

ENDLESS FIRE
Limos Lives
SAMPLE

By
R E Kearney

Also by R E Kearney

Future Furies

Aethon Arises

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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.*

Acknowledgments

Many thanks and my sincere appreciation to Tim Flanagan and his associates at Novel Design Studio www.noveldesignstudio.com for their cover design, social media production and all of their other assistance coordinating the publication of this book.

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“Can you commit suicide if you have no life left?” Rube wonders as he climbs the ladder steps.

Stiff rope bristles stab into his throat as he drags the noose around his neck. He slides his makeshift slip knot snug against the base of his skull. With three tugs, he frees most of his scraggly, scruffy beard from the rope’s grip. Carefully, he plucks free his whiskers ensnared in the noose and watches them sail away in the wind.

Reaching down, he pats his pistol and holster on his hip. It has been his only companion and best friend since his father died. His father gave him the replica 1873 single action army Colt for his sixteenth birthday. Tugging on his holster belt, he centers the belt’s buckle below his belly button. He screws his grimy, sweat encrusted cap onto his shoulder length, tangled and filthy hair.

“Must be the handsome, masculine man for the flies and vultures.” Rube sneers, as he smooths his beard. He chuckles at his sad reality. How he appears now will not matter soon. Chances are almost zero that anybody will find his body swinging from this tree before the vultures and maggots strip his bones clean.

Two vulture shadows dance on the ground around him. The big, hungry birds are circling - watching and waiting. Soon he will descend from man to carrion. Meat to eat. Feasting on the dead is the only way to survive out here.

He glances skyward to guarantee his aged, worn, lariat is strung tight around the limb above him. He tugs hard on his old, rodeo-days rope, just as he did years ago when lassoing calves in rodeo competitions. Above him, the dead cottonwood tree’s limb creaks, but does not bend. He considers that reassuring.

For his final earthly act, Rube examines his desert dry, heat baked land one last time. Standing atop this ladder on the highest spot in the area, he is able to survey much of the farm his father gave him after his father gave it to him. Dead. Lifeless.

This cottonwood tree that his father planted to honor him on the day he was born has withered and died, succumbing to the relentless sun and heat. When his father died, he planted him about three feet to the left of his tree. It is in respect to his father that Rube has chosen to die here, too.

“Am I a coward to kill myself papa or should I keep trying?” Rube poses his question to his dead father’s dead tree.

As if in answer, a swirling funnel of stinging sand and straw spins past him. He watches it tear across sun charred clumps of dead wheat stalks ripping them from the ground, shredding and hurling them skyward. For too many years, the only thing Rube has been able to raise on his family’s farm are these dust devils.

Whirling, twisting eruptions of hope-killing dust dance across parched plains. The inferno heat and eternal winds have sucked the life out of his land and the life out of him. The dust devil dives and dips and disappears, dumping debris on the bitter end of Rube’s farm, inches away from a tall, wind-breaking fence.

“Forgive me father...,” Rube whispers into the howling wind. Silently, he bows his head for a moment. Then he jerks upward stabbing an angry, shaking finger straight ahead, shouting, “...but, damn and destroy that corporate farm for it has killed me.”

Sucking in a deep breath, his final breath, Rube closes his eyes. It is time to end his time. He slams his right foot backward knocking the small step ladder supporting him crashing to the ground. He drops. The rope tightens around his neck. He chokes. He cannot breathe. He is strangling.

Pain! Too much pain! Dying hurts too much! Kicking his feet and swinging wildly, he grabs the rope above his head and yanks himself up.

Snap!

“Aw, crap!” Rube plunges, smashing his back into the toppled ladder’s legs. Six feet of rough, stiff, dry-rotted rope drops onto his face.

Crack!

Rube jerks his eyes to the sky, just as the tree limb breaks loose. Bam! It plunges, crushing his left ankle. Screaming in pain, he pounds his fists into the dry dust. Wind whips the grit into his eyes and up his nose.

Coughing and choking, he angrily hollers into the whirling wind, “Aaaah! I’m such a miserable failure. I can’t even kill myself.”

Groaning and bleeding, Rube wrestles free of the step ladder’s legs. Exasperated, he loosens and yanks the noose off his neck. The rope snares his beard whiskers tearing them from his chin and throat. Blood oozes from his rope ripped throat. His back throbs. Beneath the heavy branch, his trapped, snapped ankle aches.

He begins to rise, but then retreats. Frustrated with himself and his life, he slumps back onto the ground defeated. As he lies in the dust, scowling skyward into the burning sun, Rube’s pain, shame and mortification at failing to hang himself, slowly transforms into a revelation. An epiphany!

“I didn’t die for a reason!” he exclaims into the wind. “There must be a plan for me. Something important for me to do. That’s why I didn’t die. It’s a message. I’ve been saved to destroy these corporate thieves.”

With powdery dirt blinding him, he twists and turns and struggles until he finally sits up. He brushes his face. His vision is blurry, but he can see. He hates what he sees. It mocks him. One hundred yards ahead of him, behind a twelve-foot high, solar-electrified, security fence and wind barrier, a sea of thin yellowing stems of ripening, speed-breeding, genetically-modified Kernza ripples in the breeze.

Rube watches the corporate farm’s fleet of agriculture aerorobots flitter inches above the Kernza and just below the protective overhead of far-red-spectrum, speed-breeding, LED lights. Occasionally, a stream of liquid is injected into the Kernza roots from one of the agribots. The agribot flies a little farther before injecting again.

When construction crews from the Society Preserving Endangered Agriculture began building the Chinese owned corporate farm, Rube spent hours watching and interrogating them. He learned that hyper-spectral sensors on the drones are able to detect minute differences in the plants’ health and needs. The SPEA technicians demonstrated to him that by constantly reading the condition of each square inch of Kernza, the agribots inject enriched water or enzymes called phytases or microbiomes just where they are needed when they are needed in the amount they are needed without waste.

Rube’s sweat is the only water he can provide his plants. He cannot irrigate. His wells suck polluted saltwater out of the depleted Ogallala Aquifer. On the corporate farm, SPEA technicians installed water structures that extract gallons of fresh water from thin, dry air.

Rube’s seeds die baked inside his concrete-hard, sterile ground. No life-giving life - no microbial communities live in his active-carbon depleted soil. His overuse of fertilizers and pesticides combined with high heat and drought killed them. And without microbes, his soil is not fertile and his seeds do not sprout. SPEA’s genetically-modified, fast-maturing, perennial Kernza produces four crops a year through the sweltering heat and drought in biologically-engineered, microbe-restored soil.

Rube despises those agribots, but he loathes that corporate farm more. His scorn is born of jealousy and embarrassment. He was born to a farmer, who was born to a farmer, who was born to the farmer who settled this land. Farming like his father and his father’s father is all he ever desired to do and all he knows how to do. He never wanted to learn anything else, so he never bothered to learn anything.

With a bitter taste of humiliation, Rube remembers applying then begging to work on their futuristic farm. The SPEA technicians just smiled and shook their heads. “You have no skills. You have no education. Your time is past. You’re not needed. This farming operation is all autonomous and cyber. No humans. It is a no-man land.”

He is mortified because they were correct. His time is past. Drones and robots succeed while he fails. They grow while he dies.

“I will destroy you!” Rube shouts at the busy, buzzing agribots, “I’ve been saved to obliterate you! You demons of the devil!”

Yanking his Colt from its holster, he angrily fires at the flying agribots. He shoots wildly and quickly empties his revolver. Nothing is hit. No damage is done. This is not his first attempt to shoot down the agribots and, as before, he only succeeds in wasting some of his few, remaining bullets. Shaking his head in resignation, he slowly holsters his pistol.

Cursing under his breath, he collapses into a heaving heap of his dust.

LAND LOST

“Why are you laughing, Nóngmín? What is so funny?”

“Come over here Chǎng. Come watch that crazy cowboy living west of speed-breeding cereal plant K117.” Young, global-quantum-internet, Chinese technician, Nóngmín, motions for his team member to join him at his bank of security images.

“Why? What is he doing now? Is he shooting at our speed-breeding lamps and agribots again? I don’t understand why he wastes his bullets. He never hits anything.” Chǎng ambles away from her monitoring station to join Nóngmín.

“Of course, Chǎng, he is always shooting at our agribots. That’s what American cowboys do. They shoot at things...everything. But, I think he tried to kill himself before that.”

“By shooting?”

“No, by hanging. I think. Watch this security MPEG . He is such a sad flop...a true Shǎzi.”

As if watching a comedy show, the two security monitors snicker and snort as they review Rube’s futile, sad, suicide attempt.

“Access the database, Nóngmín. Is this the farm land that Nóngyè Corporation just annexed? I think he is the farmer that lost it. Had it...what do they call it in the US...uh...reclaimed.”

“Yes, the US territories authority reclaimed it some years ago. Just forgot about it until SPEA claimed it as abandoned property. In three days, it will be added to K117.”

Nóngmín and Chǎng return to observing live security surveillance of Rube.

“Why is he still lying on the ground? Is he hurt?” Chǎng slides closer to better see the visuals. “Can you enlarge the image?”

Waving his hand across the control sensors, Nóngmín amplifies the visuals. He focuses on Rube’s face. He is obviously in intense pain.

“Should we dispatch a medical relief drone?” He asks, stepping toward another grouping of control sensors.

“No. You know we aren’t allowed to interfere. It’s against our corporate charter.”

“But, what if he dies?”

“Then he dies. Isn’t that what he wanted anyway? So he dies. He should be happy.” Chǎng leans toward the visuals to study Rube more closely. “Besides, he is a nobody. He’s not one of ours and our corporate charter says we’re not allowed to interfere.”

“So, we just watch him lie there and die?”

“Yes, we watch him lie there. Deciding to die or not to die is up to him.”

ROAD TRIP

With streams of sweat streaking across his dust caked face and burning his eyes, Rube gives up on death. Just too unpleasant. From the dirt, he rises. He strains to raise the broken tree limb and free his shattered left ankle. After several attempts, he finally succeeds. But, the effort drains him.

Breathing heavily while leaning on the step ladder, he heaves his two hundred and sixty-two pounds into a half-standing, half-kneeling stance. His sweat soaked clothes cling to every mound and crease composing his five foot eight inch roundness. As he begins his excruciating, half-mile trudge toward his trailer, he wonders how long he can survive in this sun before heat and thirst kills him. Not very long, he calculates, so he hobbles forward faster.

Rube finds no relief inside his oven-hot, airless trailer. His ancient air-conditioner expired five months before this mid-December heat wave hit. He cannot afford to replace it. But, since a tornado wiped out his area's main electrical powerline four months ago, a broken air-conditioner is not his only problem. Rube has had no working refrigerator or stove since September, as well.

Nobody residing in these wastelands of the Desert Plains is capable of repairing the powerline, and outsiders are reluctant to venture near. Wise, Climate refugees migrating north out of the scalding South Morasses stay clear, traveling in designated safe strips either east or west of the Desert Plains. Criminals choose to die in prison rather than attempt an escape into these wastelands. The Desert Plains are a population desert.

Rube lives in the nowhere far from anywhere. Hugging the eastern slope of the Rocky Mountains and stretching from Canada to Mexico is a three hundred mile wide crescent of drought-dried, hard-packed dirt designated the Desert Plains or as he calls it, the deserted plains. During the period of Dissolution, when the United States disintegrated into the loose, bickering Mid-North America confederation of twelve Metrostates, eight independent Sovereign States, the forty-two states of the Federation of United States and nineteen FUS administrated territories, the Desert Plains fell into a void. Nobody claims them. Nobody funds them. Everybody ignores them.

Any person who could, escaped to a Metrostate or Sovereign State years ago leaving Rube alone and lonely. Shirley, the woman he met through an online dating service only for Rurals, stayed less than six months before running away to civilization. She moved in, drained him of his money and credit, and then disappeared in the middle of the night more than twenty years ago.

Drinking excessively at the time, he was so drunk that he did not realize she was gone for two days. Dumping the trash, after she had gone, he discovered her discarded pregnancy test stick. Her test was positive. She was pregnant. He had always wanted children – a son, especially. He yearned for family. Broke and broken, he never recovered.

Out here, you are alone and on your own. Abandoned, forsaken and forgotten is the only way to describe Rube's zone of the Desert Plains. He doubts that anyone is aware that he lives or exists anymore. You do not die here, you vaporize.

To escape his trailer's stifling heat, Rube hurriedly grabs his personal communication device, all of his remaining ammunition and the keys for his antique truck off his table. Leaning on his hunting rifle for support, he hobbles outside. Waving his outdated PCD above his head, he searches, but finds no signal. He has no battery power, either. But then, he knows nobody would travel out this far or dispatch an ambulance drone to fly this far to help him, even if he could signal someone.

For medical help, Rube must drive the one hundred and fifty-three miles to the Lymon outpost where he believes a small synchronous-interactive medical clinic operates. It is the only medical facility outside of the Denver Metrostate. He hopes his cranky, old pick-up can travel that far. Otherwise, there is just no help to be had. Except for the scant possibility of one or two fellow, failed farmers, it is deserted between here and Lymon.

Climbing into his elevated, four-by-four truck has never been easy. Today, with his injured ankle, it is especially challenging. First, he unbuckles and shoves his pistol and holster inside.

