

Seeds and Stones: Part 2

by Paul j Rogers

Kona Fiveheads wasn't shy with the accelerator pedal. That little buggy must've been greasing forty through the pumpkin plantation. Rudy glanced at her bare knee as she lifted her work boot off the juice to take a corner. Right now, they weren't speaking, communications severed upon the discovery that they disagreed about certain scientific principles.

It'd started when Kona had told him, in language peppered with master's degree terms, that conventional cloud seeding did not, as was commonly misconceived, take rain from one region to give to another. According to her, downwind rain, precipitation as she'd called it, actually increased after an area had been seeded, but that data was obsolete as nobody would ever seed without illegal coalescing chemicals and super-sulphates because the yields were negligible. Anyway, since the ammonium fallout scandals, nobody seeded in summer anymore, just the big government winter programs, silver iodide sticks at high altitude to increase snowpack. Rudy had just listened in silence to all that because he'd watched rain dropping off ever since he was a kid. Besides, he'd seen The Corp's pickup. When she was done, he'd told her that the universities must be polluted, just like the internet, polluted by corrupt governments and big business. The Corp paid agriculture and biotech students' tuition fees. He'd even bet that her professors were on the payroll.

They zipped through a sector gateway onto the main artery through the west of the plantation. As the cart hummed, still no conversation in the cab, Rudy wished he were back at Glasshouse 19 picking romaine because the atmosphere in here was choking him. Kona lifted both work boots onto the dash and let the buggy glide.

"Rudy Cam, you don't seriously believe what you said back there, do you?"

"The Corp are stealing our rain," he said. "There's no other explanation."

The buggy had come to a stop now, pumpkins climbing A-frames on either side as far as the eye could see. Kona produced a tightly rolled cone from the pocket of her Gore-Tex and passed it to him.

"What about the cameras?" he said.

"Why d'ya think I stopped here?" she said.

Rudy looked to his left and then behind. She was right. The cameras had no line of sight, a surveillance blind spot. He took her Zippo, cranked the screw a few times and began to burn the tip. Kona, who was now messing with the air-cool blasters, said the decrease on The Steeps was due to climate change. As for that pickup he'd seen, it was indeed a rocket launcher as The Corp were experimenting with a new salt for summer seeding, not chemicals and super-sulphates, just salt.

Kona was staying pretty calm, voice even, pitch steady, which Rudy appreciated as things had got a little out of hand earlier. Even so, he disagreed with everything she was saying; to him, she just sounded like a Corp infomercial. Kona asked if he knew that his father had approached The Corp about a desalination deal. Rudy blew on the cavoring flame, which flared then smouldered. He nodded and mumbled there was a meeting at the hall about it, right now in fact. Emptying his lungs of violet smoke, he asked again why rainfall had decreased since The Corp arrived.

"Last year precipitation was up, Rudy, remember?"

“It was up on the year before,” he said. “Down on the levels before The Corp.”

After another lungful, he passed her the burning cone and let his head loll backwards, neck elastic, although the buggy had no headrests and pretty soon he straightened up again. Kona told him that the climate had been changing since the twentieth century, but the local weather really freaked out after they’d built the hydro plants along the seaboard. But people needed power so what could they do? Nobody challenged the Power Co. The Power Co. were gods. For a while, they just smoked and listened to the cicadas and crickets that’d survived the dusters.

Rudy wasn’t sure how long they’d been sitting listening to those insects, maybe a few minutes he guessed. He tried to sharpen his focus, but his mind was still drifting, attention now hijacked by the big male pumpkin flowers bouncing on stems like kites on cables. He asked Kona what The Corp would do with the marshland if they got their hands on it.

“Rice paddies,” she said smoke tumbling from her nostrils. “Perfect crop for the terrain what with the run-off from The Steeps.”

Rudy thought about that for a while. Rice paddies, a high-yield crop, it made good sense. He wondered out loud how much action the village’s new desalination plant would see once The Corp had jacked up the price of seawater, but Kona told him not to worry about that as there’d be legislation, officials would set tariffs.

“You trust those cronies up in Haine?” he said. “Get real, Kona. They’re The Corp’s political division.”

Rudy took a few more lungfuls and passed her back the cone, which she chipped and sealed in a stay-fresh bag. Kona stared out at the pumpkins, as if she was done with this conversation, like she regretted requisitioning this picker from Glasshouse 19. Rudy glanced at her legs. Her figure had blossomed since she’d been away, and now he was buzzed those tanned pins framed by shorts and work boots had acquired eyeball-swivelling properties. Yes, it was good to see her again, even if she was Nils Fiveheads’ kid sister.

“What’s in the backpack?” she said.

“Just water,” he said.

