

We Interrupt This Program...

August 01 - 3:34 Eastern Time

John Horne set down his coffee and once again addressed his screen. No matter how many times he recalculated the new budget there wasn't any escaping the fact that at least one member of the office staff was going to have to be laid off. Resignation washed over him and he clicked the "save" icon like he was signing a figurative death warrant. A rumble from the window caught his attention and he looked up to see the black afternoon thundercloud so typical of this time of year approaching from the northeast.

Almost as if on cue the weather radio behind his desk clicked on and he slapped the kill button. "You're a little late to tell me we've got a Severe Thunderstorm Warning, I can see it for myself out the window.", he said to the radio as he turned back to his computer. The opening strains of Copeland's *Rodeo* flowed from another radio tuned to the local classical music station.

Seconds later his concentration on his work was shattered with the following announcement:

"We interrupt our programming: This is a national emergency.

Important instructions will follow. "

The cup fell over spilling across the budget papers as John leapt from his chair to cross the room to turn up the volume. His other hand swept his cell phone out of his shirt pocket, flipped the cover and punched the pre-programmed memory button that dialed his wife's cell phone.

"This is an Emergency Action Notification. All broadcast stations and cable systems shall transmit this Emergency Action Notification Message. This station has interrupted its regular programming at the request of the White House to participate in the Emergency Alert System.

During this emergency, most stations will remain on the air providing news and information to the public in assigned areas. This is 88.4 FM, a radio service of the University of Florida. We will continue to serve the greater Gainesville area. If you are not in this Local Area, you should turn to stations providing news and information for your Local Area. You are listening to the Emergency Alert System serving the Gainesville, Florida area.

Do not use your telephone. The telephone lines should be kept open for emergency use. The Emergency Alert System has been activated. We will also be serving as a message distribution and relay source to other broadcast stations."

He heard the connect on the other end of the line, "Hello, this is Ann!"

"Ann! It's John. Where are you?"

Her tone became quizzical when she heard the seriousness in John's voice. "I'm in town with Melinda. We're going to buy her school shoes. Why?"

A new voice arose from the radio across the room. *"Ladies and gentlemen, the President of the United States."*

John said, "Stay in the car for a moment and turn on the radio to 88.4. We've got some sort of national emergency breaking."

"My fellow Americans I come to you with word of a grave emergency that has suddenly befallen not only our nation, but indeed the entire world.

Moments ago I was informed by the North American Aerospace Defense Command that they have detected an asteroid in an intercept orbit with our planet. Unfortunately, it is coming at us from the direction of the Sun which prevented us from being able to detect this massive body in time to give an earlier warning.

By means of our national technical resources this previously undetected asteroid has been established to have a diameter of 750 yards and is moving at a velocity of fifteen miles per second. This means that it will impact the Earth's surface with an energy greater than all of the nuclear weapons presently in the armories of the United States and Russia combined. As I speak news of this impending impact is being communicated by us to every government on this planet.

Impact will be fifty miles southeast of Bermuda in thirty six minutes. The first tsunamis will reach American shores approximately three hours after impact. As they approach the shallow waters of our continental shelf the wave will be greatly slowed but will grow in height until it reaches an estimated 900 feet. The first wave will break, recede and be replaced by another wave and then another. Our Eastern Seaboard from Florida to the coast of Newfoundland will be flooded to the foothills of the Appalachian mountains. The coastlines of Europe and Western Africa will be similarly devastated with lesser waves racing through the Caribbean, past the Straits of Gibraltar into the Mediterranean, the Cape of Good Hope into the Indian Ocean and around the southern tip of South America into the Pacific. Virtually every coastal nation on this planet will be impacted to some extent.

As must be plain to you now the three and a half hours remaining to us will not be sufficient time to affect any meaningful evacuation of our eastern coastline cities. Those of you in the Piedmont areas of the Appalachian mountains are advised to leave your homes immediately with whatever you can carry in your hands and head further west higher into the mountains. Residents of the Gulf and Pacific coasts will have a longer time to get away from the coastline and you are advised to do so immediately.

As I speak the highway patrols of every affected state are clearing the interstate highways and major national highways for one way traffic only in all lanes away from the shorelines. There will be prolonged and severe weather effects following the impact that your local radio stations will advise you about after this broadcast. As your President I ask and pray that you will remain calm, not panic, and to help your fellow man to the best of your ability so that as many lives may be saved as possible. I pray the Good Lord will watch over and guide us all in this time of emergency. I will be making further broadcasts as the necessity arises.

Dead air for a moment before the local air person comes back and says, "This is 88.4 FM, a radio service of the University of Florida, we are serving the greater Gainesville, Florida area. If you are not in this area please tune to your local station for information specific to your area. Standby for upcoming information on evacuation areas and locations to move towards away from the coastline."

Like all Gulf coast and southeastern Atlantic states Florida had a well developed emergency system for

coping with hurricanes but nothing dreamed of by the state's emergency planners had ever been intended to deal with this.

John came back to himself and realized he was still holding the cell phone in his hand. "Ann? Ann?!", he said, voice rising.

"Yes John, I'm still here.", she replied, "What should we do? Will the waves reach us this far inland?"

In a decisive tone he said, "Go straight home - right now. Don't stop for anything, God only knows how long the roads will remain passable once the shock wears off and people begin panicking. When you get there start bracing the place for a severe hurricane. There's going to be a lot of prolonged severe weather after that thing hits. Don't worry about filling water containers, we'll have more than we'll ever want to see again shortly. I don't think the tsunamis will come this far...but I'm not sure - that work was all theoretical. In any event there isn't time to try to make it Alabama. I'm leaving right now.

I love you. Tell Melinda I love her."

"And we love you John. See you when you get home. Sure hope we don't have to swim."

The connection broke. John put the phone in his pocket, picked up his kit and left the building towards his car. He saw others with stunned looks on their faces not moving.

As he left the building he wondered if he'd live to see another like it built again in his lifetime...

Countdown

This is the Emergency Alert System being broadcast on 88.4 FM, a radio service of the University of Florida serving the greater Gainesville, FL area. If you are not in this local area please tune to a station in your local area for news and information.

The following is a partial list of emergency shelters being opened by the Alachua County Emergency Management and the Red Cross.

Gainesville, Bucholz, Eastside, Santa Fe, and Newberry high schools.

Kanapaha, and Lincoln middle schools

The O'Connell Center at the University of Florida

Florida Field football stadium at the University

Other emergency shelters will be opened as necessary.

The following roads have been made one way only to facilitate the rapid evacuation of evacuating coastal residents to the inland counties.

State Roads 121, 24, and 26. Other local state highways leading inland from the Gulf Coast may be made one way in the next hour.

Gainesville area residents are requested to avoid these roads to their maximum possible extent while the evacuation is underway. Further news and information will be broadcast as it becomes available.

At the tone impact will be in twenty four minutes. Beep

This is the Emergency Alert System being broadcast on 88.4 FM, a radio service of the University of Florida serving the greater Gainesville, FL area. If you are not in this local area please tune to a station in your local area for news and information.

At the beep John punched the button for the timer function on his watch and it began telling off the seconds. He then allowed his concentration to refocus on the road ahead of him. By leaving immediately after the initial broadcast by the President he had managed to get away from the University before the roads leading off campus had jammed with others fleeing work for their homes. He'd already seen two sheriffs cruisers putting out cones and he knew that soon the road would be blocked off for the direction he was heading but he could see his turn up ahead. He made his turn and steadily rolled up his acceleration until he was at 65 mph, all the speed that he felt was safe. He passed the turn off for his house and kept right on going. The other end of his county road intersected with U.S. 27, undoubtedly soon to be jammed if it were not already, but it was the country store at the intersection that interested him. He passed several cars moving fast in the opposite direction but encountered no difficulties reaching the store.

Somewhat to his surprise there was an opening at the fuel pump so he pulled in. Taped to the glass of the pump was a hand lettered notice stating "CASH ONLY". Not surprising he supposed given the circumstances and he was gratified to see the pump price was the same as it had been the day before yesterday. John faithfully followed the "half=empty" rule but under the circumstances having the tank completely full would be a good thing. He also filled the two and a half gallon can he kept in the bed.

Stepping through the screen door he looked for the balding man behind the register and said, "Hola! Buenas tardes Miguel! I'm glad to see you are open. Have you heard the news?"

"Hola John!," replied the man, "Yes, it came over the television about fifteen or twenty minutes ago." He nodded at the set high on a corner shelf facing the register. "This is surely the Judgment of God come down upon us! Will the waves come as far as us?"

John shook his head, "Miguel, I just don't know. This sort of thing has never happened before in all of human history, at least no one has ever lived to record it anyways. There was some theoretical work done some years ago that says not but how can we know until the waves roll in? Until they break over us we'll just have to keep right on fighting the good fight. Have many people stopped since the news broke?"

"A few, yes, but most I think are going straight to their homes." The hose bell rang, "But I expect that will change very shortly." He reached under the counter and pulled out a holstered revolver on a belt and cinched it around his waist. "My son Ricardo will be here in a minute to help me run the store and watch for the bad ones. Be glad you live down the county road, soon the highway out there will be jammed."

Nodding his head John said, "You're right." He glanced at his watch - 12 minutes, 34 seconds - and then eyed the sacks of chicken and dog feed in the corner. He briefly considered buying it all with the two hundred dollars of emergency cash he kept in the truck. "I've got nearly a year's worth of feed in the cans at the house and there'll be a world of people short of feed for their animals. I'll leave it."

He took the money out of his pocket to pay for his gas. Miguel took it from him and asked, "Do you think we'll see it hit?"

John considered for a moment and said, "I don't think so. It's a long way to Bermuda from here and the curvature of the Earth will block almost all of it from us and the cloud cover outside now will block most of the rest. We might be able to see the immediate aftereffects though when the vaporized sea water hits the upper atmosphere. It will begin to storm very hard not long afterwards. It may stay that way for many days. You should have your family get your house ready." He turned and started walking towards the door, he could see several cars waiting to get to the pumps and more were pulling in.

"Vaya con Dios Miguel!" he called from the door.

"And to you as well my friend" he heard Miguel reply as the door closed.

By the time John pulled out of the parking lot and back onto the county road there were nine cars at the pumps and more pulling in. People were streaming into the store. The truck rolled swiftly towards home.

As he shot through his gate his watch read 21:30

Impact

The ladder on which John was standing began to shake causing him to miss the nail and deliver a good rap to his left index finger. "Ouch! Goddamn it!", he snarled, then realized that it was not only the ladder that was shaking but the house as well!

"John!", Ann anxiously shouted up from below where she was attempting to steady the ladder, "What's happening!? Why is the ground shaking!?"

He'd never had to cope with seismic activity before so it took a moment for him to beat down the reptilian cortex panic reaction he felt and get himself back under control. The shaking wasn't intensifying but it wasn't dying down yet either. "Ground shock from the impact!", he shouted down at Ann, "It moves faster than the tsunami so we're feeling it now! Thank God we're not closer to Bermuda or it might be strong enough to do some damage. If it doesn't get any worse than this we should be OK."

Almost as if in reaction to his words the shaking began to subside. He could hear the motor sounds of the tractor as his father drove it into the barn. He'd been watching a rising black cloud in the far northeast. They hadn't actually seen the impact, he suspected that anyone close to enough to have seen it clearly would soon be dead. What they could see still feared him with dread as the cloud front visibly grew larger and closer. It looked like an approaching Ragnarok.

Fear drove him onwards and he readdressed the nail he'd been hammering. He, his father, wife, and daughter had largely removed everything that might blow in a hurricane wind. This late into hurricane season they did not leave a lot lying around so it didn't take them long. He'd become concerned that the antenna mast might not hold if the winds rose above 100 mph so he was running and anchoring extra reinforcing cable to strengthen it. Their livestock was now secure in the barn and his father was moving the last of whatever outside equipment remained under shelter. He thought they'd have the place as secure against violent weather as they could make it and prayed they wouldn't catch a tornado.

Once finished with his task on the roof they all fell to in the garden and began harvesting everything that was mature or that would ripen after picking. There wasn't anyway to really protect the garden or orchard, it would all just have to take its chances.

At Impact plus two hours the approaching storm front filled half the sky with a darkness so intense that it made the hair on the back of his neck stand up. With nothing left to harvest he set Ann and Melinda to processing the produce they wouldn't be eating fresh. John and his father Robert set to cleaning, sanitizing, and filling empty barrels with drinking water. No one was sure how long it would be before the atmosphere would clean itself of salt, mud, and other debris and be OK to drink.

At Impact plus three hours they all went inside and sat down to rest in front of the small household television. Helicopters belonging to many different media organizations were in the air watching the East Coast. Most of the best roads in the Florida peninsula run in a north/south direction - the better to move tourists and freight. What east/west roads there are were never intended to handle even a remote fraction of the traffic that was trying to use them now. State, county, and municipal emergency services and road departments were going to heroic efforts to keep the traffic flowing. Where ever a car stalled it was quickly pushed off the road by others behind it and the stranded occupants divided among the remaining cars. Heavy equipment had been moved to bridges and overpasses to push stalled vehicles over the side. Anything to keep the traffic moving. A network feed showed a veritable armada of boats

of every sort of description going to sea from the Florida Keys. The larger craft were heading out into the open ocean to ride out the wave in deep water while the smaller were making for the mainland Gulf coast as fast they could make it - which wouldn't be fast enough for many. The approaching storm front grew ever larger.

A knock on the front door proved to be from his neighbor Mike who was standing there with his wife, brother and three teenaged children. "We thought we'd see if you needed help with anything getting ready.", Mike offered, "Looks like you're pretty squared away though. You've got a better rig than I do. Heard anything about the tsunami yet?"

John invited them all in. "No, not yet. We just finished a little while ago and sat down to watch it. Y'all come on in and join us." As everybody was getting settled he took down his best bottle of ten year old bourbon and a tray of glasses. He poured a good shot into each then handed them out including Melinda and Mike's boys who took theirs wide eyed with wonder. John said by way of explanation, "In the Gaelic from which the word 'whisky' comes to us it translates as 'the water of life.' If we are to be overcome by the waters of the deep I thought it only fitting that we who have come together here should share, perhaps for the last time, a taste of the Water of Life. As we drink it and it burns deep within us let us remember that Life too still burns within us until the waves roll over us."

A helicopter borne television crew caught the wave with a long distance lens as it suddenly erupted from the ocean depths and climbed skyward. John reached up from his chair and took down the King James bible from its shelf. The rapidly approaching wave overtook the Jacksonville skyline and washed over it. Another taste of the strong whisky and John began to read aloud -

"The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.
He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters..."

Darkness Falls

CRACK!!!

A flash of lightning out the window and a near deafening blast of thunder but hardly anyone notices anymore. It had been raining continuously for hours in the most intense downpour that anyone could remember ever having experienced before. The storm front had overtaken them moments after the tsunami had struck the coast. In minutes the daylight gave way to black night punctuated with rapid fire flashes of lightning and howling winds. The precipitation was muddy and full of salt gradually giving way to still salty but clear water. The noise of the downpour and thunder was so great that even with the television turned to its maximum volume the watchers had to sit close to hear.

With the intense rain and winds the airborne television crews were soon forced to abandon their coverage and race away in search of safety. The last moments of footage they were able to provide showed the wave collapse into a frothing chaos of foam and debris. It had penetrated just ten miles into the interior of the Florida peninsula. The majority of the land mass of North Florida would be spared a salt water bath but ten miles was enough to devastate Florida's coastal cities from Jacksonville to Miami. Property loss would be reckoned in the tens of billions of dollars and the casualty rate would be in the hundreds of thousands possibly millions of lives. It was the greatest disaster ever to have struck the state.

There was no word from north of the state line.

Ann leaned over towards John and asked, "The news said there would be multiple waves. If the first wave made it ten miles how far will the following waves go? We're sixty miles from the Atlantic side, do you think they will come this far?"

John replied, "I don't know. The tsunami study that I read said except for Miami they wouldn't make it very far inland and with the first wave only making it ten miles I'm inclined to think the rest won't make it much further, but I don't know for sure. All we can do is hope and pray."

The big pine tree in front of the house is struck with lightning blasting sparks and bits of bark across the yard. "Of course," John observed, "we'll still have plenty to worry about even if we don't take an ocean dip. I hate to lose any source of news but I think it would be prudent to unplug the television before the lightning gets it. I'm not sure how long we'll be able to take this sort of pounding. Another day of this and the garden will be finished and the orchard will be damaged. If this goes on for months we'll lose all agricultural production for this year and next year's won't be so hot either."

John's dad nodded towards the living room bookshelf and asked, "Son, you've read about impacts. How long do you reckon this is going to last?"

"Dad, it's hard to say. There was never a lot of this kind of stuff written and most of what was modeled was for bodies one mile or larger in diameter. This asteroid was under a half-mile in size so it had a great deal less mass than was stipulated in the studies. If NORAD had the velocity right it wasn't moving as fast as it might have been. I'm hoping there will have been a great deal less dust and water injected into the upper atmosphere than the models predicted would be with a larger strike. If there was then the weather effects we'll suffer as a result of the strike should be correspondingly less. Hell, for all we know maybe the tsunamis won't have washed away the whole East Coast either. I think we may have a good chance of making it if we don't get hit with a tornado but it may very likely get hungry

before the end."

BLAAMMM!!! The blast was so loud that John's ears rang. He'd just opened his mouth to speak when the house shuddered and a loud crunching sound was heard. "Aww damn!", he shouted towards the back of the house. "I think that was the oak tree off the back porch and it's just fallen on the house!"

Through rain and storm and dark of night...

August 08 - 12:00 p.m.

Sheet lightning played across the sky and the resulting thunderclap seemed to shake loose even more rain. The wire slipped in the pliers and a barb penetrated both John's glove and his left thumb. "Son of a bitch!" he cursed, "I am sick and tired of being wet! If I have to fix this god damned fence one more time I'll just shoot the damned goats and eat them!" He pulled off his glove and critically examined his thumb. "Damn glad I had a tetanus booster last year and I'm FURTHER damned glad that Ann can't hear me or I'd get yet ANOTHER lecture on my damned language and its impact on the development of my children. Thank you Jesus for sparing me that!"

He grabbed the broken strand of barbed wire with the fence pliers again giving it a savage pull and wrapped it around the post and held it so that his dad could nail it in place. "This rain's getting to me too, son," he admonished gently, "but we've just got to tough it out. You need to get a grip on your temper. This last day or two you've been putting the wind up Ann and the kids. This rain can't last forever."

"Well, why shouldn't the wind get up them! It's for dam... uh darn sure getting up everything else!", John retorted. Feeling embarrassed he continued, "OK, OK, I'll work on taking the edge off my tongue. It'd be a lot easier if I could ever feel *dry* again. Seems like we spend so much time out in the rain it's about washed all the coping out of me. This is the fourth time we've had to fix fence since Impact. And the porch roof, and the barn roof, and hen house, and work shop, and Mike's house, and his barn, and Ed's house and just as soon as we get inside it'll be some other da... doggone thing that has to be attended to right away. Might as well go naked for all the good wearing any kind of rain gear does." He let the rest of his frustration out with a long sigh.

The fence once again fixed the two men picked up the chain saw they'd used to cut up the tree that had fallen across the wire and the other tools and slogged their way across the pasture to the gate and then on to the workshop. It was Impact plus seven days and it had not stopped raining since. The salt rain had ended on the first day and what was now coming down was fresh. Sources at the University of Florida reported that forty six inches of rain had fallen during this time along with high winds and intense lightning. Rainfall, wind speed, and electrical activity were slowly diminishing but no one could predict when normal weather would return.

Back in the workshop they cleaned and oiled the wet equipment then made their way back to the house. Smoke rose from the stack and they could smell coffee. When they had shed their slickers on the back porch and stepped through the door Ann handed them both steaming cups. "Bless you!," John cried, "You are surely a queen among wives!"

Ann smiled and said, "Lunch will be ready as soon as the cornbread is done. The news just came on the radio if you want to listen."

John and Robert walked over to the Sony on the kitchen table and turned it up as they sat to the table.

The U.S. Geologic Survey released a statement today that it has now been firmly established that the tsunami of last Saturday was indeed caused by the slippage of a large section of the island of La Palma in the Canary Islands along a previously known fissure. Experts feel this slippage was induced by the shock of the initial impact of the asteroid followed later by the tsunami it produced. Damage and

casualty levels of both tsunami series are still being determined with work being seriously hampered by the still violent weather resulting from the asteroid strike. Preliminary casualty figures for the state of Florida are projected to be 1,200,000 with the majority being in the greater Miami area but authorities caution this figure may be drastically revised up or down as more complete data comes in.

The public affairs officer of the newly established East Coast Rescue and Recovery Command reports that the preliminary aerial survey of the tsunami stricken Eastern Seaboard have largely been completed. Initial reports indicate the tsunamis did not reach as far as was initially feared and in many areas penetrated inland to only a distance of 200 miles. Major river valleys were more seriously stricken with most showing damage all the way to the piedmont areas. This smaller area of devastation has raised hopes that the nationwide casualty figure may be kept to 40 million deaths or less. Rescue and Recovery commanders emphasize that a full and complete survey of the damage and casualty figures will take months.

On the West Coast California emergency services authorities continue to dig through the rubble of the 7.3 earthquake which struck Southern California last week within hours of the Impact. Seismological experts state that the ground shock of the asteroid striking the Earth is responsible for the quake but emphasize that stresses had been building along the southern San Andreas fault line for decades and that it was near to releasing on its own. Casualties attributed to the quake are moderate at 157. Twenty seven were reported dead from the tsunami that struck the next day as the hydrological pressure wave made its journey across the world's oceans. Missing persons from both disasters are reported to be 321 with many feared to be remaining in the stadium collapse rubble.

A spokesperson for the Midwestern FEMA region states that casualties for the 6.1 earthquake along the New Madrid fault line have been moderate with 23 dead, 46 missing. All Mississippi and Ohio river bridges remain closed as safety inspections are carried out. Emergency water releases through the Tennessee Valley Authority dams continues to relieve stress on the dams possibly weakened by the quake as the record breaking rains continue to fall. Residents along the affected waterways are being evacuated as water levels rise.

Locally, Gainesville Regional Utilities report that both of their generating plants have been inspected and found to be in safe working condition though only the coal fired Deerhaven plant is running due to the disruption in the flow of natural gas pipelines. Frequent local outages will continue for the duration of the violent weather but spokesmen stress that repair crews will be on continuous duty to restore power as necessary.

There will be more news at the top of the one o'clock hour. This is Classic 88.4 FM, a radio service of the University of Florida."

John looked at his dad and said, "Well, it's the worst disaster in recorded history but it seems the Union still stands, what's left of it anyways. That cornbread sure smells good. Ann's really gotten the hang of that woodstove."

The overhead lights flickered and came on. Robert smiled at the sight and said, "Maybe it'll stay on long enough for us all to get a hot shower. We'd better get the batteries on the chargers while the power lasts."

The rain droned on.

Limitations - Part One

August 15, 2002 - 6:00 a.m.

The mantle clock was softly chiming the hour when Ann stepped through the door of Melinda's room into the living room shaking down a thermometer. John ran his fingers through his hair, "Well?", a tone of worry in his voice, "any change?"

"No, John", she replied, "the Tylenol hasn't changed it at all, she's running 103.4. She's curled up on her side in a fetal position with localized hardness and tenderness in her lower right abdomen. What are we going to do?"

He let out a long sigh. "Well honey, we've just come up against an important limitation on self-reliance. We've got to get Melinda to a doctor and we need to do it today - right now. Mike's patrol zone covers the west part of Gainesville I'll go over there right now, he shouldn't have left yet for work, and find out what it's going to be like trying to get to Shands. We haven't been a mile away from the house since Impact and from what we've been hearing on the radio I suspect it's getting pretty bad in town."

Giving his wife a kiss he stood up and headed for the back door. "I'll be back as soon as I talk to Mike and we'll take her in the van." A few seconds to don his slicker and he was gone, lost into the rain and darkness.

Four hundred yards down the road he came to Mike's gate. "HELLO THE HOUSE!", he shouted from the road. He'd known Mike for years but since Impact one did not simply walk up on to anyone's porch anymore without first announcing their presence, most especially not in the dark. Word had come last week that a neighbor of Miguel, the store owner, had been found dead in his living room, his house ransacked. Now passing through someone's gate uninvited was asking to come face to face with a shotgun - or worse.

A light sprang from the deeper darkness of the porch and played across his face and hands. "Morning John!", Mike called from the door, "What brings you callin' so early this morning?"

"Mike, I need to talk to you. Mel's bad sick and needs a doctor, maybe a surgeon. I want to take her into Shands but from what we've been hearing on the radio I suspect it's going to be a chore to get there. What can you tell me about the situation in town?"

"Are you sure she really needs a doctor?... No, I reckon you are or you wouldn't be here. OK, I tell you what. I go on shift at 0800. If you'll give me a lift to the hospital I'll have my partner meet me there. Since Impact we're all partnered to save fuel and... for other reasons and he's got my car. I'll be in uniform and will be able to get you through the check points faster than you'd get through otherwise."

John nodded and said, "Is it as bad as that then? I'd heard that the Guard had set up checkpoints but I thought they were just looking for looters and whatnot."

Mike studied his shoes for a moment and came back, "Yeah, it's bad alright. Might get worse too." He let out a sigh, "Probably ought to fill you in anyways. The way things are going it might come to... community involvement towards the end."

The darkness was gradually giving way to a deep gray through the heavy clouds. John said, "I'll go and

get Melinda and Ann in the van and I'll pick you up here in a half-hour."

"Sounds like a plan then. Oh, and John? Wear a sidearm. Wear it openly and put a rifle in the back."

John turned and walked back towards his house, the rain stealing the sounds of his boots on the pavement.

Limitations - Part Two

"Better turns toward Archer", Mike explained, "Payne's Prairie has come up so high that it's covered the part of the Williston road that curves around it. Covered 441 where it crosses the prairie too for that matter and is threatening to cross the Interstate as well. They've opened all the gates but it's coming in faster than they can let it out again. Looks like it's going to be Lake Alachua once more instead of Payne's Prairie for a long time to come."

"How bad is the water in town?" Ann asked, "I've heard that Hogtown Creek is out of its banks pretty far."

"Hogtown Creek, Sweetwater Branch, every little crick or branch in the county is trying to become the Suwannee river. Word off the net is that the Suwannee, Santa Fe and Itchnetucknee are miles into the woods and threatening to undermine a couple of bridges. No one living along those rivers now unless they're ten feet high or more on poles and even a lot of them washed away I hear. Lake Santa Fe and Newnan's Lake have risen twelve feet since Impact. Dad says they ought to look like he remembers then when he was a boy. Fishing down to Lochloosa and Orange Lake ought to be mighty fine in a year or so if ever this weather settles down. Course, we'll all have to paddle or sail from the landing with the fuel situation and all. Be hard put to even be able to drive by then."

This piqued John's interest. "Is the fuel situation that bad? Have they started rationing?"

"Oh yeah, they're rationing alright. That is when there is any gasoline at all there's a definite hierarchy of who gets it. Even the sheriff's department is having a hard time keeping our cruisers on the road and you can bet that running the a/c is right *out*. I'm sure you wouldn't be wasting your fuel storage like that but it wouldn't do to be seen driving around too much where folks could see you. Might arouse some unwanted curiosity. Word has it that come Spring folks like us with tractors and land will be entitled to special agricultural fuel if we use it in food production. It'll be like the 'off road' fuel that's not taxed now and has a special dye in it. Just don't get caught with it in your car because it'll be more than just a fine if you do."

The Horne's Aerostar came to the intersection with U.S. 27 and turned right, past Miguel's store now dark and with plywood nailed over the windows and doors. "Did something happen to Miguel?", Ann asked, "His store is all boarded up, he didn't get looted or anything did he?"

"No," Mike answered, "I saw him yesterday. He's fine. His boy Ricardo did put a .357 bullet past one fellow's head who wanted to get rough with Miguel when he wouldn't take his credit card but that was about as bad as it got. He's just got nothing to sell and doesn't want folks to damage the place looking for food or gas. Told me that he pumped every gallon of gas he had before the waves hit and sold everything in the store that could be eat or drunk by dark. Got a box full of cash now. I'm bettin' he'd rather have his gas and food back, leastwise his food anyways. He'd just have had his gas 'requisitioned' if he still had it. A can of pork and beans'll bring five dollars now - unofficially, of course - price controls won't allow for selling it for more than what it brought before Impact."

He grinned, "Course, there ain't no pork and beans and not much of anything else for that matter to be found for sale - officially that is. Nobody's starving...yet... but ain't no one getting fat in town either. Plenty of folks out here in the country ain't eatin' too well as far as that goes. We don't lack for feed corn to the house so we'll have pone at least right on but my boys would be pretty shy on protein if it weren't for them eggs y'all been giving us. Don't think I'll forget that."

Ann said, "Mike, we've been friends and neighbors ever since we moved out here five years ago. I can't recall how many times you or your boys have helped us. That's what neighbors are about - good neighbors anyways. Those hens keep right on laying - Impact or no - and we're certainly not selling eggs to coworkers anymore. Better to share them with the folks who are important to us. I'd say you're making it up in kind right now."

Conversation faded and they rode on in silence. Melinda moaned softly but her condition did not change. At Archer Rd and I-75 they came to the checkpoint. A dozen wet, dejected looking people sat under the overpass finding what shelter they could against the never ending precipitation under the watchful eye of a trooper who looked like a boy dressed up for Halloween. There was just one other car in front of them at 7:30 in the morning on one of the main roads into Gainesville. Another trooper walked up to the driver's window and bent over to see inside. "Good morning. Do you have business in Gainesville?"

Mike leaned over so the trooper could see him, "I'm Deputy Mike Daniels, ASO, These are my neighbor's John and Ann Horne and their daughter Melinda. They're giving me a ride to work and taking their child to Shands. She's seriously ill and looks to need a doctor bad."

The trooper, a corporal from the collar tabs, belonging to the local Gainesville company, gave a cursory examination to Mike's uniform, glanced through the car but scarcely noted the rifle in plain sight in the back. He took out a pad in an aluminum box and leaned inside the window to escape the rain. He wrote down the names of the vehicle occupants, their destination, license plate number and reason for being in town. He then gave a carbon copy of the form to John. "This is your pass to be in town Mr. Horne. You'll need to be able to produce it if you're stopped. We've had trouble with looting and stealing from the refugees so we're trying to limit their movements until things can be better organized." He glanced at Melinda, "I sure hope they can help your little girl. God speed to you."

The makeshift gate swung up and John drove through. The traffic lights were blank but as there were virtually no cars to be seen moving this wasn't a problem. John glanced at Mike and asked, "Is it like that at every road into town?"

Mike nodded, "Yes, it is. If I weren't with you and Melinda not so obviously sick you might have been a spell longer getting through - might not have gotten into town at all. I expect they'll be moving that checkpoint out to Tower Road before long, maybe even as far as Parker Road. They're not trying to restrict movement in the country but with the fuel situation being what it is and all no one's much driving out there anyways"

He gave a glance back towards the overpass, "I wanted you to see that before I said anything. Once you get Melinda seen by a doctor you and I have to talk."

In sickness and in health...

The Shands emergency room was crowded which did not surprise him as it was crowded every time he'd ever been here over the years. It was also rather dirty which did surprise him but considering the circumstances he supposed he should have expected it. Occasionally a moan would be heard, sometimes from Melinda, mostly from others. A low, constant mutter of conversation filled the room as well the audio of the TV's mounted in the ceiling corners of the room - all tuned to different channels. As patients came and went John gradually moved his family closer to the one tuned to CNN. They'd been sitting for four hours and he fully expected to be waiting at least four hours more maybe much more. They'd seen the triage nurse in the first half hour of arriving - a tired, but efficient squad of them worked in the room's far corner - and he told them to be prepared for a lengthy wait. "Emergency services doesn't know how many refugees have made it into Gainesville since Impact but they do know that better than 50,000 have registered for services by now. Every hospital in town is inundated. If this rain doesn't let up soon it's going to get worse once we start having disease outbreaks. Your daughter's condition is serious but even that means a wait. Might as well make yourself comfortable."

John and Ann took turns holding Melinda and comforting her as best they could. She was conscious but not alert, her fever unabated. Ann left for the cafeteria in search of something for them to eat and John focused on the news.

CNN Breaking News - Reports are coming in from Paducah, Kentucky of the failure and collapse of the Kentucky dam on the Tennessee river. There are no reports of casualties yet but they are expected to be minimal as the river has been sixteen feet and rising above flood stage for days so most residents in the danger zones had already been evacuated. The Kentucky Dam was the final dam in the Tennessee Valley Authority series of dams on that waterway and one of the largest both in terms of volume of water retained by the structure and the circumference of its shoreline. The dam itself measured over 8,400 feet long with a height of 206 ft. Emergency warnings have been sent to all communities downstream along the Tennessee, Ohio, and Mississippi rivers all of which were already in extreme flood stages. Ohio and Mississippi river bridges that had just been reopened two days ago are now being closed again until the crest of the new flood has passed and they can be re-examined for safety. Dam safety experts state the dam was probably weakened by the 6.1 earthquake on the New Madrid fault of two weeks ago and further stressed by the record breaking rainfall lashing the nation since Impact. Local weather authorities tell us that sixty three inches of rain have fallen here since the asteroid struck. The remaining TVA dams are being evacuated until they can be inspected for safety. Experts say that with all dams already at maximum emergency water release that other possibly quake weakened dams may fail as well. Further details as they come in.

Officials with the Army Corps of Engineers reiterated today that the Mississippi lock and dam system has been inspected and found to be holding even with all dams being in full emergency water release. It is not expected that the Kentucky dam collapse will cause dam failures on the Ohio or Mississippi rivers though the flood prone areas which have not already been evacuated are being cleared now as a precaution. Corp engineers do state they expect significant damage to levees and other flood control structures along the lower Mississippi perhaps as far north as Memphis. The record flooding along the river is severely hampering rescue and recovery efforts in the now sunken city of New Orleans devastated by the Impact tsunami"

The National Weather Service reports Hurricane Dolly has now reached Category Three with further strengthening expected before she makes landfall on the Texas coast. Latest projections are that she will strike the coast between Port Arthur and Galveston tomorrow morning at approximately 9:00 a.m.

local time. Dolly is the third hurricane to have formed since Impact and weather experts predict more will form before the asteroid strike generated energy dissipates. Rescue and recovery personnel are being evacuated from the area along with surviving residents in flood prone locations.

This is CNN - more news after this.

A commercial was next and John tuned it out. Presently Ann came back with two large Styrofoam cups of steaming soup. "There's absolutely nothing in the vending machines, the Wendy's, Pizza Inn, and frozen yogurt place in the food court area are all closed but the cafeteria is open. Not much there either but they did have hot soup and I got plenty of crackers to put in. Reckon it'll have to do until we can get home." Melinda moaned softly at the smell of the food but wouldn't take any of it. Pushing away the outside world Ann and John willed strength and life into their daughter.

After a time their inward concentration was distracted when they heard the name "Melinda Horne" over the sound system. John had held Melinda in his lap for over an hour and realized his left leg had gone to sleep as he tried to stand but he held his daughter tight and limped to the examination room with Ann. Unlike the waiting area outside this room was clean and well lit. Melinda moaned occasionally and drew more tightly within herself as they waited. Finally, an hour after being shown into the room a knock came at the door and a man entered. John's eyebrows rose as he said, "Well hello Luke! They have department chairs doing ER work now?"

The man in the white coat looked up from the chart he was reading and replied, "Hey John! Haven't seen you in a while!" He gave a rueful grin, "I'm afraid ever since Impact if you have 'M.D.' after your name you work when and where you're needed. My research schedule is just wrecked! When was the last time we went shooting? Been four, five months now." His face fell and he continued, "Looks like we won't be shooting for fun for a long time to come. I see Melinda is in a bad way today. Set her up here on the table and we'll have a look."

The doctor examined the child with some difficulty as Melinda resisted being uncurled from her fetal position. She cried out as he palpated her abdomen. "It's as I expected. Her white count is very high. Looks like acute appendicitis but it hasn't burst yet." He pulled out a pad from his pocket. "Ordinarily", he explained as he wrote, "I'd schedule her for the OR and be done with it but we're critically short of surgical supplies now. Anesthetics are so low the chair of Anesthesiology has a team in the library researching the use of ether - ether! - because we'll soon be out of anything better.

I think we may be able get this under control with a heavy antibiotic regimen. We're very short of those too but not as bad as some other consumables. We'll bag her and give her the initial course intravenously here and replenish her fluids, she's looking dehydrated. If she responds well I'll give you this prescription for a ten day course to follow up the IV with. If not we'll schedule her for the OR. I want to be straight with you, she's likely to have a chronic inflammation problem until it's removed but if we can forestall surgery for a couple of weeks or, better yet, months we should be in better condition when supplies are replenished. If she responds I'll want to see her again in three days. Do you have enough fuel to come back into town again? Still seems strange to say that but it's an important consideration now."

Remembering what Mike had said as they passed Miguel's store John replied, "Well, we don't have a lot but we'll use what we have. We can come back."

"Good. There'll be a pass waiting for you at the desk to come back into town. The authorities are

restricting travel into and out of the city as I'm sure you've already found out. Frankly John, between you and I, some of what they're talking about makes me uncomfortable... but I'm needed here so we'll have to tough it out. I may not get to see you again if she responds to the antibiotics - I haven't worked like this since I was a resident! If I get a chance I'll bring Lisa out for a visit. She's always loved your country life. Good luck and we'll pray for Melinda."

He shook John's hand and gave Ann a hug and was gone. The door closed behind him and once again they were left with the bright white stillness of the examination room. Melinda moaned and curled herself tighter.

Home is where the heart is...

The rumped looking nurse slipped the I.V. catheter out of Melinda's arm, and taped a small bandage over the injection site. The girl's color was improving. "We'll need to keep her under observation for another couple of hours," the nurse explained.

The sense of relief John and Ann felt was so strong it was almost palpable. Melinda was sleeping soundly so John left Ann to sit beside her on her gurney in the hallway crowded with other patients on gurneys and in chairs - there was no other place to put her - while he went downstairs to get them something else to eat. The hospital cafeteria was largely empty of people and nearly so of anything to eat as well. He supposed the patients at least would be fed but visitors and staff looked like had to largely fend for themselves. Another consequence of Impact and he suspected it would get worse before it got better. He did manage to come up with two peanut butter sandwiches, more of the soup they'd had earlier, and two cups of coffee. He had just returned upstairs when Luke came down the hall. He examined the girl and read the new chart notes. "Turns out I've got a few minutes before I need to be in the OR so I wanted to check in again on Mel." he explained. "She seems to be responding well, no reaction to the antibiotics and she's not in as much apparent pain. You should be able to take her home in a couple of hours if she continues like this."

He reached into his coat pocket and took out some folded pages. "I wouldn't do this for many but I know you and you're not prone to foolishness. Since you're out in the country and may be able to find some of this stuff I made up a list of veterinary antibiotics that are equivalent to those which can be used to treat Melinda's appendicitis. This is in case we run out of medical antibiotics. I've been working with one of the vet school faculty to put it together in case we have to resort to expedients. There's brand names, generic names, and dosage equivalents there. Until we can remove the appendix it's going to be prone to periodic inflammation. These should keep matters from getting out of hand." His pager went off and he removed it from his belt and read the display. "That's my OR call, I have to go. Good luck to you and we'll be praying for Melinda. The time may come that it will be good to have friends in the country. Good bye."

The doctor walked quickly off down the hallway and disappeared around another corner. John and Ann studied the printouts that Luke had left them as they ate their dinner.

Darkness was beginning to fall as John carried his daughter out of the hospital to their car. He carefully stowed away the pass the trooper had given him earlier and the other one they'd need to come back into town they had picked up at the desk. They drove away from the hospital along Archer Road heading west and did not see but four other cars and two Humvees on the road with them for the three miles to the big shopping center just before reaching the Interstate. As he reached the area of the grocery store they began to hear sirens. Looking in the rear view mirror he could see Gainesville P.D. and Alachua Sheriff's Office cruisers with several Humvees and a military truck rapidly approaching from behind. He was considering pulling over to let them by when he cleared the restaurants in front of the shopping center so that he could see the grocery store itself and the reason for the force moving in. A large crowd of several hundred or more people were rioting in front of the store attempting to pull down the plywood covering the windows and doors. A Humvee was burning in the parking lot. He could see two camouflage clad bodies lying on the ground and hear gunshots, some of the from automatic weapons. In a tense voice John told Ann, "Get the rifle out of the back seat and your pistol out of the glove box!" as he stomped the accelerator to race towards the Interstate overpass. As he reached it he slowed

expecting to be stopped by the troopers at the roadblock but none were to be seen nor the Hummer that had been there earlier. He wondered if it were the one burning at the grocery store but he didn't wonder enough to stop. He kept a steady speed going through and passed under the bridge.

"If it weren't for the necessity of having Melinda seen again it would be a long time before we came back into town." John said as he breathed out a sigh of relief. "If matters are getting so bad that people are killing for food there's nothing in town that we need bad enough to come get it - except a doctor. You and Lisa were always tight, do you think you could convince her to try to talk Luke into coming out with us? That posh little neighborhood they live in is pretty close to the poor side of town. Might not take too much convincing I think."