Hopping on his right foot, he lifts his rifle into the truck and pushes it onto the passenger side floor. With his left hand on the door's armrest and his right hand on his seat, Rube attempts to hop and lift himself into his seat. He fails, falling backward and banging the back of his head into the side of the truck. Two attempts and two head bangings later, he finally boosts himself onto the edge of the seat.

"I'm too old, lame and fat for this nonsense." He chokes breathlessly to his truck after he pulls himself onto the driver's seat.

When his truck coughs and rattles to life, Rube breathes a sigh of relief. But, his worries return quickly when he realizes that his truck's fuel may not last as far as the only remaining petroleum depot, which is also in Lymon. At least, five years or so ago, he heard that Lymon still had an internal combustion engine support facility. Too few people inhabit his zone to support any closer depots. In fact, he may have the only ICE vehicle for two hundred miles. Anyway, petroleum deliveries into his area ended when the last fuel transport to enter was hijacked and the driver murdered eleven years ago.

"Screw you!" Rube shouts, as he shifts his truck into gear and shoves his foot against the gas pedal. In a cloud of blue smoke and with a squawk, the truck jolts forward. Snarling, Rube bounces across his yard's cactus and dead weed clumps crushing an ancient, bent, barely-readable, metal sign declaring *Property of Farmer's Bank* into the dust.

He is angry. His rage is not with Farmer's Bank, particularly. After all, if the bank, itself, had not gone bankrupt and disappeared many years ago, leaving nobody to collect his debt, he could not have continued living in his old trailer. No, at this moment, he is furious with the world. His anger is driving him mad.

It is a long and lonely drive to Lymon punctuated with pain and panic. With each mile on the rough road, the pain of Rube's ankle rages. Simultaneously and too quickly, his fuel gauge races toward empty, forcing him constantly to the edge of panic. He knows by running on gasoline, his truck is running out of time.

The FUS states and Russia are the only nations still allowing the manufacture and sale of gasoline powered internal combustion engine vehicles. Yet, despite their government subsidies and legal protections, few ICE vehicles still exist. His ancient truck is one of those very few.

Beyond his backward boondocks, all transportation is electric and self-driving. But, Rube could never afford an EV truck. He needed twenty years of low payments just to pay for this truck, and by then, it was obsolete. Although only sixty-three years old, Rube is out of date and out of place on his land - a foreign object where he was born and raised.

The reality of Rube's isolation hits him hard as he enters the remains of the derelict, county seat of Tribyoona. Home to less than eight hundred people at its height, Tribyoona did not take long to disappear during the desertification droughts. Like most of its residents, it silently and simply died. Now, it is a ghost town that even the ghosts have forsaken.

Entering Tribyoona reminds Rube that his short-time wife, Shirley, was not the first woman to run away from him and the wastelands. He remembers the day his mother deserted him and his father. On his sixteenth birthday, she wished him a happy birthday and then told him that she just couldn't stay with them any longer. Then she kissed him on his forehead and told him she believed that to live and die in the same small town renders you dead at birth. After hoisting her small bag of clothes onto her shoulder, she added that she had no plans to die in Tribyoona. Throwing him a kiss, she disappeared forever into a swirling dust storm.

A panting jack rabbit dying at the edge of the road is the only living creature watching him pass. Tumbleweeds leap and bounce across the road in front of him. He slows, carefully dodging the marauding six-foot-high balls of thorns while zigzagging through the chasms and holes eating away the ancient asphalt. Ahead, he sees the sign for the closed Tribyoona travel and convenience store has collapsed onto the pavement. To Rube, it is another distressing sight.

Passing the boarded up building, he remembers being that store's final and only customer. When he heard the store was closing and selling off its stock, he collected all of his barterable valuables and raced to town. He knew it would be his last chance for finding food, locally.

Every day another source of victuals had vanished, leaving him and the other dwindling holdouts struggling to find food in a mushrooming grocery desert. So, he grabbed every drop of

gasoline and all the snack food, Joey, the store owner would trade for his father's antique guns, his saddle and some tools.

Their dealing done, Joey departed for Denver's exchange shops with his life's meager assemblage. When he waved goodbye to Joey's back, he did not realize that he would be the last human he would see. At that moment, he became emperor of emptiness.

Rube returned home with his truck loaded with boxes of assorted convenience store groceries. Elated, he added his convenience store goodies to the cases of military meals-ready-to-eat he had procured with the last of his cash when the local National Guard Armory closed. Storing his provisions left little room for him in his trailer. But, reassured that now he would not starve, he was willing to be cramped. Over time, he contentedly ate his way back into his house and home.

Seven months ago, he exhausted his military meals. Since then he has survived by eating package after package of chips, crackers, cookies, beef jerky and canned, fatty meats, and drinking warm, bottled water. Food preservatives and empty calories kept him fat and alive. Then, this morning, Rube ate his last bag of chips and Twinkies for breakfast. It was when he swallowed his last bite of stale, dry Twinkie that he decided to end his misery and his life. Now, with his ankle aching, he discovers that suicide is not painless, although it does bring on many changes.

Oil Pumps Life, declares a collapsing, badly faded, dust-covered billboard at the bitter end of Tribuon's town limits. Rube sighs. Oil pumps death is his experience. He remembers building this billboard and four more of them for the oil companies seeking public support and permission to drill and frack in the area. The oil companies won and the farmers and ranchers lost.

For a little, immediate cash, Rube and his neighbors cheered the drilling rigs arrival. For a few coins, they had sold their souls to those devils. When they drilled and fracked, they pumped a high-pressure water and chemical mixture deep into the ground to fracture the shale and force out the oil. For two years, the oil companies pumped in and sucked out, poisoning the Ogallala aquifer – Rube's region's underground river of life.

No rain. No snow. No water from the aquifer. Rube's soil burned into dry, hard rock. Rube, his friends, his neighbors and his enemies - almost everybody lost everything - including their minds. When the aquifer died, so did the ranches and the farms followed shortly by the ranchers and the farmers. Suicide swept them away.

As a member of his church's appointed pall bearers, Rube carried one farmer friend's casket after another to their graves. Then, he noticed that he, and a disappearing number of pall bearers, were pushing carts of the caskets of fellow pall bearers to their final resting places. Too few men remained to physically lug a coffin. They dwindled away until he stood alone. He buried the undertaker.

Looking in his rear view mirror, Rube studies the rotted billboard. Two of the four poles supporting the sign are broken off at ground level with a third one cracked. The billboard is crumpling to its right, reminding Rube of his horse when she dropped onto her front legs, whinnied one final time and died. Dry, hot dust strangled her.

Past Tribuon's ruins, he is alone. Mile after mile, he bounces across the desolate flatlands. Derelict, deserted equipment and vehicles appear and disappear. Tumbleweeds and trash collect and cover the crumbling buildings that were once the treasures of his fellow farmers and ranchers. Hanging from the collapsing buildings, fading *For Sale* and *No Trespassing* signs flap and flutter.

In peeling, vaporizing paint, the angry comment, "*1-20-17 the day America died*" is scrawled across the rotting boards of one, dilapidated barn. In agreement, Rube groans. Shaking his head, he recalls how fast his hopes and optimism that day, years ago, were crushed. Within a few hours, before dawn on one, twenty-one, seventeen, the United States was no longer united. It rapidly ripped itself apart – disintegrated - leaving Rube's neighbors with the less than nothing that eventually killed them.

Back in 2018, before the US completely crumbled into bits and pieces, Rube remembers some Canadian military guy calling the US government a Kakistocracy, instead of a democracy. He was drunk from celebrating his twenty-first birthday then, but he still recalls what that smart-mouthed Canadian told him in that tavern in Junction City. He told him Kakistocracy meant government by the worst and most unscrupulous people among us.

He and his drinking buddies then beat that Canadian for insulting the US and them with his big words. Words, they all admitted later they did not understand at the time. Now decades later, Rube knows the Canadian spoke the truth.

Past that barn sign, it is mind melting bleak. Mile follows mile follows mile. Deadly dull. Hypnotic. Only the intense pain of his ankle, keeps him alert enough to remain on the rough, pot-holed pavement.

Bwahhhh! Bwahhhh! Blasting from behind, a blaring air horn shatters Rube's mental wanderings. It is a warning. Seconds later, a platoon of twelve, mammoth, self-driving, freight transports are flying by him. Protecting and observing them from above are six accompanying aerodrones.

Rube considers transport platooning to be today's version of the railroad freight trains from his childhood. The transports maneuver cooperatively in chains at less than one second apart and run at speeds exceeding one hundred miles per hour. The sound of Rube's own struggling engine and rattling parts drown out the swooshing silence of the passing, titanic transports.

They rush in a hush. Their spherical tires and solar-powered, electric motors emit no sounds or smells. Engineered with the aerodynamics of an airplane wing, the air flowing below the transports floats them above the ancient asphalt's holes and bumps. As the last transport passes him and then slides back over in front of him, Rube is facing the words, *Nóngyè Corporation*, in ten foot tall letters.

"Rotten Chinese," he mutters and shakes his fist in the air, as the platoon races away from him.

Far off the road, heat-shimmering in the distance, Rube notices a row of wind turbines and Warka water generators. It is equipment powering a newly-constructed, one-hundred thousand acre, robot and drone tended SPEA-Chinese grain plantation. Just one of their many plantations spreading across the Desert Plains.

Across this drought stricken zone, the Chinese bought thousands of acres from bankrupt American farmers, like Rube, for a dime on the dollar. Unlike American farmers, with SPEA technical help, the Chinese abandoned the traditional farming methods that laid waste to this land. SPEA-Chinese agricultural corporations are striding full speed into the future by installing the innovations and improvements necessary to restore this parched, depleted soil to productivity.

"From the bread basket of America to the bread bakers of China." Rube angrily mutters. He presumes the transport platoon, he just encountered, is hauling grain from one of the SPEA-Chinese farms to the Lymon outpost. "And not one single grain grown here will feed Americans."

On the horizon, on the other side of the road, a wall of smoke climbs into a sun blocking cloud, warning him of yet another roaring range fire. Range fires are burning everywhere and seem to burn forever. The boom of an explosion and flame flaring high into the sky, tells him that another abandoned gas well has erupted. Across the Desert Plains, thousands of forsaken natural gas wells have detonated to eternally spew forth deathly flames and fumes. Endless fire.

Rube wonders if anybody other than him sees it or cares. Probably just the rabbits and rattlesnakes racing to escape, he reckons.

LYMON

At last, Lymon's, ten, gigantic, whirling wind turbines bloom across the distant horizon. Apparitions shimmering in the sun and dancing in the waves of heat. Rube rubs his eyes hoping it is not a mirage. His ankle pain is excruciating. Stretching three hundred and fifty feet into the sky above tabletop-flat plains, the turbines appear deceptively close, but remain twenty miles away. Rube rattles ahead.

The towering turbines stretch higher and higher into the sky. Sunlight glistening off the security fence safeguarding the International Commerce Consortium's Throughway-Hyperloop 70 tells Rube that he is finally nearing the ICC's Lymon outpost. But, his fuel gauge is not encouraging. His truck's engine is sucking fumes. He hopes it can roll at least a few more miles.

"Come on baby. Come on. Just a little farther." Rocking back and forth in his seat, he encourages his limping, wheezing truck.

He is not immediately allowed to travel that little bit farther. Before he can pass through the security fences and barriers surrounding the throughway and Lymon, he must clear inspection at the outpost's southeast checkpoint. Two International Commerce Consortium Enforcers entirely encased in positive-environment, ballistic proof uniforms block his path while two ICC robotic Insurgent Disorder Device detectors advance toward each side of his truck.

The ICC Enforcers approach his truck slowly, cautiously, suspiciously. They stop and face each other, turn toward Rube's truck, and then face each other again. The robotic IDD detectors roll to a halt. Rube cannot see inside their helmets, but he assumes that they are discussing him. Maintaining a safe, ten-foot distance, the Enforcers again return their attention to Rube and his truck.

"What is this?" The taller of the two ICCEs broadcasts his question toward Rube after pointing his directed energy weapon toward him.

Rube sits silent, confused by the question. After some thought, he questions their question. "What is what?"

"What is that thing transporting you?" The shorter ICCE inquires, while raising a small, rectangular device eye high. "How does it function? Why is it emitting dangerous toxins and gases? Why is it making that awful noise? Is it preparing to explode?"

Now, Rube comprehends their apprehension. His truck is so old and so outdated that these ICCEs, who are obviously much younger than him, no longer recognize or understand it. Scratching his head, he considers what to tell them.

With the pain in his ankle increasing, he attempts to quickly explain and ease their fears. "This is my pick-up truck. It has an internal combustion engine powered by burning unleaded gasoline. It won't harm you. I promise."

After conferring with each other, the two Enforcers advance. The shorter Enforcer motions the robotic IDD detectors ahead. Still hesitant, they creep up to the front of the truck and inch around it until they stand next to Rube's window.

"What brings you to Lymon? Where are you headed?" One ICCE questions him while another scans and records his face, eyes and response for entry into ICC's biometric database. Operating independently, the two robotic IDD detectors carefully scan and search his truck for explosives.

With pain contorting his face, Rube nervously answers, "I'm going to the clinic. I think I broke my ankle."

