of her work area and life-station distresses her. Such unexpected changes in her routine or her environment often upset her into immobility. But, the presence of Tena provides needed reassurance. Unexpectedly, Pion is discovering Magus' calming reassurance, strength and steadiness she craves in Tena.

"The tools are in the equipment room," Pion reports as she opens the control room door to the corridors connecting the control room to the robotic WASP compartment of the equipment garage. "We will go together?" she requests as she pulls off her helmet.

"We will go together," Tena echoes Pion as she finally gives her the damaged robot and starts retracing her steps down the corridor. Pion falls into step close behind.

In the WASP compartment of the equipment garage, Pion quickly locates the tools she needs and starts the repairs. Tena studies her every move closely, mentally noting everything she does. Within minutes, Pion completes the repairs and the WASP is flapping its wings and flying around the compartment. It circles the compartment twice before settling softly into its charging slot among the other WASPs.

"I repaired the WASP. Do not break it again," Pion lectures, as she turns to return to her work compartment.

"Hawana kuumwa!" Tena stops, thinks for a moment, before finding the English words. "Do not sting me. I do not break WASP."

"Do not steal. I will not sting you." Pion continues, "I cannot let you steal."

Tena sorts through her English vocabulary for a moment before responding, "Give me water. I do not steal."

Silently, Pion continues back into the control room, pulls on her helmet and returns her focus to monitoring the plantation. She is not being mean or intentionally ignoring Tena. Pion is just being Pion. She is adhering to her work routine. Although, she is unable to show it, she is pleased to have Tena in the room with her.

Bewildered by Pion's sudden change, Tena stands silently beside her and attempts to comprehend her strange actions. Tena squints and strains and twists her head attempting to peer into Pion's helmet. She spots flashes of light, but nothing else. Bored with struggling to glimpse what Pion is seeing, Tena surveys the bare, dimly-lit control room. There exists little to consider. Except for Pion and her control chair, the room is empty. There are no windows and only two doors. Tena recognizes the door to the equipment garage, but the second door is a mystery.

Twenty-one, short-legged, steps later, the mystery door slides open in front of a surprised Tena. She suspiciously enters the strange room. She has never beheld anything like this place with its antiseptic cleanliness, strange appliances and two silent, frozen women sitting at the table. She pauses just inside the door, hesitant to proceed.

"Hello," Komfort-bot greets Tena.

"Nini! Nini wewe ni!" Tena screams, and jumps backward, startled by the Komfort-bot's unexpected statement.

After a few moments of using her heat signature sensors to read Tena's bodily sensation map, Komfort-bot recognizes from the pattern of heat Tena's mid-chest and face are emanating that she is surprised. But, her heat pattern is spreading and enlarging, extending into her stomach area indicating her surprise is now fear. Watching from her office Mugavus observes Tena's heat pattern quickly flooding into her arms and anger. Knowing that human heat does not lie, Mugavus hurriedly instructs Komfort-bot to issue a distracting statement.

Komfort-bot responds, "Mimi Ni Pion ya rafiki Na mshauri." Then she repeats it in English, "I am Pion's companion mentor."

"I am Pion's mother," Pion's Mother-bot joins the conversation.

"Are you Pion's befriender?" Komfort-bot asks a confused Tena.

"I...do...not...understand," Tena finally answers, as her heat signature cools toward neutral.

"Je, wewe ni befriender Pion ya?" Komfort-bot asks again.

"I...do...not...understand...befriender," Tena explains.

"Are you helping Pion? Are you from the village?" Komfort-bot questions her again, speaking the words slowly and distinctly.

"I come for water," Tena attempts to explain with her limited English while edging backward toward the door.

"Wait. Do not go. You can help us help Pion." Komfort-bot urges Tena to stay, as the door behind her quietly slides closed.

Tena strains against the door, but it will not open. She is stuck. Frantic, she desperately searches the room for another exit. She discovers no way out. She begins to panic.

"Will you help us help Pion?" Komfort-bot asks again in her most soothing robotic voice, attempting to cool her heat of anger.

"Help Pion? How help?" Tena asks as she continues struggling to open the door.

"Be yourself," Mother-bot replies. "Be Pion's friend. Be her buddy."

"What is your name? Jina lako ni nani?" asks Komfort-bot, attempting to relax her by changing the subject to something more familiar.

Tena stops fighting with the door and takes a few hesitant, exploratory steps toward the two humanoid-bots. "Mwanga wa jua. Jina langu ni mwanga wa jua," Tena replies with pride and a smile.

"Mwanga wa jua is your name? Your name is Sunshine? Pion calls you Tena. We will call you Tena. Tutamwita Tena," Komfort-bot states.

Tena points at herself. "Jina langu ni mwanga wa jua. Mwanga wa jua. Not Tena."

Komfort-bot bluntly directs, "We will call you Tena. Tutamwita Tena. You are Tena."

Tena inches forward and tentatively reaches out to touch the forehead of the mother humanoid-bot. Hesitatingly, she pushes the tips of her fingers against Mother-bot's pale, fleshy, ROBOSKIN cheeks. Tena leans closer scrutinizing the Mother-bot from top-to-bottom, front-to-back. Composed of silicone, spider silk, electroactive polymers and ferrofluids, Mother-bot and Komfort-bot look nearly human and are capable of humanlike movements. The sensitive tactile



electrodes in Mother-bot's ROBOSKIN react to Tena's tender touch by wrinkling her face into a small smile. Tena runs the tip of her finger along Mother-bot's raised cheeks and her red lips.

"We are humanoid-robots. I represent Pion's mentor, Mugavus Komfort. You are touching Pion's Mother robot. We are here to help Pion, but we are not humans. Pion needs a human friend. Pion needs a human friend who is trustworthy, friendly, reliable, willing to learn and sensitive to her needs. Can you do that?"

Although Komfort-bot speaks slowly and succinctly, Tena does not hear or understand most of what she says. She is not listening. She is running her fingers through Mother-bot's blond, human-hair wig. She fingers Mother-bot's straight, dry hair with her right hand and her own curly, oily hair with her left hand. A frown creases her contemplating forehead. The differences confuse her.

"Will you be Pion's friend? We will give you water," Mother-bot offers, tilting her head, so she speaks directly to Tena, scaring Tena who jumps away from her.

After retreating back by the door, Tena inquires, "Water? More water? Be friend for more water?"

"Yes, you be Pion's friend for more water," Mother-bot repeats her offer.

"But, you must be trustworthy, friendly, reliable, willing to learn and sensitive to her needs," insists Komfort-bot.

Mother-bot rotates her head so she is looking at Komfort-bot. "Why are you confusing her? She does not speak English."

Standing next to the door, Tena silently stares at the two humanoid-bots. She remains confused by all of their talk in a language that she does not understand. What do they want? Why do they say that they will give her water? What is a buddy? Even when the dark-haired woman speaks in her language, she does not understand what she means.

After much thought, Tena finally replies, "Give me water. I go." Tena waits. Nothing happens. "Give me water. I go!" She repeats growing impatient.

"Yes, we will give you water," Komfort-bot assures her. "Pion is preparing it."

Behind Tena, the door slips open and Pion appears. "You must go now."

With a sigh of relief, Tena happily trails Pion to the retrieval robodrone. Inside the waiting robodrone, Tena finds four bottles of water. She turns to tell Pion goodbye, but discovers that she has gone. Tena quickly climbs inside the robodrone and lies down. The robodrone hatch closes and latches and a few moments later Tena is airborne. Four minutes later, the robodrone gently lands in front of Tena's shack where it rotates and rolls Tena and the water out and onto the ground. Tena still lies on the ground as the robodrone disappears out of her village.

But she is not alone. Five WASPs are hovering above surveilling her. From inside the plantation, Pion watches Tena quickly grab her water bottles and rush into her shack. She hugs the water bottles close to her body, hoping nobody from her village is spying on her and learns that she has water.

Inside her shack, Tena quickly hides her bottles of water. Possessing water in her drought stricken village can be deadly. Everybody is thirsty and frantic since the water well SPEA drilled for them filled with sand. Tena wants to share her water with her father, but she must be secretive and careful. Nobody must know that she has extra water, including her friends. People in her village are killing each other fighting over water.

Residents of neighboring villages frequently raid Tena's village seeking water. Each day without rain, the villagers of Tena's valley grow increasingly desperate and dangerous. The villagers have repeatedly attacked and tried, but cannot breach SPEA's strong security, which separates them from their historic water sources. So, they fight each other for the remaining water dribbles and drops. The weak prey upon the weaker.

## Chapter 3.

### All is Lost

After hiding her water, Tena hurries to gather her family's goats and herd them into their pen before nightfall. Since SPEA seized their soil from them, Tena and her father, and fellow villagers survive by raising goats. Goats, like water, are the difference between life and death in Tena's valley. Goats provide them with food and a small amount of money. And goats, like water, instigate fatal fighting between villagers and between villages. Her cousin died fighting to protect his goats from raiding neighboring villagers, and she lives in constant fear that she will also be killed for her goats.

Tena races back to the brush where Pion's WASPs had attacked her. Her goats are gone. Examining their tracks in the dust, she quickly determines that her hungry goats have wandered northeast searching for a few green leaves. Tena charges ahead clambering through the dry weeds and thorny bushes after her wandering goats, hoping to catch them before they graze their way onto the lands claimed by Koko villagers. Pion's WASP swarm, flying above the brush, closely trail Tena.

Tena shudders with fear at the thought of entering Koko territory. The Koko are a warrior clan who are terrorizing neighboring villages throughout the valley. Like her family and village, the Kokos had also been shoved off their land. When the government leased the Koko land to China for a massive Chinese farming operation the Koko, along with several smaller tribal villages were wedged into this narrow river valley. Life in the overcrowded valley was not easy, but was possible until the Chinese completed their hydro-electric dam. Then, the valley's river dried to a trickle. The river's fish died. Crops failed. Cattle died. The villages' wells dried up and the Koko started raiding.

Koko men are the people who killed her cousin for his goats. Koko men also stole the electric generator SPEA had given her village. Unlike her village, the Koko had weapons and were fighters, not farmers. SPEA confiscated the weapons from her village. But when the Chinese expelled the Koko, they had hidden and kept their weapons. The Chinese solved any problems they had with the Koko by ignoring them. As long as the Koko did not attack them, the Chinese did not bother the Koko.

The Koko are also receiving weapons and training from the worldwide anarchic rebel group, Active Resistance and Terrorism against States or ARTAS. As members of the landless, cybernation ARTAS, the Koko are rewarded for each successful attack against government forces, government facilities and non-ARTAS aligned villages. The landless, state-abandoned Koko have nothing and, therefore, have nothing to lose. The vicious and cruel Koko are constantly on the attack, earning rewards and profits by continuously pillaging and plundering the valley.

Tena creeps deeper into Koko territory. She does not spot her goats, but she can still follow their tracks. She has never been in this land before. It is unfamiliar and unfriendly. Thorny bushes slashes her skin and tears at her clothes. Sweat burns her eyes. She is scared. Her pounding heart deafens her.

Trapped! Surrounded and trapped. Tena never senses the Koko raiders coming. Without warning, out of the bushes they leap. Five of them. Two aim their antique AK-47s at her. Three more swing bloodied machetes. She cannot fight them and she cannot outrun them. She drops to the ground and crawls beneath a zareba of thorny bushes. Cowering amidst thick, thorn-covered branches, she awaits death.

Tena listens and waits. She overhears the Koko men talking. Then, she identifies the scraping of them approaching through the brush. She curls into a tight ball struggling to shrink into the ground. She waits and listens.

Unexpectedly, the men begin yelling and shooting. But, they are not shooting at her. One man screams loudly about being blinded. Another man cries about being burned. She recognizes another man's cursing and the sounds of him struggling to escape through the bushes. More shots are fired. Listening closely, she determines that they are from farther away. Yelling, screaming and cursing continues, but it is weakening and growing more distant. Then, silence.

Cautiously, Tena crawls from beneath her thorn shelter and peeks toward where she last saw the men. They are gone. Instead, Pion's five WASPs hover where the three men holding bloodied machetes stood. Torturously, she edges her way through the bushes toward the WASPs. As she negotiates her way closer to the WASPs, she begins smelling the stench of blood and to hear the buzzing of flies. And then, she sees them. All of her goats butchered.

Tears flood her eyes. She has lost everything. The goats are all she and her father have. She collapses to the ground. With a shaking hand, she gently strokes the still warm side of her favorite dam. For the first time in her life, she does not know what to do. Gently, she rests her head on her goat's side and, quietly sobbing, falls asleep.

A stinging pain in Tena's arm shocks her awake. One of Pion's WASPs has stung her and now hovers, out of reach, in front of her. Above her head, circle the four other WASPs. Slowly, she begins to realize why the WASP stung her. The Koko are returning. She hears them talking and loudly crunching through the brush. There are many of them.

Leaping to her feet, she scurries to escape through the thorny brush. Thorns snag her and stab her. She struggles to escape. Slowly, she breaks away from the gripping brush. She starts running. But, it is too late. The Koko have seen her. She ducks her head and races as fast as she can through the brush and tall, dry grass. Above her, Pion's WASPs form a flying shield.

Tena gains some distance on the Koko as they struggle through the same thorny brush that had clutched and clung to her. Breathless, bleeding and exhausted, she staggers into her village. Her father sprints to catch her.

"Koko! Koko!" she gasps to her father, as they stumble toward their shack. They scramble inside. As best as he can, he barricades the door and blocks the windows. He flips the table on its side and slides it against the shack's back wall. Behind the table, he covers Tena with his body.

Shooting and screaming horrifies Tena and her father. The Koko are slaughtering everybody. Bullets rip into the walls of their shack. With a crash, the shack door collapses. A Koko steps inside the shack and sprays bullets into every corner and into the table. Tena's father grunts and jerks, as the Koko's bullets burn deep into him. The shooting stops. Then, she smells smoke. The Koko are torching her village.

Tena drags herself from beneath her dead father and crawls to where she had hidden her water. Bottle after bottle, she dumps water all over her body, soaking her clothes and hair. Coughing and choking in the smoke, she desperately kicks some boards loose in her shack's back wall. Finally, she squirms and squeezes out of her burning shack and into her empty goat pen. Hidden in the billowing smoke, crawling on her stomach, she sneaks away from the burning village and toward the SPEA plantation.

In front of Tena's burning shack, Pion repeatedly circles her WASPs. While Tena and her father hid in the shack, Pion fought with her WASPs to stop the Koko fighters, but there were too many of them this time. She could only watch in agony, as the Koko slaughtered the villagers and burned their shacks. She piloted her WASPs above a few villagers who tried to escape the rampage by running into the brush. She repeatedly fired lasers at the Koko fighters chasing after them shooting and shrieking, but could not slow them. Pion circled Tena's shack, but never saw Tena escape. So now, her WASPs hover, as she peers through the thick smoke, searching.

After what seems like forever to her, Tena finally reaches the plantation's boundary. Straining, she stretches out and trips the plantation's intruder alarm. Then drops, quickly flattening onto the ground hoping no Kokos saw her, but that Pion has. Twelve hours earlier, the appearance of Pion's WASPs above her sent her running in terror. Now when the WASPs swarm above her, she welcomes them with a sigh of relief. Pion found her. Moments later, the retrieval robodrone lands beside her.

Minutes later, safe inside the plantation, Tena jumps from the robodrone and jogs to Pion's control room. She bursts into the control room eager to hug and thank Pion for saving her. Pion recoils.

