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MOUNTAIN MEN

By VICTORIA LEIGH BENNETT

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MOUNTAIN MEN

“I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills, from whence comes my help.”—Psalm 121, *King James Version of the Bible*

“Tell that Seth to bring some more wood in,” said Blue to Robbie.

“Tell him yourself. I see no call to go stickin’ my face out in the cold just to relay your message. It’s warm enough now.”

“Robbie.” Samuel’s tone was gentle, but reprovng. “Blue is second-in-command. You’d better look to yourself.”

Robbie, irritably hoisting his strong frame out of the old couch where he sat, responded, “That’s me, just a dogsbody. And anyway, Blue is third-in-command. You’re the real leader, Samuel, and everybody knows it.”

“No. I’m the Elder. That’s like being retired. I’m not a real Mountain Man anymore, just a old cell leader who’s seen better days. I may still shoot, but I’m here for advisement, not

for command. Ask James if that ain't so. He's the real leader, after all."

Robbie shrugged into his heavy coat and continued to argue. "Well, I don't see what call Blue has to be second-in-command, just because he's James's little brother."

Blue scowled, but said nothing, tucking his hands into his gloves and then sticking them in his armpits. It was a bitter, cold evening.

Samuel chuckled a short, wry laugh. "He ain't so very little, as you found out that last time you got on his bad side. And why are you worryin' about who has what call to do this and what call to do that? Just follow orders, and you'll be all set."

Robbie muttered, and ducked out the front door of the cabin complex, yelling out "Seth! Hey, Seth!" He waited, still not going off the front steps.

“For God’s sake, Robbie, don’t bust all our eardrums with your hollerin’. He’s out at the barn. Do you want me to go out?” This was Jared, Robbie’s closest friend in the cell. But Robbie didn’t answer.

Samuel sighed. “He’s stubborn, I’ll give him that.”

After a minute or two, an answering call came from the barn, where Seth had been sent to tend to the cow and the chickens and the pigs. “What’s up, Robbie? What’s wrong?” Seth’s voice sounded far away, and garbled.

“Hurry up and load some more wood in when you come. We’re freezin’ in here.” And with that, Robbie strode across the interior of the cabin and collapsed back in his seat.

“Can’t make up your mind whether you’re warm or freezin’,” commented Samuel, but he held out his old hands to the blaze at the fireplace, obviously considering that he had said his piece.

“You don’t want to pick at Seth, Robbie,” observed Jared.

“He’s set up right. Just a little young.”

“Undergrewed, if you ast me,” said Robbie. “And way too purty. Girl trouble for sure, mark my words.”

“He’s done well enough for starters,” observed Samuel. “He brought down that buck just two weeks ago, and we’re still a-eatin’ of that.”

“Yeah, that buck was undergrewed, too,” retorted Robbie, but he got up and joined Samuel by the fire, staring into the flames and embers. “Let’s see how he does with the Brotherhood Oath. That’s where he’ll make his mistake.”

Samuel sighed and said nothing. James had been gone a long time, and it surely didn’t take so long to recon the areas he had gone out to cover. Samuel did not even approve totally of his doing it, but James had said to him in private that if he and Blue did not lead from an equal basis of duty, they could not ask the

others to follow them willingly. This sounded good and plausible, so for the time being Samuel buried his stricter sense of what was owed a leader, descended from his own days of obedience and active duty. Things did change, he had to admit.

It was difficult with Robbie especially; he seemed to have ambitions to push ahead into leadership himself, though he had not said anything about it. But he sometimes seemed to feel smothered and repressed when the others were only expecting him to do his job as quartermaster, and James and Samuel were the only two members of the cell that he did not quarrel with on a frequent basis.

They heard footsteps, time after time coming up on the porch, and a loud tumbling thump each time a load of wood was dumped there just outside the door. Then, silence. A distant whining sound came, as of the barn door being hauled to and shuttered, and silence again.

Now, the door opened, and the wind pulled it back even further, and blew a frozen gust in as James entered. He was a tall, solid man, though not as tall as his brother, Blue.

“Seth, shut the damn—oh, it’s you, James. What’s the news?” Robbie turned as James pushed the door to and came over quickly to the fireplace to warm his hands. “What was our canton like? And do we get the new guns, or not?”

“Wait.” This was James’s response. He was a man who largely kept himself to himself, and he did not often expound or say much; but his word was law. “Where’s Seth?” he asked.

“Oh, out a-lookin’ after them everlastin’ animals. I know we need them, but just because his father gave them up to us when he came, he acts as anxious as a girl lookin’ after her hope chest.” Robbie was aware that as a quartermaster, he should have been on any trip about guns, ammo, or supplies, but for some reason, James had picked that as his own particular

mission this time, and had left Robbie there with the others, cooling his heels.

“Well, it’s been nice to have bacon onct in a while, and ham, and milk,” responded Blue, mildly. He was responsible for the killing of such animals as they ended up eating, and though he had not mentioned it more than once, he really felt that the quartermaster should have been in charge of that, too. But Robbie had said that he was not raised on a farm, was a town man, and had no experience with the butchering of livestock. He had eagerly as any of them accepted Seth’s family’s gift, but had left it to other hands to convert the gift to something usable.

James frowned, but said, “Well, I reckon we’ll wait for him to come in before we go on with a briefing.” And with this, he sat down in a chair, and pulled it up to the fire on the opposite side from Samuel, obliging Robbie to step back a pace or two to make room for him.

“Come on over and sit back down over here,” Jared invited Robbie, patting the couch Robbie had earlier vacated. “He won’t be out there much longer, I’ll be bound. It’s too cold for that.” They all sat quietly for a while, without any of them having much to say.

When Seth came in, the small storm outside had blown itself out, but the cold had settled down around the cabin complex as if it meant to stay a while. Likely, the winds would be back before morning. They all looked up at him, and waited for him to take a seat, but he looked a bit odd.

“What’s the matter, Seth?” queried James, noting the dripping nose which Seth was none too delicately wiping on his sleeve, and the streaming eyes and red face. It seemed to be from the cold until they took a closer look.

“A blamed old weasel or fox has dug under the foundations again,” he gasped, trying his best not to show his distress in

front of the others. “Ruthie is missin' a wing, and there's blood everywhere. He musta just pulled it off through the bars of the pen. The rest of them seems okay, but once a dog has bitten, it'll bite again. I filled in the hole, though. I don't see why we can't put a cement foundation around it somehow, when Spring comes. I hate fightin' this on-again off-again war with scavengers. And speakin' of dogs, I thought we was goin' to get a couple to help Susan watch the complex.”

“Why, so you can make a pet of them, too? Well, that's one less wing we'll get to eat,” said Robbie, pretending to be philosophical, but his eyes glinted at the sight of Seth's upset.

“Ruthie, huh? I don't see why you insist on givin' them chickens names. You know they're only goin' to end up in the pot.” He was gratified when Seth gave him a dirty glance and sat down on a couch opposite, by Blue, without anything further to say.

“By the grace of God, we all have names, Robbie.” This was Samuel, gentle for Seth’s sake. “And for that matter, we too are a-fightin’ of a on-again off-again war. We can take good examples from the foxes and weasels, even if they’re not our close kin, or anything we’d want to chum up with. And from the chickens, too, for that matter. Now, let’s hear what James has to say about the recon, and the guns. It’s a cold night yet ahead, and we’ll all want to be in our beds.”

At just that moment, though, an old woman stepped into the room. Her creased, chocolate-beige face was impassive and noncommittal. “Supper, boys,” she said. “I thank you kindly, Seth, for bringin’ that chicken up to the back porch door. Poor thing, I wringed her neck for her after a while of her noise. You can’t let even a chicken suffer forever. Don’t worry, I’ll put the little cage back out there in the barn tomorrow mornin’.”

“Boys, are we?” teased Blue, as Susan started to step back into the dark hallway towards the kitchen. “Susan, you may be older than sin, but we ain’t boys. I ast you!” he exclaimed, grinning back at her.

“Men, Susan, men,” Jared joined in the joke. They all but Robbie laughed. He sat, not saying much.

“Mens, boys, it’s all the same to me. Just like all of you, out in the woods, a-playin’ of silly games with guns,” she answered back, smiling at Blue especially as she uttered these incendiary words. Turning back, she prepared to go again.

Just loudly enough for her to hear, though, Robbie said, “That ol’ nigger is gettin’ a lot of lip on her, ain’t she?”

None of them responded, as a chill floated over the warm social atmosphere that Susan had introduced with her mention of a warm meal. James got ready to reprove Robbie, but it was not

immediately necessary; it seemed that Susan could fight her own battles, verbally, at least.

“You ain’t got no *call*, man-worried-about-everybody’s-call-to-do-sich-and-sich, to be callin’ names. My man and two of my boys, too, gave their lives in sich a fight, and I reckon they were just as big and bold as you. So, just you watch your mouth to me; I’m old enough to be your granny, nearly.”

“No granny of mine ain’t that color,” muttered Robbie sullenly.

“Shutcher mouth to her!” Blue yelled out, “or I’ll give you another taste of my medicine! You know she’s my friend, and the friend of all of us here, probably exceptin’ you, ‘cause you’re the way you are. So, just keep a civilized tongue between your teeth.”

By this time, Susan had already gone back into the kitchen to put the finishing touches to the big, round table there, leaving Robbie to be handled by his fellows in the group.

“Blue’s right, Robbie, we ain’t never had no trouble with the blacks, and Susan there is a noble soul among them. They’ve been in this fight as much as we have. And you are a-steppin’ a little bold and high for a quartermaster who don’t half do his duty, sometimes. Remember what Susan’s been through, and pretend to be normal, even if you ain’t.” This was a very long speech for James, and the rest of them were quiet, but Robbie complained,

“I would’ve done my duty this time and have gone along, James, only you wouldn’t have me. Yeah, and ain’t we ever goin’ to hear the end of that nanny’s sacrifices? You’d think nobody’d ever died before. Lots of us have lost men plenty of times.”

Samuel for him was even sterner than James, though even less overtly inclined to comment. “Don’t answer back to James and Blue, Robbie. They’re in the right of it. And when you’re Susan’s age and you’ve lost a mate and two sons, then you might have room to answer back. After all, nobody’s castin’ off on you for bein’ that pasty color you call white, so you have no leave to talk.”

This raised a shout of laughter at Robbie’s expense; they all stood up, and, the peace being restored, they grouped into the kitchen, Jared lingering to talk to Robbie just a minute.

“What’s gettin’ into you, Robbie? You want to be more careful of what you’re a-sayin’. James can take a man down quick, I seen it before ever you came. I might only have been here a half year before you, but he’s a good man for keepin’ men in line. You don’t want to get on his bad side any more than you do on Blue’s.” Robbie didn’t answer; this whispered warning

given, Jared went on into the kitchen, Robbie bringing up the rear.

The room was warm from the wood oven and redolent of good food smells. They all sat at their accustomed places at the table. Turning the water-turbine generator switch on the stove part down several notches, which made the light in the ceiling flare up for a moment, Susan served each one of their plates, taking hers from the plate warmer last and bringing it to her place on one side of Samuel. They all sat for a moment for Samuel to ask the blessing, a little shy as full-grown men of shutting their eyes, which only Seth did, but waiting patiently for the conclusion of the prayer.

It was a little awkward at first, because of the recent exchange of verbal gunpowder in the front room, but Susan faced it head-on. “Well, I guess I will sit my ol’ black self down in my usual place, as long as Robbie there ain’t worryin’ about

any of my color rubbin' off on him." Without waiting for a response, she told them, "This is pies made from them there rabbits that Jared brought back a day or two ago. It should be toothsome, but as always, there may be a bit of shot in it still, so bite down careful. I cleaned it as well as may be, but my eyes isn't what they used to be."

"You know we've offered to replace your glasses for you, Susan, lots of times," James said, looking around to see where in the pots and pans she had put them this time. Susan was very bad for taking her glasses off and putting them down somewhere without being able to remember where they were later.

"Don't fret about me, James. I reckon that when I gets ready to see more, I'll just drive to see Shirley from the Jackson farm, the one where we gets our vegetables, and go into Piedmont with her. That eye doctor there's done my last three sets, and I sees better every time."

Blue decided to pick this up for a joke. “Well, maybe sometime you’ll see that he’s not only old as you, but blinder than you, and get a new eye doctor.”

“I can see when I’m being kidded, and that’s a fact. Umph! There we go, what’d I tell you, boys! Bit into a bite of shot my own self. Jared, do you think you might just sometime blow up those jack rabbits with denamite, and scoop up the smithereens? I’d be saved the trouble of cuttin’ them up thataways, and no broken teeth.”

After they had all gotten a first helping down and were just filling up the plates again, James said, “Well, I surmise that you all are a-waitin’ for my word on the recon and the guns, and I figure I owe it to you. You particularly, Robbie, as quartermaster, will want to know what I know, and that from Lucien himself.”

After staring around the table, as if judging his audience, Robbie responded in an even tone, “Well, that’s true, James. But if it’s all the same to you, the cell I was in first didn’t discuss business with women at the table, if you’ll pardon my sayin’ so, *Susan*.” And he looked back down at his plate, then gave her an arrogant glance.

“That’s my name, all right, and I’m glad to see you knows it. Make free of it, I begs you. James, if you and the others wants me to take my meal in the front room, just say so. I relish being thrown out of my own kitchen. Maybe Robbie will like to do the dishes before he leaves.” But she waited and watched James.

“Stop this stuff right now, Robbie,” barked James. “And you, Susan, you know you don’t have to set him off like that, he’s havin’ a hard enough time puttin’ up with his own self. *Of course* Susan don’t have to leave the table; she knows what we

all know, and probably has some good advice now and then. She's accounted a fine shot herself, and I don't know how many of you knows that. Here's the gist of it, then: there wasn't much goin' on in the canton woods. It was quiet, and the snow was ponderous for a while, so I wouldn't have been able to see much anyway. It got a might noisy when I got to our eastern border, a few birds and some deer spooked by somethin'. But likely it was just the result of the other cell gettin' itself in for the storm and the night. Lucien, the new leader of the Mountain Men Three, has thirty guns that we could use, but they need some ammo for their other weapons, and as of right now, we don't have enough to trade, though we could probably trade for as many as fifteen of the guns. That'll leave us with a few extra to have in reserve. I still don't like, though, that gun that backfired and exploded of the last lot they traded us. It was a near thing that Blue didn't get his hands blown off. But that was

under their old leader, and Lucien promised that it won't happen again."

"Uh-huh." This was Robbie. "And what assurance of that does he offer us? Just his word? Does he have a new quartermaster, too?"

"I think we can trust him. He was a part of this Resistance before you four were, Blue; Jared; Robbie; Seth; and he has been in other chapters, too. He was one of the leaders that started to organize the meetings from chapter to chapter. We in Mountain Men Two are a new cell to him, but he's still willing to trade with us for supplies. You'll get to meet him next time, Robbie, and take his measure."

"But what kinda name's 'Lucien' for a Mountain Man? I never heard sich a thing," said Robbie, his fear of anything new and different coming to the fore.

“Don’t get so quick to cast off on people,” warned James. “I think he may be one of those French Indians from down around the further bend of the river. I think their chapter calls themselves Les Aigles. He don’t look like an Indian, except for havin’ wide cheekbones; he’s blond, too. But he’s got a French-soundin’ sort of way of speech. Understands good, though. You’ll have to meet him when I go for the guns. In the meantime, be gettin’ that extra ammo a-rounded up.”

“I just don’t see why the Government ain’t helpin’ us some,” Seth said, sopping up his pie gravy with one of Susan’s hot biscuits. “It’s as if they don’t even care that we’re tryin’ to help.” A few of them chuckled at this naïve view, but Samuel tried to explain the matter as slowly and carefully as he felt consistent with Seth’s inexperience.

“They’re being very, very cautious, Seth,” he said. “You have to remember that back thirty-five or so years ago, when the

Government had just started to collapse, a few of the older militias were against ‘em, and tried to bring them down even more. They’ve got a bad taste of that in their bellies still, and they don’t trust us much.”

“But they accepted the help of Mountain Men when they were fightin’ off the A-rabs who come over on the little planes. We got the final shots of ‘em to bring ‘em down, my uncle told me about that, and they put us up some statue or other markin’ the spot. That’s one of the reasons why my Daddy let me join. To help fight off A-rabs and Russians.”

“They ain’t no Arabs and Russians still doin’ that, though, Seth,” said Blue, “and the older militias are still a-fightin’ with us, even. It’s all trust where you dare these days, all disorder and chaos everywhere, nearly. Especially near the Capitol. And a tributary statue is cheap, compared with help with guns and ammo, and even their specialty, information. They ain’t good

with much but information these days, and that mostly obsolete and the like. We even have to take the info with a grain of salt, in case they're doublin' back on us. They only rarely donate any practical help; true, Samuel?"

"You speak right, Blue. The goal, Seth, is to shore up the East like in the original colonies in the First Revolution, long times ago, when we was all Americans a-fightin' off the British, and then to let the Government take it over again. If they're able, that is. They'll still be a long fight over the distances out West, nobody much can be sure of what's happenin' out there these days. The info may not be accurate," answered Samuel, taking a final drink of his coffee and holding out his mug to Susan for more.

"Now, Sam, my friend, you know it ain't good for a ol' body like you to be awake of nights with too much coffee. Wouldn't you rather have some green tea? I've got a little bit in the

cupboard still, and you know you've let me fix it for you other times."

Samuel grimaced, said "Gnat piss, Susan." He sighed. "All right, go ahead. I'm a-hopin' to sleep well tonight. Coffee would taste good, though." He watched and waited while she boiled the water. The rest of them ate, and pondered what James had told them. When the water had boiled, Susan poured it in a already warmed teapot with Samuel's tea in the bottom, then put the teapot down on the table. She rinsed out his cup from the old well-pump sink, and placed it back in front of him.

Susan softly commented to James, "You know, James, my nephew in the Black Brothers knows some of them Indians down around the way. He ain't seen them for a while, I don't think, but he himself is just the other side of Piedmont. I could get a message to him over the email from the eye doctor's office, if I went in there and saw his secretary. They still got a

computer up. Ain't nobody would have to know I wasn't just goin' for glasses. We could maybe check on that Lucien and know who he is for sure."

"You know how to work a computer, Susan?" asked Seth, wondering. "My Daddy has one, but I don't know how to work it."

"I ain't just a pretty black face, young sweet thing," she answered. "And you know, James, Blue, that doctor is with us. He regular does right by chapters and cells that are fightin' for the Government. The Black Brothers goes to him a lot, when they venture up so far, though I thinks they has their own docs farther down their own way."

They finished their meal. The others burped quietly after the rich fare, excused themselves and got up, going either to the privy or back into the front room where the fire had burnt down

a bit and the embers were broiling hot; James stayed behind with Susan.

“How soon do you think you could be ready to go to Piedmont, Susan?” he asked. “I don’t mean to put you outside in a storm, but if it clears in a day or two, you’ll need to go then and get back before we get more evil weather. I’ve given Lucien a passin’ commitment to be in touch again in two week’s time. If the trip there takes a day in bad weather, do you have someone to stay with on the way back? I won’t be lettin’ you go otherwise.”

“Ah, what you’ll let me do and what I’ll do anyways of my own account ain’t always the same thing. I’m glad to be of use. But I can stay on Jackson’s farm with Shirley on the way back, you know that. And don’t worry about that ol’ rattletrap truck you lets me drive: they ain’t nobody messes with a ol’ nigger woman in a truck that looks like it might bust at any minute and

need the help of a stranger on the road. It runs like a dream, too, since Jared fixed the motor.” She paused a minute. “You say you gave Lucien a ‘passin’ commitment’—what’s that, when it’s at home to folks?”

James gave a slight sly smile, the attitude and the gesture both being unusual for him. “Well, whether Lucien knows it or not, it means ‘If I’m passin’, I might and I might not.’ I left it sort of indefinite. If I can get Robbie through whatever is eatin’ his guts out these days, I might take him on a recon with me then, and if Lucien’s at the meetin’ point with his man, well, then, we’ll see. We’ll have to go prepared with the ammo, as if we’re goin’ to make a trade, just in case.” He touched her arm. “And Susan, you ain’t a ‘ol’ nigger woman.’ You may be black, but I’d rather have you backin’ me up any day than others I have had in my life, plenty of others. I just can’t figure out what’s

gotten into Robbie; he didn't seem to be this way when we first took him on."

She smiled, touched that James had spent so many of his words in confiding in and talking with her. "Well, I might be as black as the ace of spades, but he can't say it and I can. James, my son, it's been a-brewin' for a long time, practically ever since he first walked in and saw me here. He wasn't well-pleased, but sometimes it takes a bad storm, isolation, and bein' cooped up with people you work with to bring out your evil side, and I reckon that's what's been happenin' with Robbie. Just don't you worry your head with it, you've all the rest of you been lookin' out after me fine. He'll come around someday, when he sees it's to his advantage, mark my words. I think he just wants to be boss, too, and he's chafin' at not givin' commands. I noticed him one day when he was drillin' 'em with that last batch of new weapons back in the fall, and even

though it was a pure waste of ammo in some terms, I was glad to see him lookin' so fine and happy that day. He even came into the kitchen after an apple, and when he saw me there, where I mostly am by that time of day, he said, "Hi, Susan." Just that. You could've knocked me over with a feather. I didn't even know he knew my name. It passed, of course, but he's lookin' for responsibility. Slowly, though; you don't want to give him the big head. It'll go to his head for sure, otherwise." And she smiled again, and said, "I've got to go now and finish up in the kitchen. And then to bed. So, I'll be sayin' goodnight."