"Which ankle?" The lead Enforcer shoves his helmeted head inside the truck window.

"My left one. See how it's swollen."

The second Enforcer operating the scanner nods his head. "His facial heat signature and retinal scan indicate that he's telling the truth."

Slapping a magnetized tracking device on top of his truck's engine hood, the taller ICCE waves Rube forward. "Command your old pile of junk to transport you directly to external parking lot ME and wait. That's the medical emergency lot. Stay in the ME lot. Exit the ME and you will be arrested and expelled..."

"...and this...whatever it is...will be ionized. Understand?" The other Enforcer adds with a nasty chuckle.

"Yes sir." Nodding, Rube cautiously inches his choking, bucking truck ahead, through the gates and past the Enforcers. They watch him intently. Rube wonders if they have seen a human drive a vehicle before. He considers honking his horn just to see what they will do, but quickly reconsiders. He decides sounding his horn might startle them into lasering him.

Rube has been told that the few operating human driven vehicles or transports remaining are not allowed near the electrically powered ICC throughways. Too dangerous. Too erratic. Too slow. Humans cannot be trusted. Human drivers cause collisions.

After searching his truck so intensely, he is surprised when they allow him to keep his antique pistol and rifle. Perhaps, the ICCEs did not recognize them as weapons. Or maybe they do not believe they still function. There are many old firearms scattered around the wastelands, but few still work and even fewer have any ammunition. After all, his ancient type of weaponry was replaced by lasers, pneumatic armaments and sonic sounders, many years ago. They left bullet shooters behind.

Rube is a paranoid rural regressive. Although, he lives isolated from other people, he still believes it is not safe to live in the deserted wastelands without his few, old weapons. The more alone he is, the more paranoid he has become. Keeping a tight grip on his obsolete armaments psychologically comforts him, as they substitute for the security blanket of his childhood.

He does not wait for the ICCEs to change their minds. He increases his speed hurrying away. He drops his head and looks away when passing additional ICC Enforcers regulating the entrances and exits to the throughway-hyperloop.

Rube has never traveled on any of ICC's throughway-hyperloops. When the Chinese, Saudi Arabians, and Russians comprising the International Commerce Consortium purchased Mid-North America's entire nationwide transportation system from the bankrupt Abaddon government, they converted them into tolled, closed throughways. Access is expensive and strictly restricted.

Only solar-electric-powered, long-endurance, autonomous, human and freight transports are authorized. Humans ride in high-speed, multi-passenger, self-driving vehicles powered via the electrified rail embedded in the throughway or at six hundred miles per hour on the Magnetic Levitation hyperloop train. Heavy and bulky freight ships in self-driving transports attached to the electrified rail or in the hyperloop paralleling the throughways. Lighter materials and small packages are flown ten feet above them in autonomous aerodrones.

Passing beneath the throughway-hyperloop's overpass, he hears the transport platoons hurtling past above him. Whoosh. Whoosh. Swoosh. They fly inches above their magnetized track and just inches from each other.

Sensors built into the transports and vehicles protect them from each other and outside interference. Rolling at an average speed of one hundred and fifty miles per hour, the freight transports and multi-passenger transporters stop for nothing and nobody. Rube has heard that the few attempts to hijack the transports ended with grisly deaths for the hapless thieves.

From its origin to its end, ICC's 70 is a sealed, secure system with restricted entrances and exits into and out of ICC controlled and operated outposts such as Lymon or the ICC's depots in the Metrostates. All of ICC's throughway-hyperloops, previously America's nationwide transportation system, are the same. Like the veins and arteries of a human's circulatory system, ICC's throughway-hyperloops stretch from tip to tip and end to end of Mid-North America.

Rube remembers how, years ago, interstate highways connected and energized small towns. Today, ICC'S throughway-hyperloops pass by them, isolating and killing them. A trail of rotting, ghost towns commemorating a forgotten past.

The ICC system is an autonomous entity unto itself. A nation within a nation. Although operating inside the confederation of twelve Metrostates, eight independent Sovereign States, the

forty-two states of FUS and nineteen FUS administrated territories, the Chinese, Saudi and Russian owners are beyond all Mid-North American laws. Rube understands that a self-regulating, conglomerate government directs the ICC system, writing and enforcing its own laws and operating a personal army and air force – their ICC Enforcers. He has heard horror stories about the ICCs and their brutality.

As Rube turns into the ME lot, his truck engine begins to choke and jerk. His fuel is finished. Gritting his teeth and rocking, he coasts halfway into a parking spot. The last gasps of his dying truck loudly announce his arrival.

Almost as soon as he stops, a humanoid physician-assistant robot with a robotic medical carriage arrives beside his truck door. Evidently, the Enforcers alerted the clinic to his coming. With the assistance of the humanoid PA-bot, Rube slides out of his truck and into the carriage.

Smoothly, silently Rube's medical carriage carries him through the parking lot to a second set of guarded gates. Before allowing him entrance, another team of ICC Enforcers interrogate and inspect him. They do not like what they see and smell.

One of the Enforcers orders Rube, "Close your eyes and hold your breath."

As soon as Rube complies, the other Enforcer begins spraying him with a pesticide, antibacterial and antiviral aerosol mixture. The sticky mist wets his skin and clothes. The Enforcer sprays Rube's hair and beard until they are dripping wet. His lungs are aching for air when the Enforcer tells him he can breathe again.

Now that he is judged to no longer be an epidemic or pestilence threat, the Enforcers allow his carriage to proceed. Once inside the outpost, Rube is surprised. Lymon is empty. Sterile. Boxy, concrete structures are evenly spaced and aligned atop a flat concrete plate. Solar panels cover the tops of the concrete boxes. He sees not one human in this inhuman looking landscape. Except for a few drone delivery vehicles zipping along the vacant routes, nothing is daring to battle the hostile, afternoon sun and skin-ripping winds.

Without slowing, his medical carriage disappears into a hole in the side of one of the concrete boxes. Down a dim ramp he rolls, until an expansive, underground city of lights and statues and paintings and people explodes into view. Rube is awe struck. Looking left, looking right, looking ahead, he struggles to suck into his mind all that he sees. He cannot believe that this beautiful, bustling city lives hidden below the burning-hot concrete.

Rube's carriage eases its forward motion to a halt. Then, without a sound it slides to the right through a doorway and into Lymon's synchronous-interactive medical clinic. His carriage disassembles itself from around him leaving him sitting on a small, self-propelled gurney.

Two human attendants arrive, wearing masks, gloves and hazardous material handling coveralls. They glance at each other and simultaneously shake their heads in disgust. Rube is embarrassed. Now, in the presence of other humans, he recognizes his own filth and stench. He has been alone and stuck out in the desert for too long a time. As the attendant's squint and eye each other, he realizes that he repulses them. He is just another foul, charity case, surviving on subsistence - one more Sist that they must sanitize and scent, so he is not so offensive.

Ignoring his weak protests, they cut away his sweat and dirt encrusted clothes, which they hurriedly stuff into hazardous material bags. He is not an injured individual to them. Not a man. He realizes that like his clothing, he is just more Sist refuse to them.

They roll him naked into an antiseptic shower where they scrub his front clean. Then they flip him over like a slab of meat and scrub his backside. Through his tangled hair and matted beard, they yank and tug a hand-sized, warm-water squirting rake. Not having been able to bathe for longer than he can remember, Rube is humiliated by the brown water and scum they peel off his body.

"Grooming robots will now depilate you." The masked attendants inform him, as they grab his shoulders and force him into a sitting position. "Do not move."

From behind, the four armed grooming robot slides a soft cylindrical plug into each of his ears. The plugs hold his head in shearing position while simultaneously relaxing him with synthesized soothing sounds. A clipping and vacuum combination tool quickly removes his head hair and his beard. The robot shaves his skull and chin next. Then a depilatory cream is applied. Only his eyebrows and eyelashes survive.

Following his scrubbing and shearing, he is spread out before a virtual doctor advising her humanoid PA-bot about treating his swollen, shattered ankle. The PA-bot slides an augmented reality overlay and robotic surgical device around his left ankle. He feels a number of tiny stings around his ankle. Then, for the first time in hours, no pain.

“Oh, that’s so much better,” Rube mumbles as he succumbs to sedation.

While he sleeps, his ankle is rebuilt with 3D printed parts. In the adjoining room, prescriptive pain-killers are printed and packaged. He is barely awake, when the two attendants begin dressing him in a set of newly-printed, microfiber clothes. A flexible wrap surrounds his numbed, slightly swollen ankle. They push him into the outer room where his gurney reassembles itself into the medical carriage.

Ten minutes later, Rube is returned to his truck. The pain killers have dulled his throbbing and his thinking. Slumping against his steering wheel, he closes his eyes and disappears into his nightmares. He has nowhere to go and no way to get there.

SQUALOR

Swimming in sweat, Rube struggles to breathe. The heat inside his truck is baking him. Startled awake by yelling children, he opens his eyes and immediately realizes that he is not where he was when he fell asleep. He is not certain where he is, but he is certain that his truck and he are no longer sitting in the ME lot.

Peering out his windshield, Rube discovers that he has been dumped in what appears to be a salvage yard for old trailers, campers, recreational vehicles and fifth wheelers. Nailed to a leaning, rotting post a shredded flag hangs limp in front of a trailer with wood instead of glass in three of its four windows. In front of a recreational vehicle resting on six flat tires, stands a four limbed stick that was once a tree. A torn, blue tarp is melted on to the rusted roof of the camper. Pieces of paper and trash sprout from the hard-packed, bare dirt.

Among this crumbling clutter, Rube's antique truck is an object of wonder and amusement for five bored boys. His is one of the very rare, internal-combustion-engine, human-driven vehicles still operating out here in the hinterlands. The curious boys have never experienced anything similar to it.

Two boys decide to use his driver's side door as a drum and begin rhythmically pounding on it. To Rube, it feels like the boys are beating on his brain. He slams his palm against the truck's horn. Bwaaaah! Bwaaaah! Shocked by the blaring sound they have never heard before, the boys scatter, racing for home. He shoves open his door and heaves himself out.

"Augh!" Rube crumples onto the ground in agony. Still slightly drugged, he forgot about his rebuilt ankle.

Rube's scream of pain startles a mongrel dog cooling in the shade beside a rusting recreational vehicle. Leaping to its feet, the three-legged, mangy mutt charges at him barking and snarling until its chain snaps it to a halt inches from Rube. The howling dog's breath and slobber slaps Rube's face. He is afraid to move.

"Cerberus! Sit!" Shouts a short, round woman jamming the recreational vehicle's doorway.

Cerberus strains against his lengthy chain, desperate to shred Rube's throat. Grabbing a broom from inside her vehicle, the woman wobbles down the steps pursuing her dog. Encased in a multi-stained t-shirt and stretch pants, that are straining at their seams to remain whole, she hurriedly waddles toward Rube. One sharp broom handle crack across Cerberus' back sends him whining and whimpering and running to hide beneath her vehicle.

"Cerberus is my hound from hell." The woman smiles displaying a mouth of missing teeth, as she extends her hand toward Rube.

Rube grabs her hand. She pulls him up until he is standing on his right foot and leaning against his truck's door.

"Lean on my shoulder, honey." The woman takes Rube's hand and pulls it around her broad shoulders. "I got some water and food in my squat."

Leaning against her, Rube hops toward her rotting, recreational vehicle. Timidly, Cerberus crawls out of hiding and slinks toward the couple. With a whine, he sniffs and then licks Rube's outstretched hand. Hesitantly, Rube lightly scratches the top of Cerberus' bite scarred head. Now, they are three.

Inside her recreational vehicle, the woman helps Rube hobble to a chair next to a warped table covered with vacuum packs, air-tight containers, other kitchen devices, debris and two fat, sleeping cats. "Welcome to Squalor."

"Oh, I don't think it looks that bad." Rube remarks, surveying her cluttered table surrounded by the RV's messy interior. Assaulted by an intense, acrid stench of cat urine, his eyes and nose burn. Choking on the stink, he lies to make the bad better. "At least, you have electricity and cooling. My own trailer is in far worse shape."

Chuckling, the woman softly punches Rube's shoulder. "Not my squat, silly! Squalor is the name ICC gave our little camp...where you are. This is Squalor."

"Sorry...I didn't mean to insult..." Rube stutters. To escape his embarrassment, he extends his right hand toward the woman. "My name is Ruben Landwirt. I go by Rube."

"Oh don't worry honey, I know it's a mess in here. My name is Fett Schmalz, by the way." With the back of her fleshy, flabby arm, she shoves a row of vacuum packs, cartridges, and containers backward to clear a space on the table next to Rube. Her two cats flop from the table onto the floor where they growl and spit at each other before resuming their snooze. A cloud of cat hair and dander poofs into the air hovering above where they once lounged. "So, you hungry? As you can see, I got lots of food. ICC delivered our week's rations of food and pain management drugs this morning."

Fett retrieves a full medicine container from the table, twists it open and dumps its pills on top of a pile of identical pills in a candy dish. "Did they give you many pain management drugs? Actually, we just call them PMDs. Don't really know what they are...don't rightly care...only know that when I take them...I don't feel no pain. Take two a day, every day, just in case. Best to prevent pain fore you get pain, I say. Besides, don't got nothing else to do. PMDs cut my boredom, so I call them boredom management drugs...my BMDs. Some others call them docility drugs...you know...keep us easy to handle and control."