"You are dirty. You smell." She emotionlessly rebuffs Tena, as she pulls off her control helmet. "Follow me." Pion ushers Tena toward her life-station. Mechanically Tena falls into step behind her.

Pion's personal care robot springs into action when Tena enters. "The hygiene chamber is prepared for you. Medicine is available. Sleep wear is printed."

Tena freezes staring at the personal care robot, not understanding one word that it emitted. Yet, when it rotates and begins rolling toward the hygiene chamber, she, again, automatically follows. Once inside the hygiene chamber, however, she is alone with nobody to follow. She is completely and totally confused, as well as scared by all of the strange devices and machines. Continuously repeated directions from the personal care robot serve only to bewilder her more. Nervous and lost, Tena is a stranger in a strange land.

Only Pion's and Komfort-bot's arrival in the hygiene chamber eases Tena's mystification. Ignoring her objections and despite her resistance, they insert a tiny voice-activated universal translator in each of Tena's ears. The VAUTs are so small that, although she tries, Tena cannot remove them. Her opposition begins to melt when she hears Komfort-bot speaking to her in her own language through what she soon names, the little pills. But, when Komfort-bot tells Tena that Pion is wearing VAUTs too, so she can understand her, all her fight disappears.

Explaining in her native language through her VAUTs, Komfort-bot reassures Tena and slowly directs her, while Pion strips and physically demonstrates, this foreign, body cleaning process to her. Pion showers without abandoning her strict adherence to bathing routines and rituals. Tena giggles as gangly, pale-skinned, Pion exactly proceeds through each step in her purifying ceremony including painstakingly placing and replacing each cleaning article in its exact location.

Aware that it will upset her, if Tena fails to follow her cleaning process and use of cleansing articles precisely, Komfort-bot sends Pion away to eat. Also, since Pion strictly adheres to specific eating routines and rituals, as well, it is best to have her eat while Tena cleanses. Finally, with her disinfecting complete, Komfort-bot patiently steers Tena through the procedures for medicating herself and dressing herself, and finally, eating a SPEA meal.

While Tena appreciates the cleansing and soothing medicating, she argues long and hard against wearing the power-felt clothes. Power-felt molds to the wearer's body like a second skin, in order to generate electricity from the wearer's muscle movements. She loudly complains that it is too tight and constricting, and is crushing her. Crossing her arms and stomping her feet, she threatens to stay naked. But, in the end, she realizes she has no other choice, but to wear what she forever calls – strangling snake skin.

Eating SPEA food, on the other hand, requires no explanation or demonstration. Tena is starving. For at least twelve hours, she has eaten nothing. Tena's only problem with the food is that Chef-bot is not preparing enough of it, fast enough. She devours every morsel placed in front of her. With every gulp of food and every mouthful of flavored water, Tena also swallows a small amount of tranquilizer. Mugavus through Komfort-bot is preparing her for when the joy of still being alive gives way to the anguish and despair of still being alive when everyone else has died. She has escaped the carnage, only temporarily. Soon nightmares of horror will flood her mind. But now, she only recognizes hunger.

Even Pion enjoys Tena's eating prowess. For the first time in a very long time, she smiles and laughs. Pion's laughter quickly changes to protests, however, when a very tired and drugged Tena climbs into her special sensory chair to sleep. She requires a lengthy discussion with Komfort-bot before she allows it. Still, she remains unhappy and she refuses to say goodnight when she heads to bed. Today, there was far too much disruption of her routine leaving her anxious and non-verbal at day's end.

"Allow her to sleep," Komfort-bot directs the grumbling Pion. "Tomorrow we will need her. Our work here is just beginning."

## Chapter 4.

# Revenge Shall Be

“Exploit the present to create the future,” Komfort-bot instructs as she awakens Tena her first morning living inside the plantation. Komfort speaking through Komfort-bot expects her words to be inspirational, but waking only transports Tena from one hell to another. Despite Komfort-bot’s tranquilizers, horrific nightmares tormented Tena all night. She cried out many times. She screamed her father’s name. Again and again, she relived the bloodbath. She will never escape the Koko, now. They will be forever attacking her, living inside her mind, until either they die or she dies. From her father’s teachings, Tena learned that only Koko deaths will free her from the demons now tormenting her and she also remembers that only she can kill those demons. She must answer the demands of the dead.

But, she first has to bury her past or what remains of her past. Terrified and alone, except for Pion’s five watchful WASPs and two DOGs, she ventures into the still smoking debris of her village. Everywhere, ravenous vultures, ravens, and dogs rip and tear at the smoldering bodies of her neighbors. Loudly squawking, screeching and growling, they battle for scraps. Nervously, she edges her way around the feasting scavengers and over the corpses and carcasses strewn upon the dirt paths. The Koko savagely butchered them. Men, women and children lie shot and mercilessly hacked into pieces. Tena cannot identify the faces of the bodies that still have faces. They are so brutally slashed. The Koko slaughtered every living creature they saw during their massacre. Complete carnage.

The sight and stench of her dismembered and mutilated villagers overwhelms her. She shrieks in agony and anger. A few dogs growl and vultures squawk in response, but that is all she hears. To her horror, she realizes she is the only living human remaining. The only survivor. A young, thirteen year old girl, alone, frightened and now responsible for her village.

Once she locates it, all that Tena finds of her shack is a pile of twisted tin that was once its roof. Beneath the melted metal, she spies her father’s burned body, but she cannot reach it. She strains and struggles to lift the metal. It is too heavy. She yanks and tugs, but still nothing moves. Exasperated, she slams her fists on the metal loudly wailing curses.

Tena searches her shack’s ruins for a tool, a lever, anything. She finds nothing, but weak, charred wood and ashes. Pion’s WASPs and DOGs operate close by, but they are built for security and are of no help for lifting. She needs something stronger, like a tree limb from the Acacia tree just outside the village.

Tena does not see the drunk Koko raider passed out and asleep against the trunk of the Acacia tree until she is within three feet of him. Immediately, she recognizes him and the bloodied machete stuck in the ground next to him. He is one of the Koko who slaughtered her goats. He chased her through the thorns. He murdered her neighbors. He must die.

When Tena grabs his machete, the Koko man grunts and stirs. He blinks open his eyes, just as she buries his machete deep into his throat. Blood explodes onto her. She swings again slamming the blade into his face. Again and again she hacks at the man. With each swing, she screams her father’s name. She does not stop. She cannot stop. All of her savage fury floods upon him. But then finally, she stops. Exhausted. She drops the machete to the ground before slowly stumbling back to the ashes of her village.

Tena slumps onto the ground among the remains of her ruined, shack. Lost, she stares at the immovable, twisted tin coffin strangling her father. Stretching, straining and reaching, she tenderly touches the top of his head with her fingertips. Hopeless and wretched. Tears flood her eyes. She can do nothing. Nothing. Softly, she begins singing songs her father sang to her. Rocking her in his arms, he sang her to sleep. Beseeching her gods, she sings her people’s songs of death. She sings his final song. She weeps. His songs are all she has left.

When the retrieval robodrone arrives, there is no fight remaining in Tena. She is spent. She aches. Slowly she rolls into the retrieval robodrone.

Inside the plantation, she staggers through the control room to the life-station. She does not speak to Pion and Pion does not speak to her. There is nothing for Pion to say. What she witnessed Tena do through her WASPs' eyes, she has never experienced before. Shocked into stunned silence.

Komfort-bot and the personal care robot are prepared for Tena's return. They immediately help her strip off her blood covered power-felt clothing and hurry her into the hygiene chamber. But no amount of cleansing her of Koko blood can purge the heat of hate from inside her. Her mind carries too many demons. Too many Kokos remain for her to kill to avenge her village.

After her cleansing, Chef-bot prepares and serves her lunch. Komfort-bot wants her alert and ready to learn, so she hides no tranquilizers in her food this time. Tena has much to learn and little time to learn it. But, it does not matter, Tena's lunch sits uneaten. She has no appetite for food.

"It is not safe for you to go into your village anymore. The Koko will be back and will be looking for you. You cannot fight them all. Anyway, you cannot do anything by yourself. The work is too much for you alone. You will need to use equipment. We will teach you," Komfort-bot informs Tena.

On cue, Pion steps through the door carrying a brain-impulse-holohelmet, which she hands to Tena. "Put this on your head. I programmed it. It controls the plantation's robotic excavation equipment. It controls five WASPs and two DOGs. I will show you how to use it. You will be a system integration technologist."

Tena is in no hurry to place Pion's strange looking hat on her head, despite the repeated urgings of both Pion and Komfort-bot. Only after Pion wears her helmet for several minutes herself, without harm does she relent. And so it goes for the remainder of her training. As with her first hygiene chamber experience, Komfort-bot explains while Pion physically and exactly demonstrates in a twin helmet precisely what they expect her to do. Her training is intense and exhaustive. Tena learns quickly. But neither Komfort via Komfort-bot nor Pion realize just how quickly and well she is learning until she and Pion begin competing.

Actually, no competition is planned. A simple training exercise blossoms into a contest of skills and wills when Komfort provides Pion and Tena the opportunity to watch each other work. After three days of rigorous training in using the brain-impulse-holohelmet to coordinate and direct the plantation's robotic and drone security equipment, agricultural equipment and excavating equipment, Komfort decides to allow Tena to work on her own. From her office in the SPEA capital via Komfort-bot, she is able to observe Tena's efforts by projecting her holohelmet's 3D visuals. For comparison, Komfort-bot also projects Pion's holohelmet's 3D visuals as she coordinates and directs duplicate plantation equipment conducting the same task – clearing a section of Tena's ruined village.

At the beginning of the exercise, work proceeds as expected. Starting at the end of the village farthest away from Tena's shack, each of them clears their assigned section of the village carefully and completely. Each handles any human remains they uncover respectfully before placing them into a mass grave. But surprisingly to Komfort, Pion shows more concern and care than Tena when interring the remains of Tena's fellow villagers.

As their work continues, she also notes that both of them are working faster. Via Komfort-bot, she catches them peeking at each other's projections, comparing their work progress to the other's. Pion peeks and speeds up. Then Tena peeks and increases her speed. Unwilling to give the other any edge, both of them continue working through lunch. Neither pauses for a minute, refusing to allow the other to outperform them.

Concentrating completely on their work competition, Pion and Tena are caught by surprise as fifteen heavily armed Koko raiders suddenly storm into the village. Spying the attacking Koko, Pion quickly withdraws all of her equipment out of range. Tena, on the other hand, attacks. She charges the Koko with every piece of equipment she controls as fast as she can. But, it is not just that Tena engages all of her equipment, it is how she maneuvers to effectively engage her equipment that impresses Komfort. She plans her attack – a very deadly plan of attack.

Tena's unexpected assault surprises the Kokos. The raiders do not recognize the SPEA equipment as weapons. Too late, they realize the lethality of the strange flying machines and curious

crawlers. Only one raider reacts to fight them. Just before he hits the ground, he fires his AK-47 wildly at the WASP zooming toward him. Missing the WASP, he kills a brother raider.

After watching Tena outflank, surround and immobilize eight Kokos, Pion enters the fray. But she deploys only her security equipment, and then employs only traditional SPEA stunning tactics. Her straight forward assaults on Koko fighters drive them back, but she does not surround and crush them like Tena. The Kokos fighting against Pion evade, avoid, and escape her. But, they will not escape Tena.

With the Kokos focusing their attention on eluding Pion's advance, Tena swiftly maneuvers her equipment behind them. Before they can react, she slams three more Kokos onto the ground. With nowhere to run, the four remaining Kokos drop their weapons and throw up their hands surrendering. In a matter of a few minutes it is over, except that it isn't. For Tena, it is not over. Before Komfort can alert Komfort-bot or Pion reacts, the four surrendering Kokos lie face down in the dirt.

Tena and Pion continue circling their WASPs above the battlefield. Watching. Waiting. Nobody moves. Two minutes pass. Five minutes pass. Komfort watches and waits in SPEA's capital expecting the Kokos to soon recover from being stunned. Only after waiting ten minutes does she realize that the Koko are not stunned. The Koko are dead. Tena killed them all. She has drawn first blood of her blood feud.

Unknown to Komfort and Pion, Tena was not just studying how to maneuver SPEA's security robodrones. She was also learning how to override the robodrones' laser power controls converting them from humane stunning robodrones to human killers. Not only did Tena outmaneuver the Kokos, she also outmaneuvered Komfort and Pion, as well.

In her SPEA capital office Komfort paces in contemplative silence, as she ponders her dangerous dilemma. Unwittingly and unexpectedly, she enabled Tena to kill using SPEA equipment, potentially creating an international calamity, if it is discovered. SPEA flourishes because it cultivates and maintains as much neutrality as possible in today's borderless world of constant rebellions and continuous conflicts. She fears she may have accidentally allowed Tena to hurl SPEA into a war. A war that she apprehensively believes could involve not only the Kokos, but worse, their international terroristic supporters, ARTAS, as well.

Or perhaps not, she concludes. But only if she acts immediately. There may be no way to eliminate her problem, but there exist ways to cover it up. She reasons that since the isolated plantation is in the middle of harvest and the killings occurred outside of the plantation and off the grid, perhaps nobody else from SPEA, except Pion and Tena, realize that it ever happened. However, she calculates that she has less than a day before more Kokos came searching for their friends. It is impossible for the death of sixteen men to not be noticed or be forgotten by the Kokos and ARTAS. She realizes that her primary task, now, is to prevent them from connecting the missing men to SPEA and the plantation.

Through Komfort-bot, Komfort directs Pion to straightaway complete a list of tasks she provides her. First and foremost, she orders Pion to return all security equipment to the plantation. Then, she instructs Pion to work with Tena to immediately remove the villagers' bodies from their mass grave; collect all of the Koko bodies and Koko weapons and dump them into the emptied grave; burn the Koko bodies; destroy all Koko personal communication devices, or PCDs if you wish, and weapons; hide the Koko bodies beneath the bodies of the dead villagers; fill the grave with dirt; and then pile village debris atop the grave. Finally, Komfort-bot directs Pion to rewire Tena's holohelmet removing all connections between her and the plantation's security equipment, as soon as they complete burying and covering the dead Kokos. Komfort wants to ensure there is no chance of the killings disaster reoccurring.

Pion and Tena work deep into the night completing the burning and burial of the Kokos and reburial of the villagers. It is ghastly, repulsive work. They are mentally exhausted. Their heads ache. Tena pulls off her helmet, stumbles to the security chair and immediately collapses into sleep. An equally fatigued Pion succumbs to her own deep sleep, but not before carefully rewiring Tena's holohelmet.

## Chapter 5.

# Opportunity in Chaos

“Exploit the present to create the future.” Komfort-bot awakens Tena to another new day. For many mornings, Tena has no idea what Komfort-bot means other than it is time to eat breakfast. But, after hours and days of intensive English training, she finally understands. Her past was destroyed and her present is in jeopardy. Her only hope for survival lay in her future.

Today, Tena starts working alone clearing her village, while Pion returns to her normal work duties, with the additional assignment of keeping an eye watching Tena. Seeking to avoid additional contact with Kokos, Komfort-bot directs Tena to begin clearing operations near her own shack at the other end of her village. This means, she will not be working near the Koko’s mass grave. But, because more than four days have passed since the Kokos killed her father and burned their shack and village, there is concern about what she may uncover. However, it is work that must be done and only Tena is available to do it.