Ann nodded her head, "I think it wouldn't take much either. With her and Heather there by themselves when Luke's at the hospital she's got to be scared about half to death now. You remember how reluctant she was when I taught her how to handle the little 20 gauge auto Luke bought her. I bet she's got it close by at all times now. When we come back in with Melinda I'll try to get over to their house and talk to her. Convincing Luke to come is going to be the hard part."

John considered for a moment and said, "I reckon so but much more of what we just saw he might just come. We'll know better in three days."

Passing through Archer they saw Miguel out working in his garden next to his house behind the store. They waved and he waved back. The rest of the trip home was completely uneventful. As they pulled up into the yard John could see his dad under the barn overhang skinning an animal. He waved as they got out of the car and went back to his task. After taking Melinda into the house and putting her to bed John went out to see what was up.

At first he thought the animal was a coyote - they were shy creatures but were occasionally seen around the homestead - then realized it was a German Shepherd. A Labrador pelt lay near by. "Dad, is that a dog? Why are you skinning it?"

Robert replied, "Saw these two and two more in the pasture chasing the chickens just before dark. They managed to kill one before I could get out with the shotgun so we'll be having chicken for supper tomorrow. I dropped these two right off from the barn, hit one more but didn't down him and the fourth got away clean. We've got more problems than dogs. While I was killing these two a boy jumped up from behind the mineral feeder in the pasture and hit the woods. Looked to be late teens, early twenties. Don't know who he is but I think I've seen him hanging around Miguel's. He startled me so bad when he jumped and ran that I missed the fourth dog. May have thought I was shooting at him from the way he leapt that fence at a run! Looks like we're going to need to keep someone in the barn at nights from now on. Reckon we can take it in rotation."

Nothing was said for a few moments as John paused to consider the implications of what his father had just related to him. "OK, but why are you skinning those dogs? "

"Why, for the pelts of course!", his father said in an exasperated tone. "Wally World isn't going to be opening anytime soon so we need to be thinking about where we're going to get our clothing from. I'll tan these two out with the fur on. Might come in handy this winter. Been reading your books and from what they say it's going to be a cold one. Come to think of it we'd best be putting away more firewood. We're going to be using a lot more than we ever have in the past if we have to use it to cook with regular and depend on it for house heat. We'll cook the carcasses and feed them. Between the dogs, the

pigs and the chickens they'll clean them up and it'll save on the stored feed."

His son nodded his head in agreement. "I need to talk to Mike if he's home yet. I reckon you're right about the clothing but I'm going to let *you* explain to Melinda about her new Labrador coat!" Laughing he headed back out into the rain towards Mike's house.

He was wondering if he could convince Ann to sleep in the barn with him. He suspected he wouldn't be very happy with her answer.

A deeper darkness

Ann stepped through and closed the door to Melinda's room as quietly as she could. Her temperature was steadily falling and was now under 100. She shook the thermometer down, rinsed it and dropped it into its little alcohol filled holder. Glancing out the kitchen window she could see her father-in-law working the two dog pelts and shook her head. Admittedly, it might well come down to needing to use the things but the idea of wearing a coat or whatever made out of someone's family pet underwhelmed her. She didn't even want to think how Melinda was going to take it. She had no problem helping her daddy butcher a chicken (most *especially* that nasty Aracauna rooster last year!) or nor even slaughtering a hog but wearing dog fur was probably going to be over the top!

She wondered what Mike wanted to talk to John about and hoped it wasn't going to be another one of those wild conspiracies he listened to on the shortwave. He and John had really been thick into that junk when they first moved out here but when credible evidence proved to be lacking for many of the rumors and theories that were flying then John lost interest, but not the gear and supplies that Mike had convinced them to buy. At least she'd finally gotten John to move all that junk out of the house and into the barn and workshop - she didn't have to clean out there nor stumble over it.

The power was on again - for now at least - so she poured herself a cold drink and went into the living room with the printouts that Luke had given them. After the Impact she was afraid they'd have to give up refrigeration for the duration with all that it implied for food storage and comfort. Fortunately, Robert pointed out that if they had even intermittent power they could still keep food cold by using the refrigerator as an old fashioned ice-box. They took everything out of the refrigerator freezer and stuffed it as full as they could with filled water containers then turned the freezer to its coldest setting. When the power was on the water froze solid. When the power was off the ice above kept the food below cool. They did much the same with all of the empty space they had in the chest freezer as well and they tried not to open either while the power was off to conserve as much cold air as possible. They all knew that if the weather stayed continually violent for months that one day the power would go off and might not come back on again - for a long time at least - but while they had it they were determined to make the most of it.

In the living room she went to the bookshelf where they kept the family medical books. The whole family had somewhat eclectic tastes in reading and experience so their collection had a rather eccentric feel to it. This time, however, she pulled down some standard references, the *Physicians Desk Reference*, *The Merck Veterinary Manual*, *Oxford Handbook of Clinical Medicine*, *Current Medical Diagnosis and Treatment*, *Medicine for Mountaineering*, *U.S. Special Forces Medical Handbook*, and *Where There Is No Doctor*. She didn't recognize some of the antibiotics that Luke had put on the list and she wasn't going to give her daughter anything she hadn't read about first. Most of the books were at least two or three years old some even more, medical books were expensive even with their educational discount, so they couldn't keep up with the latest and greatest. She reckoned though that if they were using them on animals they probably wouldn't be the latest generation antibiotics so she ought to be able to find at least a little something on them in one of their books. She pulled the coffee table close, sat on the couch, turned on the reading lamp and started in. It felt good to be in a book again and the Impacted outside world began to fade away.

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Outside lightning flashed and with the following thunderclap the rain began to pelt down harder. Sitting next to the fireplace John took another swallow of the awful Canadian whisky his host preferred, shook

his head and gave a rueful smile. "OK Mike," he said disbelievingly, "I can see your point about the President trying to Federalize the Guard. It's been done before when a governor won't play ball but that's a long way from a coup. I just don't see how they could realistically pull it off and besides how can the Federal Government launch a coup against itself?..."

Reaction

August 22 - 6:20 a.m.

He could just make out Jimmy through the darkness, rain, and morning mist. The point man was about sixty or seventy feet ahead and to the left. For the hundredth time John wondered why he had volunteered for this. He had no law-enforcement training and had never particularly been any good at walking silently in the woods. When he hunted it was usually from a stand where the game would come to him rather than stalking it himself. Fortunately, with three weeks of perpetual non-stop rain the ground and everything on it was completely saturated so even a rhinoceros like himself could move more or less quietly and what little noise he did make was lost in the rain.

Jimmy made the stop and cover motion so he froze behind a gallberry thicket. A moment later they heard the lowing of a cow. "Bingo!", he yelled in his mind, "We have you now you son-of-a-bitch!" They'd been tracking the men who'd rustled a half-dozen of Ed's cattle, shot and wounded Ed getting away when he surprised them in the act. About four hours ago Mike had come to the house with the news that Jimmy had located the rustlers and it was time for the posse to move on them. Naturally they'd headed for the thickest, swampiest, nastiest place they could find to hide rightly fearing that having shot Ed the community would not just accept the loss of the cattle and forget about it. Mike began to gesture and the posse began the slow process of enveloping the rustlers while trying not to give away surprise. As each man made what he felt to be a good position a single click on the radio was heard. John's click was the last.

A moment later Mike's voice rang out, "OK, it's over. This is the Alachua County Sheriff's Office. You're surrounded. Put down your guns, put your hands in the air, and walk out into the open." For a heartbeat nothing else was heard and John began to hope they'd comply but his hopes were shattered when gunfire erupted from the bayhead. They were met with a return of answering fire followed by screams. Two dark shapes darted from a tangled mass of vines twenty yards ahead of him firing wildly to one side in the direction from where Mike's voice had come. John's Remington came to his shoulder and the 870 spoke once, twice and fell silent. A ghastly gurgling and thrashing sound was heard from behind a palmetto so John eased around a large pine to one side with his shotgun at the ready. A boy lay on the ground, drumming his heels, eyes bulging as he clamped his arms over his abdomen. The front of his torso was a bloody mess. The boy's eyes focused on him and for a moment he thought he saw recognition before light and life faded from them. A second body lay just yards away. It had been the first and his shot there had been high, taking the man in the neck and head. He was quite dead.

John wondered at the lack of reaction he was feeling after having just violently killed two men. "Shock," he thought, "It's shock. Later there'll be a reaction." He then realized there were voices calling, Jimmy, Mike, his dad. He'd tried to talk his dad out of coming, he was approaching seventy but he and Ed were friends and he wouldn't stay home. Age or not he was still better in the woods than John was he had to admit. Mike's voice rang out, "John! You alright?! John!" He croaked at first, as if he hadn't spoken for a long time, then managed to get out, "I'm here! I've got two down - both dead. I recognize one of them." The young man he'd seen at Miguel's a couple of times in the past with the baggy pants and hat turned sideways. He was almost certain it was the same boy who'd been in his pasture when dad killed the first two dogs last week.

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Mike had been trying to convince him all week that the Federal government was attempting to seize

power but his success had been spotty at best. "Mike," he tiredly tried to explain, "the Federal government already *has* that power *now*! They don't need to seize it."

Exasperated, Mike doggedly continued, "Not like this John! I'm not talking about the day to day kinds of things like before the Impact. We're talking about the suspension of civil government and civil rights. The Feds want to assume direct administrative control of all the Eastern Seaboard states. Homeland Security wants to supplant state governments entirely and institute a regional principality with county and city levels just being lesser bureaucratic levels of the greater whole."

John grinned and retorted, "Would we notice any practical difference? Country's been like that for decades. Besides, how could the possibly pull it off without the active cooperation of the very state, county, and municipal governments you claim they're trying to supplant? Most civil rights are already trashed, the court system washed out to sea along with everything else! I don't like a lot of what I see either but that doesn't make it into some sort of dark conspiracy. When we pull things back together we'll be able to go back to normal civil government. They're killing each other for food in town, we've got thieves stealing anything that isn't watched over twenty four hours a day out here, feral dogs starting to pack up and attack livestock, there's not a tenth of the sheriff's deputies needed to cope with it, and if it gets any worse the Guard isn't going to be enough either. Where in Hell would the Feds get the kind of manpower they'd need to pull off some sort of dictatorial coup like you're talking about? There's not nearly enough surviving active duty military left in the nation to pull it off and that's assuming they'd all cooperate and support such a plan which I most certainly do not think quite a few of them would!"

With a long sigh Mike said, "Well, you're right. We're all short of manpower and that's a fact. The Sheriff just let it be known this morning that he's going to reinstitute the Posse here in Alachua county. In fact, I put your name down to be contacted. If you're able bodied, got your own gun, don't have a record, and are a known, respected member of the community then you'll be asked to join. A deputy, active or reserve, will lead each group but we'll be looking for potential leaders who'll be sworn in as 'Special Reserve Deputies' to serve more or less as local constables. I think you'd do OK that way."

With a chuckle John replied, "I've never had any law enforcement training at all Mike, and honestly not much interest either. I suppose I do have a civic responsibility to join the Posse, but I can't see myself as a lawman."

In a serious tone, Mike came back, "That's exactly what we want John. Somebody who'll be conscientious about the job but who is doing it because he feels it has to be done, not because he likes doing it."

Continuing on, "I can see I'm not going to convince you about the Feds, but consider this. There have been several reports already the Army is bringing troops back from overseas. Supposedly ten thousand have been brought back from Korea already. If that isn't enough they might just bring in a few blue helmets too."

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"Mamma, Dr. Luke said my appendicitis was clearing up when we saw him two *days* ago!", Melinda pleaded with her mom, "I feel FINE! I'm SICK of being cooped up in the house! Can't I at least show Heather the routine for feeding the animals and gathering the eggs? She wants to learn and we can share the work."

Ann considered for a moment and relented, "OK punkin, you're right. You've been moping around the house getting crankier by the day so I reckon you're well enough to do your chores. Show Heather the ropes and you two can work out how you want to divide them between you subject to her mother's approval when she gets back from the clinic in Archer. You be sure you wear your .22 AT ALL TIMES while you're outside but you KEEP that thing in its holster do you hear? When your daddy has cleared Heather to handle it then you can let her wear it if she wants but NOT before then! He'll take a switch to all three of us if he finds you've been misbehaving with it after he gave it to you. Now scoot and let me get these dishes done before the power goes again."

Continuity - Part One

The shots he heard coming from in front of him rolled past in a dreamy, underwater, slow-motion fashion. The tangled mass of wax myrtle and cat brier shook as the two rustlers desperately attempted to flee the bag they found themselves in, shooting wildly, with the sound of each shot slowly flowing past him. Again the shotgun came to his shoulder, shoved against him, and he could see the charge of buckshot leaving the tube in a brief spurt of flame and smoke, the pattern beginning to spread before impacting and spinning the rustler into a downward spiral ending in death.

His arm pulled the slide backwards, the spent shell he had no conscious memory of seeing kicked outwards to his right and his arm pushing the slide forward again to bring the shotgun back into battery. Again the shove and the charge of shot exiting the muzzle, leaping forth, spreading like a lethal rain to impact the boy's torso. The pellets dimpled his clothing and disappeared into his body, causing him to stumble and fall. Again the slide action ejected the spent shell and rammed a fresh one home. Minutes went by as John stepped around the big pine tree to get a clear view and there on the ground was the boy laying there staring at him intently with an expression that clearly communicated, "You shot me for a cow?" before closing his eyes as if to take no more notice. As if coming across a vast plain he heard voices - some seemed to be the wailing of the damned, others seemed familiar, Mike, Jimmy, dad - all calling to him. He felt his voice rumbling upward from his chest, not quite making it, then rumbling forward again - "I'm here. I've got two down!" or was it "I've got to go down!" He still wasn't sure who he'd been responding to when he awoke.

His mouth tasted like the floor of the hen house and his head felt dangerously overpressured and at risk of bursting along his cranial sutures. He closed his eyes and laid his head back down on the pillow, a gassy belch bringing the taste of bourbon back into his mouth. "That was stupid," he berated himself in the throbbing confines of his head, "that whisky is irreplaceable and you're still dreaming. It's just a delayed stress reaction - it'll pass in time." He knew he was too awake now to go back to sleep so he slid out of bed as quietly and tried to focus on the clock radio on the headboard - 4:30 a.m. With the violence of the weather gradually subsiding the power was staying on for longer stretches which suited him fine since he hated listening to the ticking of the big brass wind up alarm clock which would have sounded cacophonous in his present state. Of course, if they started power rationing like they were threatening to do he'd have to suffer with it anyways. Making his way into the bathroom he voided his bladder, washed his face and scrubbed his teeth thoroughly to get the hungover taste out of his mouth. He pulled on yesterday's pants and went into the kitchen. He really, really wanted a couple of ripe bananas to soothe his stomach but they'd eaten their last nearly three weeks ago and God only knew when they'd ever see another. Bananas would grow here but they were really still too tropical of a fruit to make for more than a novelty so he'd never planted any. He made do with a cold glass of water from the fridge and a bowl of cold cereal. Now that he'd become accustomed to drinking the fresh, raw milk they traded eggs for with Ed's wife he kicked himself for not having done it years sooner! They had goats, but not milking animals. He'd see about changing that when he could.

He washed his face again at the kitchen sink then crept into the bedroom to retrieve his clothes to dress in the living room. He stuck his head in Melinda's room - Melinda's AND Heather's room now - and they were both asleep. There wasn't a spare bed so rather than share one the girls had elected to eliminate the bed and make what they called a "sleeping nest" on the floor. They seemed happy with the arrangement and it freed up a bed to be used by Lisa Hatcher.

They'd given it their best shot but nothing would convince Luke to leave town. He did, however, readily agree to allow Lisa and Heather to come and the females were all too happy to make the move.

It had been a few years since Lisa had worked in the field but upon a time she'd been an RN working in a trauma clinic in Cincinnati which put her a long leg up on anyone else in the neighborhood in terms of medical skill and experience. When Luke came to UF and made chair they decided Lisa would stay home and concentrate on home and family as well as getting serious about a promising writing career. Her third book was to have been published in the fall but the Impact had washed away her publisher when it washed away New York City. As a doctor and department chair Luke rated a small amount of gasoline each week which he elected to use in coming out to see his wife and children and catching everyone up with the news. During the week he slept at the health center in his office - their posh neighborhood having proved to be unsafe when civil order began to decay. So far he'd only managed to make it once but felt that as the situation settled he should be able to accomplish the trip more often. No one was sure when it would be safe for his family to move back into town. From what Mike told them those who could leave Gainesville for a safer place were doing so as more poured into the town from everywhere.

Continuity - Part Two

His fast broken, John pulled on his boots - he rotated boots each day to give each pair a chance to dry before wearing them again - and stepped onto the back porch, pulled on his slicker and slogged out to the barn. The grass wasn't dead - yet - but he figured it surely wouldn't take much longer before it simply drowned or died of some fungal disease. He thanked God that he'd bought hay in July when it was cheap rather than waiting they way some did. They were feeding it as sparingly as they could to make it last and it would just have to do. For all he knew the rain would go on all the way until it turned into snow.

Stepping into the warm, heavy smell of the barn he saw his dad working another pelt. At more than three weeks since Impact the food situation for many was getting so desperate they were eating the dog food themselves - assuming they had even that - so now there was a growing problem of abandoned dogs turning feral and beginning to hunt in packs. He regretted not having bought land even further away from town but it was done now and would just have to be coped with. The problem would eventually resolve itself he figured between people killing the dogs to eat them and others killing them to eliminate a predatory threat.

Until then they had to keep a close eye on their livestock and they did not allow Melinda or Heather to leave the property without being properly armed. Mel's little .22 revolver would kill even the biggest dog but it might not stop a large dog in time before it hurt her so now when they left sight of the house to go to a neighbor's house they carried Lisa's little 20 gauge loaded with buckshot and slugs. Mel took it in stride but Heather was reluctant to have anything to do with the weapon until John had made it clear that she wouldn't be allowed to leave the yard without demonstrating competency. The thought of a ten year old being allowed to go and do when a fourteen year old had to stay home was enough to goad her past her distaste. Even then she was cavalier about gun safety. Until she'd forgotten about being careful where she allowed the gun to point just once too often after John had corrected her and he demonstrated the gravity of her offense with a spanking and some time standing in the corner after her mother declined her appeal. At the next encounter she displayed the proper attitude to the relief of everyone.

Picking up a pitchfork John began forking out soiled bedding into the loader bucket of the tractor. They had to keep the manure pile covered to conserve nutrients due to the rain but it would be as valuable as gold when the rain stopped (someday) and they could apply it to garden and field. As he was doing so he talked with his dad about the nine pelts tacked to the barn walls, the range they were taken at, number of shots fired, efficacy of the particular caliber, cartridge, and bullet type. Robert had more hunting experience (and interest) than John but it was his son who did their ammo reloading. It was a way to share each other's company doing something they both enjoyed. Now it was invaluable. One of the pelt's had been taken by Ann and Melinda accounted for two, with John and Robert accounting for the remaining six at three each. They'd also killed several more that hadn't been worth skinning and thought they'd fatally shot but hadn't been able to retrieve several more. Everyone in the neighborhood heartily cursed any and all who owned large dogs that just let them go feral without having the intestinal fortitude to kill them. John's dogs - Jake, Andy, and Bad - wouldn't touch dog meat, cooked or not, but the hogs didn't care a bit nor did the chickens. John still resented the loss of one goat, four chickens and a turkey to the predators and the use of the ammunition but at least they were getting something in return. If it turned as cold as he feared it might this winter they'd all be glad of a pair of dog skin mittens and the black chow pelt his dad was working would make a nice hood lining for their coats.

Six a.m. rolled around and his dad turned on the barn radio to catch the morning news. The intro came and went, the quicky weather forecast was as usual - rain and more rain -and then they were into the national and international news.

President Bush reiterated today to the Chinese leadership that their attempts to forcibly incorporate Taiwan into the People's Republic of China would not be taken lightly by the U.S. stressing that America was quite prepared to meet force with force if no other solution could be found. 'The American Eagle has been hurt but it would be a grievous error for the Dragon of China to forget that she still has her talons. America will not allow the people of Taiwan to be forcibly incorporated into the P.R.C. against their will and any further attempts by the Chinese navy to land troops on Taiwan will result in the U.S. Navy sending it to the bottom.'

Robert looked up at John who looked back at him. "Son of a bitch", he said in a voice of soft wonder.

Getting by

"Pass the okra, please" Robert said and Heather handed him the bowl. As he spooned out another helping onto his plate he remarked, "I reckon it was inevitable. A month ago the U.S. was the global superpower and carried a big stick. Now we're hurt and the whole world knows it. Everybody who wants to jump someone else is going to try it now that they think we can't do anything about it nor back up what's left of the U.N. if they decide to interfere."

Lisa observed "It was probably chance that China was the first to act in a way the President decided he could not afford to ignore."

Robert nodded in agreement, "Now he has to slap her down - hard - so that the smaller dogs will stay under the porch or every one of them will come out and start yapping at our heels. Likely we could handle any one of them but not everyone at the same time."

Ann asked, "Do you think it might go nuclear? What can we do if it does?"

He swallowed a mouthful of okra then said, " If China gets away with taking Taiwan then we'll probably see others make their moves right quick so he's going to do whatever it takes to convince anyone and everyone that we still can. Don't know what we've lost in the way of ships and planes but it's been more than three weeks and we haven't heard from Carla. She was supposed to be in port at Norfolk about the time of the strike according to her last letter so we may have lost ships that were at the dock. We do know the East Coast bases were destroyed and probably the Gulf and Pacific Coast bases were damaged. Resupply is probably going to be tough so the President is likely going to be reluctant to take major losses in a toe-to-toe stand up fight with China. Wouldn't surprise me at all if he ordered nukes."

John took a long swallow of his iced tea and observed, "Well, if we zap them we zap them. I can't see much we can do to get ready for it here that we're not doing already. I don't think China has the same throw weight of nukes that we have so I don't think she'd attempt a general exchange but if she does we're not downwind of any likely targets. An EMP burst could really hurt us long term but we're living with on again, off again power and telephones now as it is. If she did nuke mainland U.S. targets she's got to know we'd well and truly unload on her. Wouldn't surprise me if Russia didn't move in on some of her western and northern territory once the fallout settled. Probably going to mean fuel and other supplies are going to get even tighter. Surely it's got to have rained monstrous amounts in China too, you'd think she'd be too distracted to be worrying with Taiwan."

The conversation went into deep shade so for a time everyone attended to the matter of their plates.

"Daddy," Melinda spoke up, "Timmy Daniels tells me that a market is starting up to the old fire station in Archer. Do you reckon we can go tomorrow? It's supposed to open at 9:00 on Saturday morning and Sunday afternoon after church if enough people show up."

John considered the idea as he had another forkful of peas and rice. He swallowed and replied, "Mel, we don't have much to sell or trade at a market right now. Going to have to hold on to what feed we've got and it's for sure the garden is shot and we may not even get a Fall garden in this year. With daylight being so short from the cloud cover and range being so poor from the rain the hens aren't laying like they should and we're pretty much either eating what they lay or are trading the surplus eggs already."

Mel's face fell and she turned back to her plate. There was silence at the table.

"But," John continued after a moment, "I suppose we could at least go and look. Sooner or later this rain's got to end and we'll eventually be producing more food than we're going to need - I hope anyways - it'd be good to have a place to trade or sell it. Not looking forward to a ten mile round trip in the rain but I reckon we can go. We'll go Saturday morning this time and if it looks like it's going to take off we'll go Sunday afternoons afterwards. I've had a hankering to go back to church and we can attend the morning services first. At least for the folks in the country I think more of them would come on a Sunday so they could go to church and not have to make two trips into town since they're going to have to walk or ride a bicycle or horse."

At this Mel, Heather, Ann and Lisa smiled. John glanced at his father who quirked an eyebrow but said nothing. "Reckon y'all have been feeling a little confined here it looks like. It'll be good to get out. Ten miles on a bicycle in the rain though."

"Can't we drive daddy?" Melinda asked.

"No, honey, we can't" John explained, "I did have fuel stored before the Impact but we've used a fair amount of it. With no knowing when we'll be able to get more what we've got is going to have to be saved for necessary work and emergencies. Radio says that limited fuel shipments are supposed to start this week and that rationing would be started for those folks who have a demonstrated need. Lisa here being one of the primary clinic personnel in Archer ought to be in line for a fuel ration I'd think. If we're careful and conservative we might be able to get by on that but it's too soon to tell. Shouldn't take us more than 45 minutes or so to get to Archer on the bikes, even in the rain. We can take clothing in dry bags and change there."

The mood lifted somewhat at the table - most especially when Ann and Heather brought out the blueberry pie they'd made for dessert. As she handed him his slice Heather asked, "Uncle John, would you teach me to shoot a rifle like Mel?"

John glanced at Lisa who nodded so he said, "Well sure, honey, I'll teach you to shoot. We can start on the basics tonight before you go to bed if you like. Taking an interest in shooting?"

Before Heather could reply Mel spoke up and said, "Stevie Daniels said he won't take anyone hunting with him if they can't shoot" then took a bite of pie. Heather went red in the face and whirled around to stare daggers at Melinda.

A chuckle arose from the table and he said with a glint in his eye, "I see. Well then, in that case I'll not only have to teach you how to shoot but how not to embarrass a young man when you can outshoot him!"

Endings and Beginnings

John was dreaming of taking a cruise to the Bahamas when Big Red's crowing in the hen house woke him up. "Why do roosters have to crow an hour and a half *before* dawn!" he mentally muttered to himself and rolled over to go back to sleep. For a moment or two he lay still trying to slip back into his dream when the sound - or rather lack of it - that he should have been hearing brought him fully awake. He sat upright in bed and said, "It's NOT raining!" Leaping out of bed he ran to the window and threw it open. Sure enough he could hear no rainfall but water dripping from the eaves of the house. He ran into the living room in his drawers then remembered Lisa and Heather, went back into the bedroom and wrapped himself in his housecoat and went back and out the front door to stand in the yard. Ann groggily stepped out onto the porch to say, "John, what on Earth are you doing standing in the yard? It's 4:30 in the morning!" He saw his father step out of the barn. John stood face up to the sky. It was still cloudy and overcast, the stars were not to be seen but no rain fell on him. "It's not raining Ann! It's stopped! It's not raining!" he shouted as he ran back up on the porch, grabbed his wife and swung her around and kissed her. They went down the steps and stood in the yard again as his father walked up.

In minutes the entire house was awake and standing in the yard looking up at the blackness overhead rejoicing over the lack of rain.

"Cool!" Heather said and squelched her toes in the wet grass with Melinda.

"Thank God!" Lisa said passionately, "These bike rides have been really getting hard to take!"

"Do you think it's stopped for good?" Ann asked, "I mean, the Impact induced rain? Is it ending?"

John said, "Probably not. I expect it'll rain off and on for a while longer yet until the last of the asteroid strike energy dissipates but I think this is a sign that it's beginning to wind down. I wonder how much we've had since Impact? Anyone heard lately, I missed the news last night."

Robert replied, "News last night said we were supposed to top seventy two inches total since the strike sometime last night or this morning. I think I've had enough of standing in the mud so I'm going in to fix a pot of coffee."

Everyone had seen as much of nothing as they cared to see so they all went back inside and set about preparing breakfast - two hours early but no one wanted to go back to bed."

Melinda asked, "Do you think we'll see the clouds break today? It'll be good to see the sun again. I've been feeling like a mushroom."

Her father said, "I don't know but it's a hopeful sign. Clouds have got to break up sooner or later."

John and Robert went into the barn to put fresh bedding down and feed the goats. The chickens wouldn't come off their roosts for another couple of hours yet so they'd come back to put their scratch down after breakfast. They opened all the doors and windows into the barn to promote air flow. Even the animals seemed excited with the younger goats bouncing off the walls.

After breakfast the six o'clock news came on and the end of the rainfall was the lead story. The official weather service reading was for seventy two and three quarters inches of rain from the first day until the rain had stopped at just past three a.m. in Gainesville but as expected the forecast was for more rain

in the late morning or early afternoon. The meteorologists did say they thought the worst of the Impact induced rainfall was over and the sun was expected to put in its first appearance in weeks over the course of the next several days. Even the news that hurricane Gustav had reached Category Three and was turning northwest towards the Florida peninsula from its present location several hundred miles beyond the remains of the Bahamas did not diminish their brightened spirits.

While Mel and Heather stayed behind to wash the breakfast dishes and mind the baby the adults went outside to survey the garden. If the rains were going to ease up it would be possible to work the soil once it had a chance to drain. Fortunately, the garden was on a slight rise so water ran off quickly. "We've got enough gasoline still that we shouldn't have any problems turning up the present garden area and there's enough usable room that we should be able to just about triple it in size." John observed, "It's going to mean a lot of labor but it'll greatly extend the food storage and maybe even give us enough to trade at the market. If we keep winter greens going we'll be able to keep up egg production through the cold time and they should fetch a good price. I didn't see but one other person trading eggs last weekend and she sold out right quick."

Robert bent down and picked up a handful of soil and examined it. "After six feet of rain we've probably had a serious loss of nutrients. Even with fertilizer this Fall's garden is likely not going to produce the way we'd expect. We'll need to expand but we might not have as much to trade as we might think. Been reading your books and they said something about increased levels of ultraviolet light after an impact event. We're going to need to find what can take higher UV and what can't so we won't waste seed, fertilizer and time."

John studied the blank, gray sky for a moment then said, "Well, the Impact was smaller than the ones that were modeled so maybe we won't have so much of a UV problem but you're right. Somewhere I've got a list of crops that will withstand higher UV levels and those that won't. We'd better find it. I seem to recall the grains were OK but some of the beans weren't. I suspect we'll get cold weather early this year so we'd better be sure to plant cold hardy crops as well. We've never grown oats before but we've got a couple of hundreds pounds of whole oats in the feed cans. We should try out an acre or two, they'll grow through the winter and be ready for harvest about the time we want to put in the corn. I think we can even use them for winter grazing if we manage it carefully."

Ann turned and looked the workshop, "We had a lot of trouble with that rototiller last Spring. Have you tried to crank it yet?"

"No" John replied, "Not yet, but this time I made sure there was plenty of fuel stabilizer in it when I put it away. Probably ought to sharpen the tines too. It'll be a few days at least before the grounds dry enough to work so we'll have plenty of time to get all the equipment running. Sure hope the pasture recovers, we're going to need all the grass growth we can get before frost to make the hay last."

They were all walking towards the orchard when Melinda came running up from the house. "Daddy!", she said out of breath, "There's three soldiers at the gate in a Hummer and they say they want to talk to you!"

Tension - Part One

The group walked towards the front of the property. John said to his dad, "Until we know what they want I think maybe you'd better take the family into the house while I talk to these soldiers at the gate - you'll be able to see me from the house."

His dad nodded and led the family into the house as his son walked around the outside towards the front gate and the awaiting troopers. As he approached he could see the men and their equipment looked like they'd seen a lot of use. He put out his hand and said, "Howdy, I'm John Horne. My daughter says you were asking for me?"

The older looking of the three shook his hand and said, "Good morning, Mr. Horne, I'm Sgt. Bob Nichols, Eastern Recovery Command. We're here to inventory your livestock and feed pursuant to the National Recovery Executive Directive."

A puzzled look cross John's face, "Excuse me sergeant, you're here to inventory my what?"

Sergeant Nichols adopted an affable smile and explained, "Your livestock and feed sir. Under the powers of the National Recovery Executive Directive all farms are to be surveyed to determine the extent of their surplus livestock and feed grains so they can be utilized in recovery efforts. Once your surplus has been determined the Eastern Recovery Command will issue a requisition, determine the fair market value, and issue you payment for your products. Right now we're just inventorying what is on hand and the experts back at the HQ will then determine your surplus and cut the appropriate requisitions. Based on the size of your recorded acreage this shouldn't take more than twenty or thirty minutes at the most and we'll be out of your hair."

John let his voice take on a neutral expression, "I see, or at least I think I do. Sergeant, how are you defining what is and is not a 'farm'?"

"Sir, I don't get to define anything. A list was generated at the regional HQ at Camp Blanding and sent down to the local HQ, a small portion of which was given to me. Your name is on the list as a farmer. I see a barn, pasture, and fields. Sure looks like you're a farmer to me."

"Ah so," John replied, "Then much is explained. Someone is obviously working with county records which states our acreage and structures and came to the probably not unreasonable conclusion that we farm for a living. Unfortunately this is not true - my wife and I both work for the University. We don't sell any agricultural commodity products or anything else on the market - other than a few dozen eggs a week from my flock of yard hens. What with the weather and all even they aren't laying like they should so between my family, the family we've taken in since the Impact, and what we trade to the neighbors even those are all used up. Whoever generated your list is mistaken."

Tension - Part Two

"Yes sir," the sergeant continued, "but the fact is you *are* on the list which means I am obligated to inventory your livestock and feed. The experts back at the HQ will compare this to the number of people living here on the property and will then determine what your surplus is."

"Sergeant," a note of determination crept into John's voice, "I've just explained to you that we are not farmers and we do not sell agricultural commodities. This is a private home and what animals we have are for the consumption of my family, dependents, and immediate neighbors. Surely this 'Executive Directive' you mention was not intended to be used to search the homes of private individuals to seize their private property."

"Mr. Horne, I'm just a sergeant. I don't interpret policy, that's for officers, but I do carry out my orders and they are to inventory *your* livestock and feed. I have my orders and the authority given to me by the regional Recovery HQ. I must ask you to cooperate or at the very least to stand aside and not hinder us."

"I'm sorry sergeant," John tried to sound conciliatory, "but I'll have to decline your offer to search my home. Civil law still holds sway here and I do not believe your 'Eastern Recovery Command' has the valid legal authority to search private homes without a duly executed search warrant served by a sworn law enforcement officer - neither of which you seem to have. "

"Mr. Horne, I have tried to be reasonable with you but you are unwilling to cooperate. I have thirty other places besides yours to inventory before I can call it a day and you're holding up the program. Allow me to make it plain for you - either cooperate, get out of the way, or we'll have to restrain you while we conduct our business."

John was surprised at how steady his voice sounded as he spoke in a quiet manner to the trooper. "Sergeant, I presume you're familiar with the Uniform Code of Military Justice?"

This took the trooper by surprise so he blinked and said, "Yes sir, it's required of all troops. Why?"

"Then you are aware of the stringent requirements the UCMJ places on disobeying illegal orders?"

An edge crept into the Sgt's voice, "Mr. Horne, I've reviewed my orders quite thoroughly and I have found nothing in them that I interpret to be illegal..."

"But I do Sergeant Nichols. As a private citizen of these United States I find your orders to be illegal and as such I am justified in resisting their execution - if necessary by unmitigated act."

"Mr. Horne, are you threatening me?"

"Sergeant Nichols, if you intend to attempt to carry out these illegal orders which you have been given by whatever misguided individuals are presently in charge of this Eastern Recovery Command then, yes, you may construe this as a threat."

"Mr. Horne," the sergeant's voice was very cool, "that pistol on your belt isn't going to do you much good with the three of us standing here with rifles. Now just stand aside and let us get on with our job."

"Sergeant, as I've told you before my family lives here but there is only myself standing here in front of you. You may not see them but right now we are betting our lives - yours and mine - that they can see you - through rifle scopes. Your body armor will not avail you. The second you attempt to lay hands on me or draw your weapons you, your troops, and your Hummer will never be seen again. I honestly and truly do not want any trouble with you but I cannot allow you to endanger the lives of my family." The two troopers became very still and the sergeant's hand eased slowly away from his holstered pistol towards which it had been gravitating. "Mr. Horne, let's not be rash now. You really don't want to start this kind of trouble. We are NOT here to endanger ANYONE - most especially not your family. All we want to do is to inventory your animals and feed so that whatever you don't need can be distributed to the hungry. You've got to know there are tens of thousands of refugees in this county alone and a hell of a lot more in the other interior counties. Food is getting tight and is going to get tighter before it gets better. It's everything the Guard and civil authorities can do to keep order and if things get much hungrier it won't be enough. There's not enough active duty troops in the States to seriously back them up without resorting to killing people - a lot of people. Surely you don't want it to come to that."

"No, sergeant, I don't want it to come to that but you and I both know that it's almost certainly going to in spite of however much food your 'Recovery Command' can 'requisition.' What you're proposing to do very much threatens the survival of my family because you and I both know that these faceless bureaucrats you are toadying for will surplus away my family's food supply until we are in the same straits of starvation that the refugees are in. I've told you twice now we DON'T raise commodity livestock or crops. We have NO surplus. Everything we are capable of producing at the present time is consumed within a half mile of this house keeping my family, dependents, and my neighbors are alive. With any luck and by the Grace of God we'll make it through to next Spring with sufficient breeding stock and seed left to ramp up our production and maybe by then we'll be able to do some real farming but right now we have just enough to try to survive on while leaving enough to have *something* to farm with next Spring. Let your Recovery Command get us the seed, fertilizer and fuel and we'll grow food to feed the starving for all we're worth but you cannot have the food my family must have to survive the coming winter. If you try to cross my property line by force you will be met with force. I realize you are only trying to carry out the orders you have interpreted to be lawful but I do NOT interpret them to be lawful and we will NOT comply. "

"I am offering you the opportunity to go in peace. Please take advantage of it. Our conversation has come to an end." With that John stepped two paces back, keeping his hands clear of his holster.

The sergeant's jaw worked and he looked as though he was going to attempt to carry on with his arguments. He stopped, slowly turned towards his two troopers and said, "Get in the Hummer! HQ got us into this ---- and they're going to get us out of it!" Keeping his hands clear he walked to his vehicle and got in with his men, started the motor, turned around and pulled onto the road going back the way he came.

John waited until they were no longer visible around the bend then let out a long, long sigh of relief as he turned around. The front door opened and his father stepped out with his deer rifle followed by Melinda with her .22 rifle, Lisa with one of John's rifles, Heather with the little 20 gauge, and Ann with her .243.

"I may have just gotten us into some deep ----," he said as he stepped up onto the porch. "This problem is bigger than just us - it affects the entire community and we need to let them know what they are in for from this 'Eastern Recovery Command.' Mel, you and Heather run over to Mike's place and ask them to come here right now, tell them it's urgent. If Mike's not there, ask Kate to come. When you're

done there go tell Jimmy. Ann, you go and get Ed and Rick behind him. Dad and Lisa, take the truck and go to Miguel's then work your way back towards here. We've got to move fast. They're gone for now but they're not going to take this lying down and when they come back they'll be in force. Almost everyone out here is in the same position as we are and have as much, maybe more to lose than we do. If we act fast and stand united as a community we might be able to resolve this somehow where no one gets hurt."

The house split up and began making their appointed rounds. John went into the workshop and began opening up some long sealed surplus ammunition cans. "Dear God", he thought, "Mike may have been right!"

Action - Part One

Within ten minutes of the children's departure Kate Daniels and her two older boys arrived at the house followed soon after by Melinda, Heather, Jimmy Bryant and his brother Don who had come to stay with him. Not long after Ann came back with two more of their neighbors - Ed Strickland and Rick Young. Their faces grew grave as John explained to them the encounter he'd had with the soldiers and the implications it held for them all. They'd just begun to discuss possible options when Robert and Lisa came back in the truck with four more in the back. John knew the name of only one - Steve, who he'd met at Miguel's from time to time - and three others who he'd seen in Archer but had never spoken with before but who turned out to live between them and Miguel. He explained the situation to them and just as he was finishing Miguel arrived driving a large flat bed Ford with his sons Roberto, and Albert and seven others John assumed were Miguel's neighbors. Once again he launched into an explanation of the National Recovery Executive Directive and its implications.

Jimmy said, "Goddamnit! The Sheriff's Posse just killed four men for rustling and here comes the government to do the same thing and call it 'requisitioning'! We're all going to be hard put to avoid starving before next year's crops come in if the winter is as bad as John says it's going to be. If they take what they please of our livestock and feed we'll starve for sure!"

"Well, there are a lot of refugees in Gainesville, Ocala, Lake City, up to Newberry, over to Palatka and probably a lot of other places that I haven't heard of.", a woman said who John hadn't met before but who had come with Miguel, "The government's got to feed them. It's only natural they look to area farmers for the food."

"But that's just the problem Angela," Miguel explained, "Except for Ed here, none of us here **are** farmers. I doubt that any of us here have made more than pocket change from what we raise on our land and with grocery deliveries stopped we're eating it all. Even that's not quite enough. Maybe Ed here has enough cattle that he could let some go but what are they going to pay for them with and how are they going to determine their worth? Do you know what a dollar is worth now? Government price controls won't let food products be sold for more than ten percent over what they brought a month ago but there's very little to be bought from price controlled suppliers. Flour went for a dollar twenty five a pound at the new Archer market last weekend. Next weekend I expect it'll be at least a dollar and a half, maybe more. Since this is the government they're going to pay what the price control board says the cattle are worth and pay for them with dollars that lose value every day. They'll pay a pittance for what they take and we'll be short of food with no way to get more"

Rick said, "They're not searching my place and that's a fact. I've got my sister and her kids with me and we're all losing weight as it is. As soon as the weather gets cold we're going to butcher my two pigs so we can stop feeding them. Like as not we'll be eating the pig feed before anything we can plant comes in."