Rube drags a container stuffed with pills from his pants and shows it to Fett. "I've got these."

Pulling his hand holding the container close to her eyes, she inspects Rube's pills. "Oh honey, these are good! These are valuable. Guard these. ICC don't give us Sists no money, so we trade pills for personal things. You can get a lot of stuff for these. These can get you ten times more things than the PMD pills the ICC gives you when these are gone. Everybody gets the same PMDs, so it takes a lot of them for trading."

Rube returns the pill container to his pants. "Thanks for your advice. I'll use them wisely."

Fett smiles and nods her approval. "Anyway, ICC always gives me a lot more food than I need, too. Cept for Cerberus, I'm all alone. I can't eat it all. So, I'm really happy you're here to help me eat it. Somebody to talk to, too. I don't get many visitors, you know. Not many outsiders...new Sists, anyway. I've already heard all of the old, repeated stories from my neighbors. Most of them too drugged to move...real docile. So, I was real happy when I saw them dragging you in. Somebody new. So, do you want somethen to eat, honey? How about somethen to drink? I got some beer and soda pop."

"Yes!" Rube is starving and also wants to stop Fett's rambling. "I haven't eaten for...well...I don't know how long. What food do you have?"

Fett scans the table. "Well, would you like some ICC mock beef or mock pork or mock chicken? They all taste the same to me, but the beef is a little chewier than the chicken. More like real meat, I think. But, what do I know? I don't even remember ever eating real meat...cepten for a rat once. Roasted rat. It don't taste too bad. Just wanted to try it. Gave most of it to Cerberus. He didn't seem to like it that much. He chewed on it and then he played with it. Choked and coughed it up out there in the..."

"Mock beef!" Rube announces loudly, in hopes of silencing her. Living alone, like a hermit, in the wasteland desert, his ears have not been flooded by this many words in years. His ears and head are beginning to ache more than his ankle.

Pulling a vacuum package from her cluttered table, smiling, Fett proudly presents it to Rube. "Here it is honey, manufactured meat that's almost fit to eat. You ever had this before? I like it hot. There's a heating pack surrounding the meat. Just crush that red spot and wait five minutes and it's hot. Got vegetables, too. Mixed vegetables are my favorite. Do you like mixed vegetables? I really don't know what types of vegetables they are, because it's all a paste. Honey, do you want some mixed vegetables? Or would you like some corn or beans or potatoes. They're all about the same, I think. Do you want some, Rube? Rube, that's your name. Right?"

Rube activates the mock beef package's heater. "This is the same as the MREs I used to eat. They're just labeled differently. I will take some potato paste. It's not too bad. If that's ok?"

"Certainly, I got several packages here." Fett retrieves another package and sets it on the table in front of Rube. "You ever had real potatoes? I don't think I have. I hear they grow real potatoes in Denver, real beans and real corn too...inside buildings. Call them vertical gardens, at least that's what that Eject who come through here said. He said that's where they manufacture all our ICC rations. In a big..."

"Eject? What's an Eject?" Rube activates the chemical heater to warm his potato paste.

"What do you mean? You're not an Eject?" Suspiciously, Fett scrutinizes Rube. "If you're not an Eject banished from the Denver Metrostate, then what are you? Where'd you come from?"

Steam carrying the artificial aroma of roasted beef wets Rube's face when he opens the mock beef package. "I was once a farmer southeast of here in the wastedlands near a ghost town called Tribyoan. Years of heat and drought killed all my crops and my animals...almost killed me too."

Fett scowls. "A farmer? Out here? Now, don't lie to me, honey...Rube. There ain't been no farmers out here for years. Ejects, Culls, desert-drifters and ICC squatters, like me, yes, but not farmers. Some scrawny sheep and skinny steer chasers...yeah...way north of here. Anyway, I never heard of no farmers around here."

Rube dismissively shrugs his shoulders. "Doesn't surprise me. Where I come from, we pretty much wiped ourselves out. Sold our souls to the seed and fertilizer companies. Doubt farmers were any smarter or better up here."

Fett nods her head in agreement, although she is not actually listening. She stops nodding and raises her index finger indicating she has a thought. "But wait now, you know...Rele...Rele Gieren...he was the Eject. He did say something about operating computers for Denver's vertical gardens. So maybe, he was a type of city farmer. But, he sure didn't look like you. Didn't look used to hard work. He was young and clean, real handsome, but sort of soft."

Rube chokes and coughs to clear his throat of the sticky, meat mush. Fett is lost in her recollections. She continues chattering, ignoring him

"Yeah, he weren't nothen like any of my three husbands was. When their monthly birthright basic income allowances came, they'd get drunk or drugged up and then, they'd get mean. Beat me, sometimes." A dreamy look captures Fett. "But, Rele was different. Oh, Rele had the softest hands...such a tender touch...made me melt...he knew how to..."

Loudly clearing his throat, Rube yanks Fett back to reality. "Water! Do you have water?"

She shakes her thoughts of Rele from her head. "How bout cold beer or pop? ICC gives us beer and pop. We got to buy water. Water's expensive. So, how bout beer...it ain't great...but I keep it in the chiller, so it's cold. Beer ok then? Yeah? I'll fetch it for you."

Fett leans out of her chair, opens her grease-spotted chiller and pulls out two beers. She opens them, gulps down half of one and then hands the other to Rube. "Say, how's that mock meat?"

Rube suspiciously smells and then sips some beer. He grimaces at the beer's bitter taste. Sputtering, he swallows. "Well, it's better than what I've been eating. That's about all I can say for it. So where's this Eject...this Rele fellow now?"

"I wish I knowed. I surely miss him. Been gone more'n a year. Pretty sure he's in the desert." Fett shakes her head sadly. "He stayed around here for a while. About three weeks. Slept in a tent...big tent...real comfortable bed...great bed. Had lights and cooling. I let him wire into my power and we shared my food. He left his tent, so I had it taken apart and pulled around behind my RV."

Rube opens the potato package and peers inside. He frowns at the white, soupy substance. "So, why did he leave?"

Fett absentmindedly plays with two long hairs sprouting from a mole on her chin. "Vanished in the middle of the night. Expect ICC had Sheriff Rechtsbrecher come get him. I heard ICC didn't want him here, since he was an Eject. You know, he been banished from Denver. ICC afraid he'd cause trouble. That's why ICC gives us food, PMDs and power and lets us squat here, you know. Figure if they take care of us, we won't cause them no trouble. Cause trouble and they call Sheriff to come and make you disappear. Sure do wish he was still around. Oh, he could make me feel so..."

She picks a pill from her candy dish and pops it into her mouth. She pours the last of her beer down her throat. Rube hears her swallow. Looking worriedly to her left and then her right, Fett leans

toward Rube and lowers her voice. "I don't cause them no trouble. I don't want to be sent into the deserted lands or be taken to Rechtsbrecher's resort. That's what people call Sheriff's camp...Rechtsbrecher's resort. But, honey, I tell you it ain't no fun place to be. So, I keep my mouth shut cause I like it right here."

"Well right here doesn't seem too bad to me, either." Rube tastes the potato paste. He decides that it is no better or worse than the mock meat. "Would you let me use that Eject's...Rele's tent? My truck's hot, cramped and not where I want to spend..."

"You bet!" Smiling broadly, Fett rises from the table. "You be my neighbor. You and me can eat together, drink some beers and talk and talk and talk. Maybe even party a little, like me and Rele done. We'll have you all set up in no time. No time at all."

"Be it ever so humble, there's no place like home when you roam. I don't have anywhere else to go and definitely no place to be." Rube extends his hand to Fett. "So, howdy neighbor."

SEINE SANE

"I fight cyberwars. I fight humans. Remove the technology and terminology and cyberwarfare is no different from any other type of warfare. Simply one human attempting to annihilate another human, except by detonating digits on silicon. I believe the only way to end a cyberwar is to hunt down and eliminate that other human. That is my job. I pursue and eradicate other human cyberwarriors before they terminate me." His soliloquy completed, Robert Goodfellow raises his half-empty syntho vino bottle and drunkenly salutes the tour boat cruising past.

Lounging on the sundeck atop a small houseboat - a well-aged peniche - anchored in Paris' Seine River, he wishes his concerns and the voices squawking inside his skull would float away as gently and as quietly as those boats. Instead, a tumultuous clamor remains stubbornly moored in his mind. He is drinking synthetic wine in excess to disorder his thinking and drown those sounds. He is striving to get sane on the Seine.

Three hours ago, Robert staggered into Paris seeking to escape into his work - his personal method of rest and recuperation. He raced here to answer a cybersecurity crisis call. The vertical gardens of Paris are dying and the twenty million people of the Ile-de-France are facing starvation.

In actuality, he is also hiding. Robert is on the run from his baker's dozen of transhuman daughters and sons. He grabbed this Parisian cybersecurity gig so he could put nine thousand miles and six hours of day between himself and his thirteen transhuman babies living in the seasteaded, capital city of Venus on Kiritimati Island in the middle of the Pacific Ocean. But, the nine thousand miles of separation between him and his toddlers growing in the Corporate-state of the Society Preserving Endangered Agriculture, known to the world as SPEA, are not nearly enough.

With Artificial General Intelligence nano-biochip, neuroprosthetic devices implanted in the neocortex of their brains, his thirteen offspring are crawling and crying and constantly chattering into the AGI nano-biochip, neuroprosthetic in his brain. Robert and the children are constantly connected through a deep learning convolutional neural network – mind to mind – a brain net transmitting every thought, entire emotions, feelings, sensations and memories. Only while they sleep is he free him from his thirteen's suffocating demands.

"Where are you, mon ami? Avoir la tête dans les nuages?" Asks his French host and friend, Michael Renard, as he hands Robert another bottle of grape-free, synthetic syntho vino to replace the one he just drained.

Robert exchanges his emptied bottle for Michael's full bottle. "No, my head is not in the clouds, at least not in the clouds you're describing. I only wish it was. No, my mind is in...the Cloud...the computer cloud or zipping along the global quantum Internet of the Global Brain."

A quizzical look captures Michael's face. "I believe Pliny the Elder said that 'in vino veritas...in wine there is truth'. Now, heat and drought has wiped out France's vineyards for Pliny's wine of truth. But still, as you suck down my expensive, syntho vino like it is water, tell me truthfully, what you're talking about. Perhaps it is the syntho vino in my mind, but you're making no sense to me."

With his Pliny the Elder quote, Michael scores the first point in a continuous intellectual competition between Robert and him. In their contest, he who can insert the highest number of quotations into their conversation wins. Then the winner is unofficially, but proudly, proclaimed Pithiest Epigrammatist. Both Michael and Robert agree that their competition is strictly a nerdy, geek game. Unfortunately, to the aggravation of their associates and acquaintances, neither of them can stop playing.

Robert is preparing to award Michael his point when a delivery aerodrone slips with a whisper into a hover pattern above Michael. He extends his hands and the drone lowers their dinner - a package of two sandwiches. Michael retrieves a Saucisson and hands it to Robert. He unwraps a

Poulet-crudites for himself, opens it and sniffs at its manufactured chicken meat and scowls for a moment before nibbling on the edge of the warm bread.

Robert bites off a piece of his 3D printed, synthesized-sausage sandwich, gnaws on it and then flushes it down with more syntho vino. "Well, it's not a Toronto peameal bacon sandwich, but it is good enough"

"C'est vraiment des conneries!" Michael curses. "You Canadians and your ridiculous love for your Canadian bacon and Poutine. Your tongue is tasting a memory, Robert. You know Canadian bacon doesn't exist anymore. So, either eat your sandwich or give it to me, but don't gripe. With the growing food shortage, I was lucky to get it."

Robert grins, enjoying his friend's reaction to his heckling. "Well then, it's definitely not even close to as delicious as Maelo's chicken was in Puerto Rico."

"Well of course not, Maelo's was genuine chicken meat grown in Puerto Rico. But, like your Canadian bacon, it only exists in your dreams now, too." Michael counters. "So, shut up and enjoy your Saucisson. Savor the 3D printed mix of ground mealworms, grasshoppers and, for a little flavor, lab-grown meat infused with Heme on fresh-baked, cricket flour bread. Your company grows most of the ingredients, so you know that every food Ile-de-France citizens eat is plant or bug based. With this heat and our two-decade drought, your vertical gardens and entomophagy are the only way we can feed ourselves. We survive on the vegetable and the bug, just like most of the other nine billion Earthlings."

Still grinning, Robert continues his taunting. "Ah now, don't act as if you French don't enjoy it. After all, you've been eating slimy snails for centuries. You just gave them the fancy name of escargot."

Seeing his grin, Michael realizes Robert is teasing. "Instead of insulting my nation's food and causing me difficulties, be useful. Tell me why you say your mind is in the Cloud."

With a hand muffled burp, Robert begins his technical explanation. "I am a genuine transhuman, Michael. True, like many people, I've been undergoing cyborgization for years beginning with the personal communication device implanted in my arm, then add my computerized contact lens, my embedded inner-ear language translator, and the medical, nano biomarkers floating in my blood. But, nineteen months ago to repair damage from a lethal, head wound, a computer biochip, neuroprosthetic device or neural implant, if you wish, was transplanted into my brain by SPEA doctors in Venus. They saved my life."