Kona looked at him for a while and then rolled her stoned eyeballs to the footwell, to his rucksack. Maybe it was the weed they’d been smoking, but she flashed a little grin, not at him, though, out towards the pumpkins.

“I know what’s in your bag, Rudy,” she said. “I have a pretty good idea what you’re planning to do with it as well.”

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Village Superintendent Cam yanked the rope and hoisted the metal pail up to the cypress bough, and then, with a flick of the wrist, engaged the locking mechanism. Cam removed his felt homburg and looked up at the waxing gibbous moon. He was dressed in a black suit, a frock coat with many buttons, a real Edwardian-looking getup. When he was done moon gazing, he returned the hat to his head and shifted his eyes from the swinging pail to the stream a few paces south. Even by moonlight he could see that the water level was low, flattened reeds that were once underwater now dried by the July sun. He cast his gaze further downstream, his stretch of water, as he was standing on the south edge of his land. He looked to where the stream ran off The Steeps, joined other streams, and then cut

a stripe into the marshes — communal village land. They were no longer marshes. The sun had baked them to divots and ridges, a lunar desert in this pale light.

Cam turned back towards the cypress. He had important work to do, rainmaking work, and things had to be done just right. For the hundredth time, he checked the moon phase in his almanac and then returned the book to his doctor's bag, almanac and bag both being the official property of his office. He unfastened the buttons on his coat, unlined lamb's wool and half a century old, and then dropped to one knee for a last inspection of The Stones. The Stones weren't actually stones. They were the crystallised remains of children's bones and organs, firm and smooth, the colour of mint jelly, and arranged in a semicircle on peach leaves. They'd been locked in The Chest for over three hundred years, passed down from one superintendent to the next for safekeeping and for use in times of trouble, times of drought. The Stones had been kept in The Chest since the last children were sacrificed.

Cam's eye was drawn to a stone, a translucent pebble, an olive on peach leaf bedding. The angle wasn't right, needed realigning, but before resetting it he'd need to start everything over. He'd need to unlock the water pail and lower it back to earth, repeat the incantations, repeat his sin confession. He pushed up from the powdery earth and marched back towards the cypress in exact strides. At the base of the tree, Cam pondered the meaning of that incorrectly aligned stone. It was a warning, a warning that his earlier confession had not been truthful. He'd confessed to misleading the villagers about the desalination deal but had asked for forgiveness as it was for the good of the village. But that sin was not his greatest. Nor was his tryst with the married woman in Ooster, grunts and moans in a rusting silo. His greatest sin was driving his son Rudy from the family home. Cam flicked the locking mechanism open and then released the rope, one hand over the next.

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Rudy scraped back a chair in the West Sector cafeteria, slipped his rucksack under the table and then took a seat opposite Kona. It was the kind of place you'd never eat at unless you had to, all strip lights and laminate, despite The Corp's best efforts to disguise the fact. Their idea of creating a relaxing atmosphere was to deck out the walls with pictures of produce, giant Easyripe tomatoes and Triplefloreto broccoli, the last things a picker would want to look at on their break. Kona slid her keys onto the table and removed her Gore-Tex, hot in here, she mumbled. One cup after the other, she checked the takeout coffees she'd just bought for pencil marks, his espresso, her latte.

"There are cameras rolling but there's no sound," she said. "We can talk freely."

Rudy nodded. He was still mulling over what she'd told him in the buggy about security scans identifying a picker with a suspicious bag on the Glasshouse 19 crew. He tried to think where they could've x-rayed his rucksack as he'd hidden it over a truck wheel arch before going through the front gate. There must be equipment built into the transport carts was all he could come up with. Kona's look was unsettling him, like she was trying to read his mind, and maybe she could because she started to explain that she'd planned to visit him tonight, already knew which crew he was on, but then that message about the suspicious bag had come through the system. Luckily for him, she'd got there first.

Rudy guessed she was waiting for him to express some gratitude for saving him from Corp security, but he just nodded. Besides, he knew what was coming: a lecture on his recklessness and the consequences of destroying Corp property, how sending their modified pickup to the heavens was a pointless act. After all, they'd just buy another and then he'd be off to the meat pens for penal correction. But Kona didn't say any of that. She just stirred her latte, looking at froth expanding as she whisked it with a plastic stick.

"Why do The Corp seed at night?" he said.

She played with her froth awhile, probably still stoned because her mouth wore a childlike grin. Gently, disinterested even, she told him that seeding had nothing to do with Orb's decreased precipitation.

"So you keep saying. Answer the question, Kona."

"The dusters are up in the day," she said. "It's too dangerous then, I guess."

Rudy examined her eyes, her mouth, looking for traces of deception. There weren't any. A spasm jolted through him, toes curled, an after effect of the cone, and then he lowered his eyeballs to his espresso, still untouched.