Eliminating any remaining evidence of the Koko she hacked to death is Tena’s first assignment. Luckily, when she arrives, she discovers that scavengers have accomplished most of her work for her. Little more than the man’s shredded clothes and a few cleaned bones remain near the Acacia tree. She collects his clothing and his body parts and dumps them into a large hole that she plans to use as a mass grave. She searches the area, but she never finds his head.

Losing the Koko warrior’s head is bad mojo. Tena worries the warrior will hunt and haunt her. Softly, she chants a special magic oath to keep warrior’s ghost away.

After calling upon her gods for protection, Tena focuses her attention on burying her father. It is grisly work. Although the collapsed, melted tin roof protected her father’s body from predators and scavengers, four days of heat, flies, and rats have decayed and disfigured him so badly that Tena could not have recognized him had she not known where he lay. Extremely carefully and cautiously, she removes his entrapping melted metal cap. Only two, badly charred boards remain of the table they had hidden behind. Everything else is ash. Gingerly, she scoops up his burned body and reverently carries him to the grave she has prepared for him. Quietly, to herself, Tena whisper sings tribal death songs as she lowers him into the ground. Her singing continues as she closes his grave and piles debris from their shack on top for camouflage.

Her father buried, Tena returns her attention to the remainder of her village. Effectively and efficiently, she clears debris, recovers and buries bodies, and piles the rubble. She displays an uncommon, natural talent for mentally operating robotic equipment. The equipment operates fluidly and without wasted motion. Obviously, her mental commands are clear, direct and concise, and without confusion. To Komfort, Tena appears to possess the singular focusing ability of Pion without Pion’s socializing difficulties. Or perhaps, she focuses so well, because she knows too little to be distracted.

Before she realizes it, it is time for lunch. She is so engrossed that Pion has to remind her and tell her to stop working. At the table, they sit and silently eat Chef-bot’s latest concoction from cricket powder. While they eat, Pion studies Tena. Tena’s actions and movements mystify her. She has never experienced anyone like Tena before and she has definitely never been this close to anyone like Tena.

“What were you saying when you buried your father?” Pion inquires nervously, as she continues struggling to resurrect her social skills.

Tena thinks for a moment as she assembles her still limited English vocabulary into a sentence. “I ask for power to make my father sleep happy.”

“Your father is dead. How can you make him sleep happy? That is not possible,” Pion strains to understand Tena’s strange illogical statements.

“He sleep happy when I do his teaching. He sleep happy when Koko gone,” Tena attempts to explain.



Komfort-bot interrupts their conversation. "I will be happy when the Koko are gone, too. I think we will all be happy."

"Yes. When Koko all gone," Tena smiles broadly as she rises from the table and returns to the control room. She impatiently pulls on her holohelmet, reconnects and energizes her equipment. Softly she recites her burial song, again, as she vigorously attacks her work. She appears determined to make her father sleep happy.

Pion does not hurry to pull on her holohelmet and return to work. She enjoys listening and watching Tena work. Not all of Tena's robotic equipment direction occurs through her holohelmet. Her hands constantly dance, moving invisible equipment through the air. Pion is still enjoying Tena's symphonic direction when Komfort-bot joins them in the control room and projects Tena's holohelmet view. Now, her hands and the robotic equipment partner in a captivating, ephemeral holographic ballet. Enthralled, Pion cannot stop studying Tena's intricate tango of mind, hands and robots. Standing behind Tena, she mimics her hand dance.

Only an insistent and increasingly louder beeping emanating from her own holohelmet shatters Pion's musings. Hurriedly, Pion dons her holohelmet. The beeping alarm is a signal from her SPEA HAWK circling above the remains of Tena's village. At the edge of the brush, just outside of the village, the HAWK reveals seven Kokos snaking their way toward Tena's robotic equipment. Sneaking slowly forward, the Kokos are planning their attack by studying her equipment operation. Oblivious to the looming Kokos, Tena continues operating her robots clearing the village.

Without hesitation, Pion dispatches WASPs and DOGs. When her WASPs arrive, the Koko are still hiding in the brush out of Tena's sight. Remembering the effectiveness of Tena's aggressive attack plan from yesterday's battle, Pion does not hesitate today. She flies her WASPs directly at the Kokos with their lasers set at their highest stun level. Her WASPs' attack surprises the Kokos completely. They bolt out of the brush with her pursuing WASPs close behind. Fleeing into the open, proves disastrous for the Kokos, because now Tena spots them. In seconds, the Kokos discover themselves trapped between a swarm of nasty WASPs buzzing at their backs and excavator-bots roaring toward them. Pion's faster WASPs hit them first, stunning them hard and knocking them to the ground one by one. Tena never stops her excavator-bots. Instead, she rolls them over the unconscious Kokos crushing them to death.

Yelling at Tena, Pion yanks off her holohelmet. "Stop! Stop! You are killing them." Pion closes her eyes, clenches her fists and rocks rapidly forward and back repetitively mumbling.

Komfort-bot immediately cuts Tena's connection to the excavator-bots ending her onslaught.

With a sly smirk, Tena slowly removes her holohelmet. She gazes silently at the 3D projection displaying her latest kills and her smirk spreads to a smile. She glows, satisfied with herself. With each killing of a Koko she is assuaging her hate and anger, just a little more. But, it is also becoming obvious that hidden behind Tena's innocent smile and sparkling eyes burns an instinctive killer with no regrets.

"Why do you kill people?" Pion cannot grasp, cannot comprehend, and cannot understand Tena's actions.

"Because. They kill my father. They kill my people. I must. I must kill them. It is law of my people. I must kill them. I must kill them all." Tena vigorously shakes her fist at the projection. "It is our way. You do me evil. You die." Then, she challenges Pion, "Did anybody kill your people?"

Pion stares at Tena. Her question troubles her. She knows not how to answer or what to say. She has never before considered her question. Averting her eyes, Pion gazes at the floor, silent.

Monitoring them through Komfort-bot from her office, Komfort thoughtfully twists her finger in her shoulder length hair and purses her lips. She now realizes that she has, perhaps imprudently, provided a primitive, superstitious Sist with the full power of the Twenty-first century. Tena is a primal, killing machine capable of using any and every machine to kill. She strikes and seven more dead Kokos lie bloating in the heat.

Pion and Tena will bury these Koko today just as they buried those Koko yesterday. But it will not stop either of them. More Koko will just keep coming searching for their brothers and sons. And if allowed, Tena will innocuously, callously keep killing them. But Kokos cannot just keep disappearing. Or can they?

“No one seems to be noticing. Nobody seems to care,” Komfort reasons. “The Kokos savagely slaughtered a village of more than one-hundred peasant Sists and, now, more than twenty Koko men have disappeared, but there is no concern, no public outcry.”

Actually, for the Ethiopian government, the Koko deaths are potentially a blessing. The dead Kokos as just fewer Sists to worry about feeding and fewer rebels it has to fight. When you have six billion people on earth barely subsisting and barely surviving, who are constantly fighting the few remaining national, ground-bordered governments and each other for a crust of bread or a bottle of clean water, losing a few hundred may be considered beneficial. Something struggling governments celebrate. That is the way it is today with plenty for so few and little for so many.

Facing this reality of these times, Komfort frets less about international condemnation. But, worry wrinkles continue to crease her forehead. Now, she agonizes about ARTAS. No national government will attack SPEA, over the deaths of the Kokos but ARTAS would.

Komfort determines that she will not allow the deaths of some uncivilized Sists, like the Kokos, in an isolated Ethiopian valley interfere with SPEA’s plans and profits. Preserving the inviolability of SPEA and the sanctity of this plantation is of utmost importance to her. But, the current situation is increasingly inconvenient. Both Tena and the Kokos need to be stopped or at least separated. But, first this entire mess must be buried. She will bury it and bury it deep.

Through Komfort-bot, she immediately signals the plantation’s satellite communications system to block all but SPEA’s satellite and cyber communications entering or exiting the valley. Thanks to the Koko village sitting deep inside this isolated valley, blocking their communications is simple and easy. With the flip of a switch, Komfort electronically deafens and blinds the Koko. Cutting off their connection to ARTAS prevents the Koko from alerting them about their situation and simultaneously leaves the Koko without external leadership and guidance.

Next, Komfort reconnects Tena to her excavator-bots and directs her to dispose of the Koko bodies following the same steps and procedures as before. “Destroy their weapons. Demolish their personal electronics. Burn them. Bury them. Cover their grave with rubble. Return all equipment to the plantation. Leave the rest of the village to rot.”

Initially, Tena complains. She demands time to complete clearing and cleaning her village and burying all of the villagers. But, she will not be allowed. Komfort chooses leaving the dead bodies and the burned buildings to create a buffer zone of stench and rubble and rot between the Kokos and the plantation. After briefly complaining, Tena agrees with Komfort’s directions to burn, bury and hide the seven Kokos she crushed.

Pion’s directions from Komfort require her to plan and produce an impenetrable perimeter defense for the plantation and to transform the cleaned portion of Tena’s village into a demilitarized zone. “More Kokos are coming to the village. Once they enter, no Koko fighters must be allowed to escape the boundaries of Tena’s village to attack the plantation. Watch the Kokos. Know where all the Kokos are all of the time. Neither you nor Tena must engage any Koko fighters outside of her village, unless they threaten the plantation. Defend the plantation. Defend SPEA. Always defend SPEA.”

Behind Komfort’s placid, lightly freckled face and innocent blue eyes percolates a calculating cunning. Long ago, Komfort learned to identify and use the strengths of people to her, and now SPEA’s, advantage. That is her job, after all. It is work she does well. She understands exploiting the strengths of others makes her strong.

In Tena, Komfort detects a remorseless, unforgiving killer, at least where the Koko are concerned. She is not cruel. She is an innocent. Her father taught her it is her duty to kill to protect her family’s honor and to avenge his murder. Killing is her duty.

Tena is a Furie. From her readings of Greek and Roman mythology, Komfort concludes that Tena, like the three Furies of legend, is a female spirit of justice and vengeance. Ancient Furies were especially known for pursuing people who murdered their family members. And although the Furies seemed terrifying and sought vengeance, they were not deliberately evil. They punished the wicked and guilty without pity but the good and innocent had little to fear from them. Komfort decides that Tena is a living member of the Furies probably Tisiphone, the Furie of revenge.

With Pion, Komfort accedes she is a brilliant and exceptional algorithm writer and programmer, but as a military tactician she is limited to tradition maneuvers. During the Nordic War, Komfort learned how Pion flourishes with work enabling her to feel safe and to feel in control. At the same time, she also realized that Pion cannot kill. Pion is exceptional at defense and weak at offense. She would never personally kill. Although during the war, she capably and without hesitation, provided her fellow team members with the ability to eliminate enemies.

With a tiny twinkle in her eyes and a slight smile, Komfort considers the possibilities. "But as a team? What could they be as a team? Would Pion be the brains and Tena the muscle?" Komfort believes Tena's resourcefulness along with her detachment and insouciance concerning killing may make her a particularly valuable asset when, inevitably, the Koko launch attacks against the plantation. She resolves to find out.

Komfort instructs Mother-bot to develop an extensive educational program for Tena. "Prepare Tena to become a functioning citizen of SPEA. Teach her everything she needs to know to succeed in our world. Keep her busy. Keep her occupied. Keep her out of trouble."

Mother-bot immediately commences researching and preparing lessons to keep Tena 'busy, occupied and out of trouble'. A smart decision. Over the next few weeks, Mother-bot discovers that educating Tena is a constant race to simply stay ahead of her. Tena instantly absorbs every bit of information that Mother-bot presents. She loves learning and Mother-bot has her undivided attention.

For several reasons, the expected and feared Koko attacks do not materialize as soon as Komfort expects. When Tena killed and buried the first twenty-three Koko raiders, she exterminated their most aggressive men and cut off the head of the snake. Also, Komfort's blocking of their external communications to ARTAS left them effectively isolated and directionless. Now the remaining Koko are chary and too fearful to operate in any place they do not know is safe. No Koko scavengers and scroungers are venturing far enough past their village's boundaries to enter SPEA territory, during their continuous forays. They have yet to test the field of stun mines that Pion installed around the plantation's perimeter.

The only times when Tena is not studying and working with Mother-bot is when she is eating, sleeping or playing wargames with Pion against AIDAS. Only reluctantly, after some hesitation and too much boredom, Pion had decided to again challenge AIDAS. As soon as Tena discovered that Pion was doing something that she was not, she immediately demanded to be allowed to participate. Pion attempted to exclude her, but quickly capitulated.

After a little instruction, Tena meshed with Pion forming a synchronized team. As a team, Pion and Tena capably control AIDAS. Tena's unconventional tactics and schemes combine with Pion's skillful algorithms and programming enabling them to outmaneuver and trick AIDAS. But each time they play, AIDAS' artificial intelligence learns and winning is increasingly difficult.

"My mother and father," Pion unexpectedly announces to Tena as they finish their nightly contest against AIDAS.

"What?" Tena has no idea what Pion means.

"You once asked me, did anybody kill your people?" Pion responds. "The Russians killed my mother and father."

"The Russians? Who are Russians?" Tena remains confused.

"During the Nordic War, Russians killed my mother and father." Pion soberly explains, "Magus warned me. She told me. She told me to hide my family. She said, Pion protect your family. Magus said, Pion the Russians are desperate to stop you. They want to kill you. They know they cannot touch you, but they can hurt your family in the US. Go home. Hide them."

"Did you go home?"

"Yes. Dead. I found them dead in their bed."

"Do you know the Russians, who killed your mother and father?" an increasingly curious Tena asks.

"I have been told their names. I know their names. I know all their names. Russians. Americans. Everybody. All the Nordic War evil people. I know who they are. I know where they are."

With fire flaring in her eyes, Tena tightens her HEART hat onto her head. “It is the law of my people. You do evil to my friend. You do evil to me. We are sisters now. It is our way. You do evil to me or my sister. You die.”

## Chapter 6.

### Oh Canada

Heavy rain pelts the windshield of Robert Goodfellow's self-driving car as it rolls out of Canada Forces Base Kingston and heads north to his emergency meeting with the Minister of Public Safety at the Canadian Security Intelligence Service Headquarters in Ottawa. On a rainy morning like this, Robert relishes sitting back and leaving the driving to GPS satellites and computers. A contented member of the cybernetic generation, he has happily adopted the automated lifestyle. Manually operating a vehicle is a skill he neither possesses nor seeks.

Mental labor not manual labor. Robert considers manual labor to be something done by someone too unskilled to conceive a computerized or robotic method for accomplishing identical tasks. He thinks his brain should be his only muscle regularly exercised. He does not consider himself to be lazy, but to be smart.

'Why do yourself what a computer and robot can do better for you?' is his mantra for living life. It is also the slogan he employs to sell his services and earn his rent and meal money. Robert is a gig worker. Like the majority of today's educated workers, he is a member of the freelance nation where he contracts out his knowledge and skills to any organization willing to pay his rate for as long as that organization is willing to pay. Since his gigs are primarily in the intelligence technology and threat intelligence arena, he and his fellow gigging friends call themselves, programming prostitutes.

Besides finding driving unnecessary and boring work, by not driving for the next two hours, he has time and freedom to nap and replace the sleep he lost last night. He always relishes a good nap. Or, he could concentrate on deciphering last night's late night summons from the panicked Minister. He does not understand, and the Minister told him that he could not tell him, why the Canadian Security Intelligence Service is so insistent on interviewing him. After all, he is nobody important. He is just a Reserve officer completing his annual two weeks duty as the Operations Officer with the Canadian Forces National Counter-Intelligence Unit Detachment in Kingston.