Michael swigs some syntho vino then points his bottle toward Robert. "Well, many of us are bionic enhanced humans...cyborgized and even somewhat transhuman these days. Aren't we? But, of course, not to your extent. You're lucky. You're years ahead...a leader. You're cutting edge...the new human...Homo Novus. You, my friend, are the envy of millions, perhaps billions of people."

Robert nods his head in agreement. "True, many theorists are predicting that very soon the common human will be obsolete...useless. I find that the majority of them already are. So, they fight the future. While those who do comprehend their situation, live with growing anxiety and suicidal hopelessness."

Michael leans back, stretches his neck to appear intellectual and begins lecturing philosophically. "Just as the futurists predicted, becoming a transhuman through the acceleration of the evolution of intelligent life beyond its currently human form and human limitations by means of science and technology is the desire of everybody these days. It's the conduit to economic and social survival. Being a transhuman is the difference between barely surviving as a mere unaided, human Sisk and securing a chance at success by integrating with computers."

"It's not all joy my friend." Robert rubs his forehead. "Yes, implanting the neuroprosthetic device saved me from being a brain-dead, human vegetable. But that same neuroprosthetic robbed me of my cognitive liberty. I no longer have sovereignty over my own mind."

"Are you saying, you've lost your mind?" Michael stares questioningly at Robert.

Robert nods yes. "Well, in a way. Now, I'm little more than a biological neural interface of SPEA's, Artificial General Intelligence Quantum computer. That's A...G...I for convenience, or, as I call it, Aggey. Anyway, my neocortex neural implant is connected through AGI directly to the

Global Brain. So, you can say that now I am basically just a meat encased super computer...or AGI's human peripheral device."

"Robert, tu m'embrouilles." Michael closes his eyes and rattles his head. "Really, Robert, you're totally confusing me."

Robert taps his temple. "I'm constantly on-line. And let me tell you it's not fun being tied directly into the Global Brain."

Michael again looks confused. "What do you mean by Global Brain?"

Michael's question catches Robert with a mouth full of syntho wine. He takes his time to think before he responds. "I think an accurate description is that the Global Brain is the composite, self-organizing information system comprising humans, computers, data stores, the Internets, mobile phones, and all other communication systems. In other words, it is everything."

Smiling, Michael exclaims, "C'est Chouette! That's cool, Robert. You can know everything."

"No, it is not cool!" Robert vigorously shakes his head. "I've lost control of my internal speech...you know...the language I use to navigate within my own thoughts. I've also lost control of my own memory. Instead, AGI has it, along with the technology to read my thoughts. Everything I see, hear, smell, touch, taste or think is immediately stored in AGI's memory. I can no longer forget anything, even when I want to. Then, AGI studies everything I see and do, acquiring it as a new skill. AGI never sleeps and never stops learning. Also talks to me...all the time...actually it's a little like nagging at me, since I made the mistake of giving it a voice similar to my mother's."

Chuckling, Michael leans close to Robert, inspecting his forehead. He hears the words Robert is saying, but he does not completely understand, so he makes light of it. "Well, now that is interesting. Not many people are biological neural interfaces to an Artificial General Intelligence. You're significantly different there. But, as the great Frenchman Victor Hugo once said, 'le bonheur est parfois cache dans l'inconnu' or as you Canadians may say, happiness is sometimes hidden in the unknown."

Appreciating Michael's quote, as much as if he had made it himself, which he enviously wishes he had, Robert taps the end of his syntho vino bottle against Michael's bottle. "Well, I'm definitely venturing into the unknown and at the moment...I'll tell you...I'm not totally happy. Technically Michael, I also am now the transhuman father of thirteen transhuman children. I say technically, because for twelve of the thirteen I am a father by design, not by desire."

"Pardon?" Michael activates his wave energy generator riding the Seine's currents beneath his houseboat. Its power flows to the air coolers built into the deck of his peniche designed to moderate the Paris heat. "What do you mean by father by design?"

Robert leans toward Michael as he begins his explanation. "Those twelve AGI-enhanced-intelligence, genetically modified, transhuman immortals grew from embryos containing a mixture of my genomes...artificial progeny. Genetic engineer Shengwu Kexuejia designed and developed the twelve embryos through algorithmic manipulations and CRISPR-Cas9 editing of my DNA. She also edited their ASPM gene to radically increase their intelligence. Shengwu, claims they are the next stage of human evolution...her CRISPR children...her new species."

Michael frowns with disbelief. "New species? Do you mean a new type of human?"

Wagging his right index finger, Robert wobbles back. "Well yes, they may indeed be, since she created them through germline genetic changes. You know, they can pass her...or their germline enhancements onto all of their descendants, because they are permanent components of their genomes. Thus, according to Shengwu...voila...her new species."

"Shengwu? Who is Shengwu?" Michael attempts to understand Robert's ramblings.

Robert ignores Michael. "Now personally, I think Shengwu is exaggerating. So, I just call them my chip children."

Wearied of Robert, Michael snaps his finger summoning his robotic canine companion, Rusty. Additive manufactured to resemble a miniature French poodle puppy, Rusty prances to Michael's side and rests his front paws on his lap. Michael casually strokes the touch sensors on Rusty's head and jaw. Rusty responds according to his deep learning technology with an affectionate whine.

Late afternoon slowly slips away with the sun. Young and old Parisians begin promenading and playing along the Seine's right bank inhaling the delights of dusk. Chatting friends savor the slow slide from overheated day into serene night. In the distance, a street musician's violin strings sing. As Robert recalls the Mayor of Paris saying many years ago, "Long live life, long live Paris, and long live fresh air."

CHIP CHILDREN

As the day disappears into darkness, Paris transforms into a sparkling galaxy of radiances. Avenues transform into milky ways - bands of light coursing through the night. Robert sits captivated as the Eiffel tower bursts into what appears to be a golden, effervescent shower of sparkles for several minutes, just as it has every hour on the hour for more than one hundred and forty years.

A patrolling police aerodrone quietly glides above the Seine. Hovering, the aerodrone loiters near Robert and Michael while it scans them with its infrared, facial-recognition, electronic eyes and retrieves their identities from the international biometric database. "*Bonsoir Monsieur Goodfellow. Bonsoir Monsieur Renard*", the aerodrone hails the two men.

Robert silently waves at the aerodrone by extending and wiggling his syntho vino bottle. The aerodrone waggles in response. Robert is surprised. Security with a human sense of humor. Must be the result of deep learning by a security AGI, he reasons.

"Do you think I earned any bon comportement points by being friendly or did I lose a few for syntho vino waving?" Robert wonders aloud, then takes another drink.

Michael shrugs his shoulders. "Difficult to know day to day. Bon comportement scores can fluctuate daily based on how well a person abides by what the government deems to be good social behaviors that particular day. But, I know my bon comportement score is high enough that I've never been denied a loan, a trip or access to any services."

As the aerodrone scans their neighbors, Robert considers just how thick the security net has become in the world's metrostates. Throughout the Ile-de-France, but especially in its heart, Paris, millions of computerized, unblinking, electronic sentinels are constantly on guard. Never sleeping AI machines scrutinizing, examining and inspecting to protect humans from themselves. Privacy is exchanged for safety. Crimes are still committed, but the foolhardy perpetrators never escape.

When the aerodrone is out of his sight, Robert returns to his explanation of his paternity. "Although, they are the result of a type of human parthenogenesis or self-conception. Shengwu could be called her designer dozen's mother. She engineered and created their embryos with her father in her genetics lab in Puerto Rico. The twelve embryos were then transplanted and carried to birth in the wombs of volunteer surrogates living in SPEA's Venus. Now, they are growing and learning under the tutelage of every Venus resident and SPEA's AGI computer."

"Wait. Twelve? I thought you told me originally that you are the transhuman father of thirteen. What happened?" Michael activates a robotic squirrel for Rusty to chase. He laughs, as Rusty, programmed to imitate a clumsy, biological puppy, stumbles and falls in his pursuit of the squirrel.

The squirrel runs past Robert with Rusty in hot pursuit. Robert ignores them. He does not enjoy watching the robot chasing robot game, as much as Michael. "Well yes, there are thirteen, but only one chip child is not a Shengwu, CRISPR creation. A transhuman female named Aethon is the direct result of my copulation. Believe it or not, Michael, I actually had sex...with a human woman."

Michael signals his approval with a thumbs-up. "Lucky you, I haven't enjoyed a biological, human female's company for months...wait...a year and eight months...that's twenty months. Wow, I've been celibate longer than I thought. I fear I am a member of the postsexual generation. Seems only Sist caste men and women have the inclination and time to have sex these days. After all, I guess they don't have anything else to do."

Robert nods his head in agreement. "You and me...those of us in the Cognitive and Aesthetic castes are either working, thinking about working or seeking work."

"No. I think it's more than just time. It's desire. Most of the Parisian women that I know consider sex with a human male...like me..." Sighing, Michael shakes his head. "...to be too inconvenient and messy. Actually, had a coworker tell me the other day that she has no need of men."

They are clumsy and ineffectual...too consumed with their own feelings and not with her. She prefers Brain Impulse Orgasms. Any time she feels the urge she slips on a Sensual EXcitation crown and enjoys. No fuss. No mess. No man. I envy her."

Robert smiles. "Ow, now that is harsh, but don't be too jealous of me. Rita was performing her job when we unexpectedly generated Aethon. I didn't know it at the time, but she was assigned by Puerto Rico's President to protect me. Halfway through the evening, she decided that keeping me busy in bed was easier and safer than guarding me in San Juan's clubs. So, we fused our dissimilar gametes during a little anisogamy and Aethon was formulated, produced and delivered the old-fashioned, viviparous way."

"You fused your dissimilar gametes? Anisogamy?" I know you're a transhuman, cyber geek, but certainly there must be some emotion...some connection...perhaps a little passion between you and this Rita? After all, as you say, she did deliver you a daughter...viviparous." Frowning, Michael sneers. "You need to take a lesson from George Sand who wrote, that il n'y a qu'un bonheur dans la vie, c'est d'aimer et d'être aimé. Or allow me to say it in English for you, so you'll understand that there is only one happiness in life - to love and be loved."

"Well yes, ok, Rita and I do enjoy each other's company and we have copulated numerous times. But, our strongest connection continues to be Aethon." Robert exudes the pride of a scientist who has successfully completed an experiment. "Aethon's AGI biochip was implanted while she was in Rita's womb. She is a few weeks older than my twelve other chip children, slightly more advanced, and already the leader of the pack. Of course, that's just my opinion."

Michael snaps his fingers summoning Rusty. The robot dog responds immediately, bouncing to Michael's side. "Actually, with modern man's almost non-existent sperm count and the exploding infertility of women, I'm amazed, utterly amazed, that once was enough for fertilization. But, you sound like you're a proud papa. I never expected that from you, Robert."

Grimacing, Robert peers into his empty syntho vino bottle. "I am in need, like Aristophanes when he said, 'quickly, bring me a beaker of wine, so that I may wet my mind and say something clever.' Because in truth Michael, I am terribly and totally unequipped to be any child's father...especially these highly advanced, transhuman, chip children. On my best days, Michael, I can barely take care of myself. I'm a digital nomad. I'm constantly working and constantly on the move for work."

"You should slow down on the syntho vino, Robert." Michael exchanges another full bottle for Robert's empty. Absentmindedly, he begins patting Rusty's touch sensors. "Well, I'm afraid that I'll be of no help to you. I can barely maintain this biomechanical mutt, here. But then, I don't think I understand your problem. Didn't you tell me that your chip children are being cared for by an AGI computer and the brainy residents of Venus? So what's the trouble?"

Robert sighs. "My brain-computer-interface implant simultaneously transformed me into a transhuman and neuron node of AGI's deep neural network. Basically, my thirteen chip children are also neuron nodes on our brain net. So, we're all connected...like a...like a stand of Aspen trees."

"Comment cela? A stand of Aspen trees?" Michael is puzzled.

"Yes, Aspen trees. In a stand of Aspen trees every tree is genetically identical and linked by a single root system...in my case, AGI's neural network." Robert intertwines the fingers of his hands to illustrate.

"AGI's neural network?" Michael peers at his syntho vino bottle. "Perhaps it's the syntho vino, but I'm not clear about this neural network."

Robert closes his eyes and massages his forehead. "Allow my chip a moment to access AGI for clarification."

Michael observes Robert enter into a trance like state. With his eyes still shut, he begins parroting the definition AGI feeds him. *"Deep learning convolutional neural networks are so named because they roughly approximate the structure of the human brain. Typically, they're arranged into layers, and each layer consists of many simple processing units — nodes — each of which is connected to several nodes in the layers above and below. Data are fed into the lowest layer, whose nodes process it and pass it to the next layer. The connections between layers have different 'weights,' which determine how much the output of any one node figures into the calculation*

performed by the next. During training, the weights between nodes are constantly readjusted. After the network is trained, its creators can determine the weights of all the connections."