"I've never regretted talkin' to you, Susan, and that's not somethin' I can say of many people." James nodded at her, and watched her walk away, humming some old folk song or other as she went along.

When he got back into the front room, Jared had just said something to Robbie about Susan's nephew and the "French

Indians down the crick,” and Robbie had said something about “all the coloreds hangin’ together.” Having had enough and having been warmed into a kind human response again by his talk with Susan, James felt suddenly that this was all he needed to hear.

He grabbed Robbie, who was a couple of inches shorter, up by the neck of his plaid work shirt and heavy coat, and pulled him up very close to his own face. Growling rather than speaking, he shook him back and forth repeatedly, cutting off his airpath, saying, “Don’t let me hear one more word from you, not one more word, on any occasion, about anybody’s skin color, race group, or how you feel they’re inferior to you because of somethin’ nobody can help. You ain’t white because you’re so superior, you’re white because your ol’ man climbed on top of your ol’ mother and got you that way. Do you hear me?” And still, his voice had been so low that none but Robbie and Jared in

the room had heard what had been said. Samuel, though, knew the gist by the appearance of things, and bowed his head, weary of men and having himself just found Susan's company at the meal refreshing.

Robbie, grasping at his throat, was only able to nod in agreement, but he nodded repeatedly, with as much motion as he could muster under his constrained circumstances. Abruptly, James let go of him and thrust him backwards at the same time, so that he landed with a thump on the couch beside of Jared, red in the face and gasping.

"I warned you, didn't I warn you?" whispered Jared.

Meanwhile, James strode over to the fireplace at the far wall, his anger not yet exhausted; he looked down at Blue, who was sitting in the chair across from Samuel's accustomed place.

Blue, taken aback by the expression on James's face, misinterpreted it, said, "Oh, sorry," and jumped up and went to

sit instead on the other couch by Seth, whose eyes were wide and troubled.

“No, Blue, it’s okay—” started James, but sighed as he realized that Blue was already talking to Seth and did not hear him.

“Well?” Samuel asked, when James had calmed down enough to sit in the chair and be closer to his ordinary taciturn self. “Are you satisfied with your first major rebuke of your new quartermaster?”

“I hate havin’ to get coarse with a man to get him to understand me. He didn’t come with any such warning from the Mountain Men One cell; maybe they were just passin’ him along to get rid of him?”

“I think every man has a set of circumstances in which he can shine, and others in which he don’t look so good. Sometimes, Robbie reminds me of a ol’ huntin’ dog I had when I was young.

“Well, that was what he was sold to me as, anyways, a prime huntin’ dog. And I was young and not too experienced, and I took him. He was friendly, and right lovin’, and seemed to have a healthy interest in squirrels, rabbits, the woods, you name it, although the first time I took him out and we seen a deer in the clearin’ ahead, he just sat plumb down on his flat backside and stared at it, then up at me, as if to say, ‘Well, don’t that just beat all!’ It didn’t matter too much, it was a doe, and I didn’t want him after her, so I didn’t worry.

“But the first time he heard the gun go off, he bolted off a-whinin’ and a-carryin’ on, and didn’t come back home until that night after supper. Wantin’ his own supper, of course. Well, I was patient with him. I tried to take the gun out, let him smell it, get him to watch me fire it again, but he wouldn’t have none of it. The minute he seen it, he would put his tail between his legs and slink away, and hide. Huntin’ just wasn’t in his nature.

“So, we made a pet of him for a while, and let him sleep in the kitchen when it was cold, and he was a pretty good gentleman, never piddled or shit anywheres in the house, but whined until somebody let him out, and not often did that. We got a couple of other dogs for the huntin’ and they did fine.

“Then, one night, we heard a big commotion out in the barn, and Ol’ Dannel, that was his name, Ol’ Dannel, was a-barkin’ and a-bawlin’ and makin’ a right fuss, in-between of somebody a-cryin’ out and yellin’ at the top of their lungs that the dogs was a-killin’ them, help! help! Because of course, the other dogs had been started up by him, and were out there barkin’ too. We went out to find that somebody, a man we’d never seen before, had unhitched two of the horses and tried to make away with them in the middle of the night, but the funny thing about him was that he had practically no pants on. Because, by then, Ol’ Dannel had bitten him in his legs and his arms, too, but had

concentrated most of his less gentle attentions on the man's posterior parts and his thighs, and the man was in rags and tatters and cryin' and so all the rest of it.

“Finally, Ol' Dannel had given his notice that he had been in the wrong job, and that he was really a watchdog. So, we built him a luxury-size dog house, and I mean, a big one, and my wife even filled it up with old carpet scrap that we'd had and nothin' to do with it, leftover stuff, and let Ol' Dannel sleep out in one of the sheds in his own house, with the doors propped open. And if that ol' dog didn't hear everything passin' in the night, he nearly did. Of course, he met up with more than a couple of skunks, and onct, I had to scare the dickens out of him again by gettin' the gun out, because him and the other two had chased a bear into one of the sheds, and cornered it, and I had to shoot it. But he forgave me for the noise after the next mornin', and I

apologized with a hambone, and we stayed good friends. You know, I miss that ol' dog even now, sometimes.

“But the long and the short of this ol' long tale a ol' man like me just told you, is that Robbie may be givin' you the same sort of sign: he may be some other kind of dog. You just don't know what kind yet.” And James sat back, smiling a little. Samuel sighed privately; it had worked. James's basically even mood seemed to be restored.

After another hour or two, they built up the fire, put the heavy firescreen securely in front of it, and then began to wander off to the bedroom quarters, which were built in three sets of bunkrooms with two beds each, and one privy for the six of them, on the opposite side of the kitchen from Susan's room and her privy.

As James wandered out towards the door, Robbie surprised him by approaching him, looking him in the face, and then

sticking out his hand a bit quickly. James almost started to interpret this as an assault, but then he looked down and noticed that it was intended as an offer to shake hands. He gave Robbie a stern, hard look for a minute, trying to be sure he meant it, then accepted the offered hand and shook it. With no further words between them, they filed on out, Robbie and Jared to one room, Blue and James to another, and the third room still empty.

For Samuel, still a little wakeful not from Susan's green tea but from old age and thinking over the events of the day, had re-seated himself in front of the covered fire and was still reflecting. At just the next moment, though, he noticed that Seth had approached, and was waiting for an answer to a question. He had not heard it.

He said, "I'm sorry, Seth, what was that again? I was daydreamin'. Repeat yourself."

“I just wanted to know if I could sit here with you a minute. I had somethin’ I wanted to ast you, if that’s all right.” He waited.

“Sure, Seth, go ahead. Have a seat. What was it now?”

Seth gulped. He looked so young, Samuel thought. A lot younger than he himself had been when he had first lost his wife, and then the Government had started to weaken, and then he’d joined his first Mountain Man cell, and—but he had missed the question again. “I’m sorry, Seth, one more time. Ol’ men dreamin’ by fires has always been around, and I warrant they none of them heard a question the first time any better than me. Tell me, ast me again.” He gave Seth his full attention.

“Well, I was wonderin’ what you meant by somethin’ you said earlier. You said that part about how we could all learn things from the weasels and foxes, and I think I get that. I mean, they don’t walk in by the front door unless somebody’s stupid

enough to have left it open. They dig holes under things like foundations and fences, and wriggles in thataway. So I figured you were talkin' about guerilla warfare, like what we do. Is that right?" He waited.

"Yes, I was just sort of talkin' in a general way, but that's more or less what I was gettin' at. So, what's your question?"

"But you said then that we could all learn from the chickens, too. What did you mean by that? I didn't understand that."

"You think too much for somebody so young! You're goin' to be frettin' by a fire in no time."

"So, you didn't mean anything?"

"Well, yes, I did actually. I guess I was sort of thinkin' about the ways chickens acts when somethin' frightens them. If they're only a little bit frightened, they all huddle together, and make a smaller, tighter group, which gives anything dangerous less purchase to get a hold of them. And that's good; that helps

protect them. But when they gets really frightened, it's every chicken for herself. Blamed if they don't start a-runnin' around in circles, and squawkin' and carryin' on, without sense, sometimes right into the very clutches of what's after them, they're so panicked. I guess I was just thinkin' that this could go either way with us here: either we could act like good chickens, sensible chickens, and all hold together for however long this thing takes, protectin' ourselves better thataways, or we could go off a-squawkin' at each other and everything else, and get right in the way of trouble. We have to work together, group together. That was all it was. Now, ain't you sorry that you let a ol' man worry you with one of his examples?"

"No, it makes perfect sense to me." Seth stared into the fire. His face was sad, and he looked almost tearful again.

Gently, Samuel said, "Now, Seth, you can still pull out. If this way of life ain't to your liking, and God knows there are

times when it rubs all of us in the wrong direction, you can withdraw. You won't take the Brotherhood Oath for another week yet, and even after that, if you have strong feelins about not bein' suited, James will let you go, and no harm or penalty, savin' a commitment not to give us away to our enemies. And that, my friend, is a life-or-death commitment. We'll shoot you on the spot if you break that and we track you down."

Seth became indignant. "Do you think I'm a coward? Or lazy? Or stupid, somehow? Why do you think you need to suggest leavin' to me?"

Samuel hesitated a minute. "A cheap predator got into the barn and tore the wing off a chicken, which wasn't even your fault, because you locked up proper, and he did like they always do when they can't get in otherwise, and dug under the boards, right?"

Seth couldn't trust himself to speak, so just nodded.

“And he only got one chicken out of the whole flock, right, and didn’t touch the others, which is right unusual for a marauder who’s hungry. Right?”

Seth nodded again.

“And all you did was deliver the chicken to the back porch, and tap on the door, I guess, and Susan wrung her neck, and so you weren’t even responsible for killing her, true?”

Seth gave him an even look. “Do you think I shoulda been?”

“That’s not my point. My point is, Seth, if you carry on over the accidental death of a chicken thataways, what are you goin’ to do when it comes your turn to kill a man? Or men?”

Seth thought about this point for a moment. “If I could just take my huntin’ bow and arrows, I’d be fine. I wasn’t at all bothered for that buck I shot, and I got him with two arrows and he dropped. Leastways, I wasn’t at all bothered after I said a prayer to his spirit.” He blushed, but he was not afraid to say

this sort of thing to Samuel, the only one of them, with the possible exception of James, who might understand it.

“A prayer for its spirit? Where on earth did you get that from?” Samuel looked at him, feeling that he would never stop being surprised at the variety of men he encountered.

Seth paused, but feeling that he was already in it with both feet, he went on. “Well, I didn’t want to mention it with Robbie in the room, after all. I mean, he don’t seem to like anybody different from him. Clannish, that’s what my dad would call him. But I onct knowed one of those Indians, my dad called him a Native Somethin’, Native American, that was it, and he’s the one, not my dad, who taught me to hunt. Reuben Whitepath. I don’t think he was one of the French ones from downriver, he was from somewheres out West. But anyway, that’s what they do, they pray to the spirit, or for the spirit, of their kill before they take it, and that makes it all right. I’m okay with a huntin’

rifle, too, though I never brought down anything as—as tall as a man.” He gulped again, but seemed to have found some self-confidence from his talk with Samuel so far.

“Seth, now listen to me. You can hunt for us all you like, and I hope you will, I’ve found venison steaks to be quite a nice change from other things. But I’m tellin’ you, and I’m tellin’ you now that they ain’t no god to pray to that can forgive you that particular way for the killin’ of a man.”

“But what about in the Bible? They had wars and stuff, and they thought it was right to defend their homeland, and even to take other people’s away from them when they felt like it. And that was in the Bible!”

Samuel had not counted on having such a disputative discussion, and he drew a weary breath. He tried to explain again. “That’s the Old Testament. But as far as I know, the New Testament, which I speculate you’re familiar with as well,

is supposed to be the fulfillment of the Old Testament, and at least in some ways to supercede it. To add to it, and in some measures to change it.” It was hard on him to think back on an early life spent as more of a farmer with some intellectual leanings, which there had not been much call for in the woods in its undiluted form so far, but he could tell that Seth was going to be one of his burdens to bear. “And,” he added for good measure, beginning to feel at last ready for sleep, and wanting to wrap things up, “there are lots of things even in the Old Testament about justice and right-doin’, in the Psalms, for example, and justice and right-doin’ don’t include killin’ of another human bein’.”

“Never?”

“Seth—well, no, not never, but hardly ever. It’s just one of the things we consider wrong. But we’ve all done it, had to do it, and if you stay with us, you’ll have to be a-doin’ of it, too; it’s

just the way of it these days, in this situation. Now, if you go back home, to your father's farm, you can take care of livestock and raise crops to feed people, and do lots of other useful things like that, too."

"But eventually, I'll have to kill the animals, won't I?"

"You, or someone else, but let's say you. But that's better than killin' a man, ain't it?"

Seth thought about this. Then, after careful thought, he answered truthfully, "I think, though, that I'd almost rather kill a man than a innocent animal. Men are so much meaner."

"Not always."

"No, not always, maybe. But often enough. Our enemies may be mean."

Samuel at last lost patience. "For the love of God, Seth, do you expect our enemies to go around with signs around their

blamed necks sayin,' 'I'm mean,' or 'I'm not mean,' so's you'll know which ones to shoot and which ones not to shoot?"

Seth said, "I'm sorry if I'm makin' you angry. But isn't the fact that they're our enemies sign enough that we should shoot them? Doesn't that make it right? Because they're fightin' to bring down the Government?"

"I'm gettin' mighty sleepy, and you have a lot of confidence in yourself and your beliefs, my young friend. But I want you to consider this little bit from me: well, not from me, but from a great poet a long time ago. He was a-writin' a poem to his new wife, on their honeymoon. First, he thinks of happy things, then sadder things. Then, he ends by sayin' to her: 'Ah, love, let us be true/To one another! for the world, which seems/To lie before us like a land of dreams,/So various, so beautiful, so new,/Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,/Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain;/And we are here as on a darkling

plain/Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight/Where ignorant armies clash by night.’ And I want you to mark, for yourself, two things. Even though he was in love, and was talkin’ to a woman, and you know you sometimes have to be softer then, he said there wasn’t no ‘certitude,’ which means bein’ sure, and he mentioned a bit about ‘ignorant armies’ clashing by ‘night.’”

“So, he thought it was stupid to fight.”

“It’s not like that. In the lack of certitude comes the part sometimes about not really knowin’ who you’re fightin’. What they’re all about. What thoughts they may be havin’ about you. When told to shoot, you don’t get to pick and choose. In the ‘ignorant armies,’ I think I can remember bein’ told, or readin’, that he was a-thinkin’ of a mistake that was made at night in some famous battle or other, where two allies accidentally were a-shootin’ at each other, a-killin’ each other, because they

couldn't see proper who they was shootin' *at*. Hell, we nearly had that happen to us a few years back, when James and I had a bit of other different men with us, just after James got made leader by the group. James has learned caution the hard way about lots of things, and that was one of them. And you ain't prosecutor, judge, and jury; you don't get to hear all about the man you're aimin' at and what he done wrong or right. Your duty is to shoot."

Seth had been attentive all this time, but even though he too had grown up with a dreamer's love of poetry when he could spare the time, he said, "Well, that poem's not one I've heard before. What a sad thing to say to a woman on her weddin' day." Then, abruptly, he yawned. "I'm sorry; I'm not bored, Samuel."

Samuel, though, had already stood up at this natural break, and said "Well, you and I are both behind the others to bed by a

considerable bit. You think over the things I've said to you serious-like, and that way when James asks you for your Oath at the Brotherhood Ceremony, you'll be able to give it or not give it, true and honorable. Now, let's head off; you know Susan and breakfast, she don't like laggards."

(2)

The day of Seth's Brotherhood Ceremony dawned bright and cold, and it was predicted to start a late winter thaw in the evening. It was cold enough for the men and Susan outside, though, so they waited to start their business outside until it got to be ten o'clock. Seth wondered what Susan was doing with them, because she had driven them all to a spot on the snow-covered gravel road and through the woods to a clearing, a little wrapped-up package on the seat next to her; they could see her

from the back of the truck where five of them rode. James sat up front talking to her in the passenger seat, their conversation unheard, but obviously of no real moment and sporadic.

When they all got out and were milling around adjusting their gloves, caps, and coats, James came up to Seth and said in a quiet voice that no one else could hear, “Now, Seth, not passin' tales on you, but Samuel tol' me that you and him had a talk a week or so ago. Are you still determined to go ahead with this?”

“Yessir.”

“And you know what's involved?”

“Yessir, I do.”

“Well, then, come on ahead into the circle up yonder, and step into it for the first part of the ceremony. We'll be up there in a minute.”

Seth walked forward, and then saw a circle marked in the snow, and drawn with what looked like blood. He looked back a little doubtfully, but Jared called out in a friendly way, “Just pig’s blood, Seth. Go ahead and step in, we’ll be on along soon.”

He stepped into the circle, then looked back at them and waited as the rest of them stood conferring, with Susan still seated in the truck, the engine turned off now. When James was satisfied that everything was fine with his men, they came forward and positioned themselves around on the circle boundary, all of them facing Seth where he stood in the center.

Samuel was the master-of-ceremonies, evidently. He began in a calming tone, “Now, Seth, this part is not going to make much sense to you right away, but it will by the end. I need someone to volunteer to fight Seth here—”

“I’ll do it,” put in Robbie, overeager.

James spoke up. “No, I think it’d better be Jared. He’s a little taller, but they’re more of a match in weight group. Jared, step up.”

Jared stepped up, and Robbie scowled; he clearly was looking forward to putting Seth in some sort of place or other of humiliation, or worse, perhaps.

Samuel continued. “All right, three knockdowns is the limit. There’s no winner, just the count of three. Jared, you try to knock Seth down, and Seth, you try to knock Jared down. Each time there’s a fall, it’s one count. Nobody steps outside the circle, or aims hits at anybody else. Ready? Shake hands—and go!”

Seth circled Jared warily, looking for a place to throw a punch. Jared, though, knew this ceremony, and got in first with a hit on Seth’s jaw, which took him off-guard and off-balance, and caused him to trip over his own feet and fall. They all

cheered but Robbie, who jeered and laughed. Seth glanced at him, but got up and squared his jaw for the second attempt.

This time, as a former farm boy who'd been in his share of teenaged fights and quarrels, he planned his strategy a little better. He aimed a hit at Jared's solar plexus, not really the best place for a hit if his opponent had been anticipating it, but Jared had assumed from the first contest that it was going to be easier, and thus didn't have his stomach muscles clenched. Seth gave a good, firm punch, and Jared stumbled backwards and sat down directly in the line of pig's blood behind him. They all cheered again, even Robbie a little, who as much as possible liked to see a good set-to, even though he was basically rooting for his friend, Jared.

The third time, both of the fighters had been seasoned in the other's methods, and they circled and circled each other, finally

gripping each other in a sort of odd shoving contest-cum-dance, until Samuel said aloud,

“Nope, no holding, boys. Try to throw your punches. We’ve got other things to go on to. Right, now—and fight!”

After about a minute or two, Jared threw himself at Seth, his fist aimed at Seth’s gut this time, but Seth reached out and grabbed it just as it landed home, and pulled Jared forward. They landed in a heap, still inside the circle. This time there was laughing and catcalling as well as cheering.

“Oh, good God,” said Blue. “Two of a kind. Get up off your asses. What do you think of that, Samuel?”

Samuel just laughed, something none of them could recall hearing him do for a long while. “Okay, now onto the next part.” He turned towards the truck and beckoned to Susan, who gathered up her little mysterious bundle, and stepped up to where they were, inside the circle.

Samuel continued to Seth. “This next part tests stamina, Seth, in case you’re injured sometime, though it’s far shy of the real thing. It’s just a symbolic wounding, after all.

“You see that far trail, over across the way?” and he pointed the trail out. It had a rough, pig’s-blood arrow drawn at the beginning of it.

Seth nodded at Samuel.

“I can’t hear your head rattlin’, boy, speak up.”

“Yessir, I see it from here.”

“Good, good eyesight. Now, you are goin’ to run down that trail as fast as you can, and get back here. It circles around and comes out over there.” He pointed to another trail ending just behind the group to the left, and near the gravel road. It was marked with blood, too. “It circles true, so all you have to do is stay on the path. Got that?”

“Yessir, I seen that one when we come in.”

“Now here’s the trick. You ain’t blood shy about yourself, are you?”

“Now’s a fine time to be astin’, Samuel, when he’s already halfway in,” commented Robbie.

“Be still, Robbie, you know this is the way we do it. If you want to change the ceremony form, you can worry it over with me and James later. But he has to be taken gradual through. It’s the way of it.”

Robbie shrugged and said nothing.

Seth, both curious and impatient, said “Samuel, sir, I ain’t blood shy. I’ve a-broken my arm onct, with the bone a-pokin’ through and a doctor had to set it. And onct I cut myself with a saw and bled copious. I ain’t afraid.”

Curious himself, the usually silent James asked, “How did you break your arm that way, Seth?”

Seth flushed. “I was in the barn a-milkin’, and one of the ol’ cows had a stroke or somethin’ and fell on me.”

They all burst into laughter, which at first annoyed Seth a little, and then he smiled at James, who stepped forward and punched him in the shoulder. “Well, I sure wouldn’t want a cow to fall on me,” James teased, and at this friendly joke from his leader, Seth calmed down and waited.

“Okay, Susan, you can step forward and do your bit,” instructed Samuel.