Ed Strickland joined in, "Well..., I'm willing to sell them cattle. What with having lost that last cutting of hay to the rain and the possibility of a prolonged winter I'm not going to be able to feed them all so someone might as well eat them. I'll be damned if they'll just waltz in and tell me how many I'll sell and for how much though! I'll sell for a reasonable price but I'll decide how many I'll sell, not them."

Kate Daniels said, "John, I've got a message into Mike over the radio to come here right away and I told him what Heather and Mel told me. He said he was on the way but he didn't know what he'd be able to do. Do you have a plan or anything?"

John paused for a moment before speaking, "Well, the most important thing is to not let them take the food we're going to need to survive the winter and the second most important thing is to make sure no one gets hurt. I can't help but think that if the whole community presents a visibly united front they'll listen to reason... They'll probably listen better if we can get them at a disadvantage though where they can't damage our homes."

He turned, looked at Jimmy and asked, "You were in the infantry in Vietnam so you've had some experience in this. Is there some place we can box them up and make them listen to us?"

The man considered for a moment before replying, "Yeah, I think if we can barricade the road on just this side of Skunk Bend where the tree line crowds the road on both sides we can block them there. Of course, it all depends on what they come with. Nothing we have is going to trouble even an APC much less any real armor. A few Hummers and a couple of trucks or something we can make an attempt with."

Ann put in, "When they left all they knew they were dealing with was just us and Lisa. If they think there's just four adults and a couple of kids would they send a lot of troops with the situation in town being as bad as we keep hearing it is?"

Jimmy said, "You might have a point. They're really short on manpower from what Mike tells me so for just one family of holdouts they may not send more than a couple of Hummers. We can probably deal with those if it we get them at a disadvantage. I'll go get my chainsaw and John you get yours and let's head to Skunk Bend."

The group nodded. Miguel said, "If there's anyone that doesn't want to be a part of this say so and I'll drop you off. I'm going back to my place so Roberto can get the other truck. John, we'll meet you at Skunk Bend. Vaya con Dios!"

Action - Part Two

"Sergeant," the man in the right seat asked, "how far out of Archer did you say these people were?"

From behind the wheel the non-com replied, "About five miles out of town to the southwest down the county road. Nothing much out there but scattered houses, barns, gardens, pastures, and woods. Other than planted pine and maybe hay I didn't see a terrible lot of what I'd call real farming. If you don't mind my saying so, sir, this fellow Horne may be right."

"That's not for you or I to decide," said Captain Frank Swift, "we've got clear orders from Blanding and fifty five thousand hungry refugees in Alachua county alone that have got to be fed. If we let this fellow Horne get away with this it'll spread across the whole damned county and the entire effort will collapse. We're going to inventory his place and get this program back on schedule!"

Sgt Nichols sighed, said "Yes, sir.", and drove on. He darkly thought to himself, "Christly way to save the nation. Wish I was back in Arkansas."

The convoy of three Humvees and sixteen troopers passed unmolested and apparently unnoticed through Archer, they saw no one on the street or in their yards even though it was early afternoon and not raining. The Sergeant shifted uneasily in his seat. "Captain," he asked, "When did you join the Army?"

Swift frowned slightly and replied, "In 1995 after I graduated. Why do you ask?"

"Just trying to make conversation. Me, I enlisted back in the eighties, just in time to be sent to Panama. Spent some nasty time in Haiti and like to have sweated to death in Saudi during the Gulf War. Figured we'd be for Afghanistan this year or next some time but with the Impact and all I suspect we'll be pulling out there. Here's the county road. We turn left here and it's about five miles to Horne's place. White house with dark green trim. Barn in the back painted the same way."

"We'll pull up out front and have the troops deploy." The Captain explained, "This Horne fellow doesn't sound like he really wants a fight. Once he sees there's sixteen armed troopers surrounding his place he'll listen to reason and you can get on with your inventory. I'm surprised you weren't able to handle this yourself Sergeant."

Nichols sighed again and said, "yes sir."

At about three miles out of Archer the road passed between a thick, mature stand of planted pine on one side and a heavy stand of oaks and tangled undergrowth on the other. The road began to bend more to the south and the trees crowded close. As they were halfway around the bend they saw a number of pine trees felled across the road making a barrier too high for the Humvees to climb over. A man sat on top of the trees, his hands resting on the trunks, apparently unarmed.

"That's Horne, Captain," the Sergeant said, "but I don't see any of his family. We're still a good two miles or so from his place."

"Stop a hundred feet in front of him Sergeant." The Captain instructed, "I'll get out and talk to him." He picked up the radio mike and spoke with the other two vehicles. "Have all the men get out when we stop, but keep their rifles slung. We're just going to put on a little show of force but I don't want anyone

getting hurt."

The Sergeant did as he was instructed, stopping short of the trees. The Captain stepped out, leaving his rifle in the vehicle and approached the man on the trees.

Action - Part Three

At about ten feet he stopped and asked, "Are you John Horne?"

John replied, "I am he."

"Mr. Horne, I'm Captain Frank Swift, Eastern Recovery Command. My Sergeant tells me that you refuse to cooperate with the national recovery effort. I'd like to resolve this impasse."

"Not at all Captain," John replied in a light tone, "We're quite happy to assist as much as we are able in the national recovery. After all it's in our interest as well as everyone else's. I'm just not going to cooperate in the endangerment of my family, dependents, and neighbors."

"Mr. Horne, no one is going to endanger anyone as I'm quite certain the Sergeant has tried to explain to you. All we want to do is carry out our orders under the National Recovery Executive Directive so that we can keep fifty five thousand refugees here in Alachua county from starving. Surely you don't want to see that. We're all reasonable men here."

John shook his head, "Of course I want to see these people fed Captain but by now you've got to know there is no way they and the resident population of the county are going to be fed on what's to be found here. We're not farmers, we don't grow crops, nor raise livestock for the market. All that we have goes to feed my family, the family we've taken in since Impact, and my near neighbors. We have no surplus to share with the government and we're not going to allow you or anyone else to forcibly take from us what we have to have to survive."

"Mr. Horne, surely the Sergeant explained the experts at the Recovery HQ will only direct the requisition of your surplus food and you will of course be paid for it. We're not thieves here. No one will be left to starve nor anyone's property taken without recompense."

With a sigh his opponent responded, "Captain, you and I both know that these 'experts' at your Recovery HQ are going figure us all subsisting on some starvation diet no better than the refugees are getting now in order to maximize the amount of 'surplus' they can requisition. And once they've figured what they can take from us through an involuntary sale they're going to calculate some price controlled rate for our animals and feed far below what these commodities are currently bringing on the *real* market. Having done that they'll pay those prices in paper dollars that are losing value by the day so that when what little you'll have left us finally does run out we'll have nothing with which to try to buy what little food there is left to be found in any market - price controlled, the black market, or otherwise. In a nutshell Captain, we are not going to cooperate. We'll help where we can but not at the price of starving my family, dependents, friends, and neighbors."

Swift nodded his head, "OK, OK. Sergeant Nichols said you were a hard case and I didn't believe him. I'll have to apologize to him for my lack of faith. Mr. Horne, allow me to speak plainly here because your intransigence has sadly delayed our program and I'm here to get it back on track. Under the legal authority vested in this command by the National Recovery Executive Directive we have the right to inventory the livestock and grain stocks of all farmers in Alachua county. We *will* inventory yours then the rest who are on our list. Since you have chosen not to cooperate I'm afraid you leave me no choice but to resort to force. I've got sixteen armed soldiers here with me and if you do not IMMEDIATELY stand aside and allow us to get on with our business I will have you taken into custody. What will it be? Decide.... Now."

John eyed the angry military officer in front of him for a moment and then spit to one side. "Captain, I don't think you've understood my use of the word 'we' in this conversation." He reached into his shirt pocket and took out an FRS radio and keyed it - click. The sound of truck motors could be heard within seconds and a flatbed Ford and a panel van pulled out of the trees behind the Hummers and stopped, blocking the road and shoulder. The man keyed the mike again - click, click - and armed men and women began to come forward far enough to be visible but not out from behind the cover of the trees. All had their rifles and shotguns pointed upwards but in the general direction of the troopers.

"Captain Swift, I'd really, really like for this not to come to violence but these folks who are my friends, neighbors, and fellow community members are all agreed with me. We will not allow you or anyone else to take from us what we must have to survive - not for dollars, not for anything. If you force this issue we will use force to resist. Now I'm not much of a military man but it looks to me like you're surrounded. Will you reconsider your position?"

"Horne, this isn't going to work. I've got trained men here with automatic weapons. Even if you somehow managed to take us my HQ staff knows where I'm at and if I don't report back - soon - they'll send a reconnaissance in force to come look for me. You don't have anything that'll stand up against a helicopter gunship or armor. Tell these people to put their weapons down and I'll forget this ever happened."

"I'm sorry Captain, but I can't do that. I've done my best to get you to listen to reason but if you intend to force this issue then force it'll have to be. You're right, we don't have anything that'll take an Apache but I do believe we've got enough to take you. You don't seem to be a man of much sense so I reckon you'll order your troopers to take us into custody or maybe even fire on us, we'll fire back and a great many are going to be killed. Not you though - we've all agreed not to shoot you - so you'll be able to go back to your masters at this Recovery HQ and explain to them how you killed a good many otherwise law abiding citizens in your attempts to forcibly take their food from them. You'll tell them too because we've made sure that several individuals who are not here are going to tell every damn soul they can find what we're here to do today and why. By this time tomorrow I reckon you'll be getting close to a general uprising and that *will* draw attention from all over I think" In the distance a siren's wail could be heard steadily growing closer. "Your call, Captain."

The Captain's jaw worked for a moment and then spoke, "Sergeant! Place Mr. Horne under arrest and take him into custody! Do the same for anyone who attempts to interfere!" The sounds of the siren grew steadily louder. Sergeant Nichols and the two troopers who had gotten out of the lead vehicle were plainly reluctant to move forward. "Uhhmm, begging the Captain's pardon sir," he said, "but this may not be the wisest course of action here."

"Sergeant!" Swift said in an authoritative tone, "I am not accustomed to discussing my orders. You will take Mr. Horne into custody or you will be relieved. Do I make myself clear?"

"Yes sir. Very clear sir." The Sergeant stepped forward with a look of resignation on his face. After a moment's hesitation the two troopers began to follow.

To John it seemed as if everything had gone into slow motion. The Sergeant stepped forward as if through thick molasses from a hundred feet away. "I'm about to get us all killed." flowed slowly through his mind, "This hasn't worked at all." Behind him Ann shouldered her rifle sighting in on the Sergeant, Robert and Lisa did as well. After a heartbeat's hesitation the rest of the community

shouldered their weapons and took aim. The soldiers began ducking for what cover they could find behind their Hummers and drew down on the tree line. Beads of sweat began to appear on the Sergeant's forehead as he moved forward at a funeral cadence towards John.

He was just drawing even with the Captain when a screech of brakes from behind the barricade was heard.

"THIS IS JOHN FREED - SHERIFF OF ALACHUA COUNTY. YOU WILL ALL LAY DOWN YOUR WEAPONS - THIS INCLUDES YOU SOLDIERS AS WELL!"

Detente - Part One

The sheriff stepped out of his car. In his middle fifties his close cropped gray hair had gone gray at the temples and he was beginning to thicken at the waist but it was plain the man had worn a uniform for much of his life. Deputy Mike Daniels stepped out of the other side. A second ASO cruiser pulled up on the other side of the barricading trucks and two deputies stepped out but did not advance.

Walking up to the fallen trees Sheriff Freed spoke to the man sitting on the trunks, "You John Horne?"

The man nodded his head, "Yes sir, I am."

"Good", came the reply as he climbed over the trunks, "attend me please." He then walked up to the Captain who had not moved since before the sheriff's arrival. "Good afternoon Captain Swift. I have just driven hell-for-leather to get here from a meeting of county sheriff's at Camp Blanding after my office called to tell me that members of my Posse were about to engage in a war with troops from the local Recovery Command HQ. Sure enough here you all are about to kill one another! What in flaming Hell is going on here?!"

The Captain did not immediately respond as if he were struggling for control. Presently he spoke, "Sheriff Freed, I am attempting to execute my orders given to me by the Florida State Recovery HQ at Blanding as per the National Recovery Executive Directive. I have been tasked to inventory the livestock and feed of every listed farmer in this county. You know as well as I do how short of manpower we are so any delays must be quickly and immediately resolved if we are to be able to carry out our mission in a timely fashion. You also know how close we are to losing control of the camps which further food shortages and the resulting riots they bring will only exacerbate. Mr. Horne here has absolutely refused to cooperate even after it has been repeatedly explained to him both the legality of our mission and the practical need for doing so. What's more he has now inspired seemingly his entire local community to rebel with him and if this is not immediately cru... resolved may well render our entire supply mission untenable as his rebellion spreads across the county - possibly into the surrounding counties as well. I have both the orders and legal authority to carry out this inventory and by God I intend to do so!"

Sheriff Freed nodded his head, "I see. Do you have a copy of the list that Mr. Horne and his neighbors appear on?"

Swift turned to Sgt. Nichols and said, "Give the list to the sheriff."

The Sergeant pulled it out of his breast pocket and handed it over. The sheriff studied the list for a moment then turned to John and asked, "Mr. Horne, you ever sell anything down to the livestock auction? Sell any feed grain or raise any for your own animals?"

John replied, "Sheriff, in the ten years we've been out here I've sold two goats and a pig at the auction that my daughter had named and wouldn't have anything to do with eating if I'd slaughtered them. We've bought animals but we've seldom sold any. Mostly we eat them ourselves. I participate in a heirloom seed preservation program so I grow between a quarter to a half acre of corn every year to keep the strain viable. What I don't sell for seed or plant myself we feed to the livestock, but it amounts to only a small portion of the feed we use every year. We do have a flock of forty hens and we sell eggs to our coworkers at the university - to our neighbors now post Impact. I raise two pigs a year. We put one in our freezer and usually sell the other to a neighbor but with no way to buy food in town anymore

and having taken in another family to live with us since the asteroid strike we'll probably eat that one too. What money we've made since coming here on what we raise ourselves probably doesn't amount to a half of what we've spent on producing it. That's not why we do it. I don't know everyone here very well but I can tell you that of all that I do know only Ed Strickland over there actually farms or raises anything for the market that can be eaten. You know most of the ag around here is tree or hay farming."

The sheriff nodded his head again. "I see." Turning back to the officer, "Captain Swift, where did you say this list of Alachua county farmers came from again?"

Glancing at John the Captain replied, "It was sent to me from Blanding, I don't know for sure who actually generated the list. But my orders about it are clear enough."

Nodding his head once more, He then asked, "Captain, from the sound of you you're not from Florida, this part anyways. Where do you hale from?"

Swift answered, "I'm from Philadelphia, went to school there too and joined the Army after college. Why?"

Another head nod, "Much as I suspected - you don't know one end of a cow from another. Some bureaucratic peawit got ahold of records from some place or other and compiled a list of people he thinks are farmers without bothering to verify the truth of what he was putting on that list. It got sent out to only God knows where and put into the hands of some local commander without the experience, imagination, or initiative to question the intelligence of what he's been told to do!"

The Captain reddened and his mouth opened to speak but the sheriff cut him off and continued. "Now when you get back to town Captain Swift I suggest you contact Larry Forrester, he's the cooperative extension service agent for this county. He will be able to compile you a listing of everyone in Alachua county that holds an agricultural property tax exemption. Likely, he'll also be able to give you a general idea of what that exemption was granted for so you won't be pestering some fellow with a hundred acres of pine trees or some other fellow who only raises hay. I hold such an exemption myself for the seventy five head of Angus I run. Those are the folks you should be approaching. Most of them are going to be in the same position that Ed and I are in about being hard up for feed, forage or hay to get through this winter so if you'll approach them in a civil fashion they'll probably sell you what you need. Further, I suggest you get ahold of these 'experts' that compiled this list and see if they can't come up with some formula that the hay farmers can sell, trade, swap, whatever their forage to the local dairy farms so they can keep milking their cows rather than having to slaughter them."

Swift swallowed what he'd been about to say, paused for a moment and then spoke, "I'll have to confer with Blanding about changing their orders but it sounds like a workable idea."

Freed smiled and said, "Excellent Captain, I suggest you hurry home then and contact Colonel Scott at Blanding because I can tell you he's most anxious to hear from you! I'm quite sure Mr. Horne here will ask the gentlemen in those trucks to move them out of your way."

The mention of his C.O.s anxiety to speak with him set Swift's jaw into a rigid cast but he said nothing about it. With another glance at John he spoke, "Sheriff, I'm not about to openly cross the local civil authority over a matter such as this. I *will* confer with the Colonel and inform him of the situation here. Once he has decided the policy on this matter I will get this program back on track. Good day to you sir!" With a last glance at John he turned towards his troops and shouted, "Load up! We're going

back to base!" and walked away, back stiff.

His opponent pulled the little FRS radio out of his pocket and spoke into it, "Miguel, you and Roberto go on and move the trucks out of the way. The good Captain is calling it a day."

Detente - Part Two

When the last soldier had boarded the sheriff turned to John and said "Come with me." He then turned to the others standing there watching and said, "This is a public road. I want these trees cleared off and the road reopened right away. The rest of you folks go on home, the party's over." He climbed over the trees and walked back towards his car. Ann and Robert walked up along with Lisa and Ed.

Upon arriving at the car the sheriff reached inside, picked up a small parcel and then turned to John. "Mr. Horne," he said, "If you'd be so kind as to raise your right hand and repeat after me."

John quirked an eyebrow at the request but he raised his hand. The sheriff continued, "I, John Horne, do solemnly swear to uphold and defend the Constitution of the United States and of the State of Florida."

After a moment's hesitation he repeated the words and then said, "Sheriff, what the hell is this?"

The sheriff said, "Just keep repeating Mr. Horne, I'm swearing you in as a special deputy. I swear to uphold the laws and regulations of Alachua county and to faithfully execute these laws to the best of my judgment and ability, that I will show no favoritism in my service and to honorably uphold my duties as a Deputy of the Sheriff of Alachua County Florida so help me God."

John finished his repetition and the sheriff handed him a deputy's star. With a tone of real concern he asked the law man, "Why are you doing this?"

The sheriff let out a sigh and said, "Mr. Horne, it's like this. I don't have anywhere near to the number of deputies I need to keep order in this county since Impact, nor does the Gainesville Police Department or the smaller towns. Half the county, maybe more goes to bed hungry every night, nearly everyone is out of work, communications are spotty at best, and the fuel shortage aggravates everything. Every National Guard and military reserve trooper in the county has been called up as well as what we could scavenge from the evacuees and they've all been folded into the Recovery Command and what few active duty troops that could be sent too. It's simply not enough. We've got at least 55,000 refugees here in Alachua county alone - that we know of - and more come in every day. The whole house of cards may collapse anytime. Like it or not I've got to rely on the local citizenry to help keep the peace. You're a county resident, have been here for ten years, are respectable, and most importantly, have just demonstrated that you are capable of acting with coolness and decision. Maybe if we'd gotten a more able local military commander we might not be so bad off but I've got to work with what I have. You're part of that now. Your area of responsibility will be the county road from the Archer city limit down to the Williston road and the branching roads off of it. From time to time you may be called on to assist outside of your area and you'll need to come into town periodically to the office. When we have it you'll be entitled to a small gasoline ration. If you have CB radios or can get them I'll have one of our communications techs come and get you set up for the sheriff's net so you can call for help if you need it when the telephones are down. I strongly suggest you try to organize a neighborhood watch for your area and set up a net of whatever residents in your area that may have two way radios of some sort. You were in the posse that brought in those cattle rustlers from out here the other day weren't you?"

The new deputy nodded his head and the sheriff continued, "Then it'll come as no surprise to you that we're having an increasing theft problem, sometimes violent encounters too. You'll do best if you can get your area as organized as possible communications wise. The thieves, rustlers, and incipient bandit wannabe's will avoid you if they know they run a higher risk here of catching a load of buckshot. You'll

liaison with Deputy Daniels and if there's anything from the office that needs to be brought out he'll bring it. He's familiar with our 'Local Constable' program and he'll fill in further tonight when he goes off shift."

He allowed this to sink in for a few moments. John said, "OK sheriff, I reckon I can see the need, even if I don't think I'm particularly suited to the task, so I'll take your... commission I suppose you'd call it. I suppose I owe you that much after intervening in our fracas here."

Another of the sheriff's nods, "I suppose you do owe me that much as well. I probably don't have to tell you this but you've made yourself an enemy out of Captain Swift and he strikes me as the kind of man who doesn't forget these things so watch your back around him. Between you and me he's everything that I don't like in a deputy and under other circumstances in real action I'd hope the Army would try him and find him wanting but for the foreseeable future we're probably stuck with him. Poor as he is there simply isn't anyone to replace him with until they can get more of their troops back from overseas. The Colonel tells me with the China situation and the Middle East about to boil over that might not happen for a while - if ever. With you as a Local Constable he should be a little more circumspect about trying you again but don't give him no easy openings. Most of his responsibility lies with the camps in Gainesville and around the county and their logistical needs so hopefully your paths shouldn't cross again but don't count on it. Between you and me that man has been chapping my ass a bit more every day but then so does the county commission so it's all just part of the job."

Freed put out his hand and they shook, "Goodbye Deputy Horne. Keep your sector quiet and let's all get back to the business of staying alive." The sheriff then climbed back behind the wheel and started the motor. Mike nodded at him and got in the other side. The cruiser backed, turned and disappeared down the road back the way it had come.

John turned to Ann and the rest with the star in his hand. "Well," he said, "once again we see that no good deed goes unpunished."

August 25 - Big Stick

John came in from the barn with the dawning, having fed the goats, chickens and horse. It had been his night to sleep out so he headed for the bathroom to clean up. He and his dad had set up a comfortable enough situation in the feed room but after a night out there Ann always said he came in smelling like a goat. The power was staying on now more often than not which allowed everyone to more or less reestablish their accustomed hygienic habits. The family was going to the morning services in Archer so this meant thoroughly scrubbing off the barn smell and a good shave. He briefly considered just letting it grow out but the last time he'd grown a beard it had taken months before it began to look good and now that he was an "officer of the law" it probably wouldn't do to go about looking scruffy. With no way of knowing when they'd be able to buy more Ann often reminded everyone to be as conservative as possible with the soap and shampoo. "Well, at least we're not short on water." he mused as he stepped into the shower, "Even if we have to boil it on the woodstove we won't be short on water for a long, long time." The rain had stopped early yesterday morning but by mid afternoon the precipitation was falling once again and the weather folks said it would continue for the foreseeable future with increasing breaks in the rainfall and clouds as the last of the Impact weather gradually faded into the normal late summer Florida thunderstorms.

He dressed in loose trousers, sneakers, and a pullover shirt. His church clothes would go into a dry bag to be tied on the back of his bike and they'd all change there. Miguel said many people were doing this now since few had gasoline to drive to church which meant getting wet in the rain as they walked, biked, or rode a horse into town. The church took it in stride and provided gender specific rooms for the purpose. Attendance had been steadily rising since Impact - "To be expected of course, there's no atheists in fox holes nor in the Apocalypse... or whatever passes for it."

With a ten mile bike ride ahead in addition to the usual day's labors Heather and Melinda had made up a big breakfast of grits, eggs, milk, Tang, and coffee. Mel did pretty well for a ten year old in rustling up simple meals but since having moved in with them Heather was really starting to blossom - both in the kitchen and elsewhere. "Lack of responsibility and accomplishment" he thought to himself, "Kids need to feel like they're an important part of something, not just a family appendage. Here she's got chores - important ones - just like Mel does and she gets recognition for them when they're done well. Buying her expensive toys and sending her off to camp doesn't substitute for that."

After the breakfast dishes had been cleaned up the family broke out their bikes and mounted up. Robert would be staying home, he hadn't attended services since John was a boy, and would be disking up the garden preparatory to working it over with the roto-tiller. After church and the market the family would be working in the garden or raking up mulch. No longer a pleasant hobby gardening was now about to become a serious business and success or failure could mean the difference in making it through winter well fed or malnourished.

After the events of the previous day it felt good to burn energy. He'd had such an adrenalin rush after their near brush with pitched battle that he'd had trouble getting to sleep last night. On the way in John noted a couple of blow down trees that he'd see about cutting for firewood. If the power stayed on regularly their need for wood would be fairly small but after the last three weeks he'd decided that henceforth they would keep at least a year's supply of seasoned wood on hand. The regulatory authorities were still discussing power rationing and the winter was likely to be a cold one. He was never again going to be entirely comfortable about being dependent on miles of copper cable and a generation plant at the other end to keep the family warm.

The rest of the trip in was uneventful though it seemed to John that quite a lot of folks waved at them on the way in and an extraordinary number of people shook his hand as they dressed and went into the church. "Why on earth is everyone being so gregarious?," he asked Ann, "You'd think I'd hit the lottery or something."

With a wry smile she replied, "Well, it couldn't have anything to do with the fact that you're the local hero now would it?" and poked him in the ribs.

"Hero!" he said with an incredulous tone, "Get on with you! I nearly got everyone's asses shot off yesterday. We could have all been killed. I half expected someone to throw rocks at me this morning."

"But we didn't get killed" Ann persisted "and the Army isn't going to come in and take everyone's food now and that wouldn't have happened if you hadn't stood up to them and then got everyone organized so we'd be ready when they came back. You gave these people at least the illusion of still having some power and control in their lives at a time when everything seems to be completely out of control. Real or not they think you're responsible for that. Why else do you think the sheriff made you the local constable? That reminds me, you and I have to talk about this lawman thing. Here comes Mel and Heather, we'd better go sit down. Lisa said she'd save us some places."

The familiar routine of the service was comforting as was the sound of the church organ. It had been a while since John had attended services but it was starting to come back to him. He sang softly as he found that he'd forgotten the words to many of the hymns and had to resort to reading them from the hymnal. "Just as well" he thought "since I can't carry a tune in a bucket."

The opening hymns and prayer over the pastor stepped up to the podium and began his sermon. The morning's topic was about faith and resolve even in the face of seemingly overwhelming opposition and it felt to John that the pastor looked at him far more often than anyone else and he shrank into himself. Eventually he segued into a bit of hellfire and brimstone and Ann whispered into his ear, "I think he's really a repressed Baptist" when a boy of about eleven or twelve came slamming through the doors behind them. His feet slapped loudly as he ran up the center aisle and the pastor stopped in mid-sentence when the boy approached him. He bent over and the youngster whispered animatedly into his ear. A look of gravity crossed the man's features as he stood then walked over to the organist and bent over to speak to her. She stood and went behind the organ to the sound system controls and the congregation could hear her adjusting the controls and then the sound of a radio tuner came from the overhead speakers finally settling on a station in mid-sentence -

...that's three nuclear detonations in the Straits of Taiwan. The Japanese government reports over its national radio that nuclear detonations have been detected in the Taiwanese straits and indicates they are believed to be as a result of U.S. Naval attacks on the Chinese Navy which is once again attempting to land troops on the island...

The pastor stepped up to the sound system and turned the volume down to a background level. Stepping up to the podium again he said, "Let us pray..."

Overhead they could hear the bell begin to toll.

August 25 - Apprehension - Part One

After services the family wanted to go straight home but John insisted on first stopping by the market at the old fire station. "It's important" is all that he would say so they dropped in. Even with the news of the nuclear confrontation there was still considerable activity at the tables - "Folks still gotta eat" he observed, "Y'all watch the bikes for a few minutes. This won't take long." He walked into the selling area scanning the tables. Nearby one dealer had a radio set to the classical station which was playing *Carmina Burana* which he disliked because the music always put him in a Gotterdammerung state of mind.

Eventually he fetched up at the feed dealer's table. A woman looking to be a few years older than he was at the board counting out quarters from a bag and weeping softly. This struck his curiosity so he counted the stacks of four that she put on the table - sixteen - as the dealer loaded a fifty pound bag of layer pellets into the little red Radio Flyer wagon she was pulling. After she left he turned to the dealer and spoke, "Sixteen dollars is pretty steep for a bag of layer pellets isn't it Bill?"

The feed man gave him a short smile and replied, "Just capitalism at work, John. Feed's mighty short right now. This'll be the first time in years that I've done well in this business."

John nodded his head, "There's a lot of intangibles in business though. I hope you'll do OK after things get back to normal. The family's waiting so I'd best finish my business with you from last market day so we can get home." He untied a sack and reached inside to pull out a brick of Winchester Super-X .22 ammunition.

"Been meaning to speak with you about that, John" the dealer said as he eyed the ammunition, "What with the attack and all I think our original bargain may need to be renegotiated."

His customer pulled out a second brick of the ammunition, a third, then reached into his pocket for some coinage - thirty six 1964 silver dimes and stacked them on the table. He dropped his voice into a deeper register and put some volume into it as he replied, "Bill, you and I made a bargain in good faith last market day. I'm here to keep my end of it." A dealer at a neighboring table and the customers in front of him and the table on the other side turned to look at them. "Are you going to keep your word or not?"

Bill opened his mouth to reply then realized that customers and dealers were looking at him as the surrounding burble of conversation faded. He hesitated a moment then said, "Why sure John, sure. We made a deal and we'll keep it. I was just talkin', that's all." He reached into a box under the table and pulled out five white plastic bottles with veterinary labels. "Here they are, just like we agreed. That's an awful lot. What are you gonna do with it all?"

In a tone that did not encourage further discussion his customer replied, "Going to be a cold winter and I suspect I'll be needing it. Thank you Bill, it's been a pleasure to do business." He put the bottles into the sack, retied it and walked back to his awaiting family. As he put the sack into his dry bag and tied it on Ann asked, "Did you get whatever it was you needed that couldn't wait? What was it anyway?"

John replied, "Veterinary antibiotics off Luke's list." then mounted and started riding.

They'd made it about a mile out of town and the clouds were threatening rain when a woman stepped out into the road and flagged them down. John didn't know her name but he recognized her as one of the folks who'd showed up at Skunk Bend the day before to join in their confrontation with Captain Swift's troops. "Morning Deputy Horne!" she shouted, "Could I have a word with you?"

The word "deputy" in connection with his name still sounded strange to John and he suspected it would for a while yet. He briefly considered asking her to use the title "constable" instead but decided that sounded even worse. "Yes ma'am" he replied, "What can I do for you? I'm afraid we weren't introduced yesterday at our little... fracas."

"Oh!" the woman said, "We weren't were we? I'm Nancy Tiersdale, my husband John works at the archery plant, well, did anyways. I wonder if you could help us with a problem."

John nodded, "Well, I don't know Mrs. Tiersdale, I reckon you'd better tell me what it is."

"Well" she said, "it's like this. We keep hens and my little girl raises rabbits for 4-H but lately we're having a terrible time with dogs trying to get in and kill our animals. They haven't called him back to work yet so John's been trying to find what work he can and can't always be here to shoot them. We've got a .22 rifle but I'm afraid neither I or my daughter Brittany are much good with it. Everybody in the neighborhood has been having a time with the creatures. Isn't there something that can be done?"

He paused to consider for a moment then said, "Yes ma'am. We're all having a bad time with feral dogs. My dad's got quite a collection of pelts going from the one's that we've killed alone. With things being the way they are pretty near everyone in the county with a dog is probably run out or is running out of feed and they're just letting them go rather than killing them. If they can't find anything to eat in town they'll naturally gravitate out here into the country and kill whatever wildlife or livestock they can to stay alive. The county does have an animal control office but I suspect if they're still functioning at all they're completely overwhelmed. What I suggest you do is to reinforce your rabbit cages, hen house and yard as best you can. How old is your daughter?"

With a look of concern the woman replied, "She's twelve. Why?"

"Then ma'am" John continued "I'd keep her in the yard where you can watch her close unless you or your husband are with her. A pack of starving feral dogs might not try a full grown man or woman but they're only going to get hungrier and hungrier and they might just try a child. I need to discuss this with a few folks first then maybe we'll be able to do something to relieve the situation. If we come up with a plan I'll be sure to get the word out."

"Thank you Deputy Horne. Sure hope we'll here from you soon."

John remounted his bike "We'll do what we can Mrs. Tiersdale. I'll be sure to let you know" and rode off. The clouds were lowering and getting darker.

Apprehension - Part Two

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The first drops were coming down as they rolled into the yard so they rushed the bikes into the barn then trotted to the dryness of the house.

Ann asked, "John, what do you plan to do about the dogs? Is this something that the sheriff's department should handle? Why you? The county's got animal control people for this, why not call them?"

"Well darling," he replied, "that's exactly what I'm going to do. I'll talk to Mike tonight about animal control but I strongly suspect they're not going to be able to help us because this has to be happening all over the county just now."

His dad came into the kitchen just then. "Did you hear the news?" his son asked.

"Yes. Came in to get my hat and the weather radio was going off. The government triggered the Emergency Alert system to tell everyone. I put off the disking until we can talk about it."

With a sigh John said, "Yep, just one damned thing after another it seems. If we're not trying to kill each other right here we're trying to kill each other over there. Are you concerned with fallout?"

His father nodded, "Don't reckon we'll get any to worry about all the way from the other side of the world but if there are any detonations here in the States you think we should put off planting?"

John poured himself a glass of water from the tap and sat to the kitchen table. "I don't know dad. How long do you reckon we can hold off planting?"

His dad put his hat on the table and sat down as well along with Ann. "I'm a little concerned we may have waited too long already to get non-cold hardy crops in the ground. National news is reporting the first snow storms up in Montana, North Dakota, and Minnesota. If your books are right about an Impact Winter then we may get frost a lot earlier than we normally do."

Lisa had come in and stood listening for a while then took a chair.

After pondering for a moment John said, "Seems to me we're going to have to take a risk one way or the other. If we wait because we might get fallout we may wait too late to plant anything that can't take a frost. If we plant now and there's nuclear attacks the garden may get dusted along with everything else. I'm for planting now. With the weather this time of year they'd have to hit a number of targets in Texas with something really dirty for a worrisome amount of fallout to make it all the way across the Gulf to us. I'm more concerned about getting caught by frost before we get our food reserves built up."

Lisa asked, "You don't think we'll have to worry about radioactive fallout if the fighting is confined to Asia? We adults aren't as susceptible to low-levels of long-lived radioisotopes as our children are. They could be seriously affected in the long-term. What about milk and eggs?"

Ann nodded her head and spoke, "John, I think we ought to get out the KI. You told me back when India and Pakistan were threatening each other that the radioactive iodine from any nuclear weapons

they used on each other could reach here in a week or less. We need to be sure that Melinda, Johnny, and Heather are protected. There's other children in the neighborhood too like Mike's kids and Rick's sister's children."

John nodded his head. "Ok, I suppose we might as well. There's a small risk to using that much iodine but it's probably smaller than the risk from the radioiodine from the Asian nukes. Even that risk is pretty small but we've got plenty of KI crystals. I had a friend on campus order me eight ounces of reagent grade KI a couple of years ago and it's been sealed up ever since. Lisa, if the phone's working today why don't you see if you can get ahold of Luke and ask him about it. If he says grace over the idea we'll do it. I don't recall the dosage off the top of my head but it's in one of the books somewhere or Luke may suggest one. We'll need to give the kids theirs in some sugar or something - the stuff tastes nasty."

No one dissented so Robert brought the subject back to agriculture, "Well then, I'll get on with the disking tomorrow. Have you found that list of crops that are UV resistant yet?"

"No, not yet" John said, shaking his head, "It's in Kearny's book I think or one of the others. I'll dig it out tonight before going to bed. Hopefully we won't see a terrible lot of UV increase otherwise it's going to complicate matters. Another complication is the feral dog problem. It's steadily getting worse and is threatening to seriously affect livestock production. Only going to get worse when the weather turns cold. You got any ideas?"

Filling a glass with water his father replied, "Been talking it over with Ed. We figure the best thing to do is an old-fashioned driven hunt. Put the word out to the community to confine their dogs on a selected day. Get a group together to act as beaters and start them on one end and have everyone else in a wide U and drive them into it. Any dog we see that's loose gets shot. Probably have to do it periodically for a while."

"That's a good idea" his son nodded. "In fact, I think it'll be a good way to start putting the rudiments of a community network together for communications and teamwork. Dogs can't shoot back and we can start working the bugs out of our coordination and commo. I'll talk to Mike about it tonight and we can start putting it together."

Robert glanced at the wall clock and said, "Near to the top of the hour. News will be on. Lisa would you reach over and turn the radio on? Might be some new developments in the China war."

Lisa powered up the radio and the opening music for the news programming came out and was cut short. No intro was given, just a straight transition into the news feed directly from NPR -

The Navy has made no comment on their losses in the battle for dominance in the Taiwanese Straits and the South China Sea but confidential unnamed sources within the Navy Department told CNN that as of 6:00 a.m. Eastern today one frigate and a destroyer have been lost with minor damage to an aircraft carrier being reported. No word on the names of the ships or the number of casualties these losses represent. Department of Defense sources have told us that the Chinese beachheads previously established on the island have been withdrawn following the nuclear detonations earlier today that rendered them untenable.

No official statement has been made by the government of the People's Republic of China and all communications links into the country remain blocked. Communications with the island of Taiwan also

remain down, possibly as a result of the detonations.

The announcer paused briefly and a sound of paper rustling could be heard.

This just in. Witnesses in the Louisiana city of Shreveport report heavy air traffic of B-52 bombers taking off from Barksdale Air Force Base. Witnesses in the Dakotas also report a heavy traffic of B-52 bombers taking off from Minot Air Force Base, both of which are in a state of communications lockdown. Many air tankers have also lifted off. Traffic from Whiteman Air Force Base in Missouri has been heavy as the B2 Stealth bombers roll down the strip. The surviving Trident submarine base in Bangor, Washington cannot be reached. The security zone around the sub base has been extended to ten miles with warnings to all sea and air traffic they will be fired on without warning if they penetrates this zone. We have been unable to establish contact with any of the strategic missile forces at F.E. Warren Air Force Base in Wyoming; Malmstrom Air Force Base in Montana.; or, Minot Air Force Base in ,North Dakota.

John looked at his father and asked, "Dad, you went through this when you were a radioman on a Coast Guard cutter off of Cuba during the Missile Crisis. What do you think?"

His dad drained his glass, stood and went to the cabinet they kept the kitchen whisky in and poured it half full. He took a sip and replied, "I think the President has just done what Dirty Harry did. He's pointed the Strategic Forces of the United States at the Chinese and said, 'Well, do you feel lucky, punk?'"

"Who's going to blink this time I do not know."

August 29 - The Brink - Part One

"That should do the trick now deputy Horne." The communications tech said as he began to pack up his tools, "It's not the prettiest set up I've ever put together but with having to make do with whatever we can lay hands on since Impact it's good enough. Shouldn't blow down in anything less than a hurricane or a tornado and you've got enough height on the tower now that you shouldn't have any trouble hitting the main antenna in Gainesville. Anyone putting out one watt or better on a hand held CB should be able to hit your tower pretty well out past the county line so it'll cover your sector and a fair bit more. I'm still working on the FRS antennas but when I get them set up we'll rig you out for that as well. The lower rigs are your TV/FM/scanner antennas which ought to increase your range there too."

John shook his hand and said, "Proud to see it. We've got a dog hunt coming up this Saturday and we'll need to be able to coordinate movement. It'll be a sort of working exercise to get the bugs out of our community security program."

The tech replied, "Yeah, I've heard you rural types have been having a problem with dogs going feral and packing up. You don't see very many in town now - nothing for them to eat and I think maybe people are starting to eat *them*."

Ann came out and said, "Mr. Gaskins, would you like to set to the table with us? We're just about to have lunch."

"Well, I've got two more rigs to get set up out Newberry ways" he hesitated, "but if you don't mind I think I will."

She smiled and said, "Well you're welcome. It's nothing fancy but it's hot and filling."

They all went in and washed up at the sink then sat to their meal. John looked around the table and asked "Where're the kids?"

Ann replied "Melinda and Heather are over at the Daniels helping out - more of an excuse to spend time with kids their own age than anything else. Judy and Chuck are there too, they're Rick's sister's kids. Not sure how much work Kate's actually going to get out of them but at least they have some fun. Since the attack on Sunday everybody's been so tensed up it'll be good for them to let off some steam. Lisa called from the clinic and said she'd be home late but that Miguel's boy Roberto would escort her so she wouldn't be riding home alone in the dark."

John nodded then asked Ted Gaskins about his allusion to the dog problem in town, "Is it getting so bad they're starting to eat the dogs now?"