"Then why do they cover it in tarp when they're in the towns and villages?" he said.

"It's a black project," she said, "under wraps from their competitors. Besides, they don't want to provoke the locals."

Kona repeated what she'd told him in the buggy, that summer seeding without chemicals and super-sulphates was ineffective but they were banned, so The Corp were looking at other solutions. She looked up at Rudy, stirring his espresso now, but he didn't notice because he was wondering why she'd referred to the people on the Murray Seaboard as 'locals' like she wasn't one of them. He was also thinking about sipping some of that espresso, wondering if it would level him off after the cone they'd smoked or whether it'd make him hyper. He didn't want to be hyper. His thinking was scrambled, in and out, unfocused, but he needed it to be clear. When he looked up from his coffee, Kona moved her key bunch: buggy ignition key, key to her locker. She moved them just enough to draw Rudy's eye to them, nothing more.

"I'm going to the bathroom," she said. "If the buggy's gone when I get back, I'll call security in fifteen minutes and say you stole it. You'd better take my jacket. It'll help at sector checks and there's a blue pass in my pocket that'll get you out through the front gate. The pickup was in the North Sector, last time I checked, row 88."

Kona got to her feet. She pasted a fake grin onto her face for the cameras, like she'd just made a joke, two friends goofing around and catching up on old times while having coffee. At the service cart, she turned back and faced him.

"People in the cities need to eat, Rudy," she said. "Whatever you think about The Corp people need to eat."

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Village Superintendent Cam tramped the upper west lane, no more than a track on this part of The Steeps, barely wide enough for a single tractor. He was hiking in the opposite direction to his farm, still wearing his rainmaking garb, still clutching the doctor's bag. An engine rumbled behind him, growing louder with each pace. Cam turned, shielding his eyes from the headlights with his free hand, and the

vehicle stopped when it drew parallel. It was a beaten four wheel drive, so old the driver had to push down the electric window with his elbow.

“Been out to your farm,” Charbonneau said. “Tried your phone.”

“Phone’s off,” said Cam. “And I had no mind to go home.”

Charbonneau examined the superintendent’s apparel, the frock coat, the homburg, everything. He told Cam he’d have liked to have seen the ancient ceremony. It would’ve been a privilege. Cam looked at the novelist, whose jowls were wobbling because his vehicle was in neutral. It was a stupid question; Charbonneau knew the rules: outsiders weren’t permitted to watch the ritual. Cam stayed silent and held his eye.

“Sorry, that was inappropriate,” said Charbonneau. “It’s the novelist in me, always curious.”

Cam accepted his apology with a nod and Charbonneau offered him a ride. Cam didn’t need one. It’d been a difficult evening. He wanted to be alone with his thoughts. Nevertheless, he accepted. Charbonneau, checking the rear view mirror, said he wasn’t comfortable reversing to the crossroads. If it was alright with Cam, he’d rather drive him through the village. Cam nodded and closed the door with a thud.

Before Charbonneau could put his jalopy in gear, Cam asked about the drainage strip. The novelist looked confused, perhaps having difficulty remembering that he owned a drainage strip or perhaps why such a strip might be of some importance. Cam explained his plan to make a deal with The Corp, the desalination unit and seawater pipes, the communal village land, everything. They were still stationary, vibrating gently in Charbonneau’s four wheel drive. The cab fell silent, just engine tick. Cam had said his piece.

“I can do that,” Charbonneau said. “I want to do my bit to help the village.”

Cam nodded and the two men shook hands. The novelist put the vehicle in gear and pulled away, and they drove for a while both with their own thoughts. At the turn past Appendix du Pooly’s dilapidated farmhouse, once a grand country seat now little more than driftwood nailed together, Charbonneau, perhaps out of panic because he’d just given away land for nothing, told Cam he’d like to take a more active role in village affairs in future. He’d like, for example, to run for secretary at the next election and he hoped he could count on Cam’s support. Cam nodded, eyes ahead, looking into the void.

By now, the jalopy had wound its way into the village, little more than a sprinkling of houses, the pub, a few provisions stores. They turned onto the lane that approached the square and Cam leaned forward, straining his eyes, nose hair twitching. Parked outside the hall, he could make out vehicles. They weren’t locals’. They were black Corp SUVs.

“They were here earlier,” Charbonneau said.

Cam asked him to pull over which Charbonneau did. The Corp suits were saying their goodbyes, grinning, getting into vehicles. Molly Bliss was the first one to Cam’s window.

“You’re too late, Brother Cam,” she said. “I’ve heard some of them have already signed.”

As Cam crunched across the gravel, Bliss updated him on the events. This was The Corp’s final offer to buy their smallholdings, take it or leave it, a one shot deal. They’d advised everyone to get onboard now while prices were competitive. Those gentlemen had told them that Brother Cam had been negotiating to sell the communal marshland.