“Now, Seth, I’m a-gonna cut you. It ain’t a real cuttin’, and you sure shouldn’t lose a lot of blood, but if you got wounded out by yourself and had to run to a safe place to hide near where one of us was, that’s what this means. So, do you want the cut in a arm or a leg? It’ll only take a second.”

Seth thought a minute, then said, “Well, this is a old shirt and jacket, but my pants is newer, so I don’t want to get blood on them. Better put it in a arm, Susan, thank you for astin’.”

“That’s what I like, a polite young man. Don’t ever forgit them good manners of yours, and we’ll get along just fine.

Which arm, or do you care?”

“The left, I guess.”

Susan gestured silently, and he put out his arm, withdrawn from the coat and with the sleeve rolled up. Samuel moved up and held the cloth bundle under his arm to catch the blood, and Susan took in her hand the little scalpel that she had held out of Seth’s view at first, and made a small nick in a part of his arm. He spurted a little blood out of the wound, then the blood just trailed down his arm where he held it awkwardly by his side.

“Here, Susan, here’s the bandage,” Samuel said, offering her another piece of cloth he had been holding. She tied it around

the wound and cinched it as tight as seemed good not to cut off circulation any, and that part was done.

“Okay, Seth, you can take off now, just run it as fast as you can. It’s about five miles, give or take. If you fall or feel faint and have to sit down, don’t worry; someone will be up the trail behind you in about fifteen minutes to make sure you’ve done gone on up. Do your best, but it ain’t a race, so don’t worry about time. Now, go!” And Samuel and the others stepped out of the circle, watching Seth take off and head for the first marked part of the trail.

When they couldn’t see him anymore, Robbie said, rueful and in a better mood, strangely, now that the ceremony was getting along faster, “I do wish you hadn’t told him to take his time. It’s awful cold out here, even today.”

Blue piped up with, “Oh, Robbie, your blood is always thin. Is it Seth goin’ through the ceremony, or you? Maybe you better have another try.”

But this jest was not well-received, Robbie having clenched both his fists and started to step forward, so James thought to separate them, and said, “Blue, you can be the one to follow him up the trail. Maybe you should start out now, a-walkin’, that’ll give you something to be doin’. When you feel you’ve gone far enough that way, then pick up the pace. He’s a swift runner, or I miss my guess.”

On the trail, Seth was running as fast as he could, conscious suddenly of the bright sun now coming through the trees, and small animals rustling in the underbrush, and the birds chirping and calling to each other from the treetops, silent suddenly as his footsteps sounded past them. After a few minutes, he felt a little light-headed, and he stopped to roll up his sleeve and check the

wound. Sure enough, his healthy young system had pumped enough blood to soak all the way through the bandage and make a considerably large stain on it, and then, as he noticed, on his shirt and a little on his jacket. He pulled his sleeve back down and picked up his pace once again, determined not to look bad in front of his new comrades. True, he had been given a month to get used to them before committing to the group, but he still felt the situation as something new happening every day, and he wondered briefly when he was going to get used to it.

After he had started to tire and slow down a bit, but long before he thought he could have run the five-mile distance that Samuel had mentioned, he heard cheering from a space ahead. “Surely they ain’t a-cheerin’ for me—I ain’t there yet,” he thought, but the next moment as he burst into the original clearing and saw them waving their arms and making a racket, he realized that they had been able to see his red plaid jacket

coming through the leafless trees. But one of the number was missing. Then, he remembered that one of them was following him on the trail, and after looking at them all in turn as he approached, he understood that it was Blue who was coming along behind him. He slowed to a walk as he approached the circle, then stepped full inside of it again as Samuel motioned him on forward. They all stood for another five minutes or so not saying much, while Susan checked his arm again. She wiped off his sleeve with a bit of something on a rag that took some of the darkness of the blood out of it. Then, she unbound the wound and dabbed at his arm there with something that stung fiercely, before re-bandaging it with a new, clean, bandage and surgical tape.

“Thanks, Susan,” he said shyly, winded but mindful of her earlier praise of him.

For answer, she just smiled at him, then gathered up all the little pieces of her kit which she had been holding in the pocket of her apron while she used them. It had looked funny to see her in a house apron when she was out in jeans under it and driving the truck, but now Seth understood. She headed for the truck and put the kit back inside in the front seat, making sure both windows were fully rolled up before she stepped back into the group.

Blue came along a couple of minutes later, huffing and puffing a little more than Seth had, though Seth thought back on it for a minute, and realized that Blue had eaten a full breakfast that morning, and was ten years older at least, whereas he himself was young, and had felt too excited and nervous to eat much. Besides, Blue had had to make up for time on the trail, following a younger and faster, if slightly wounded, runner.

When they were all there again, Seth looked up inquiringly at first Samuel and then James. James said, “Fine so far, Seth. It’s almost done. Have you got your Oath memorized?”

“Yessir, I do.”

“Good. Samuel, you’d best explain the next part.”

“Well, Seth, the truth of the matter is that when you get a pack of men all together, they picks at one another, and quarrels, and fights, comes to blows sometimes, even. You’ve seen it happen here already a few times. And they ain’t like women, not most women; they can’t pull each other’s hair, or slap each other, and most of them don’t spread tales about each other. Susan, now, I’ve seen her give as good fisticuffs as she got onct, but that was when we was all in a particular tight spot, and she came through for us. Anyway, back to my topic.

“This part just purely shows that you’ve got to be willin’ to stand up for yourself even with your friends, but then make

friends again when the quarrel is over. And me and James neither one, nor Blue either, holds with quarreling a lot. You follow me?”

“Yessir, I sure do.”

“Okay. Well, this is like the first part, in a way. Each man here is goin’ to step up to you and give you one good lick to knock you down, or put you in your place. And this time, you don’t get to trick him, or step aside, or even fight back and defend yourself. You’ve just got to take it. And then, you shake hands with him, and he steps aside, and the next one comes. Got that? And there shouldn’t be any hard feelins about what happens, because we’ve all been through it to be Mountain Men. Are you ready?”

Seth swallowed a little nervously, but answered again,
“Yessir, I am.”

“We’ll go in order of seniority. I’m not really in the lineup anymore except for fightin’, but I’m the oldest, so I’ll go first. Prepare yourself. Make sure as much as you can not to step outside the circle. Self-control is important.” Without giving him a chance to worry or think too much about what was happening, Samuel aimed a blow at his chin, decking him neatly. Seth fell flat on his bottom, looking a little perplexed. It had been so quick. He got up and dusted off his backside, though, and waited for Samuel to extend his hand. This happened in due course, and Samuel stepped out onto the circle boundary again, his hand held out. Seth shook it.

Meanwhile, Robbie was saying almost under his breath, “God! That was just a tap. He’d better hope everybody he runs across is a ol’ man with a soft spot for his company.”

“Shut up, Robbie. I’m next,” said James. Seth kept his eyes lowered at first, shut them once, then as James waited quietly for

him to be ready, he looked James straight in the face and waited himself. “Let’s hope this is one of the only times I have to do this, Seth,” he said, smiling faintly and grimly. Before Seth could move aside or step away anxiously, James took a hard blow at his sternum, and then another blow with the other fist at his stomach, which doubled him over, and which after all made it clear who the leader was. When Seth was able to straighten back up and draw breath, his eyes a little watery, though not from tears, James smiled at him warmly.

“That was a little unfair, Seth: two blows instead of one,” James said. He held out his hand and they shook on it. “Hard enough for you, Robbie?” he muttered to the quartermaster as he passed by him and stood back on the rim of the circle again.

Robbie did not answer.

Next was Blue. He was diffident and matter-of-fact, but he was the strongest man in the cell. “Nothin’ personal, Seth. You

can count on me to give you fightin' tips later, if you want them." And he aimed at Seth so quickly and hit so truly that Seth fell flat on his back. He shook his head as if to clear it, and sat up, but still didn't stand. After a minute, Blue reached down his hand and helped pull Seth back up to his feet. "Good man!" exclaimed Blue, when Seth got up and tried to look unfazed.

Blue held out his hand again, and after they shook, Seth turned half-around inside the circle to face Robbie; this was the encounter he had been dreading the most ever since he had arrived, really, because Robbie had seemed to have it in for him for a long time. It just surprised him now to think back on it that it had not happened before, under another set of circumstances than the ritual.

"Think you can face me out, young blood?" Robbie asked carelessly.

With a good deal of bravery, Seth answered, “I don’t know, but I’m a-fixin’ to try.”

“Well, you do that,” Robbie answered, and taking Seth off-guard, he aimed a hard and vindictive punch right at Seth’s nose, which promptly began to spurt blood from where he sat on the ground. Seth wearily crawled up first onto his knees from a sitting position, and then stood up, weaving just slightly, but still game, glad that the last man was Jared, whom he had already once met. Robbie did not hold out his hand right away, so Seth held out his. Robbie glared at him, but then smirked and shook Seth’s hand.

“Got that out of your system, Robbie?” James was severe, but kept to the form. “You don’t have to break his nose to put him through this. You’re up, Jared.”

Jared, a bit shocked at Robbie’s manner, which was not like that of the original man he had thought of as his closest buddy in

the cell, nodded blankly at James, and stepped forward. He seemed to be considering just where to hit that had not been hit before, but after a couple of seconds, he shrugged and popped Seth a blow on the jaw, as much as possible like what he had seen Samuel do.

This time, Seth jumped up swiftly and waited for Jared to put out his hand, which he was sure must signal the end of this part of the ritual. James and Samuel meanwhile had stepped a little out of the circle and were conferring in low tones. When they saw that everyone was waiting, Samuel stepped up with a canteen of cold water, and passed it around, to Seth first. After they had all drunk, Samuel and James stepped back into the circle a little closer to Seth.

“This is the last part, Seth, where you say the Brotherhood Oath. As you know, all of the chapters have their own Oaths, like this one enough, I guess. But all of the cells of the

Mountain Men chapter have this one, or a close variation on it. Can you stand in the center for us now, and look at me and James, and say it? Give yourself a minute to clear your head if you need it. And after we're done, we'll all ride back and eat up that good meal that Susan has ready for us back at the camp. You here, Susan, come up here and join the circle; you're a part of this, too." Susan came alongside of Samuel and stood and listened.

"Take your time, Seth," James was kind. "One word the more or less won't matter, but you want to stick close to the form."

Seth, though, did have his Oath word perfect, and said it in good time. It reminded him a lot, though he would not have said this to anyone, of every oath he had ever heard for any kind of club or secret society; he supposed, as that flitted briefly through his mind, that that was because every kid's game that he had

joined in in the barns, sheds, or woods back home had had oaths based on things some of them had heard from adults. He committed himself to loyalty to the group, to its Elder and its Leader, to all of his brothers individually, and promised after this to save the Government from its enemies and challengers. He had not asked Samuel about it yet, but it had caused him some momentary anxiety when he had originally heard the Oath that the Government was not mentioned first, whereas loyalty to his group was. He reminded himself, though, that every Elder probably was not as well-read and intelligent as Samuel, and that the Oath was old, very old, and might have been composed by anybody.

When he had said the Oath to James and Samuel, a rush of high spirits got into the group, and they began calling, caterwauling, and making a lot of noise in the truck, as like the boys playing in the woods as Susan had playfully accused them

of being. They sang a crudely composed song or two on the way home, bouncing around in the back of the truck, giving no heed to having a woman along with them.

In her day, Susan had heard worse, though, and she smiled at them in the rearview mirror, when not watching the road ahead for animals roaming across the snowy track.

“Do you want me to make them stop?” James asked, after a particularly ripe lyric met their ears.

“Hell, no, let them get it worked out of them before they gets home and has somethin’ broken that we has to clean up. They’ll settle down some after lunch. I’m a-loadin’ them up with a young turkey, stuffing, cranberries, yams, and all the works. After all that meat and sugar and carbohydrates, they’ll feel like sleepin’ it off, and they’ll quiet down. And if that don’t do it, some of Shirley’s good homebrewed beer will do it. As you

knows, I been savin' that up for a special occasion, and I reckon this is it."

"You're right, I forgot about that. I had just clean forgotten it." He pondered about Seth for a moment, then an infrequent smile crossed his face. "He done well today, didn't he?"

"He sure did. That boy's got plenty of heart. He needs him a good woman, though maybe not for a few years yet. But when I gets a little older, it might be good to have another woman here with me. If you won't mind two of us eatin' off of you, that is. We gots to be able to afford it."

"We'll see. The others ain't a-showin' any desire to be settled down yet, but Blue and me come from a farm, so it's logical that he'll want to settle down on one again sometime after it's over, if it ever is. I think Robbie is a career militia man; I can't think what's goin' to happen to him when they ain't any more Resistance to carry on with. Samuel will be older by

then, too. He's already spoken to me once or twice about retiring for real, but I've tried to discourage him and hold onto him still, because I feel he's good for my men. And Jared, well, Jared. He's a bit of a puzzle. He's a town boy like Robbie, but I don't know if you know this: we rescued him from a sort of gang his parents were trying to break him of, and we've never had a bit of trouble with him since. I think he may be good for a Government army by and by, if one forms. He responds well to lots of discipline and authority. But it's early days yet for any of this. We still got a job to do."

"And what are you fixin' to do with James when the Resistance breaks or ain't needed anymore?" she half-joked with him about himself.

"I don't have no crystal ball, Susan. I'm in charge, so I've got to see all my men safely bestowed before I can make my own plans. I do sometimes think of a little place along what

used to be the New Hampshire coast, though. It sits up on a bluff, and all the sea roars underneath it. There's a woman lives there that I used to be with sometimes, way back when, before I had progressed very far in the Mountain Men. But for all I know, she's dead and gone by now, and the place all shuttered up or given to other people. We'll just have to wait for some things."

He thought again for a minute or two, then said, "You know, though, things are a-gettin' a bit rougher out and about, a couple of stray shootins I haven't told the men about, a couple of robberies from other camps in the daylight. One thing I am a-gonna do, and this as much in honor of Seth's good conduct as in need of it being so: I'm a-gonna go ahead and get them two dogs for to be with you here durin' the days, when we may be out somewheres or at a distance. For proper protection, you know. If I can stop Robbie from ridin' Seth about bein' partial

to animals. They'll have to be good watchdogs, though, not just pets. We'll want them to know all of us, and recognize us from strangers, and all that. Did you say last week that the Jackson farm had a litter of puppies? Or did I hear you right? You whispered it so fast, that I wasn't sure."

"Oh, yes, James, do get Seth his brace of dogs! I was a-whisperin' of it because Jared and Robbie were comin' in for supper; and what Jared knows, Robbie knows. I can't think why Robbie has taken so against Seth as it seems he has, but after all, Seth ain't black or Indian, so that ain't it. I noticed it again today."

James grinned. "Well, I reckon Robbie is a little bit jealous of Seth. He's commented more than onct on how 'purty' Seth is, and Robbie, you know, was probably never one to be popular with the ladies, though that's not sayin' he didn't wish he was. He doubts Seth for that reason, I think, and for his youth, and

because he's a thinkin' boy who grew up on a farm and not in town, like Robbie, and I imagine that's all it is, if that ain't enough. In fact, I can see a lot of Samuel in Seth, what Samuel musta onct been like when he was young, and a-readin' books on a farm. But here we are; just remind me to give you some money for a couple of puppies when you go into Piedmont next week. Two weaned bitches, we don't want anymore quarrelin' and fightin' among males than we have around here already. And when it's their times, I can take them up to that vet that runs that medicine clinic for people and animals up there a few miles north of us here, and get them spayed.

“You know, it's been a lucky thing for all of us that he hasn't gotten caught by any Government agents for takin' care of people, too. Even though they can't even hardly take care of their own business, and have to depend willy-nilly on us for help, and only give us even a harsh word now and again, they

can sure interfere in lots of things that would be workin' to their advantage if they just let it alone.”

One minute later, Susan thumped the old truck into the clearing outside the cabin complex, and she and James got out, locking their doors while the jubilant men in the back jumped down from the sides.

The rest of that day was devoted to eating and drinking, and telling tales in front of the fire. Susan was sitting with them, on one couch by Seth and Blue, where she bathed the marks on Seth's face with witch hazel and then rubbed in some aloe lotion. He let her do it, confident that having proven himself already, it was okay to allow a woman's gentle touch on his wounds even beyond the essential cleanup that she had done at the initiation clearing.

James and Samuel talked quietly in front of the fire, James mentioning for Samuel's approval the plans he had earlier put

forward in the truck with Susan. Samuel said, “Okay, two dogs, but if you don’t warn Seth not to favor them so much, we’re goin’ to see some kickin’ of them and other mistreatment by Robbie. Seth has got to learn to hide his feelins a little better, or Robbie’s always a-gonna be makin’ for him.”

On their couch, Robbie and Jared were talking about totally other topics, their own adolescences and younger days, Robbie with Mountain Men One, and Jared with the gang he had started out with. Jared kept his voice lower, since he doubted that James would approve of his dwelling on such a topic. Robbie, though, aware of having been a much-valued man at one point in another cell, felt called upon to brag and boast to Jared, who had always seemed to admire him so freely.

All in all, it had been a tiring and full day for all of them, and so they all went to bed early after James made them help Susan clean up the kitchen. She let them for a while, but then in play

exasperation, picked up a dish towel and started swatting at all of them, saying, “Now okay, that’s enough. You mens get outta my kitchen! It’s too much. You’ve clearly never washed a dish or scraped a bowl in your life. I can go on just fine from here; you’ve helped enough. Go to bed! I can’t finish and go to bed myself until you do. Why don’t you go along and sing some of those lullabies you was singin’ in the truck together? I gots work to do.” They all laughed at her, even Robbie, but made for bed the very next thing, James banking the fire himself and then going into his room with Blue.

When Samuel and Seth were in their beds, Seth asked,

“Samuel?”

“Yes?”

“When do I get a real fightin’ gun? I heard James tellin’ Blue that that Lucien character was a-gonna trade us some new

AR-15's. I heard about them that they can fire anywhere from thirty to ninety rounds a minute. Do I get one a them?"

"You get pretty much what the rest of us gets. I didn't have my ears cracked open like you did, so I didn't hear that part, but what makes you want to go so fast from shootin' a buck with a bow and arrow to makin' a smashed melon of a man's head? And I don't think all of them guns is goin' to be AR-15's. They're expensive, and likely they'll only be a few of them. And ammo is expensive, too. We're gettin' it right now from the brothers in the Mountain Men One cell, in exchange for some of our tribute dollars from the people who're on our side, but money spends fast when you're buyin' guns and ammo, so don't be expectin' miracles. You're good with that ol' huntin' rifle; why don't you practice some more with it until you know for sure?"

Seth was a little disappointed not to know something for sure, but he bid Samuel goodnight and turned on his right side, with his arm injury turned up to the ceiling so that he would not be sleeping on it and make it sore. After a few preliminary whuffles and snores, the two of them were asleep like the others, who were also making deep sleeping noises. The momentous day was over, and Seth had passed the test. He was a full Mountain Man now.

(3)

The next day, Susan prepared her kitchen for other hands, making several meat pies, several fruit pies, some casseroles, and some vegetable dishes. It took her all day and a bit into the night to do it, but she wanted to be on her way to Piedmont early the next morning, while a winter thaw was still on and the roads were as clear as was possible. She made sure the water-turbine

generator from the windmill out back was working fully, and that the dials on it were not frozen or stuck. When they had first come to this cabin complex, when she was a younger woman and James and Samuel were younger, too, one of their first renovations had been to build a shed around the generator, to keep the snow in winter from blowing up around it and freezing the buttons and dials in place. It rarely happened now that the snow or wet ever got to it, but it never hurt to be sure. She served a cold meal to the men, and then when the dishes were done, went on with the rest of her planning. At the end of her long day, she went to her room and packed a kit bag in case she had to put up with Shirley on Jackson's farm on the way back. Jackson's farm was just this side of Piedmont, and her nephew's Black Brothers chapter, Cell Ten, was camped just the other side of Piedmont. But unlike the Mountain Men in her own cell, they had access to small amounts of electricity and a computer screen

in their smaller hamlet, and she was sure she could get an inquiry through them to the French Indian base they shared the mountain range with, and maybe even get some sort of old-style photograph of their man. That would surely help James and Robbie out some on their trip to rendezvous with Lucien.

Her truck made all sorts of unpredictable noises on the way, but she was used to it by now, and knew which sounds to worry about and which not to. When she arrived at the farm, Shirley ran out to greet her, and when she explained that she needed to go to the eye doctor's, and wanted two of the female pups to buy and take back, Shirley said, "You're havin' your eyes done again already? Well, I guess if you can't see, you can't see.

"And you came just in time about the pups. Whoever wants bitches for watchdogs, anyway? It ain't many, so we were a- fixin' to sell them in town. We only have the three pups left,

and one of them's male. You're sure, now, you wants the other two?"

Susan gave her a definite affirmative. Shirley said, "Well, they's both healthy, but one of the bitches is the runt of the litter. She's a little smaller, but full of fire and fuss, just like the other two. If you're sure you don't want but the two, I'll tie them up inside the barn for you, and tell Barney. He's the one owns them, after all. How much were you thinkin' to offer?"

Susan named the generous figure James had given her to spend, and Shirley and Barney both confessed themselves well satisfied when he came in for a late lunch. "I'll be back to pick 'em up this evening or tomorrow, only I may need to stay over for a night. Can you put me up? I wants to get my new glasses by tomorrow."

"Tomorrow? Are you crazy? They won't have them ready this week."

“Oh, all I’m a-needin’ right now is some readin’ specs. I can’t see my recipes so well, anymore.”