Ted nodded his head. "Yes, I think it is. We're just not getting enough food shipped in to adequately feed everyone. Between the damage to the roads and rail beds, the fuel shortages, and the military having priority for its transport, there just isn't enough food coming in and it's getting pretty hungry in town. You country types don't realize how good you have it. Out here your worst problem is dogs and you're not hungry. In town you can get killed for what used to be \$5.00 worth of food a month ago. We're finding a body a day, mostly in the camps, but some around town too. Captain Swift's troops have suppressed three riots in the last ten days between the three largest camps. Been pretty rough about it too if you ask me but he's so short on troops it's about all he can do. He's trying to get authority to 'streamline' the justice system, at least in the camps. So far that's been resisted by the local civil

authorities. Another couple of riots or a serious increase in the murder and violence rate and the sheriff and police chief may be outvoted. Word around the department is the governor is waffling and may go over to the Recovery Command position which is to 'temporarily' suspend civil law and put area administration on a more military footing. Gives me the sweats to think about Captain Swift getting control of the county. Everyone heard about the way you faced him down. Man, you sure had balls!" Remembering Ann was at the table he said, "Pardon me, ma'am. But it hasn't improved his disposition any since I can tell you that."

The conversation faded for a time while everyone attended to the matter of their plates. Presently Ann asked, "Have you heard anything about the war that's not on the radio? Have the Chinese said anything yet?"

Ted shook his head. "No, still no word. Nothing solid but a blue million rumors and theories flying around. Going on four days since we nuked their navy but not a word. The Sheriff thinks there may be an internal power struggle going on. Talk on the shortwave is all over the map - some say they're preparing to invade the U.S... like they could pull that off if they couldn't invade Taiwan. Others say they're going to hit us with some biological super weapon, which gives me the cold sweats I can tell you but nothing has happened so far along those lines. Me? I think we've spooked them. They tried to cross us and we gave them a strong shot to the jaw and knocked them on their butt. They're too scared to get up and take another swing at us."

Ted took another bite of his lunch and the others waited for him to continue. "My boy is a university student. He's moved back in with us since the campus is awash with evacuees. When the power's up the university still has their Internet connection so he logs on at our place. There's this board he reads that's left over from that Y2K nuttiness a few years ago - pretty wacko in spots but they do get a lot of news flowing through which you don't hear about on the national news. Been a lot of violence in L.A., St. Louis, someplace in Louisiana where they've got a big camp set up for the survivors from New Orleans. Some fella in New Hampshire says there's talk about a revolt in the New England states if the Recovery Command doesn't send in a new commander. The present one seems to be a little too handy with a gun when it comes to suppressing discontent. Another fella claiming to be in Pennsylvania somewhere says he's seen the Navy loading bodies onto barges. Says there's so many to dispose of they're dumping them at sea. Hard to say how much of any of it's true but it does make ya wonder."

"I was talking to one of the Health Department docs yesterday and he said the Chinese don't need a super bug. Plain old cholera and typhoid will do it for them if we can't get our water and waste systems better squared away in the camps. May be right too. Getting to be pretty squalid. It's for sure that they're having a dysentery problem. Some people are so stupid! Some of them won't do a damn thing to help themselves but sit on their butts and demand the government save them. Others go feral at the drop of a hat and turn into predators. There's plenty who want to work but there's just little for them to work with. If it weren't for the job that keeps me in town I'd be trying to find a place out here in the country too like anyone that has any sense does."

Turning back to his plate he gave it his full attention for a while and when Ann offered him seconds he gratefully accepted.

Presently Robert said, "Well, I can live with silence if it means they're not sending missiles. Maybe when we rebuild this will mean we'll have to go back to building stuff here in the U.S. again. Maybe that no one will want stuff made in China after this."

John said, "Well, we can hope. For sure we ought to be concentrating on rebuilding the U.S. rather than buying more cheap crap from China. If we don't get into some general nuclear exchange or biowar this fracas with them may work out for the best."

When the soup and cornbread was finished Ann brought out a cake.

"You're kidding!" Ted exclaimed.

She blushed and said, "Well, it's nothing special. Just plain old chocolate. The midday meal tends to be our big meal of the day since everyone does so much physical labor now and I like to make dessert when I can. Supper is usually leftovers or eggs. Would you like a slice?"

The man hesitated then asked, "Mrs. Horne, if it's all the same to you may I take my slice with me? I'd like to give it to my wife if that's OK."

"Well sure it's OK but there's enough here for both of you to have a piece. You've done us a big favor getting that radio set up the way you did. The least we can do is to feed you a decent meal."

With a grin he accepted his plate, took a bite, then his face fell. "Thirty days," he said, "It's not even been quite thirty days and we've come to this." He slowly savored every forkful until it was gone.

The meal over Ted looked at John and said, "I've just got time to look over your portable rig real quick if you like before I have to head north." Turning to Ann he said, "Ma'am, that was mighty fine and I sure appreciate it."

She smiled, "I'm glad you enjoyed it."

August 29 - Apprehension - Part Two

The two men walked into the living room to look at the portable CB. Robert went back out to continue in the garden and Ann cleaned up from lunch. When he was finished with the radio John walked Ted out to his truck. "Maybe if you get back out this way sometimes Ted you can help me get my short wave set up. I've had it for some time but never got around to putting it up. A simple dipole I can do but maybe you could do better."

Ted got in the truck and shut the door. Leaning out the window he replied, "Let me cast around and see what I can come up with. For just receiving a dipole will work pretty well but we might be able to get you some better cable and then I'll tune the antenna for you."

Ann stepped off the front porch and walked up to the truck. "This is for your family when you get back home." she said handing him a folded brown paper bag. With a puzzled look he took it and said, "Thank you. Got to be going, I want to be done and back to the house by dark. Y'all take care."

The truck pulled out and disappeared around the bend. Walking back towards the house John asked, "What was in the bag?"

Ann said, "The rest of the soup, cornbread and the cake. Did you notice how thin in the face he looks? God only knows what they've had to eat lately. John, if they don't start getting some real food into town soon what's going to happen to the children?"

August 31 - Dead Tide - Part One

John tied the horse to a tree and went into the Archer fire station. He wished this first meeting of the southwestern Alachua county deputies could have been held on another day since he had the dog hunt coming up that afternoon but it was when it was and he'd just have to cope with it. "At least since I came in by myself this time I could ride the horse instead of a bike. The pedaling is beginning to get to my right knee. Like it or not I'm fifty years old and the machinery is going to start showing its age. Just too damn bad that the world has become a physically harder place than it was a month ago. And why am I in such a foul mood this morning anyways? Probably shouldn't have stayed up to listen to the news last night I suppose. It's never anything but bad. Between dysentery and Swift's troops shooting people the funeral industry is doing a booming business. Of course, there's not a lot of profit to be made with a backhoe digging a mass grave."

For a wonder the air conditioning was on when he went inside. Private homes were forbidden to run air conditioners or other "non-essential" electrical equipment in order to conserve power. Even then it was now rationed with all but the most essential power users receiving only four hours of electricity a day. "Well, being a 'modern' building and all there's not the first window in it that can be opened. If they were going to use the place to meet at all I reckon they'd have to turn on the a/c." He felt his mood begin to lift as the dampness and humidity of a Florida late August morning evaporated from his skin and clothing.

He looked around the room which held about twenty five people and recognized only a few of the faces. "Not surprising. Most of them probably aren't real law-enforcement any more than I am. With better than 200,000 residents in the county before the Impact chances were they were going to be strangers." The few remaining empty chairs were near to the front so he took one of those. A man he recognized from the university, Stu Rogers, worked in the same department as his wife came up to him and spoke.

"Hey John! I heard they'd asked you to join the program. Good to see you. We heard about you facing down Captain Swift. Took real guts to do that. Wish we'd done it ourselves instead of letting them waltz in and inspect everything but we fell for their story and got suckered in. They sure sang a different tune when they came back the next week. I still had to sell them twenty cows but they were much more deferential about it."

John replied, "Yeah, they bought up most of Ed Strickland's cattle too except for a fair number he's keeping as breeding stock and wouldn't sell. He managed to work a deal with them to where they'd pay for part in cash and part in stuff like fencing, fertilizer and whatnot. He figures he didn't get anywhere near to what they're really worth just now but at least the Army didn't come in and take everyone's food and leave them to starve. You had much action out your way since they signed you up?"

"No, not much at all. We're near to thirty miles out of town and no big highways. Had some minor theft but that's about it. Been doing more impromptu relief work with the church than I have law enforcing. Hopefully it'll stay that way."

With a nod John said, "Your church organizing for relief work? Lisa who works at the Archer clinic lives with us now and she said something about several of the churches here in Archer trying to start programs for the locally hard up and some for the camps."

Stu grinned, "Yeah, we're working on putting together what organizational aid we can. Several of the

local boys in the church belong to the Guard and were incorporated into the local Recovery troops. They get home every once in a while when they can and they sure tell some sad tales. We figure if something isn't done to help relieve the situation the evacuees cooped up in there are going to bust loose and fall on the surrounding countryside like a swarm of locusts. We've got damn little food we can send but things like tools, building supplies, and whatnot to help make life more livable. Several of the congregation who have done missionary work in Central and South America have gone in to teach about primitive sanitation and cooking. It's for sure the Recovery HQ and what few FEMA people there are in the county sure don't have the manpower for it."

Another man came up to them. "Sorry to butt in," he said, "but are you John Horne?"

John nodded his head and the man put out his hand, "Glad to meet you. I'm Ed Harris. I heard about you facing down the Army. He sounds like an insufferable bastard but then I retired after thirty in the Marines so we don't get along anyways. I've got the sector to the west of you running down 27 from Archer to the county line and some of the side roads. We ought to link up sometimes since we'll be helping each other out."

He was an older man in his late fifties, permanently tanned and creased with plenty of gray showing in his high and tight hair cut but none of him looking slack. "Good idea" John said "You free this afternoon? We've got a feral dog hunt coming up and you can watch if you like. We're using it as a working exercise to get our organization and commo worked out."

Ed shook his head in agreement, "Sounds good. We're not even that far along yet so maybe you'll give me some ideas. Starting an organized program to kill those goddamned dogs is really a good idea. We've all been shooting them whenever we see one but I still had a big rottweiler get in and tear up one of my cows."

Over the next ten minutes John ended up shaking hands with nearly everyone in the room as word began to circulate who he was.

Presently the Sheriff entered the room and with little wasted time started the meeting. "Gentlemen, you all know why you've been chosen and I'm not going to sugar coat the situation for you. The Sheriff's Office is stretched nearly to the breaking point right now and if we don't start seeing some relief coming in from the undamaged parts of the country soon we'll be facing collapse. State governments and the railroads are working around the clock to get the rail lines working again and it looks like they'll have the first trains ready to go in the very near future. Be that as it may they aren't here now but all of our problems are."

"The long and the short of it is I can't devote much more than moral support, limited amounts of communications support and some centralization to you in the outlying areas. Rather than waiting for the inevitable Vigilance Committees to form I've taken the initiative to start a program of local citizen policing to maintain order and deter any bandit wannabees from starting trouble. You're it for southwestern Alachua county from west of Interstate 75 to Newberry. I advise you all to get to know everyone bordering on your sectors and maybe some of those near to your sectors that don't directly touch on them. Figure out what communications you have in common between you and work out certain shared channels or frequencies that you can use to communicate with each other in addition to the one you'll use for internal communications within your sector. Get familiar with each other's special skills or equipment because you're mostly going to have to look to yourselves for support outside of some specialized investigation or communications support that I can provide you. If we start getting

regular fuel shipments you'll each receive a ration but I can't say when or how much it'll be. I realize that sometimes this is going to be a great burden on you but you know as well as I do why it has to be done. I wish the situation was otherwise but it's not. If we cannot maintain order the entire state may break down into bloody anarchy."

"Let me make it clear to you that as sworn deputies you have full powers of arrest. I trust you to use your judgment wisely in exercising this power. Most especially be very cautious about the use of force but use it if you must because we cannot tolerate a climate of lawlessness and violence developing in the county. Unless you've done something really stupid I will back you to the hilt. Each one of you was chosen because of your background, experience, or your demonstrated ability to cope with difficult situations. I trust you will not do anything stupid."

"To assist you in your work I've had a map of the county made up showing each of your assigned sectors with your name in it." He pointed to the large four by eight map on the wall. "If there are portions of your given sectors that present practical difficulties for an individual deputy to police it then confer with your neighboring sector deputies and try to work something out. For those of you needing communications assistance that's Ted Gaskins in the back in the green shirt. He's one of my radio techs and he'll do what he can to get you set up. Now I've got an emergency county commission meeting to make in Gainesville so I'll leave you to it. Good luck gentlemen." With that he stepped from behind the podium and went out the door.

Stu turned to John and Ed sitting next to him and said, "I begin to understand how the Britons must have felt when Rome recalled the Legions."

August 31st - Dead Tide - Part Two

John's fatalistic mood had settled deeply upon him again as they finished up with the meeting. There were six other sectors that touched on his and he'd met all but one of the deputies assigned to them - the last having not attended the meeting. He'd also met and spoke at least a few words with everyone else in the room so he'd at least know their faces. By mutual agreement everyone in the room agreed that CB Channel 9 would serve as the area "911 channel" for people to call for help on regardless of their sector and Channel 11 would serve as the intersector deputy's channel. He left the meeting with as many questions unanswered as resolved and suspected he'd get few of them dealt with if he called the sheriff. Mostly he figured they'd have to solve them for themselves until things could be put back together.

Lisa had told him the Archer post office was running again. There was no fuel for rural deliveries so you had to come into town to get your mail even if you didn't have a box in the building. With no one sending junk mail and most of the companies that sent him bills now probably scattered across the continental shelf he figured that the postal mail volume would plunge steeply. "Probably just as well" he thought "I doubt the postal service can even pay more than a very few employees now. Mail's going to go back to being mostly personal or official communication like it used to be way back when."

To his surprise there was a handful of mail waiting for him. Most of it was now irrelevant having been posted before Impact - junk advertising, book catalogs gave him a pang of regret, credit card bills, the power bill, a jury summons brought a momentary grin to his face but the last letter on the bottom stopped his breath for a moment. A huge grin split his face and he carefully tucked the letter into his breast pocket and the rest went into his saddle bags. Even junk paper was paper and paper was a manufactured commodity which meant that it did not get thrown away until it had absolutely no more possible uses. Even then it could be used to light a fire.

He pulled the CB out of the saddle bag. "John to Base. I'm finished with the meeting and I've got the mail. I'll make a quick stop by the market on the way out then I'm heading home. I've got a surprise!"

A moment passed then the radio crackled, "Base to daddy. I read you. What's your ETA? What's the surprise?!"

A smile crossed his face again, "John to Base. ETA of approximately an hour and fifteen minutes. If I told you it wouldn't be a surprise would it?"

He rode through the gate within the specified time and up to the barn. He was just unsaddling the horse when Ann came in. "Mel tells me you've got a surprise for us? What is it?"

John grinned, "I'll tell you what I told Mel. If I told you it wouldn't be a surprise would it?" He picked up a curry comb. "When I get Cricket squared away I'll show you. When's lunch going to be ready? The hunt's at two and I want to be finished by then."

She grinned back at him, "Yes dear, I'll be sure you're fed before you go out and play with the boys." Walking back to the door she turned just before going through and said, "I've got a surprise for you of

my own" and stuck her tongue out at him as she disappeared into the brightness outside.

August 31 - Cyclical

"Alright John Horne!" Ann pointed the spoon at him threateningly "There'll be NO cobbler for you until you TELL us what this surprise is!"

Her husband grinned as he pushed his plate away. "Well," he said, "I can't rightly tell you seeing as how it's actually Dad's surprise!" He unbuttoned his pocket flap and withdrew the letter then extended it to his father.

Robert quirked an eyebrow but said nothing as he took the missive from him. "Men!" Ann let out a sigh of frustration. Melinda and Heather looked expectantly at Mel's grandfather. "It wasn't even yours yet you've made us sit here through the entire meal consumed with curiosity!"

With a chuckle her husband replied, "Ahh, but it's the anticipation that makes it all the sweeter."

His wife opened her mouth to retort then noticed her father-in-law staring intently at the letter with a grave expression.

Finally the elder Horne said, "It's from Carla. Must have mailed it before the impact."

"Dad," his son interjected, "look at the postmark! It's dated the 8th! She mailed it after the impact. She's alive!"

His father squinted at the outside of the envelope then took his reading glasses out of his pocket and put them on. He reexamined the letter and said, "Well, sure enough. It is dated August 8th!" His hands shook slightly as he carefully slit the envelope open with a butter knife. Inside were three folded pages with Carla's neat penmanship on them. Unfolding the pages his father began to read aloud.

August 7th, 2002

Dear Dad,

I have no way of knowing if you and the family have survived the tsunamis resulting from the asteroid strike or even if this letter will ever be delivered so I suppose I'm writing this as much for myself as to let you know that I and the kids are alive. I don't know about Aaron. He was with us when the news came but somehow we were separated in the madness of trying to get as many people on board as possible before we had to undock but I'd better start this at the beginning so you'll understand.

As you may recall from my last letter we had been back in Norfolk for a week when the news broke. I think it went out over military channels before the public announcement so we had a few more minutes warning. Aaron had brought Cindy and Neil to the base so I could show them around the carrier. As you probably recall it's open on a limited basis for public tours when we're not actively preparing to ship out. We'd decided to have a late lunch at the chow hall you and I ate at last year and had just left when the base warning sirens sounded. We didn't know at first what the emergency was about or even if it was only a drill so we ran for the nearest shelter so I could be sure Aaron and the kids were safe before reporting back to the ship. When we got there the shelter commander immediately ordered everybody to head to the wharves yelling about an asteroid that was going to impact and we all had to get aboard before the tsunamis hit Norfolk.

It seems when the word came in about the impact the Admiral ordered every ship that could make way and every plane that could get off the ground to move to safety but only after as many people as could be safely crammed aboard were taken on. The asteroid was only 45 minutes from impact when the sirens went off so there wasn't time for any organization, the S.P.'s just started grabbing anyone and everyone and shoving them towards the docks. This is when we lost Aaron. A woman with a child in her arms fell and he stopped to help her get up while I ran with Neil in my arms and had Cindy by the hand. I thought he was behind us but when we got to the ramp he wasn't anywhere to be seen and the S.P. wouldn't let me go back to look. I can only hope he made it aboard another ship but I know he is not on board with us. Two hours before the tsunamis arrived the Captain threw off the lines and pulled out going to flank speed as soon as he was clear enough that he could do so. We've never done that before because of the damage and the safety risk but every ship in the yard was moving fast. We saw plane after plane rising in the distance. One went down and crashed into a housing area but I've never heard why. The entire group was blowing every horn and whistle it had to warn everyone out of the way as we made our insane dash to open sea and deep water. I know we ran down at least one cabin cruiser that didn't get out of the way. I saw the people bailing out. They must have had engine trouble because they were sitting dead in the channel.

By the time we cleared the harbor and were heading out into open ocean we could see a monstrous number of ships and boats of every description before and aft of us all heading outbound. When the asteroid was supposed to enter the atmosphere I had the kids cover their eyes but I put on my sunglasses and saw it hit air. I shouldn't have done that as I may have damaged my vision but it seems to be getting better now. It was well over the horizon from us so what I saw was a like a camera strobe flashing then it disappeared. I was mostly blind for a little while but I could see the sky in that direction begin to turn dark and expand like watching time lapse photography of an approaching storm. We were hustled below after that so I didn't get to see any more as everyone was sent below decks and the ship battened down for gale weather. I don't know how tall the wave was or in what depth of water we were at when it came but for a moment we were all terrified we would capsize. The ship eventually righted itself and the damage crews got on top of everything very quickly. We had hundreds of non-ships personnel on board ranging from kids like Cindy and Neil to vendor repair technicians and base shore personnel so it took a while to get everyone squared away and it is very cramped. We're very short on fresh water and it is severely rationed as is food but we're alive.

Once he was sure the last of the waves had passed the Captain spent a day searching for survivors from any ships or boats that might not have survived the deep water waves. He eventually called it off as shore debris began to drift out and pose a hazard to navigation along with overturned boats and ships. We didn't recover many and before we left I saw many, many bodies in the water.

I can't tell you where we're at nor am I allowed to say where we're going but if ever you receive this then take heart that at least the three of us are alive and maybe Aaron as well on one of the other ships. I've got to go make sure the kids are squared away before I go on duty. Cindy is taking this like a trooper and has been a real help in organizing the kids and keeping them under control. Neil's settling down now that the fright of it is passing and starting to do well. I'll write again when I can.

Love, Carla.

PS. Tell John that all those nutty books he bought may be finally paying off. I take back all the ribbing I've been giving him over the years. Love C.

His father folded the letter and gently put it back in its envelope then excused himself to use the toilet.

John reckoned he'd never seen his father weep in his life, not even when his wife, John's mother died, and wouldn't see it now either. "Probably just as well because he'd get me going too most likely." Ann and Melinda did not try to hide their tears and Heather looked close to weeping herself.

Presently John cleared his throat and said, "That's the first piece of really GOOD news we've had since Impact. Tonight when we all sit to supper we'll have a prayer of thanksgiving."

With a glance at the kitchen clock he said, "I told Ed Harris to drop in about one. He's a neighboring sector deputy and is going to watch our dog operation. Reckon I'd better round up the gear and get ready."

August 31 - Crisis

The sun was near to touching the horizon as John keyed the mike “Rover leader to Net. We’re at the end point. Let’s call it a day. The Rover team scored 6 dogs, a coyote, and a fox. Over.”

“Roger Rover Leader” came Heather’s reply. “Dog Pound do you copy?”

A momentary lapse then Ed Strickland’s voice came across, “Roger that Net, I copy. Tell the Jefe’ that we’ve put nine dogs in the pound, two raccoons, two coyotes and a couple of cats. We’re packing it in and will meet up at Rover Leader’s place.”

John and Ed kicked their horses into a trot and started towards the house. Sixteen men from John’s sector had participated in the dog hunt and he figured the next one would probably net even more as the word got out. It had started off clumsily as the members of the two teams learned the necessary radio protocol and how to coordinate within the teams and how to work the teams together. The clumsiness gradually wore off and for the last two hours everything had worked fairly smoothly. He figured they probably hadn’t gotten every dog but any survivors should be pretty shy around barns and pastures for at least a little while until gnawing hunger drove them back. He also figured that word of the successful exercise would get around to those who might be thinking of doing a little preying of their own on their fellow humans and he devoutly hoped they too would be deterred.

Back at the house the teams threw the kills onto Miguel’s truck as he had asked for the corpses. John suspected they’d end up on someone’s table but purposely did not ask what he wanted them for. Miguel knew virtually everyone in the area and had a fair idea of their personal condition, those who were in the worst need would have some protein in their diet tonight. A month after the Impact had blown the bottom out the grocery industry John didn’t figure there’d be many who’d turn up their nose at the meat. With every meal he gave private thanks that a little foresight and diligence was keeping his family from having to resort to the same.

In the back yard he could see Ann stirring the huge cauldron that Ed had brought, formerly used to scald hogs it was now serving as a community soup pot for the collective meal that had been put together. Several families had contributed little or nothing and although this was seen it was not noticed. John wondered if they would be among those who would be receiving a gift from Miguel. Ann and Heather had started a game for the kids involving how much corn they could grind into meal with the hand mill that involved some complicated reward system based on age and gender that he didn’t understand but by the end they’d milled nearly a bushel of feed corn. A fair part of this had been turned into cornbread, some baked in the oven in the house but several pans were cooked over a fire in the yard as Ed’s wife Ellie gave a hands-on class in camp cooking using several different methods to bake the bread. With a grin she said, “I used to go off to the cow camps with Ed when we first married before the kids came along. Lord, I used to cook up tons of camp food and you should see the way those hands could put it away. Haven’t done this for years and years. Makes me feel young again!”

Presently the kitchen bosses pronounced the meal ready. The group looked at John as he took off his hat to say grace. “Tonight I will be giving a prayer of thanksgiving for in addition to our successful hunt and this excellent meal the Horne family has received some personal good news. This morning my father received a letter from my sister Carla who was at the naval base in Norfolk at the time of Impact. Beyond all hope it seems by miraculous chance that not only she but her two children are alive. The whereabouts of her husband, my brother-in-law, are presently unknown but there seems a good chance he too maybe be alive as well.”

Placing his hat on his chest John bowed his head and spoke, "Lord, we are gathered here together this night in community fellowship to give thanks and to celebrate the successful hunt that has just ended which removed the threat of dangerous predators to the livestock and children of our community. We thank thee oh Lord for your blessings this day and we thank thee for this most excellent meal of which we are about to partake. We thank thee that so many of us are able to gather here together this evening and we pray for the safety and deliverance of the loved ones of every one here of whom we have not heard. We thank the oh Lord for the deliverance beyond hope of my sister Carla, her daughter Cindy and her son Neil. We pray oh lord of the safe deliverance of her husband Aaron whose whereabouts are unknown to us. We pray oh lord for the deliverance of our nation and indeed this entire world which you saw fit to create from the trials and perils that now beset us. We beseech thee that aid and comfort may be delivered unto all in our county, our state, our nation and our world who are in desperate need this night. In Jesus name we pray. Amen."

"Amen" intoned the gathered group.

John looked up and smiled at Ann, Ellie and the rest of the cooks. "My but that soup smells good. Let's eat!"

The ladies begin to dip out soup into bowls and hand out generous hunks of corn bread. Rick said, "If I'd known how much better corn bread tasted when it's made out of fresh milled corn I'd have bought a mill myself! We ever get back to something approaching normal I will."

Miguel chuckled and Ed spoke, "Things ever get back to normal I reckon everyone is going to buy a hand mill. If'n we don't starve to death first it'll be a long, long time before you see the total reliance on a grocery store again that we all allowed ourselves to fall into, at least in this county, I can tell you that!"

Every one found places at the sawhorse tables and for a time conversation fell to nothing as the assembled saw to the matter of their plates. Seconds were offered and were gladly accepted. John had just reached the bottom of his bowl and was chasing the last little bit of pot liquor with a chunk of corn bread when the outside bell of the phone rang. "Well, looks like the phone's are working today", he said. "Heather, would you be kind enough to answer it?"

"Yes sir" she said and dashed into the house. Seconds later she dashed out of the house again and ran to the tables.

"Uncle John! There's a woman on the phone, says she lives next to the Tiersdales. She says there's screaming coming from their house. I could hear it over the phone!"

"Damn!" John swore. "Run back inside and tell her I'm on my way but it may be fifteen, twenty minutes before I can get the saddle on the horse and run up there. Is she by herself?"

Heather nodded, "Yes sir, she said her husband hasn't come home from work yet and she's by herself."

"Then tell her to bolt the doors and if she's got a gun to get it. Tell her to watch out the windows for what she can see and I'm on my way."

John turned towards the barn and Miguel stood up. "John! I'll take you in the truck. From the sounds of

it maybe all of us should to go.”

With a nod he agreed. “OK, it’ll be a lot faster. Let’s keep this to Posse members right now and make sure everyone is armed.”

John and six others leapt into the back of Miguel's truck and quickly went up the road to the Tiersdale's house. The truck stopped in front of their gate and they unloaded. Nothing could be heard from inside. "Jimmy, you and the rest surround the outside of the house. Miguel, come with me and we'll go find this neighbor woman then we'll check the inside of the house."

The men went through the gate and began to fan out. John took his star out of his pocket and pinned it to the front of his shirt where it could be seen. He was just about to rap on the frame of the screen door when the inside door swung inwards. "Deputy Horne!," the woman at the door nearly shouted, "Thank God you're here! He's got Brittany! I saw him run out the back door with Brittany! You've got to catch him! He had a knife in his hand!"

John put his hands in the air making calming motions, "Easy ma'am" he said, "WHO has Brittany and what direction did he run in? What did he look like and how long ago did he leave? Easy now, we can't help her if you can't tell us what you know."

The woman took several deep breaths and forcibly brought herself back under control. She shuddered but managed to speak in an even tone. "He's about your height, a white man, with black hair cut very short. He had tattoos on the arm he was holding Brittany with, his left arm I think. They were kind of lurid and stand out. Oh! When he ran out of the house he didn't have any pants on, just sneakers, underpants and a t-shirt. He had blood on his shirt."

"That's very good ma'am. Very good. " John spoke in soothing, reassuring tones, "How long ago did he leave with the girl? And what direction did he run?"

The woman turned to glance at a wall clock in the room behind her. "It wasn't very long ago I think. Maybe only four or five minutes just after I called. He ran out their back gate. It's wooded back there so I couldn't see him any more after that."

"OK" John said as he pulled the little CB out of his pocket. "Miguel, if you'd stay with the lady here and get whatever further information you can think of I'll get Jimmy and we'll start tracking this fellow and the girl. We may need you to come running with the truck later."

Miguel nodded and John backed out of the portico into the yard. He trotted through the gate of the Tiersdale's yard shouting at Jimmy. "He's grabbed the daughter and ran out the back gate. Rick and Bill, you stay here at the house. Go inside and see if you can find Mrs. Tiersdale or her husband. Don't disturb anything if you can help it. The Sheriff might want to send an investigator."

Jimmy and the others began to move towards the back gate with John. "What's he look like?" asked Jimmy.

"My height, white male, big tattoos on at least one arm, close cut black hair, sneakers, t-shirt, NO pants. The girl's white and about twelve years old."

Jimmy nodded and they all began to scan the ground. The trail proved easy to follow as the man and Brittany had scuffed up the wet, fallen leaves in their passage. At about a hundred yards into the thick

belt of oaks they came across a pair of blue jeans that had obviously just been thrown there.

They were girl sized.

"Jesus!" John said. "Well, if the son of a bitch is going to stop for that then we'll catch up to him all the faster."

The radio crackled, Miguel's voice sounding from the speaker. "John, this is Miguel. Rick and Bill have made a quick run through the house. Mr. Tiersdale doesn't appear to be here. Mrs. Tiersdale is in the bedroom. She'd dead. They say she's been repeatedly stabbed and the body is about half-naked. Over."

John spoke into the radio, "I copy. John to Net control. Do you copy? Over."

After a moment Ann's voice came back. "Uhh, this is Net Control. We copy. What do you want us to do John? Over."

John replied, "See if you can raise County Central and apprise them of the basic facts and that we're in pursuit of the kil... the suspect. Leave the house exactly as it was found and we'll report in periodically. Did you copy that Miguel? Over."

Miguel came back, "I copy. Let me know if you need pick up. Over."

Ann came back, "We copy. We're trying to raise County Central now. Over."

The trail led through a grassy clearing and for a few moments they could not find the trail until Jimmy found it in the trees on the other side. The posse trotted onwards, John's right knee began to twinge. "Not now, damnit!" he growled to himself.

Another fifty yards under the trees the leaves were much more disturbed and they found a pink t-shirt hanging from a catbrier vine. Jimmy said, "Must have had to struggle with her getting her shirt off. He stared at the leaf mold, then the shirt. "I don't think they're more than a minute or two ahead, the duff is still springing back from where he stepped on it." They ran onwards.

Minutes later they heard a high pitched feminine scream. The posse began to sprint. Presently they could begin to see a bright line ahead and John figured they must be approaching the other side of the belt of trees. He vaguely recalled there was a large cow pasture somewhere near and hoped that the light was it ahead. Another scream and now they could hear hoarse, muffled cursing, obviously a male voice. They ran around a thicket of oak saplings surrounding a long fallen tree and saw them.

The man had the girl by one arm struggling to bend her over a low horizontal large limb of the fallen tree. "You little ----! Shut your ----- mouth or I'll cut your goddamned throat!" The girl was thrashing wildly, naked but for her now dirty white panties. She screamed again. John drew his big N-framed Smith & Wesson revolver and shouted. "Sheriff's Department! Drop the knife and put your hands up!"

The man whirled around, shock and surprise on his blood streaked face. At that instant the girl the girl gave a hysterical jerk of her arm and snatched her hand free of her captor's grasp. The man whirled back again to grab her as she leapt over the limb. He leapt onto the branch and was about to jump for her when John's revolver spoke. The man spasmed then fell off the other side. John and the rest ran forward. As he rounded the top of the fallen tree the man lurched to his feet with his knife in his hand

to jerkily run towards the lawman, blood pouring from the massive hole in his right side. John's revolver and the guns of three of the others spoke nearly as one slamming him into the wet leaf mold. He thrashed for a moment and was still - eyes open staring into infinity.

Nothing was said for a moment as the men breathed deeply catching their breathes. Finally Jimmy said, "Just as well. Saved the county the trouble of a hanging or a firing squad. Goddamn predator."

After another few breathes John asked, "Does anyone recognize him? I don't think I've seen him before."

No one knew who the fellow was. The deputy spoke again, "Where did the girl go? We'll need to find her. She's certain to be traumatized all to hell and could be injured. Y'all go look for her while I radio this in."

The men fanned out, quickly finding the girl behind a tree where she'd hidden. John pulled out the radio. "John to Net Control. We have found the suspect and the girl. The suspect is dead. Over."

A few seconds passed then Ann's voice came back, "Net Control to John. We copy. Suspect dead. Is the girl OK? Lisa's got her bag and is ready to head your way. Over."

Jimmy walked up with the girl. John spoke gently to her. "It's OK. We're with the Sheriff's department. We're not going to hurt you. I just need to look you over quickly to see if you're injured, OK?"

The girl mutely nodded her head and John gently took her by the shoulder and turned her around for a quick visual examination. Jimmy took off the BDU shirt he wore as a light jacket and gave it to the girl who shrugged into it when the examination was over - she shivered violently. John spoke into the radio, "John to Net Control. She has no visible injuries other than some bruises and scratches. She is shocky. Over."

Ann replied, "We copy John. Over."

Miguel's voice came across, "Miguel to John. Where are you? Do you need pick up? Uhh, over."

The deputy looked back the way they had come and then towards the edge of the tree line just yards away. "We're near to the other side of the belt of trees that comes up against the backyard. I think we're on the backside of that big pasture that runs up to the Archer road. Do you know where it is? If you can make it back here come get us so we don't have to carry this trash back through the woods. Over."

The reply came, "I'm familiar with it. Shot doves back there a couple of years ago with Ned McKasky who owns it. I think I can be there in about twenty minutes. There's several gates to go through. Over."

John nodded his head. "I copy. Go by and pick up Lisa first. Brittany's going to need some care. Over."

Miguel came back, "I copy. Pick up Lisa first and we'll be there to you in about thirty minutes, maybe less. Over."

John started to put the radio back in his pocket when it sounded again. It was Ann's voice but in the background he could hear Heather on the other radio. "Net Control to John. We've raised County Central. They advise to preserve the crime scene intact and recover the body. They cannot send anyone

at the present time. The watch captain advises you to put all available manpower on alert and prepare to move into Gainesville if you are called. Major fighting has broken out in the big refugee camp at the county fairgrounds and the sheriff doesn't know if they are going to be able to get it under control. Captain Swift is dead. If called to do so go to Shands Hospital to deploy. Do you copy? Over."

He swore fervently and passionately before keying his mike. "Roger that, I copy. As soon as Miguel can pick us up we'll head to the house and start preparing. Get on the local net and call as many as you can."

August 31 - The Hour Before Dawn

After a time Miguel arrived with the truck. They loaded the girl into the front with Lisa so she could examine her. The body they wrapped in a tarp and threw into the back being careful to keep it away from the more useful carcasses of that afternoon's hunt. On the way back Miguel stopped at his place and unloaded the animals with instructions to his son Alberto to handle them. They stopped at the murder scene again to pick up the remaining two men and to let the neighbor woman know that the girl would be with Lisa and Ann at the house and to make sure that no one entered the house and disturbed anything. John left a note for her to give to Mr. Tiersdale when he returned home briefly explaining why things had been left the way they were and to ask that he not disturb anything. Coming home to find that your wife had been raped and murdered, your daughter nearly so, and the law had just went off and left everything was going to be a hell of a blow to the man but John didn't know what else to do. His duty was to the living - the dead no longer cared. "A hell of a way to handle a murder" he thought to himself. That completed everyone returned to John's house.

At the house John found the men who had not gone with the Posse and many more besides. As he began to question everyone about the state of their weapons and ammunition supply one of them, Steve, hesitated, looked at his feet and finally said, "John, I'm not sure I'm up for this. I mean it's not like this is happening in our community, nor even in Archer. The fair ground's clear to the other side of Gainesville. I'm not sure this is our fight. Why not let Gainesville handle it's own?"

For a time no one spoke, several of the men looked uncomfortably at each other including several of the Posse. As the silence became painful John said, "You're right Steve. The fairgrounds are on the other side of Gainesville from us, makes them near to twenty five miles away I think. But consider this, the sheriff tells me there's some fifty five thousand evacuees in Alachua county alone, never mind the county residents who are themselves in desperate straits. From the sounds of it the Recovery Command troops have lost control and the refugees have busted out of that camp and are rampaging through Gainesville now. We all know that what's left of the Federal government and many of the state governments are trying to get relief supplies through to the East coast but it's taking time. Those supplies ARE coming but it may be a few more days, maybe even a week or longer. All we've got to do is hold out until then and most of the driving force behind these problems will begin to subside. Be that as it may that aid isn't here yet and those hungry refugees are busting loose and will take what they want where ever they can find it. That's a big camp and if they can't get it under control the other camps around the county may slip away as well. How long will it be before they've scoured Gainesville clean and began to rage through the countryside like a swarm of locusts? Do you want to try to hold them off from your front yard? It'll be a hell of a lot better to take the fight - if there must be a fight - to them rather than letting them bring it to us where their attacks could wipe us out."

John looked around at the other men and continued, "We don't know that we'll be involved in any fighting at all. Camp Blanding has to know by now and they should be sending troops. From the sounds of it we're just going to be a reserve. I won't ask anyone to come along that's unwilling but as far as I'm concerned I've had my fill today of predators running loose in my neighborhood. This threat I want to scotch at the source! Anyone that doesn't want to go can go on home now. The rest of us have work to be done."

Many of the men looked at the ground and would not meet anyone's eyes. After a minute two did walk away, not looking back. The rest stayed. Including himself John counted twenty one. "It'll have to do" he said. "Let's look over everyone's rifles and make sure we've got ammo for everyone. I want each man to have at least forty rounds. If you don't have that much run back to your house and get what you

have."

He turned to Miguel, "You got enough gas in the truck to haul us all to Shands and back?"

Miguel nodded to the affirmative. John nodded back at him, a growing suspicion now nearly confirmed.

"OK then, all we can do now is wait and see if we're needed."

John stepped down off the truck in the parking garage east of the Shands emergency room. A hospital security officer said, "Sector deputies to meet in the cafeteria. All others head to the top level of the garage."

With a nod to Miguel to take charge John walked from the garage, across the street and into the hospital. He'd never seen the place so dirty but it appeared to still be functioning. The room contained about thirty men and he recognized many of them from the southwest sector deputies meeting. With a mild shock he realized that meeting had only been just that morning. It felt like days in the past now. An acute sense of fatigue washed over him. A uniformed deputy walked in and stepped up onto a chair.

"My name is Captain Dick Parker, I'm the west side watch commander for the A.S.O. There may be more of you coming but time is pressing so I'm going to start."

"The situation is like this. About four hours ago in the Fairgrounds evacuee camp a man there was discovered by other camp residents to be hoarding a stash of canned goods. We don't know where he got them from, it may be that he'd brought them with him. Regardless, this sparked outrage among the other camp residents where they have been subsisting on a 1200 calorie a day diet for several weeks now. Apparently he refused to give them up and a fight broke out quickly resulting in his being lynched. The camp commander notified the local Recovery HQ of the situation and said he was sending in troops to break it up and recover the body. He never reported back and we can only assume he and however many troops he may have taken with him were overwhelmed. When he failed to report in a timely manner Captain Swift went to the camp with a platoon of soldiers to restore order. He was confronted with a well-organized group of camp residents, some of whom were carrying M16's believed to have belonged to the camp guards but they also possessed many civilian weapons that were apparently not found when they entered the camp. From their actions we think that at least one or more ex-military may be among them. Captain Swift ordered them to surrender the weapons and disperse and they refused. At this point one or more shots were fired - we don't know who fired first. The residents charged Captain Swift's troops and he ordered volley fire into the mass. General fighting broke out, the Captain and at least six of his troopers were killed soon after and the situation began to spread outside of the camp."

"So far the fighting has not spread much beyond the Waldo Road and 39th avenue and we hope to be able to contain it there but we are at risk of losing the airport which sits near to the fairgrounds. To prevent this we are moving all troops and law enforcement personnel out of southern Gainesville to the northeast. The airport must not be allowed to fall as we were just notified this morning that a joint venture between a number of the Midwestern states and the Federal government is trying to airlift food supplies to the most desperate areas as a stopgap until the rail lines can be brought back into usable conditions. Your roles here are to protect the hospitals, Shands, the V.A. across the street and Alachua

General Hospital further east and you'll be divided up by sector accordingly. We think the fighting won't come this far but if it does just try to hold out here until more troops can be sent in."

He looked across the lunch room to a man on crutches. "If you'll look behind you the gentleman with the crutches is Captain Thomas Wayne. He's an infantry officer who is a patient across the street at the V.A. He has volunteered to lead up the defensive details along with a number of sergeants who were also at the V.A. They'll be your leadership. Captain Wayne, I leave these men in your hands. I'm needed in the northeast so I must be going."

