

## An excerpt from *Endemic* by Robert Chazz Chute

### Chapter One: Shadow

As daylight ticked down and July's shadows grew long, the city's streets lay nearly deserted and almost dead. I picked up my pace and tried to ignore the girl following me. Half my age, she would have caught up were she not half-starved, limping, and crazed. Mumbling something incomprehensible, my pursuer was relentless.

Sometimes, when the heat lingered and grew mean, it seemed as if all of New York had emptied. But we, the survivors, still lurked, furtive as foraging rats amid the ruins and debris, wary as skittish rabbits too far from the safety of the warren. I wondered, *Is this a Monday afternoon?* It certainly felt like a blue-gray Monday, full of hot gunmetal dread, far from any cooling respite. In the desert of discontent, there is no oasis. All that remained was the grim resolve to keep moving.

Remember how it felt when, from another room, you heard a plate shatter in the kitchen? There's that second or two of shocked silence? In that pregnant pause, you wondered if you should ask if anyone's hurt or haul yourself off the couch to get the broom. Would there be blood or relief? A catastrophic heart attack or mere clumsiness? That's the kind of nervous silence that descended upon the city and refused to leave.

Rising too late to the alarm, the nation failed to become immune to the disease's churn. Though vaccinated against the first iterations of the virus, various strains mutated too quickly for us to protect ourselves. The variant storms had claimed many victims and murdered most. Some survivors, Thirders, were left with cognitive impairments like that of my pursuer.

The Zeta-3 variant often scrambled Broca's area, the brain's speech center. My pursuer's ruin was a slow, cruel erasure. Imagine termites in your brain, chewing away

at your ability to communicate and digesting the foundations of who you once were. This unfortunate woman might once have become a teacher, a research scientist, or a firefighter. She could have fulfilled any number of roles before the variant storm zeroed in. Many had died of earlier viral iterations, but Z-3, also known as the Third Kentucky Variant or TKV, was brutal. When the disease process stalled, some Thirders babbled. Others went mute.

My father — typically inaccurate and casually cruel — grinned as he pronounced Thirder as “turder.” TKV casualties had been objects of pity once. However, since they neither died nor healed, disaster fatigue had set in. As food supplies dwindled, people were often unkind to these wandering beggars.

Since What Was, people had become more superstitious, too. They searched for omens, alert for deception, and gloomy to the nth. And no wonder. Central Park — now Central Memorial Park — was commonly called Hell’s Basement because that’s where the bodies were buried. Manhattan was Hell’s Office. We referred to Brooklyn as Over the Rainbow Bridge. Queens’ nickname became Hell’s Dying Room, and the Bronx was Hell Central (because of the riot fires). Staten Island was still Staten Island.

That odd voice in my head that spoke like a tough British man chimed in: *Hey! Morbidity and comorbidities are everywhere, love. No need to pile on by being morbid.*

“I gotta be me,” I replied. “And I still don’t know why you’re British. I’m a middle-aged woman from Maine whose farthest travels have been to Canada when I was a child. For God’s sake, what are you and why are you?”

He didn’t reply. We were often short of reliable answers. Like the truth of the pandemic, disaster relief was also promised but never arrived. Nevertheless, some still held their breath, waiting. I don’t know what they expected. Change, I suppose. Isn’t that what everyone is waiting for? *Was* always waiting for?

Despite the great numbers who had fallen — no one knew how many — most of the survivors remained in the city. Border restrictions were strictly enforced and

punishments were harsh. Armed militias backed the travel bans. Slipping past them was risky business, and the price of their bribes was high.

Though the Big Apple had rotted, there were still mouths to feed, and I had a business to run. Survival is my business. Every new day offered a narrow toehold to the future. Each step felt tentative, as if I were climbing a steep cliff, the ledges greased and slick. Each handhold was too small and not to be trusted.

My pursuer was gaining. “Hey!” she called. “Humannahell ... humanmahelp ... *w/hoooo! Yoo-hoo? L-lady?*”

A filthy curtain rustled high above the street. The weight of the gaze from spying eyes fell upon us. New Yorkers used to live in small boxes and work in cubicle farms. Our domiciles were now either fortresses, crannies, or crypts. I was one of the lucky few who owned a secret farm.

The girl called after me again, “Watchu? Watchu?” She mumbled on. I couldn’t decipher the rest.

Preferring to conserve energy, I resisted the urge to sprint. They were easily distracted, but running encouraged them to give chase. I tried not to think of those cursed by TKV at all. Some, especially Taxmen, called them mean names like dim bulbs, whistle heads, or brain-dead. It wasn’t true. Thirders were often sensitive and emotional. You could sense something of what they once were behind their eyes. Sometimes they spoke gibberish, but many spoke in full sentences that didn’t necessarily connect.

*Conversation by approximation*, the British voice added.

“*Sh!* Not now!” I whispered back. “You’re distracting me.”

I scanned the street, looking for a way to evade her but also hoping the girl wasn’t inviting more unwanted attention. Taxmen hated anyone who possessed nothing of value to steal or extort. They’d get nothing from the girl, but I had much more to lose.

*Downfall, demise, destruction.*

I shushed the voice in my head, though that only worked haphazardly.

I quickened my pace again — almost a run now — but so did she. Though that poor soul was wounded, it was I who felt hunted. Every door was barred, and every ground-floor window boarded. I serpented among abandoned hulks of long-dead vehicles.

Some cars had been left in the middle of the street when their fuel ran out. Others, the burnt wrecks, had been used as barricades during the riots. Blockages and clots wound through the heart of the city that went on for miles and miles, choking the life from it.

As I cut down a side street, I wondered how my pursuer had survived this long. What did she eat? Where did she sleep? How did people like her keep going under these conditions? Someone fed her, surely. I knew because I had one of my own to feed.

*Rats, maybe. That's the only plentiful food supply.*

I shuddered with revulsion at that. The voice in my head was like me in that we both meant well, but often fell short of the mark.

My pack slowed me. It was heavy with supplies and made my shoulders sore and my back ache. I carried too much, but everything on me was essential. I needed to be able to bug out and abandon everything if things went awry. My blue tote bag held the only food I would eat that day: a sweet potato and a couple of green tomatoes.

I slipped in and out of her sight as I made my way south. She kept coming, close enough for me to hear her ragged breaths and slurred muttering. When I deciphered her muddled speech, I found she was fixated, stuck on repeat: “What you got in the pretty blue bag? Huh? Whatcha got for me? For me? For me! Huh? L-lady?”

I clutched my tote tighter to my side. My empty canteen bounced on my hip. It had been more than two years since What Was fell to pieces, perhaps never to be reassembled. I was tired.

*Call him, then. Be Daddy's little girl and retreat to safety. Physical safety anyway.*

“That would be too easy.” I could try my luck breaking borders, or my father could simply pay the necessary bribes and not feel the pinch in the least. My Alamo was in Maine.

*But you know what happened at the Alamo, Ovid.*

We still had one viable and very expensive cell network. Somewhere, high up, satellites spun in orbit, cold machinery oblivious to our earthly problems. Not all cell towers still functioned and communications from Poeticule Bay were sometimes spotty and sounded crinkly and crackly, as if Maine were on the Moon. My father insisted I could be home within a couple of days. All I had to say was yes.

When Lloyd Fairweather said, “Come home,” he meant “surrender.”