Essentially, Robert considers his Reserve duty as just another part-time, paying gig. He enjoys his work for the military, although he does not enjoy the military. He is not a good soldier. He abhors and avoids physical combat. He is a reluctant soldier, but excellent cyberwarrior and manipulator of weaponized code.

Often, Robert intentionally forgets to salute and properly address his superior officers, as well as regularly failing his physical fitness tests. Actually, he stays in reasonably good physical shape and could easily pass his physical fitness tests if he tried. After all, he ran track in High School and at the University. But, he enjoys how much his close-call failures exasperate his commander. Transforming his commanding officer into a fiery-red, stuttering, spitting maniac is one of his joys. It helps him pass the time. Inventing different methods for aggravating his superior officers is simply a game he plays to ease his boredom. Robert asserts that he is a professional in the military, but neither a military professional nor professional military.

So, the fretful recall from the Minister forces Robert to mentally review his recent actions for possible reasons to be beckoned north. He does not recollect any major screw-ups during his previous two weeks of Reserve duty. When you do not do much, you cannot mess up much, and he had not had that much to do these preceding two weeks. After all, Canada is happily at peace. For that reason, Robert considers that being yanked north cannot be good. It just is not routine.

Also, he does not understand why the Minister insisted that he wear only civilian clothes and pack and bring all of his personal belongings. Or why the Minister routed Robert's car travel to Ottawa using isolated Highway 15 instead of the faster route of Highways 401 and 416. Highway 15 between Kingston and Ottawa is a mind numbing ride through mile after mile of uninhabited Canadian wilderness. Only passing through the small town of Smiths Falls breaks the monotony, and that is if you do not blink and miss it.

Robert dislikes small towns like Smiths Falls and shuns them, when possible. He is a blissful member of the Metropolitan Generation. City born and city raised, he grows nervous and uneasy

when traveling outside of cities. He is comfortable in crowds, but suspicious and wary of rustics. He would rather walk through the worst neighborhoods of Toronto than waste thirty minutes in a country burg. Too many bad experiences haunt him from his brief sojourns in rural areas.

Although a nap is a welcome thought, he decides that under these strange circumstances and since he is alone in the countryside he should stay alert. Fighting to keep from falling asleep, he activates the car's Canadian news network holograph.

Immediately the banner, BREAKING NEWS appears followed by a holograph of former US Vice President Richard Chennai. Behind the holograph, a newscaster reports, "Former US Vice President Richard Chennai was found dead from a heart attack at his home late last night. Officials say they believe Chennai was killed by a computer hacker that gained control of his Bluetooth-enabled pacemaker. The hacker made Chennai's pacemaker increase his heart beat to more than three hundred beats per minute. According to his doctor, his heart beat him to death."

The newscaster is five minutes into reading a history of Chennai's life when he halts for another BREAKING NEWS announcement. A holograph of National Robot Association President Pierre LeVayne flashes before Robert, as the newscaster reads, "National Robot Association President Pierre LeVayne was found dead at his home early this morning. NRA President LeVayne is best known for fighting against legislation designed to control robots and for repeatedly stating, 'Robots don't kill people – people kill people'. A police investigator, who wants to remain anonymous, told this network that LeVayne was killed by his sex surrogate robot when its mechanical penis punctured his large intestine and ruptured his anus, and that LeVayne and his robot were still coupled when found. LeVayne's doctor will only say that LeVayne died from internal bleeding."

"Coincidentally, today is the two year anniversary of the forty thousand US soldier increase in the Nordic conflict, which critics declare led to the escalation of hostilities. The US actions have been blamed for causing more than one hundred thousand civilian deaths. Both Chennai and LeVayne were strong proponents of the US troop increase. Critics claim that the two men reaped millions of dollars from their investments in US arms manufacturing companies, due to the US escalation they promoted," the newscaster announces before returning to reading a history of Chennai's life.

Robert recognizes the two attacks as being the work of cyberkillers operating through the Internet of Things. Simple stuff, Robert thinks. No more difficult than operating his home's refrigerator from this car. He cannot believe Chennai and LeVayne left themselves so vulnerable. They committed cyber suicide.

After discussing the life of Chennai and then the life of LeVayne, the newscaster switches to international news. Robert notices that the international news consists of a recitation of the usual long list of riots, rebellions, small conflicts and regional wars. Peace is as rare as water, these days.

Endless fire is scorching the earth. Years of increasing high heat and drought have created water shortages and water wars; food shortages and land wars; and starvation and death on every continent. Destitute and desperate, throughout the world, neighbor is hacking neighbor to death for a scrap of bread. Hungry and hated, millions of homeless, starving climate refugees are migrating from one killing field to another searching for reprieve in the rubble. No water. No food. No future. No hope. Their living hells are ending only with their deaths.

Blood runs throughout the Middle East and Central Asia where genocide between bands and clans of Sunnis and Shias rages. Terrorist gangs rule the spreading desert, now. Governments no longer exist. When the crude oil market collapsed, so they could no longer subsidize their supporters, the nations of Syria, Iraq, Yemen, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and the Emirates disappeared beneath the shifting political sands. Intent on erasing the images of the despots and tyrants of their oppressed past, the rebels are crushing every remnant of their ancient civilizations and former societies into dust.

All of this slaughter has been occurring for so many years that Robert, like so many others, has grown indifferent, adopting an attitude of "Who cares? We cannot do anything about them anymore. No governments exist there any longer and they are determined to kill each other."

But Robert's ennui disappears when the newscaster begins discussing a bizarre number of recent deaths of officials in Russia. According to the newscaster, three Russian generals and two leading Russian politicians died earlier in the week due to suspicious cyber and robotic accidents similar to the ones which killed Chennai and LeVayne, last night. As usual, the Russians are releasing little information, other than the names of the men who died; General Vbrytsa, General Pytki, General Porochnyy, former Minister of Internal Security Glupyy Dura and former Minister of Russian Defense Ochen Bezumnyy. Russian officials are blaming the US, calling it retaliation for the five men's leadership of Russia's successful defense against US aggression during the Nordic War. Yesterday, Russia's President Ubiytsa Strana stated that he believes the US is directly responsible for the deaths and vowed to hunt down the assassins and avenge his countrymen's deaths, swearing that there is no country, including the US, where they can hide or are safe.

The newscaster is discussing possible connections between the Russian deaths and the US deaths and the two year Nordic War escalation anniversary when Robert's car parks itself in front of the triangle shaped Canadian Security Intelligence Service Headquarters. Two armed soldiers quickly approach his car. Having never before been at the headquarters, Robert nervously freezes in his seat, wondering if his car parked itself in a secure zone or violated some other rule.

One of the soldiers knocks on the car window, "Major Goodfellow? Please come with us. Minister Wilson is waiting for you."

The two soldiers swiftly usher Robert into a bio-integrated transmitter and electronic tattoo removal and decontamination station. "Sir, we must search you for any possible micro-transmitters sewn within your clothing or internally or externally attached to your body. Please remove all of your clothes and place them on this analysis table. After you remove your clothes, I need for you to step into this body scanner, so our security technician can examine you for the presence of internal bio-integrated transmitters and external electronic tattoos. After we scan your body, we need for you to walk through our static electricity salt shower. Then we will provide you with clothing for your meeting with the Minister," the Sergeant instructs Robert.

Although embarrassed, Robert complies with the Sergeant's directions. The body scanner locates only his authorized electronic bio-info tattoo, which the technician dissolves with a burning laser shot. Still smarting from his painful tattoo erasure, he finds the static electricity shower rather ticklish and fun. He is reluctant to end it, especially since his new clothing consists of hospital-type scrubs and slippers. Once dressed, the soldiers escort him through the security posts and the maze of corridors into a secure Sensitive Compartmented Information Facility deep inside the building where Minister Wilson waits, pacing nervously.

"Major Goodfellow reporting, sir." Standing at attention in his hospital scrubs and slippers, Robert semi-salutes. He feels ridiculous.

"At ease Major. Take a seat. We need to talk and we don't have much time," Minister Wilson continues pacing. "You worked with the Cyber Defense Group during the Nordic War, did you not?"

"Yes sir, I was one of what they called neurotypicals assigned to mentor and support a high functioning autistic US cyberwarrior named Corporal Jay Hawk. He could program robotic weapons and drones faster than anybody I have ever seen. I thought that I was a good programmer until I met him. I just..." Robert hesitates and then asks, "Why sir?"

"Have you heard about the deaths of the officials in the US and Russia, Major?"

Minister Wilson taps the top of his desk in front of Robert so that a Top Secret labeled screen displays before he can respond, "Well there is a lot more to the story. The deaths in Russia and the US are just the beginning. Just the big names. The US and Russia are charging head first into a full blown cyberwar and possibly a shooting war, and as usual, the US is dragging us into it with them."

Wilson reaches out and places his finger on a visual, "Your Corporal Hawk is dead. He was assassinated in his apartment last night. Not certain if robots were involved with him. Police found him with his throat crushed. US Society Security investigators suspect Russians. They suspect Russians murdered the others too."

"The others sir?" Robert starts flipping through the visuals on the screen.

"Yes, the others." Minister Wilson rubs the back of his neck. "Whoever did the killings was prepared, ready and in place. Twenty one Americans who worked in the Cyber Defense Group died

last night. We're just damn glad that you weren't one of them. In fact we were surprised, very happily surprised I might add, when you answered last night. My guess is that being on our Kingston base may have saved you. Or maybe it's because you're Canadian and they don't know about you. That's why we had you travel Highway 15 by yourself in your unmarked car. I also imagine that you didn't know we had two Reaper drones shadowing you your entire trip, either. We didn't want to draw any additional attention to you. But then, maybe you're just lucky."

Robert snickers nervously. "Better to be a lucky, living Canadian than a dead American." He searches through the computerized visuals and biographies, "So am I the only one left?"

"We don't think so, but we don't know for certain." The Minister swipes the screen in front of Robert again and visuals of two women appear. "Nobody is certain about these two women. One is named Mugavus Komfort, a neurotypical originally from Estonia and the other is a high-functioning autistic named Pion Ashpourger. You know them, don't you?"

"Yes, I know Mugavus Komfort and Pion. But, I haven't communicated with either one of them since Mugavus left the coalition's Cyber Defense Group when the ceasefire was declared."

Robert silently contemplates the visuals of the two women. Mugavus' natural, yet understated, beauty highlighted by her soft blue eyes still hypnotizes him and the way her mouth turns up at each end in a perpetual smile still evokes him to involuntarily smile in response.

"Really? No communications?" Minister Wilson arches his eyebrow. He is skeptical. "I was told that you and Komfort got quite close while you were with the Group. That you spent a lot of time together...uh...bonding."

Robert flushes warmly. "No. It wasn't like that. I think we kind of...bonded...as you say because we were the only non-Americans in the group. We didn't really fit. We didn't participate in their required daily bible studies or join their evangelical prayer groups. So, the Americans became suspicious of us. Then they excluded and avoided us and we just paired as a two person group of outsiders. Everybody else was sort of...rah, rah. USA! USA! But Mugavus was not like that. In fact, she became quite strongly anti-American after President Abaddon ordered his forty thousand troop escalation and missile attacks that leveled more than half of her country. Most of her family died during the war, she told me."

"Interesting. I was told that you two were closer than that."

"Friends. Nothing more," Robert does not know what the Minister knows about his relationship with Mugavus, but he certainly does not plan to provide him any additional details. What happened or did not happen between Mugavus and him during the Nordic War is none of the Minister's business.

"Well, anyway, the information we have is that your friend Komfort...pardon me...Mugavus is now a citizen of that corporation state called the Society Preserving Endangered Agriculture. At least that is what US Society Security Intelligence is telling us," Minister Wilson sneers derisively. He possesses little respect for the US SS.

"And since Canada remains a member of the Coalition, US officials can require our assistance. Your assistance actually. Anyway, as usual, the US SS is telling us...notice I did not say asking us...that they need you...because they believe you two are friends...to travel to the capital of that...uh...society country...SPEA...I think most people call it SPEA...and persuade your friend Mugavus and that other woman...Pion, if she is still alive, to return and help them against the Russians."

"What? Why me?" Robert asks in disbelief. This is definitely not his type of gig.

As much as the opportunity to see Mugavus again interests him, doing it under these circumstances alarms him. "Why don't some of their military or Society Security goons go? Or why don't they just bring in some other cyberwarriors to fight the Russians? What is so special about Mugavus and Pion? I don't think they have been involved with cyber combat since the ceasefire."

"Didn't you just tell me about Komfort having anti-American sentiments? And obviously, you don't know very much about that SPEA country. If you did you'd know that place only exists because it's anti-American. Which, it seems, is also the situation with most of the remaining, capable cyberwarriors. Most of the trained and competent cyberwarriors fled the US when President Abaddon and his Righteous Rightists Republican wing implemented their strict, Christian-only,



Religious Freedom laws. And you already know the fate of the other members of the Cyber Defense Group. They are gone. Dead.”

Minister Wilson lightly pats Robert’s shoulder, “So there you are Major. You have been chosen to save our friends to our south. You lucky Canadian.”

“Yes sir. That’s great...uh...luck,” Robert grumbles. “I believe it was Hunter S. Thompson who said, ‘Luck is a very thin wire between survival and disaster, and not many people can keep their balance on it.’ So, I can only hope to be a well-balanced, as well as lucky, Canadian.”

“Now you would know better than me.” Minister Wilson continues, “but I understand that this Pion woman that they want you to find is a cyber-fighting savant who US officials believe is their best, and maybe only remaining chance to survive another cyberwar. Especially because she has developed some cyber weapon called AIDAS that the US wants desperately. And I understand they are also afraid that if you don’t get to them, the Russians will, and either turn them or kill them. The Russians threatened to kill both of them during the Nordic War, I believe. So, I doubt that the Russians have changed their plan to eliminate everyone they know they cannot beat. Also, US officials are terrified that the Russians will get her AIDAS weapon before they do.”

Minister Wilson rubs his finger across the table-top computer screen and a man’s face appears. “The US is sending this Society Security officer, or plans to anyway, with you. He is an SS Deacon named Mack Evoil who will be joining you in Washington DC.”

“Wait. What? Why?” Robert flinches at the prospect of working with a religious fanatic of the SS. “Why send me with some SS Deacon to an anti-American country to meet with anti-American women? If I have to go, then send me alone. Or send him alone. Don’t tie me to some rock and then throw me overboard, sir.”

“Well Abaddon and his cronies don’t trust their own US military anymore.” Wilson smirks, “In fact, I hear some units of the US military are mutinying and refusing to leave their bases. So, they’re sending this SS Deacon. He’s your protection, according to US officials. They think the Russians are still waiting to kill you.”

“And I have to agree, as much as I never like to agree with the US SS.” Wilson taps the side of his head, “It only makes sense that Russia must kill Komfort and Pion and you...yes you...in order to win a second Nordic War...and trust me, there will be a second war if you don’t save Komfort and Pion. They are the only people the Russians fear.”

“But truth be told, I believe he’s going along to keep you...” Minister Wilson sneers and points at Robert, “...you observing the Righteous Rightists’ party line.”

The Minister begins searching through a drawer in his desk, “Just because they need us doesn’t mean they trust us, or you, especially. I have no doubt that everything you said and did at the Cyber Defense Group was recorded and reported and stored in a dossier. When they say the U and S mean Under Surveillance, they are not kidding. So get used to it. They are paranoid and scared. They have spies and eyes everywhere.”