“Well, I imagine they can probably do that. Yes, I’d love to have you here for tonight. You can tell me and Barney all the news from North of here. We’re out of contact a lot with peoples during the winter.”

When Susan got to the eye doctor’s in Piedmont, they had a “back at 1:30 p.m.” sign on the door, which made her fear lest she was going to be kept waiting even longer and maybe not make connections, but just as sure as anything, at 1:35, the eye doctor’s nurse-secretary, Anna Mae, went up to the door and unlocked it, turning the sign around to show “Open Until 6:00 p.m.”

Susan made her way in and walked to the back desk where the computer, a precious and rare piece of equipment, was kept, and said “Hello. I knows you remembers me.” And she made a

funny little sign, brushing her cheek with her first two fingertips of her right hand.

Anna Mae looked to see if anyone else was with her or had come in behind her, and then motioned her behind the counter, lifting the counter hatch for her as she came. “Susan! Here you are again, so soon! New glasses, too, or—” and she paused.

“Well, I needs a pair of reading glasses, and that’s a fact. But I’m mainly here to...get a copy of my records.” This was their language for using the computer, and quickly, seeing someone else pausing at the door, Anna Mae pulled Susan to the back and helped her out of her coat, handing her a white medical lab coat to put on over her other clothes.

When this was done, Susan sat behind the counter watching the real customer out of the corner of her eye while entering her nephew’s name and email, and communicating the urgency of her message for the French Indians who shared a mountain pass

or two with the Black Brothers Ten to her nephew to relay.

Then, she waited. And waited. When it got to be 5:30 p.m. and still no answer had come through from her nephew's cell, she asked Anna Mae, "Can I come back tomorrow and try again? He ain't respondin'. Leastways, he may be out or busy and away from the cell. But I got to do this in quick time."

"Well, the doctor has already left for the day today, and he won't be in tomorrow, because it'll be Saturday. Mostly on Saturdays, people just comes to pick up their glasses. But I can come and let you in and sit with you. Will that be okay? And as for the cheaters, I can fit you for them today. We has lots of pairs of them here, just pick the pair you like."

So, Susan bought and paid for a pair of "cheaters," her old reading glasses having been missing a long time anyway, with her dependent on her good glasses to read. She asked Anna Mae to hold them for her until the next day. Then, it was time to go,

and she made sure that Anna Mae had the proper email address that an answer might be coming from; she left to go back to Jackson's farm.

She pondered this a bit, absentmindedly. It was called Jackson's farm because of an old couple that had owned it years ago; their produce had been famous for its quality, so when Barney and Shirley Benson had left the Black Brothers to settle down, they kept the old trade name, and had even paid something for the goodwill. They were a regular stop for Black Brothers' members who wanted to stay a night or two, and they sold lots of produce to all and sundry who were a part of the Resistance. She thought that James's money was enough to allow her to take a few boxes of vegetables back home to the cabin complex with her too, assuming that she could get the dogs to behave in the front seat alongside of her.

After supper, she and Barney and Shirley went out to look at the pups, and it was as Shirley had said: one was a larger pup, and one was a smaller pup, both German Shepherds, the smaller one having more light yellowish-brown fur on her muzzle. They seemed comfortable in a large box, so Susan proposed taking the box and the blanket in it with her, to minimize their desire to get out and roam around in the truck. Shirley assured her that they were weaned, and gave them some chopped-up meat to prove it. They clearly had good appetites, and made quick work of the proffered meal.

When Shirley heard that Susan had to go back after her glasses the next day, she offered to go with her for company, but as politely as possible, Susan made light of the trip, and assured Shirley and Barney that the glasses would be ready early the next morning, and that she would be able to head for home directly after that. She hated not being able to tell Shirley, who

had been her friend for years now, what she was really here for, but even though Shirley and her husband both knew that Susan was helping out the Resistance, Susan had been warned strictly by James and Samuel not to reveal her computer connection at the eye doctor's, so as not to get either him or his nurse in trouble. Chances were, Barney already knew about him, and so probably did Shirley, but they too were not mentioning anything about it. It was important to everyone to keep the lines open as long and as far as possible. And sometimes, that required a diligent tact which might seem excessive in whatever normal times had once been.

When Susan got to the eye doctor's office at 9:30 a.m., she had to wait for another half an hour to get in, because the door was unaccountably locked, even though it said on the sign, "Open at 9:00 a.m." This worried her extremely, but she figured there was nothing much she could do about it, so she made her

way to the gas station in the center of town, which sold the precious gasoline for her truck, the gasoline that had been smuggled across hostile territories and friendly territories alike, all the way from the Gulf of Mexico, where the valuable oil derricks were still pumping sporadically. So far, because they never went long distances in their two trucks, they had not run out of gasoline at their cell. But James had already talked recently about a rumor he had heard that the derricks were slowing down and being sabotaged, and had talked about buying two horses and a wagon for emergencies. That, in turn, would require a field during summer, oats or other grain, and some hay during winter, though the small grassy plot behind the cabin would perhaps serve for some part of the year. And of course, the area just below the windmill would be ideal for the building of a small watering trough.

Carefully counting her remaining money that James had given her, leaving enough out for the pups, her glasses, the vegetables she usually picked up, and her cautionary amount for possible road emergencies, she spent the rest on gasoline, appreciative of having nearly a full tank. Then, once again, she headed for the eye doctor's. This time when she got there, the store had three other customers, so she just said to Anna Mae, "I'll wait." And she did, for about forty-five minutes while the others picked up their glasses, got them adjusted, paid, and left.

When it was her turn, she approached the counter eagerly.

"Well? Any messages?"

"An oddly worded message, which I for one don't understand, and a badly scanned old photo. It may not be current enough to be useful, but this is from the email address you sent your message to, which you said was your nephew."

She handed over the documents, and looked at Susan with a little curiosity, as if wanting to see if she could decode the message.

Susan glanced at it and said, “It’s just a message for the leader of my cell. He’ll know what to make of it,” not telling even Anna Mae that she herself could read the coded message, and would soon know what it said. It was an old, childish if ingenious cipher which she and her family had used, in the last days before the Government started to totter. She wanted to read it, but she knew it was time to go, and she thanked Anna Mae and gave her the money for the glasses and a hug, which was all she had else to offer.

“I’ll need to tell Dr. Hardy when he comes in that you were here. It’s always necessary.”

“That’s fine, Anna Mae, my friend. Dr. Hardy’s a man we trusts.” Then, she waved and headed on back out the front with

her papers, just as two more customers—or perhaps people sending covert messages, as she was doing?—were coming in. Making quick progress back to Jackson’s farm, she went to the front door, but found a note there from Shirley: they had had to make a quick trip out. She was supposed to leave the money for the vegetables and the pups inside on the table in the front room, and help herself to what she needed to get.

She picked up the vegetables where Barney had left them on the porch for her, far more than she had actually paid for by her account of other times, and put them in the back of the truck. Next, she went to the barn and picked up the box containing the two pups, which was a considerable bit heavier. They jumped up and licked at her face, which made her giggle like a young girl and nearly drop the box. When she had them in the front passenger side of the truck seat, she got in behind the wheel, and taking a long breath, started to drive for home.

It seemed that she was just barely fortunate in her timing. The snow was starting to fall on the road, and it was getting slippery under the truck's tires, though they were holding steady so far. The pups, which she took an indulgent look at from time to time, had wearied themselves out with biting and snapping games, then curled up around each other and fallen asleep. She finally had to turn the windshield wipers on, which had already been denuded of rubber long ago, but had been repaired by a clever trick of Jared's with hard cardboard. The wipers would last for about six weeks at a time with judicious use, then he had to start stapling more of it together with baling wire from an old round of it that was left in one of the sheds. How he did it, she had never figured out, because somehow the baling wire was not out where it could scratch the glass of the windshield; but Jared happily kept his secrets to himself, enjoying being behind such innovative inventions. And James just smiled at Susan when

she fussed about his secrecy, knowing that she did not mind depending on someone else once in a while.

Just as she got ready to turn in the long gravel road that led to the cabin complex, with the dark already gathering around her on all sides, a smooth, long tawny shadow about six or seven hands high at the shoulder walked calmly across in her headlights. Reflective green eyes stared at her for a moment, the nose lifted and scented the air, and then the mountain lion paced gracefully over to the stopped truck and stood up full height on the passenger side door and looked in at the pups, and then back at Susan. Frozen until that moment, Susan leaned on the horn for all she was worth, blaring and blaring and sounding it again and again, hoping to drive the lion away before she got to the cabin and had to leave the truck.

It stepped a little aside and dropped back down, and she drove as fast as she dared down the road, glad to see the lights of

the cabin fire shining from the front room, until she looked back and noticed that the lion was slowly trotting after her. It must be really hungry, she thought, and was glad that it couldn't dig under the foundations of the barn the way the other predator had. But it could throw its weight on the door, and then who knew what might happen to their animals inside? The pups had started to whine softly, as if either they were hungry too, or they knew they were being stalked, possibly along with Susan herself, their only protector.

When she reached the cabin, she leaned on the horn again and again, until all six of the men came out the front at their different speeds, wondering what was wrong. She looked back for the shadow trailing behind in the road—was it still there?—she couldn't tell. When the men were all there staring at her, she rolled down the stiff old window as far as she dared, and yelled,

“Go get a gun! There’s a mountain lion out there behind a-stalkin’ of me and these pups.”

Three of them went in and grabbed hunting rifles from the case in the front room and headed up the road behind her, and the next thing she heard was a loud pop! and then another, and then a blast. She thought she saw Robbie, Blue, and James in the rearview mirror. She stayed still in the truck, the cold air drifting in her partially opened window.

“Well, we didn’t entirely get her, Susan,” said Blue in her window, “but we maimed her a little. I think she’s carryin’ kits; a bit of a shame, really, that we had to shoot her just now. But we can’t just let her roam around and prey on our animals. Maybe she’ll go back over the other side of the mountain now. That’s where we sees most of ‘em when we’re huntin’.”

“Come on, you can get on out, now,” invited James, “she’s gone. But we won’t be lettin’ the pups sleep on the porch any

time soon.” He directed Blue and Robbie to put up their guns and carry the vegetables into the kitchen for Susan, and then he himself opened the passenger side door and took out the box of pups, carrying it in through the front door and into the front room. Susan pulled the truck a little closer to the porch and then rolled up her window and got out, looking once nervously behind her before going inside.

The men had obviously elected to eat in the front room that night, and one of the pans of casserole that she’d made was still sitting half-consumed on the bricks resting among the embers.

“Now, why are you mens getting’ my casserole pan black and ugly on the bottom? Don’t you know any better than that? Who’s goin’ to scrub that charcoal off my pan?” But after her trip, which had been tiring, and her frightening adventure just up the road, she was more than glad to see them.

“Don’t scold, Susan,” laughed Samuel. “Come over and have some supper. We’re sittin’ in here to be a little more comfortable; we haven’t finished yet. Come and get a plate.”

“Pups?” Seth had stretched his neck out to see what was in the box, and his tone was surprised and joyous. “Oh, Susan, thank you! Both girls. Have you named them yet?”

“No, I haven’t. They ain’t mine, and the first time I finds a mess in this house, I give you one guess as to who’s a-gonna be cleanin’ it up; and it ain’t gonna be me. You needn’t thank me, neither; it was James as was so ill-advised.” But she grinned at James, who came over and patted Seth on the shoulder.

“If you don’t know how to train dogs, Seth, then Blue or Samuel can help you.”

“You mean, they’re for me to train?” Seth was delirious with happiness. “Why?” he asked.

“You done a good job on your Oath,” said James quietly.

But Robbie came in just then, and heard the last exchange. He glowered at the box, said, “So now, James, you’re a-keepin’ of pets.” And he flopped down with an unpleasant air on his accustomed couch, picking up his plate again and alternately chewing and glancing back over at the pups with dislike.

James stood up to his full height and surveyed him. “That better have been a reference to the pups, Robbie.”

“What else would I have been talkin’ about?” answered Robbie, satisfied that he had made his point without penalty. “Pups is pups, wherever you finds them.”

James frowned and started to step over towards him, but not wanting to see the evening ruined by Robbie’s ill-humor and James’s necessary rebuke of the same, Susan distracted James by touching him on the arm, and saying,

“James, here’s your message. It come direct from the Indians through my nephew. And here’s a old photo of their man

Lucien, who's up with the Mountain Men Three now, and not up in the mountains downriver anymore. I hope this is some help."

"You done three men's work these two days, Susan. Thank you for this." Distracted for a moment, he looked up at her.

"Did you get your new glasses?"

"I just needed to have my cheaters replaced, James, the ones I was never able to find after last fall. But yes, I did. I thanks you all very much." Susan went over and got a plate and served herself, finding that she was very hungry. She sat down by Blue near where Seth had been sitting, while Seth played with the pups; and then, she ate.

"So, this is that old code you taught me before, Susan, from your family?" asked James.

"Yes, it is," she responded, "do you need me to refresh your mem'ry?"

“No, I figure I got it. The writer here, some Jean-Pierre Brownfeather, just says that Lucien St. Vincent ain’t been back downriver for ten years now. They figured he was dead. If I’ve established contact with him, “please to have him contact his wife and family.” Closing signal, and that’s it. Who’s this in the picture, Susan? Oh, I see, he says on the bottom margin of the scanned copy that it’s—but it can’t be! This ain’t Lucien St. Vincent. Not the one I know.” He touched his jawline.

“Wonder how many men have a name like that?”

“Robbie, come here a second.” Glad to be used for something controversial and serious, Robbie stepped up and joined James in front of the fire, where James was holding the picture close to a kerosene lamp. “When you were in Mountain Men One, did you ever meet up with a man callin’ himself ‘Lucien St. Vincent’? Or other than that, someone like this here in the picture?”

Robbie took the photo from James, and viewed it closely. He held it near to his eyes and peered again. “No, I haven’t,” he answered, slow to guess what was in James’s mind. “But what’s the problem? Is this the man we’re supposed to meet, or ain’t it?”

“Not by what I know. The man I met the first time was blond; remember, I told you. He had those wider cheekbones of Indians, but he was definitely blond. He did sound French. But look here at this man: he really looks like an Indian. He’s got dark, dark hair, the features of a Cherokee or a Sioux, and dark eyes. Not blue eyes. You can tell it even in this bad photo scan. There’s somethin’ wrong.”

“What do you want to do? Do we go ahead and meet him, see what he’s up to? Or just skip it?”

“Well, he’s over just to our East. He’s a little close just to ignore. He only has eight men in his cell, that’s two more than

us, not really bad odds, I guess. But who knows if his men even know what's going on with him? We simply don't know that."

"We don't have to give him the best ammo we got in trade. We could take something he won't really want to trade for, and then maybe he'll just back out. Problem solved. Or we could go ahead and make a good trade, and play it as it lays."

"Yes, but if he's what they used to call 'a danger to the body politic,' we need to be aware, maybe get the Mountain Men One to take him on with us, when and if we're sure he's an impostor. We're set to meet up with him and his quartermaster next Wednesday, at the big walnut tree in the meadow down around where you used to turn off for Emmettsville.

"We'll have to take the good truck with the bigger backend and put the tarp over them, if we want to carry weapons home without being noticed. Let's see what he's got to trade, first. If it's good enough, maybe we can just be practical and tolerate

him for a while, at least until we're sure what's goin' on.

Agreed, or do you have other thoughts?"

Robbie thought. This conferring with his leader was heady, almost the first time that James had included him as an equal in the command decision making. Oh, he had trained the men with various weapons before, cleaned the weapons, traded for ammo with the Mountain Men One, and alone selected supplies, but this was just he and James, planning a strategic move together. He said, "I think it's probably best not to raise his suspicions. If he don't know we're a-watchin' of him, he might make a mistake that gives him away. I think we need to play dumb."

(4)

The next Wednesday, with Robbie driving and James in the passenger seat, they headed off in the direction of Emmettsville. When they got near the rendezvous point, Robbie gestured at the muddy tracks made all across the meadow by trucks, maybe an

odd car or two, and numerous animals. “We don’t want to get stuck up in that mess. Let’s sit up here at the road level, and let them approach us. Maybe they have a different kind of vehicle.”

Ten minutes later, they found out that indeed, Lucien and his quartermaster did have a different kind of vehicle. They came across the meadow making good time in an old army weapons transport van, which had no trouble getting up to the top of the rise where their supposed allies sat awaiting them.

“This is humiliating,” said Robbie. “Look at the size of that thing! Wonder how they afforded that, and where they got it?”

“Don’t let it get to you. We’ll find out something soon enough.”

The van pulled up and stopped, and two men got out to meet them. “Hell-o, *mes amis*. And how are you today?” This was the blond man James had seen once before. He held out a palm

to shake hands as he and his quartermaster approached James and Robbie, who had already met them outside their own truck.

The men took turns shaking hands, and James introduced Robbie. The other man with Lucien, as he called himself, was called Bartolet, which seemed a bad sign to Robbie, not only because of Robbie's incipient xenophobia, but also because of a more logical reason, which he later articulated to James: if 'Lucien' was determined to accomplish something dishonest, it was better, safer, for him to have a fellow Frenchman along, who might be a close comrade of some kind from way back.

Bartolet was an older man of about fifty-five or sixty, short and balding and wearing a red cap that covered the bare top of his head that they only saw because he had a nervous tic of pulling the cap off to scratch his head, and then replacing the cap haphazardly in its former place. Lucien was blond and slight, though muscular, much as James had described him.

The two Frenchmen were so eager to get down to business that they did not seem to have much time for the relay of important information; when asked if they had had any news from the Coast, from such far-flung Mountain Men cells as Five through Eight, Bartolet just shrugged, the genuine Gallic gesture expressing either indifference or the negative. But they were on the other hand keen to hear such news from cells like Mountain Men Four out where Ohio once was; Lucien said something in French inaudibly to Bartolet, and he then commented to James that they might even send one or two of their eight-man cell out to Four to negotiate for further trades.

“What are you goin’ to do for gas? That’s a far piece away,” observed James, watching the two men keenly.

Bartolet looked at Lucien as if not quite sure how far to go with this, but when Lucien nodded, he answered, “Horses, we have; gas, not as much. But we have horses, and wagons.”

“Excuse us just a minute,” spoke up Robbie. He drew James aside and said, “Where are they a-gettin’ all these things? I never even heard tell of Lucien before you mentioned him to me.”

Before the other two men could withdraw from negotiations for new guns, James said to Robbie, “I think I told you. I’ve heard of him before a lot. Lucien, as far as I heard, helped link up the Mountain Men cells in this part of the country; he also ran missions for the other chapters, like the Black Brothers, and a little further South, those Indians, Les Aigles.”

“Less What?”

“Not less, Les. Les Aigles; the eagles. Well, we can either trust him or not.” He waited for a moment.

Robbie debated, and then gave a shrug of his own. “I’ve already written the ammo off our accounts; I guess it won’t hurt to trade with him onct.”

Robbie went around to the truck rear and let down the back of it to show the boxes of different kinds of bullets and shells. Some of them were old and faded boxes full of ammo that had originally come from Government warehouses and been “liberated” by other cells who had men planted inside the warehouse crews. These had been circulated among the chapters and cells by trades and purchases for several years now, though the ammo had been taken care of by James’s respective quartermasters, and was in good condition. The rest of it had been purchased new with the precious tribute money the farmers, shopkeepers, and small manufacturers had given them to allow them to continue to protect the area. Robbie had been proud of his own husbanding of resources since he had come to be James’s quartermaster, but now the amount they had brought for the trade looked like little enough.

The two Frenchmen, though, in their turn flipped back the huge tarp that topped their van and let down the back door, nothing loathe to trade when they saw what James and Robbie had. James and Robbie were filled with an unaccustomed envy when they saw the wide variety of weapons: AR-15's, MK-47's, sniper rifles, even older-style hunting rifles. And many, many boxes of grenades with a grenade launcher or two.

Robbie, as the quartermaster, negotiated with Bartolet for a while over the arms purchases, making sure they got a wide variety of things, and in especial three or four of the AR-15's and MK-47's, which cost them deep in the pocket, not only in ammo, but in actual money.

They wanted to continue to talk to the two other men, to attempt to get a feel for just who the man calling himself "Lucien" was. But it did not work. The minute the trade-cum-purchase was over, the two Frenchmen were eager to depart.

Finally, baldly, James asked Lucien, “Are you both from Les Aigles’ area originally?”

“Ah, no, we meet up in Mountain Men Three, when I am first organizing it with other cells. We have to be gone now, to get back and—but you know, you too will be wanting to get back safely to home base, yes?” And with that, the two men gave them no further conversation, but leapt into their oversized van and roared off, not back across the meadow as they had come, but onto the highway that James and Robbie had arrived by.

“There’s no road that leads to the canton of Mountain Men Three in that direction,” James was puzzled. “That truck won’t go through the woods to the place where the cantons meet. Wonder where they’re off to.”

“Unless I miss my guess, they’re on the way to do more deals,” Robbie answered. “Did you see the weapons they still had inside there? They’re a lot richer than us, and a lot richer

than what I ever heard, or knew about. Well, I inspected the weapons we got as well as I could, and you heard me fire a couple of the pricier ones. We'll just have to check them out with some of the other cells to find out more."

They pulled onto the highway and headed for home, too many questions in their heads to be totally comfortable with the deal they had made, though on the surface of things, it had gone well.

