BEE FUTURES

Reports from the battlefield.

BY VAUGHAN STANGER

Having counted his thirtieth bumblebee corpse of the morning, Farmer Giles could no longer deny that the Battle of Sheldon Farm had begun.

He trod the scorched remains into the turf while gazing at the nearest apple tree. By rights, its blossom-laden branches ought to be thick with bees. Sadly, today's inspection of the orchard had revealed none; at least none still alive. At this rate there would be hardly any Braeburns for his pickers to harvest come September. And the same would hold true for his pears, raspberries, tomatoes and courgettes.

Until now, Farmer Giles had given little credence to the local rumour mill's mutterings about laser-equipped robo-wasps. But faced with the destruction of his genetically optimized pollinators, he could no longer deny the reality of the situation. Now that GM wheat production had ceased throughout the United Kingdom, the bio-Luddites were turning their firepower on the Weald of Kent's fruit and vegetable growers.

Why do we bother?

His inadvertent broadcast over AgriNet brought an instant reply, buzzing deep inside his head.

Because farming's what we do, brother!

As usual, Farmer Jones spoke the truth.

Amen to that!

If the people of this increasingly brown and unpleasant land were to enjoy their usual cornucopia of foodstuffs, farmers like him would have to find a way to win the war.

After finishing his day's labour, Farmer Giles liked to relax by watching wartime documentaries beamed directly into his head by the History Channel. From these he understood that determined attack usually overcame stubborn defence.

Still, he had quotas to fulfil, with heavy penalties from the supermarkets if he failed to deliver. So he ordered a new batch of pollinators — this time an artificial variety equipped with laser stings.

The bee did not stir when Farmer Giles brushed his toes against it. On this occasion he could discern no signs of scorching. Given the absence of a diagnostic data feed, he concluded that an EM pulse had fried the robot's tiny brain.

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Alerted by a motion detector flashing red in his peripheral vision, Farmer Giles strode out of the orchard. As he approached Sheldon Farm's eastern boundary, he discarded his stealth cloak. A gangly, shaven-headed man and a stouter, dark-haired woman, both dressed in camouflage gear, looked up from their mil-spec tablets.

"You'll never stop me farming," he told them.

It was what he did. He knew no other purpose.

The pair gawped at him. Perhaps it was his nakedness that startled them. But why wear clothes when one was sustained by sunlight?

And why grow food for people who didn't deserve it?

The man shrugged. "Your wheat-growing friends in Norfolk said the same thing."

"I can always buy more pollinators."

Now the woman chipped in. "And we'll destroy them, too. We won't give up until you stop planting GM crops. You'll run out of money long before we do!"

Which was doubtless true, Farmer Giles mused. Plus the local police had long since given up any pretence of defending his land. Was this a war really worth fighting? Faced with a financially ruinous escalation in insect hostilities, he nodded his acquiescence.

"Okay then; I'll think about it."

"Well, all right!" The woman looked startled at the ease of her victory.

Farmer Giles turned away from his persecutors.

He would just have to find another way to turn a profit.

The truth was unpalatable, but could not be denied.

Growing non-GM fruit and vegetables made no financial sense. Non-GM plants

cost too much; the required fertilizer levels were illegal; the yields too low.

Farmer Giles gazed at the meadow daisies, flourishing despite the heat.

I think I'll try flowers.

With continental growers struggling to maintain supplies due to summer droughts, he felt confident he'd identified a profitable new niche.

Farmer Jones snorted his contempt. *Well, I'm switching to biofuel maize. There's profit in that, for sure. Good luck with your blooms, though.*

Good luck to you, too!

Farmer Giles suspected his neighbour would need something a lot stronger than luck to repel the swarms of pests migrating from the Mediterranean, but he decided to keep his counsel.

In any case, he had seeds to order.

After depositing two baskets of freshly cut flowers on a fold-up table, Farmer Giles leaned against Sheldon Farm's main gate and waited for the next group of refugees to arrive. His bee count had reached ten before a 4x4 parked up.

Biofuel supplies remained plentiful, evidently.

Two people got out of the vehicle. A gaunt-faced, dark-haired woman clutched the hand of a whimpering child. Farmer Giles realized he'd seen her before. He guessed that the anti-GM campaigner's partner had deserted her shortly after the supermarkets closed their doors for good.

The woman stared at the flowers before turning despairing eyes on Farmer Giles.

"Haven't you got any food?"

Farmer Giles shook his head while sliding a tulip stem above the boy's left ear.

The woman frowned. "What's *that* for?"

"Something for the journey," he said.

The boy had started munching on the offering even before his mother could drag him away from the baskets. Farmer Giles gave a sorrowful shake of his head. He had hoped that people would choose to die wearing flowers in their hair, but that rarely happened.

These days he didn't have the heart to ask for money. ■

British SF writer **Vaughan Stanger** shops at the usual supermarkets. He buys food there, not flowers. For news about his writing adventures, go to www.vaughanstanger.com.

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