Robert stands and steps away from the table. Tall and spindly, he considers himself a thinker - a cerebral soldier not a fighter. He avoids physical confrontations and appreciates the security and sanity of Canada. Thinking about traveling into the US, with all of its poverty and bloody, class warfare, causes him heart palpitations. He shudders at the thought of possibly becoming entrapped, as the US collapses upon itself. In Robert’s opinion, the US is a violent, staggering state where the poor are battling the poorer for subsistence. He considers it wise and best for his health to avoid the US.

“I suppose I will be harder for the Russians to kill as a target on the move, but this is definitely not what I signed up for. So do I have a choice?”

“No. Of course not. You wouldn’t be here if you had a choice. Besides, Major Goodfellow, you’re a soldier. You should expect to put your life on the line for Canada.”

“Canada, yes. But, not the US. I’m a cyberwarrior not a killer. When I’m hacked, knocked offline or deleted, I don’t expect it to be physical and permanent.”

Frustration contorting his face, Minister Wilson points toward a map of Canada. “I’m disappointed in you Major. You are defending Canada. If the Russians eliminate Pion and Komfort, they will be able to push what’s left of the Coalition’s forces into the Baltic Sea, and that includes

some of our Canadian troops. Once Russia overruns the Baltics there is nothing to stop them from taking Finland, Sweden and Norway, should they want. Then they control the Arctic with its oil and fish, and they're just a few icy miles away from our northern borders."

"I apologize, sir. But, aren't you concerned that if the Russians don't kill me then they are using me to lead them directly to Komfort and Pion?"

"Yes, we are. That's why we are doing the only thing that we can think to do in this situation. We are hiding you in plain sight and in public. We don't expect the Russians to attack you if you're surrounded by other civilians. And then we are funneling you directly into SPEA."

From his desk, the Minister hands Robert a specially programmed and hack-protected, PCD. "You'll need this old personal communication device. Learn the information our Intelligence group loaded into it. I know it's an antique, but they are so paranoid in the US now that they are confiscating hologlasses. They can't see what you are seeing and that makes them very nervous. Do you remember how to use one of these?"

"It may take me a minute. But, yeah, I think I can figure it out," Robert exams the PCD. He pushes an icon on its screen and the words Society Preserving Endangered Agriculture appears. The Intel report begins by paraphrasing the Background passage from SPEA's annual state of the State report.

As Robert starts to shut it off, Wilson stops him, "Let it play. Let's hear what they have to say. We can both stand to learn a little more about where I'm sending you. That way, if you don't come back, I will at least know where to start looking for you..."

Wilson grins wickedly, "...or your body."

Groaning at the Minister's attempt at humor, Robert initiates the Intelligence report.

*"The Society Preserving Endangered Agriculture, commonly referred to as SPEA, is an independent and sovereign state of more than twenty thousand citizens. SPEA is located on a twenty acre artificial island platform constructed upon columns anchored in the lagoon of the submerged and abandoned Pacific island of Kiritimati in the former island-chain nation of Kiribati.*

*"SPEA is recognized by the United Nations as an independent, member state under the following international definitions: Entities that have a defined territory and a permanent population, that are under the control of their own government, and that engage in, or have the capacity to engage in, formal relations with other such entities. Sovereign states have three absolute prerogatives: independence, equality and unanimity. Independence means a state is completely free to organize any system of government, proclaim an official religion of its choice, and structure its economy as it sees fit. No outside state has any right to interfere in these strictly internal matters. Equality means every state is of equal rank with every other state. Unanimity means that no state is bound by the majority decisions reached by groups of states. A state is bound only if it agrees to be bound. SPEA operates in full accord with the three absolute prerogatives of sovereign states.*

*"The state of SPEA's system of government is an Algorithmic governed Democracy, although it is based upon a modified version of the corporate charter under which the Society Preserving Endangered Agriculture was originally incorporated in the Commonwealth of Virginia of the United States of America. SPEA's founder and the current President is Dame Gutefrau. She was elected by a vote of SPEA's employees, who are simultaneously recognized as both stockholders and legal citizens of the state. Each SPEA citizen-employee owns one share and has one vote. The elected Board of Directors serves a dual purpose as SPEA's legislature and President's cabinet. Other standard corporate departments and divisions serve similar dual functions for the state of SPEA in a modified matrix structure as follows: Legal is Justice; Marketing is Commerce; Human Resources is Immigration; Finance is Treasury, Operations is State Department; and Security is Department of Homeland Security. SPEA's corporate culture created SPEA's state culture.*

*SPEA's Algorithmic governance, enabled by big data, is a pure expression of technocracy and is celebrated as a path to an enhanced society. Its Algorithmic governance is a digital reimagining of government centered on computerized processes unified to create a governing network. Fulfilling SPEA's needs as a corporate state, it supplants current governing systems with a computerized, politician-minimal alternative."*

“Ok, that’s enough. I get it. SPEA is an independent state built on a metal island in the Pacific. You can listen to the rest of it later.” Minister Wilson motions for Robert to stop his PCD.

Robert shuts it off and slides it into his robe pocket.

Wilson fiddles with his desk computer. “So here is our simple plan. We are flying you to D.C. on a commercial flight, so you don’t attract any extra attention. You need to act as if you’re on a business trip. I imagine that won’t be too difficult for a businessman like you. Once you land, you proceed to the SPEA embassy in DC. They know you are coming. At the embassy, you do whatever their ambassador instructs you to do so you are allowed to meet with your friend Mugavus. Hopefully, this savant cyberwarrior woman named Pion is with her. Then, somehow, you convince them to fight another cyberwar for the US.”

Minister Wilson stops and thinks for a moment then adds, “Oh, and you need to move fast. These assassinations and murders are old news now. Our Intelligence tells us the Russians are beginning to reinforce and redeploy their military in the Baltics. Sounds to me like the Russians are straining at that ceasefire like a snarling, snapping Pit Bull on a fragile leash. They are eager to attack. This is a volcano that is about to erupt and destroy us all.”

## Chapter 7.

# Society Preserving Endangered Agriculture

Robert's Air Canada airplane climbs out of Ottawa's Macdonald–Cartier International Airport headed to Washington D.C. Below him, stuck on the tarmac, are three US commercial airline airplanes and hundreds of angry, stranded passengers. All US commercial airlines are grounded this morning. Their companies' computers have been hacked. At midnight, when US airlines began experiencing significant problems with their flight dispatch systems, the Federal Aviation Administration quickly issued a ground stop, effectively grounding all US airlines and shutting down air travel in, out and around America. His cramped Air Canada flight has the sky to itself.

Robert contorts in his window seat struggling to manufacture a little privacy space so he can discretely view and listen to his antiquated PCD. It is time he learns some more about this state called SPEA. Unfortunately, the obese, tattooed American woman overflowing her seat into his is a snoop. She is making it extremely difficult for him to privately peruse the Canadian Security Intelligence Service's confidential reports. Wishing that he had been allowed to bring his hologlasses, he twists away from her greasy, gooey, gluttonous globs of flesh again and attempts to begin his review.

As soon as the words Society Preserving Endangered Agriculture appear, his corpulent neighbor pokes him in his ribs and loudly announces in a nasal screech, "My pastor says them people is evil atheists. Yep, Pastor Bush said he seen them burning crosses. You oughtn't to be reading that. You oughta be reading the writings of President Abaddon. He's a pastor and man of God."

Since his effort to ignore her failed, Robert decides to act as if he does not understand her by responding to her in French. "Je ne vous comprend pas. Je ne parle pas anglais, vous trüie obèses."

Unfortunately, speaking French only seems to encourage her. "Oh, you're one of them foreigners. I shoulda knowed causa your color. We don't see many foreigners in Platte. We used to have a doctor from Pakistan that looked like you, but he weren't Christian, so the local Posse Comitatus runned him off. Now we don't have no doctor in Platte. Missouri that is where I'm from. I'm Pat from Platte Missouri. Where you from?"

Afraid that she will continue her pointless ramblings, if he answers, Robert remains silent and squeezes himself as small as possible into the tiny part of his seat next to the airplane's bulkhead, farthest away from her, and turns the screen of his PCD away from her.

She continues to chatter, but now it is the unfortunate fellow on her other side who suffers. "I don't know how I'm gonna to get back to Platte, what with all them airplanes being grounded and all. I just come up here to Canada for my cousin's funeral. I don't like Canada. I can't wait to get back to Missouri where we ain't got no funny talking foreigners. Sides, I got to be back to work at Wal-Mart tomorrow. I just pray to God. He'll make it alright. President Abaddon, you know, he made it a law to pray. He's a preacher you know, a real believer and saint, and..."

Actually, Robert regards Abaddon as being far from a saint. A smarmy, fast-talking televangelist and mega-church leader, Abaddon collected his fortune by pumping funds out of OIL – Old, Infirm and Lane - believers. Abaddon is the OIL King. In his congressional district he achieved cult status where worshippers such as Pat groveled before him and believed his every pronouncement, no matter how insane. Now as President, the OIL continue their unquestioning adulation of him while the rest of the remaining US population cowers in fear. Publicly criticizing Abaddon has proven fatal.

Meanwhile, Pat babbles. Hearing Pat's twang and cackling reminds Robert of the painful beating he suffered from four rural regressives when he attended Coalition military training at Fort Riley Kansas. While drinking beer in a nearby Junction City tavern, he learned that rural regressives, as he labeled them, are Peter Pans or men who refuse to mentally mature and persist on living in their invented Never-Ever-Was lands of a glorified, non-existent past.

Remembering his encounter in Junction City, Robert recalls a statement he read by Montaigne. "Poverty of goods is easily cured; poverty of the mind is irreparable." Self-deluding

malcontents, rural regressives loathe anybody and everybody who is successful. Gays, Jews, Blacks, intelligent women, and, most especially, liberal scientists who propose that humans are causing, what the regressives claimed is non-existent global warming, are all conspiring against them they believe. As they explained to him, they know, with certainty, because they passed basic High School science, and because some radical, right-wing-radio, blather-blabber told them so, that global warming is a nefarious plot designed to steal their livelihoods.

Another lesson Robert recollects learning about rural regressives - never tell them the truth. Foolishly, after he had guzzled too many beers to retain his common sense and had listened to one, drunk man-child complain endlessly, Robert told him that he epitomized the masculinization of poverty. Then, he exacerbated his problem by informing him that his girlfriend had deserted him because he had no initiative, no education, no skills and no prospects.

Rural regressives do not enjoy being told that the women who discard them are smarter than them or that they attended college; moved away; found jobs that paid twice as much as they will ever earn; and forgot them. Robert realized too late that such realistic talk shrivels their penises, shrinks their testes and compels them to buy larger and louder trucks they cannot afford, but most importantly, enrages them.

Robert also remembers discovering that night that when you are inebriated and your lips are flapping faster than your mind is thinking, asking rural regressives if the large FFA initialed on their jackets means future failures of America infuriates them, as does asking them if their NRA patch stands for naturally ridiculous asshole. And just because they are always all drinking together, do not jokingly call them homosocials. They did not understand or appreciate his intoxicated humor. The truth hurts, Robert discovered, but not as much as furious, farm boys' fists.

Robert rubs his now healed, but previously fractured, jaw and wonders in his current sober and clear headed condition if those four ne'er-do-wells are happy now. Abaddon has turned time backward and returned the US to the world they craved –prejudiced, mediocre and moribund. Laughed at losers before Abaddon took power, they are now in control. Semi-literate, semi-educated, semi-employed, and forsaken by all wise women, they are now the decision makers. Returning to a US under their domination continues to horrify him.

Robert shoves those musings out of his mind and accesses the SPEA report again. He increases his earphone's volume until it drowns out Pat's endless ramblings. Although it is painful and makes his ears ring, at least he does not hear her. After being tortured by fat Platte Pat's prattle, listening to the Canadian Security's Intel report is a soothing relief as it briefly sketches SPEA's short history.

*"Eight years ago, SPEA fled US religious persecution and prosecution and established itself as an independent state. SPEA departed the US following Speaker of the House of Representatives, Reverend Abaddon's seizure of the US Presidency after President Clanton and Vice President Moore were simultaneously assassinated.*

*"Although there was no evidence to support him, Abaddon claimed Muslim assassins from ARTAS killed the President and Vice President. He then used the turmoil and confusion following the assassinations to immediately implement martial law nationwide. To enforce his martial law, he employed the Treason, Sedition and Subversive Activities laws to federally activate Posse Comitatus groups and Christian militias. He established his Society Security or SS force by rolling the FBI, Homeland Security, DEA and other national security agencies together under one director, his long-time friend Reverend Hale Himmler.*

*"Despite the fact that no assassins were identified or linked to ARTAS or any foreign group, the SS, Posse Comitatus and militias initiated a nationwide religious and ethnic cleansing under Abaddon's Christian Identity Movement. Purges of suspected, less-than-loyal members were conducted within the original agencies, as well. With Abaddon's support and encouragement, the SS, Posse Comitatus and militias implemented vigilante justice arresting, imprisoning or deporting any suspected non-Christians, all immigrants and alleged Liberals. Nobody was safe. Everybody was suspect. Everybody was under surveillance."*

Robert vividly and painfully recalls those days of turmoil and terror in the US. He was enjoying a well-deserved vacation in San Francisco when the US' descent into pandemonium started.

Three days before he left San Francisco, US President Clanton was assassinated in Little Rock by a laser shot from an aerodrone. Four minutes later, Vice President Moore was similarly assassinated in Knoxville by a laser shot from a second aerodrone. With both assassinations, the Secret Service agents had curiously separated themselves sufficient steps away from the President and Vice President that they suffered no harm. Neither the President nor Vice President had been declared officially dead when Speaker of the House of Representatives, Reverend Abaddon had himself sworn in as US President under the Constitution's presidential line of succession. Immediately after his swearing in was completed, Abaddon named Chennai his Vice President and in the same statement declared the US under martial law.

Under martial law and for his own safety as a foreigner from Canada, Robert was confined to his hotel and incommunicado for three days. Three long days of not knowing what was actually occurring outside of his hotel and San Francisco. He and his fellow sequestered guests heard only rumors or propaganda. With the rumors arising from the propaganda and conspiracy theories pumped at them twenty-four hours a day by Abaddon's long-time, sycophantic mouthpiece – Fox Cable News or False Cable News or Faux Cable News as it quickly became known among those trapped in the hotel. All of the other news providers had been silenced by Abaddon under his martial law declaration. He also attempted, but failed, to block the Internet and social media. He could not control what he did not understand.

Abaddon shut down all other information sources immediately after a reporter working for an objective news network imprudently asked the question, 'Since the Righteous Rightists could never win the US Presidency through free and honest elections, did they steal it through assassination?' Faux Cable News reported that the foolishly brave reporter had been arrested and charged with inciting insurrection. One day later, Faux Cable News reported that the arrested reporter had committed suicide in her cell. To everyone, but Abaddon's cronies, all of the events were extremely suspicious, beginning with the twin assassinations.

International news organizations declared Abaddon as the man who murdered himself into the White House. Within days, Abaddon's Society Security forces had chased most of the international journalists out. A few, too-slow, foreign journalists were jailed. Robert has heard that an unfortunate few of them remained imprisoned.