“I was negotiating to secure desalination equipment,” Cam said. “Equipment this village needs to survive. That deal has nothing to do with our smallholdings.”

“But you didn’t mention it at the meeting, Brother Cam.”

“You were rioting at the meeting,” Cam said.

Cam’s boots shuffled chippings, gait widening with every stride. The SUVs pulled away, just dust and tail lights. There was no change to his expression even though he knew they’d waited for him to get close before they’d driven off. The village superintendent cast his gaze over the assembled villagers. He could tell who had signed by their faces, those who could look at him and those who could not.

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As Rudy approached the sector check, he lifted his foot off the juice although he was only doing twenty-five to start with. Kona’s jacket was too small so he’d rolled up the arms, zip undone, mesh fabric flapping in the breeze. The sector guard looked over from his monitor towards him. He was peering down at Rudy as the guardhouse was raised so they could see above the crops. Cam’s words about looking trouble in the eye came to him for the second time that evening, through the static fug of the cone he’d smoked, echoing round his cranium, dampening adrenaline. Rudy locked onto the sector guard. He looked at that guard like he was head field researcher on eight times his salary. The guard processed Rudy’s face, the buggy and his jacket, and then he looked away.

Rudy kept his speed steady along the central artery of the North Sector, kept the needle glued to twenty-three. Maybe Kona was right and The Corp were experimenting with salt. But then a field researcher like her, a new recruit, would have no access to information about management black ops. She thought the way she did because she never questioned the machine. The Corp, her professors, the internet and the officials up in Haine, you couldn’t trust any of them. They were all blighted, a swarm of aphids on young fruit. Rudy wondered whether he could trust her, but without her he wouldn’t have got this far, would’ve been busted back at Glasshouse 19. One thing bothering him, though, was that despite everything she’d said this evening she’d still given him her buggy keys.

Rudy eased off the juice and turned everything over in his mind once more. By destroying that pickup, blasting it to hyperspace, The Corp would be unable to seed for a few days, maybe longer because seeding launchers — specialist gear — were unavailable anywhere near here. That was long enough for Orb to have a shot at natural rain. He looked at Kona’s workbox, test samples, empty vials. The Corp were seeding with chemicals and super-sulphates; he was sure of it, and with the pickup gone he’d prove it. It was time to throw something back, let them know that the people of Orb, the people of The Steeps, were not so easily defeated. His toes connected with the pedal and the turbo began to whistle.

Row 88 was a jungle of Superpod peas on moulded webbing. The pickup was at the end of the row, just like she’d said it’d be, launcher covered with tarp. It was unattended. Rudy took his foot off the juice again for a few seconds. Kona’d left him the key to this buggy and given him her jacket, putting her own behind on the line. Kona was an Orbite, born and raised on The Steeps. That was why she’d helped him, no other explanation. His gut was telling him she might even want him to do it. And there’d never be a better chance than this.

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Glass cracked on wood and Cam brushed fireball from his lips with the back of his hand. He poured himself another and knocked it back. Peach schnapps burning his belly, he reached to the porch handrail and closed his fingers around the night vision binoculars. A fox was lurking in the coppice, crows squabbling in their roost.

They said five villagers had sold. More had taken contracts to consider. He should've announced his plan to exchange the marshland for equipment and called a vote. He'd been too cautious. Didn't matter now. Cam flipped the binocular cord over his head and his work boots thumped the floorboards, two bangs of percussion.

Binoculars to nose, he marched the first row of his orchard, the alcohol and gradient loosening his legs, anger twisting at his mouth. When he reached the southwest corner, he left the path and got amongst his crop, checking stems and leaves, looking for signs of spider mites. He found plenty. Maybe tomorrow he'd wash them with detergent, but it was a risk as the leaves would yellow and maybe then the fruit would stall. It'd take three days to syringe the orchard with just water, twice as long if he rinsed them with some soap. If Rudy was with him they'd rid this scourge in half the time, in one long day perhaps, father and son, dawn till dusk, working the land.

Cam dropped to a squat, like he was about to defecate. He wondered how much The Corp had offered the other villagers for their land. It was their final offer Molly Bliss had told him. He'd be damned if he'd sell. Even if The Corp bought all the farms around him, Cam would stay on his ancestral seat.

A wallop slammed across The Steeps, a real crack and rumble. It'd come from somewhere on The Plains. He counted to ten but there was no second cuff. Cam pushed up to his feet and glassed the sky. A storm, he'd hoped, but obviously not. The wallop shook the earth again, this time louder, and then an electric pitchfork lit the sky. Another few seconds passed and the sky ripped in half just overhead. Cam lowered the binoculars, let them dangle on their cord. He held out his palm. It'd begun to rain.