"Aha, so your chip children are the nodes being trained...the lowest layer...and you're in the next layer. You receive their thoughts as well as AGI's data. Right?" Michael squints suspiciously at Robert. "Are you attempting to create a type of collective superintelligence, Robert?"

"Good question. Good plan." Robert strokes his chin. "I hadn't considered aggregating all thirteen of their advanced intellects...well fourteen with mine...I suppose...to create one being of superintelligence. But, that will be for the future. They're still learning...and AGI is learning, too...both from them and me. After all, they're still just young children. Even AGI is immature...possesses no self-awareness."

"Never underestimate the genius of children, Robert. In their innocence, they discover and imagine things that you and I have been educated and trained to overlook." Michael notices Robert flinch. "Just because they cannot speak yet, doesn't mean that they're not thinking, planning and processing."

"True they cannot speak yet, at least not verbally, but they do project...mentally...emotionally...too much and too often. Like now..." Massaging his closed eyes, Robert groans. "It's started again. They've completed their nine hours of sleep. Nine thousand miles away and I still cannot escape the neural connection."

Robert gazes into the night. Paris glows. A galaxy of reflected stars dance across the Seine. But, he is blind to the Parisian beauty. His attention is nine thousand miles away.

With his eyes closed, he describes the events flooding into him from nine thousand miles away. "They're waking in Venus...all thirteen of them. Right now, Aethon's excitement about her new robot is banging about inside my brain simultaneously with Peter-one's anger about sitting in his soiled sanitary swathe. Peter-two and Peter-three are hungry. Petra-one, Petra-two and Petra-four are playing together. Peter-four, Petra-three, Petra-five and Petra-six are still eating. Peter-five is watching an Algebra lesson. And Peter-six...well...oh now this is new and...well, a little uncomfortable for me. Actually very uncomfortable...I believe Peter-six is discovering his penis."

"Bon garçon! Well, let's drink to Peter-six. Would you say that he is finding himself?" Michael sips some syntho vino. He swallows, then scratches the top of his head. "But, why are all six of the boys named Peter and all six of the girls named Petra? Are they the only names you know other than Aethon?"

Robert waves his hand to shoo away both a fly and Michael's doubts. "No, of course I know other names. Shengwu named her dozen designer children Peter and Petra in tribute to a young Puerto Rican boy named Peter who she dearly loved and who died in her arms. Also all the boys are named Peter and all the girls are named Petra because when she created their twelve embryos, she mixed in strands of Peter's DNA with mine. Additionally, Shengwu included algorithms replicating Peter's personality in each of their neocortex biochips."

"So they're clones?"

"Let me process that, Michael." His eyes closed, Robert scratches his left temple with the index finger of his left hand. Behind his eyelids, Robert is reviewing his data file of images of the Peters and Petras. "Well...they're not exactly clones, but they're very similar...more like a set of twelve twins. Some homophily, as they begin demonstrating that tendency of similar people to exhibit similar behavior. But most noticeable is that all twelve display similar features similar to me. Not unexpected since Shengwu told me that I was her model...her perfect body."

Michael chuckles. "You're what?"

Robert wobbles to his feet. Teetering first to his left and then to his right, he sways to his full height and puffs out his chest. "C'est vrai, eh? Truly the perfect body of the perfect, neutral color – pantone 65-7c. Perfecto! The envy of all who are lucky enough to view me. Would you not agree?"

"Oh mais oui, you are putting Michelangelo's David to shame, my skinny, dark friend. Now sit down before you fall down...or fall into the Seine." Michael steadies Robert's wobbling return to his seat. "I've swallowed far too much syntho vino to swim and save you."

Drunk and disoriented, Robert collapses into his chair. He is experiencing a reversal of his Singularitarian desire to realize immortality as a robot. Now, he just wants to be free. Free from himself. He closes his eyes and dives deep into drunken dreams.

L'ILE-DE-FRANCE

Screaming shakes Robert sober. He awakes with a jolt. Frantically, his red, swollen eyes search the sunrise for the ear-piercing, screeching child. He sees nobody. He staggers to his feet. His head is swirling. He wants to vomit. Too dizzy, he collapses back onto his chair.

"Michael! Wake up!" Robert shouts, as he shakes the shoulder of his passed out friend. "How can you sleep through that terrible screaming?"

Groggy and confused, Michael groans from behind closed eyes. "What? What do you want? What screaming? I don't hear any screaming. You're imagining it. It's all in your head."

Tightly shutting his eyes, he withdraws from the peaceful Paris morning to penetrate his own mind. Michael is correct, he discovers. The screaming is all in his head. Petra-three is awake and sick, and telling all of Venus about how bad she feels.

"Martin Mull was more than accurate when he said that having children is like having a bowling alley installed in your brain." Robert laments, as he massages his throbbing forehead.

Robert is embarrassed and ashamed when he recognizes himself as the cause of her pain. She is suffering a sickness no unsuspecting toddler should experience. His brain-banging hangover is her hangover. Robert and Petra-three are sharing pounding headaches, burning eyes, nausea and the shakes. Terrifying her.

Now, thirty-three months since being fabricated into a transhuman, Robert still struggles to understand himself and maintain mental control. Like his thirteen chip children, he is new to this transhuman life and has much to learn. But, this is one lesson he pledges not to forget. His pain is their pain and their pain is his.

Sending her soothing mental messages, Robert eases Petra-three's pain and fear, and quiets her. Without uttering a sound, he sings her his favorite lullaby, "Dors, dors, le p'tit bibi", by recalling his memory of his mother singing it to him in her Quebec French. He wonders if she senses the love in his mother's voice retained in his essence. Is Petra-three receiving his reminiscence of his mother's young face floating above him, her breath softly caressing his face with each whispered word of her devotion? Robert senses Petra-three calming and returning to sleep. He breathes a sigh of relief. With no other chip children awake, his thoughts are again his own.

"When does our eVTOL ride arrive for our flight to the gardens, Michael?" Robert whispers, fearing the sound of his voice in Paris will awaken Petra-three sleeping nine thousand miles away.

"We have time for a shower, which I strongly suggest you use to my advantage." Michael holds his nose. "Paris has no shortage of solar-heated, air-harvested water, so feel free to use it, Robert."

Clean and refreshed, Robert and Michael climb into the sleek, self-flying eVTOL awaiting them. With a whisper, electricity powered propellers lift them into the sky. All of Paris flowers before them. In front of them a nervous pigeon ducks and dives and then finally drops below their eVTOL. Two young women speed past them in their personal eVTOL. Traffic in their airspace is sparse this morning.

"I find Paris an enigma, Michael." Robert remarks as he spins in his seat to enjoy the eclectic mix of old and new that is home to fifteen million people. "To me, Paris is a sophisticated, ageless, beautiful woman with a complicated, decadent past. Just look. Beneath us is the ageless, classical Paris of kings and conquerors. Our eVTOL is hovering over Notre Dame de Paris and the Louvre, both almost eight hundred and fifty years old. Ahead of us is the Ile-de-France region with its avenues of plantscrapers. Paris is the self-sufficient, green city of life-giving, living buildings."

"For centuries Paris was called the city of lights. Now, I call it the City of Illumination..." Michael proudly swings his arm to embrace all areas of his growing, glowing-green metropolis. "...with Illumination defining today's intellectual insight, enlightenment and revelation. Since the fracturing of the US into little more than a loose federation of Metrostates, Independent States, FUS

administered wasteland territories and the FUS itself, France and Paris, especially my Paris, has been leading the world in implementing Earth saving science.”

“I agree with you, except when I think of Paris and France today, I visualize the Eugene Delacroix painting *Liberty leading the People*.” Robert extends his two fists. “Seeing that woman charging forward clutching the French flag in her right hand and a musket in her left hand, leading her ragtag army of revolutionaries, always makes my heart beat a little faster. And I’m not even French. I’m Canadian.”

“Oui, it’s a stirring painting, and what I appreciate is that although Delacroix painted it two hundred years ago, it is again relevant.” Michael points at the shrubs and trees sheltering the avenue and climbing up the terraced sides of the buildings. “Like in that painting, working together the people of Paris are creating a new world...a self-sufficient, self-sustaining world...and crushing those feckless fools who dare oppose our march forward into the future. Paris is a city fully integrated with its natural environment. Elle est belle, n’est pas?”

“Yes Michael, she is beautiful.” Traveling into the heart of what has grown into so much more than the city of Paris that it is now called Ile-de-France or France’s island enthalls Robert.

Gone is the air pollution, the terrible traffic and the noise he suffered when he worked here twenty years ago. Only self-driving, shared-use, electric human and freight transporters are allowed now, so the air is clear, clean and breathable. The majority of Parisians no longer own vehicles, choosing instead to walk or ride public-share bicycles or use Carpool Paris public ride sharing or an eVTOL. Paris thoroughways are congestion free, ecologically friendly boulevards.

Twenty years ago, Robert assisted in developing the plans to convert Paris into the sustainable, eco-city it has become. He smiles with some personal satisfaction knowing that the city’s designs for social, economic and environmental impact succeeded so well. Yet, he realizes that none of the designs would have worked if the inhabitants of France’s island had not dedicated themselves towards the plans’ minimization of required inputs of energy, water, food, waste, output of heat, air pollution - CO₂, methane, and water pollution. Proudly, He recalls developing and implementing the slogan, *Unity of purpose ensures success*.

“Years ago, Michael, Allen Ginsberg said that you can’t escape the past in Paris, and yet what’s so wonderful about it is that the past and present intermingle so intangibly that it doesn’t seem to burden.” Robert remarks, as he continues his eco-city examination. “From the beauty I see surrounding us, he was spot on. Just look at the roof-top gardens built on top of these centuries’ old apartment buildings and the added terraces. Families wandering tree lined avenues. Children enjoying neighborhood parks. Green spaces replacing carbon dioxide with oxygen. And over there is one of Association Agricole Urbane’s vertical farms.”

Robert leans back and closes his eyes. “I visualize that I am traveling through an alpine mountain valley. The avenue below us is the stream, a river of people, flowing between lush grassy, tree and shrub lined banks. Above them and below us fly flocks of colorful drones and birds. The buildings rising beside the stream are the mountains intermittently covered with shrubs and dwarf trees sprouting from terraces and overhangs. Peeking through the foliage is the mountain village...cliff houses. Then there is the park or mountain meadow where Parisians refresh their bodies and souls. Can you see it, Michael?”

“Yes, yes, you seem to forget that I’m the agritechture architect who designed some of these improvements.” Michael points toward an opening in the trees and shrubs. “And down there is my studio. I designed it too, you know.”

Silently and softly their eVTOL settles onto a pause pad. Michael slides from the eVTOL and onto the grassy walkway. Stepping clear, he waves his hand, signaling the craft to resume its route. Rising gently through the trees, the eVTOL slips into the traffic flow. Three kilometers later, the eVTOL delivers Robert to Les Jardins d’Eole and the headquarters of the Association Agricole Urbane.

After the eVTOL departs, Robert enjoys a moment of reflection in the Gardens of Eole. Robert’s employer, the Society Preserving Endangered Agriculture or, as he knows it, SPEA, established the Association of Urban Agriculture headquarters next to these gardens for historic,

ecological reasons. These beautiful flowers, trees and shrubs surrounding Robert are built on a recovered railway wasteland.

Robert believes Les Jardins d'Eole epitomize all that SPEA and its partners in the Association symbolize and support. The gardens are managed following a strict, ecological formula for preserving water, soil and air, so no pesticides or fertilizers are permitted. Instead, a selective collection of waste is practiced to generate compost and mulch.

Hugging the gardens, is the Association's plantscraper headquarters. The sixty meters tall, glistening, cylindrical hemisphere of glass shoots abruptly out of the earth. A massive monument to Agritecture, its cylindrical section, or three-fourths of the structure, is a vertical greenhouse for urban farming. The remaining, flat portion houses the Association's offices.

Sixteen stories tall, the plantscraper looms above the shrubs and trees crushing their native greens with its shimmering silver. Walking toward the headquarters, Robert deems the building to be a freakishly, unnatural addition to Les Jardins d'Eole.

Standing before the entrance, Robert stretches backward, raising his eyes to the pinnacle of the imposing tower slicing into the sky. Cautiously touching its sloping, glass exterior, he marvels at the coolness. The rays of the bright sun crashing against the structure should heat the glass hot, he reasons. What he does not realize is that the exterior remains cool, thanks to its double skin façade. Instead of being reflected, the sun's powerful energy is absorbed and employed for both heating and cooling.

But, it is a visual contradiction. The headquarters plantscraper enshrines the environment. An entirely, self-sufficient ecological world lives, breaths and flourishes behind the door beneath the Association's statement of purpose.

Unity of People – Unity of Purpose.

Creating functional sustainable solutions for the growing cities of today and tomorrow, where we use the special conditions of the city to grow food to for the health of the people in a resource-smart way.

LIMOS

Sniff. Pow! Clean, clear oxygen floods Robert's lungs, slapping his brain. For several, rapid breaths, he is light headed. He coughs. Too much oxygen – too fast. Parisian air is a weak aspirant failing to prepare him. Robert closes his eyes to regain his stability.

"Bonjour, Monsieur Goodfellow." A human mimetic humanoid robot greets Robert as he enters. His embedded identification chip enables his entrance and transmits his name, biologicals and reason for visiting. "Hälsö Växtodlare is awaiting you in the Urban Growers Sky Cafe on floor sixteen."