With some difficulty Captain Wayne stepped up onto a stool that had been provided for him. "Good evening gentlemen" he said, "Let's take a quick review of the buildings and surrounding grounds to see where we can do the most good. If our riot makes it this far chances are we're going to be outnumbered so we'll need to make our defender's advantage count..."

September 7 - The End of the Beginning - Part One

It wanted to rain and John was tired but he still had six more rows to go with the seeder before he was done and it had to go back tomorrow without fail so he unfolded the accordion top on the tractor and drove on. It had been a good week all things considered, especially compared to the week previous. A large military transport passed overhead on its way to the airport in Gainesville. "Won't be many more of them I think" he said to himself, "with the rail lines coming back into play. Sure got us out from between a rock and a hard place though."

The rain began to come down steadily as he finished the last two rows. When the truck came by to pick up Ann in the morning they'd be taking the implement with them. He smiled when he thought about that. It had taken a little while for him to get use to the idea but he had to admit she'd been very foresightful when she cut her deal with the university. The surprise that she didn't get to tell him about until the next day after Carla's letter had come in had been the fact that the university wanted her to come back to work right away, badly enough that they'd feed and lodge her to get her to do so. With the economic and physical devastation caused by the asteroid impact and its resulting weather effects local food production and self-reliance suddenly took on an importance they had not enjoyed in many decades, maybe ever before. With her Atlantic ports smashed, her Gulf ports damaged to one degree or another, and acute fuel shortages predicted to last several years or more the Governor made it a crash priority that Florida had to become more self-reliant in food production. This pointed the arrow of urgency straight at the various state colleges of agriculture and the state cooperative extension service that presented their public face. After years of slowly subsiding in political and budgetary relevancy this sudden urgency and importance had taken them utterly unawares and they were now scrambling to fulfill what they had been tasked to do. Now, like never before the vast collection of knowledge held in their libraries and databases on large and small scale food production, food preservation, home economics, disaster mitigation and other topics needed to be able to get out to the people. This meant the university needed its trained staff to find and distribute this information, much of which had been previously considered outdated, which meant they needed Ann and her colleagues.

John backed the tractor under the barn overhang so he could detach the grain drill and clean it so he could return it like he'd received it. It was an old drill, the extension farm off campus no longer used it as they had newer, more efficient equipment but for planting oats and wheat like he'd been doing it worked well and it would fit his tractor. Realizing that she had an importance that she'd never held before Ann had dickered with the vice-president that part of her salary was to be paid in ways such as allowing her to borrow certain tractor implements or other agricultural machinery that would be useful on the Horne farm -becoming one in actual fact rather than just a fanciful name - as well as necessary seed and other considerations. The VP took it all in stride but insisted that she work with the university agronomists on certain projects which is how John came to be planting this new variety of hullless oats rather than the oats he'd intended to plant and also putting in several acres of soft wheat to be trialed. This was fine by him as they would get to keep half of the grain and the agronomists would get their data and seed to distribute if it worked out. He'd also agreed to greatly increase his planting next Spring of the open-pollinated yellow dent corn he'd been conserving and improving on his own for the last seven years which he'd intended to do anyways but now they wanted to study it for possible distribution as well. All of this grain planting left him short of pasture which he solved by getting Ed to agree to rent him an adjoining pasture which he had no present use for having sold so many of his cattle to the Recovery Command. It was going to be a long winter and they weren't out of the woods yet but if they could make it through then next summer they ought to be doing alright relative to quite a lot of the rest of the surviving state population. At least they could grow their own food.

You couldn't get fuel at all if you didn't have a ration priority and very little even if you did but he hoped that would change in the coming months. All of this unexpected planting would have more than completely used up his stored diesel fuel but agricultural food production now enjoyed a ration priority just below food transport and emergency services so it had been possible to get enough for the plowing and planting. There wasn't any gasoline to be had, not even for himself as a sector deputy or Lisa as one of the most important personnel at the clinic in Archer. Well, where was he going to go anyways? At least the university picked up Ann and brought her home again. They couldn't pick up and drop her off everyday which meant she stayed in a dorm during the week and was only home for the weekend. Even after only a week he missed her when she was gone, most especially with three girls in the house and Lisa being at the clinic all day!

With the seeder ready to be picked up he put his slicker and hat on and walked over to Mike's place. He should be getting home about now and was supposed to have the case wrap up on the Tiersdale murder which he'd have to review and sign off on. He was still dreaming about it. "I'll never get used to that. My God, I hope I never get used to it!" he sighed to himself as he squelched down the road. After the riot and breakout at the camp had been resolved and the sheriff's office could get around to lesser priorities they had identified the perpetrator. His name had been Richard Louis Nelson with a long history of mostly minor crimes but his last conviction had been for attempted rape. In fact, he was supposed to still be in jail for the crime but it turned out that in the previous week the local prisons had been forced to release a number of prisoners on "early parole" because the increasing absenteeism of the prison guards and the lack of food to feed the prisoners was making it impossible to guard all but the worst offenders. "Too bad he had to rape and murder a woman and nearly do the same to her daughter for them to find out they'd made a mistake with that one." Well, he'd murder no more. He'd felt guilt pangs for shooting the rustlers but not for killing Nelson. "It's too damn bad somebody didn't do it before he reached the Tiersdales."

The Sunday of the dog hunt, murder, and camp riots seemed a month long to him. They'd been at Shands until nearly four a.m. in the morning before word had come that fresh troops from the Recovery H.Q. at Camp Blanding and the on-site troops and law enforcement had finally managed to crush the rioting, but at a heavy cost of 127 civilians dead, 13 soldiers, and four deputies and police officers. The ring leaders of the riots had been identified, were tried, and subsequently ordered shot by the new county Recovery C.O., a Major Randolph McCall. After much intense negotiation between the Recovery Command, the Governor's office and a coalition of county boards of commissioners and sheriff's it was agreed the camps and the coastal areas directly devastated by the tsunamis would be placed under Direct Federal Administration, or DFA for short, which so far as John could tell seemed to be a euphemism for martial law without actually coming out and calling it that. All areas outside of those zones would remain under what civil law there remained. Word around the department was that it was the arrival of the first military transport planes carrying food relief that actually ended the riots. Once word got around what was in the planes that over flew Gainesville the rioters simply gave up. John didn't care either way if it meant they weren't going to have to participate in a pitched battle.

September 7 - The End of the Beginning - Part Two

The sun was just beginning to lighten the sky when he'd made it home last Monday morning and he was surprised to see Ann up and with her bags packed on the bed. For a bad moment he'd gotten the idea that she was leaving him! She laughed when he expressed this thought and said, "No darling! This is the surprise I've been trying to tell you about! The university wants me to come back to work!" Fatigue and sleep deprivation made it all seem unreal to him as she explained the deal she'd negotiated with the university and what it meant to the family. He still hadn't liked the idea and wasn't going to agree but she sat him down and laid it all out for him in a step-by-step fashion.

"John, we need this. No one in the family is working, we have no income coming in. You yourself have told us that it'll be next Spring before we have anything that we can sell from what we produce ourselves. The Federal moratorium on mortgages, rents, loans and other debts also froze our bank account presuming the loss of New York and the other cities wouldn't have eliminated it anyway. With inflation spiraling higher and higher the cash money we have left on hand is worth less every day. We need the income. What's more I managed to dicker with the VP to allow us to use some of the implements and other equipment from the extension farm so you can expand our plantings here and we'll get seed and other stuff out of it as well. This could put us years ahead of what we'd be able to do otherwise. Besides, with me being in town all week eating the university's food it'll take some of the strain off of our food supply that taking a new mouth in would place on us."

That last one puzzled him so he said, "What new mouth?"

She laughed again, "Why Brittany of course! You brought her here yourself! Have you forgotten about her?"

In truth he had but he replied "Why should she figure into this? She doesn't live here. Her father will pick her up when he gets home."

A serious expression crossed her face, "John, it's going on seven a.m. Monday morning. Her father hasn't come home yet, at least we haven't heard from him. If you'd come home and found me murdered and your neighbor told you that Melinda was at a another neighbor's house wouldn't you go get her right away?"

"Well, yeah," he said, a little confused, "You mean he's never shown up yet?"

"No John, he hasn't. What's more no body has shown up to do anything about Mrs. Tiersdale's body either. Lisa and I think he's missing, or maybe run off and abandoned his wife and child, may not even know his wife has been murdered but we think he's missing."

"----!" John said with tired passion. "Lord God I hope this won't turn out to be a double murder. Maybe that's how the bastard knew to go to that particular house... I'll have to call this into county central. They're supposed to come and deal with the crime scene, though I don't know what's left to do other than clean up. With the riots and all - God it was only last night! - I suppose they haven't had time to do it yet. I'll call them this morning before I go to bed and goose them. But what about Brittany? Why are you counting her into our food situation. Even if her father doesn't come home she's got relatives she can go to doesn't she? Maybe family friends? Somebody?"

Ann shook her head, "Yes, she's got relatives but they're in Maryland. On the map it looks like they

may have been far enough west that the tsunamis may not have taken them but how would they come and get her? The two friends families she might go stay with are even worse off than her family was. Do you think they'd take her? We thoroughly explored all of the possibilities last night. Melinda, Lisa, Heather and I discussed this after Lisa gave Brittany a sedative and put her to bed. We want her to stay here John, at least until we can locate relatives who have a responsibility to her. We don't want to just send her off to some orphanage or something. Where would she go? Into the camps? It would be kinder to just shoot her! She can do the same kind of work that Melinda and Heather do and I won't be here during the week so she won't be a burden on the food supply. I might even be able to bring food from the university maybe, or something. She stays here!"

John was so tired that he felt dizzy and not up to this contention with his wife so he let the matter drop until he'd had some sleep. He realized later that day after he'd awoken that this meant it would have to wait all week until she came home unless they could settle this over the phone. This she simply refused to do and by the time she'd made it home Friday night the entire matter had set up like concrete and he realized he faced the immovable object of the united front of the house females.

"Well," he finally conceded, "We'll just have to make it work somehow."

Mike pulled up behind him just as John reached his gate and he got out of his car. "See you Tuesday morning Mac!" he said to the driver who turned and went back the way he'd come. "Hi John! I've got your paperwork. Guess what?! I get tomorrow off! First damned day off I've had since the rock hit! I've got your paperwork too, come on in and have a look at it. Wanna stay for supper? Kate will feed you some of your eggs."

John smiled and said, "I appreciate it Mike, but Ann's going back in the morning so I'll eat at the house. Maybe another time. I've been on the back of the tractor all day so I'm about filthy and dog tired to boot. Let me sign off on the Tiersdale case so I can go home and clean up."

"OK", the deputy grinned, "I reckon I can't compete with your wife, especially when she's gone all week. That Tiersdale mess was a nasty business, I'm sorry it fell to you to have to deal with it. Near as we can tell we think Mr. Tiersdale may have run into Nelson at the Archer market since men hang out there looking for day work. Still no trace of him though so we're still not sure if Nelson murdered him or maybe he just didn't run off as some of the nastier gossip would have it. I never met the man but from talking to the neighbors I don't think he'd just up and run off. We'll find him sooner or later, probably in a shallow grave."

The sector deputy nodded his head. "Yeah, I don't think he ran off either. What a crappy world it is sometimes but it's happening all over. Brittany seems to be taking it as well as can be expected. With Mel and Heather to keep her company and plenty of chores and responsibility she doesn't seem to dwell on it too much. Any news down at the department?"

"Well, as a matter of fact" Mike allowed, "there is. Word about your dog hunt got around to the Recovery HQ and they'd like to send some folks out when you do the next one. Feral dogs have become a serious threat down to Orlando and some of the other larger cities. They want to watch the way y'all did it so they can show it to the folks down south. When do you reckon you'll do it again?"

"Dad and Ed was talking about doing another one next week, probably Saturday or Sunday sometime. Right now everyone's too busy planting. Dad shot a dog in the pasture this afternoon so it's looking to be time again. Tell them to come on out, we can always use more hands."

"OK, I'll pass that on. Oh, and here's a heads up for you. Levy county sheriff's office put the word out there was a cross burning in Raleigh last night and someone shot into the houses of a couple of black residents. Raleigh being just to the south of Archer they wanted us to know in case whoever did it comes north."

With a sigh of disgust John said, "Well, if that don't just take the cake! Here we are everyone's trying to keep from starving, we've got thieves and murderers to deal with and those ignorant yahoos in bedsheets want to stick their heads up! There's at least twelve black families in my sector alone, three of the men on the posse here are black and these folks are all just trying to stay alive like we are. And of course with you being gone twelve hours a day every day who is going to have to deal with it! Me! Anyone starts burning crosses or shooting into houses around here should count themselves lucky if ALL they get is an ass full of birdshot!"

With a grin Mike said, "I knew you'd take the news calmly" and then laughed. Levy county said they had a good idea of who'd done it but they wanted to put the word out just in case. The sheriff wants this squashed too so if it crosses the county line he's going to come down on it like a ton of bricks."

The men hung up their rain slickers and went into the house. John sat at that kitchen table reading the paperwork, asking Mike about procedure, and making corrections. In the background the radio was on but he gave it only half an ear. The Federal and state governments were creating a program called the National Reconstruction Corp for the evacuees presently trapped in the camps and for anyone else unable to find work. They'd be used in the salvage operations in the devastated areas and to rebuild damaged infrastructure resulting from the earthquakes and flooding. With the fuel shortage much work that would have once been done by machinery would now have to be done by hand. The Corp wouldn't pay much relative to pre-Impact wages but at least they'd all eat, be clothed, and have a place to live during the coming winter. It sounded rugged but given the alternative it presented an attractive option. He was doing more physical labor now himself than he'd ever had to do before.

The paperwork reviewed and signed, John put his rain slicker back on and headed home. There'd be the usual alarums and difficulties to deal with tomorrow but for tonight he was going to take a hot shower, get dry, eat a good supper and then share a week's worth of company with his wife before she went back to the university.

September 13 - The Beginning of the Middle

The sun hung just above the trees on the west side of the pasture and they threw long shadows that were slowly creeping closer. John poured himself another glass of lemonade - made with real lemons that had been a lucky score at the Archer market last weekend from a shipment that had made it up from the southern end of the state. He'd spent the day in the garden and it felt good to sit in the late afternoon sun on the porch after a good bath. His stomach growled but he ignored it. Ann wouldn't be home for at least another few minutes yet and they were waiting supper on her arrival. He'd had the girls give the house a good cleaning that morning and he'd come in and helped them cook supper so that everything would be perfect for when she got home. He had to admit the sensibility of her arrangements but he still missed her company nonetheless. He clicked on the little portable radio to catch the last of the evening news

China watchers in the U.S. and Europe are discussing a news article appearing on page six of yesterday's Hong Kong Daily News which reports a change in leadership of the Chinese Central Military Command. This command is the means by which the Chinese Communist Party controls the Chinese military - the People's Liberation Army. In the past a change of leadership in this post has oft times presaged a change in leadership at the highest levels of the P.R.C. The U.S. government has offered no comment on this news story. There is still no official word from the Chinese government.

In national news President Bush blasted the leaders of the coalition blocs that have locked horns over the manner by which the U.S. Congress will be reconstituted. Fierce political infighting has crossed party lines as the New Reality bloc of Midwestern and Western states demand that congressional representatives and senators to replace those lost to the Impact and its aftermath be appointed by their respective state legislatures on the basis of the actual post-Impact U.S. population distribution.

Death tolls have still not been fully determined but Eastern Recovery Command and FEMA authorities state they believe it will finalize between thirty seven and thirty eight million casualties approximately four fifths of which were in the Atlantic seaboard states with the remainder being spread across the Gulf Coast states and lesser numbers attributable to casualties resulting from the earthquakes and flooding following the asteroid impact.

The opposing view is presented by the Stability bloc of Atlantic and Gulf Coast states that demand all Congressional appointments be based on the population distribution as determined by the last census which they state is required by the Constitution. Neither side has yet managed to prevail in the struggle.

Eighty seven Congressional Representatives and Senators who were in Washington during the summer recess as well as three Supreme Court Justices were lost when they could not be located in time to evacuate them before the giant waves hit or were lost in the collision between two of the large Sikorsky helicopters used in the evacuation as they were lifting off from the grounds of the Capitol.

This deadlock is frustrating the President's attempts to push forward with the full implementation of the National Reconstruction Corp programs. One of those programs includes the absorption of assets from those insurance companies in the U.S. that are unable to meet their financial liabilities resulting from Impact and Post-Impact claims. These assets would be used in funding the National Reconstruction Corp projects. This move is being vigorously opposed by the insurance industry. A friend-of-the-court briefing has been filed in favor of the insurance industry's position by representatives of the National Bankers Association who fear that banks left insolvent by East Coast losses may also be absorbed into

the NRC.

President Bush is said to be pushing for an expedited decision by the surviving five men, one woman Supreme Court also based now in Denver. The Court has not yet said if it would hear the case nor how long they would need to rule if they did

In the Southwest the Arizona Department of Public Safety reports increasing incidences of cross-border raids by a previously unknown group calling themselves the "Villaists". The last such reported raid resulted in a half-hour long running fire fight between the bandits and local residents in the town of Douglas situated on the Mexican border. Two Villaists were reported killed and one towns person wounded. Arizona National Guard troops are being moved to the border area in response.

A spokesperson for the Eastern Recovery Command report the first aid shipments have begun to arrive from Australia and Japan which is targeted at East and Gulf Coast disaster areas. Aid shipments from the South American Pacific nations of Chile and Peru are due to begin arriving this week. Foreign aid to the devastated areas of the U.S. was delayed when difficulties were encountered in getting permissions to bring the material into the country.

John had just taken the last swallow of lemonade in the glass when he saw the blue University of Florida van pull up in front of the gate so he set down his glass - *Breaking news from Riyadh, Saudi Arabia reports eruptions of gun fire in the Saudi capital city as reports of an att...* switched off the radio and went to meet his wife at the gate. He was just giving her a kiss when a man stepped out of the van with a small suitcase and a five gallon bucket in his hands. John glanced at him not recognizing the face at first then realizing it was Luke Hatcher. "Luke!" he exclaimed, "My God, you look bad... Well, sorry about putting it that way, but you really haven't been taking care of yourself."

The doctor stuck out his hand and shook with John. "Hi John" he said, "that's why I'm here. One of Lisa's friends ratted me out to her and she raised Hell with the hospital director so he packed me off to here for a few days to get her out of his hair!"

Taking Ann by the hand he said, "Well come inside you two! We've got supper ready to put on the table and we'll fatten you both up right proper."

His wife smiled. "Sounds good to me! They do feed us at the university but well... it's not exactly cordon bleau nor is there a lot of it. That's a big part of the reason why Luke looks like he does I think. That and the big lug not having enough sense to sleep once in a while."

Luke smiled, "Being a doctor in a disaster area is never easy. Oh, by the way, Ann said this is for you." He handed the bucket to John.

John examined the sealed, unlabeled white plastic bucket and said, "What's this?"

Ann replied, "Crown vetch seed. Dr Martin in Forages and Feeds thinks it might do well here if the winter turns out to be what they think it will be. He'd like you to try it in the pasture. Says it ought to provide some winter grazing if you plant it with rye. He'll bring you enough rye grass seed and the seeder again for the pasture as soon as they're finished with it. I think he's concerned that the extension farm pasture is too close to town and they might not be able to keep grazing animals on it through the winter so he wants to try it someplace further out of town. Might be a way to save on feed if it works."

Her husband nodded his head. "Crown vetch. I've heard of it but I can't recall much about it. Ought to be something on it in Morrison's *Feeds and Feeding* or one of the others. I'll take a look at it this weekend."

They stepped through the door and the girls ran up to meet them. "Daddy!" Heather yelled and ran up to hug her father. He picked her up and swung her around. Melinda ran up and hugged her mother who gave her a big hug and kiss. She then hugged Brittany and Heather when her father let her go. Luke looked at Melinda and asked, "How have you been feeling? Has your tummy been giving you any more trouble?"

Brittany poked her in the ribs and said, "Only when she eats too many green peanuts out of the peanut hay!"

Melinda whirled around to confront her accoster then turned back to the doctor, "No sir," she replied "My 'ppendix has been fine since you gave me that medicine." Then she poked Brittany back and said, "And I don't either eat too many peanuts out of the peanut hay!"

Everyone chuckled at that and Ann said, "No, I think she learned that lesson when she was six!"

Robert poked his head through the kitchen door and said, "Y'all come on and set to the table. I just took the biscuits out of the oven."

September 14 - Part One

Luke said, "There's one" as he raised his rifle and began tracking the running dog that looked like it had a lot of Dalmatian in its history. He fired but missed when the animal jumped a bush and then hit the ground running twice as fast as before. It ran parallel to the line of beaters so several men had a try at it but the wildly jinking dog proved impossible to hit until Ellie Strickland put a round from her .308 through its hips. It thrashed and screamed until she finished it with a follow up shot.

Several of the hunters walked up to examine the kill. "With their speed and size these dogs are a lot harder to hit than a deer." Luke said. "Do the beaters get a lot of shots?"

John responded, "When we did this last week we took most of ours in the first hour or so. After that they stayed well ahead of us but we could hear the men in the pocket start to get busy, most especially in the last hour or so when we began to close the trap."

One of the men was dressed in BDUs with a gold lieutenant's bar and Eastern Recovery Command patches. He said, "I had a Dalmatian when I was a kid. Seems a shame to just shoot it but what else can you do? There's probably hundreds of thousands of dogs across the state turning from pets to predators now." Lieutenant Andrew Wilkinson was a recent West Point Graduate home on leave before shipping out to Korea who found himself among the sea of humanity fleeing the Florida East Coast ahead of the advancing tsunamis and was now a part of the Eastern Recovery Command. This morning he was acting as an observer to learn the technique that John and the others were perfecting for thinning out the numbers of predatory dogs that preyed on the local livestock.

"Yes, it is" said John, "one of the first dogs we killed was a really pretty black Labrador that my dad shot. Under other circumstances I'd have been happy to have the dog but I've got three of my own and before things get better we may end up having to shoot one or more of them. Just another consequence of a rock falling from the sky but it's the dogs that have to pay for it."

The men and women went back to their positions and once more began to advance. The radio crackled occasionally as positions were checked and kills announced. This hunt had drawn forty two individuals, both from within John's sector, several from neighboring sectors, and the two Recovery Command observers, Lt. Wilkinson with the beaters, and Sgt Mark Shiloh with the men in the pocket.

The line moved on, the occasional shot sounding. John figured it was probably as much the prospect of finding some sport in the hunt as much as it was to remove dangerous predators that attracted some of the men. At noon everyone broke out their lunches and sat under a large live oak in the backside of a large cow pasture. Talk turned to news of the day, especially to that of China and her silence in response to the destruction of her navy by the Americans.

"We knocked her on her ass and she's afraid to get up again" said Ed Harris. "As soon as we blew the first nuke we changed the rules of the game. She realized she wasn't in our league so now she's just got to suck it up and take it just like in the Boxer Rebellion. My great grandfather was part of that action. He'd just joined the Corps the year before."

John said, "You may be right. She hasn't attacked us or sent any missiles, hasn't done anything at all. Just a big wall of silence."

Luke said, "That wall may be starting to crack. That article in the Hong Kong paper may be a subtle

way for them to tell the world there has been or is going to be a leadership change." He took a swallow from his canteen and continued, "I've been to Hong Kong and Beijing for conferences and vacations. The Chinese are very big on the concept of 'face' which is somewhat difficult to explain but it matters a great deal to them. I think the Chinese leadership reasoned that we would be too hurt, distracted, or both to make any real effort to stop her from taking Taiwan. Without us to interfere she would be able to take the island at relatively little cost and maybe not even much damage. She got a real shock when President Bush authorized the use of nuclear weapons and destroyed what was probably the best part of her navy. If we'd left it at that she might have launched a counter attack but then the president openly committed the U.S. strategic forces and aimed them directly at her. We may never know exactly what happened behind the scenes but I think China took one look at the board and decided she couldn't win. She hasn't capitulated but has simply withdrawn within herself as she has done in the past, beaten and humiliated but still intact."

The lieutenant asked, "Do you think this is going to cause a leadership change at the top levels? That seems to be what the article was implying."

"Yes, I think it is going to cause a change." Luke continued, "As I said, face matters a great deal to the Chinese and the destruction of their navy and being stared down in a nuclear confrontation in front of the whole world has intensely humiliated her and cost her a great deal of face. Now someone must expiate her losses so there is a power struggle going on behind the scenes. That little news article deep inside a Hong Kong paper is the way such things are sometimes hinted at. There's almost certainly a great deal more happening right now that we haven't heard about yet."

September 14 - Part Two

Ellie was more interested in the local situation so she asked the lieutenant, "How are things in the camp now lieutenant? I've been hearing about this National Reconstruction Corp that's supposed to come in and give people jobs. Have many signed up yet?"

A frown crossed the soldier's face. "Yes ma'am," he said, "many have but there's still quite a few able bodied types that haven't yet. They've got no place to go, nothing in their pockets, and no way to sustain themselves outside of what we give them but you can't get them to actually DO anything either! They were the reason we had so much trouble to begin with. None of us had a lot to eat before the transports started coming in but you couldn't get them to help maintain the camp and they acted like they were supposed to have room service come in and clean up after them. We shouldn't have had a quarter of the disease cases we did but no matter what we did we just could not get some of them to understand that you HAD to keep a latrine just so, that garbage HAD to be kept policed, that laundry and dishes HAD to be kept clean. They won't work, they won't learn, they won't do anything but whine that the government isn't doing enough for them!" A sheepish grin crossed his face and he said, "Sorry about that, it's a sore point with me since I lived in the camp before Captain Swift started combing it for military personnel. Probably why the Major sent me out here..."

John nodded and spoke, "I'd heard that there was a hefty contingent that wouldn't do anything but sit on their butts. Once the folks who were willing to work and join the NRC were moved out and the truly disabled were situated I'd be all for just turning the rest of them out and telling them to fend for themselves but I'd probably end up having to deal with them here when they started stealing! So far as I'm concerned if they're able bodied and can't support themselves then they should be MADE to work, Draft their asses and send them up to Georgia and let them salvage what's left of Savannah."

Luke said, "There's some trying to do just that. CNN had a blip about a bill proposing an involuntary draft of able bodied displaced persons that could not support themselves for any who would not voluntarily join the NRC. Only a couple of sentences and I haven't heard anything else about it."

Another man by the name of Earl from Ed Harris's sector said, "Good! If they ain't crippled then make them work! You don't work you don't eat! Welfare has come to an end in the United States and that's the way it should be!"

No one dissented with the sentiment and the conversation drifted onward. Earl asked Lt. Wilkinson, "You heard anything about when we're going to get some gas again? It's fifteen miles from my place into Gainesville where I work and I'd sure like to be able to stop having to ride my daughter's bike to get there!"

The soldier shook his head then said, "If I were you I'd try to get a better bike because it's going to be next Spring, maybe longer before you see gasoline for sale in this country again. With the Atlantic ports smashed, the refineries in the Gulf damaged and the big one down in Venezuela damaged we're barely able to get enough fuel just to run freight transport and agriculture. I heard last week that an early winter is predicted and it seems to be true since they've had two snowstorms in the Northern Tier states already. They'll be having to switch over refinery capacity very soon to making heating oil if they haven't already. It's not that there isn't any oil it's just that a lot of our ability to move or refine it has been damaged or destroyed. With the Saudi Arabia situation on top of it we might have fuel rationing for at least another year, maybe longer."

John asked, "What's happening with Saudi Arabia? I don't remember hearing anything thing about them, The tsunami shouldn't have touched them at all."

Wilkinson replied, "It happened yesterday afternoon. I heard the first story about six or seven. There's been a coup de tat in the royal family with the crown prince being over thrown by one of the other princes - the defense minister I think. There was quite a fire fight in the royal palace when it happened according to CNN. Washingto.... I mean Denver is probably hemorrhaging because the defense minister, Prince Sultan I think they called him, is supposed to be very pro-fundamentalist and against western influences but no one's sure what he's going to do. This morning before I came out CNN said that their correspondents were not permitted to report from Riyadh without getting government approval now. Mecca and Medina have been locked down too. Haven't heard what the president thinks about it but you know he's going to be uptight."

With a nod John said, "Well, with the U.S. and half of Western Europe washed out to sea I suppose it's to be expected that a lot of different groups will try to make their moves. One prince or another, they've got to sell their oil to someone."

"Damn, my feet hurt!" John said as he sat down at the table with his soup. The two drives of the day had taken over fifty dogs, coyotes, foxes, raccoons, cats, possums, and armadillos. Many of the men had kept some of the animals to take home but there still remained a pile of the predatory species heaped in the wagon that Miguel had brought. In a previous life it had been an old Mazda pick up truck but after Miguel had worked it over with a welder it was now a mule drawn wagon. John was considering doing the same with his truck if it looked like gas was going to remain scarce for a good deal longer.

Luke groaned, "I came out here to get some rest and you walk me across half the county!"

Ed Harris chuckled and said, "Doc, you should be glad you never joined the Corp. We did that kind of thing every day before breakfast."

John laughed, "And they did it barefoot in the snow, uphill BOTH ways! What are you complaining about Luke, you seemed happy enough when you took that double this afternoon. Can't believe I missed that hound at fifty feet!"

Ed Strickland spoke up, "But it was worth it. Between today and last week we should have some relief for a while. Maybe the government will pay a bounty on dogs before long."

Lt. Wilkinson said, "Can you imagine doing this kind of thing before the Impact? We'd have PETA all over us with court injunctions!"

Robert observed, "The animal rights types are probably eating their dogs by now and trying to convince themselves that it's really tofu." A general chuckle arose from the table.

A sheriff's cruiser pulled up in front of the gate and Mike Daniels got out then the cruiser backed out and continued down the road. He came up to the tables, got a bowl of soup then sat with the others. "Hey Miguel! That's some wagon you got there. That's a mighty heap of dogs too. You could probably sell wagons like that down at the Archer market and bring a pretty price about now."

"In fact, I have sold one" Miguel said. "Mike Morgan convinced me to build him one."

Ed turned and looked at the wagon with a fresh eye and asked, "Be pretty expensive for you to build one of them things wouldn't it? That's a lot of welding, even if you got the truck for free. What'd he pay for it?"

Miguel replied, "One hundred dollars."

Earl asked incredulously, "Only a hundred dollars? That's cheap!"

With a smile Miguel said, "That's one hundred *silver* dollars, face value. Paper is losing value so fast that I wouldn't deal in it for something big like a wagon."

This caused many raised eyebrows around the table. John asked, "What's silver bringing now? That wouldn't have been all that much before Impact but what about now?"

The wagon builder shrugged, "Before the asteroid strike a silver dollar was worth about three dollars, maybe a little more. Now, after the strike" he cupped his hands and slowly raised them skyward "a silver dollar is worth a great deal more. It's recognizable and solid. People want them. A hundred silver dollars now would be like buying a new car but Mike paid it gladly enough."

Mike Daniels observed, "Morgan's been doing a lot of big spending lately. Got my curiosity up so I asked him where he got it all. Said that he'd been salting it away for years because he always figured that paper dollars would go back to being paper one day."

John said, "Before the Impact I'd have said he was making a fool's bet but now he might just be the town millionaire."

September 20 - Developments - Part One

John took another pull at his coffee mug and settled further into his chair in the living room. It had been raining since before dawn and with a muffled rumble of distant thunder it began to come down harder. He tried to concentrate on Salatin's *You Can Farm* but his leg was beginning to throb again and it kept him from focusing on the book. It would be another three hours before he was supposed to take the next Darvon and for a few moments he considered just taking another one anyway. Unfortunately, it was the only good painkiller they had and they had only the one bottle which would have to be made to last. With a grimace he swallowed four aspirin and poured three fingers of bourbon into his coffee.

The day before John and his dad had been cutting firewood. By their reckonings they had enough seasoned wood to get through their normal winter but with no way of knowing how long power rationing would last they felt it best to lay in as much wood as they could. By the time they had used up their seasoned wood the new cut wood should have dried enough in the wood shed to make for decent fuel. The Impact induced intense rainfall and storms had downed a large number of trees in the neighborhood and it was those that they cut. A tall, straight hickory had taken a lightning strike and lay fallen, lodged against a neighboring water oak. They had cleared a working area around the tree for safety reasons and carefully began to dismember the tree. Blow downs snagged in other trees were always risky to cut and this one showed why when the trunk unexpectedly broke before John was ready, fell, caught in some grape vines climbing the oak tree and the top swung quickly to the side catching John across the left calf before he could leap clear.

"Damn lucky it didn't do worse than a greenstick" John growled as his leg throbbed. The cold front passing through had brought cooler temperatures with a high not expected to top sixty five - cool for the time of year in Florida. The cool, damp weather was making his leg, right knee and shoulders throb. John had been worried the break was more serious than it was until his dad had managed to get him to the Clinic in Archer. "You're lucky, Mr. Horne," Dr. Rittenhouse had told him, "X-rays show a simple, greenstick fracture but not a complete break. If that tree had hit you a bit harder it probably would have. You're going to have a whacking great bruise from it though." He was right, from his knee nearly to his ankle the left side of his left calf was a livid bruise and tender to the touch.

He laid back in his chair and closed his eyes. In the dining room he could hear Mel, Brittany, and Heather giggling as they did their school work. The county was trying to reopen the schools but there was too little fuel available to run school busses. The Archer Community School had opened but it was five miles away and the nearest high school was fifteen. A family council the weekend before had decided they would try their hand at home schooling until the county was able to make pickups again. Lisa had spoken with the principal in Archer and he agreed to loan them textbooks and Luke had procured high school textbooks in Gainesville for Heather and had them sent to the house. When the power was on and the phone was working they used Ann's university Internet connection to supplement their texts. So far it was working OK but John hoped they wouldn't ask him to help with their algebra again. He'd been chagrined at how much he had forgotten and found himself unable to help. "You'll have to ask Aunt Lisa when she gets home tonight" was all he could tell them. "Math was never my best subject, I'm afraid. Grandpa Robert and I will help you with the practical subjects and Aunt Lisa and Ann will help you with grammar and math."

September 20 - Developments - Part Two

The mantle clock chimed eight times and he decided to distract himself by listening to the last hour of NPR morning news so he carefully stood, tucked his crutch under his arm and crossed the room to the radio. He clicked it on, then turned and headed back to his chair.

In Tallahassee Governor Bush gave his public backing to the bill introduced yesterday in the state legislature mandating a work requirement for anyone receiving state administered relief funds. With Federal disaster relief funds being administered by the State in addition to those funds appropriated by the Legislature the practical effect of this bill would be that all persons receiving disaster aid would be required to prove they are undertaking some form of productive work. The bill is opposed by a number of Democratic representatives in the State House and a smaller number of Democratic State Senators but with a Republican majority in both houses and the prevailing mood of bootstrap rebuilding the bill is expected to easily pass. Representative Wayne Osborne of the panhandle town of Chipley is the primary sponsor of the bill in the House. He explains that the work requirement would not be applicable to anyone who has been found to be totally medically disabled but those who have only partial disabilities may be required to perform public labor if suitable jobs can be found for them. Childcare will be provided by the state, possibly staffed by other relief workers.

Internationally a small article in the corrections section of yesterday's Hong Kong Daily News reports an error in their earlier article concerning a leadership change in the Chinese Central Military Commission. The article states that the change was to be in the Vice Chair position of that Commission presently held by Generals Zhang Wannian and Chi Haotian. It is not immediately clear if only one or both of these individuals are being replaced. China watchers in the U.S. say this may be indicative of an ongoing power struggle in the top circles of Chinese leadership. NPR has been unable to contact the author of the original news article for clarification. No official word from the P.R.C. has yet been released.

In the same edition of the Hong Kong paper there is a front page story of the loss of Chinese Premier Zhu Rongji in a plane crash as he was flying to southern Hunan province to view the devastation left behind after the failure and collapse of retention dikes around Dongting Lake. This lake is China's second largest freshwater lake and covers an area approximately the size of Luxembourg. The article did not state a casualty figure but speculated that the impact induced flood related deaths may soon top one million with a further sixty five million people displaced as all of China's major rivers overflow their banks. Dongting lake is a major outflow for the Yangtze river, one of the largest in that nation. Hunan province is one of China's most important rice producing regions and the harvest there is predicted to drop below 155 million tons this year due to the record breaking flooding. This is some twenty two millions tons less than last year's harvest which raises the spectre of famine.

In Moscow today Russian President Vladimir Putin reiterated his offer to the U.S. and China to mediate in their dispute and has stated that if Moscow is not found suitable he was willing to move the negotiations to Switzerland or Japan. Speaking through a translator he stated, "I feel an obligation according to the Russian-Sino Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation and our long standing bonds of friendship with the U.S. to try to resolve this dispute between our friends the United States and the People's Republic of China." Neither the U.S., nor Chinese governments have yet to respond to this latest offer of mediation.

Also from Russia today further controversy in the Russian Duma as the Russian Communist Party finds itself increasingly outmaneuvered and marginalized in the Russian legislature. After being expelled by

the party for refusing to resign his post in protest for the Communists losing seven of their nine committee chairmanships Genady Seleznev, Speaker of the State Duma has joined forces with the pro-Kremlin "Unified Russia" bloc that control a combined 240 seats spread between four allied parties. Mr. Seleznev states "The Rodina is in need of a new center-left party, perhaps based on the European model." Weakened as it may presently be the prevailing wisdom among Kremlin watchers is that the Communist Party will remain an important factor in Russian politics for the foreseeable future due to their still being the largest, most disciplined single party in the Russian Federation.

John swallowed the last of his coffee so he limped into the kitchen to refill his mug with fresh brew, brown sugar and cream skimmed from the morning's milk. Melinda came out of the pantry with a small brown paper bag heading for the dining room. "How's the school work coming sprout?" he asked.

"Pretty good daddy." She replied, "Heather is helping Brittany and me with our math. I'm just getting us a snack. Since it's raining we're going to do schoolwork until eleven then fix lunch."

"OK" her father said, and limped back into the living room. Once back in his chair he poured more bourbon into his mug, more than he intended actually. "Well, damn it."

He took a tentative sip, "Not bad." He took a deep swallow.

In the Crimea today representatives of the Russian Federation reached agreement with representatives of the governments of Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan over the apportionment of the oil rich Caspian sea bed. This trilateral agreement is expected to put increasing pressure on Iran and Turkmenistan who demand a different method of apportioning the sea bottom be used.

Agricultural officials of the European Union and the Russian Federation at a conference in Berne, Switzerland released statements that due to adverse weather conditions and flooding resulting from the asteroid strike the grain harvests this summer and fall are expected to be as much as 35% below normal leading to fears that rationing may become necessary this winter."

The throbbing in his leg was beginning to subside and John took another deep pull from his mug. "Damn but that's good. That fresh cream makes a huge difference. Should have got a dairy cow years ago. Wonder if I can talk Ellie into selling me one?" He picked up the Salatin book and began to read.

In Brussels today European Union officials indicated they felt that it might be possible to reclaim flooded lands in the Netherlands, Belgium and parts of France within two years. British officials indicate that food shipments are now reaching all areas in need in the tsunami devastated areas of the British Isles. Flight routes and refueling stations have now been established for aid shipments from the unaffected European nations to be flown to the United States. Relief efforts have been complicated by the loss of stop over points in Iceland, Greenland, and coastal Canada but now new refueling stations have been put in place.

USDA officials state that due to flooding and other adverse weather the national grain harvest will probably be reduced by 35-40% this year but there should be sufficient food stocks to feed the nation now that Midwestern fuel distribution difficulties are being cleared. The livestock industry is expected to be seriously hit by this reduction in the harvest which will make grain too expensive to be used as animal feed. Sharp increases in the price of meat are expected starting in October.

In the weather the third snowstorm of the season is advancing across the northernmost Midwest and is

expected to blanket the Northeast within three days. Light rain is falling across the central portion of the nation but is expected to subside by tonight. The cold front presently passing across Florida, Georgia, and the Carolinas is expected to move out over the Atlantic by tonight without dropping significant amounts of precipitation

John put the book down in his lap so that he could rest his eyes.

Presently he began to snore.

September 29, 2002 - End Times - Part One

The gasoline-soaked wood went up with a flash. Leaping flames quickly ran along the arms. The brightly burning cross revealed six hooded white-clad figures standing in a circle around it. After a moment they began to silently spread out in a line, unslinging rifles to point them at the windows of the small white country church in front of them.

As the first man shouldered his rifle John Horne stepped out of the darkness under an oak tree some thirty yards behind the cross and worked the action of his short barreled shotgun.

SLACK!... SLACK!...

The six hooded figures whirled and as they did so John shouted, "SHERIFF'S DEPARTMENT! DROP YOUR WEAPONS AND PUT YOUR HANDS IN THE AIR!"

One of the robed figures swung his Mini-14 around to hip shoot at the figure illuminated by the fire but was slammed to the ground by rifle fire from the darkness on either side.

The deputy said nothing for a moment then spoke. "Any of the rest of you gentlemen want to try your luck?"

One by one the remaining five Klansmen dropped their weapons to the ground.

John stepped forward until he was within twenty yards of the men. "That's better, much better... Now if you gentlemen would be so kind as to take three paces back from those rifles I'd be much obliged."