The next week, Robbie sent a message by Seth to his former comrades in Mountain Men One, to see what they knew about Lucien, the Lucien that was now in evidence. He also circulated a description of the photograph to them of the Lucien that Les Aigles had sent, to see if they had ever seen him before, or knew him by another name. Maybe, he thought, it was all just some kind of mix-up.

When he got a return message, he called James into the kitchen after a brief midday meal, and opened the issue with him again.

“So, what does Anders have to say about our man?” queried James, speaking of the leader of the other group.

“Well, for one thing they have known the blond man by sight for ten years. Before that, he seems to have been a bit shy of meeting in person: sending messages, working through lieutenants, being in general evasive, I’d say. But he’s established a presence with them, so they’re inclined to trust him. They have never seen this other man at all, the one I described from the photograph. And they don’t often see the Mountain Men cells Five through Eight from the Coast, so if he did organize those other groups, it may have been the original man who did it. You know, the one in the photo. Maybe this blond one made off with the one from Les Aigles someways,

and is just taking credit for his work. You remember that neither of the two Frenchmen we met with seemed to have any knowledge of the coastal cells. Or didn't want to answer questions about them, anyway. So, what are we gonna do?"

"I'll write a dispatch to the Black Brothers, Les Aigles, and the other Mountain Men cells we know of. And I think I'd prefer for you to take the messages to the drop-off points, rather than Seth. He's a good man, and did well this time with the message, but I'd rather have your authority and experience on the road with this particular message. Luckily, we're hitting Spring now, and the weather's a bit better. Do you want to take Blue with you, or Jared?"

"No, I think I might attract less notice if I went alone, just sort of maybe lookin' like a overgrown courier."

"I don't need to tell you to go well-armed. And watch yourself. The places where we meet up with the coastal cells are

places we haven't been to in at least the last five years, save for the odd message."

"I gotcha."

"How long do you think you'll need?"

"It's almost less a matter of how long I'll need than how much gas I'll need. Are you sure you want me to go to all the coastal cells as well? Couldn't I trust one or two of them to relay the message to the others?"

James, unusually enough, grinned at him. "Well, I have a surprise for you. I'm takin' a page from the book of our two French friends. You're gonna have two horses and a wagon. We've already arranged for Barney Benson's third team for us, from that farm that Susan goes to."

Robbie swore. "Oh, God, no! Not horses! And me, horses and me?"

“You know how to take care of horses and drive a wagon, don’t you?” James insisted.

“I do, but me and animals don’t always see eye-to-eye.”

“Don’t worry. Susan says they’re a very placid team. You shouldn’t have any trouble. You can take some barn supplies with you and pretend to be trading those. We’ve got plenty of them, and they’re less of a theft magnet than guns and ammo, and won’t spoil fast, like produce. And if it turns out that you need to sell or trade anything, we can afford for you to do so. When can you go?”

“This week sometime would probably be best, before our man has a chance to—well, do more of whatever it is that he’s a-doin’.”

They agreed that Robbie would start South, with the dispatches to be delivered to the Black Brothers first, whom they hoped would be able to transmit a copy to Les Aigles as well.

Joking, which was unusual for him, Robbie asked, “I ain’t expected to go runnin’ into that eye doctor’s of Susan’s sayin’ that I needs glasses, am I? We can leave a message further down the line at the Black Brothers’ camp, can’t we?”

The men all laughed at this notion of the sharp-eyed Robbie in glasses, and even Susan smirked a little. He returned to a serious subject the next minute, though.

“But don’t you think I could leave cells Five and Six to get the word to Seven and Eight? Seven and Eight are further North, and we haven’t even had as much contact with them lately as with the other two. They might take it more as a credible threat if it sort of acquired a layer of belief, you might say, from the two we know best.”

James pondered. “See how much time you have, and how well your money and supplies are holdin’ out. And travel as

light as possible. Don't trade for anything too hard to transport, not even to keep up your cover."

Robbie snorted at this. "I'm not an imbecile, James. You can leave the rest of the details to me."

When Robbie pulled the wagon out the day he left South to the Black Brothers and for their cantons, they all came out to see him off, having packed everything everyone could think of that he might need. Truth to tell, though, it was a relief to have him gone for a few weeks, as his presence was often grim and not entirely friendly to the others.

James was quietly hoping that this mission would settle Robbie down for a while and make him more contented with his lot as quartermaster, and that Seth would have a chance to start training his two pups before they got much older. Already, they were contributing mightily to the noise level of the cabin complex with their barkings, whinings, and occasional

scrabblings around the sheds and the barn after mice and other rodents. So far, Seth had only taught them to go outside to relieve themselves, and to shake hands for tidbits, which latter accomplishment while he was there had occasioned much scorn in Robbie.

One day, though, when Seth had the pups in the front room playing with them, Samuel brought an ancient, tattered book out of the chest in his room. “Here, Seth, I want you to have this,” he said. When Seth looked at it, he found that it was an old dog training manual from some monastery or other a long time ago. The covers were both gone, the print was faded, and some of the pages were missing or torn. But had he known it, it had been one of the treasures of Samuel’s collection, which he was passing on now assuming that he himself would have no further use for it.

“Thanks, Samuel,” he said, pushing the pups away as he endeavored to look into the book and they tried to chew on the pages. After he had received this gift, it did not take long for Seth to decide to implement it. He read most of the first part of each day when he was not doing some kind of chore for either Susan or his fellows; in the afternoons before it got dark, he took the dogs outside on the back porch and trained them to sit, heel, speak, and other such minor tricks. But finally, Samuel himself had to take a hand, and to tell the soft-hearted Seth that that was not all the dogs needed to do. They needed to learn to attack and hold as well, which was not in the book; it had after all been mainly intended for family pets, a long time ago. Real guard dogs needed other training.

As patient with Seth as with the pups themselves, Samuel taught Seth to give commands, and the dogs to jump up and grab and hold a man’s arm, to lunge for the neck and hold there

without puncturing the skin, and other such maneuvers. The dogs as well as Seth seemed to regard this as great fun, since they were taking their attitudes from Seth himself, who was still in some ways a playful boy. But even Blue and Jared, who sometimes agreed to be the targets of such practice attacks, warned Seth that it had to be taken seriously, because someone's life, either one of theirs or those of the animals in Seth's care, might be at stake. Samuel, for his part, was also devoutly thankful that they showed no disposition to chase chickens or harass the other animals in the barn, but that the runt, whom Seth had named Tabitha, had caught a raccoon trying to steal eggs, and had killed it. They noticed it when they entered the barn and found three broken eggs, and then saw her and her litter mate, Tildie, playing keep-away with the dead raccoon and dragging it all over the yard, until it was taken away from them. All in all, it was a more peaceful time with Robbie gone for a

while, though as Susan said to Seth and Samuel one day when they came into the kitchen from the back porch where they had been with the dogs,

“I don’t know which is a-leavin’ all the mud on my kitchen floor the most, you mens or them blamed dogs. But either they can lick it up, or you two can mop it up. I’ve been busy all mornin’, and I ain’t a-doin’ it. And you, boy, Seth, don’t keep a-leavin’ your rifle in the corner. Somebody goin’ to knock it down, and it goin’ to go off.” With this, she supplied a bucket full of soapy water and two mops, and Seth and Samuel were relegated to the kitchen for the next hour.

One day after about three weeks, when all of them were out on recon in various directions but Susan and the dogs, she thought she heard a noise from the road, possibly a car or truck. Then, she heard an animal noise indistinctly, also from the road. She went up on the back porch and looked down the way, her

regular glasses on her nose from where she had found them earlier, in a dishpan. There was no one there. She looked and looked, but could not see anything, and did not want to go off and leave the cherry pies she was making, as they were almost ready to be taken out. She sighed. A wood-burning oven just was not as even-tempered as a good electric oven from the old days.

After about five more minutes, she heard the dogs yelping and making a fuss, but it stopped just as she was about to take the pies out, so she went ahead with that, and then stepped to the door again. She did not see the dogs anywhere, but now the second shed had a shut and bolted door. The dogs were still whining, but not barking now, and she almost came away from the door before she saw what she saw.

In what would have been a comic sight if it had not been so sinister, she saw Robbie in front, rifle held up ready to shoot,

approaching the shed. Directly behind him were two other men, also armed, one with a rifle and one with a handgun. She started to call out to the group, but then she noticed that Robbie did not seem to know they were behind him at all. And in the next moment, just before Robbie reached the shed where the dogs were barking furiously now, the two other men both aimed at him; one of them was a slim, blondish man, and the other was an older man, short, with a red cap on. The man with the pistol held it out in both hands, aiming apparently for Robbie's head, while the man in the red cap knelt swiftly on one knee and took aim at Robbie's chest area.

“Oh, God, please that boy done left his gun here again,” she breathed, looking in the alcove just at the back door. Sure enough, she saw Seth's hunting rifle there. Grabbing it and stepping within seconds out the back door, she took aim at the two men and fired swiftly, one shot after the other, hoping at the

very least to scare them away or distract them from the man they were stalking as their prey. Her luck was even truer, however: both men fell almost simultaneously and remained still.

At the sound of the shots, Robbie whirled around and saw her just taking down the rifle from her shoulder. He was enraged. "What you think you're a-doin' shootin' at me, you ol' black bitch? I'll beat you within an inch of your life! I'll shoot you dead!"

Just as angrily, and feeling a rush of odd hostility from her relief as well, she yelled back, "What I'm a-doin' is savin' your stinkin' white ass, you damn asshole, you! Look behind you!"

He whirled around. In shock, he went back to the two dead men and looked down at them. After prodding each of them a few times with a toe, he picked them up by their hands one at a time and dragged them into the first shed, leaving it open. Then, he scuffed up the road where the bloodstains had been, and went

on back out the way he had come in. Shortly, he called out to her, "I'll be back in a minute."

In about five minutes, he came back into the dirt lot in front of the cabin, leading the team of horses and the wagon. Susan noticed critically that one of the horses appeared to have fetched up lame at some point. She watched silently as Robbie went into the first shed and got a hoof pick. Then, he seemed to be digging some rock or pebble out of the horse's front hoof. The horse snorted and started to rear up, but the next moment came back down to earth and nuzzled Robbie's shoulder. When he was done with the pick, Robbie rolled out two of the big barrels of water from the side of the shed where they had been left to gather rainwater and melted snow, and hitching the horses to the front porch posts now, left them to drink.

But seemingly not satisfied with something, he traced his steps back to a point up the road beyond where Susan could see

him. She waited for a minute, but he did not reappear. Then, however, she smelled her last pies getting too done in the crust, so she stopped watching for Robbie and instead brought the pies out and set them to cool. She figured to herself that whatever had happened with Robbie, she would hear about it soon enough.

It turned out it had to wait the rest of the afternoon until the others got back, however. It was nearly dusk when they arrived. She told James about what had happened as she knew it when the men were inside again, getting hot coffee and—even though the pies had been intended for dessert for supper—helping themselves to pie to go along with it.

Robbie still was not back yet, so James and Blue went out to the first shed with a lamp, and opening the door there, they surveyed the two corpses. “These are the two Frenchmen, Blue. That one there is the one that called himself ‘Lucien,’ and the

other is called 'Bartolet.' I think they must've been all set up by findin' out somehow that Robbie was checkin' on 'em. I wonder if the rest of Mountain Men Three is goin' to be layin' for us."

"But how did they get here?" asked Blue. "We came back on the road half of the way back, not through the woods, and the only tracks we saw looked like Robbie's wagon. They must've been really spooked if they tried to kill him just on a second-hand report."

When they went back in, Jared heard the story, and asked, "Susan, why did you have the dogs locked up? They ain't much count yet, but they do know how to make a racket when a stranger comes along. Don't you remember what they did when that peddler come by a few weeks back? A right ruckus." He was looking concerned.

“I didn’t have them locked up. They was a-roamin’ around in the yard sniffin’ after things when I started making the pies. Then, I didn’t realize it, but I don’t guess I heard them anymore, ‘cept for a yelp or two a little later. Seth, you better go out and see if they’re all right. They barked a lot when I was gettin’ ready to shoot, but I confess after Robbie left again, I was shy of goin’ out in the yard before somebody come back.”

When Seth came back in, he said, worry in his voice, “Somebody lured them into the shed with beef scraps. It was blood on the floor from it; it smelled like beef, anyways. I guess we’re lucky it wasn’t poisoned. It must’ve been easy enough to lock the door onct they was in there.”

James had been listening to all of this, but he did not say much except to Samuel, and that in conversation inaudible to the rest of them. After a few minutes, he said “Seth, put up the horses, and make sure they’re curried and fed. And probably

some more water.” When Seth was gone on out again, James added, “That should give him something to do other than bein’ anxious about the dogs. I guess they’re not as foolproof a system as we thought.”

When Robbie got back, he gave them a brief account of where he had been: earlier, before Susan had shot, he had been sneaking up on the shed because he had seen footprints coming out of the woods up the road, and had heard the dogs confined in the shed. On his second time out, he had not found any tracks further up the road, however, but had trailed the two men’s footprints through the woods to a point where there was a creek, and they had stopped there; their tracks did not appear on the opposite bank, so they had started somewhere upstream and walked in the stream in the time-honored way of losing trackers. Robbie looked as subdued as they all felt. Susan thought the best thing for it was to get supper into them, so she hurried her

supper plans along and served them pork chops and some vegetables. When they had heard grace from Samuel, James said to Robbie, “So, I understand Susan saved your life today.”

Robbie flushed. “Yes, she did.” He paused, then gave Susan a direct glance, for a change. “Thank you. I sort of misinterpreted you when I saw you aimin’ my way.”

“If that’s an apology, you kep’ it back long enough.”

“Well, it is an apology.”

“Don’t seem much like it. Why would you think I was a-shootin’ at you? Don’t you think I knows which side I’m on?”

“Yeah. Sorry.” Robbie mumbled. “I guess I owe you one.”

She made a slight sound of contempt, but said no more.

The next morning, James called them all into the front room around the fire; it had gotten cold again, and they had warmer clothes on than in the two or three weeks before, when things had thawed a bit and Robbie had been travelling. “We’re going

to have to be very cautious,” James said. “We can’t afford to let anyone from any cell or chapter get a whiff of the news that we shot those two men.”

“I shot ‘em,” Susan said.

“I’m the leader of your cell,” he retorted firmly, “and it might as well have been me, or any one of us. Blue, you and Robbie go out today with me, and we’ll dig deep graves down in the ground, and cover them up and disguise them well with underbrush and leaves. Not only don’t we want them being found, but we don’t want predators and scavengers a-draggin’ them out to be found. I’m bein’ explicit: don’t tell anyone. Try not even to discuss it too much with each other, and if anyone else would ast you if you seen them, you didn’t. None of us did, after all. Only Robbie and me knows what they actually looked like alive, and we can lie. Are we clear?” They all nodded, and took mental note of how serious James was.

He continued. “It’s a desperate business when cell or chapter turns against cell or chapter, and we don’t want to start a war, or even a battle. Chances are, I figure now, that a lot of men didn’t know but what this Lucien was the real one, and they may have been dealin’ with him and Bartolet for years. Why should they believe us? I feel the truth will out, eventually, but we will just have to sit tight, and keep our own counsel.”

James instructed Blue privately to keep the men busy for the rest of the day with anything at all, and Blue did his best. That evening after everyone else was finished with supper and back in the front room, Robbie asked James to come into the kitchen with him a few minutes. They sat down at the table, and James said, “What’s goin’ on, Robbie? Need to say something?”

Susan was finished with her kitchen chores, so she said almost to herself, “I can go in the other room.”

“No,” Robbie added hastily. “It’s all right. You...you might have somethin’ to say.”

She was surprised, but she acted more surprised than she felt. “Well, will wonders never cease! Now what would I have to say about men’s business?” But she pulled out a chair and sat at the table with them.

“Cut it out.” Robbie looked down at his hands, then back up. “So, here’s the thing. There was somethin’ sort of funny about this weapons deal to begin with. I couldn’t quite lay my finger on it at the time when we went to meet with those two dead men—leastways, the ones that are dead now—but why should they need so much more ammunition and have so many guns? It occurred to me more than once that it wasn’t goin’ to do us a lot of good to have a whole bunch of weapons if we ain’t got any ammo. You know we have to train sparce sometimes so as not to use too much of it up.

“Well, I was careful what I said about Lucien to the cells on the Coast, because I didn’t know them well, but with the Mountain Men One, I was able to be a little freer. They also had gotten a big pile of new weapons, or at least weapons that seemed to be new or in good shape, but just like us, they had to give up a sizeable amount of ammo for it. And they’re one of our main sources of ammunition, so that didn’t sound good. And nobody can figure out up there just exactly where Lucien So-Called was a-gettin’ all the weapons.”

“Your point?” asked James, his expression intent.

“Well, if we don’t have nothin’ to fire with, it’s no use havin’ weapons. What are we goin’ to do with them, beat men over their heads with them until they’re dead?”

James paused and moved his hand in a gesture that seemed to mean, “continue.”

“Then, today, I was lookin’ at some of the weapons. Just a few of them were like this, mind, but a few may be enough to form a sort of conclusion. They come to us all nice and bright and shiny, and new-lookin’, for sure. But a lot of them are really older weapons. Don’t mean they’re obsolete, but they were so polished up, and all. And then, I noticed one of them had somethin’ scratched on its ammo carriage, underneath: it just looked like a meaningless scratch at first, but I put more polish directly on it, and rubbed and rubbed. All of a sudden, I could tell there was a name on there: ‘Matt N.’ I had to check it close to be sure, but someone’s name had been scratched over so that you couldn’t see it. I checked weapon after weapon, and found several more like that. Then, in some of them I could see little tiny holes where little metal tags of some kind had been mounted at one point. And I swear, I thought, ‘Some men have enough money to put real name tags on their weapons.’”

“James”—he paused—“Susan, I think we’re dealin’ with stolen weapons here. Now, this was mostly true of the older guns, and not so much of the AR’s and MK’s, which would be expensive for individual men outside a cell or chapter to own by themselves. But we’ve heard tell before now of thefts of farmers’ and store owners’ guns from their own cabinets when they were away from home, and even two of them when they were asleep at night. And who knows where the bigger guns came from. Bought, stolen, traded for? Who knows? But why was them two men stockpilin’ so many more weapons than most cells seem to have? They only have eight men in their cell—well, six now, like us. Chances are, they’ll be meanin’ to replace the other two once they figure they’re dead or missin’.

After all, Lucien was their leader, and Bartolet was their quartermaster. If I'd been more senior in Mountain Men One when I was there, I mighta knowed them, but I wasn't no

quartermaster then."

Susan and James considered the things Robbie had said.

Then, James said, "There's one major thing to our advantage. I thought of it just this mornin'. It was a bit unusual for me to take out the first time and go and meet Lucien on my own; usually, I just send my quartermaster and a helper. Same probably for most cells: weapons and supplies are the job of the quartermaster, and sometimes another man. But yet, when they came out to make the trade, not only was their quartermaster there, but their leader as well. That's not usual, even if I did it onct. That may mean that they weren't trustin' or confidin' in the others in their cell. It may have been just a two-man scheme that the other six were not in on."

Susan pondered this. "Yeah, I see that. But wonder what the others felt when the two of them kep' bringin' weapons in all the time? If they weren't a-plannin' to start some big offensive

somewhere, what do you think the others made of all the guns and ammunition?”

“They just might have been told some big lie,” answered James. “And you know how proud we would be, too, if we had so much firepower. Proud men can be blind, sometimes. Anyways, what happened when you circled around down to the South at Piedmont, before goin’ up North?”

“The Black Brothers took my warning and said they’d be in touch again with Les Aigles about their missing man, and would tell them about the new Lucien, and about the man callin’ himself Bartolet. I gave as full a description as I could, but the Black Brothers themselves haven’t seen the two of them that they know of, though we naturally don’t have a picture of the new Lucien to show. And of course, even there, I had to be careful what I said, not knowin’ for sure where them two came from, or who might have been dealin’ with them.

“Oh, and I did manage to trade some of those barn supplies and tools, a few, for some more ammo while I was up with Cell One. It’s not much, but at least we don’t have to feel quite so strapped for ammunition as we were after that French trade.”

The Spring was upon them, and with warmer weather came a better time fully to train Seth in recon and tactical maneuvers.

While James and the others all took their turns with this, going out in groups of three or four and instituting minor war games, they preserved such ammo as they could, and taught him more as a scout at first. He and Samuel in their turn worked with the dogs out in the woods, teaching them to seek out friends and alert them when something was happening around the camp.

Tabitha had a habit of scaring up game and treating it as enemy combatants, but she was at least fairly quiet about it, whereas Tildie had to be trained again and again to be still in the woods when a human scout who was trying to remain unseen by other

humans was there to be contacted. Finally, though, Samuel pronounced them as ready as they were likely to be, and James thought Seth also ready, and the men all prepared to try their first contact in a long time with a Government troop of operatives, who had issued a call for help to all the chapters they knew of.

(5)

Robbie was having a hard time of things. He had always respected both Samuel and James and treated them with deference, but he was just as full of himself as he could well be when messages and reports from the other Mountain Men cells and the other chapters started coming in, in response to his earlier winter trip around. They were not at all about the two dead men and their tradings, but because he had been the last man in contact with the other cells, and the quartermaster, they sometimes even met him on recons and recognized him in

preference to asking to speak to James. This did not unnerve James, but he felt that he and Blue needed to get around and establish some ground rules for rendezvous and message channels, and Robbie was becoming a bit resentful, because he had valued becoming more important to his cell, and chafed under such directives as forced him to spend more time with the junior members of the cell, such as Seth and even his friend Jared, and also with Samuel.