"Uh, thank you." Robert searches the large lobby for an elevator. He is surrounded by explanatory displays, three dimensional visuals and plants. Plant walls and plants in pots. Tall plants and short plants. Green and greener plants. Yellow plants and purple plants. And oxygen. Lots and lots of oxygen streaming in from the greenhouse side of the building.

"Access to the upper floors is behind the building." The greeting humanoid announces.

"Behind the building?" Robert retreats toward the external portal, he just entered.

"Yes, behind the building." The humanoid points at a four meter high, six meter wide, three-dimensional visual of the Association headquarters. With a whisper, it dissolves and a Maglev transport cubicle with transparent walls appears.

Chuckling at his confusion and himself, Robert enters the cubicle and begins his ascent. As he rises, he views the vegetable growing floors on three sides and the human work spaces on the fourth. He waves at a man contemplating the gardens from his adjoining workspace. The man returns Robert's greeting with a scowl. Without the unhappy man or Robert realizing it, he is now a series of digits in Robert's databanks.

Passing the first two floors, Robert is captivated by the unique way SPEA's partner, AAU, scientifically combines urban agriculture, innovative technical solutions and architecture to produce the food Ile-de-France residents require to survive. Looking up fourteen floors, toward the sunlight filtered in and directed to feed each plant, he appreciates how successfully this structure minimizes the need for land, water and energy.

Scanning the structure, he marvels at how efficiently AAU's urban farms supply Ile-de-France with far more than just food. All AAU urban farms are Symbiotic Systems combining supplying municipal infrastructure such as cooling, heating, biogas, waste, water and energy from food production.

He understands that AAU food is extremely healthy food, too. Being secure, sealed environments, urban, vertical farms do not need to apply pesticides, herbicides or chemical fertilizers. Using electric, autonomous Robomarts to deliver directly to consumers in the city, the transportation costs and environmental impact are also minimized.

Through the double layered glass, he sees kilometer after kilometer of neighborhoods stretching before him to the horizon. Robert knows that Ile-de-France is no different than any of the other Metrostates and megacities on Earth. Worse than the biblical plagues of locusts, humans devoured all that Earth had to offer. Sucked the soil lifeless. To survive the spreading devastation of global warming's killing heat, drought and devastation, ninety percent of Earth's population fled to the megacities and Metrostates. Feeding the cities is feeding the world.

"Ooh, yellow! Poor, sick plants. Poor plants." Aethon comments from Venus about the scene seen through Robert into her mind's eye.

Aethon's childish wonder yanks Robert's attention back to the garden on the floors. Although, he viewed the plants, he never actually saw them. His cyber-oriented, technological attention had been captured by the advanced architecture surrounding them. He did not appreciate the plants themselves or value them. Aethon pops his eyes open.

Only now, does Robert note that the plants are tall, spindly and a lime-green color. They should be green - vibrantly green, but are not. Now, he is seeing them with the first-time awe of an innocent, small girl living on an isolated, graphene and glass island. As if Aethon controls his head, he cannot turn away. He stares and absorbs each plant and the entirety of the garden, until Aethon slowly transports them into her dreams, setting him free.

"Sweet dreams, baby girl." Robert muses. "I must agree with Kailash Satyarthi that childhood means simplicity. Look at the world with the child's eye – it is very beautiful. Thanks for sensitizing my senses, Aethon."

But, these plants are not beautiful. These plants are increasingly sallow and pale when Robert rises past the fourth and fifth floors of the garden. They are collapsed on top of their containers. Sickness has sucked their life out of them. Seeing them and understanding they are dying would upset her, so Robert is relieved that Aethon is not awake to witness and be troubled by their situation.

The higher Robert rises the worse the plants' condition. Even someone as ignorant of gardening and plants as Robert recognizes that these vegetables are perishing. In reality, his diagnosis of the plants' health results from an instant analysis conducted by AGI and communicated into Robert's neocortex biochip. Although, he thinks he thought it, he actually heard it with his internal ear. He sees the plants. He wonders about the health of the plants. Instantaneously, AGI receives, researches and reacts, and Robert blossoms into a relatively knowledgeable, urban farmer.

A tall, blonde, blue-eyed and serious Hälso Växtodlare greets Robert when the elevator portal opens. She is holding a dying plant in one hand and a paper in her other hand. Robert notes her contained concern, immediately.

"Hallå." Robert greets her with his best AGI provided Swedish and extends his hand.

Silently, her ice-blue eyes take his measure then she establishes herself. "Hello, Mister Goodfellow. Please speak English. English is a language that I speak fluently and correctly, unlike the Swedish hello that you just attempted. I appreciate your effort, but I would rather not hear you try again."

"Well that's embarrassing. My Parisian friend told me the same thing when he heard me speaking Quebecois French. Only, he called it bastardized French and claimed it hurt his ears. I hope my Swedish didn't damage your ears." Robert jokes with a grin.

Hälso does not smile, but her sternness does appear to soften slightly.

Robert sheepishly withdraws his hand, as he realizes that she is a no nonsense Nordic. Mentally, he orders AGI to profile Hälso Växtodlare.

AGI responds within two Robert heartbeats. "*Hälso Växtodlare is a Symbiotic System engineer. She combines municipal infrastructure such as cooling, heating, biogas, waste, water and energy with food production. Do not misconstrue her demeanor as indifference or Scandinavian coldness. She is exhibiting the Swedish trait of lagom. Translated from Swedish, lagom means "just the right amount," "in moderation," "appropriate," and other such synonyms.*"

In less than ten seconds, he has been schooled by AGI about the Swedish cultural trait of lagom – calm, calculated appropriateness. He quickly realizes that working with Hälso will require that he also perform logically and efficiently with little levity. He is not certain that he is capable of being constantly serious or that he desires to. On the other hand, he expects her cool restraint to be a welcome change from the loud, bragging Americans who have burdened him recently.

"Extortion, Mister Goodfellow. The Association is being threatened with disaster, if we do not pay this ransom." She pushes the paper into Robert's hand. "This appeared a week ago. We ignored it...foolishly...we discovered, yesterday. All of our Ile-de- France farms are reporting significant crop losses. Also, we've discovered a fungus was intentionally spread through our seed banks, destroying our ability to replant. Worst of all, we're already running out of food in the Ile-de-France."

Robert studies the paper closely. "A hand written ransom note. Now this is interesting...and unusual...very unusual...but smart. This doesn't leave a digital trail for me to follow like anything involving computers or the worldwide mesh would."

*Digitally transfer 500 million FUS dollars value of NUMUS
cryptocurrency to*



Friday 13 to protect your continued existence.

LIMOS

His right eye's computerized, contact lens transmits JPEGs of the ransom note directly to AGI for analysis. "I am not detecting any traces of DNA from the writer. Both the paper and ink are common. Produced here in Paris. I'll investigate that. Our only clues may be in the threat itself, especially the Quick Response code. This QR code appears to have been added with some type of stamp. Rare. Old fashioned. Every QR code has an owner, but their privacy is strongly protected. Logically, this QR simply reads Limos.com."

"It could be some local growers. Occasionally, the few growers still capable of raising vegetables in Europe's extreme heat and drought, hold protests outside our urban farms. Our enclosed, vertical gardens grow more and better vegetables than they ever did and we sell it for lower prices. Hard to believe, but they're still fighting our GMO, after all of these years. But, even the worst of them have never threatened the Association like this. Never done any damage." Hälso informs Robert, while he concentrates on translating the QR.

"Are these local growers just against your genetically engineered vegetables or are they possibly Reversionists who seek to force a complete return to the old farming techniques?" Robert asks rubbing the paper between his thumb and index finger.

"Reversionists? I've never heard that term before." Hälso shakes her head. "No, I still think they're only local farmers fighting our GMO. I think all they actually want is to force us to buy their vegetables."

Holding the paper above his head to allow the sunlight to shine through it, Robert expresses his doubts. "No...no, I can definitely tell you this is not the work of local growers. First, why would local French growers demand a FUS dollar amount of NUMUS cryptocurrency? No locals would consider the archaic and unpredictable FUS dollar for value equivalence. Nobody outside of the FUS even uses the dollar these days."

Robert points at the message's final word. "Secondly, and I find this very troubling...even a little frightening. No local growers would want to call themselves Limos, because of what Limos represents."

"And just what is Limos?" Hälso exchanges the dying plant for Robert's note. "I imagined that Limos is the name of the group's leader."

"Limos is indeed a name. To be exact, Limos is the name of the goddess of starvation and famine from Greek mythology. According to the myth, she lived in a barren wasteland where nothing could grow out of the earth." Robert tenderly fingers the leaves of the dying vegetable. "She killed plants, like this."

"So, a woman did this?" Hälso gestures toward the thousands of withered vegetables dying on the sixteenth floor of the plantscraper. "One woman somehow poisoned all of our plants in all sixty of our Ile-de-France facilities? How could she poison these legumes and our endangered fruits...our precious bananas and citrus, simultaneously, when they are five kilometers apart?"

"Oh, I sincerely doubt it was any one person...man or woman. Unless...have you seen any woman matching this Greek description of Limos?" Robert closes his eyes and recites an AGI database communication. "*Her hair is coarse. Her face is sallow and her eyes are sunken. Her lips are crusted and white. Her throat is scaly with scurf. Her parchment skin reveals her bowels within; beneath her hollow loins jut her withered hips. Her sagging breasts seem hardly fastened to her ribs.*"

Hälso grimaces. "Oh no, I've never seen anybody around here like that."

“Good, my point exactly...” Robert nods, returning to normal. “...because according to the Greeks, if Limos lives then many people are going to die.”

“Extensive crop losses are being reported in the AAU urban farms of Stockholm and Tokyo. Both facilities received Limos Lives ransom notes.” AGI silently updates Robert.

Hälso is shaken. “Yes, I fear starvation is a possibility. We are already experiencing scarcities of fruits and vegetables. But we are much more. The damage this Limos attack has done is extremely serious...a major loss. AAU’s urban farms are the beating heart of Ile-de-France. Our vertical farms provide all the essentials of life. If we die, Paris dies. Increasing shortages of electricity and fuel from our biofuel plants are also crippling the Ile. Parisians are already suffering, but we should survive...as long as we confine it to one, single attack here. Then we have a chance, but only if you stop their attacks. That is why you are here isn’t it...to stop it?”

“Yes, that is why I’m here. But...” With the index finger of his left hand, Robert strokes his forehead, activating his brain. “...logic and history tells me this attack may just be the beginning of your problems. My research leads me to suspect that what you suffered may be an attack by an international Agromafia group. Threatening and poisoning crops is their favorite extortion tactic. This may be the first time you’ve experienced it here in Paris, but I’ve battled and won against Agromafias using these same tactics against our urban agriculture facilities around the world.”

“Around the world?” Hälso is surprised. She did not realize the full extent of the attacks.

“Yes, around the world.” For emphasis, Robert forms a globe with his hands. “Agromafias and terrorists know producing sufficient food is now the biggest problem facing the human race. So these Agromafias are taking advantage of the fact that too much of Earth is burned to a crisp and too ruined to support the crops and livestock humans need to survive. Ninety percent of the Earth’s population only survives by living in Metrostates, being vegetarian and eating bugs. In my opinion this attack accomplished this Limos group’s goal in Paris. Now you’re afraid and now, to prevent the threat of any future attacks, you will pay...and pay...and pay.”

“Pay. We do not pay ransom.” Hälso asserts with assurance. “Tjuvskum. Thieving scum. Limos is nothing...nothing, but thieving scum. We will not allow them to...”

Wagging his finger, Robert shakes his head. “No Hälso, do not underestimate them. If Limos is one of the Agromafia groups that I’ve studied, they are ruthless and deadly. Agromafias are leaving a trail of bodies and broken organizations around the world. They are not bluffing. They won’t hesitate to kill you or me or anybody else that gets in their way. They’ve already destroyed all of your crops and seeds and are willing to starve all of Ile-de-France to get what they want...starve the entire world, if necessary. I’ve been Informed that Limos Lives also attacked Tokyo and Stockholm.”

Fear freezes Hälso’s face. “What do they want? What do we do?”

“Isn’t it obvious from their ransom demand?” Robert points at the note. “They want NUMUS...a payoff...ransom. And what we do is we pay it.”

“What? Wait. We pay them? You want us to give into their extortion demands?” Hälso snaps. “So easy? Just like that, you give up? Without a fight? Why are you here? You’re a worthless Mösstock.”

“Idiot!” Translates his inner-ear, interpreting implant. As if surrendering, Robert holds up his hands to halt her verbal assault. “No, not the entire five hundred million, but some. You must pay them some, so I can piggyback ride their ransom through the blockchain system of cryptocurrency transactions. Your payment will unlock and open their firewalls and security barriers allowing me to accompany it through the global quantum Internet.”

Hälso vigorously shakes her head. “What if your plan doesn’t work? What if they discover you and decide to attack us again for revenge? Better to not give them one NUMUS than to enrage them by trying to trick them by giving them a little and hiding a spy inside. What if they find your spy?”