A moment's hesitation, two ... then one man did as had been told and the remaining four did a moment later.

"Very good," John said, "now as I'm sure you're aware there's a law in the State of Florida about wearing hoods in public so I'll have to ask you to kindly shuck them for me. While you're at it, please be so kind as to remove your robes. I'd hate to find that one of your is wearing a pistol under there somewhere that I didn't know about."

The hooded figure who had lit the cross spoke, "Who are you? What do you want with us? This isn't none of your affair."

"I'm John Horne, Sector Deputy for the Alachua County Sheriff's Office. You gentlemen are in my sector. You are also all under arrest. Now I told you to take those hoods and robes off so get with it!" John motioned at them with the shotgun. One of the men on the end threw down his hood and robe. Three others soon followed with the man who had spoken being the last.

"That's much better, I like to look a man in the face when I talk to him, don't you?" John said. Out of the black shadows thrown by the corners of the church, members of the Posse stepped forward and began to cuff the men. The man who had spoken was wearing a holstered revolver of which Ed Harris quickly relieved him. A search of the rest yielded pocket knives and rifle ammunition but no other weapons.

The Klan speaker spoke again, "John Horne. I've heard of you. You faced down that Army man. What

are you doing here? This isn't your affair! This has nothing to do with you!"

"On the contrary," John replied, "it has a lot to do with me. As I told you, I'm the sector deputy for this area and you men are under arrest on suspicion of murder, rape, and robbery. One of your compadres had a real brainstorm at the Archer market yesterday morning and tried to trade Mrs. Rutledge's wedding ring. Too bad for him that the trader he was dealing with had attended her wedding last year and got to wondering about the inscription inside the ring. He sings very sweetly when we lean on him and he fingered you all quite precisely."

A look of shock crossed the faces of the five men but the speaker soon recovered. He eyed John in the light of the burning cross, then Ed, Jimmy, and the other four Posse members he could see. "You're all white men, you're all a part of us. Don't you understand them people were just -----s, not real people at all but just mud people. Don't you understand - these are the End Times! The White Race has got to band together to fight the AntiChrist and his minions the mud people, khazars, and the other mongrelized races. It's no crime to kill them and take back what they have stolen from us! You should join us in doing God's work!"

This time it was John who was shocked. For a moment he said nothing as he tried to digest what he'd heard. The spokesman looked pleadingly at him to understand. Finally John said, "It was an asteroid you idiot, not the Second Coming! This isn't Revelations or where ever it is you get this crap from! You raped, robbed and murdered three people! Never mind the homes you shot into and the damage you've done."

"NO!" the man shouted at him, "It was God's work! He sent that rock as his Sign! We have a holy duty to battle against the AntiChrist and all who would join him. We do only what we must and any sins that we commit will be forgiven! You're all white men! You've seen the way the Mud People and Khazars have taken white women and mongrelized our race. It's the work of the Devil and we must combat it! Join us in the Holy Crusade!"

John was beginning to grasp the nature of the man's passion, or at least he thought he did. With a tone of disgust, "Fella, you're as crazy as a sack full of -----s. You can debate theology with the prison chaplain if you like but I'm done with you. Ed, Jimmy, you and the rest get these men over to the truck, we'll keep them there in the headlights where we can see them until County Central can get a van or something out here. Miguel, how about searching the body there and see if there's anything worthwhile on it. We'll let the county put it in a body bag. Steve, gather up those rifles and remove all the ammo." He turned and looked back towards the tree he had stepped out from under and shouted, "Jake!"

A voice answered from the darkness, it belonged to Jacob Daniels, Mike Daniel's eldest son. "I'm here!"

John hollered back, "Jake! Switch on the truck headlights so everyone can see and move it up about another hundred yards or so. Then bring me my sticks, my leg's beginning to pain me."

A few seconds later he heard the sound of a truck motor turn over, catch, then headlights came on about a hundred fifty yards away and began to pull forward until they were about fifty yards behind the oak tree. The posse members marched their prisoners towards the light and had them sit on the ground about ten yards in front of the truck. Jake ran up with John's crutches and handed them to him. "Thanks" John said and began to limp towards the truck. Upon arrival he picked up the CB mike from the truck radio and spoke, "Rover to Base, Rover to Base, Over."

A second later he heard Lisa's voice come across the radio, "Base to Rover, we read you. Over."

John keyed the mike again, "Good, Base contact County Central and ask them to send a van and at least several armed deputies to the church at the junction of the county road and the dirt road about three miles north of the Williston road. It's uhh, 148th Avenue, I think. We've taken five men into custody and have one other dead among the suspects. All armed, all arrested on suspicion of the Rutledge murders last week in Archer. Do you copy? Over."

A few seconds later the reply came. "Roger that, we copy. You're at the church at the intersection of the county road and 148th Avenue three miles north of the Williston road. Requesting van and several armed deputies for five suspects and one body in connection with the Rutledge murders in Archer last week. We're establishing contact now. Will get back with you when message communicated. Over."

"Roger that, I copy. Over." He hung the microphone up on the dash and walked over to the edge of the light standing just inside the darkness.

September 29, 2002 - End Times - Part Two

Miguel walked up to him and asked, "Do you think we have them all?"

John shook his head in disgust, "Who knows! Until last week I'd have bet you money there wasn't this many Klansmen in Alachua county! Who knows how many we may shake out of the haystack."

The man who had spoken for the Klansmen swiveled around on his butt and struggled to his feet. John's hand went to his pistol butt and Miguel unslung his rifle. Squinting against the light he said, "The Soldiers of the Lord are everywhere but they are not seen until they strike. I've heard you have several women at your house since the Fall. Was that one of them? You Godless Secular Humanists are only pawns for the AntiChrist and you shall perish along with the rest of his minions when the Savior returns."

With a shake of his head the law man replied, "Fella, the more you talk the more I'm sure you're crazier than a bed bug. Looks like the university isn't the only place that attracts the religiously nuts."

"You would be wise to heed my words Deputy John Horne. That star on your chest will not avail you for long. The Soldiers of the Lord take care of their own. It would be a pity to see your family come to harm because you have allowed yourself to be misled into believing the lies of the AntiChrist."

John stepped into the light so that he could be seen. "Is that a threat, mister?"

The man replied, "Your fame precedes you deputy, as well as the wicked ways in your house. One day soon if you do not repent it may be necessary for the Soldiers of the Lord to rid our county of the den of iniquity found in your household. A prudent man would thin...unh!"

The butt of Ed Harris's Garand caught the man in the back of his head with a solid "thock!" and dropped him roughly to the ground. He groaned and rolled over on his back, his face in a grimace. Ed placed his boot on the mans throat with his rifle muzzle pressed against his lips. "You piece of ----! One more word out of you and I'll blow your goddamned head off and you can talk to the Lord in person! Let me make something clear to you and the rest of you trash. The first time that anyone of your kind make even the smallest attempt to harm this man's family or any other deputy's family I'll hunt you down and cut your balls off!"

John's hand came down gently on Ed's shoulder and pulled him backwards. "Ed, he's not worth it. We've got him clean and the evidence is good. We won't be seeing him for a long time, maybe ever. Let him go and the county will take care of him."

"It's not these ----s that I'm concerned with John. It's the rest like him that we haven't caught yet. They don't have the balls to operate in the daylight against us. They do their work in the dark against helpless women and children." He looked coldly down at the men on the ground, "But let me tell you bastards something. You're not the only one who knows how to make someone afraid. You make the first move against anyone's family and for the rest of your short lives you'll wonder at every sound in the night if it's me."

"Soon, very soon, it will be."

October 6 - Implications

With a soft clank the stove door latched shut and John adjusted the flue and damper again. Another cold front was blowing through bringing rain and predicted to lower the temperature to about forty degrees which was in line with the porch thermometer outside. The year old oak billets were burning nicely and the living room had a toasty feel to it though the bedrooms would be cool in the morning.

He settled into his chair next to Ann so the radiant heat from the stove could shine on his leg which was throbbing with the damp cold then said, "If it gets as cold as the long range weather folks say it will and we stay with power rationing through the winter then the living room and kitchen will return to being the social centers of family life like they used to be. It'll be too cold in the bedrooms for anything but sleeping."

His wife looked over the top of her book and said, "Uhm hmm" and went back to reading. The three girls and Judy Young, Ricks ten year old niece, were at a folding table playing Uno. Robert and Lisa had chairs on the other side of the stove and were reading books of their own.

Presently John's dad put his Travis McGee novel down and said, "I reckon we'd better be building on those row covers tomorrow. If it goes to forty tonight it may well frost by Monday or Tuesday night. Did you get more of the plastic sheeting John?"

His son nodded his head, "Yes, I did. Cost more than I'd like to have paid but I got it. If we're careful how we build the frames and attach the plastic it should hold up pretty well even in a storm. I've got a good line on some glass windows and sliding glass doors too. The NRC is beginning to sell salvaged materials they're recovering from the coast. If we can get the fuel to go and pick them up in Gainesville we might get enough to put a real green house together. Keep us in fresh vegetables through the winter and give us a real leg up for starting seeds this Spring. Might even be able to sell bedding plants if we can get the seed. Bill at the feed store may have some of last year's stock left. I'll ask him next market day though he's probably going to want a big price for it."

Ann laid her book in her lap, "That's a good idea. I'm sure we've got to have plans for all sorts of green houses at the University. I'll see if I can dig some up this week. In the summer when it's hot maybe we can use the green house for food drying or something if we can rig up a good ventilation system."

The gate bell rang and Heather went to the window to see who it was. "Uncle John, it's Deputy Daniels."

"Thank you Heather" he replied, "Stick your head out the door and tell him to come on in please."

The girl did and went back to her card game, giggles arising soon afterwards. John figured they had to be talking about the Daniels boys again, a topic sure to arouse prolonged fits of giggling.

A moment later the sounds of boots could be heard on the porch and they could see Mike take off his rain slicker and hat and hang them on the porch hooks. He stepped through the door with a large manila envelope in his hands which he handed to John as he stood in front of the stove. "It may only be forty degrees outside but that wind and rain really drive it right through you! I'm betting we'll see snow this year. That's the follow up on the Rutledge murders that you need to review and sign for your part." John's face wrinkled as he recalled the facts of the case. "Did y'all come up with anyone else who was involved or was the six we picked up and the fellow at the market the lot of them?"

Mike replied, "No, there were two more. Sgt Fuji does a lot of our interrogations and he's very good at it. Only took him a few hours to have most of them rolling each other over trying to cut the best deals to save their own butts. No honor among thieves there. Except for the leader, Archy Lauren, the one who 'banged' his head in the arrest. Fuji couldn't get anything out of him and I suspect he could tell us a thing or three."

"I bet he could too" John said, "the rest of them didn't strike me as anything more than followers but that fella was something else altogether. That wasn't his first rodeo. He's either had a lot more experience at this than I'd like to think about or he's been well trained or maybe both. But still, we got the lot so that's one particular problem resolved."

The deputy had an uneasy look on his face. "I'm not so sure John. I can tell you that the sheriff was considerably consternated that we found nine here in the county with the balls to actually pull off something like those murders. We've got some hotheads that will run their mouths but that's about all they'll do. Taking a hand in murder is something else. Having experienced Archy Lauren I wouldn't be surprised if we didn't have more that we don't know about, especially since we didn't know anything about five of the nine that we did pick up."

The hair on the back of John's neck prickled, "They still in the jail?"

Mike nodded, "Oh yes, they ain't getting out. Judge Smith had a stroke the day of the Impact so just now there's only Rufus Greene on the felony bench and he's pretty hardnosed about these sorts of things. He's let a lot of lesser men out on their own recognizance until their trials come up to spare the county the expense of keeping them but not these Klansmen. They'll stay in the jug until they are tried. I have a feeling if he's the one to try them they won't get out of Raiford except in a box. In fact, there's a lot of pressure to streamline the justice system and bring back public executions. Lauren at least may hang in the courthouse square."

Lisa looked alarmed at the prospect. "You're not serious about them executing people in public are you?"

"Well, there is a lot of talk about it and word has it there'll be a couple of bills come up in the legislature to allow it. Can't say much more about it than that."

John had an uneasy look on his own face, "If they've been duly convicted and had their appeals denied then people like Lauren should be publicly executed as far as I'm concerned. I'm more concerned about this 'streamlining' the justice system. That sounds pretty close to the martial law they're using in the camps and the devastated areas even if they do use euphemisms like 'Direct Federal Administration' instead of calling it what it really is. God knows the court systems is a slow, balky process at best but even before the Impact we let way too many men go free from Death Row when it was found they were actually innocent after they were condemned. I want those predators tried, convicted, and duly executed but only after they've had a fair trial first! Too easy to railroad a man to his death otherwise. Our little contretemps with Sgt. Nichols and Captain Swift could have gone the other way. Sure would like to think I'd have had my rightful day in court if I'd survived the experience."

"I don't know John. It's a different world now. We've got even more predators now than we did before Impact and even less with which to cope with them. Limiting appeals is proving to be very popular in the Legislature just now and with a big chunk of the Justice Department and Federal court system

washed away they might be able to make it fly for a long time." Mike shrugged, "I reckon I can see more good than bad with it."

Conversation lagged for a time as Mike warmed himself by the stove. "Oh, by the way. I nearly forgot to tell you. We're finally getting regular fuel shipments in! There won't be any for open, public sale. It's all going to be strictly rationed as there's still not that much coming in but if you've got a ration priority you'll be able to buy gasoline, diesel fuel or LPG. You'll be entitled to ten gallons a week as a sector deputy. I imagine that Lisa might get a ration as well but I don't know how much. Not much for country distances but it's a damn sight better than none at all!"

With a grin John said, "That's the best news I've had all week! We've used all of our diesel including what we got from the county for plowing and planting. Be nice if we can get some more because Ed thinks we might be able to get a hay cutting in before frost if we could get fuel to run his tractors. He said he's go in shares with me if we can get the fuel but the agricultural allotment ran out. He's got more to cut than his allotment would cover but both of ours might do it."

"Well, just make sure you get some of it in gasoline for official business. Even with fuel coming in regular it's going to be a while before we can retire the Local Constable program. We're going to be losing a lot of our Recovery Command troops soon when they get sent up to Georgia to help in the salvage and recovery operations so we'll need all available manpower for a while yet."

"One last thing John before I head to the house for supper." Mike reached into his left side pocket and pulled out a small S&W revolver with a shrouded hammer. "The sheriff let me have this out of the property room. Sorry I couldn't get a second but at least you've got that. Ann's got her little Taurus, I figure you can give this one to Lisa."

October 8 - Negotiations - Part One

John peddled up to the gate in front of the house and dismounted, his knee giving him a sharp twinge in spite of the elastic brace he wore around it. Miguel stood up from where he'd been picking lettuce in his garden and yelled across the fence "Good morning John! What brings you around today? Do you need the Posse?"

Stepping through the gate he met the deputy and shook hands, "No, thankfully." John said, "Not this morning. I'm here on personal business this time."

A curious look came over the man's face, "Well then my friend, what can I do for you this cool October morning?"

John came right to the point, "Miguel, I want to rent your flatbed truck."

A reserved look over came the store owner's features. "Ah then, why don't we go in the kitchen and have a cup of coffee and we can discuss it."

The men stepped through the gate and went around the house and entered through the kitchen door. The host poured two cups of strong Cuban coffee and set them on the table. "You're quite welcome to use the truck John, but do you have fuel to run it? I've heard that some of the county people are getting a fuel ration so perhaps you are getting some of it?"

John shook his head, "I'm supposed to get a fuel ration but it hasn't shown up yet and I have pressing business that won't wait. That's why I'm here."

Concern showed on Miguel's face when he said, "But the fuel? How will you run the truck?"

John sighed and said, "Come on Miguel, I know good and well you've been holding a lot more fuel than you've let on about. Even acting as deputy I have to take Cricket when I need to be somewhere but you've always been quite obliging about using your truck when we've needed it. Anyone as short on fuel as the rest of us are would have to be a lot more particular."

In a guarded tone Miguel replied, "This is so but as a business man and member of the community I feel I have a public duty to assist in any way that I can in keeping law and order in our town. I have a lot to lose if we can't keep the bad ones under control. This should not make me a figure of suspicion in anyone's eyes."

John grinned, "Miguel, I don't suspect you of anything other than having more fuel than you've let on about. It's your juice, I'm not asking you to give it to me. I'm quite willing to work out a deal with you."

"But you know that the county and the Recovery Command have requisitioned all fuel supplies from dealers and distributors. If they were to become suspicious that I had not been fully truthful with them they might make trouble for me. I do not wish to jeopardize my family even if it means not being able to help a friend."

Nothing was said for a moment and the silence jelled the air. Finally John said, "OK, I suppose I can see your point. You're too great an asset to the community in emergencies to risk bringing the logistics cops down on you. How about I do this - you've got the flatbed parked inside your barn so no one will

see you put about half a tank of diesel in the truck, that's more than I'll probably need. I'll go home and get one of the yellow diesel cans I use for the tractor and lash it to the back of the bike and ride back up here with it where everyone can see me and I'll make a show of emptying the can into the truck tank so that it will be seen that I put the fuel in the truck which should divert any suspicion from you. Would that make you comfortable?"

Miguel considered the proposition for a moment. "I suppose you'll be able to make it look convincing enough. OK, I'll accept your proposition. Now about the deal?"

"We've got cash, how much do you want?"

The businessman shook his head, "For this deal it is best we do not deal in dollars. I cannot buy more fuel with dollars and besides, there is a strong rumor that soon the government will recall all old money and issue new currency - at a steep exchange ratio. For the fuel you must have to run the truck we must talk precious metal or barter."

John quirked an eyebrow, "Are you sure about this currency recall? That's going to hurt! What's the exchange ratio going to be?"

The other man shrugged and spread his hands, "I do not know. I don't even know for sure that it will happen but I hear this rumor again and again. One man who works in the Recovery HQ in Gainesville I have done some favors for and he is quite certain but he cannot say when or what the exchange ratio will be other than very unfavorable. It's supposed to have something to do with the government trying to reopen the banks."

The deputy ran his fingers through his hair, "If it ain't one damn thing it's another. If they revalue the currency to get the banks open again they'll have to revalue the dollar amount of the outstanding mortgages and other loans. At least I'd think they would. They couldn't possibly expect us to pay off mortgages or whatever valued in old dollars with new dollars that are worth many times more."

Again Miguel shrugged and said, "My friend, I do not know. I do not know if it will happen at all just that I hear many rumors about it and it is for this reason I do not wish to deal in dollars for fuel. What did you have in mind to trade?"

The two men discussed the situation back and forth for many minutes until at least they had settled on five silver dollars and a brick of Winchester Super-X .22 ammunition and a few dozen eggs as a sweetener. John felt it was a steep price to pay relative to the value of the fuel, the silver and the ammunition before the Impact but there was no other place to go. Miguel couldn't legally get any more fuel and was not even supposed to have as much as he did now but John wasn't foolish enough to lean on him that way and lose a resource that was much more valuable than a half-tank of diesel fuel. They shook hands and John said he'd bring payment back with him when he returned.

As he walked out the gate and unchained his bike he muttered to himself "It's another round trip on this damn bike but I suppose it can't be helped. With forty pounds of water in that can on the back of the bike it's going to be a hard ride back too." He sighed, got on his bike and rode off.

October 8 - Negotiations - Part Two

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There were no other vehicles at the road block on S.R. 24 entering Gainesville at Parker Rd so John pulled up to the barricade and stopped. "When we brought Mel in this was at the Interstate overpass."

His father nodded and watched the three troopers at the checkpoint, none of which had yet moved to approach the truck. "It's nearly five miles further to get to the overpass from here. If they've got this wide a perimeter around Gainesville manned twenty four hours a day that's got to be using a lot of troops. Sure seems like they'd be better used elsewhere."

John shrugged and replied, "Yep, seems that way to me too. Looks like they've finally noticed we're here and one of them is deigning to come speak with us. Maybe I was supposed to get out and go to them."

A trooper in worn, dirty BDUs walked up to the driver's side and said, "You got business in Gainesville?"

The driver nodded his head and said, "Yes, I do. I'm John Horne I have a meeting to attend this morning at the Sheriff's Office."

The trooper looked him up and down then asked, "Who are these other two with you. They going to this meeting too?"

"This is my father Robert Horne, the young man here is Jacob Daniels. When I am finished with my meeting we're going to the NRC salvage yard which is why we're in this truck." Something about the soldier's manner and tone was beginning to stick in John's craw. "Now, you know my business, how about my pass so I get on about it."

"Welll..., there's the matter of the fee, Mr. Horne."

"Fee? What fee? There isn't any fee to get a pass into town."

The trooper gave a slight grin then said, "Well, it's like this. There's this fee we charge for processing paperwork like so folks can go on into town and not have to wait around all day in the weather. I'm sure you understand how it is."

The driver nodded his head knowingly. "Why yes, I do know how it is. How much is it?"

"Just ten dollars - payable in cash or in kind." The trooper stuck out his hand.

John pulled out a ten dollar bill and laid it in his hand. The soldier filled out the pass form and took it over to the corporal in charge to sign. He brought it back to the truck and John examined it closely. "Looks like everything is in order, I suppose. All duly signed off on by.... a Corporal Meyers, isn't it? Yes, that's what it looks like. And you are Private Tanner. Very good. " The other trooper lifted the pike so they could pass. John reached up, put the truck in gear and when he brought his left arm down he pulled that side of his jacket clear so that his star could be clearly seen. "When I see Major McCall today at the meeting I'll be sure to tell him what a good job you all are doing, especially your diligent

efforts at increasing revenues for the Command. Take care!"

The truck pulled through and went on down the road leaving the private standing at the pikestaff, sweating in the cool late morning air.

October 8 - Negotiations - Part Three

"Gentlemen, it's like this." The man in the BDUs with gold oak leaves said, "The National Recovery Corp has now become sufficiently organized that they are ready to begin to move into the major Devastated Areas and begin full salvage and recovery operations. Most of this work will be done by those displaced persons who have not been able to find a means to support themselves and others thrown out of work in the economic aftermath since the asteroid strike. Troops from the Recovery Command are being provided for security and to assist with logistics. The long and the short of it is that just over half of the present Recovery Command personnel in Alachua county will be pulling out for the coast starting tomorrow. The same for Columbia, Marion, Sumter, and Lake counties. I will be shipping out with the transfers and HQ administrative duties for the four counties will be handled by Lt. Col. Samuel Marks at Camp Blanding via a liaison in each county HQ, probably a captain. I have not heard who is being assigned here"

"Now that we have regular food shipments coming in and fuel shipments starting to arrive it seems the worst of the forces driving the lawlessness problems of the last several weeks should begin to fade. It's the opinion of the Recovery Command, the governor's office and the sheriff here that the remaining Recovery troops and local law enforcement should be able to cope with whatever arises. Check points at the city perimeters will be removed but some will remain inside the city itself in areas that have proved to be especially troublesome in the past. The five displaced persons camps in the county will be consolidated into two - one at the county fairgrounds, the other being the Newberry camp - after the NRC enlistees are shipped out. Should the NRC draft bill pass it is projected only the fair grounds camp will remain. The camps will remain under DFA rules and Recovery will continue to provide troops for what check points remain, otherwise county administration will be left entirely to civil government."

Sheriff Freed stood up and said, "Thank you Major McCall. Much obliged for you to come today. OK folks, you've heard it direct. Two thirds of the evacuees in the county are due to start shipping out over the next several days and maybe most of the remainder will as well if the draft bill passes. It'll be even more than that when the 'work to eat' bills come out of the state legislature. Thirty days from now I don't expect we'll have more than maybe a thousand or so in the fair grounds camp and they'll be mostly unable to work - or cause much trouble."

"This does not necessarily mean that all of those who will have left the camps will be gainfully employed or staying out of mischief. Those that go off with the NRC into the Devastated Areas will be under DFA rules administered by the Recovery boys and not our problem. The one who will be OUR problem will be those layabouts and parasites who won't even try to make the effort to get out and scratch once the free chow in the public troughs dries up. Some of them will drift on but many will stay right here in the area getting in our hair doing things from picayune begging and panhandling all the way up to trying their hands at making a career out of banditry or burglary. They'll make themselves a boil on our collective ass until we've caught up with them all and put them in the jug - the ones that aren't killed that is."

"If the appeals streamlining bills in the legislature pass as I expect they will then these folks will move pretty quickly through the court system and onto the chain gangs but this means many of you men will be cooling your heels in court to get them there. I'm doing what I can to keep this to a minimum but it cannot be entirely eliminated. At least you'll be able to drive into town for the trials. I know I've been saying for weeks now that I'd get a fuel ration for you sector deputies and haven't been able to deliver but I just got confirmation this morning the first tanker assigned to us will be here in three days and

THIS time it damned well better make it!" He gave a direct glance at the Major who affected not to notice.

"I leaned hard on the Recovery folks at Blanding and told them straight up if they couldn't get my people some fuel to carry out their duties with I'd send the Posse to Blanding and seize the stuff directly!" This drew a general laugh. Many wondered if he'd really do such a thing. A few knew.

"Now those 'work to eat' bills haven't actually passed yet but when they do I expect they'll go into effect quite shortly given the mood of the Legislature so before then we'll have some new procedures worked out that will hopefully make it easier for some of you to cope with those less than serious but still important enough crimes that simply have to be attended to. With luck and continuing improvement in the logistical system my regular deputies and municipal law enforcement will be able to resume the responsibility for law enforcement in Alachua county again by the end of the year but I can't promise you that. Even when it does become possible I'd like most of you to remain in the program on an inactive status for at least a little while longer until I'm sure we really are out of the woods - at least those of you in the rural areas that are more difficult to serve."

"That's it for right now. I thank you all for coming. If you have questions or requests I'll be in my office; Ted Gaskins is over in Communications if you need him; records, reports, filing and whatnot you can take to the ladies next door. I've had a lunch laid on in the break room for you who are interested. Good morning."

John looked at his watch and decided against taking advantage of the lunch in favor of being about his other business but on the way out he did stop by to see Ted Gaskins. With the telephone system steadily becoming more reliable fewer deputies were relying on home brewed radio networks but John wanted to maximize his. He rapped at the comm. Office door and stuck his head in. "Howdy Ted!"

"Well hey, John! How's it going? Haven't seen you in a spell. Radios giving you a problem?"

"No, as a matter of fact, they're doing pretty well for us. That's why I wanted to stop by and see you. When do you reckon you'll be out my way again? I'd like to get the shortwave set up."

Ted rooted around on his desk and came up with a calendar book. He flipped through a few pages then said, "How about Friday? I've got to do some PMs on the repeater out that way, I can stop by your place and get you set up. Oh! That reminds me too." He got up and went to a steel cabinet in the back of the room, opened it and pulled out a box He pulled out a transceiver with the name 'Icom' on the front and set it on the desk. "Recovery gave this to us from where ever they get this stuff. We could use it here but it's much better suited to long range communications which we don't have much call for except over to the emergency management center but they have backups for all their main equipment anyways so would probably never use this. I've serviced it and it's working well. Thought you'd like to have it. It's not on our property books so it wouldn't be a problem. Got a good home built antenna for it too as well as a copy of the ARRL antenna book I can give you. What do you think?"

John was stunned, "Ted, I don't know much about this gear but that radio looks expensive. I'm not sure I can take this."

Ted's face was serious, "I'm sure. I want you to have it. You and your wife did my family a good turn when we were in a bad way. Now I'm in a position to do you one. Take this. *Listen* to it. I think you'll soon find there is news and there is truth and the American Media has a curious relationship with both.

October 12 - Secrets - Part One

"OK, ease it up another inch or so. There! That's it. Now just hold it while I get these screws in." John began powering in the screws with the cordless drill. Below Ann and Lisa held the sliding glass door frame in place until he could get enough fasteners in to hold it in place.

Ann scrutinized the greenhouse roof, now two thirds complete. "Do you think it will leak? These doors don't look all that tight."

John drove another screw in then decided the battery pack needed replacing. "Lisa, would you go into the workshop and get the other battery pack out of the charger? It's on the workbench to the right when you go in the door." He climbed off the ladder, handed Lisa the spent battery and she headed to the workshop. "Well, it might. We've got a pretty good slope but we'll know the first time it rains. We'll need to spend some time sealing air leaks too. We considered just using the doors themselves but by installing the frames to we'd be able to slide four of the doors on each side open for ventilation. Hopefully it won't leak too much but if it does we'll have to seal it all up and find some other way to ventilate."

His wife studied the structure they'd all be working on for the last three days. "I suppose this has used up most of our lumber didn't it?"

John sighed. "Yes, it did, close to all of it but the value of the greenhouse is such that it was worth the trade. I'm sorry, I know you were really counting on that new addition. Good thing for us that we've been steadily accumulating the lumber to build it or we'd be out of luck trying to build this. If things settle down there's about a dozen mature pines on the back of the property that can be felled and milled into lumber where I'd like to open up the pasture a bit more. A year to season the wood and we'll build on the new kitchen."

Ann wasn't particularly happy but she bowed to the necessity of it. "Maybe if we can start selling farm goods next year we'll make enough to pay for the materials we have to buy. We keep hearing about how the country is picking itself up from the Fall, do you think the university will be calling you back to work anytime soon?"

With a troubled look and a shrug her husband replied, "I don't know. Lately I'm wondering if they'll ever have need of a grant writing office again. A good deal of the grants the University received came from the Federal government. Much of the rest came from various foundations and institutions that derived their money from trusts and other such instruments driven by the stock market, bonds, and what not. When the asteroid hit it blew the bottom out of the global financial markets and the Federal government both. The University will go on - somehow - but whether it will ever need a grant writing office or whether there'll be major grants to apply for again I don't know. We may be witnessing a major paradigm shift in the way things are done in this country. I'm not going to sit by the phone hoping they'll call."

He slipped his arm around his wife's waist and looked out across the small fields and pastures that comprised the Horne homestead seeing it not as it presently was but the way it would be when they had willed it into being. "If dad and I can make a go out of farming we're going to try. Sooner or later American agriculture will shake out again like it did before and small scale farming such as we can do won't be profitable anymore but until then we should be able to do OK. At least for the next ten to twenty years I'm willing to bet there's going to be a big emphasis in the Eastern states on home

gardening and local food production. Over the last month there's been a lot of folks who have known real hunger for the first time in their lives and if rationing proves to be necessary for a while longer it will serve to keep that lesson fresh in their minds. In time they'll forget how fragile the web is that brings them food, fuel, and the other necessities of life from far away places but until then I think there'll be a lot of folks who will place great value in having as many of those necessities produced close to hand as possible. A family willing to work ought to be able to make an agricultural living from that, at least until I'm too old to work anymore and by then Mel should be college age and heading out on her own. We can retire then, at least from farming. Don't reckon we'll ever quit gardening and keeping at least a little stock."

Heather walked out the back door to the bell post and gave the two double rings that meant "come to the table." Lisa was just returning from the workshop with the fresh battery for the drill so she handed it to John who put it on the drill and they all went inside. Robert came in out of the garden carrying a basket of ripe tomatoes and squash. Everyone admired the produce which prompted the man to say, "those row covers have really worked well. The leaves have been losing their scalded look since we put them on. You reckon it's because they block out the UV?"

John shrugged. "Could be. Ann noticed last night that I'm darker in skin tone and I think you are too. To be expected since you and I spend so much time in the sun. The kids look darker as well. Maybe the plastic is filtering out some of the UV."

Lisa frowned and turned to John. "Take off your shirt, I want to see this change."

He did as she requested and removed his shirt. She compared his untanned areas to his arms and the back of his neck then called over Heather and looked her over. "We haven't been taking this seriously enough. Both of you have got a dark tan. That's not good, especially for you John. I think we're all going to start needing to wear long sleeves and wide brimmed hats in the sun until the ozone layer rebuilds itself. It's getting pretty late in the year so the sun will be lower on the southern horizon. Maybe the UV problem won't get any worse before the equinox begins to lengthen the days again. Anyone have any idea how long it'll take the ozone layer to reform? We could have a real problem by next summer."

No one spoke at first then John said, "Well, the theoretical studies predicted that a big impact would temporarily wipe out the ozone layer letting more UV radiation hit the ground but they didn't really say for how long it would last beyond stating it wasn't expected to last more than a year or two. Those were for big impacts a kilometer in size or larger. The asteroid that hit us was smaller than that so maybe the length of time the ozone layer will be disrupted will be correspondingly less. Reckon we should ask Luke. If he doesn't know then he'll probably know someone at the university who might - its got to be something that's being studied."

Brittany opened the over door and took out a pan of cornbread then set it on a trivet on the counter to cool. The family sat to the table, John said grace, and they began to eat their salads. "I was afraid we were going to have to subsist on preserved foods through the winter" Lisa said glowingly, "but with the row covers and the greenhouse we'll be able to have fresh food whenever we like! I've paid two dollars a pound for winter tomatoes that weren't half this good before the Impact. Now that we're eating this Buttercrunch lettuce I'll never buy Iceberg again. When we move back I'm going to have Luke dig up a garden spot in the back yard and put in a small greenhouse."

Ann asked, "Are you and Luke thinking of moving back into town then?"

Lisa looked a little troubled at this, "Well, I think maybe we'd better discuss it. From the news it sounds like the government is beginning to get things back under control, at least in Gainesville. The crime rate is falling, food is starting to come in again, fuel will be rationed for a while but it is coming. I'd like Heather to be able to go back to her regular school and I certainly won't miss that morning and evening bike ride to the clinic in Archer every day come heat, cold, or rain though I'm probably in better physical shape now than I've been since before Heather was born. The only problem is that Luke says our house has been all but gutted by thieves since we came here. It's going to take time and materials which may prove to be hard to come by to make it livable again. If you'll have us for at least a little longer we'd like to stay."

Ann smiled at her and said, "Of course you welcome! You've been a valuable asset and we've been happy to have you and Heather."

Her guest smiled, "I'm glad but lately I have been feeling guilty that we haven't been contributing enough for our keep. We've made a major impact in your food supply and have contributed little towards that other than labor. We do have medical skills but it's not like you all have needed a lot of that. It may be inflating away by the day but Luke and I would like to at least contribute cash towards keeping the Horne homestead afloat since we have little else we can give. We're both working and we're both being paid. This will keep you all from having to subsist on just Ann's salary."

John spoke up, "Well, I won't try to fool you that it hasn't been something that was on my mind. The country has been knocked solidly on its behind but it is starting to try to function again which means the economy is going to have to start working again to do it. We can get by for a while longer on just what we already have here, what we can produce for ourselves or trade with others nearby but that won't work forever. It's going to take time and some outside resources to get the farm up and running as a profitable operation and your assistance can help close the gap. Whatever y'all feel that you can contribute will certainly help."

Lisa smiled and said, "Good! I'll talk it over with Luke tonight when he calls."

October 12 - Secrets - Part Two

Conversation drifted on to other topics. Heather asked if she could go over to the Daniels after they had cleaned up and her mother agreed. Melinda and Brittany wanted to catch up on their school reading. A rumble of thunder was heard so John got up from his chair to go and look out the window. "Well, shoot!" he said, "Looks like we're going to catch that 30% today. I'm going out and put the tools up before it starts and I'll finish my lunch when I get back inside." Robert got up to help him. They put on their hats and went out the kitchen door.

After the door closed Lisa asked Ann, "Do you think he suspects?"

He co-conspirator grinned, "No, not at all. I still think that's way too much but since you and Luke insist I'm not going to say no. You and he might find John is a harder sell. He's always been stiff necked that way."

"Mama, we're finished with our school reading the rain has stopped." Melinda asked her mother, "Can Brittany and I go over to the Daniels too?"

Ann looked out the window at the sky. "I suppose but I want you two back before dark or call if you want to stay longer but I don't want any of you coming home after dark without the twenty gauge. There's still dogs out there."

"Yes ma'am. We'll be home before dark. Come on Brittany!"

The girls stopped on the porch and put on their boots then ran the four hundred yards down the road to the Daniels. They knocked at the kitchen door and Kate Daniels answered. "Hi girls. Timmy's down at the creek hunting crawdads. Heather and Stevie are in the barn throwing down hay for the animals. Jake's off working with Rick today."

Melinda said, "Thanks Mrs. Daniels. We'll go find Heather and Stevie. Timmy always tries to put a crawdad in my hair when he catches them."

The two girls ran into the barn through the open door heading for the ladder up to the hay loft. When they reached the bottom they yelled "Hi Heather, Hi Stevie!" They could hear movement above and presently Heather yelled back down, "Hi! We're up here! Uhh, would you grab the other bale hook hanging from the stall over by the door? I forgot to bring up it up."

Brittany ran over and grabbed the hook and handed it to Melinda and they climbed to the top. The girls carefully crossed the hayloft to where Stevie and Heather were standing. She was slipping a piece of pink and white fabric into her jeans pocket as Melinda rounded the corner of the stack of bales with Brittany following behind. Stevie was taking a bale of hay apart and throwing it down to the animals below. Melinda handed the hook to Heather and she began to taking down another bale down. After all the animals had been fed she said, "Let's go down. It's too hot to stay up here." She, Stevie and Brittany walked over to the ladder and began to climb down. Melinda stood for a moment eyeing the loose hay and the stack of bales then climbed down the ladder after them.

In the living room John sat down at the desk where the radio equipment was rigged and turned on the power to the short wave transceiver. He pulled out the printout of frequencies that Ted had given him and began to scan them one by one until he hit a news broadcast -

...al-Jazeera television released video tape today showing the assassination of Sheikh Said Nayan, President of the United Arab Emirates. Responsibility for this assassination was placed with fundamentalist groups opposed to the sheikh's cooperation with the U.S. in its "War On Terror" but no groups as of yet have specifically been named. All six assassins were killed in the attack and its aftermath.

The United States today continues to remove its forces from its former bases in Saudi Arabia two weeks after being requested by the new king to leave. Saudi government officials complained today of the slow pace of the removal but were rebuffed by U.S. Under Secretary Richard Stokes who stated, "We are simply not going to abandon our equipment and supplies on those bases no matter how much the present Saudi government would like us to. It will take as long as it takes." Most of the troops and equipment being removed is on its way to other U.S. bases in Bahrain, Oman, and Qatar.

Chinese officials today at a Russian-Chinese Codevelopment conference again hinted that U.S. naval losses were much heavier than were claimed by the U.S. Navy after its victory over the navy of the P.R.C. in the Straits of Taiwan. Precisely what these losses were was not revealed. When queried by this office the U.S. Navy returned no comment.

This is the English language service of Radio Moscow. We will have further news at 2200 hrs Greenwich Mean Time.

John nodded his head and scanned his list again.

October 16 - Developments - Part One

John pitched another forkful of manure laden bedding out of the goat stall into the loader on the tractor. Across the way his dad began to spread fresh bedding into the horse's stall. Outside it was raining again turning into freezing sleet as they continued to receive precipitation from the cold front that had stalled on top of them. When the last of the used bedding had been forked out and replaced they hayed the animals. Their evening chores completed the men donned their hats and slickers and headed back to the house. The ground was crunchy with ice.

"Well, we knew it would be cold early this year" John muttered, "but I was hoping it would hold off a little longer. It'll likely freeze hard tonight. We don't even normally get *frost* until next month. At the rate we're going it'll start to snow soon!"

His dad stepped up on the porch and began taking his slicker off. "Looks like this sleet is starting to stick. We'll need to come back out and examine the greenhouse in another hour or so to see if the ice build up is going to be a problem. Probably ought to make another leak check too. I'm not sure if that stove stack will take a lot of ice so we'll need to make sure the heater fire doesn't go out before this storm quits."

Nodding his head, his son said, "Thank God we finished the walls and roof yesterday morning before the temperature started dropping. I'd hate being out here trying to work in this stuff and I'd hate having to postpone work waiting on it to pass. You want to work on the tray racks after we check on the ice buildup"

Robert nodded acknowledgement and opened the door to step inside. In the kitchen Melinda and Heather were readying supper for the table and bickering between themselves when they came into the room. "Melinda, it's NONE of your business! Butt out!"

Mel's jaw was set with a determined look on her face and shot back, "Heather, you're being stupid!" when she saw her father and grandfather come in. She looked up, straightened out her face and said, "Hi daddy, hi grandpa. Supper will be ready in about five minutes. Aunt Lisa called a little while ago and said she'd be home in time to set with us."

"Good." her father said, "She should get here before the roads begin to slick over with ice. Sure hate to see her wrack up her car the day after we finally started getting fuel again. Call us when it's ready, I'll be in the living room."

"Yes sir"

The two men walked on through the kitchen to the living room to warm themselves at the wood stove. Brittany was there folding clothes. She hurriedly wiped her eyes when they came through the door and returned to her chore. It seemed to John that she'd been crying so he asked "Brit, is anything wrong?"

The girl shook her head and said, "No sir." and continued folding, offering no other explanation.

Her guardian could see that she was upset but was unsure of whether he should press the matter so he decided to table it until he could speak with Lisa in private on how to proceed. After the trauma of her mother, and probably her father, being murdered and herself so nearly raped he was sure that she would be dealing with reactions to the incident for a long time to come but helping a twelve year old girl to

come to terms with it was outside of his experience. He resolved that he, Lisa, and Ann would discuss the matter some more the coming weekend. Until a couple of days ago she seemed to be coping as well as could be expected but lately she seemed hurt and dejected and he could not understand why.