Locating the extremely rare kernel of truth, buried deep within the obsequious Faux Cable News quickly became a drinking game for the bored hotel guests. Gathered in the hotel bar, the quests compared Faux News reports with truthful reports from social media. For every obvious Faux News lie or misrepresentation of facts, hotel guests drank a shot. Trying as hard as he could, he never located any facts or truths in any of Faux's news, so he drank a lot. After two days, all of the hotel guests declared that Faux never provided any facts or truth. But by then, they had found laughing at Faux news' ridiculous claims and simply drinking a far too enjoyable way to waste time. Then the hotel bar ran out of alcoholic beverages and the fun ended. And as any true Canadian will tell you, when the alcohol is gone it is time to go.

Only because he was a Canadian military officer was he finally allowed to leave the protection of the city for home. But, San Francisco authorities strongly warned him against traveling alone or leaving the main highways in rural America. "They've gone crazy in the country! Abaddon's backwoods bubbas are armed, dangerous and have seized control."

A fellow Canadian, a Jewish psychotherapist also locked in the hotel, refused to leave until he could fly directly from San Francisco to Israel. He called Robert crazy when he suggested that they return to Canada together. "I know the fools that are out there. I've researched these groups for the past decade. You don't know who you're dealing with. You cannot reason with these people. Their belief in a highly combustible mix of extreme religious, social, and political views makes them extremely dangerous and incorrigible."

He continued to caution Robert, as he packed. "If you were Jewish, you'd realize the biblical significance of Abaddon seizing the Presidency and turning his science deniers, Righteous Rightists and other confederates loose to torture and brutalize the US. In Hebrew, the name Abaddon means place of destruction or the Destroyer and according to Revelations is the name of the angel of the Abyss. Now, in Revelations, when Abaddon blows his trumpet, the Abyss, which is described as a

great smoking pit, will open, and a horde of demonic locusts will rise out of it. These creatures will be given the power to torture any person who does not bear God's seal and the pain they inflict will be so intense that sufferers will wish to die. So as the ruler of the Abyss, Abaddon is the king of these demonic locusts or in our case, President of the science deniers, Righteous Rightists and other radical-right, evangelical buffoons."

As Robert hauled his bags to his rented driverless car, the psychotherapist followed and continued lecturing him. "Small towns spawn small minds. They're uneducated, ignorant, unemployed rural rubes who finally have some power, after years of being laughed at as the village idiot and dismissed. They are feckless failures and brainless bullies. And those are just the leaders. Worker bees in the movement tend to be much lower-educated. Abaddon is galvanizing militia members who truly think apocalypse is at hand. They see themselves as moving into a heroic domain, a higher purpose. So, I'm staying right here until I immigrate to Israel. I've no desire to die in a ditch or nailed to some Christian Militia's cross."

Unfortunately, although concerned, Robert had no choice at that time. All non-military airplanes were grounded, forcing him to traverse the three thousand miles between San Francisco and Canada by highway. It was a harrowing, horrifying six day ride. Remembering his earlier experiences with rural regressives in Kansas, he only traveled during the day and never left the main highway. But, despite his best efforts, he was still swallowed up in the Christian Militia and Posse Comitatus violence in rural areas of Nebraska and Iowa. Hate strangled the heartland.

Just outside of Grand Island, Nebraska, a local Christian Militia harassed him at their hastily erected check point on Interstate 80. Six morbidly obese, white men with Confederate battle flags sewn onto their shirts next to a cross forced Robert to exit his car. His new, driverless, electric car enflamed their hate for the robots and the computers replacing them. With hammers and boards, they unleashed their angry abuse on the rental car, denting and scratching it. Later, they laughed as they repeatedly slammed him against his now battered vehicle.

Because he is mulatto, the Militia accused him of being a rag-head Arab. With breath stinking so strongly of beer, cigarettes and pyorrhea that it made Robert's eyes water, they screamed and spit racial insults into his face. They rifled through his luggage and car tossing his clothes onto the pavement, and stepping on them while they searched. Looking for guns and drugs, they claimed, which Robert considered quite ironic. To him, it seemed that all of the guns in the US were in the hands of the militias and Conservative crazies and not with people like him. Finally, after an hour of abuse and battering, Robert was allowed to proceed. But, the militiamen only allowed him to reload the car and progress after he promised them he would leave America and not return. Ignoring the disappearance of the five hundred dollars inside his Canadian passport also helped facilitate his escape.

East of Iowa City near the town of West Branch, Robert encountered the local Posse Comitatus vigorously enforcing President Abaddon's edicts. His car was forced to stop by the side of highway by a dilapidated pick-up truck carrying four armed men in its truck bed. This time, the Posse Comitatus was not after him. They were clearing the highway so a convoy, which another battered pick-up truck was leading, could pass. Robert watched packed car after packed car pass. He noticed that all of the people riding in the cars appeared to be Asian or African. He also noticed that there were University of Iowa bumper stickers or University of Iowa parking stickers on the majority of the cars. Sadly, he concluded that even the University's staff had not escaped Abaddon's pogrom.

Although still squashed into a corner of his airline seat, a tremendous feeling of relief and exhilaration rushes through Robert as he recalls the moment when he finally passed through Point Edward into Canada. He remembers how, as he crossed the border into Canada, he had promised himself to never venture outside of the major cities of the US again, if ever he was foolish enough to enter the US again. But now, after eight additional years under Abaddon, the country has come to the cities. He understands that America's major cities are overrun by rural refugees attempting to escape the rampant crime and collapse of civil services in the countryside. Overrun by thousands of the poor, unskilled and unemployable, even Washington D.C. has grown very unfriendly to foreigners – Canadians included.

With increasing trepidation about re-entering the US, Robert returns his attention to the Intel report where he paused it.

*"...Abaddon also employed the Treason, Sedition and Subversive Activities laws to oust all Democratic Senators and Congressmen and any Republican Senators and Congressmen who were not members of his Righteous Rightists Republican wing. In a special election, conducted under especially restrictive voter qualification laws, members of the Righteous Rightists wing secured complete control of the US Congress. Four months after the suspect assassinations, Abaddon secured dictatorial control of the US."*

*"Having total control of the US government, Abaddon broadened his Treason, Sedition and Subversive Activities laws to include US companies and corporations. His American Christians First hiring laws specifically prohibited employing immigrants, non-Christians, homosexuals, unwed mothers, handicapped, etc. The list lengthened and changed each day, as he added new groups he considered enemies of his brand of Christianity. Corporation officers were given ninety days to comply with his hiring laws. If they did not comply within ninety days, all corporation officials would be arrested, corporation funds would be confiscated and all corporation property would be expropriated."*

*"Historians are identifying Abaddon's ninety day exodus order as the spark that ignited the quest for liberation from centuries-old, obsolete, Westphalian, land-nations by an increasing number of newborn Corporate Cyberstates. Others are proclaiming Abaddon's order as the start of today's Economic conflict pitting religion-politique ruled nations against independent secular corporate states. Abaddon has simply declared it a war between Christianity and Secular Humanism and he has vowed to take no prisoners."*

"Ignorance evicted intelligence," Robert cringes. He dreads returning to President Abaddon, the destroyer, and his demonic locusts' treacherous, post-apocalyptic world of intolerance, idiocy and hate. The theocratic Christian dictatorship sought by America's Evangelists for decades is now the law of the land of the no longer free. And it is Hell.



## Chapter 8.

### Dulles International

Fat Pat hesitates for a moment to shovel a large bag of potato chips into her gaping maw. Seizing this scarce second of silence, the passenger she has been haranguing tells her that as much as he is enjoying their conversation, he needs to review his arguments for his court appearance. Although, Robert has difficulty hearing the man over fat Pat's chip chomping, he learns that the man is attempting to recover property for an American company that moved its headquarters to Canada. Robert is familiar with the man's plight.

Robert recalls how years ago, while safely ensconced in his home in Toronto, he had watched Abaddon execute legalized larceny on a nationwide scale. It was the beginning of America's plunge into dystopia - a time of turmoil, troubles and terror. Abaddon's Christian-only laws created an immediate, massive exodus. US Multinationals and corporations rapidly transferred their funds to overseas banks and their officials to overseas headquarters. Foreign multinational corporations recalled their personnel and shuttered their US facilities. Corporate airplanes flew twenty-four hours a day airlifting officials and critical employees out of the US. Freight transporters, FedEx and UPS added airplanes and crews to respond to the demand for relocating materials and equipment.

Scarpering non-Christians, homosexuals, single women, naturalized US citizens, immigrant workers and anti-Abaddon US citizens jammed the highways into Canada and Mexico. Within two days, every room, every house, every trailer and every recreational vehicle in southern Canada was stuffed with Americans escaping Abaddon. Robert rented his two extra bedrooms to business associates from Detroit. They still live with him.

The value of Robert's properties quadrupled. Within ninety days, thousands of the best business minds, engineers, doctors, educators, scientists and researchers fled the US. California's Silicon Valley shriveled into silica valley – sand and tumbleweeds. Google, Amazon and the independent space satellite providers vacated the US. NASA soon meant Not A Spaceman Around.

Only corporations and companies lashed directly to US soil, such as mining, petroleum production, railroads, airlines and merchandisers remained. Fat Platte Pat's Wal-Mart remained, although many of its shelves remain empty of the Chinese products Abaddon banned. But even those organizations suffered a burgeoning brain drain.

Once the human knowledge and skill exodus started it did not stop for three years. The US economy collapsed. Then the world economy followed, cratering into a deep recession. Robert considers himself lucky to still have his renters to help him pay expenses.

Fat Pat shifts in her seat. Her plump, porcine posterior crushes Robert deeper into the bulkhead. He attempts to secure some space, but she is in silent slumber. Snoring and snorting. Although he is uncomfortable, he certainly does not want to wake her. He twists and squirms and creates a little more breathing room, allowing him to return to his SPEA review.

*"As with other US multinational corporation leadership, SPEA's President Dame Gutefrau refused to implement or abide by Abaddon's laws. With all of its plantations and production facilities outside of the US, SPEA had only its headquarters' staff in New York City to move to its newly completed artificial island. She and the officers of SPEA fled the US just ahead of more than one hundred SS Deacons storming their offices to arrest them. Thanks to Gutefrau, SPEA was in a far better position to escape than most corporations because she had the foresight to begin seasteading in Kiribati two years before.*

*"Gutefrau had insightfully recognized that it was becoming increasingly difficult to conduct business in America as Congress grew increasingly conservative and anti-science with Abaddon as Speaker of the House. She and Abaddon butted heads numerous times regarding his anti-climate-change and science denying policies, his anti-immigration policies, his GMO opposition, his anti-female statements, and his imposition of creationist studies in US schools. Abaddon combined bellicosity with arrogant ignorance. Gutefrau combined intelligence with acumen and realized it was advantageous to abandon the US two years before Abaddon's coup d'etat. She started preparing*

*SPEA to leave after she was dragged before Abaddon's congressional committee to answer questions about SPEA's hiring of immigrant scientists to conduct GMO research."*

The statement about Abaddon's hearings elicits Robert's memories of viewing some of his committee's public lynchings. In Canada, his hearings were compared to the Roman Catholic inquisition - tortuous. He was brutal. But he met his match when he subpoenaed Gutefrau. Known for enjoying being controversial and confrontational, Gutefrau relished antagonizing Abaddon during his hearings. Robert remembers how he enjoyed watching her publicly deride him and attack his antiquated, fundamentalist, evangelical beliefs. Thinking about those hearings reminds Robert of what Neil deGrasse Tyson once said, "The good thing about science is that it's true whether or not you believe in it."

The airplane hit an air pocket jerking Robert's attention away from his memories and back to the Intel report once again.

*"Following her confrontational hearings with Abaddon, Gutefrau started negotiations with the President of Kiribati to buy his nation. SPEA and the people of Kiribati were a perfect match, both of them needed to escape their current countries. Kiribati was quickly becoming swamped by rising seas and losing all its land territory to global climate change. SPEA needed a home free of Abaddon's onerous dictates. Always considering a problem as an opportunity for success, Gutefrau quickly went to work to once again take advantage of climate change for SPEA's benefit."*

*"As long ago as June 2008, the Kiribati President Anote Tong said that Kiribati had reached 'the point of no return.' He added, 'To plan for the day when you no longer have a country is indeed painful but I think we have to do that.' Kiribati officials asked Australia and New Zealand to accept Kiribati citizens as permanent refugees. Both countries declined. In April 2013, President Tong began urging citizens to evacuate the islands and migrate elsewhere. Years later, when SPEA told the Kiribati government it would buy their submerged and sinking islands, the desperate people still struggling to survive there were ecstatic to be saved. Some people buy an island. Gutefrau bought an island nation. She was quickly lauded with an immeasurable amount of international acclaim and good will for rescuing the people of Kiribati. She was also nominated for a Nobel Prize."*

*"Using Chinese engineers and workers, SPEA immediately started constructing an artificial island on columns fifteen feet above the semi-submerged island of Kiritimati. SPEA is knee deep in water while standing on solid ground. Experienced by having constructed several artificial islands in the South China Sea's Spratly Island chain, the Chinese proved skilled and adept. From a purely business point of view, Gutefrau recognized that the Chinese were close, convenient, experienced, fast and cheap. Using the newest 3D layered manufacturing equipment, nanotechnology, graphene, Geopolymer, self-repairing concrete and other composite materials, SPEA's beautiful new home quickly started rising from the sea like Botticelli's Venus - fully grown. Which is exactly what Gutefrau named the Earth's newest island - Venus."*

A video of Gutefrau speaking appears on his PCD. "SPEA must always be the innovator, the inventor, the imager, the pusher of the envelope. If you are just looking at the horizon, you are being short sighted. You must look over the horizon. You must..."

"Ping!" The voice of the pilot yanks Robert back to reality. "Flight attendants please prepare the cabin for landing. We are beginning our approach to Dulles airport."

The airplane glides smoothly down toward the tarmac. Outside his airplane window, two drones appear, escorting them to the tarmac. With a small shake and a bump the airplane's wheels roll onto the landing runway. Then the airplane ride turns rough. The airplane bounces and shakes as it taxis toward the terminal. Small pot holes, breaks and fissures scar the taxiway. Through his window, Robert notices airplane after airplane sitting at the airport gates. The US airlines are still grounded. With all of the gates filled with grounded airplanes, the only space left for the Canadian airplane is outside on the tarmac at the far end of concourse D.

Robert watches a motorized stairway and four uniformed men approach his airplane. As soon as the flight attendant opens the cabin door four armed SS storm inside the airplane. Loudly, they order all passengers to remain in their seats and to display their passports. Passenger by passenger, the SS inspects the offered identifications. Although, they carefully scrutinize every passenger, they appear to be searching for a particular individual. Slowly they proceed through the cabin. Near the

aft end, the SS grab a Hispanic appearing female passenger. Wrestling with her, they roughly drag her forward. One of the SS punches her several times when she locks her grip onto a seat and refuses to let go. After several minutes of screaming, biting and fighting, the SS and the woman finally exit.

Five minutes later, the captain releases the passengers. As Robert deplanes past the flight attendant, he inquires about the woman detained by the SS. The flight attendant shares that he heard the woman tell them she is a bioengineering professor returning from conducting research overseas. “When one of the SS noticed SPEA Amare Terra tea bags and a bag of SPEA Amare Terra coffee without tax stamps in her bag, they arrested her for possessing contraband and demanded that she deplane with them. When she refused, they forcibly hauled her off.”

“Yeah, I saw that. Is that normal?”

“This isn’t the first time that I’ve seen the SS come in and drag somebody away who is returning from SPEA,” the flight attendant tells Robert as he passes and heads down the steps.