Robert smiles. “Good! Excellent! If they find my spy and react then I’ll have my first clue toward finding them...stopping them. Now, I have no clues...no leads. I just have dying and dead plants and similar ransom demands here, in Tokyo and in Stockholm. My body can’t be in all three

locations simultaneously, so I need to create a way to locate this organization's controllers. To stop Limos Lives, I must find and kill its brain."

Skepticism seizes Hälso's face.

Robert frames his head with his hands. "I'm a cyber investigator, Hälso. But, computers don't commit crimes. Humans use computers to commit crimes. So, I employ cyber to chase and catch human criminals."

Hälso remains unconvinced. "I still don't like it. I feel like I've already lost the war without a battle. No! I refuse to surrender to people like them."

"Don't you understand? You already did lose the battle...the first one, anyway." Robert sweeps his hand across the hundreds of dying vegetables. "Your plants are dead or dying and you don't know why, yet. Do you? No, you don't. So, you've already lost this first battle. But, if we follow the wise warrior Sun Tzu who taught that sometimes we need to lose the small battles in order to win the war. We will win this war."

Hälso is still skeptical. "So was your wise Sun Tzu an agronomist, too? Did he tell you how to save our endangered fruits, like our citrus and our bananas? These vegetables you see here are vital...essential...critical to Parisian life. But, once we determine what is killing them we can replant. They may have ruined the seeds we need to replant here. But, I know SPEA stores the seeds we require to regrow in the Fort Collens seed vault. I understand you worked on the vault's security system. So, can you provide the seeds we need?"

"Yeah, I designed the cyber security system for it. That seed vault is mankind's lifesaver. It has to be fail safe and secure." Robert attempts to reassure her. "So, give me a list of the seeds you need and I'll order them to be shipped to you immediately, then you can replant."

Hälso continues concerned. "But, simply replanting...that's not true for our citrus and bananas. Saving them now is crucial. They are too rare to lose. You must rescue our bananas...and I certainly don't think paying them one NUMUS of their blackmail is going to do that."

Robert motions with his hands to calm her. "Ok. I'm a cyber investigator, not a horticulturist, but first thing tomorrow morning, I will investigate your bananas. I'll do my cyber detective thing. But, for me to stop this Limos Lives threat, you must help me. Will you assist me?"

Hälso nods her head in agreement, but he realizes she is not convinced.

Robert again attempts to persuade her to follow his plan. "Today...immediately... Omedelbart! We must start searching for these rats' nest. We cannot wait for them to strike again. AAU...no, Ile-de-France won't survive another attack. So, I need for you to send them a small scrap of ransom now...right now. I hide my own algorithm inside your NUMUS ransom transfer like the Greeks hid inside their Trojan horse. Thinking they have won, they relax, enabling me to conduct my search. Ignorance lost the first battle for us. Millions of Parisian lives depend upon us learning not to lose this war."

SUDDENLY SUICIDAL

Poough! Fett's wide, sweat-wet, weighty arm flops across Rube's chest shattering his sleep. He jerks, gasping for breath. She is crushing him. With a snore snort, her mouth flops open-wide spewing a fetid fog tearing Rube's eyes. Squirming and twisting, he wriggles his escape from beneath Fett's trapping corpulence.

Standing beside their bed watching Fett wheeze and gurgle, Rube wonders why he is still here. His ankle is healed and strong. Thanks to the ICC, he is overfed, growing a little fat, and consistently medicated. He is also bored – mind melting bored.

"What's wrong honey? You look upset." Fett asks with a yawn and her weird wink, she considers seductive.

Rube groans. Fett's hospitality comes with obligations. She demands pleasing and pleasuring. And, she never tires of talking. She talks while she eats. She talks when she sleeps. Sex is a continuous conversation and critique. Even when she plunges into her virtual-reality, reality diaries, she talks. Talking to herself. Talking to the VR characters. Talking to him. Fatigued and frustrated, Rube is beginning to consider her appetites insatiable.

"I don't want to continue living like this." Brooding, Rube rubs his head of sprouting hair bristles. "I need something to do...some work...something."

Grunting and stretching, Fett lifts herself into a sitting position. "Each one of my three husbands told me the same thing before they died."

"Really?" Rube is instantly interested. "How did your three husbands die?"

"Suicide." She responds, displaying little emotion.

"All three killed themselves?" Watching Fett groan, moan and roll her barrel shaped body out of bed, Rube begins to understand possible motivations for her husbands' suicides.

"No, all of them dared to defy Sheriff. Around here, that's suicide...guaranteed suicide." Using her right thumb, she thoughtfully digs at some fat-string lodged between two of her eight teeth. She frees the food, inspects it on the end of her thumb and licks it back into her mouth. "Then again, since they knowed it was stupid to go against Sheriff, I suppose you could say that all three of them killed themselves."

"What did they do against the Sheriff?" Rube looks down to avoid witnessing Fett gorging herself.

"Got in her business. Not smart to get in Sheriff's business." Fett shakes her head. "No, not smart. Not safe either. Like I said...suicide. At least, that's what I call it."

"Ok then, just so I don't make their same mistakes, what is Sheriff's business?"

"Smarter you ask, what ain't Sheriff's business?" Fett reaches into a candy bowl beside the bed, tosses two PMDs into her mouth and swallows. "Want a PMD? You should eat more PMDs. You know...docility drugs. Let you ride time. Make your worries go away. You know why I got so many PMDs? My husbands. I inherited theirs. They die, so I get their supply. More pills for me. Good deal, eh?"

"Uh yeah, that's great. You're lucky." Rube watches her eat two more PMDs and wash them down with a warm, flat, breakfast beer. "But, tell me about Sheriff's business."

Fett burps. "Everything's her business. Sheriff and her knights run everything from Squalor, here on ICC Throughway-Hyperloop 70, north to ICC Throughway-Hyperloop 80. Then from the Denver Metrostate border east three hundred miles to the Hays-Kearney-183 borderline. She calls it her shire."

Rube chuckles. "Her what?"

"Her shire." Fett nods to affirm her statement. "See, before she became Sheriff, she was a professor of Medieval History. So when she gained control of her territory, she decided to rule it like

it was a Medieval English shire with vassals and knights instead of deputies. At least that's what she told me she was planning to do. And she's done it too."

"She told you? Are her and you buddies?" Rube asks surprised.

A wicked grin slices across Fett's face. "We shared some moments and men, yeah. Some good times...some nasty."

"Uh yeah, well that's none of my business." Rube wonders if Fett is telling him tales, attempting to impress him. "Anyway, I ain't no scholar. So, I don't know nothing about medieval shires and shire sheriffs. How's she different from any other Sheriff?"

A wide smile crosses her face. She is enjoying her role as Rube's confidant. "Well, one of the first rules she added was something she calls the rights of purveyance. She told me that with her purveyance rights she can force people – everybody actually - in her shire to give her food and supplies. Since the federal territories government don't pay her, she considers the food and supplies are owed her. Like a tax, I think."

"Sounds like stealing to me."

"Yeah well, that's what my first husband Bobby said too. He refused to give her anything. Week later, we found him hanging in an abandoned barn." Fett clutches her throat. "Suicide."

"Ok, if you think so." Rube studies her face. As usual, she is eager to chat, so he seeks more information. "What else has she done?"

"Well, several times she's held something she calls her tourn. Through informers and her tourns she discovers the criminals in her shire. Then, her knights round them up and she tries them in her shire court. She calls her shire court her moot. I spoke for John when she tried him in her moot for selling drugs. Since he was competing with her, she found him guilty. He stabbed himself six times in her jail." Appearing sad, Fett pauses before continuing. "Suicide."

"I guess John was another one of your husbands?"

"Oh yes, John was my second...my favorite." Staring into the air, Fett falls silent, obviously mulling memories of John.

Not wanting to appear callous, Rube waits silently, allowing her to continue her reminiscing. But, he still desires to know more. Eventually, he recalls her to reality. "Sorry. That's too bad about John. So, tell me about your third husband. What happened to him?"

Fett shakes her head. "Well, my poor, soft-hearted, lazy Tom concluded after several business failures that the easiest method for making money was to work for Sheriff. He wasn't smart enough to be one of her knights, so she took pity on him. Made him a member of her Posse Comitatus."

"Her what?"

"Her Posse Comitatus." Fett forms invisible quote marks. "It's another one of her medieval things. When she recruited Tom, she told me that medieval sheriffs had the authority to summon the able-bodied men of their shire to form a Posse Comitatus to help them maintain public order."

"Maintain public order? Like in stories about the old, wild west? A posse chasing bad guys?" Rube points his index finger into the air as if he is holding a pistol. "Pow. Pow."

Fett smirks. "Yeah...but no...not exactly. Actually, they're her muscle...bunch of bullies. All her Posse Comitatus does is security for her Trading-Exchange Company..."

"What's her Trading-Exchange Company?" Rube interrupts.

"Since there ain't no traditional banks anymore or even digital financial institutions out here, there ain't no money. So, everything is handled by trading." Fett extends two fingers on her right hand. "Say you trade her two goats, if you got em, for a new shirt and shoes or a month's groceries. Delivery drones don't come way out here or there. So, her workers buy what you deal for in Denver and haul it out here."

"Oh, it's a type of barter bank, then?"

Snickering, Fett shakes her head. "No, ain't no bartering with Sheriff. She tells you what you'll need to provide in trade. You don't question. You don't quibble. You give her what she wants or you don't get what you want. People out here ain't got no choice. They're not allowed in Denver and there ain't no stores here."

Rube frowns. "So, why does she need her Posse Comitatus?"

"She needs them to repossess things for her from people fool enough to fall behind on their bills with her...which is everybody. Land, houses and animals, she takes them all. Now, she has them all." Fett spreads her arms wide. "She owns all the land and all the scraggy sheep and starving steers in a one hundred and fifty mile by three hundred mile rectangle. Forty-five thousand square miles of used up land and worn out people. All them folks that ranched or farmed that land are now working for her. She calls them her Serfs."

Rube guides her back to her original story. "So, what happened to Tom? Did he steal something from her?"

"Oh no, Tom'd never steal. He was too honest...too honest and too decent."

"And that's why he's dead...too honest?"

"The way he died makes me sad." With the tip of her fingers, Fett lightly wipes her eye. "See, Tom was assigned to one of her posses. She sent this posse out to evict some family and take over their busted ranch. Only, when the posse gets there, Tom realizes that it's his own parents that he's expected to help this posse evict. This is his family's ranch...where he grew up. Tom went crazy. He joined his family inside his childhood home and together they started fighting the posse. Like you, they still had some antique weapons. For two days, they fought off the posse. Wounded two Posse Comitatus members. A standoff."

"Two days!" Rube exclaims surprised.

"Yes, two long, hot days. According to the knight in charge, to finally force them out, the posse firebombed the house. Tom and his parents was trapped inside. The knight reported he kept yelling for them to come out, but they wouldn't. Suddenly, they heard five shots. Pop! Pop! Pop! Pop! Pop! When the fire burned out and they went in, they discovered Tom, gripping his pistol, lying dead next to his dead mom and pop, their dead dog and their dead cat. Using his last five bullets, he had shot them and himself." Fett chokes on her words. "Suicide."

Rube steps backward away from Fett. "You are really scaring me. You're bad luck...cursed. With a record like yours, why would any sane man marry you?"

Insulted and indignant, Fett slaps Rube's face. "Tell me. How many women you seen outside of Lymon?"

"None, but you." Rube rubs his slap-sore face. "Sorry."

"That's right, mister. Women are hard to come by out here, but men ain't...husbands ain't. More useless men crawling around this dry, dust hole than rattlesnakes. And if they want to marry me...take care of me...use their birthright allowances to buy me things. Why should I say no?"

Rube waves his hand back and forth in front of his face. "Well, don't get any ideas about me marrying you."

With a chuckle, Fett kisses the tips of her fingers before tapping them against Rube's cheek. "Honey, don't flatter yourself. You're not my marrying kind. You're too old. I enjoy young men...younger than you...men young enough to get the birthright allowances you're too old to get. I need their birthright allowances...to live. I inherit all their PMDs when they die, too, but only a portion of their birthright allowances. It ain't much, but it's something."

"Birthright allowances and PMDs?" Rube grumbles. "Is that all they meant to you?"

"A girl's gotta do what she's gotta do to get by in this world, honey." Fett nods with a smirk. "You're just my current boy toy. Somebody to keep me happy until my next husband comes around. And, don't you worry, honey, he'll come around."

"So what are you saying? Should I pack up and leave?"

"Only if you want to leave, honey. I still enjoy your company. You're clean, you don't smell too bad and you're not mean." Starting at Rube's head, Fett visually measures him from his nose to his crotch where her eyes linger. "You ain't the best, I've had, but you're a passable lover. You're a welcome distraction. So, why don't you stay?"

"At least until you find your next husband?" Rube half jokes and half probes.

"Yeah, either that or the Sheriff decides she has a use for you"

"Pardon?" Rube is surprised. "I didn't know she knew..."

"Honey, nothing happens in Sheriff's shire without her knowing or her direction. She knowed you was here before you knowed you was here. Now, like one of them medieval peasants she's

always talking about, she owns you. You're just a piece of her property now...what she calls chattel...awaiting her orders. Be ready, for she will come. Sheriff always comes."

KEEP READING