The evening news was on the television so he started watching. A local anchor person was at the new NRC camp being built on the west side of Jacksonville. While not appearing to be under military discipline it did appear to be fairly clean and well organized. The camp residents were all individuals who had volunteered to join the NRC and they looked reasonably clean and well fed. Several discussed the work they were doing salvaging materials from the Devastated Area and several shots were shown of crews loading lumber and structural steel onto trucks. The only heavy equipment shown was trucks and cranes lifting loads onto them. A spokesperson said that shortage of fuel kept other useful heavy equipment from being employed. The same spokesperson also talked about how they were getting upwards of fifty people a day applying for the NRC at this one camp alone which would soon lead them to spin off satellite camps nearer to outlying salvage areas.

John nodded at the TV and said to his dad, "Well, looks like a cross between basic training and working for a construction company. Grandpa did a spell in the CCC back during the Depression didn't he? I wonder what he'd think of our new version?"

His dad tucked his shirt into his pants and replied, "Probably be glad he was getting three hot meals a day and a dry place to sleep. What they're doing there can't be any harder than trying to stay alive farming in rural Georgia in the '20's and 30's. When the war came and he enlisted he said basic training was a lot like living at home and he got paid better to boot."

The local time passed and the news segued to national topics.

Treasury Secretary Smith today confirmed for the first time that the Treasury and the Federal Reserve Board of Governors was consulting with Congress about a possible recall of all U.S. currency in order for new bills to be issued at a new valuation. He declined to say what the proposed rate of exchange between the old and new bills would be but internal sources who wish to remain anonymous tell us that rates of 5:1, 10:1, even 20:1 have been proposed. Secretary Smith states a full report will be given if and when a bill is actually introduced for legislative consideration.

Robert grimaced at the news. "They did that during the Depression too when they recalled gold coins. Haven't seen a Social Security check since the impact and now they want to tell us that ten dollars will only be worth a dollar."

In other economic news the House/Senate conference committee resolved the final details of the National Reconstruction Corp bill package and sent it back to the floor of both houses for a final vote where it is expected to pass.

Major features of the bill are the absorption of assets from insurance companies that have failed as a result of being unable to pay out claims resulting from the asteroid strike and the resulting aftermath; making the government responsible for those claims but limiting the amount of each payout by claim type; authorizing the government to salvage materials for resale from the Devastated Areas; extending the length of time that the Devastated Areas will be under Direct Federal Administration; phasing out of all evacuee and displaced persons camps in favor of incorporating them into the NRC.

A strong rumor is making its way through the news halls of Congress in Denver that the NRC involuntary draft measure was struck from the final bill but we have not been able to confirm this at the present time.

In other national news the Supreme Court handed down several rulings today. One such was their decision that the missing members of Congress who were lost in the Impact aftermath shall be appointed by their state legislatures according to the population distribution of the last census in 2000. A part of this ruling also ordered that another national census must be immediately undertaken so that appropriate reapportionment changes can be made in time for the 2004 elections. This new census and the resulting reapportionment is expected to radically change the balance of power within Congress as the Eastern Seaboard states lose House districts. A consequence of these changes will be the strengthening of California's power within Congress as well as the state of Texas.

Heather came into the room and said, "Uncle John, Mr. Horne, Brittany, supper's ready. Y'all come on to the table."

Internationally, confused reports are reaching Western Europe of open strife breaking out in several Northern Russian provinces as the provincial governors and the central government vie for political control. Tensions are being exacerbated by a depressed Fall harvest, an early onset of winter weather, and difficulties in fuel distribution. Several provincial governors are reportedly claiming the central government is deliberately holding up food and fuel shipments in an effort to pressure them.

October 16 - Developments - Part Two

Lisa came in by the front door after first shaking the ice and water off of her coat on the front porch. "It's freezing out there!" she exclaimed, "If I had known the sleet was freezing I'd have come home an hour ago. I haven't had to drive on ice covered roads since we left Ohio. The way it's coming down and the temperatures dropping I may not be able to go back in tomorrow until it melts. There's probably not a snow chain or studded tire in the whole county."

John said, "You're just in time for supper. I'm sure a hot meal will improve matters." He clicked the radio off and the family went into the kitchen to eat. The normally talkative meal was quiet as the three girls spoke little among themselves. Lisa and the two men spoke of the day's events and the weather but this did not seem to fill the void. Finally the meal was over so the two men put on their coats, hats, and slickers then headed to the greenhouse.

Ice was beginning to coat every surface and the ground was becoming slick. By the time they'd inspected the roof and that of the barn, work shop, house, and hen house to be sure there wasn't going to be a problem it was full dark and the wind began to pick up. They went inside the greenhouse and stoked the makeshift stove they had built to heat the structure. After an hour or so they had laid out where the tables and tray racks would go and began to diagram the structures to determine how much material they would need. They had just begun to move wood from the workshop into the greenhouse when the lights went out.

John sighed, "Well, it's blowing thirty miles an hour out there and coating everything with ice, I suppose we should have expected it would take the lines down." He pulled the little Mini-Mag flashlight off of his belt and turned it on. "Let's just call it a night. My leg's killing me anyways." He and Robert put on their hat and slickers and began heading towards the house, a light could be seen shining from the kitchen window. Robert said, "Looks like the girls got one of the lamps lit."

They had just stepped up on the porch and took their hats off when Heather came through the door in her coat and hat, "Uncle John!" she exclaimed, "I was just coming out to get you. Mr. Strickland's on the radio and wants you to come over right away. He says he's shot a man in his barn!"

October 16 - Developments - Part Three

"Oh THANK YOU Ed!" John growled, "It's 30 degrees, blowing 30 miles an hour, freezing rain, and pitch dark so now I have load up and head on over to your place to investigate the burglar you just shot!"

Lisa stepped out on the porch behind her daughter buttoning up her coat and with a bag under her arm. Heather interjected before he could continue his rant, "He said the man was still alive but wounded."

John looked up at Lisa and said, "Well, I reckon that means you too." He turned and looked at the ice beginning to glaze the walk leading up to the porch then turned back. "You've had more experience with this than I have. Do you reckon we should try to drive or would be better off riding the bikes? The way my leg feels I don't care for the idea of walking the mile over to Ed's place."

She laughed and said, "There's NO way I'm going to try to ride a bicycle in that! Can you put some weight in the back of your truck to improve the traction? If we take it slowly we shouldn't have too much problems getting there though I do have to say if it weren't for the emergency I wouldn't try to drive tonight."

The deputy sighed, "Yeah, I reckon we can stack blocks in the back over the rear axle. I'll pull the truck around next to the workshop. Dad, would you help me load them?"

His father put his hat back on and they headed out. It took about ten minutes to get the truck cranked, moved over to the workshop and the blocks loaded. By then both men were coated in ice and near to freezing. John turned the truck heater to its maximum setting and drove the truck up to the house where Robert got out and Lisa got in. "Drive slowly" she said, "and keep it in a low gear. The road is going to be quite slick in places."

They pulled out and moved in the direction of the Strickland ranch. Fortunately, the ice had not yet begun to cover the road too badly except for where the road crossed several culverts. There the truck wanted to skid which put John's heart in his mouth but he kept it on the pavement. He looked to Lisa and said, "I'm a Florida boy. We don't get this kind of thing more than about once a decade and when it happens I stay off the road. Maybe you should drive."

She laughed and said, "If I've lived long enough to learn anything I've learned that no sensible woman will ever drive a man's truck if there's any chance that it could get damaged! You're doing just fine. Keep it in low gear and go slow. It's only a mile to Ed's place."

Presently they arrived at their destination and drove through the gate which Ed had already opened for them. He poked his head in the driver's window and said, "He's in the back barn." Then walked around and got in the other side. John drove towards the rear of the property. Ed continued, "Got some late calves in there and with the ice storm and all I wanted to make sure they were well situated before I turned in for the night. About out of gas so I went down on foot. When I came through the door I surprised a fellow inside and he whirled around with a pitchfork in his hand. I thought he was about to attack me with it so I drew and shot him before he could get close. Just grazed him good along his ribs along the left side and he went down hollerin'. Once I looked him over and talked to him I realized he was probably just lookin' for a dry place to get out of the weather. Other than hay and the calves there's nothing in there worth stealing and he didn't look like he was up to doing any rustling. Of course, he didn't ask if he could sleep in the barn either."

John pulled up in front of the barn and they went inside. There was a man lying on a small pallet of hay in one of the stalls, pale and still. Lisa went to him and stripped off his shirt and began to examine him. After a while she said, "He's in shock but I don't think he's seriously hurt. You're right Ed, it was just a graze. There doesn't appear to be any bones broken nor did the bullet enter the chest cavity. He is in shock though so he needs to be kept warm and watched closely. John, do you think we can get him to the hospital?"

The deputy rubbed the back of his neck and considered it. "Well, if he needs to go he needs to go. It's fifteen miles there and fifteen miles back with the ice outside getting thicker by the hour but I guess it can't be helped. Let's load him into the truck and we'll take him in."

Ed spoke up. "Lisa, how bad hurt is he? I ain't gonna ask anyone to drive thirty miles in this kind of weather. You'd all likely end up spending the night in a ditch somewhere trying to keep from freezing to death. Looks to me like he just needs the wound cleaned and some sutures. If you can do that I'll keep him at the house, at least until the storm's done then John can take him on to the jail if he's going to. I'm not going to press charges against a man trying to stay alive in an ice storm so he can just drop him off in Archer or where ever when the weather clears if he will. Ellie used to be a fair jackleg nurse in her day."

Lisa considered it for a moment then said, "OK. Under other circumstances I wouldn't but Ed's right about us trying to drive in this weather without the proper tires, chains, or anything. The wound really isn't very serious. If we can get him up to the house where it's warm I'll do what I can for him there and we can leave him with Ed until the weather clears. If he worsens Ed can call us on the radio."

With that they loaded the man into the truck and carried him to the house. Inside Ellie had a fire going in the woodstove in the living room so everyone soaked in the warmth. Ed went and got a Coleman lantern, pumped it up, and lit it for brighter light than what the kerosene lamps were giving out. Lisa carefully cleaned the wound and sutured it. When she finished she coated it with antibiotic ointment and put a bandage over it. She turned to Ellie and said, "If it starts bleeding badly put pressure on it with a clean cloth. Change the bandage in the morning. Call me if he gets worse." Ed poured them all hot coffee and fed them biscuits. When they finished John and Lisa got back in the truck and drove slowly home. He checked on the animals in the barn and the greenhouse then went in himself.

He sat down in the living room next to the woodstove to soak up some warmth before taking his coat off. His dad had already gone to bed and the girls were in the kitchen doing their school work. Lisa came in and sat down next to the stove as well with a mug of hot peppermint tea. After a few minutes John glanced at the kitchen door then said, "I was meaning to speak with you before the excitement with Ed came up. Have you noticed how Brittany has been behaving lately? She seems pretty moody and depressed. Do you think it might be some sort of delayed reaction from the murder?"

She said nothing for a moment as she stared at the fire through the glass stove doors. "I don't know John. Pediatric psych was never an area I studied much but having a daughter of my own it would seem plausible that she could be having some form of reaction. She has been down these last few days. For that matter Heather and Mel seems to be on the outs with each other too. I'll keep an ear out and see if I can determine what's going on."

John nodded his head, "I'd sure appreciate it if you would. The girls are at home with us all day but I can tell you I'm at sea with trying to cope with this. Mel's about to turn eleven so I suppose I should be

learning to cope but just now I'm sorta clueless. You reckon the girls have been fighting amongst themselves?"

Lisa shrugged, "Well, maybe Heather and Mel but they don't seem to be mad at Brittany. I'll have to try to find out but it might take some time. Kids are all over nerve endings about their privacy when they hit puberty. We're already living closely together now without crowding them even further. Give me a couple of days and I'll see what I can find out."

He nodded and said, "OK."

They went back to gazing at the fire and trying to get up the initiative to go to bed. Presently, Lisa said, "Luke told me today he'll have some time off this weekend and will give Ann a ride home. Probably be a good time for us all to talk. They're getting regular food shipments into town now so he'll be bringing some groceries with him too. He received the same five gallon fuel ration that I did. If we can get through the winter alright maybe matters will start to return to normal soon."

John stood and began to unbutton his coat. "I sure hope so," he said, "but I think this winter is going to be a hard road to travel if we're getting an ice storm when it's only October. I have a bad feeling that Mr. Murphy isn't yet finished with his little surprise party."

Lisa drained her mug and stood as well. "Well, since that wayward space rock came to Earth and blasted us out of our normal lives you could be right. I'm going to go and chase the girls into bed then I'm for it myself. Goodnight."

October 17 - Natural Events - Part One

Ding-ding! Ding-ding! The sound of the farm bell could be heard out in the pasture where John and his father were examining the rye grass and vetch and trying to gauge the impact the ice storm may have had on its survival and growth. He grinned at his dad and said, "Heather's playing our tune. I could do with a cup of hot coffee."

The two men walked up to the house, shucked their muddy boots and went inside. The girls were setting out plates of sandwiches on the table and ladling out bowls of hot soup. Robert poured coffee for himself and his son. The family set into eating, concentrating on their plates with little conversation. In the background the noon news came over the kitchen radio. The weather forecast predicted the days high only in the low forties and another hard freeze expected that night with a chance of frost for the night following and a warming trend for the days following.

John looked at his father and said, "When the temperature starts staying above freezing I expect we'll see that pasture mix taking off again. At least the rye grass should, I don't know about the vetch. The book says it's pretty cold hardy though so I reckon it should do OK."

Robert nodded. "Looks like we ought to be able to finish the last of the tables and tray racks in the greenhouse. Shouldn't take long to knock together seed flats after that. This weekend when Ann and Lisa will be home we can come up with some sort of seed starting mix, then fill the trays and get our first seeds in. Looks like what we've got under the plastic row covers pulled through but they're going to grow slowly if temperatures stay low. If it goes to the low twenties and stays there for a while they'll freeze even with the row covers.

John nodded and said, "Yes and with getting last night's ice storm so early in the year I think we can count on it setting a new record this year. Wouldn't surprise me if it went into the single digits, maybe even hit zero."

Brittany looked up and asked "Do you think it might snow? That would be cool! I haven't seen snow since I was a little girl and visited my uncle Nick in Maryland one Christmas. Maybe we could even build a snowman and have snowball fights!"

Robert chuckled. John grinned and said, "Snowmen! Lord, I hope not but this year it just might could snow that much. Most I've ever seen here was back in the Christmas ice storm of '89. Went down to eleven degrees, ice everywhere, snow too. Had snow on the north side of the house for three days. Lost power just like now and burst the water pipes. Probably could have gotten enough snow together to make a decent snowball but I don't think there was enough on the whole yard to make even a small snow man."

Melinda's eyes lit and started talking excitedly with Brittany about playing in the snow and Heather chimed in as well. Robert asked John, "Has Mel even seen snow?"

His son replied, "Yes, three, no four years ago when we went up to visit Ann's parents in Maine. Saw more than I wanted to see! Hit a patch of ice and slid the car into a ditch full of snow. Like to have froze my behind off trying to get the car out. Fortunately, some fella in a big 4x4 Ford came along and pulled me out. The family thought it was funny and said it was just a fact of life up there."

The men went back to their meal while the three girls happily talked about their various snow

experiences and hoped there would be deep snow in Florida, an idea that John devoutly hoped would not come to be.

After the weather forecast there was local news which segued into national and international news.

In a ceremony on the steps of the Old Capitol Building today Governor Bush signed into law the “Work To Eat” bill that passed out of the House-Senate conference committee yesterday. One of the provisions of this bill include a requirement that all persons receiving disaster relief or other types of aid administered by the state must prove they are gainfully employed in order to continue receiving the assistance. This is expected to greatly increase enlistments in the National Recovery Corp due to job losses resulting from the asteroid impact and its aftermath. Other provisions include instituting child care centers in as yet unnamed areas and a relaxation of child care licensing requirements to better allow unemployed parents to be able to find work.

Another bill that will have significant impact on the state is the “Streamlined Justice” measure introduced simultaneously last week in the House and Senate. In spite of heavy opposition the bills passed both house but with significant differences that will have to be resolved in conference committee. Some form of the bill is expected to emerge next week to be sent to the governor’s desk where he has indicated he will sign it into law. There are major differences between the House and Senate versions but both have as their basic tenets proposals to limit felony conviction appeals to just two. Other provisions that were added as amendments will have to await the final conference committee decision.

Nationally Senator Clinton of New York today introduced legislation authorizing the Treasury Department to recall all U.S. paper currency in order that new currency may be issued at an exchange ratio of ten to one to start immediately upon its passing into law with an exchange deadline of six months after which all old currency still in circulation will become valueless. The stated reasoning for the bill was to bring under control the run away inflation that has driven the U.S. dollar to less than a quarter of its pre-Impact value and still falling. This in turn will enable the Federal Reserve System to begin reopening banks across the nation which will then allow businesses to have access to credit in order for the economy to begin to rebuild. The bill immediately came under hostile fire by a number of senators. No corresponding bill has yet been filed in the House but a sponsor is expected to file such a motion next week. President Bush has indicated a willingness to sign such a bill if it can be brought to him in a form he finds to be acceptable.

John and Robert both sighed disgustedly together. “Well, that’s that. If Clinton’s proposing it and the President has already said he’s sign it you know it’s going to pass no matter how much hooting and hollering goes on. It’ll all be for show. There goes Ann’s salary, our retirement plans, your Social Security check, the whole ball of wax. Notice they didn’t say anything about reducing the value of things like mortgages by ten to one. Well, all I can say is they’d better or they’ll be courting a damned revolution!”

Robert just shook his head and went on eating.

Also on the national scene President Bush is expected to formally propose two nominees on Monday to fill vacancies on bench of the Supreme Court. The names of these two nominees have not been released.

Internationally reports have begun to arrive from the Argentine capitol of shots being fired at the

Presidential Palace as unit of the army have begun taking stations at major thoroughfares in the city. E-mails received from persons working near to the palace indicate they believe a coup may be underway but we have not been able to confirm this. No response has been received from the Argentine public affairs office. Argentina has been suffering from an economically disastrous plunge in the value of its currency leading to devastating hyper-inflation and default on its international loan payments. We will continue to bring you the latest information as we receive it.

John turned off the radio and said, "I've had about all the bad news I can take for one day. I'm going back to work." He stood, put on his hat and went out onto the porch to put on his boots. A few moments later Robert finished his meal and did the same. With lunch over Brittany left to clean the bathroom while Heather and Melinda cleaned the kitchen. Heather worked in a busy, industrious fashion.

October 17 - Natural Events - Part Two

“Why are you in such a hurry Heather?” Melinda asked, “No one’s going to give you a prize for speed washing or something.”

Heather retorted, “Mama told me last night that I could go over to the Daniels for a couple of hours today after lunch. I want to get done so I can go over there and still have enough time get supper ready and do my schoolwork before mama gets home.”

Mel’s face soured, “Thought so. Gonna spend some more time in the hayloft with Stevie?”

Heather’s face reddened, “So what if I do? Why do you care?”

The other girl sighed disgustedly, “Heather, I can’t believe you’re doing this. What will your parents say? You’re taking a terrible chance! You could... well, you know.”

The older girl slapped aggressively at the plate she was washing with the dishrag. “I know what I’m doing Mel! It’s not like I’m ignorant or something. My mom’s a nurse and my dad’s a doctor. They taught me things. Nothing’s going to happen.”

“You hope.” Mel said as she hung the dishcloth she’d wiped the table with and left the room. A few minutes later Heather drained the dishwasher, wiped off the counter and hung her dishcloth too then left for their bedroom.

A moment later she was livid with anger as she screamed “Melinda! I know you took them! Give them back!”

Melinda was in the dining room doing her school work and shouted back, “If you won’t act like you’ve got any sense then your friends will have to do it for you! Nothing’s stopping you from going to the Daniels without them.”

Heather shot out of the bedroom towards the dining room where Mel was at. As she passed Brittany stuck her head out of the bathroom with a scrub brush in her hands “Took what?” she said. “What are you two shouting about?”

“Never mind!” said Heather exasperatedly, “It’s nothing! Just go back to what you were doing,” before she hit the dining room door. “Mel, give them here!”

“NO!” Melinda shouted back as she leapt from her chair, “You’re being stupid! I’m trying to keep you out of trouble!” She ran for the kitchen only to meet her grandfather coming the other way having just come in the kitchen door.

“Uhhhh!” Melinda squeaked as she quickly sucked in her breath in a state of surprise. Heather shot through the door, “Give them he... OH!” she exclaimed when she saw why Mel had stopped.

“Hi grandpa” Mel said in a weak tone, “Is there something I can get for you?” Anxiety showed on both of the girls faces.

“No,” Robert replied, “I’m going to the necessary. Is there a problem? Why are you two shouting at

each other. I could hear you from the porch.”

Heather forced a weak smile and said, “Uh, nothing. It’s nothing. We were just arguing over who got to use the calculator next. Weren’t we Mel?”

The wide eyed younger girl nodded her head affirmatively, “Yes sir. I took the calculator from Heather so I could do my school work and she wanted it back. That’s all.”

The grandfather eyed them both then said, “Well then, keep it down. Your dad has another calculator in the desk drawer in the living room.” He went on through and into the bathroom and shut the door. When he finished he left the house and went back to work in the greenhouse.

Outside one of the spring-hatched roosters jumped a hen which made a commotion that attracted the attention of Big Red. He ran over from where he’d been scratching next to the barn and chased the younger bird away.

John shook his head, “Gotta say one thing about that boy, he doesn’t miss a chance does he. When ever he thinks Red’s not looking he’ll top a hen.”

His father nodded. After a moment he said, “I reckon it must be in the air.” There was something about the way he said it that caused John to give him a quizzical look but his father went back to hammering and said no more.

October 18 - Down on the Farm - Part One

John heard the dogs start barking so he stepped out on the front porch. The van from the university was at the gate and Ann was just getting out. He went through the gate then gave his wife a big hug and a kiss. Picking up her bag he said, "Lisa said something about Luke coming this weekend? He change his mind?"

His wife replied, "No, he came with me. He just needed to see the Stricklands so he had the driver drop him off there. He brought out Ellie's new arthritis medicine from town. He should be here in an hour or so I think. He'll probably take a look at the man Ed shot too if he's still at their house."

He nodded his head and they went into the house, shutting out the chill of the evening. In the dining room Lisa was helping the girls bring supper to the table. Robert came in from the barn and after everyone had washed their hands the family sat down. Ann asked, "Shouldn't we wait for Luke?"

Lisa replied, "No, when he called this afternoon he said he wanted to talk to the Stricklands when he dropped off Ellie's new meds. No point in making the family wait an hour waiting on him to show."

Grace was spoken and the family set into their supper. Presently the conversation turned to matters in town and Ann said, "The university is getting ready to start classes again. There's talk they might start in November but the Provost says they'll probably wait until the new year when fuel and food shipments should have settled into something stable. No one's sure how the money end is going to work with the Federal government in disarray and the banks still not reopened. He did say there was going to be a LOT more work-study requirements for students and they'd be doing a lot more practical day-to-day work than before. Sounds like the university is trying to save on labor costs. No one knows yet how big the hit to their funding is going to be but it's going to be very big. The ag colleges are going to be important again, much more so than they've been for many years. The engineering school is gearing up too. Come Monday when the van comes to get me it may not be burning petroleum at all!"

Robert asked, "What's it going to be using, coal?"

Ann said, "Close. They've very nearly got three wood burning vehicles ready to go. They're trying to work up a means to run one on methane too."

John asked, "These wood burners powering a steam boiler or are they using the combustion gasses directly?"

"Direct combustion is my understanding. Wood is heated and the gasses it gives off are then burned in a motor. I saw one from a distance yesterday as they were making test runs. Strange looking sight to see a school bus with a furnace on the back belching smoke. I understand they're trying to build a steam driven model as well."

Her husband shrugged, "Well, I suppose for at least a medium term solution it might help with the petroleum shortage we're having now but I can't see how they'll compete when the ports and pipelines reopen. I would like to see them in action though. You said they were working with methane again. Are they producing it themselves?"

She nodded her head, "Yes. Everyone still has to go so there's no shortage of the raw material. The mechanical engineering types are cooperating with several of the ag faculty on that project to build

expedient, small methane generators and convert stationary power plants to burn it. Mobile power plants like trucks are more difficult because of trying to store the gas. There was a lot of work in this area done back in the seventies but it all died out in the early eighties. The books and papers are all still in the library collections though so they're digging them out and updating them."

John took a forkful of beans and considered for a moment. "It seems to me that with seven people and the livestock here we've got plenty of the raw material necessary for producing the gas. If they have a good small scale design that could be used on a small farm could you bring us copies?"

"I don't know. I don't work with them but I can investigate. If they come up with a viable design they're going to need to farm it out for hands-on and that sort of thing. Maybe we could build one of our own. Maybe we could store it in our LP tank?"

October 18 - Down on the Farm - Part Two

No one knew enough about the mechanics of producing and using methane to say so conversation drifted to other topics and the family reached the end of their meal. They were just starting in on their cake when the dogs became noisy again. Melinda got up to go see what they were barking at and came back to the table and said, "Daddy, it's Dr. Luke at the gate. He's got a COW with him."

This caused raised eyebrows around the table except for Anna and Lisa who adopted poker faces.

Mel's father said, "Well, how about that? Reckon I'd better go out and see if Luke has taken up rustling as a side line." He stood and walked out the front door. The rest of the family followed shortly afterwards.

Outside Luke was just closing the gate behind him, a Jersey cow on a long lead standing nearby. With a grin John asked, "Luke, you find that thing wandering the roads or did you liberate it from somewhere?"

The doctor laughed and said, "I swapped it for some magic beans."

Melinda looked closely at the creature and said, "That looks like Mrs. Ellie's cow."

Her father looked at the cow more closely himself and said, "Be damned! That is Ellie's cow isn't it? Why are you bringing it here?"

With a grin Luke said, "Thereby hangs a tale. Harken O King and I will enlighten thee to the tale of the Doctor and the Cow."

The girls giggled at this and he continued, "As a matter of certain fact, this is NOT Ellie's cow. It is IN FACT - my cow." He then handed the lead rope to John who looked at him questioningly. "Now, O King, she is YOUR cow."

John looked at the lead rope in his hand and asked, "Luke, how did you come by Ellie's cow? She didn't give it to you to pay for her arthritis medicine did she?"

Luke replied, "No, the exchange has nothing to do with her medicine nor my services but it does have much to do with her arthritis. You see, Ellie came to the Archer clinic last week to see about getting a better medicine for her arthritis which has been worsening these last few months. As a part of the encounter she allowed to Lisa as to how she was going to have to give up milking because it aggravated her condition. Lisa told this to me and we worked out a deal. I just concluded it a little while ago and here she is!"

The new owner stroked the neck of the cow and said, "Luke, this is a huge gift! A good milk cow was worth hundreds of dollars BEFORE the Impact. I can't imagine what one would be worth now. This is too much. I can't accept her."

The doctor shook his head, "No, on the contrary. It's not really enough. John, you did my family a real service by bringing them out here in the midst of a disaster. You gave them shelter, food, and safety at a time that I was hard pressed to do so. Hell, the fact of the matter is that I was providing them shelter but the food and safety part were really becoming very dicey. So far as I'm concerned I owe you a herd of

cows but just now one is all I can manage. Take her. Ellie was glad that she's going to a good home and sends her blessings."

John looked at his wife, then cut his eyes at Lisa and then back to Ann. "You knew didn't you?!"

She laughed, "Yes John, I did. And I told them you'd be a hard sell too. You never could accept a gift gracefully. Age seems to be mellowing you." The three girls walked up and began to stroke the cow's flanks.

He grinned and said, "OK Luke, we accept her." He doffed his hat and bowed to the doctor. "Thank you most generous lord for your magnanimous contribution to the Horne farm."

Melinda grinned and asked, "Are we really going to keep her daddy? Cool! Our own dairy cow!"

Her father grinned back, "Well, small hands, maybe in a week you might not think she's so cool."

A puzzled look crossed Melinda's face. "Small hands? Why wouldn't I think she's cool?"

His grin grew wider, "Because YOU are the one who is going to milk her! You, Brittany and Heather that is. I'll leave it to the three of you to work out your own schedule providing she's milked TWICE a day, EVERY day, and at the SAME two times a day. Comprene?"

Mel's face grew wide again. "But why us? You and grandpa usually handle the larger stock."

"Because milking the cow is traditionally a job given to children. It's where the term 'milk maids' comes from." John began to sing "On the third day of Christmas the Doctor gave to me - three maids a milking, two wives conspiring, and a milk cow to make a daaiirryy!"

Melinda clapped her hands to her ears, "OK! OK daddy! I'll milk the cow! Just stop singing!" and started giggling.

Heather's face showed concern and Brittany looked uncertain. "Uhh, milk a cow, Uncle John? I don't know..." the older girl hesitated.

Her mother arched an eyebrow. "Well I DO know. I'm sure Mrs. Ellie would be glad to teach you three how to milk. She'd probably be tickled, in fact. I milked when I was a girl in Ohio." She grinned then continued, "It builds character, my father used to tell me. Especially when it was below freezing and blowing snow."

Heather said, "But mom, that was years and years ago."

Her mother replied, "So it was, all the way back in the Sixties as a matter of fact. Grandpa's a doctor too, remember? Never did understand why he wanted to keep all of those animals when we could simply have bought what we needed at the grocery like everyone else. Now I'm beginning to understand what he was getting at. Store bought milk never has tasted quite right to me since I left home. It'll do you good girl!"

Heather's father chuckled, "Your mother wouldn't take me seriously back when I was trying to get her to go steady with me until I agreed to learn how to milk cows myself. My folks thought I'd gone out of

my mind but I did it. Your grandfather said that anyone who'd accept getting swatted with a manure soaked tail for the regard of a girl had to be in love!"

Heather and Brittany still looked uncertain but raised no further protests and soon were stroking the cows head.

John rubbed the back of his neck. "Well, we'll for sure have plenty of feed stock material for our own methane generator now. Holy cow! Luke, I just realized a serious problem here. We don't have enough feed or hay to keep a dairy cow through the winter."

Luke held up his hand in a calming motion. "Not to worry, we've got that covered too. Actually, it was your goodwife who enlightened us to that problem when Lisa first brought her into the conspiracy. Not only did I buy the cow I bought the hay and feed that Ed had planned to feed her. You'll just need to work out with him how best to bring it over. He'd planned out her feed requirements when he sold his cattle to the Recovery Command and kept it back. He says if your winter grazing makes OK you should be able to save a fair amount of the hay."

The temperature was steadily dropping so John began to lead the cow to the barn and the group followed. "Luke," he asked, "just out of curiosity, if you don't mind my asking, what did she cost you? With inflation eating up paper dollars by the day she must have cost you a real bag of money."

"Actually," he replied, "I didn't buy her for paper dollars. My investment adviser is, or was, a real nut for diversification. Saved me a small fortune in the dot.com bust actually. One of the things he convinced me to buy is gold. Not stocks or futures, but the real thing. Truthfully, I was never much of a gold bug but he did put me into a small quantity of coins. I bought \$20 Double Eagle gold pieces. Ellie drives a hard bargain but we both made out OK. In a manner of speaking you could say I bought the cow, equipment, feed and hay for \$80.00. Damn cheap considering what you've done for my wife and daughter."

John tied the cow into a stall, filled her hay rack, and water bucket. He looked at her udder and asked, "Did Ellie say when she usually milks? Her bag is looking full. By the way, what is her name? I don't recall ever hearing her say."

Luke said, "Seven and seven but she said you can adjust the time to suit you if you do it slowly. She's giving three gallons a day just now. She freshened four months ago so she reckons you should get at least another year before she needs to be bred again. When she does need to be serviced you can take her down and let one of Ed's Hereford or Angus bulls do the deed. Come to think of it, I didn't ask Ellie what the cow's name is. Didn't occur to me but I'm sure it's on her papers. Ellie gave them to me."

"Her name's Dandelion." Melinda said, "Mrs. Ellie once told me that all her milk cows are named Dandelion. Daddy, can we make home made ice cream?"

Her father grinned and said, "Sure, as many times as you kids want to crank the churn. And whipped cream, and hot chocolate and just about anything else you can make out of dairy products. Probably end up feeding part of it to the hogs and chickens. Damn good feed as a matter of fact."

"Well, as a part of the deal, I did promise Ellie that you'd keep them in milk but that probably won't be more than a gallon or two a week at the most. I'm sure you'll be able to get by on the nineteen or twenty gallons a week this will leave you."

"Twenty GALLONS a week!" Brittany exclaimed, "How much milk can we drink?"

Ann chuckled then said, "We're about to find out."

Lisa glanced at her watch. "Seven and seven you said? Well, it's a little past seven now. We'd better rustle up a bucket of warm water and a cloth to wash her bag with and another clean bucket to milk into." She reached out and took Luke by the hand and said, "You look like you could use the practice. Think you can still remember how?"

Luke looked mildly alarmed at the prospect, "But Lisa, I haven't milked since you moved out of your parent's place. I'm a surgeon now!"

She grinned at him and said, "Good! It's that delicate touch that works so well."

October 19 - Stormy weather - Part One

"With all the building we've been doing we're going to need more twelve penny nails before long." Robert said as he drove another home into the milking stanchion he and John were building in the workshop.

John nodded his head. "Reckon it would be a good idea to inventory the consumable supplies to get a feel for what we're running short on. Might have to explore alternatives. Never much tried it before but I suppose if we had to we could probably assemble this stanchion using wood pegs like they used to do in the olden days. Considering what nails and screws are likely going to cost when we go to buy them it might not be a bad idea to at least get a feel for how such construction works." He chuckled, "At least we've got power so we won't be having to make the holes for the pegs using a brace and bit. I never could make a clean hole with one of those things."

"When I was Mel's age that was all your granddaddy had." John's father said, "No power saws either. Your great uncle Obadiah made his living as a carpenter and he did some very good work using just hand tools. Nowadays only the rich would be able to afford a carpenter like that."

Robert went outside to cut more wood for the stanchion leaving John inside making measurements. On the shelf over the drill press the radio was on, tuned to a local talk and news station.

In Tallahassee today the controversial "Streamlined Justice" bill quickly passed out of the House-Senate conference committee after several late night meetings were held to iron out differences between the two bills. Complete details will be available as soon as the full text of the bill can be reviewed.

On the national scene Senator Clinton's "Dollar Devaluation" bill has cleared its first committee hurdle with three more remaining before it makes its way to the Senate floor. The House counterpart to the bill has not yet been introduced.

In California there have been repeated calls in the state legislature to set up a California state bank that will issue its own currency backed by as yet unnamed assets in order to allow the state economy to begin more fully functioning.. The states of Washington, Oregon, and Idaho have expressed interest in developing the idea into a regional bank of issue. Unconfirmed reports indicate that representatives of the Bank of Japan and the Bank of China have attended the bank hearings in the California capitol in Sacramento. Treasury Secretary Rubin soundly denounced the idea as ill-conceived and in contravention of U.S. law.

Internationally unrest continues today in the Uruguayan capital of Montevideo on this second day of a government ordered bank holiday. The temporary bank closings were ordered by the central government in an attempt to cut losses and restore investor confidence which have been devastating the national economy. Many of the problems besetting this small South American nation are spill-overs from the free-falling Argentine economy and the steadily sickening Brazilian economy. The flattening of the import/export trade resulting from the asteroid strike and the coastal devastation resulting from the Impact tsunami are blamed for the worsening state of economic health of these Latin American nations.

Breaking news is arriving about yet another contact between New Mexico National Guard troops and a large band of Mexican Villaist raiders. Details are sketchy at this time as to the precise location of the battle but preliminary reports state that fourteen Viliaist bandits were killed and three National Guard

soldiers. In a press briefing yesterday President Bush once again appealed to Mexican president Vincente Fox to better patrol the Mexican side of the border to prevent further raids. The President stated that if the cross-border raids did not soon come to an end he would have no choice but authorize military operations on the Mexican side of the border to quell the problems of lawlessness and banditry now taking place in the region.

Robert came back into the shop with the new wood. John looked at his dad and grinned, "Shades of Blackjack Pershing! I've got a Springfield rifle, just need to scare up a campaign hat and some puttees and I'll be ready to go. I wonder if the folks along the border down there are organizing the way we have. With radio communications those bandits might just find themselves warmly greeted the next time they came to town."

In the Middle East today a new leader in the United Arab Emirates has come forward by the name of Sheik al-Hassan bin Saladin. Little is known about Sheik Saladin but according to Al Jazeera television he shares the ideology of the radical Sunni Muslim Salafia sect that preaches the expulsion of westerners, an end to corruption, and a return to Qu'ranic law. This creed is said to be very similar to that of Prince Sultan, now head of the neighboring Royal House of Saudi Arabia. In fact, the Saudi royal government announced today that it was sending representatives to the UAE capitol of Abu Dhabi in order to formally recognize the new government.

Further news from Saudi Arabia announces the arrest of Prince al-Waleed bin Talal on charges of moral degeneracy and corruption. The prince is one of the largest individual Saudi investors in U.S. assets and was a major part of the pro-western bloc of the Saudi royal family. No word from the prince has been heard since his arrest.

The two men nailed the last boards into place. With construction completed they broke out a can of paint and put on a first coat. John said, "As cool as it is tonight this paint won't be dry before the morning. We'll have to finish it up tomorrow. It's nearly supper time so why don't we call it a night?" His father agreed and with that they cleaned their brushes and headed to the house.

Inside they found Lisa and Heather putting supper on the table. Ann, Melinda and Brittany came in from the greenhouse where they'd been filling seed flats. They all sat to the table but John noticed Luke was missing and inquired as to his whereabouts. "Sally Starling called a little while ago. Her daughter Judy has some sort of fast spreading red rash." Lisa said, "It sounded like an allergic reaction so Luke said he'd come over and take a look at it since the clinic won't be open before Monday. Said he wanted to talk to Rick anyway so he might as well go."

John grinned at her and asked, "He's not going to buy Rick's pigs too is he?"

Lisa laughed, "No, I think he'd be completely at sea with pigs. At least cows he knows a little something about."

The family said grace and began their meal. John noticed that Lisa and Heather spoke very little to each other through the meal and there seemed to be some tension between the mother and daughter. Since neither brought up the matter he did not inquire. Supper passed quietly and when it was finished Heather began to gather the dishes. Ann asked, "Do you two need some help with cleanup or can we finish with the seed flats?"

"Actually Ann," Lisa replied, "if it's not inconvenient, I'd like to talk to you. Girl to girl like."

Ann said, "OK. It's warmer in here anyway. Britt, you want to work on your school work?"

John asked, "Who's turn is it to milk the cow this evening?"

Melinda replied, "It's mine daddy. Miss Ellie and Aunt Lisa gave us all lessons this morning and I've got first go at her tonight."

"Well, I'm going to give you a break this evening which maybe you can use to work on your school work with Brittany. I'm itching to see if I can remember how to milk a cow myself so I'll do the milking tonight" He grinned, "I may need Aunt Lisa to come and give me lessons too. It's been more than thirty years since I've milked a cow."

John stood and filled a small pail with hot soapy water, gathered up the milk pail, put on his hat and coat and went out to the barn. The females began to gather up the supper dishes and Robert went to his room. In the barn John carefully washed Dandelion's bag and dried her with a clean cloth. He situated himself on the low stool that he'd cut down for the work and tried to recall the necessary technique. His back was stiff and he grunted to himself, "This will be a damn sight easier when we get that stand and stanchion in here. No wonder young girls always did this kind of work, they're more limber!"

October 19 - Stormy weather - Part Two

Dandelion stood patiently munching on her oats as John fumbled underneath eventually getting the first squirts of milk into the bucket. The old pattern began to come back to him and he gradually smoothed and speeded his milking so that the bucket began to fill. Forty five minutes later she was finished so he wiped off her bag, covered the pail, put on his coat and headed back to the house. He stopped by the gate to pick up on the mail on the way in so he walked up to the front door instead of going in the kitchen. On the porch he found his father with the insulated coffee jug and a bottle of whiskey. Inside he could hear voices, some sounding angry, some plaintive.

"Dad, it's forty five degrees out here. Kind of cool to be sitting on the porch isn't it?" He asked his father.

Robert took a sip of his coffee and said, "Too torrid inside tonight. More comfortable on the porch."

John shook his head and went into the house. He could hear raised voices coming from the kitchen.

"Melinda! How could you?! That was none of your business!" Ann's voice echoed through the house.

"She's Heather's friend, Ann! She was just trying to help keep her out of trouble!" Lisa's said angrily.

John slowed as he approached the door into the kitchen unsure whether he should venture further, but then wondered what he was going to do with the bucket of warm milk in his hand. He went forward and opened the door.

A wave of heated female voices washed over him - "MOM! I know what I'm doing!"

"Shut up Heather! You wait until your father finds out about this!"