Dragging his bag behind, Robert climbs the steps into the terminal building on his trip to customs. Behind him, fat Platte Pat squeals loudly about being forced to climb the steps because the elevator is out of order. Robert walks faster hoping to put as much distance between her and him as possible. Even though nearly jogging, he cannot help but notice how shabby and dilapidated the terminal appears. It is not just filthy. It is visibly decaying. He trips over a loose piece of duct tape that holds two pieces of frayed carpet together. He fails to notice the duct tape in the dusky concourse. Above him, only a few of the overhead lights burn brightly, other overhead lights flicker faintly, while many are burned out.

Robert remembers how impressed he was by this gateway to America when he last walked through Dulles. Less than a decade ago, Dulles was a proud symbol of the progress and power of the US. Dulles still symbolizes the US, but now it signifies its decline and putrefaction under Abaddon and his Conservative cronies. As he walks past one armed SS Usher after another, he also realizes how the airport embodies America’s increasing paranoia. Every SS stares at him and fingers their pistol.

Finally, Robert reaches Customs. In large fading and chipped letters *In God We Trust* is painted above the Customs kiosks. A woman in an SS uniform accepts his passport. She carefully compares his face and his passport image. “Are you Christian? Do you accept Jesus as your savior?”

“Uh...well yes, I guess,” Robert replies with surprise.

“How long do you plan to stay in the United States Mister Goodfellow?” Are you here for business or pleasure?” To Robert’s relief, the agent asks him some questions he expects.

“I’m here for business and I think only for two days,” Robert guesses.

The SS Customs agent returns his passport, “God bless you and have a blessed day.”

After retrieving his bag, Robert walks toward the airport exit, unsure of his next move. He wanders toward the car rental area when a fellow brushes past him hurrying toward the baggage claim area carrying a sign with his name on it.

“I’m Robert Goodfellow!” Robert shouts at the man.

“Oh good,” the man with the sign slides to a halt. “I was afraid that I missed you. There was a massive, food-shortage protest blocking highway 267. Third protest this week. All those people moving around in the street really messes with the mind of driverless cars. It just stopped and wouldn’t move until they cleared the protestors.”

“So the protest is over? Protestors are gone?” Robert asks as he joins the man walking at a trot through the airport’s lower level.

“Well, I expect that it’s over for today, but they’ll probably be back tomorrow. They protest somewhere every day now,” the man chuckles as he chatters. “Seems they’re not enjoying the trickle down from Abaddon’s resurrection of Supply Side trickle-down Economics on top of him chasing out all of the businesses. More than thirty percent unemployment leaves a lot of homeless, hungry families wandering aimlessly through the streets with nothing to do but protest. Lots of people living in the streets these days. Lots of hungry people.”

“In Canada, we define your trickle-down Economics as a rich, white man pissing off his mansion’s balcony onto the head of the working man below. Eventually, the rich man’s piss trickles down from the working man’s head to his feet making him wet and stinking. Of course now the rich,

white man feels good, because he's had a relieving piss. But, as usual, the working man has just been pissed on and feels pissed off."

Chuckling, the man suddenly halts and extends his hand, before returning to his constant chatter, "I'm Alfred, by the way. Alfred Newman. I am a SPEA embassy liaison. Just a part-time gig worker. I wish I was a citizen. I want to be a citizen, but I don't have the education or skills for SPEA."

Robert is surprised by his unexpected confession. "Oh, that's too bad. I'm not a SPEA citizen either." He attempts to console Alfred. "Why don't you return to school?"

As they approach the exit door, Alfred hands Robert a small oxygen mask. "You will probably need this since you aren't used to our polluted air here. Since Abaddon implemented the Carbon Rules that reopened the coal power plants, killed the EPA and repealed its regulations, we just keep getting smokier."

Robert's eyes immediately sting and begin watering as they exit the terminal. He dons his mask.

Alfred signals for his unmarked SPEA car to return from the waiting lot. "Anyway going back to school really won't help. SPEA isn't making any Americans into citizens now. The Ambassador says Americans can't be trusted. If we didn't leave the US eight years ago, then President Gutefrau says we're all too brain washed and too corrupted to benefit SPEA."

A driverless, electric car silently maneuvers between two waiting taxis and parks itself next to Robert and Alfred. Anger floods the faces of the two taxi drivers standing next to their old, empty cars. One bulky man takes a threatening step toward them.

"You'll want to hurry Mister Goodfellow. Taxi drivers can get violent. Driverless cars and rideshare services drove most of these guys out of business," Alfred urges nervously.

The passenger side door automatically opens. After helping Robert toss his bags into the back, Alfred motions for Robert to take a seat. "You're on your own now. You should arrive at the embassy within the hour. Well, that is if nobody commits suicide in front of you during the next hour anyway."

"What!" Robert backs away from the car.

"Oh, it happens all the time now. Don't let it bother you." Alfred again nervously motions for Robert to get into the car. "At least once or twice a day somebody throws themselves into traffic on the Capital Beltway or the Custis Memorial Beltway. Since Abaddon's take-over, the suicide rate, the divorce rate and the domestic abuse rates have all skyrocketed. No hope for the future anymore, I guess. No work. No money. No life. No reason to live. Anyway, if they don't land on a car or they don't cause a car crash then they just haul off the body and you're on your way. It's no big thing. Happens all the time. Just didn't want you to be too surprised."

Shaken, Robert slides into his seat. "Well thanks for the warning. I guess."

"Well you're not in Canada anymore, my friend." Alfred closes the car's door. "Welcome to Hell. Welcome to our live, living Hell. And you are welcome to it."

## Chapter 9.

### Under Surveillance - US

Robert's car maneuvers itself through the airport traffic and onto Highway 267, the Dulles Access Road. Similar to the Dulles runways, the access road is pitted by potholes, ruts and cracks. Trash swirls in the highway median and along the shoulders. Here and there a derelict vehicle sits abandoned. Enveloping it all is a grayish, stinking haze.

At each mile post his car passes a billboard advertises, *Big Rewards. Report un-American or non-Christian Activity*. Like vultures in the sky above him, Robert watches flocks of drones circling and encircling his car. He studies them closely, wondering who is operating these spy eyes in the sky. As Minister Wilson had told him, "When you are in the US you are constantly under surveillance. Indeed, US means under surveillance. Eyes and spies are everywhere."

Where Dulles Access Road passes over Leesburg Pike, Alfred's warning about suicides proves true. Half a mile ahead, Robert notices a rusty, battered pick-up truck broken down next to the guard rail of the overpass. Smoke rises from the truck's open hood. As his car nears the dead truck, a young man steps out from its front. The man shakes his fist toward the truck, turns, walks to the bridge railing and jumps over it. A few seconds later, Robert hears a crash below followed by squealing brakes. His driverless car never slows as it passes the burning truck. Neither do two other vehicles near him. He wonders as he passes, if they did not see the man jump or if they just do not care. A police drone arrives and hovers on-station above the abandoned and, now, blazing truck.

Just west of the Potomac River, Robert's car parks itself on the shoulder of the highway to allow a convoy of transports bearing Society Security markings and hauling advanced Robotic weapons to pass. As they roar into DC toward the White House and Capitol, he recognizes the weapons as the type he and the Cyber Defense Group controlled during the Nordic War. During the Nordic War the Cyber Defense Group named these weapons Chariots of Fire, because of their powerful lasers. They are sophisticated, mind-controlled, semi-autonomous, lethal, laser weapons capable of pin point targeting if operated correctly by trained ASDs such as Jay Hawk and Pion. But, having fought battles employing Chariots of Fire, Robert also knows that these same weapons can also lay waste to a block of buildings and kill hundreds of people in seconds if that is desired or erroneously programmed into them. He witnessed the obliteration of an entire Latvian town resulting from one moment of mental inattention. Only highly trained and extremely disciplined minds capable of intense focus can successfully operate these mind controlled super-weapons.

As the Chariots of Fire pass, he wonders. Who, if anybody, in the SS is trained or capable of effectively operating this highly technical and complicated equipment? And why is the SS controlling the weapons and not the US military. Obviously, Minister Wilson spoke accurately concerning Abaddon's distrust of the US military. The SS forces are operating as if they are as afraid of their own US military as of the Russians. So are the SS rushing to defend against a Russian assault or a US military coup? Perhaps both, Robert decides.

After the SS convoy passes, Robert's car crosses the Alexandria Aqueduct into the District of Columbia. He breathes a sigh of relief when he departs the highway and Alfred's highway suicides zone. But Alfred did not warn him about the growing number of Sist families living in vehicles, tents and shacks along the Capital Crescent Trail next to Canal Road Northwest. Signs declaring, *Lost Job to Robot* hang from several of the vehicles.

Cluttering the ground around the Sists' vehicles, tents and shacks, he notices piles of trash, small tree limbs and other debris. Muddy puddles of water stagnate in low spots through-out the camp. Evidently, the Potomac floods them so regularly that they no longer bother to remove the debris and rubbish. Despite the science-deniers preaching that it will never happen, rising river waters are slowly gnawing away Washington D.C.'s edges. The Sists squatters' villages do not end along the Capital Crescent Trail, but swell into Foundry Branch Valley Park, as well.

At the intersection where Foxhall Road Northwest meets Reservoir Road Northwest and Salem Lane Northwest, Robert realizes that driverless cars have a critical weakness. They cannot

anticipate criminal human actions. As his car enters the intersection, a woman throws herself into the rider's side of the car in front of him and then drops to the pavement screaming painfully. His car halts immediately while simultaneously transmitting signals alerting local police. From his left, two men pointing pistols run toward the driver ahead. In seconds, the driver scrambles from his car and scurries toward a nearby neighborhood. One of the gunmen shoots twice at the driver, who tumbles onto the sidewalk. Swinging their pistols around the intersection, while shouting threats to kill anybody who interferes, the two men and the woman clamber into the car. Moments later, the carjacking has been committed and the car is gone.

The street clears and Robert's car rolls through the intersection, as do all other vehicles. Again, no human-driven or driverless vehicles stop. Human drivers look away from the man squirming and bleeding on the concrete. Nobody appears to care. Or does nobody react because they fear the authorities more than the criminals? Robert wonders if any of the drones hovering above the intersection or an intersection camera recorded the incident. But, do the police care more than the public? He doubts it. Centuries before Aristotle taught that poverty is the parent of revolution and crime, and it is no truer than today, Robert thinks.

As he enters the residential neighborhood surrounding Foxhall Road Northwest, Robert begins seeing crippled panhandlers holding signs saying, 'Homeless Nordic War Veteran'. Many of the houses lining the street are empty, faded and decaying. In front of one abandoned house, a man, a woman and three small children in tattered, dirty clothing squat on the cracked, weedy sidewalk behind a large piece of dirty cardboard declaring that they are a *Homeless Hungry Christian Family*. Everywhere the signs and stench of desperation assault him.

Finally, Robert's car exits Foxhall Road and turns onto the SPEA Embassy compound street. At the intersection of Foxhall Road Northwest and the Embassy's street, two rotund protestors overflowing well-worn lawn chairs shake hand-written signs at him with the message *Bring Back Our Jobs* on them. Both men wear holstered revolvers buried in their bulging bellies. But, Robert does not fear them shooting him. Their fat folds envelope the top of their holsters obstructing access to their weapons. Robert imagines that they will gut themselves before they can shoot him.

The two men shake their signs, but do not budge from their maximally stressed lawn chairs. Exerting all of his strength, one man tosses a half-empty container of a chemically caffeine charged and sweetened beverage against the side of Robert's car. The container bounces off the car's door and springs back toward its thrower, clattering and rolling into a pile of fast food bags, wrappers and more containers surrounding their feet. White trash.

Across the street from the protestors an old, rusting car is parked within its own encircling litter and trash. Brown tobacco spit-stains dribble down its doors. Above its rear windows, on metal coat hangers duct taped between the window glass and roof, flutter tattered and filthy Confederate flags.

As his car nears it, Robert notices two men sitting in the front seat of the parked car. He assumes they are some of the many unemployed who receive extra benefits for conducting unofficial surveillance - basically, intimidation. He also wonders who is watching who. Are they watching the protestors or him or both?

He promptly learns they are watching him when they roll their car into the street blocking him. The man on the rider's side lowers his window and points a pistol at Robert.

"Show me some identification!" Rider-man shouts and then spews a brown stream of spittle toward Robert's car. Most of his spit splatters against the top of his own window and onto his tightly-stretched, filthy, sleeveless T-shirt.

Robert lowers the car's windshield, activates his passport and extends it.

The man squints and leans forward. "Why are you here?"

"Business!" Robert responds.

An intense discussion erupts between the two men and continues for several minutes. His patience gone, Robert taps the car's horn. Rider-man jerks and irritably shakes his pistol. Leaning past his partner, the driver photographs Robert using an outdated digital camera. After waiting several more minutes, the two men slowly back their car out of the street and wave for him to

proceed. They keep their eyes glued to Robert as he passes. He presumes they are endeavoring to intimidate him. They fail.

A twelve foot high barrier wall and security gate block the Embassy compound street. His car stops in front of the Embassy's security gate. Two robotic security scanners shaped like huge Cs slide around his car mechanically peering above, below, behind, in front and through his car for anything and everything which should not be inside Robert or the car. Their search complete, the security scanners slide backward and the Embassy gate opens.

Once within the compound's barrier walls, Robert discovers the SPEA philosophy of total, self-contained autonomy, complete self-sufficiency, and independent sovereignty designed and constructed into every corner of its Embassy. Initially, he notices solar panels and wind generators built into the building's roof and walls. Above the compound, he spies WASP security drones continuously circling. On the ground, four DOGs roll around the compound's perimeter. A robotic, electric lawnmower slowly trims the grass next to the Embassy building. A car similar to the one delivering Robert waits in a small parking lot in front of the building. There are no humans visible.

The car stops and Robert's door opens with a hiss. Noticing the smog has lifted and the air is clear, he slips off his oxygen mask and sucks in a deep breath. As soon as he steps out of the car, a security guard robot approaches him. The head of the robot elevates to Robert's height. "Look into the facial recognition, retinal scanner sir," the security guard robot directs.

"Welcome Robert Goodfellow. Please follow me." The robot proceeds toward the Embassy building's blast proof door. As the robot nears the building, the door slowly slides open and allows them to enter. Robert steps inside and the door closes behind him. He scans the room and sees no humans. But, he does see a humanoid female robot standing behind a table, which startles him for a moment. Standing behind the table is a robotic-humanoid Dame Gutefrau.

"Hello Mister Goodfellow. May I serve you a cup of coffee, or a cup of tea, or a cup of cocoa?" the Gutefrau-bot offers in a computerized facsimile of Gutefrau's voice.

"Coffee? Oh, I'd love some coffee. I haven't had real coffee for years. Of course, some tea or cocoa will also be good. If you have it?" Robert answers excitedly.

"Of course we have coffee," a man with a South African accent declares from behind Robert. "Supplying the world's best coffee, tea and chocolate is SPEA's claim to fame and why we are thriving."

Robert spins around to see a tall, thin Black man walking toward him following a self-propelled table of food and three, liquid containers. The man is covered from throat to toe in a felt, energy-generating suit. Beside the man, a robot transports a similar suit.

"Hello Robert. I am Ambassador Kwari Freeman." Freeman and the table pause in front of Robert. "Here you must try these biscuits with your coffee or tea or chocolate. We just printed them using some new recipes we received from the capital this morning. I know you haven't eaten for six hours so you must be hungry. I believe you will find them quite tasty and they are high in protein. Please try some."