In particular, Robbie had started to resent Samuel; Samuel always had a lesson, or a saying, or a story, or some example to give for most every difference of opinion or decision-making procedure that occurred, and while the others found this enlightening, charming even, Robbie often muttered to himself when he thought no one could hear him about “damned ol’ women and windbags,” and “blasted storytellers and preachers.” And as in these days Samuel was both starting to feel his own

age more and was full of appreciation for an especially close relationship with his latest pupil, Seth, whom Robbie did not particularly like, things had become quite difficult. In place of resenting Susan, whom he was now on better terms with, these days he resented Samuel, and since Robbie was not the tactful sort, it was a matter quite clear to Samuel, too.

James had reprimanded him again and again for disrespect to the Elder, once even relieving him of duty and sending him on an extended leave into the woods for a week to live by his wits, an extreme form of punishment that James did not often put forward. And once, Robbie had come to grips with Blue, who was having a private command conference with Samuel and who had not been receptive to inviting Robbie into it. That time, Blue had simply taken matters into his own hands and given Robbie a good beating, which James did not really approve of, but since he had been away rendezvousing with a

far-flung, solitary, and important representative of Mountain Men Four from farther West at the time, he had had no means of preventing it. That made the second time that Blue had given Robbie corporal punishment, but Robbie had resented that method less, as being more his own kind of language, than he did the extended leave, which he did not at all resent James for, but in fact laid at Samuel's door as the cause of it all.

The meeting with the Government operatives' troop was set to take place midway between the canton woods of Mountain Men Two, their own camp area, and the canton woods of Mountain Men Three, to the South in the Black Brothers Ten canton. Though they tried not to show it, the men were a bit anxious because they were trying to anticipate whether or not the six to eight men from Mountain Men Three would suspect them at all of having any connection with the disappearance of Lucien and Bartolet. An inquiry about their whereabouts had

made the rounds, but James had sent word back by Jared that they had not seen the two men since their meeting to trade at Emmetsville. This was all that they knew about any inquiries that might be getting made, and they were not sure that one of the other cells had not mentioned their previous message about the original Lucien to anyone at the Mountain Men Three cell. But the main concern now was the rendezvous with the Government representatives, who had sent a critical message asking for their help, and notifying them that an offensive from farther South, South even of Les Aigles's cantons, was forthcoming.

James got them together for a briefing after lunch one day, complete with some newer maps that had been sent by the Government scouts to the extreme edge of the canton where Seth had met them. They did not want the Government troops to know exactly where in the canton they were centered, and this

had been Seth's first solo mission. He came back jubilant, the dogs dancing around him as he eagerly relayed the locations concerned to James and Blue, and gave them the dispatches and the maps. He was beginning to feel at last like a member of the cell, and was cheerful with everyone, even when Robbie rebuked him for his giddiness.

“It seems,” said James, when all of them including Susan were there seated in the room, “that two of the older-style militias, the National Front and South-of-Center Boys, are joinin’ together to extend their mutual territories into the area just South of us and between the Black Brothers’ cantons and Les Aigles’ cantons. They’re dangerous, according to the Government, and hope to take over the Capitol as they come through it. How the Government knows all this, I guess, is through secret operatives in those old militias themselves. To read the dispatches about the matter, they want to take over the

whole Eastern half of the old country and the Government, and of course, that's what we've been preparin' to prevent. In other years, the cells and chapters we know have repelled them from these areas above the Capitol, but it's been a good seven years since that's happened. At that time, most people up in this area of the country didn't really know of them, because we from the Northern cells and chapters had travelled to the extreme southern reaches of the Black Brothers' and Les Aigles' cantons and helped fight them off there. But as soon as they had been sent scurryin' in disorder, we circulated news of them to every township and farming area we could, and word has spread since then. There've probably also been a few computer networks still in operation, but we can't count on that. Some of the more southern chapters and cells are already sendin' out vehicles, riders, and quick runners to take the word around again, and if Seth and Jared are willin', we'll send them around up here.

Maybe instead of keepin' those two horses and wagon on loan, we should send Barney a permanent payment. Be sure, men, not to be bringin' back any intruders on your trail, not even Government men. We have to be sensible about who we trust these days, and 'once bitten twice shy' should be your motto; don't get bitten in the first place, though."

Seth looked confused, and asked, "But why ain't they more computers? Can't Susan, or me, or Jared, go to that eye doctor's and send some messages? How come they ain't more computers runnin'?"

Susan was sitting by him, and patted his arm. "Oh, Seth! Honey, when I was young, computers was all over the world, in almost every business, most homes, all like that. But don't forgit, electric grids are mostly down in lots of places, the more in small towns." She hesitated, then asked, "You ain't havin' doubts about doin' this, are you?"

Seth rejected this notion with indignation. “Of course not! I just was a-tryin’ to think of the quickest way to get the word around. I’ll go anywheres for all of you.”

“Good man,” James said. He continued the briefing.

“Remember, the Government men are in a tight spot, so they need us right now. But in past times, they’ve used us when they needed us, and then discarded us—and our expectations—when they was done with us. Or worse, tried to arrest, detain, or infiltrate us. Stick with your own friends, try not to be too trustin’, and come on back in out of the rain when it’s time to get dry again.”

There would be many more shorter briefings as things in their canton and the nearby cantons developed, but this first conference with all of them there was the most essential one, the basic facts of which James or Blue sometimes repeated.

One at first smaller discussion that started out when James and Blue were still there ended up by ballooning up into a huge argument between Samuel and Robbie when James and Blue had left. It seemed to be purely and solely an ego-driven dispute as far as Robbie was concerned, with Samuel speaking to him diligently and gently, and trying to make him see reason.

It had started when James and Blue were both requested at a preliminary meeting of all the eight cells of the Mountain Men, from the West to the Coast, intended to take place in the canton of Mountain Men Cell Five. They accepted the invitation, but asked that Susan arm as well as the remaining four men they left behind them, so as not to leave the cabin complex badly protected; after all, she was younger than Samuel, and had proved her worth time after time. Robbie, they asked to be readying such guns and ammo as they would take with them in the wagon—figuring to leave the trucks behind so as not to

experience an inconvenient gasoline shortage anywhere—and they left Samuel in charge. Robbie argued about this point vociferously when it was stated as what was going to happen.

“I think you told me before,” Robbie said to Samuel, “that bein’ a Elder wasn’t the same as bein’ a leader. You said that when I myself said that you were the real leader. Why is it now that I, as quartermaster, and still younger and stronger, can’t lead the cell while James and Blue are gone? It don’t make sense.”

Samuel replied, mild in his manner so as not to enrage Robbie further, “You’ll have to ask James that.”

James too tried to be patient. “We need our quartermaster doin’ his own job, Robbie. Samuel may be the oldest here, but he’s a seasoned warrior, and he can handle all the command decisions. Command decisions don’t take muscle, after all. But

I reckon he has enough of that too, for his age. Just be patient; someday, you'll have your own command, most probably."

"Most probably." Robbie was sarcastic in his tone.

James glared at him. "Are you a-mockin' me?"

"No, sir," responded Robbie, with just that tad too much deference that said he was indeed being a smart-aleck and had other opinions.

James walked over to face him, but just in time, Robbie turned his eyes down to the floor and stood with them lowered until James walked back over to where Blue and Susan were standing looking down on some maps of the area the two men would be going to along the coastal region. "Let's hear less of it," James instructed Robbie over his shoulder, and that was apparently all of the discussion.

But two days before James and Blue got back from their trip to the Coast, something happened which could no longer be ignored.

All five of them, Susan and the four remaining men, were out in the canton woods watching a Government camp that had suddenly appeared on the very edge of their canton to the West, on the halfway boundary between where Ohio had once verged on Pennsylvania. They were far out of the center of their own canton, but they had not met up with any men from Cell Four yet, even though those men had been supposed to be making their way northeast to meet up with the other Mountain Men cells that were meeting just around north of Piedmont on the Coast. They surmised that those men must have already been all gone and present at the preliminary conference with the other cells of the Mountain Men there, and so did not worry about it overmuch.

They had kept the dogs back with muzzles and their leashes pegged down to prevent barking, and Seth had been sent as a scout to discover who was causing the drifting smoke rising from a couple of campfires deeper in the woods to the West. He was gone a long time, but finally he came back with the news that the conversation he had listened to had been conducted in normal tones of voice, as if the men were not aware of anyone around them, and were not afraid of being overheard. He repeated for Samuel and also for the others word-for-word as far as he could recall what the men had said, which seemed to be a rapt discussion about which road to take, and which Mountain Men groups were favored for the work. It seemed that the men had clipped accents, Northern-sounding but without noticeable dialect to his ears, and they had decided in favor of Mountain Men Three as the group likely to have the most armaments.

The manner by which they knew that, he didn't at first know,

but then they started making prejudicial comments about Mountain Men groups and how they all seemed to be thieves from Government facilities, which accusation took the cell members aback.

“That’s what we get for trading with them and their stolen goods,” said Samuel, not angrily but reflectively. “We all get tarred with the same brush.”

“We need to get a look at them,” prompted Robbie. “How many campfires did you say there was?”

Seth answered, “Just two. And they were on opposite sides of the same clearing. But they weren’t a-keepin’ their voices down; they didn’t seem to think there was a body around but them.”

“Let me go and look at them,” said Robbie, persisting. “I’m good with faces. I’ll know later if any of them tries to pass themselves off as Mountain Men, whatever cell they’re in.”

Samuel thought about this. He said, “No. Let’s leave Jared here with the camp, and the other four of us goes in, in a close and quiet circle. Thataways, we’ll most of us get a good look at them. Seth, you lead us up to the point where you first seen the smoke, and then fall back in between the rest of us and our camp a bit. I’ll go in closest; I still got good eyesight and since I been in this a while, I might reconnize some of them men from other times seven years ago.”

“But I’m bigger and stronger and just as smart, and I’m the quartermaster, too,” insisted Robbie with anger, far more anger than was appropriate to the decision. “I should go first. If I gets to talk to them, I can explain how it was with the Frenchmen.”

“No.” Samuel was adamant. “On no account is anyone to mention them two scoundrels to them. Likely, they wouldn’t believe us, and besides, James forbade it.”

“James forbade, James forbade. James would forbid his own mother to give him titty milk if it made him look big.”

“Disrespect ain’t gettin’ you nowhere. Has it occurred to you yet that they may have some other way of knowin’ that Mountain Men Three has more armaments than the rest of us? It don’t have to be infiltration into the cell. It could be that the Government is secretly armin’ the cell for some reason of their own. Or maybe them two Frenchmen was really Government agents. What if they’re promotin’ instability in the North because they’re really with the two Southern groups they’re a-tryin’ to set us against? There are too many ‘what ifs’. Now, like I said, onct we get close, I goes in closer first. The rest of you, observe my barrier and circle ‘round. Seth, after you lead there, you get back towards where Jared will be at our camp. We don’t got much time now before dark. We don’t want to be

out stumblin' through the woods in the dark, and maybe makin' some noise. So, let's go, now."

As he turned to follow Seth forward, he heard Robbie saying, "Goddamned ol' bastard! We would be better without such a goddamned fussy ol' windbag."

"That's a matter of opinion." This was said calmly as he went on forward. The others were not happy with Robbie, but they ignored him and they went in the order Samuel had suggested.

As Robbie left camp, Jared shook his head at him, then turned to put together a cold meal, so that they would not have to burn a campfire or suddenly douse it if the men should move unpredictably and rapidly towards them later. As Robbie was leaving, he saw Seth's bow and arrows lying there, with which Seth had intended to do some hunting for them. Robbie looked at this symbol of Seth's abilities with hatred, then turning back

to see if Jared saw him or not, picked the bow and a few arrows up and took them with him. He at first intended just to break them over one knee and throw them away as he walked, but the wood was too strong in the bow, and after breaking one or two arrows just to wound Samuel's star pupil, he gave it up and went on, the bow and an arrow still held absently in one hand. He whacked at the underbrush with them some, then heard a quiet progress towards him as someone came along just ahead. He ducked behind a tree and looked. It was Seth, following Samuel's instruction and falling back. Robbie smiled and kept out of sight, while Seth passed to one side, unaware of him. A couple of minutes later, as Robbie made his way forward again, he heard a smothered exclamation of dismay from behind him. Obviously, Seth had found a broken arrow or two. Robbie went on ahead, intent on seeing the Government men for himself now that he had gotten even with Seth. Within another minute or

two, he had totally forgotten about Seth, and was watching the scene unfold in front of him in a patch of trees up ahead.

Though he could not see the Government men well, and was really unable to hear them as he had wanted especially to do, he saw Samuel to one side just about fifteen yards in front of him, and to the right of him at the same distance, Susan, her gun held ready in case of emergencies. The more he stood there, hampered by his distance from things and getting more and more frustrated by the moment, the more he wished that Samuel were dead and gone, or at least sitting back in the cabin by the fire, a really retired force and no longer active.

Not giving it much more thought beyond that, that he wanted to be rid of Samuel, he then became aware of still having Seth's bow and one arrow in his hand. If he shot now, it would look like Seth had done it. Nobody surely would believe that a quartermaster would shoot one of his own men. Aiming as

carefully as he could, he raised the bow. He lowered it then; he had not shot a bow in fifteen years. After a moment, he raised it again, steadying the bow against the tree trunk to balance his shot.

Meanwhile, Seth had traced the path of broken arrows all the way back to camp, and had shown them quickly to Jared, who was as puzzled as he was, but told him that Robbie had just left a little while before, after the argument with Samuel was over. Seth was angry now, too, and ran forward, remembering at the last moment to take his rifle with him in case the Government men caught any of them in the woods and shot before asking questions. He made his way swiftly through the woods, and came upon the scene behind Robbie, just as Robbie was taking final aim at Samuel.

Poking his head around the tree in front of him to see what Robbie was aiming at with *his* bow and arrow, Seth felt himself

stiffen in disbelief. His expression grew livid with horror and anger, and for the first time, hatred. Robbie was trying to kill Samuel! And in the middle of the mission, with the rest of them all possibly compromised, too! Trying not to think of the two men who had tracked Robbie before, or any other standard of justice other than preventing Robbie from killing Samuel, ignoring the Government camp now entirely, Seth raised his gun at Robbie's back. At the last minute, just as Robbie released the arrow, Seth fired the gun, the new rifle jerking up in a manner he was not accustomed to.

Robbie gave one short outcry just as the thunk! of the arrow hit home in Samuel's forearm, and Samuel gave a low, deep groan. Robbie and he both became quiet in the next minute, Robbie rocking back and forth in the underbrush and holding his shoulder where Seth's bullet had hit him, trying not to make any other noise.

As Seth made his way quickly and quietly towards Samuel to make sure he wasn't too bad, the Government camp became very still. They heard one voice say, as was more or less to be expected, "What was that noise?"

Another answered, "A bird, part of it. Or maybe an animal. And then, I think, a hunter deep down away in the woods. We should build up the fires before dark. Who wants to patrol the perimeter this time?" Seth waited. They all waited. An armed Government man headed for the boundary around the camp and peered into the woods, but he obviously wasn't keen on stepping into them, and once he had walked around the perimeter twice, he went back and sat down, satisfied. "It was just something in the woods. I guess the hunter went after it."

"I know it was something in the woods," another voice responded. "What it was is the question."

“Don’t worry about it. We haven’t met anybody for two days, now. It was just an animal taking another animal, and a shot far away, you can bet on it.”

The cell members breathed easier. Seth continued his path forward in the now dusky woods, being as still as he could. When he passed by Robbie, Robbie reached out and grabbed his ankle as if to bring him down, but about that time, Susan got to them from the other direction. She did not seem entirely to understand the situation she saw in front of her, but she prodded Robbie’s other arm with the butt-end of her gun, and he loosened his grip on Seth’s ankle. Seth kicked at his hand and continued to make his way forward towards Samuel, where he could just barely be seen in the darkness sitting up against a tree, with the arrow still sticking out of his forearm.

“This is bad,” he whispered to Seth when the younger man reached him. “Why did you shoot me, Seth? You were supposed to be back nearer camp. Why did you shoot me?”

“I didn’t, Robbie did. When I fell back, I saw a lot of my arrows broken along the way. He had my bow and one arrow left, and when I came up behind him to find out why he had done it, he was a-aimin’ at you. So, I shot him, so’s to keep him from killin’ you.” Seth’s voice sounded tearful.

“Shh, don’t make a fuss. Keep your voice down. We’ve all got to get back to camp and get outta here, before they change their minds and decide it wasn’t just ‘a hunter miles away’ that fired that shot. I don’t know, I guess the sound is distorted here; that, and they’re a bunch of blamed fools. Did you hit Robbie? Can he walk?”

“I hit him in the shoulder. Susan is back with him. Can you lean on me and get up?”

“Well, this arrow may be ornamental stuck here in my forearm thisaway, but it sure does hurt. He probably didn’t intend to kill me, just to put me out of commission so’s that he could take over while James and Blue are gone. But he ain’t been particularly respectful to them lately, either. I don’t know just what will satisfy him sometimes. C’mon, we got to go. Can you step true without bangin’ us into so many things that we makes a big racket? I guess Susan will have to help Robbie.”

With slow, careful steps, they made their way back to the camp, where Jared was waiting anxiously. He said, “I wasn’t sure, but I thought I heard a shot. And then—my God, what happened to you four?”

Susan said in a weary tone, “It ain’t enough that other peoples is goin’ to be aimin’ at us, these two numbskulls are aimin’ at us themselves. I’ll tell you later.” She shrugged the weight of Robbie, who had been leaning on her shoulder, off

onto a foldable campstool and left him sitting there. More gently, Seth deposited Samuel on another campstool and got him some water. It was not easy to see each other's faces in the near darkness, but Jared had a kerosene lamp lit, and in that light, it was impossible to judge one person's conscience from another; they all looked equally culpable for something, to Jared's way of reading it. He offered them the cold meal, but after handing the water canteen across to Robbie, who looked at him strangely before taking it, Samuel said, "No. We don't have time for it right now. Wrap it up and we can take it with us. We've got to get out of these men's way before they catch up with us, if this is the way they're a-comin'. You know how to pack a shoulder wound, don't you, Susan?"

"I do," she affirmed. "I ain't had to do it for a while, back about ten years, but I reckon I can still do it. We's lucky we brought the bandagin' material with us." She seemed to be too

tired even to offer much of a bitter message to Robbie for shooting her old friend, Samuel. “Get your sorry, ornery ass over here, white boy, and let me pack your shoulder,” was all she said to him. “We’ll have to be takin’ you in to get the bullet dug out when we gets back. I guess the vet remembers how to do that. He’s been doin’ stuff like that for years now.”

Before she started on him, though, she took a look at Samuel’s arm. The arrow was stuck in at an angle, and did not go too deep, but she did not want to pull it out, which might cause a greater loss of blood. She thought a moment, and asked Jared, “Does you have them wood shears for cuttin’ firewood and brush with you?”

“I think so. I didn’t bring them a-purpose, they may just be in my tool bag.” He rummaged around inside the bag for a minute, and then pulled them out.

“Okay, Robbie, the price of sin is havin’ to wait your turn. Now, Samuel, I’m a-gonna just cut away the part of the arrow that’s stickin’ out nice and close with the shears, so’s you don’t bump it into anything in the dark and drive it in deeper. I’ll try not to move it. Sit still, now. Close your eyes, if you wants to.”

Within a few seconds, they heard a sharp snap, and the arrow was cut off even with Samuel’s forearm. “We’re a-gonna have to get you two to the vet quick before infection sets in, on both of you’s accounts. Jared, you can disinfect this arm here some, can’t you, and put a bandage around it while I does the same and packs Mr. Hitler’s shoulder wound here?”

Jared assured her that he knew how, and while Seth packed up their cold meal in small individual packs for convenience, she and Jared finished attending to the two wounded men. The wounded two sat passing the canteen between them, almost as if nothing had happened to alienate them one from the other.

Puzzled, Seth looked at them and said to Susan under his breath, “They don’t seem mad at each other, do they?”

She laughed at him briefly, said “They’re in shock,” and then started breaking camp with Jared.

It wasn’t easy to get to a resting spot that was sufficiently far away from the Government camp that Samuel felt it would be safe for the night, and the uninjured three were carrying most of the equipment and were aware that the other two were tired and flagging, and probably getting a little feverish; Samuel’s insistence, however, kept them stumbling for at least two hours along the wooded path and then to the connecting gravel one that led back onto the larger road going East. Once there, they ducked into a small thicket of trees and made up their camp again, but without fire this time, making sure that the two invalids were warmly wrapped up for the night; Jared and Seth volunteered some of their own bedding for the purpose.

They were able to get a long ride further East the next morning, from a sympathetic farmer who had a cart, and after that from a peddler who had by chance visited them before. The peddler took them all the way up to the vet's a little north of their regular cabin camp, but it was a Sunday, and the vet was closed when they got there. They asked around town, and finally someone in the small village went to the vet's and took him away from his Sunday dinner with his wife and family, which did not improve his temper. He became even more querulous when he found out that he would have to wait for payment, but since he tended to all of them as well as all their animals when necessary, he treated the two men anyway, only wanting to know how they had been wounded. Samuel gave him an even glance, and answered shortly, "In a skirmish."

The vet's curiosity was clearly not totally satisfied, as it had been a long time since he had treated any of their camp for

anything but accidental injuries and flus and such ordinary things, but he kept any more questions to himself, and when he had finished with them and given them further care instructions and a bill for James's attention, he let them walk on out without offering them a way home or any additional advice.

