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Year 2025

Hot. Scorching hot.

The weather forecaster blamed another unmoving high-pressure system for creating the relentless heat that daily shrouded them in triple-digit temperatures.

Frank Harvey ran. He hated jogging, but it settled his mind and loosened his muscles. It also made him itch from the inside out and his knees hurt, crunching bone on bone.

He found his pace. His old cross-trainers, held together by layers of duct tape, slapped the path as Old Sol beat down on his shoulders. The sun had barely peeked over the horizon and he was sweating, but not as much as he would have thought. There was no moisture in the air. There was no moisture in him.

Frank zigzagged a dirty path lined with the dried and broken limbs of hackberry trees. The leaves left on the trees had turned brown before reaching maturity making it appear as if there had been a sudden, late cold snap, but there hadn't. It was early spring.

Frank sprinted down a natural culvert and around a rocky hillside. Lake Travis came into view. It had been a large lake, often too vast to see from one side to the other. When full, Lake Travis held somewhere around 680 feet of water. On warm days, it had attracted swimmers, fisherman and boaters of all kinds, from large pleasure crafts to paddle-boarders.

Men constructed a dam to create a reservoir on the Colorado River in the 1940s. The primary purpose of Lake Travis and several other linked reservoirs was to control flooding for the dramatically shifting water levels in the Colorado River. Water was managed, making it available for over a million people to drink.

But Lake Travis was no longer full of water. It was no longer a lake. It looked as if a monster, too large to see from anywhere but space, had beaten a hole into the ground. A hundred foot of border lined the cracked earth in the middle of a dry basin.

At one time, islands and trees poked their heads out of the lake, but with no water the hills had been revealed and the trees had turned to pulp. Now, all that had been revealed had been bulldozed flat—a barren wasteland of dust that was free of all debris. The character of the lake was pushed into piles at the land end of long unused boat ramps.

Frank looked at one such pile. It contained boulder-size rocks, root balls from trees, a broken picnic table and bones from fish and animals. On examining the bones more closely, was that a human femur? He would not be surprised.

A glass and metal structure about fifty-acres square stood on the far side of the barren bed. He jogged toward it, his feet leaving prints in plumbs of dust.

He passed a series of boat docks that had caved into the ground, stranded on the parched, broken dirt. Boat debris littered the powdered earth nearby.

All except for one houseboat. It sat in dry dock on a tall scaffold made of freshly sawn lumber. The boat was a hundred-footer with a wood covered swimming platform at the front as well as a structure to hold a canvas top over the second story sun deck. The houseboat was mostly intact but in serious need of major repair.

Frank had gotten the boat for practically nothing from a man who believed that Austin was a permanent desert and, if things continued on their current trajectory, would become even more desolate and infertile.

Frank climbed out of the lake pit at a boat dock with a pier that ran into the center of the lake. The pier was long and tall, the height of the lake if it were full. He stood on the pier, now level with his boat on the scaffold. He ran his hand gently, lovingly over the gray wood of the hull and imagined it refurbished, polished and gleaming. In his mind's eye, he could see it bobbing on a full lake surrounded by a verdant shoreline.

An enormous cylinder, a pipe seeming to go nowhere, stretched into the lakebed and stopped at a pumping station near the middle. If viewed from space, its size belied, a spaceman might think the pipe was any sewer line. But, just like the Alaskan pipeline was built to deal with the 1973 oil crisis, this pipeline was built to deal with this current water crisis.

Above the edge of the dirt pit that had been the lake floor, construction was near completion on Frank's baby, an enormous hydro-farm, a long arched greenhouse, set high on concrete pilings that were solidly encased in glass and wire mesh making a 360-degree window around the farm.

One hundred feet from the farm was a dilapidated, broken power station shorn up by solar power from a home panel grid. Before the drought, many individuals had installed solar panels on the roofs of their homes and had sold any excess back to the city. Without water, the amount of electricity that the power station produced had been woefully inadequate causing black outs and shut downs. The solar power generated by the home panels had been swept up and targeted to the local hospitals and police stations with the promise that if there were excess it would be rationed back to the homes. He was still waiting for that to happen.

An assistant, Frank couldn't recall his name, a young man in dirty jeans, his thin hair pulled into a ratty tail, exited the building and grinned as he walked past Frank.

"Morning, Dr. Harvey."

"Hi there." Frank could tell by Pony's face that he knew that Frank didn't know his name. Frank had a dozen assistants, all of which he hired because they worked well independently. This allowed Frank to focus on what he needed to do.

"Big day," Pony said.

Frank nodded in acknowledgement. It was a big day. His heartbeat began to race and not solely from his jog. Frank slowed to a walk and then stopped altogether, his hands on his knees, as he gasped for breath.

At the start of the famine, farmers had cut down their drought-ruined crops. With no hope of germination of the next crop, they hadn't bothered to plant more. With no water for the animals or their pasturelands, ranchers had sent their herds to market early. They'd auctioned beef and pork at triple price, until there was no more. Like Easter Islanders who had cut down their last tree guaranteeing their own demise, the farmers had plowed under their last field and the ranchers had sold their last cow to market, thus guaranteeing a famine that could not end.

As dry as it was here, that's how wet it was on the east coast. Florida over to the Louisiana Gulf Coast overflowed with water, rivers of water, floods of water, water with nowhere to go.

Frank was determined to transport the water from where they had too much to the empty reservoir. There was no understating what a full lake could mean to the city. Austin could be one of the last places on earth where sunshine and water came together in reasonable proportions to make food.

Frank had gone to his boss, Pierce Wagner, with his idea for a pipeline. Frank worked for a think tank funded by the Wagner Company. The think tank looked for solutions to an ever-growing list of survival issues.

Frank had done a lot of research into hydraulics, irrigation and water management. He had a plan for growing food, a good plan, one he knew would work.

"Aren't you a botanist? Wouldn't you need an engineer for this?" Wagner had asked.

"I'll hire if I can. I'll figure it out if I can't."

"Hasn't a pipeline been tried before?"

"It failed for political reasons, not scientific ones."

"When was that? Before the collapse?"

Frank nodded.

Frank had been stunned when the Wagner Company funded his project instantly and completely. Wagner had practically thrown money at him.

Pushed by an ambitious schedule, Frank had built his pipeline from a water restoration and reclamation plant on the Mississippi River at Shreveport, Louisiana all the way to the refurbished water storage reservoir at the Lake Travis pumping station. Shreveport was the most populated city within eight hundred miles. It lay about 335 miles east of Austin, across a vast expanse of parched nothing. Stragglers from what should have been upstream states including Arkansas, Oklahoma, Kansas, Missouri, Nebraska and Illinois poured into Shreveport from spaces where the ground was so sterilized that nothing would ever grow again. On the coast, the water level rose in Houston, Baton Rouge and New Orleans making those places inhospitable and so their populations escaped to Shreveport as well.

Shreveport had plenty of water and a good amount of sunshine, but food was pathetically insufficient to feed their ever-growing population. Shreveport had taken up arms to deter any further population increase, but they still needed additional resources from somewhere. He had heard a rumor that thousands of people had barricaded themselves in a casino—already a small village of its own—and protected themselves with whatever force was necessary.

Frank entered the back door of the glass hydroponics farm. Under a filtered glass skylight, row after row of dirt sat in what would soon be a mineral nutrient bath connected by a weave of intertwined gutters. Frank walked down an aisle, checking on pictures, signs that indicated what would sprout with regular water: strawberry vines, tomatoes, and green beans.

Hundreds of thousands had died in Austin alone. Billions had died around the world. This was his responsibility, his job—to create food — to save his family: Etta and Alex—to save them all.