

It came without the slightest hint, the woeful time. A few seasons of worldwide crop failures, where golden wheat refused to stretch for the sun, potatoes shriveled in dusty soil, and livestock collapsed from a pestilence worthy of the bible. But it was the corn which drove the final nail into humanity's coffin. It was the only crop that seemed to thrive, yet even that was an illusion. A cosmic one-liner that the audience couldn't laugh at. The corn bled, you see, and when shucked, each stalk let loose with a terrifying scream. It was as if the Earth had seen enough of mankind . . . and perhaps, as Occam's Razor states, that explanation—being the simplest one—was the correct one.

That was three-hundred years ago, or so I'm told. My name is Karl Bishop. At least that's what's on my Federal Workers' I.D. tag, but they are known to lie about these things. Everyone lies now. It's expected. It's how we cope with reality. The books say there were over eight billion people in the world before the woeful time came. Best guess now puts us at less than a million. Some people blame Governments, some blame man's inability to see past his nose. Others point the finger at some long-forgotten celestial criminal, claiming we turned our backs on God. Maybe. Maybe it's a little of everything. I think nature got bored with us—like she did with the dinosaurs—and decided to start over. Bitch is, those mammoth beasts got a hundred and fifty-million years. Humans got what? A million?

We all live underground now. Have for the last hundred years or so. The air's too thin to breathe on the surface. Plants, trees, animals . . . they're all gone. The top looks like it must have, before life ever got a foothold on the planet. Rocky, blistering days and frigid nights. And there's the silence. Long periods of nothing, shattered only when a topsider tries to shuck an ear of corn. Then, the whole world shakes. Some people choose to rough it out, stay on the surface. We call them topsiders, and they're more beast than human. Federals—those of us who work for the government—have standing orders to kill any topsider we see. We're told that it's doing them a favor. That's probably a big lie, but you do what you're told. Besides, when they see us walking around up there, dressed head to toe in sealed suits with oxygen tanks strapped to our backs, they attack. So, we do our jobs. Gotta hit them right behind the ear though, or they keep coming. Haven't seen one in the last month or so. I guess maybe they've either moved on or gone extinct. Couldn't have been too many to begin with.

A Federal's job is to try and get something to grow on the surface. Anything. We've tried flowers, trees, and different plants, but nothing takes. I suppose that, like us, they can't breathe up there. Not only is there hardly any oxygen, but there's also almost no carbon dioxide. The only thing that lives there now, as I said, is the corn. How it survives, nobody knows, but we can't eat it or use it for anything. In the stomach, the kernels turn into razor-sharp pieces of rock and slice you apart from the inside. I've seen it happen once. I don't ever want to see that again. Today, we are supposed to survey the north-east quad, plant a few seeds, and try out that soil. It's a place we haven't gone to, due to it being a topsiders' stronghold. Our sensors haven't picked up a single one there in over three weeks, but we'll be taking five extra sharpshooters, just to be sure. I've had to look at my I.D. tag twice this morning, when the gatemen asked me my name. I probably don't have much time left.