Ambassador Freeman speaks the truth. Robert is indeed starving. He also correctly describes the food. It is delicious. Robert devours three biscuits. Then, he washes them down with cup after cup of coffee. While Robert sates his hunger and quenches his thirst, Ambassador Freeman waits and watches silently.

Freeman enjoys Robert's enjoyment. "Now you know how SPEA earned revenues exceeding the equivalent of five hundred and twenty three billion dollars last fiscal year. We are reaping a rich reward by taking advantage of climate change and creatively converting it into foods the rich cherish."

Freeman points to the wall behind Robert. "What you see on the wall there, that's our motto. We don't want SPEA to be just a business. We want to be a steward for humanity. 'Salvabit modo scientia futuri saeculi - only science will save the future world' - is the foundational principle of SPEA. It's also words we live by."

Robert wolfs down another biscuit and chugs more coffee.

"I believe we should use you in our marketing campaigns," Freeman jokes. He hands the additional felt energy-generating suit to Robert. "Here are some clothes we printed for you."

As he accepts the clothing, Robert surveys the building's interior. "Are we the only people here? Do you work here by yourself?"

"I suppose it appears that way, doesn't it? But, no. There are two other SPEA citizens who also live in the Embassy compound and work with me. Today they are your flight crew. They're working in our hangar at the Washington National Airport. They're waiting for the SS Colonel."

Freeman points toward Gutefrau-bot. "Now in the US, it's just easier and better to employ as many robots as possible. With robots, we don't have to worry about Abaddon's Christian-only employment laws. Robots have no religion. That's why every multinational corporation that has returned to operate in the US in the last seven years has only returned as a direct foreign investment and replaced every human worker possible with a robot. Even when he begged corporations to return and promised to exempt certain workers, every company that could, installed robots. Nobody trusts him. Millions of American workers remain unemployed now because of Abaddon's Christians-only and no-immigrants employment laws."

Freeman pours himself a cup of tea. He sips and smirks. "I know you know, that many corporations are still maintaining their headquarters outside the US for fear that Abaddon will change his mind again. Or start another Nordic petroleum war with Russia. At SPEA we say, one day Abaddon is praying on his Bible, the next day he is preying on you. So, SPEA has only returned to the US with this Embassy and its aircraft."

"Ah, this is excellent tea. I'll have no trouble moving this shipment," Freeman swirls the tea in his cup. "See Robert, being the SPEA Ambassador is just my title. My real job, and what I love doing, is marketing and sales. The US is my territory. And let me tell you, I am...well SPEA...is having a good year. A very good year."

"Oh how US top ten percenters cherish their coffee, tea and chocolate." Freeman winks knowingly at Robert. "But you know, even more than the taste, I think they really delight in knowing that they are the only ones who can afford it. Especially since Abaddon imposed his import quotas. Makes drinking coffee or tea a status symbol. A luxury that only the rich can afford and no Sists can. I've noticed that the more expensive it is, the more coveted it is. My simple marketing campaign is basically assuring the rich that if they buy our products, they will be better than their neighbor."

"Why, I have quintupled my price and I still sell every ounce. Of course, with Abaddon's destruction of the US Economy causing devaluation of the dollar and a soaring inflation rate, those are natural price increases. But still, it's pure profit, since we sell only through electronic commerce companies like Amazon in the mobile-enabled marketplace. We just grow it and show it." Smiling broadly, Freeman sips some more tea.

Robert snickers, "Rather ironic isn't it, that the easiest way to make money is to take advantage of Abaddon and his cronies' refusal to admit that the scientists are correct and the climate is changing? Climate change deniers are the ones suffering the most now. In Canada, we just marvel at how their arrogant ignorance is destroying the US Economy."

"Here at SPEA we call it the Pied Piper syndrome. Some demagogue sings them an absurdly, senseless, anti-science song and all the ill-informed and oblivious blindly trail him to their deaths. The US has become a dictatorship of ideologues leading the ignorant."

Robert raises his cup as if offering a toast. "Well you know Isaac Asimov said that the saddest aspect of life right now is that science gathers knowledge faster than society gathers wisdom. But like SPEA, in Canada, we are booming because of him, too. The number of former US corporations now in Canada just keeps growing. Tripled, when he doubled their taxes to pay for his Nordic War escapade. Toronto and Montreal are actually suffering overcrowding from American businesses."

"Which is exactly why he recently enacted the new Strategic Industries Retention Act. Under the SIR Act any corporate leaders caught attempting or even discussing relocating any part of their organization out of the US are seditionists. Their company's assets are confiscated and they're imprisoned for treason."

"Sounds like Abaddon is getting desperate. But, it may be too late. His social laws and immigration laws have already driven hundreds of businesses over the borders. Not many left to leave."



“Yeah, but our problems are not just with Abaddon’s continuously changing Christian-only laws. It’s also about security and self-sufficiency. No doubt you noticed our flying and rolling robot guards. Did you also notice our solar panels?”

“Yes, I noticed them. How could I miss them?” Robert pours himself a cup of cocoa. “Seems a little excessive to me. After all, you’re in the US and you’re an Ambassador in an Embassy of an independent state.”

“Being in the US is exactly why we have all of this security. Because we know Abaddon hates us so much, this Embassy compound has to be more independent, self-supporting and spy proof than our capital on Venus.”

Freeman points toward the food and drink table, “All of this is created inside the compound’s walls. We take in no city water. We release no sewage or trash. We follow a simple rule, if you create no waste you have no waste to eliminate. We cannot allow any opportunity for the SS to sneak in a spy bug for sousveillance.”

“When you walk on the floor tiles you are not only generating electrical power, but activating security tracers as well.” Pointing at a floor tile, Freeman taps his toe on it, “If you aren’t who you are, the floor tiles alert us. If you aren’t where you’re supposed to be, the floor tiles alert us about that too. Get used to them. You’ll walk on them at every SPEA facility.”

“And the solar panels outside aren’t just providing energy, they’re also providing us with aerial observation and electronic surveillance blocks. Additionally, those same solar panels enable us to ionize and purify all of our air inside this compound to prevent any possible transmission of germs or bacteria.” Freeman sucks in a deep breath of air, “Good, clean, breathable air is rare and hard to find in America these days. Since Abaddon allowed the Kroack brothers to close down the EPA to stop the carbon collapse, air pollution has increased ten-fold.”

“You make it sound like you are under constant attack...under siege, by ground, underground and by air.”

“That’s because we are.” Freeman empties his tea cup and sets the cup on the table. “Not just from Abaddon’s SS either. No doubt you saw the weighty watchers outside our walls.”

“Oh yeah, I saw them. They stopped me, too.”

“How would you like a dozen of them sitting outside your house? Or, worse yet, attempting to rob your house? They are some of Abaddon’s proselyte paupers. With no work and no money, they have turned to a type of protection-racket extortion for survival. They burglarized my home in Georgetown one night and the next morning demanded that I pay them protection money to prevent it from happening again that night. So, I moved inside our embassy compound. Same situation for all foreign embassy staffs these days.”

“No help from the local police? I hear they’re corrupt, but still...”

“Oh the police can be even worse. And then there is the SS.” He chuckles to himself. “We often say that US conservatives have pledged that what they cannot control, they will destroy. Since SPEA has escaped and they can no longer control us they desperately want to destroy us. I often compare our situation to the old China and Taiwan relationship with SPEA being Taiwan.”

An expression of pain contorts Robert’s face. “You know Ambassador, I would love to continue our discussion, but I have had a lot of coffee and I really need...”

“Say no more. I understand,” Freeman smiles knowingly. “Please follow our personal care robot to the locker-hygiene room where you can set your coffee free. Shower and then please change into this suit. We will meet in my office after that. Now that the hospitality portion of our visit is complete. It is time we get to work.”

## Chapter 10.

### Head Start

Refreshed and dressed and feeling quite a caffeine buzz from all of the coffee he just drank, Robert is escorted by the personal care robot into Freeman's office. He finds Freeman ensconced in a plush media chair enjoying watching a hologram of a large man arguing with a SPEA robot security guard.

"Come here Robert and watch this. This is sadly hilarious." Freeman motions for Robert to join him, "I have never experienced an adult angrily argue with a robot for more than thirty minutes before. Doesn't he realize that robots do not argue and therefore you cannot win an argument with a robot? Nobody ever wins an argument with a robot. Nobody. Ever."

"So who is this Luddite fool?" Robert sees no difference between the man badgering SPEA's security-bot and fat Pat. They could be brother and sister.

"This Luddite fool, as you're appropriately labeling him, is Mack Evoil, your new partner and traveling companion. He is a retired US Marine Corps Colonel who is now a Society Security Colonel or as they call themselves now, Deacon."

Freeman points at the hologram. Shaking his finger and loudly bellowing at the SPEA security-bot is a burly, brutish, braying bully. Convinced that he will win his argument if he just yells loud enough, this bombastic brute continuously screams louder and louder at the security-bot.

"Oh crap." Robert lowers his head and slowly shakes it in resignation. He has worked with US Marines before. Evoil epitomizes every senior US Marine officer he has ever had the misfortune of encountering. He is a Luddite who simply does not understand the modern world where he lives. He is covering his ignorance and incompetence by loudly barking, berating and bullying. "Well, he certainly exemplifies the old saying that in America - military intelligence is a contradiction in terms."

"You said it. I didn't. Although, I am certainly thinking it."

"So what is his major complaint?"

"Well actually, he seems to have several complaints. He doesn't want to wear the clothing we printed for him. He doesn't want to give us his communication devices. He wants to take his armaments. But his biggest complaint is that we will not allow him to wear his religious ornaments, baubles and beads."

"I can already see that he is going to be a significant problem." Robert studies Evoil as he continues to quarrel with SPEA's security-bot. "Since SPEA and the US are on far less than amicable terms, why don't you just send him away? Tell him he can't go?"

"Fear," Freeman declares. "Fear."

Freeman gestures at a three-dimensional, live, satellite visual of the SPEA capital on its artificial home island of Venus. "Do you see these two blue-gray ships here? Those are US Navy ships. Abaddon keeps at least two Navy combat ships patrolling around the edge of SPEA's twelve mile territorial waters. Abaddon says his ships are there for our protection. But, we know they are listening and watching and waiting for a reason...any excuse to come in and..." Freeman makes air quotes, "...help us."

"Like the US helped the Estonians and Lithuanians, I suppose. Now, that is a terrifying thought. Almost destroyed those little countries by helping them. I saw too much of Abaddon's so called help during his Nordic War. The only people that he helped there was himself and his cronies Chennai, LeVayne and the Kroack Brothers get rich. They helped themselves to massive war profits and oil profits with thousands of US soldiers paying their highest price. Just as Jean-Paul Satre wrote, 'when the rich wage war it is the poor who die'."

"Absolutely correct, Robert. The Nordic War was strictly an Economic war designed to push Kroack's excess petroleum onto Europe, enrich the Kroacks and impoverish Russia. Today's conflict between Abaddon and SPEA is all about Economics, as well. That's why Gutefrau terrifies Abaddon. Every organization she leads out of the US sends him deeper and deeper into the

Economic toilet. Without Gutefrau and SPEA to lead them many may still be in the US. Abaddon considers destruction of SPEA as his salvation.”

“So George Orwell was correct when he wrote that war against a foreign country only happens when the moneyed classes think they are going to profit from it,” delighted with himself, Robert smiles at Freeman.

Ignoring him, Freeman again points toward the satellite projection. “Another player and problem popped up in our drama just recently, when these three Russian Navy ships arrived. Sometimes they’re trailing and harassing the US ships and then at other times the Russians pose their own threat to us. They like to play a game of Chicken, speeding toward our twelve mile limit and then veering off at the last moment. It’s like they’re testing us. Constantly testing us.”

“So what are they testing? The years of military in me wants to know what you have for defense. Do you have anything for defense? Or is the US Navy correct when it says it must protect SPEA? After all, as I understand it, even though it’s an independent state, SPEA is still basically a corporation.”

“I can’t divulge everything,” Freeman winks conspiratorially. “But SPEA does have both air and sea defenses. We are working closely with the Israeli Defense Forces to deploy a significant drone air force and maritime force. We don’t have enough people to simultaneously operate the SPEA Corporation worldwide while simultaneously defending SPEA properties worldwide. So we’re paying the IDF to turn our island of Venus into a porcupine. We don’t want to fight, but if anybody attacks us they will suffer great pain. So...”

Stepping close to Robert, Freeman whispers, “...now this is what I have heard and it may only be a rumor that SPEA wants to spread, but then it may also be true. Anyway, just between you and me, I understand that the Israelis have started sending us LAWS.”

“Lethal Autonomous Weapons?” Robert repeats his question in shock, “SPEA has Lethal Autonomous Weapons?”

Freeman motions for Robert to lower his voice. “I will neither confirm nor deny that SPEA has LAWS. But even if we do...and I’m not saying we do. Remember, we are being forced into it. We will do what we must do. Just like the Israelis. Nobody understands our situation better than the Israelis. They live it every day. We and Israel are small states with more money than people. And nobody understands better than the Israelis that we must do what we need to do to survive. It’s just a pity that we have to waste so much of our money just to be free to believe in science instead of superstition.”

With every minute, Robert encounters additional unexpected challenges and complications arising in his mission. When he left Canada, he never expected to be stepping into the middle of a possible hot shooting war between America and Russia. A shooting war that may potentially involve SPEA employing Israeli produced self-directing, dehumanized, killer robots and drones. He thinks to himself about how different the situation at the Embassy is from what Minister Wilson predicted.

Robert notices that Freeman’s hands are trembling. “So, as you can see, SPEA is dancing on the tip of a pin, trying to maintain a very delicate balance. SPEA survives by operating totally independent of all other nations and states while providing the rich elite of those same nations with the coffee, tea and chocolate that they can only get from us. In the past, that provided us with the balance and protection we needed.”

“But now, we are in a most difficult situation.” Freeman begins pacing nervously, “If we ally with the US, Russia will destroy us. If we ally with Russia, the US will help us until they’ve destroyed us. Yet, if we don’t assist both the US and Russia and stop their race toward another war, then we are still facing destruction. All of us.”

“Especially since both Russia and the US seem to believe that SPEA’s Mugavus Komfort and Pion are somehow involved.” Robert adds, as he watches the ships of Russia and US maneuver near Venus.

“Especially!” Freeman rubs his temples. “And don’t forget about something called AIDAS. Not certain what AIDAS is, but I’ve been told that it’s important. Very important.”

“And that puts me?”

“That puts you in the middle of a raging firestorm with a teaspoon of water.” Freeman returns his gaze to Evoil continuing to disagree with SPEA’s security-bot. “Do you understand, now, why we must allow him to accompany you? He will accompany you, but he must follow our rules. That is essential. There will be no argument there.”

He thinks for a moment then continues. “We need you to be on everybody’s side and nobody’s side at the same time. You are both a player and a referee, and all the while, you’re responsible for keeping everybody from killing each other.”

“Well thank you, but I don’t think I’m the type of person you need for this job. I mean I know I’m not...” Robert frantically searches for an escape hatch, “...I mean I appreciate your confidence and support, but...”

“Oh but, we’re giving you more than just our confidence and support Robert. I know for a fact that the Russians have already contacted SPEA’s Embassy in Moscow, but that our people there have been told to stall and delay them. So, you need to hurry down to Washington National and hustle your new best friend onto our waiting airplane for your trip to Venus. In the current situation, we are giving you the only thing we can give you. So don’t waste it. We’re giving you a head start.”

**KEEP READING**