Luckily, Jared had a cousin in the village, a young woman named Molly Ann, who was perfectly willing to drive them back to their cabin in her red pickup truck. The truck's shocks were not good, and though Jared, Seth, and Susan sat in the back and left the two now-treated men to sit in the front with Molly, it still was not the most comfortable of rides for the injured. By the time they got back, it was a full evening since they had left the woods.

The next day was spent in resting up from the trip and tending to the animals, which had had to be left fed and watered, but without further defense while the cell was gone, since Susan

had had to go with the men, per James's orders. She secretly suspected that he had asked her to go along as much for her own safety in such unsettled times as for the protection of the men, thinking that he was conscious of how easily Lucien and Bartolet had crept into camp after Robbie. Already at length on an earlier occasion, she had discussed with James the possibility of hiring a couple of boys from Jackson's farm to come and stay at the cabin on the upcoming longer trips around for the Government action, but this time had only constituted a much shorter trip taken purely for the need to investigate the Government camp on the West that Seth had discovered, and so they had taken their chances.

Seth was overjoyed to discover that the animals, though just at the point of running out of food and water, were unharmed. The dogs too seemed to be happy to be home, and Jared hung around in the kitchen with Susan most of the day, probably as

much to avoid the odd atmosphere in the front room where Samuel and Robbie sat recuperating as because he really wanted her company.

Early the next morning, not too long after Susan had changed the bandages for fresh ones, James and Blue arrived home. They put up the horses and took care of them before coming in, and then came in the back door to see Susan for some food and drink, as they had gone all night without stopping to eat. They were in a good mood because the meeting with the other cells had gone well, though there had been only a few men from Cell Four, which puzzled them; it was a large cell, and even if some of the men had stayed to keep down the danger to their stronghold, James and Blue did not understand why more of the cell members had not been there.

They communicated all this to Susan, but in the meantime, Jared had gone into the front room and Seth had come in from

outside to the same spot, and as soon as the two leaders ate, they wandered into the living room to greet the others. They took one look around at the solemn faces, saw the bandages, and then started asking confused questions. Susan came in behind them and sat down on the couch near where Blue had perched.

James turned first to her, as they had just seen her in the kitchen where she had not said anything was wrong, and no one else seemed to be talking. “Susan?”

“Yeah? And why you lookin’ at me? Don’t you know idiocy when you sees it?”

Though James was rarely stern with her, he now said, “Be clear.” His tone was peremptory.

“I ain’t had nothin’ to do with it but the nursin’ of them. It’s like this: Robbie was aimin’ to shoot Samuel with a arrow, Seth saw him and was aimin’ to shoot Robbie with a gun; they both did, and though I don’t know as we’re all that lucky, I guess

we're lucky that I didn't get rid of both of Robbie and Seth on the way back."

James's face was a study in some kind of emotional upheaval or other, but what exactly it expressed was hard to say.

"Samuel?"

Samuel swiveled around a little in his chair in front of the fire, where in fact they had no fire burning now because it was a warm day outside. He looked quizzically at James, but said only "I reckon Susan's got the truth of it."

"But, on the way back from where?" asked Blue, getting down to one of the key points of the explanation. "Where was you all?"

Seth, very conscious of his fault, timidly spoke up and explained about the Government camp. Little by little, with everyone speaking but Robbie and Samuel, the story came out.

“So, with the whole eastern half of the country in an uproar and a battle coming up soon, I may be short two fighters?” This was James, incensed.

“It seems like Robbie is a-havin’ some problem that affects his mind. Why, Robbie, would you want to go a-shootin’ at the Elder of your cell like that? What possessed you?” asked Blue.

“I...I don’t—I was just tired of bein’ treated like a boy.”

“A boy? Didn’t I make you my quartermaster, and haven’t you been as much in the plans for the cell as anyone else? Even more so, when I think back on our talks about the weaponry and where it come from, and all that. I’ve allowed you to make decisions on your own about supplies, and suppliers—that’s what a quartermaster is supposed to be a-doin’. A boy!” James was so scornful of this weak answer that it made even Robbie blush and look down at his hands in embarrassment.

James stopped and walked up to Robbie, where he sat by Jared, and said softly, “You ain’t a-gonna quit until you’ve driven even me out of my role here, are you, Robbie? Huh? You want to take a potshot or two at me with a younger man’s bow and arrow? Is that what you really are a-wantin’?” And he raised up his fist and punched Robbie as hard and solidly as he could in the face. And Robbie took it, after a moment wiping the blood off his mouth and spitting out a tooth into his hand that had fallen out of the side. But he said nothing.

“I don’t know that that was in particular useful, James,” said Samuel.

“Really? What would be? Well, at least it made me feel better. That’s what we a-doin’ now, ain’t it, what makes us feel better? And you, Seth. What do you think that you were a-doin’? Are you gonna be like Robbie now?”

Seth was red in the face, too, but he looked over at Samuel first, and then up at James, and said, “Well, sir, I couldn’t let him kill Samuel. Not after everything Samuel’s done for me. How could I?”

“Yes, I know. How could you? D’you hear that, Robbie? That’s loyalty. This boy here, this man, that you hardly respect, would rather take the risk of getting dismissed from the group and maybe even gettin’ chastised physically than let his Elder get killed by another, and a supposedly superior, cell member.”

Robbie was still looking down at his hands, but at this, in a strangled voice, he said, "I'm sorry, Samuel. I just thought I should maybe be in charge for a while.”

“Maybe when the sun turns purple and cows fly!” said James. “And you owe all of us an apology, the most Samuel, but Seth too, because now, because of your action, I’m gonna have to see him punished, if he wants to stay in. And me, because you have

been respectin' my authority so little, and Blue, because he's the leader after me, and Jared, because he's been your friend and taken your example, and you're a-leadin' him false. And I haven't forgotten either that Susan, who was treated so bad by you before, took enough pity on you to take care of you when you was a-comin' home, and has been a-doin' her duty to you all here like a regular commander, all of you a-fightin' and a-bickerin' while we was gone. No, maybe not all of you. But I've clean had it. If you want to stay in, Robbie, you're a-gonna take the Oath over again, and while I'll let you take a few swings first at Seth for his punishment because he shot at you, I swear I'm almost sorry he didn't hit you dead on; that would be one less problem for me to worry about now. And I better not see that young man with any permanent hurt from your crooked fightin' tricks, either. No broken nose, no busted ribs, no nothin' like that. Just a good, clean whuppin' for aimin' at a

fellow cell member who he knew was makin' a mistake that had to be stopped. Do you hear me?"

Robbie muttered something inaudible.

"Do you hear me?"

"Yessir," he said, louder this time.

"And that better be it. If I have any more trouble with you, Blue is goin' to take you out and shoot you in the woods and bury you like we did those conniving arms thieves. And I mean it. Hell, I'll do it myself."

After a second or two, James left abruptly, and went back out into the kitchen. They were all silent as at the lull after a thunderstorm. The next moment, they could hear him running the sink water, and filling up a mug. Then, he sat down at the table; his chair creaked, and again there was silence.

"Excuse me," said Samuel and got up a little unsteadily, finding it difficult to raise himself out of his chair by his hands

with one of his arms bandaged. He went into the kitchen and they could hear him putting some series of points or other to James, but after he finished speaking each time, James's voice rose a little in anger; then, Samuel would utter soothing sounds and James would lower his voice again. And so, it went on for quite some time. At last, James seemed to have spent his fury and frustration, and they heard him chuckle at something Samuel had said. Then, they heard him whistling for the dogs from the back door, and it was apparent from the noise that he was feeding them something like bread scraps with grease soppings from the bread tray and sopping pot Susan kept for them on the back of the counter.

“He bet' not be droppin' grease specks on my floor,” Susan said almost to herself, then went in to check.

Taking a page from Samuel's book, Blue said, "Sorry; I'm going," to no one in particular, and went into the kitchen himself.

There were three of them left in the front room now, Robbie feeling his sore jaw and working his injured shoulder, and Jared sitting beside him, waiting for him to speak. Seth did not feel quite comfortable with the two of them, so he went to the kitchen archway, but hesitated there too, unsure of his welcome.

James saw him just before he turned back around, however, and said warmly, "C'mon in, son. There's plenty of room. We're talkin' about the meeting, just generalities. We'll have a briefing later, so it's nothin' you have to remember."

After waiting about fifteen more minutes for Robbie to speak and not receiving any encouragement to converse, Jared sighed gustily and got up and went into the kitchen himself, attracted by the smell of something Susan was heating up for lunch, and the

cheerful-sounding conversation coming from that end of the cabin complex.

Robbie, wondering if maybe he really after all was not cut out for this life, a question he had just asked himself for the first time, remained sitting in the front room and considered. Susan, though, having lunch ready and not being of a temperament to go in reverse with someone whom she had once started to form a better relationship with, came to the door of the front room and said,

“If you’ve still got any teeth left after that blow you took, lunch is ready. And it’s cauliflower, cheese, and veal casserole, one of your favorites.” She did not quite smile, but she looked at him without the sour dislike that had been her expression before James had disciplined him. She knew James could be a hard man, but she felt he was always a fair man, too, and she thought that Robbie had had it coming for many a long day.

And of course, James was serious about re-administering the Oath Ceremony; she had seen him do it once before to another disobedient man who was now in a different cell somewhere. She felt worse for Seth that he had to be beaten too, but she knew he was swift on his feet, and hoped that maybe he would be able to duck or parry most of the few blows that Robbie would be allowed to aim at him in front of the witness of them all.

Almost grudgingly, Robbie got up and followed her into the kitchen. There was a silence for a moment again when he stepped in, but the next minute, James had pleasantly addressed a remark to him, and he sat down while he was answering.

“So, what did you think of the Government troops you saw, Robbie?” asked James, seeming really to be interested in his opinion.

He paused. “Well, to say truth—they didn’t seem very well prepared.” This was the sort of discussion that he enjoyed, and that made him comfortable. “They weren’t much more numerous than our own cell, which ain’t what I expected to see. And even though I didn’t get that close, or hear much of what they said, they didn’t seem to know much about woodcraft.”

“How do you mean that?” asked Blue.

Not wanting to bring up a sore subject, but thinking it possibly important, Robbie said, “When things got quiet after—well, after Samuel let out a noise when hit, and after I let out a noise when hit, they started figurin’ to themselves what it was. And they guessed a bird, and a animal, and then one of them kept the others from worryin’ by sayin’ that there was a gunshot by a hunter far away in the woods somewheres else. And they didn’t come in to look around. I mean, it was lucky for us that they didn’t, but either they was cowards, or damned fools, or

both.” And he began to eat with a better appetite, though he once again felt his jaw experimentally before continuing to chew.

“Yeah,” added Susan, “and I figure they was city men by their speakin’, and that not a little city or near by here. What they mean by sendin’ that kind up here to do a woodsman’s job?”

James thought about this, and said, “I haven’t got a notion. It’s been years since I’ve met any Government men. Maybe I’m goin’ on old information of them just like they lots of times go on old information of us.” And he ate for a few minutes while the rest of them talked about the upcoming conflicts.

The briefing that followed their noonday meal was very informative, but short. James and Blue were just able to tell them that the Mountain Men were planning to group together to

seal the passages along behind where the Black Brothers and Les Aigles would have the territory divided between them.

“We’re goin’ to be the last northern frontier for the battle. If the Black Brothers and Les Aigles get divided in their ranks, they’re goin’ to regroup and try to box the National Front and the South-of-Center Boys in, with us shuttin’ off the other ways. It should work, if the numbers we’ve had reported to us is accurate. Of the enemy, I mean. They ain’t more than us, they just is more full of hate for the Government. And our problem is mainly that the Government wants our help, but don’t quite know whether to trust all the chapters and cells or not. Sometimes, it’s like they likes to pick and choose.” James was showing them the map again, pointing to the way things should work, if all went as planned.

“Yeah, I don’t like what Seth told us earlier, about how they said all Mountain Men cells were warehouse thieves and all that.

And I like even less that they wanted to go mainly with Mountain Men Three, which we know did have a source of stolen weapons, and which is where those two Frenchmen were a-plyin' their trade. If they find that there, and are already thinkin' the rest of us untrustworthy too, then how can we help? We won't have their support, and in that condition, it ain't likely to help that they have ours." And as he made these observations, Blue looked around the table for confirmation.

James looked over at Seth. "Seth, you said that they were discussin' which road to take when you first ran across 'em. What way did they confirm on?"

"None, while we was there. It got to be dark, and we had two injured and thought we better go. Whatever plans they made after we left, who knows? Before that, when they was just discussin' it, they was arguin' a lot."

For the next two weeks, they stuck close to the cabin, going ahead and hiring the two boys from Jackson's farm to come and look after the cabin and animals, and training them in what they had to do and the logistics of cabin life where there was not electricity. With a real regret, James had to tell Seth that he would have to leave the dogs behind to help protect the cabin, as well as because there was always the danger that they would make too much noise on patrol, German Shepherds though they were, and fairly well trained.

Two days later, they got word from the Black Brothers Cell Ten to move forward South to just outside Piedmont, and join with the other chapters and cells of the Resistance in forming a strong barrier to protect the mid-Atlantic and Northern territories.

There was, however, a bright spot in the otherwise murky and uncertain news they were receiving, and it was this:

whereas the various chapters and cells of the Resistance relied upon call words, codes, ciphers, and passwords to secure their way, the two renegade groups had made it easier for themselves to be identified by their enemies, out of a certain *machismo* and attitude of defiance: the National Front wore green badges on their shoulders, and the South-of-Center Boys wore red badges on their shoulders. This bit of information added to what else they knew made them feel a little less lost and wandering in a forest of possibilities, and shored up their self-confidence for their mission.

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“I says now, and I always did say, that it was a little war about a lot of nothings, and little nothings at that,” Susan said many years later, when she was balancing Seth’s youngest on her knee and talking to Seth’s oldest two about the “War Over the Divides,” as it was still called. Of course, the U.S.

Government preferred to call it “The Constitutional Conflict,” but nobody much who had fought in it and was not a government agent was fooled by that.

“Little nothings, Auntie? Like what?” asked Daniel. Just before Samuel died, Seth had asked him what he would like for him, Seth, to name his first son, and Daniel was luckily unaware that he had been named after Samuel’s long-ago dog, Ol’ Dannel, whom Samuel had never stopped missing. Daniel was sixteen, and wanted to know about everything; he was always asking questions.

“Oh, like the South-of-Center Boys hated the Black Brothers because long times ago, their farther-flung Southern ancestors had owned black slaves. And neither them nor the National Front didn’t care at all for Les Aigles—”

“What’s that? Les Aigles.”

“Dannel, you ain’t a-sayin’ it right, and I’ll never get this story finished if you don’t shet up with so many questions. It’s French for ‘The Eagles,’ and was the name of some French Indians that lived—”

“Native Americans, Aunt Susan,” corrected her namesake Susannah, wondering how Aunt Susan didn’t know that.

“It was the name of some French Indians that lived in the mountains near and about the turn-around of what was the Ohio River in hist’ry. And it was ‘Les Aigles’ because eagles is a symbol of brav’ry and nobility to the Indians. And the South-of-Center Boys didn’t like them because they didn’t have white skin, and the National Front sheerly detested them because they was part of the Resistance, and before that, long years ago, a lots of them had had ancestors who were members of another Resistance, fightin’ another nationalist group, or some Canadiens who went to fight in that old Resistance, too. And both of the

hatin' groups hated the Mountain Men, because they were mostly in the North half of the country, and though you might or might not have a nice opinion that everybody liked, you was free to have that opinion in the North, as long as you didn't make yourself too abnoxious with it."

"Aunt Susan," said Susannah, in her best pious and sententious twenty-year-old voice, "this is all rather complicated, and I'm afraid Daniel might be having a hard time following it. And if the 'nothings' were hate, then weren't they big nothings?"

Before Susan could speak, Daniel piped up with "I'm following just fine."

So, Susan patiently answered Susannah's second remark. "Hate ain't never a big thing, leastways not at first. It's a little, mean thing, that makes people mean and little. It's only when it gets contagious and spreads from person to person that it gets

big. Sometime too big to contain. But this war was a six-month wonder after years of marchin' in place, and no more.

“First of all, the Government’s attitude about it was plumb ridiculous. They wanted help from the three newer militias to fight the two old militias, but they didn’t trust ‘em, or give ‘em much support, and definitely not weapons. They would come draggin’ out their sorry informations that was usually old and useless, and expect the new militias to do somethin’ with it, like fight. The three new ones was compelled to get their own informations, and sometimes they would turn on each other in the individual cells.”

“What’s a cell?” Daniel asked, although he had heard parts of this story before.

“A smaller, broke-down group of the whole chapter. And don’t ask me what a chapter is, I already tol’ you that.” Susan paused, and took a deep, enjoyable drink of the coffee that her

doctor had prohibited, but that she got anyway now and again.

“Well, when the acshul conflict started, the Black Brothers and Les Aigles was a-followin’ the plan of pullin’ together towards the center where the dangerous open passages between their cells was. That was workin’ okay for a while. Next, the Mountain Men were supposed to move down and block off and sort of fill in the passages, and they was a-doin’ of that okay. It looked like the South-of-Center Boys and the National Front, who had tried to gather in the middle for a gret big explosion of fightin’, was trapped.

“But then, the Government agents started tryin’ to throw their weight around too soon and take everythin’ over, before we was ready for them to. They pranced around the circle with no sense, takin’ weapons and ammunitions by force from everybody, not hittin’ the older, trapped militias first, the way they should have. The Black Brothers fought hard to keep their

arms, because after all, they was protectin' the citizens too, as we all was, leastways those citizens who wanted to be protected. But they was almost overcome by the two older militias because they was simultaneously bein' attacked or at least disarmed by Government agents a-goin' around. Same in the other areas with Les Aigles and the Mountain Men, though Les Aigles had the bigger losses of life because they started out a little nearer to the older two militias' home bases, and had to fight longer. It was a sad time, and full of heartache and turmoil. Lots of people was lost, includin' our Jared and our Blue. Blue was our second-in-command, and the brother of our leader, James."

"Weren't there any women other than you in the Resistance, Aunt Susan?" asked Susannah, wanting to make perfectly sure that this side of the battle was something she could fully approve of.

“Lord, yes, but they was mostly in the Coastal groups of the Mountain Men. Anyway, your very Daddy made a major change to the battle, and that with just a handful of weapons and ammo.” She waited, but so did they; she had their full attention.

“This was the way of it. He was a-comin’ back to the cabin complex where our cell lived, with a whole cartload of weapons that had to be redistributed to the Mountain Men cells we could get to, and to the Black Brothers cells and, if it was safe enough, to Les Aigles cells the Black Brothers was able to reach.

“He got the cart and horses just around the last turn but one, and lookin’ up ahead, he saw about five Government men in their black corduroys and blue ties, but too late! I don’t know why they wore them stupid mismatchin’ ties, but they all did. Anyways, it was too late to turn, so he just slowed down. And waited. And waited some more. And tried to think of a way out of it.

“Finally, one of them, who musta been the leader, rode his horse on up—we was all a lot on horses in them days, because gas was scarce. He said somethin’ like, ‘Whatcha got in the cart, son?’ Friendly-like, but your Daddy says he didn’t look that friendly. ‘Well,’ said your Daddy, smart enough to know they was a-goin’ to look anyway, and maybe even take it even if it was just food that appealed to them, because we’d heard of that, too—‘Well,’ said your Daddy, ‘I reckon I’m a-fightin’ in the war for the Government.’ ‘Are you gettin’ smart with me, boy?’ the man wanted to know. ‘No, sir!’ your Daddy said. He was always nice and polite, and many a time it served him well. ‘I’m a-fightin’ in the Constitution Conflict,’ he answered, though he didn’t get it quite right, caused the Government liked it called the ‘Constitutional Conflict.’ The man laughed and said, ‘Close enough.’ Your Daddy thought he was off the hook, but then the other four mens started catcallin’ and one of them

said, ‘Why, he don’t look old enough to wipe his own be-hind.’ And they all laughed again. The leader said, “Well, let’s have a look at the inside of that cart, and we’ll see just what you’re a-doin’ on this lonely road that only leads to one cabin.’ Your Daddy was a bit afraid to move, because he saw a big gun on the man’s hip, and he saw the rest of them was armed too, but the man retch down and lifted the tarp, and saw all the guns and ammo that your Daddy had been a-bringin’ in. And your Daddy was awful distressed, because it was an important mission, and James, the leader, had entrusted it special to him. ‘Well, now, young man, you been truthful to me, so I’s a-gonna be fair with you. I sees some stolen guns there from a stock we know of, and a lot of Government ammo. I’m a-gonna relieve you of those—it’s a heavy weight to pull, ain’t it?—and leave you the rest, that you may actually have paid full amount for.’ And he turned and gestured to his men, and lo! they had them another

wagon down nearer the turn to the cabin. Well, they unloaded most of the cart, and left your Daddy with about one-third of what he'd started out with. Then, the leader tipped his hat, some ol' slouchy thing he'd picked up somewhere to keep his sinful ol' bald head from the sun—and they pulled off down the road, right smart. Your Daddy still thinks they was afraid that there was a lot of people waitin' in the cabin, and that they wanted to get away quick.

“Your Daddy thought fast. He had some food with him still uneaten, though I don't figure by the time he got to it that it tasted much good, but he recollected pretty well the route that his leader James had marked out on the maps he'd shown us, all around the bounds of the land from the cantons of the Mountain Men to the cantons of Les Aigles and of the Black Brothers. So, to make a long story shorter, he paused there in the road and divided up the weapons and ammunitions in small but equal

amounts for ev'ry cell that he'd heard tell of, and started lickety-split! around them with that old cart and the two horses. He had a plan in mind, but he didn't know for sure whether or not he'd get to carry it out. But just before he started to circle, he drove down to Jackson's farm, a old farm where we had friends and used to get our vegetables. And he asked them if he could please have enough vegetables to cover all the weapons. And Shirley, my ol' friend there, when she heard tell what the problem was, said, "My young friend, they might take anythin' at all away from you, and you're welcome to all the vegetables you wants, but cloth is better. I've heard they never steal bolts of cloth in number. Maybe it's because they wear that stupid Government-issue corduroy, but that's the way it is. And you can put some vegetables on top of that just so's they can feel they took somethin', if it suits the meanness of their nature.'

“This seemed like an improvement on the plan to your Daddy, so as soon as he had his cart all a-loaded up, he took off fast but safe around the outside boundary, first of all to the Mountain Men cantons, then to the Black Brothers—who helped some with a guide around the safest parts of Les Aigles’s cantons, which were the least familiar to him. And after a short while, he had to trade some of the vegetables so that they wouldn’t spoil. But whether he had somethin’ to trade or not, peoples gave him food, and an occasional night’s sleep in a warm barn, and oats and hay and water for his horses, why, even medical care onct for a cut he got on his arm from a bab-wire fence. He was a-tradin’ stuff like a peddler, esceptin’ for the armaments, which got delivered particular, and the bolts of cloth, which never were taken. In fact, when he came back to the cabin with all that cloth, we thought he was plumb demented at first! And we didn’t know where he was for the longest time,

thought he was dead or captured, but within a month and a half, he had made it all away around, and it really helped, as all the dispatches comin' back to our leader said, even though it had seemed like it wouldn't goin' to be enough. Because I guess the fact is, peoples can always do with a little less than they think they can if they try. And right after that, the 'War Over the Divides,' as most of us called the Government's 'Constitutional Conflict,' was over. And even though we didn't get official medals or badges or anything, your Daddy got a Special Citation from the Government after about ten years, when you, Susannah, was just a tiny thing. And you know, I've always wondered if that Government leader that robbed him got anything. And that's the heroic thing your Daddy did."

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"So, Aunt Susan, where were you while Daddy was making the rounds of the cantons?" asked Daniel, sipping the coffee

with cream and sugar that Susan had given him and Susannah each a cup of, and still making a face at it.

Susannah said, “Were you fighting?”

Susan laughed out loud, and then said, “Well, I had one big fight, after a way of speakin’, I guess. I figure I can tell you two; the baby’s abed and you’re old enough. And we all have them.”

Daniel was perplexed. “We all have what?”

His Aunt Susan grinned at him crookedly, and retorted, “We all have privates.”

His mouth fell open in amazement, but Susannah giggled.

Aunt Susan was clearly gratified to have shocked or surprised the two of them, and she went on without being prompted.

“And, it’s a bit of a private story, too, that ain’t that funny, or at least wasn’t that funny, when it acshully happened. Here’s what went on:

“There was this one fellow in the cell, Robbie, who wasn’t that easy to get along with. He seemed to quarrel with everybody eventual, and at last with the leader, who put him in his place, right and proper. He’d taken against me at the very beginning, because apparently I wasn’t white enough—or maybe he wasn’t black enough—but after a few tries, I started to get 'round him with kindness, and he was a better person for it. At least, I thinks so. Well, he and I were more or less doin’ okay with our mutual toleration plan, and then one day, I was inside in the kitchen, just hummin’ and puttin’ things away in cupboards, and tryin’ to get the kitchen in order again, because Robbie had just come back from Jackson’s farm with our produce and some dry goods my friend Shirley had been promisin’ me.

“At this time, it was still the war, and the leader James had said that I wasn’t supposed to go to the farm alone in the ol’

truck, but that Robbie could, because it was less likely to get stolen from a man. So, he'd brought the boxes in, and I was still a-puttin' them away when I heerd somethin' like a hyenie a-screechin', or what I imagines a hyenie would sound like if it was getting' killed. And I ran out the back door to see what it was, and there was Robbie, a-runnin' around in circles and squares and whatnot, and a-holdin' onto his private parts to beat the band, a-raisin' his hands off and a-puttin' them down on hisself again and always the screechin'. And in the corner of my eye, I saw a little teenaged boy, couldn't have been even as old as you, Daniel, runnin' into the woods and carryin' somethin' that looked like a airgun. And the barn door was open, and the pigs was a-runnin' out of their pen.

“It was a confused picture, but it seemed that the airgun had somethin' to do with it, and the pigs, and the runnin' boy, and most of all, Robbie's precious privates, that he was raisin' such

a hollerin' and caterwaulin' about. Don't mistake me, in his place I would've felt the same exact way. But I didn't know what to do about it, because if he'd been shot there, there was still nobody to treat it. For years, we'd been a-goin' to a vet a little more North, who wasn't afraid of losin' his license in them troubled times, and who treated peoples too. But he had left to go stay with his son's family way up near Canada until the war would be over, and there was nothin' to do about it.

“Just to be sure what was wrong, though there wasn't too many possibilities, I stepped out near to Robbie, who was still a-dancin' around and raisin' an unholy big noise, and said, ‘Robbie, what's happened?’ He roared at me. ‘What does it look like, you stupid black cockeyed whore—’—sorry, Robbie talked that way when he got worked up and lost his temper at people, though he hadn't talked to me that way for a while.

Then, he said, ‘He shot me! That little pig-thievin', runty

bastard shot me right in the’—well, I know you’ve heard it before, ‘dick’ is the word he said.”

Both of the young people listening to her gasped, and Susannah asked, “So, what did you do?”

Susan explained, “I didn’t have much choice of options. There was nobody else to do anything for him, because he was shot and I was the only other one there; the others were all at a meeting of cells again, and your Daddy was on his trip around the Resistance territories that I told you about. No doctor, no vet, no other friend around, and no time.

“I had some basic medical training like first aid, and with difficulty I could remove a bullet, given enough time and steadiness and quiet, though I hadn’t done it recently then. But there was a bit of hope in my mind, because in spite of the fact that it was clearly serious, he was still able to yell and create and

make such a fuss as all that, all while movin' around at that rate, and that meant he wasn't in danger of bleedin' to death.

“I got a hold of one of his arms, and right away, he nearly knocked me down on my backside in his frenzy, not a-wantin' to be touched or messed with. I realized that I was goin' to have to get really serious with him in my manner, just like a doctor. I said, ‘Robbie, you can dance around out here all you want, but you knows I’m the only one here to help you, and if I don’t help you, you goin’ to get maybe infected and lose what you holdin’ onto so tight. You better come inside and lay down on your bed and let me see what I can do for you.’

“For the first couple of minutes, he was all, ‘No, no, I ain’t a-gonna do that, you can’t see me that way, I won’t do it.’ But then, maybe it was a combination of the pain and the thoughts of being different from ev’ry other man for the rest of his life that got through to him. At any rate, he started hobblin’ into the

cabin through the back door, slappin' at me when I tried to help him up, but stumblin' when I didn't. He went into his room and collapsed on his bed and commenced groanin' and sometimes still yellin' out.

“Well, we had another struggle when I tried to help him out of his pants and drawers. He kept objectin' and hittin' out at me, but I think it was only partly out of modesty now; I think the rest of it was pain.

“But I had a good surprise when I finally got him undressed. It was only buckshot, and it hadn't been shot from a-close up, and moreover, a lot of it had gotten to the area in his groin and around, but not that much in his actual private parts. When I tol' him, he looked down at hisself, and I'll be damned if he didn't faint.

“This made it a little easier for me for a while. I hurried up and removed the outer pieces of shot with a special surgical

tweezer—because some of them was in that shallow. But I knew that when it came time to take out the five or so crucial ones that had hit the key area, he'd have to be awake and holdin' onto somethin'. Or drunk. But Robbie didn't get drunk easily, and anyway, I didn't want him a-swingin' at me when he wasn't sober.

“So, I woke him up and tol' him as gentle as possible what the problem was, and he just nodded. ‘You ain't a-goin' to tell anybody about this, are you?’ he asked. ‘Robbie,’ I said, ‘honest, I ain't, but you're goin' to have to say somethin' to the others yourself. How are you goin' to explain what's wrong with you, otherwise?’ ‘I don't care. Just let me tell it.’ ‘Fine,’ I said, wantin to get on with it before it got impossible to do.

“I got started, and it was a new and different experience for both of us. I had never taken buckshot out of a man's most precious possession, and he had never probably been in such

pain before. When I was done, I disinfected all the little puncture marks, which luckily were all empty now, and that was another time when I nearly got knocked flat. It stung, I knew that, but I felt the worst was over, and that now, he was being a little bit of a baby. And then, I bandaged him, and fed him and gave him what few painkillers we had, and got him drunk on top of that. And then, I went out and rounded up the pigs. There wasn't a one of them missing; he had obviously heard the noise in the barn when he came back, which I hadn't heard because I was in the house, and he'd caught the boy right in the act.

“When the others got back the next mornin’, he was ready to be more civil. They was a-standin’ in the front room with him, and his bandage wasn’t a showin’, but he was walkin’ kind of funny. Always one to notice things about his men, even the men that griped his guts, James said, ‘What’s up with the leg, Robbie?’ Robbie sort of looked over at me, sheepish-like, and

said, 'It depends on which one you mean.' This puzzled the others, so they looked at me, too. At last, it got the best of Robbie: he grinned at me, and said, 'Susan has got to see a thing few women has ever been privileged to see,' and he waved me out of the room into the kitchen. I knew then that his honor was goin' to survive as well as the rest of him.

“I heard the men talkin’ in an undertone, all but your Daddy, who was still away, and then suddenly I heard them shoutin’ with laughter. You know, laughin’ that had a sort of self-defensive feel to it. I waited until they settled down, and then went in with coffee and some cookies I’d made special the day before, because James liked them, and I had an idea of when he was goin’ to be back. They kep’ a-stealin’ glances at me, and kind of laughin’ at Robbie’s misadventure, and it was all right, ‘cause I knew they weren’t a-laughin’ at me.

“I gave them time to tease him well, and then I said somethin’ like: ‘Why does we have the only barn and sheds in the woods that scavengers gets into? First, it’s a weasel gettin’ after the chickens; then in the same year, it’s two human weasels a-lockin’ up our dogs and takin’ aim at Robbie. And now, it’s a pig-stealin’ weasel what gets Robbie where no one wants to be got. Not only does Robbie have bad luck, but we must be up on the map! How else is all these predators findin’ us?’

“That made them laugh, too. And Robbie and me never had no more problems gettin’ along after that. In fact, we became the best of friends, and even though I’d saved his life onct before, and this time healed him and made him feel better, and so ragged him a lot about third time bein’ a charm, it was his turn to save my life the third time. And save my life he did, almost at the cost of his own.”

(8)

“How did Robbie save your life, Aunt Susan? Was it in a battle?”

“Why keep a-puttin’ me in a battle? I was in my share, but I had a lot of duties that had to do with a-keepin’ the cell cabin goin’ for when my men returned. I had a gun to hunt with, and a gun for protection, and two dogs who were there most times to help me watch; and, I had to fix meals and keep the cabin clean whether the men were there or whether I was all on my lonesome. For a short while, I also took some dispatches, but I was too old to be a runner, so I had to have a truck, or at least a horse. No, it was the third time Robbie and I was in danger at the cabin. The first two times it was him who was threatened or sufferin’, the last time it was me. Do you still want to hear it, even if I wasn’t in a battle at the time?”

“Yes,” said Daniel and Susannah at the same instant.

“It was this way. It was acshully just after the war was over, and ev’rythin’ was unsettled and all in motion. People was a-goin’ here and a-goin’ there, some people was movin’ or comin’ back home, and there were drifters goin’ through ev’rywhere, all like that.

“We had already been told that some of the members of the two old militias was a-roamin’ around the country lookin’ for trouble or what they could steal, but it didn’t register with me, because two of our cell was dead, which was sad, but the other four was almost always at home. I hadn’t much liked that six months of war, even though it was so short. And though I hadn’t known Jared well—he was one of the two we’d lost—I had respected him, and the other we lost, Blue, had always been my favorite.

“But even under the circumstances, I was well-pleased to be at home in the cabin with my boys, for however long it was

before we would all part and go our separate ways. Because we had decided they was no need for a militia if the Government was a-takin' over, and might be harrassin' of us even worse than they had durin' the war, when there had been acshully somethin' we could do to help. I had more or less decided that it would be sad, but at that point, I would be a-goin' down to Jackson's farm to live with Shirley and her husband Barney as a sort of paid help, though James had already said that he was a-plannin' to divide up our proceeds from the sale of the cabin and grounds and give us each our part when it was time. Because of that, I knew I would be able to take a sort of workin' woman's dowry with me, anyways.

“So, we was killin' time until we would hear, and enjoyin' of each other's company.

“One day, I was cleanin' up the front room, which had gotten in a awful mess because of the dogs. I had tol' that boy, that

young man, your Daddy, not to let them in the front when they was muddy, and most of the time he was careful, but two nights before we had been celebratin' somethin', a birthday, I think, and he was always one to want to have the animals around to have their part. Dogs is dogs, and the dogs had been out in the woods and the dirt that time for sure. And the day after the party, your Daddy went on a quick overnight trip to the next town for some dry goods and things he had to wait on, so he wasn't there, either. Since nobody was there but me and the animals, I'd gotten lazy and let the front room go for a day or two, and cleanin' it up was my punishment.

“I looked up of a sudden, and heard and saw at the same time, a-comin' in the front door, another young man, so like to the Blue I had lost, and his voice even like a bit, that I was confused for a minute. He was talkin' to me while I was still a-

fussin' about the dogs, but when I heard what he was a-sayin', my voice was taken away for a different reason.

“He said somethin' like ‘Shet up yer bitchin' you ol' black hag, you, and go get me somethin' to eat. And make it fast. And what money you got, too.’

“He was plain sure bigger than me, and I hadn't got no gun, because it was away back in the corner of the kitchen, and not in reach. So, I thought to go and get it, and drive him out, not usually bein' a one to shoot a man in cold blood, escep' in war. I looked up at him again, though, as I was a-goin' into the kitchen, lookin to see which kind he looked like. He didn't have no identifyin' marks or nothin', but I could see where a badge had been torn off on each sleeve, and my heart sunk into my stomach: he was either a former green badge, and a National Front man, or a former red badge and a South-of-Center Boys

man, and from my point of view they wasn't much to choose between them, because they neither of them liked blacks.

“I ain't never been much of a actress, so there was not much help in actin' friendly, which I didn't at all feel, though I woulda liked to know how he had got all the way up where he was without a-getting' into trouble for hisself. The Government patrols mighta been irregular, but the Mountain Boys was still out and keen-eyed and alert.

“I hoped he'd stay in the front room, but it wasn't no use. He was suspicious, too and followed me into the kitchen a-watchin' of ev'ry move I might make. I didn't mean to telegraph my moves ahead, but as I was a-fixin' some food, as slow as I could and still not rile him up, I was a-glancin' at the gun in the corner, and tryin' to figure how to get over to it fast enough. But as luck would have it, he saw me.

“Well, hey there, and what’s this over here?’ he asked. ‘Are you preparin’ to shoot me?’ and he laughed. I lunged over at it, but he got there first, and slapped me winded in the head to boot. ‘You better do what I said, ol’ woman, your day for dyin’ is today, but you gonna die that much faster if you tries that again.’

"I was nervous and shakin’ now, but there wasn’t no help for it but to think of some other way around it. But think as hard as I might, I couldn’t think of nothin’ we had to put in his food to poison him with. Oh, I knowed an emetic, to make him throw up, and somethin’ which’d make him poop faster, and a coupla things that was home remedies for colds, and like that. I thought my best bet might be to load his meal up with painkillers, to make him sorta drunk and sleepy. Then maybe I could get the gun away again. And this time, I was determined to go ahead and shoot him in the boots he stood up in. But he pointed the gun at my head and kep’ a-laughin’, and I couldn’t reach the

painkillers down and crush them up, because he was watchin' me too careful.

“Well, he started a-whistlin' of a song, cheerful enough but right eerie under the circumstances. And that was where he made his mistake. Because he was bein' so happy and mean and stupid that he didn't hear Robbie a-walkin up behind him into the kitchen. I saw Robbie, who right quick showed me his hand over his mouth sayin' to be still and waved a hand to go on with what I was a-doin'. But I could see he didn't have no gun or knife, no nothin' I could see. He started a-creepin' up behind the man, and I went on with what I was a-doin', and there we was.

“I wasn't havin' the worst luck I ever had, but no good luck lasts forever. Robbie was almost to him, pickin' up the big beautiful pott'ry bowl I'd won a long time ago at the county fair when I was still young, and raisin' it above his head to bring it

down around the man's ears and knock him cold, but the man heard him and whirred around. He took one look at Robbie's bigger size, and I guess misjudged his man, thinkin' Robbie slower, maybe slow-witted too. But he was mean and ready, and aimed the gun at Robbie's chest, and pulled the trigger. Still, by then, Robbie had guessed his next move and ducked away and put the bowl there where his chest had been, and bang! there went my beautiful pot, smashed all over the kitchen floor. Robbie didn't have another chance to get the gun. The man tried Robbie's trick and raised the butt of it above his own head and cracked Robbie over the crown with it. Well, Robbie swayed, and looked a little dazed, but I've always said he's hard-headed, and he started to recover pretty quick. Not quick enough, though. The man decided next to grapple, and grabbed Robbie's windpipe and started tryin' to crush it, the two of them fallin' to the floor and movin' around down there. I came

around the counter and looked for the gun to shoot the man with, but it was trapped under the two of them's weight, and it wasn't a-goin' nowhere.

"As a last resort, the man thought him of another weapon he happened to have with him, and he drew out a blade from his pocket, cuttin' at Robbie wherever he could reach and find a way, and Robbie was a-bleedin' here and there, blood all over the floor, but he still kep' the man from cuttin' anythin' vital. So, then, since they was imitatin' each other in their fight, Robbie's hand fell, probably partly by chance, onto one of the shards of my pot, a right nice-sized one with a real sharp edge. Straightaway, without no waste of time, he retch up where the man was already on top of him, and drew it across the man's windpipe. The man stopped and looked startled, then he dropped his knife on the floor. It all seemed to my eyes to be a-happenin' in slow motion. But Robbie was takin' no chances.

He retch up again with the piece of pottery, and drew it across again, harder this time. The man stopped tryin' to do anythin' to Robbie, made a garglin' sound, held hisself up in the air, like a sort of fit, then in the next minute fell forward onto Robbie's chest, as somethin' gave way and the man started gushin' blood. He was about as dead as he could well be.

“Robbie needed to be patched up from his cuts, and had to have an icebag and some painkillers for his head, so I took care of him first, thankin' him copious all the while. Then, onct he had laid down on one of the couches in the front room sleepin', and I could be sure he wasn't concussed nor nothin', I started to clean up my bloody kitchen floor. Of course, I had to get the other man out first, so I figured just to drag him out the back door by his arms, and throw him out in the yard like the garbage he was. And that's what I done, so tired after cleanin' up all the

blood that I went into the front room next, and went to sleep on the other couch.

“When James got back the next mornin’, that’s still where we still was, and the animals unfed, and the breakfast unmade.

James himself roused around in the kitchen that mornin’ and made some biscuits and eggs and bacon, not as toothsome as mine, but as good as he probably got on the trail from his own hand. Your Daddy got back then, and we was happy in the tellin’ of the tale. And we ate, and after a few hours, Samuel, the Elder, came back on horseback from a final trip to the Coast, and that was another wonder to keep us talkin’. So, that’s how Robbie saved my life, after I had saved his twict before.

“He said to me one day, sort of sad-like, when we was all missin’ Jared and Blue, ‘I guess I’m almost as good as Blue, even though he was always your favorite.’ And I said, ‘Robbie, Blue was my favorite, and I won’t lie to you about it, but you are

the one I'm the proudest about, for the way you done growed into yourself and got to be a good man.' And that pleased him right proper.

“By that way of goin’, we all hung together until it was time to go our different ways. And I have to tell you that even though I was only in a position in the cell, and wasn’t no leader or second-in-command, though James was kind enough to say more than onct that I was, I was as sorry to leave as any man warrior could have been. It was fine to be with Shirley, later, but somehow, I so often found myself recallin’ old times with her and Barney about my boys that they must’ve been right tired of listenin’ to me.

“Samuel died soon after that, but he was a ol’ man, older than me; it was sad, but it was his time. Onct in a while, either Seth (your Daddy) or James or Robbie would drop by to see me for a few days, and then I heard that Robbie had gotten married to a

girl, Molly Ann, who was one of the dead Jared's cousins.

James travelled around a lot more, but finally we heard that he had found a woman too, and had gone out farther West with her to try his luck with ranching. And last of all, when Barney died and Shirley had to sell the farm and move to her sister's, your Daddy had just been talkin' to me about comin' and livin' with him and your Mama. I didn't want to impose at first, but when he said it would be kinda like ol' times, and that Shirley had to go, I thought it was better.

“So, that was the militia we was in, the Mountain Men, Cell Two, and that was the conclusion of it all. And now, here I sits, tellin' you about it all and gettin' by that way to live it all over again. Now, you can get your Daddy's talk out of him, too, someday when he has the time, and then you can ast him, all in all, if I didn't tell you true.”