"You two have been hiding this from me for days! I thought I was your friend!"

"Lisa, it's none of her business!"

"She was only trying to help!"

"I'm fourteen! I know what I'm doing!"

"You're not old enough for that! Where did you get them!"

"From the clinic! You told me about them!"

"I didn't tell you to GET them!"

"You both hate me!"

"We were just trying to keep from hurting you Brittany!"

"You shouldn't have been telling ANYONE about it! You shouldn't have been DOING it in the first place!"

"I was careful! You told me what to do!"

"You were being stupid! I was trying to help you!"

No one took notice of him at all.

The man stood for a moment unsure of how to proceed. Brittany, Heather, and Melinda were in tears and everyone was red in the face. Finally, he decided to cross the kitchen and put the milk pail on the counter next to the sink for straining. He edged past the table they were all standing around and put the bucket down with a loud "thunk." No one noticed.

Free of the pail he turned towards the feuding females and cleared his throat. No one noticed.

He did it again, louder.

Still no one noticed.

"Excuse me" he said. The argument raged.

His patience gave out. "QUIET!" he shouted.

The heads of all five females turned towards him like the turrets of tanks.

"Is anyone going to tell me what the hell is going on here?"

"NO!!!" came five voices speaking as one.

John poured himself a cup of coffee and took an appreciative sip. "So, dad" he said, "ever tried your hand at cheese making before? Looks like we've got the raw material. Got have something to do with all that milk." He took another sip of coffee then poured in a measure of whisky.

"No, can't say that I have," came the laconic reply, "but the ways things are going tonight that bucket you just took into the house may curdle up all by itself."

The two men sat on the porch gazing at the stars over the trees. Presently Luke hove into sight and came through the gate. He stared at the two men on the porch and said, "It's got to be close to forty degrees out here. Why are you sitting on the porch?"

John quirked an eyebrow at him and said, "Well doc, it's like this. A prudent man will know that sometimes discretion is the better part of valor."

"Care for a cup of joe?"

November 02 - Jack Frost - Part One

The bus pulled up in front of the Horne farm with a belch of wood smoke and a sigh of brakes. Ann stepped down and behind her came an older man in a blanket lined denim coat then a younger man in a bright yellow Goretex jacket. John met them at the gate, gave his wife a welcome-home kiss then turned to the two men. He stuck his hand out to the older one and said, "Howdy Dr. Martin. Good to see you again."

The man shook hands and then turned towards the younger man and said, "This is Adam Kincaid. He's Nick Smith's graduate assistant come out to check on the wheat and oat plantings you put in for him. Nick's been feeling a little puny these last few days."

John shook his hand as well and said, "Y'all come into the house, supper's about ready. We had a hog butcherin' yesterday so the girl's have made up a mighty pot of pork stew and corn bread tonight."

As they stepped up on to the porch Dr. Martin said, "Well, it's been good weather for butchering with the snow this week. Ann's been telling me about your homestead. Have you found pasturing the hogs makes a difference in your feed cost?"

"Yes," John replied, "Most definitely. Might not work for a large operation but for the two we raise every year putting them on pasture saves me about fifteen to twenty percent on feed and makes a major difference in the taste of the meat. Needed to get them put away though since they'd be burning calories to stay warm rather than putting on weight with the weather being the way it is."

They entered the house and the men put down their overnight bags. John asked, "Will y'all be staying the weekend like last time?"

Dr. Mitchell Martin, forage specialist for the University of Florida, replied, "No, not this time. We'll get out early and make our measurements and recordings then the bus will be back for us about noon. We've got three more test areas besides yours to work this weekend and that blizzard freezing Texas at the moment is expected to reach here by Sunday sometime. Houston's received six inches of snow already. If we get half that we won't be able to make many of our measurements so we're going to have to hit it at a run."

"Well, I hope you'll at least stay for lunch then. Heather's got a veritable cauldron of pintos slow cooking on the woodstove."

Dr. Martin nodded and he and Adam smiled then he said, "Well, we wouldn't want to miss out on that. Do you breed your own hogs or buy feeder pigs?"

"No," John replied, "we've always bought feeders. With our present circumstances it might not be a bad idea to breed our own but the two we butchered were both castrated males so we'd have to come up with breeding stock from somewhere else. The only thing we breed here are goats and chickens."

Lisa stuck her head out the kitchen door and said, "Everyone come to the table. Dinner is ready."

Ann smiled, "There's nothing like coming home from a cold day at work to a hot meal!"

John frowned at this and asked, "Aren't they heating the buildings on campus?"

His wife replied, "In a manner of speaking. Fuel is still so short that there's a mandatory 68 degree maximum for office areas and don't even think about bringing in your own electric heater. That might be OK for some but the old buildings we're in leak heat badly. I'm taking my wool socks and leggings with me come Monday."

As everyone sat to the table Adam said, "That's a good idea. It's going to be cold this winter. The NOAA reports I receive predict we'll very likely go below zero at least down to Ocala sometime in December or January. There's going to be a serious crisis in heating oil this winter in the northern states, maybe natural gas as well. They may have to reduce the maximum heating temperature even more before it's over. I've been toying with the idea of building a stove to burn old journals to heat the lab."

Dr. Martin chuckled, "Well there's a thought. Got enough old paper down in the basement to heat our building for the next couple of years I think."

John gave the grace then Lisa began passing around the cornbread as Heather ladled out the stew. No one spoke much at first except for Adam who said, "This is very good! It's been months since I've had a home cooked meal."

Heather, Lisa, Melinda, and Brittany all smiled at this and Lisa said, "Thank you. We're glad you like it."

Adam continued, "I never was much of a cook, I'm afraid. When you're a grad student there never seems to be enough time to cook a full meal anyways. I have to wait to go home... I mean I had to wait to go home for real food."

Melinda asked, "Where are you from Adam?"

A troubled look crossed the young man's face. "Baltimore."

"Oh." Melinda replied, "I see." and looked down.

Conversation lagged for a time then John asked, "Adam, you said you get weather reports from NOAA. What are they predicting is going to happen this winter? According to my almanac our average first frost date isn't even for another two days yet and we've had an ice storm and snow already."

November 02 - Jack Frost - Part Two

Adam looked at Dr. Martin as if to give him the first response. The older man buttered another piece of corn bread and spoke. "To be honest, no one seems to be very sure exactly what's going to happen this winter or the following winters for that matter. Adam, your wife, and I were part of a group from the University that participated in a teleconference this week for agricultural specialists put on by NOAA, NASA and the Geological Survey."

He took a swallow of his coffee and continued, "Mind you, this isn't my field but if Adam or Ann will correct any of my errors what they told us is this. They expect the temperate agricultural zones of at least the Northern Hemisphere to shift further to the south. It's not clear yet how large of a shift is coming but judging from the weather we've received already it's going to be fairly large - at least for this winter. I wouldn't be surprised if the state's citrus belt and other semi-tropical plantings don't end up moving as far south as Miami, maybe even out of Florida altogether. We've already lost an average of our last thirty days of growing season here which caught a good deal of fruit still on the trees. They've been trying to harvest the last of the wheat and corn crops in the northern Grain Belt states in blowing snow. With the tremendous amount of late season rain followed by chronic fuel shortages for agricultural use the late hay cuttings were largely lost. This is partially offset by the draw down in the national livestock population to go to immediate food needs. Efforts are being made to bring in more feed and forage from the Midwest and it has been arriving steadily for the last several weeks which will allow those caught unprepared to at least keep their breeding stock alive."

John nodded and said to his father, "We ought to investigate that. Near as I can tell the feed and hay we got from Ed for the cow will run out in late March. If it stays cold longer than normal next year we're not going to have enough for her and maybe not the goats either."

The forage man said, "That might be a good thing because the long-range weather specialists are telling us from the preliminary data they're getting now we may get frost until late April, maybe even into May, which puts it a good month or more past our usual frost date. Better be ready for sticker shock when you see the prices though, I imagine any halfway decent hay will go for more than \$10.00 a bale - a square bale - even with government price controls. That's right now. By mid-winter you probably won't find any for sale at all."

John winced and shook his head, "Well, that'll certainly hurt. I'll check it out first thing on Monday. Maybe I can talk Ed out of a bit more of his. We'll just have to get all of the mileage we can get out of winter grazing if we can't come up with more forage. Surely at least the rye will grow some more."

Robert asked, "How low do they think we'll get this year and will it be the same next year?"

Dr. Martin said, "It's hard to say. The Gulf of Mexico plays a large role in our weather here and it will give up a lot of heat in the cold times. Should moderate our land temperatures somewhat so maybe we won't see it go much below zero. The more continental interior parts of the country are going to see it really plunge. From about North Georgia up it's going to get cold and stay cold for a long time." He took a bit of his cornbread so the rest of the table digested what he'd told them.

Lisa asked, "Is this going to lower the global temperature? Could it cause an ice age?"

Ann spoke up and said, "They don't know. The question was raised several times during the teleconference but what they really said was 'we don't know.' The do think next year will be cooler than

this year was before the Impact but no one is sure if it correct itself the year following or if it will self-perpetuate. Some of the data they've found is showing similarities to Little Ice Age that happened in the Renaissance period which didn't end until the mid-nineteenth century."

"Well," John said, "it's for sure the Impact did put thousands of megatons of water into the atmosphere. We got six feet of rain here before the clouds broke for the first time and I'd be willing to bet the higher elevations got their share of it as well. I don't know how moisture travels across the poles but a lot of it may have fallen as snow there too. I really don't know much about how these things work but I wouldn't think the Impact by itself could lower the ocean levels significantly but if it was the genesis of some sort of self-perpetuating cycle it might could cause so much water to be taken up into polar ice and glaciers that sea level drops. During the last Ice Age the width of the Florida peninsula was more than twice as wide as it is now. Open bodies of water would be fewer and the climate cooler and drier. More than a year or two of that and the Grain Belt is going to over run the Cotton Belt."

Ann looked at her husband and asked, "How do you know that? Is it in one of your books?"

He shook his head, "No, as a matter of fact, I had a long talk with an archeologist from the University specializing in Florida archeology. Do you remember when we took Mel to that Knap-In at Payne's Prairie last year where all those flint knappers were? He was the one with the display of mastodon and saber tooth tiger bones. Of course, some of what he said was only conjecture but he thinks it would be pretty close. This would have been during the height of the Ice Age when most of the northern third of the U.S. was under the ice sheet. He said the Earth went through several periods where it cooled or warmed causing the ice sheets to retreat or advance. During the warming periods the ice withdrew and tremendous amounts of cold water flowed down the Mississippi into the Gulf of Mexico. Eventually there would be so much cold water flowing south that it stopped the Gulf Stream. Overall temperatures would begin to drop again, the ice would build up, less cold water flowed south and the Gulf Stream would restart. There's much to that cycle they're not sure of but he was pretty sure when enough cold melt water ran off the ice sheets it would stop the Gulf Stream."

Lisa looked mildly alarmed at this, "But what causes that cycle to stop?"

John looked at Dr. Martin and Adam. He shrugged, "I don't know. They're not sure what caused the last one to stop."

November 27 – Anticipation - Part One

“Thomas Turkey, you have been found guilty of the crime of being in good taste and have been condemned by the court of public appeal. Sentence will now be carried out. Domino nabisco, et tu oreo!” The axe whistled slightly as it fell and struck home with a solid “thunk” into the wood stump. The bound decapitated bird thrashed momentarily on the floor of the barn and was still.

“Daddy, you are so strange.” Melinda said screwing up her face at her father. “You do this every year.”

John grinned at his daughter and winked at her, “Sure do Mel! Just something to lighten up an otherwise somber occasion. Young Master Thomas here has declined to object though. Run and see if grandpa’s got the water ready yet.”

“Weird, daddy, weird. You’re going to give me a complex or something.” She said as she skipped out the door into the barn yard where her grandfather was firing a large pot of water. “Grandpa, daddy’s killed the turkey and wants to know if the water’s ready yet?”

The older man took the lid off of the pot and looked in. “Tell him to bring it out. It’s hot enough.”

The girl skipped back into the barn and soon came back out with her father and the bird. “Daddy, do I really have to help pluck? It smells so gross when you put the bird in the water.”

“You enjoyed last year’s turkey didn’t you? Well, we can’t cook a bird with its feathers still on so pluck we must. You’re old enough now to start participating in the process. I want you to understand where your food comes from and this is just a part of it. Now stop stalling. Run and get Heather and Brittany. By the time you’re all back the bird will be out of the water.”

His daughter wrinkled up her nose but said “Yes sir” then ran into the house to fetch the other girls. Presently they all three returned accompanied by Lisa. She asked, “Do you want me to assist?”

John looked at her for a moment then grinned, “Ever plucked a turkey or a chicken before?”

She gave a sickly smile and said, “Yes, as a matter of fact. Dad kept hens and raised a half a dozen turkeys every year. Butchering day was a family affair.”

“Well then, I reckon you’ve seen the elephant, or should I say the turkey, and may be excused. Come girls, he should be cool enough to start plucking. The feather’s come out easier while he’s still hot.”

Brittany wrinkled her nose and said “Eww! He stinks! Are we gonna eat that? It looks disgusting!”

Robert chuckled and said, “He won’t smell like that when Ann takes him out of the oven! Just think about how good he’ll taste tomorrow.”

Heather looked pale and said, “Mom, if I don’t eat any turkey tomorrow do I still have to help pluck? That smell is awful.”

Lisa laughed, “I tried that same approach with your grandfather. The first time he actually let me get out of plucking. But he held me to not eating turkey the next day too, no matter how much I wailed. Just breathe through your mouth and start plucking. This is all part of the country experience, dear

heart, and like Uncle John said this morning it's important to know where your food comes from and how it got on to your plate. I survived and you will too. Like Grandpa Robert said, just think about how good it'll taste tomorrow."

John hung the bird by the feet from the cross arm of a post and started pulling feathers. After a moment's hesitation Melinda joined him. Brittany and Heather hung back but with a gentle nudge from Lisa they stepped forward and started in as well. With four sets of hands working the bird was soon denuded. Robert loosely rolled up some newspaper and lit it on fire. Passing the flame over the carcass he singed off the small hairs and remaining pin feathers that were left.

"Now that Mr. Tom here has been shucked out of his suit", Robert said, "we'll hang him the workshop overnight so he won't freeze to age a bit then gut him out in the morning."

Heather raised an eyebrow at this and said, "You're going to leave the guts in all night? Gross!"

John laughed and said, "It's an old practice darling. Been done for centuries. Makes a big difference in the flavor. Don't worry, the meat won't spoil." With that he poured out the water to quench the fire then took the pot over to the hose to wash it out. "Usually we butcher out a few old hens too since we've got the pot set up but I decided to take it easy on you three, being your first time and all. Next week we'll butcher chickens. Nothing like an old hen to make the best chicken and dumplings you've ever tasted."

The girls took the news with an evident lack of glee but no one protested. With the pot clean John hung it on the post to dry then unscrewed the hose from the tap, drained it, and covered the spigot. "Well now that we're done with that, let's go in the house! My hands are freezing from the water. This is the coldest weather I've ever plucked birds in." The family walked into the house. As they passed the porch thermometer it read twenty one degrees.

Inside they warmed their hands over the wood stove then the females went into the kitchen to begin working on the midday meal. Robert asked his son, "When do you want to do the rest of the turkeys? Might as well get them into the freezer. They're plenty big enough now. Don't see much point in continuing feeding them."

John picked up the poker, opened the stove door and stirred the fire before adding another log. As he put the tool back in its stand he said, "Reckon we can go ahead and do the other two bronze birds next week when we do the cull hens. We'll do the bourbon red hen with the gimp wing too. I don't know if that's congenital or not but no sense in passing on bad genes if it is. I want to conserve the rest of the bourbon reds and breed them next year. With five hens and two toms we've got the start of a good flock. If we cull ruthlessly we should weed out any bad genes fast enough."

His father considered this for a moment then asked, "You want to start breeding turkeys?"

"Well dad," John rubbed the back of his neck, "I think we probably should. We've always ordered from McMurray, or Privett, or Ideal but I don't know if they even still exist now and if they do if they'll still be able to ship birds next Spring. I'd hate to butcher what potential breeding stock we have now only to discover we can't get any more poults or chicks. Besides, we know feed's going to be expensive for at least the next several years. Turkey's are a lot more efficient at living off of what they can forage than a chicken. Probably be a better idea to use them for meat birds and just keep chickens for eggs, aside from surplus roosters and cull hens. If we have any luck with them by this time next year we could have quite a flock of bourbon red turkeys ready for market and I think they'll sell big. Acorn crop was

sparse this year so next year's crop ought to be good and we know turkeys get fat on acorns. I'd breed the broad breasted bronze birds too but they're hybrids and we don't have a large enough gene pool to fool with all the weeding we'd have to do."

Robert nodded his head, "Makes sense. Come January we'd better separate out what chickens we want to breed and pen them up separately. We could probably triple the number of hens we've got if that old incubator still works. We'll need to pull it out and check it over. It's going to need a good cleaning and a coat of paint at least. If the thermostat wafer is bad we'll have to scare up a replacement from somewhere. I seem to recall the one that's in it now is the spare we bought when we got it."

"I expect Bill over to the feed store will have one." John said, "He's always had wafers and some of the other common incubator parts that need to be replaced. Never seem to sell many of them but you know the moment I express an interest he'll want a pretty price. Even if the one that's in there now works we'd best have a spare on hand otherwise we could lose an entire hatch if it goes bad."

November 27 – Anticipation - Part Two

John looked at the clock on the desk then walked over and turned on the radio. Classical music filled the room for a few minutes then gave way to the news. After a moment's introduction they began -

The weather heading into the Thanksgiving holiday is predicted to warm steadily through the weekend. Today's high will be thirty degrees, tonight's low will be eighteen degrees. The Severe Freeze warning of the last three days continues. Predicted highs for Thanksgiving is thirty eight degrees and forty four degrees for Friday. Skies will remain cloudless with no chance of precipitation for today and Thanksgiving. The Ultraviolet Warning remains in affect and all persons outside are reminded to wear long sleeves, broad brimmed hats or use a sunscreen of at least SPF 15 or higher.

In local news Gainesville Regional Utilities reports a steadily improving flow of coal deliveries to its Deerhaven plant which will enable them to increase the daily electricity ration to twelve hours a day for most areas. A spokesman for the utility stated that if deliveries continue to increase at their present rate that twenty four hour electricity availability should arrive by Christmas. Utility authorities remind all consumers that the sixty eight degree heating maximum ordinance is still in effect and that anyone found to be using electrically dependent heating at temperatures in excess of sixty eight degrees will be fined. Fines increase steeply with repeated offenses. Exemptions for reasons of medical necessity may be obtained at the Gainesville city hall or the Alachua county commission offices.

The Feed The Hungry coalition of the Salvation Army, United Way, and local area churches will be holding a Thanksgiving dinner tomorrow at two p.m. at the Alachua County fairgrounds and at Florida Field on the university campus. All who are in need and hungry this holiday are invited to attend. Donations of food, clothing, blankets, or cash will be gladly accepted.

In Tallahassee Governor Jeb Bush released a statement today authorizing counties to institute public executions of condemned felons at the discretion of local county commissions. He is quoted as saying, "The wave of violence and lawlessness that has afflicted our great state since the Impact must be stopped. Let all who are considering preying upon their fellow man take heed if they want to keep their neck out of a noose. The People of Florida will not tolerate being victimized any longer." A motion to institute the practice here in Alachua county is expected at the county commission meeting on Monday, December second. Several groups in favor of and against public executions are expected to be in force at the meeting. Classic Eighty Eight will be providing live coverage.

On the national scene President George Bush signed the "Dollar Revaluation" bill into law this morning in a ceremony in the new presidential office in Denver. Starting Monday, December 2 all U.S. paper currency issued before August 1 must be surrendered at any bank or other qualified institution. In exchange, new U.S. dollars will be issued at an exchange rate of ten to one and backed by the full faith and credit of the U.S. government. This is being done in order to allow the U.S. banking system to become functional again which will allow U.S. banks to reopen on Monday, January sixth after the exchange period ends on Friday, January third. Any old U.S. currency still in circulation after January third of next year will become null and void...

John let out a long sigh. "Well, we knew it was going to happen but that doesn't make it any easier when the axe finally falls. You can bet that every international holder of U.S. currency or U.S. debt is having a calf just now – brech presentation. Of course, anyone still holding U.S. dollars overseas by now must have been in a coma. This is probably going to start a wave of repercussions that will reflect back and forth for the next ten years. Local prices are going to be all over the map for a while I'd bet.

Before the Impact we were selling eggs for a \$1.50 a dozen. Now we'd have to sell them for fifteen cents. Last I looked at the Archer market Mrs. Landsley was selling her eggs for \$4.00 a dozen and said she'd probably be raising prices again soon. I wonder how she'll price them come January?

Robert took a deep sip of the coffee that Brittany had just brought him. "Well, they had to do something. It's not the first time the government's clipped a zero off the dollar to try to bail out the national banking system. I haven't had a Social Security check come since Impact. There's got to be millions across the country like me – the ones that are still alive that is. I expect quite a lot of us old folks won't make it through the winter. The more desperate the situation becomes the more desperate the government's going to act.

Rioting in the major cities of Brazil is still wide spread after last week's military coup. In spite of repeated attempts to restore order by the Brazilian Army rioters still control major parts of Brasilia, Sao Paola, and Rio de Janeiro with the entire nation being in a state of martial law. Disorder has now crossed the border into Uruguay with fighting breaking out in the capital of Montevideo.

In a statement today by Defense Secretary Rumsfeld it was announced that the last of the U.S. troops and supplies in Saudi Arabia have been removed from the increasingly fundamentalist Islamic oil rich nation. U.S. bases in Qatar, Bahrain, and Oman are being expanded to take over the roles played by the former U.S. Saudi bases... Heather stuck her head through the door and said, "Soup's ready. Everyone come to the table."

John reached out and turned the radio off with a click. "Well, at least that's something to look forward to."

November 28 - Thanksgiving - Part One

"...In Jesus's name we pray." John concluded the Thanksgiving meal grace, "Amen."

"Amen" The gathering at the table repeated.

John loudly inhaled as he looked over the table. "Ladies, you have outdone yourselves. This is quite a feast!"

Ann blushed and said, "Thank you. It was quite a group effort too! Ellie was our real ace in the hole this year in the way she straw bossed the operation this morning so that everything would come to the table at the same time. Lisa and the girls did a lot of the prep work yesterday before I got home as well. We're becoming quite a team!"

Ann passed the carving utensils to John who fingered the edge of the long carving knife for a moment before proceeding. "This thing would fair pass for a short sword in an earlier time." He swooped the blade up in a fencer's salute towards the golden brown bird. Grinning at Melinda he said, "This is Tom's finest hour and we should pay our respects. Now let us see if a long summer of eating grasshoppers has done right by him." He began carving the bird and putting slices on plates with Ann passing them down to his right and Ellie Strickland passing them on his left. John, Ann, Melinda, Robert, Luke, Lisa, Heather, Ed and Ellie Strickland had sat down to Thanksgiving dinner and the table was filled to capacity.

When Ed had filled his plate he admired it and said, "The week after the Impact I'd never have thought we'd be sitting to such a nice Thanksgiving dinner but the country and the community here as a whole have really pulled itself together. We truly have a lot to be thankful for this year."

John grinned and said, "Yes, we surely do. We've come through Hell and high water but at least in our neighborhood most of us are still here. That first twenty four hours after the asteroid hit I was really afraid we'd all had it. I think it says something about the basic nature of humans. Once the accumulated nonsense of easy living gets knocked out of us we remember that we once clawed our way to the top of the food chain. We've lost a lot but we pulled together, saved what we could and sacrificed only what we absolutely had to. It's a shame we'll forget it all again as the passing years fade our recollection of what it was like. Not that we're quite finished surviving of course, we've still got what's shaping up to be a severe winter to get through but at least we're not fighting bandit hordes and each other trying to stay alive."

Luke thoughtfully finished chewing a bite of turkey, swallowed and said, "Well, not here at least. The more urbanized areas have had a more difficult time of it. Lisa and I talked it over last night, as soon as we can get our house in town livable again we're going to sell it. An event like the Impact may never happen again in our lifetimes but this one has taught me how thinly lies civilized behavior over the baser animal natures of a good many people. We're going to find a place out here in the country somewhere and if we can't find what we want we'll build even if it means settling for a smaller house. I could have been making twice the salary I get here if I'd set up practice in D.C., Boston, or Atlanta but what good would it have done me when the system broke down? As a species I think we have been very foolish in not building more resiliency into our cities. Maybe this is because it's been so long since we've seen the elephant so to speak here on the home front but we've just had a good lesson in what one major, unexpected shock can do to American, indeed, world civilization. I've decided if we won't build more resiliency into our urban areas then the best place to be is away from them. I'll work in

Gainesville because that is where my practice is but we're going to live in one of the smaller outlying towns like Archer, Newberry, or some place similar."

"You know Ann's father was a physician too. When we were dating I always thought her father was a little odd for keeping a small farm when he could have lived a much more comfortable life without it. He told me that the family had learned a hard lesson in the Depression which his father had drilled into him constantly. He said so long as he didn't lose too much money he was quite happy to keep the farm going, even if it meant having to hire a man to run it while he ran his practice. Now that I have children of my own I begin to grasp what he was after in the way he raised his own children. I think I may just emulate at least some of that with my family."

Heather looked up and said, "Dad, you're not going to buy a milk cow are you?"

The table chuckled at this and her father replied with a glint in his eye. "Oh, I don't know hon, I think milking is doing you some good. In fact, I haven't heard you say, 'I'm bored' in months even without 300 CDs, an electronic game station big enough to run NASA, and spending weekends at the mall. You've really blossomed since coming here. You should be proud of that."

Heather blushed and said, "Well... I guess I am, a little bit anyways. But you're still not going to buy a cow are you?"

Her father laughed and said, "No, probably not. Maybe we could work out a trade or something with the Horne's here for milk but I don't think we really want to cope with three or more gallons of milk every day. I do think a bit of a garden, a few hens, and perhaps a beef or two in the pasture keeping the grass clipped would be within our capacity. We should be able to cope with that, though it might mean spending a little less time at the mall."

His daughter stuck his tongue out at him and took a large forkful of sweet potatoes. Ed said, "I think we'll be seeing quite a few folks getting the itch to move back to the land like the hippies did back in the Seventies. We've let ourselves forget that food doesn't come from the grocery and we've paid for it. These last few years Ellie and I have been feeling our age a bit and slacking off on things that we used to do like canning and what not. We haven't been hungry but this last month or so the Strickland diet has been getting a little monotonous. We didn't used to be like that. When I was coming up we always bought in quantity, mainly because it was a lot cheaper that way and we couldn't afford to be coming into town every week. Wasn't no paved road then anyways. We never thought anything of it because that's what everyone did. After the war things begin to change. When I got back from Korea I bought mama her first freezer. She still canned every year but we got used to that convenience. Still didn't go to town every week. We didn't start doing that until the early sixties when they paved the road. Not the one out there, but the road from Archer into Gainesville. They didn't pave the road out there until the early seventies but they did grade it. Slowly but surely everyone got accustomed to being able to just go and fetch something when it ran out and we stopped buying like we used to. Thank goodness Ellie had the summer garden already put away and we had plenty of beef and venison in the freezer. I'm not sure what my mama would have to say if I told her that we've run slap out of coffee and sugar in just three months though. She bought her sugar by the barrel and green coffee beans by the sack and roasted them herself."

Ellie chuckled and said, "I remember the first time your mother asked me to roast the beans. She gave me her big old iron skillet and pointed at the bag of coffee beans. I burnt those beans nearly black! She just shrugged it off and ground them up anyways. We'd never heard the word 'expresso' back then but

that's sure what it looked like when she brewed it up. I think Ed was considering throwing me back after that one but I made amends with my pancakes which he said were better than what his mother made - not in front of her of course!"

Ann put down her glass and chimed in. "Well, living in a college town it was easy to fall into the fast food mentality. When I was growing up in Maine my mom always kept a lot of food on hand. She was feeding five people so she said it was just more efficient to buy that way. Of course, up there we have the advantage of having basements that stay cool which makes keeping lots of food on hand much easier than it does down here where no one has a basement and it's hot for so much of the year. In Maine you could keep stuff like potatoes, apples, squash, and the like all winter in a box in the cellar. Here everything seems to rot so fast. You all have to can, or freeze, or dry a lot of stuff that we just keep in a wheelbarrow. It wasn't until after I'd married him that I realized how odd many people thought John was for keeping so much food in the house. Eventually we just quit talking about it outside of the family. Everyone else wanted to live in an instant, just-in-time world where everything was easy and convenient. I do have to admit that keeping up with it all and trying to find places to store everything really got to be a drag at times. I sure miss having a basement. Our first addition on the house after we bought it was a full, walk-in pantry which is nearly as good."

Robert said, "It's funny how interests can skip a generation. No one in my generation has had an interest in farming or anything like what my father and his brothers did. I reckon that's because we grew up that way and no one wanted to stay down on the farm. Make a much better living in town and didn't have to work so hard to do it too. Now John here never really grew up on a farm at all though he did spend summers at his grandfather's. He's always wanted to farm but couldn't figure a way to make it pay so he ended up working in town like the rest of us and doing a little homesteading on the side - hobby farming I'd guess you'd call it. Not a hobby anymore now but when things pull back together again I expect most folks will go back to the way they were before the asteroid came."

November 28 - Thanksgiving - Part Two

Conversation dwindled for a while as everyone became absorbed in their plates. Gradually as appetites were assuaged talk turned to local subjects. Ed took a deep swallow of his tea and said, "I hear tell that there's going to be a motion in the county commission to bring back public hangings. Now don't you know that's going to be a free for all when the college liberals get their teeth into it, leastwise them that survived the last few months with their political philosophies intact."

Lisa replied, "I sure hope not! Who would want to watch such a thing? I think it's a dreadful idea."

Ed said, "Well, they stopped that kind of thing before I came along but my daddy used to talk about a couple that he saw up to Live Oak when he was a boy. Said families used to bring picnics and make a day of it."

Ann shook her head, "Well, I certainly don't want our children watching public executions!"

John looked thoughtful for a moment before he spoke up. "Well, it's not the kind of thing I'd want to watch regularly but when Archie Lauren walks up the steps I'd like to be there to look him in the eye. I think it would be a good thing for a lot of people to see him swing. He committed a particularly ugly public crime and I think it would be good for him to receive public justice."

"Ann, where did you get the cheese for these au gratin potatoes?" Ellie asked, "I'd have expected it would have spoiled by now. Did you have some in your freezer all this time?"

With a grateful look for a change of subject she replied, "No, actually. We ate the last of ours several months ago. This is Dandelion cheese! It was our first attempt at cheese making and while it wouldn't have won a ribbon at the county fair it seems to have done OK for these potatoes."

Luke looked interested at this, "You MADE this cheese? How interesting! Was it difficult?"

Ann said, "Well, it was me and the girls who did it last week. No, it's not particularly difficult but it does seem to be very experiential. We followed the instructions exactly but it didn't come out looking like it was described as. Of course the rennet was kind of old too so that may have been part of the reason. It was a box of Junket rennet that Miguel had lying around which he gave me when I mentioned trying to make cheese. We've got instructions on using vegetable rennets as well but we won't be able to get thistle or fig sap until next year. There's a lot of work involved so when we do it again I expect we'll make large batches."

Conversation passed on to other food and cooking topics and the meal gradually wound down. The women began clearing away the dishes and the men went outside to feed the livestock, gather the eggs, and lastly for the evening milking so that the girls could assist the older women with the clean up. The sun was beginning to dip towards the tree line when Ed went into to collect Ellie so he could get home in time for his own evening chores. Luke, Robert, and John went into the living room to warm themselves by the stove.

Robert said, "I think I've eaten too much of that rich food. I'm feeling a little puny so I'm going to go to bed early tonight. Good night." He walked to his room and shut the door.

In the living room John and Luke sat around the stove talking. Luke asked, "You said you were looking

forward to Archie Lauren hanging. Isn't he the Ku Klux Klansman you arrested for raping and murdering that family a couple of months ago?"

John nodded, "Yes, that's him. I take no joy in the death of any man but in his case I'll feel better when he's dead and buried. Oh, I'm sure one or more of his compatriots we took with him that night will meet their reward too when he does but they didn't strike me as much more than followers who were either taking advantage of an opportunity or too afraid or stupid to say 'no'. He was the heart and soul of the whole affair. I'd never heard of Christian Identity before nor understood how big it is amongst such groups as the Klan. The rest of those men were just tools to his end but HE was a True Believer. I'm not embarrassed to say I'll be thankful for putting an end to such a predator as he."

With a sigh Luke said, "I'm afraid he may not be the last one - True Believer that is." He repositioned his chair closer to the stove and continued, "I had lunch with Randy Hart last week, he's the chair for Psychiatry. He was telling me they are seeing a whole new phenomena of what they are coming to call 'Apocalyptic Psychosis.' There seem to be a good many individuals out there who have interpreted the asteroid strike as a Sign - from God, from extraterrestrials, the Devil, Illuminati, and even stranger entities. Fortunately, only a few are murderously active like your Mr. Lauren. A small number have committed suicide as well - directly attributable to their interpretation of the Impact as a Sign and not just general hopelessness. CNN had a blip that same day about an Internet rumor going around that another asteroid had been detected that was projected to impact off Catalina Island at midnight. It was completely untrue but it caused a brief panic in Los Angeles as thousands of people all tried to flee at once. The media played it for the humor aspect but I think it's indicative of where some people's minds are at now. In time it will fade away but how long it will take I don't think anyone can say. For a while longer it's going to be the Apocalypse, Ragnarok, or Armageddon for some and they're going to act as their basic natures direct them."

John poured two glasses of whisky and handed one to the doctor. "I suppose it's to be expected. The more stressful the times the nuttier some folks are going to behave." He took a deep sip from his glass. "I reckon I can live with folks wearing tinfoil hats thinking the asteroid was all some form of conspiracy by the New World Order or a sign of the Second Coming so long as they're not murdering each other. I have to admit there are times I'd find comfort in it myself if I really thought there was some Purpose to it all other than just some random chance of orbital mechanics that caused a half-mile wide chunk of space rock to fall from the heavens and blow our lives apart. Many people want there to be a purpose for what happens in their lives even if it is inimical to their existence."

The two men sat for a time, not speaking as they sipped their liquor staring at the fire. Warmth, whisky, and a large meal leached away all ambition. Presently Melinda, Heather and Brittany came into the room and unfolded a card table. "Daddy, Uncle Luke, we're going to play Uno, would either of you two like to play with us?"

November 28 - Thanksgiving - Part Three

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Luke came into the kitchen in his bath robe and went to the stove where the coffee pot gently steamed. John looked up from the waffle iron he was tending and said, "You're up mighty early doc. Since you're here how about turning those ham slices in the pan there."

The doctor picked up a fork and began to turn over the slices of meat gently browning in the pan. "When you're a surgeon you get used to being up early since O.R. call typically starts at 7:00 a.m. Never could get used to just lying in bed late on the weekends. Why are you cooking breakfast? Don't the girls usually rustle this up?"

The other man grinned and said, "It's something of a Horne family tradition. The day after Thanksgiving I get up early and cook breakfast for the girls since they usually spend the whole day before putting the big meal together. Usually do it with dad but he must still be feeling poorly from last night because he usually gets up before I do. Since you're here you can help instead."

Luke looked interested and said, "OK, what would you like me to do?"

John took down a cast iron waffle iron from an overhead cupboard and set it on the gas stove and turned the fire on underneath it. "I can't man two irons, fry the ham, and tend the sauce all at the same time so I hadn't gotten this one out. Give it a minute to heat through then spray it with the cooking spray. A ladle of batter will coat the bottom iron then bring the top iron down onto it. Give it about a minute and a half to two minutes then turn the iron over on the fire and let the other side cook. Don't worry if you burn the first one, we did too the first couple of times we used it. You'll get the hang of it right quick. In the interim that pot there has the peach sauce for the waffles in it which needs to cook down a bit more. Stir it frequently to keep it from sticking."

"I think I can handle that. You look like you know your way around a kitchen. Do you cook much?"

"Actually, not as much now that I'm home full time as when Ann and I both worked." John answered, "We used to split the cooking chores depending on what the other one had to do that night. Now Ann's gone all week and I'm nearly full time busy trying to make this place a going concern so it's mostly Heather, Brittany and Melinda that do the cooking now. Mel was coming along pretty well for her age but since Heather came they've all three been blossoming and learning a lot. You should see them sitting down with the big Joy of Cooking book talking about what they want to try next and how to substitute for ingredients we don't have or can't get. Oh, we get the occasional meal that we just have to force down since we don't have enough food to throw any away because it didn't come out like they thought it would but for the most part they've done right well."

"I never really did learn to cook" Luke looked thoughtfully at the frying ham "at least not in the make a cake from scratch sort of cooking. I suppose because my family was in the traditional gender role mindset. When I left home there was too much school work - or partying - to want to cook then in med school there simply wasn't time. Lisa was working when I met her and except for about four months she took off when Heather was born kept on working so except for special occasions we didn't do a lot of cooking at home. This is a new experience for Heather so I can see how she's taking well to it. It may say 'gourmet' on the label but a frozen waffle is still a frozen waffle. Anyone can pop one in a toaster oven but making your own waffles from scratch is an accomplishment."

The two men talked for a time about the ins and outs of cooking and the differences between the way men and women went about it. The stack of waffles grew taller in the warm oven and the smell of food infused through the house.

Lisa came in the kitchen shortly after, yawning and owl eyed followed by the three girls. Ann followed them a moment later still tying the sash of her robe. "Well, there's our sleepyheads!" John said brightly, "You'll notice Luke how they showed up just as the last waffle was coming off the iron."

Ann stuck her tongue out and headed for the coffee pot. "There's coffee on the stove for them what wants it and the milk will be hot for chocolate in another minute or so." John pointed with a fork at the respective pots on the stove.

"Ohh, real hot chocolate!" Lisa said, "I'm for that."

When everyone had fixed their cups John took the waffles out of the oven and set them on the table as Luke put the ham down. Looking around John said to Melinda "Go and wake your grandpa up and ask him if he feels well enough to come to breakfast. I haven't heard him stir all morning."

"Yes sir" his daughter said and left the room. A moment later they could hear the muffled knock on his door. "Grandpa? You awake yet? Breakfast is ready."

John was draining the peach sauce into a pouring cup when his daughter rushed back into the kitchen. "Daddy! Come quick! I can't wake grandpa up!"

John set the pot and cup down and glanced at Luke who stood to accompany him. "Mel, sit down and eat your breakfast. Dr. Luke and I will look in on grandpa. Ann, will you give the grace please?" Both men left the room heading for Robert's bedroom.

He knew as soon as he entered the room that his father had left their presence. He lay on his back in the bed, his eyes closed, as if only sleeping soundly but his chest did not rise or fall. Luke crossed the room and felt for a pulse in the man's throat then raised his eye lids to examine his pupils. He looked at John and shook his head. "Help me turn him over" he asked.

The two men turned the body over so that Luke could examine his back. "Much as I suspected" the M.D. said, "Morbid lividity is beginning to set in. He must have expired last night sometime not long after he went off to bed."

He said nothing for a few moments as he contemplated the fact of his father's death then asked, "What do you reckon the cause of death was Luke?"

The doctor said nothing for a few moments as he continued to examine the body. "Well, it would take an autopsy to say for certain but from the outward signs I'd say he had a stroke in the night. Must have been already starting when he said he wasn't feeling well before he went to bed last night. He seems to have just gently subsided away. Unless you feel the need for an internal examination I'll just sign the death certificate 'natural causes.'"

A muffled choke from the door caused the men to turn around where they found Ann and Melinda looking on with Lisa and Heather peering in from behind. John sighed then said, "Well, since you're

here you may as well all come in. He's passed."

Ann said, "John, I'm so sorry." The other females nodded in agreement. Melinda looked very pale.

"It's for the best I suppose." Her father said, "It's the way he wanted to go. Quick and final. He really hated the way mom went with the tubes and surgeries and all. I think he must have known his time was near yesterday and it would be just like him not to say anything until it was too late to stop it." He bent over and pulled the sheet up and covered his father's face. "No use us all standing around here, let's go back and eat our breakfast before it gets cold."

Melinda stared at the still form under the white cotton. "Daddy, I don't think I can eat."

John bent down and picked his daughter up and held her close, "Sugar, I know this has come as a shock but your grandfather will be the first to tell you that life goes on. We've all got work to do today and you need your strength. Come to the table and try to eat at least a little bit. It will make you feel better. I made that special peach sauce you like so much to put on your waffles."

The girl smiled weakly and said, "I'll try daddy." And they all went back into the kitchen.

It was a somber meal but everyone ate, though it took a little urging from the parents. When it was over Ann said she and the girls would tend to the clean up so that John could do what needed to be done about his father. John picked up his coffee and went out on the front porch where white frost still lay thick in the shade of the house. A moment later Luke joined him.

November 28 - Thanksgiving - Part Four

They looked out across the fields for a time then John said, "Dad and I used to go out and shoot doves out there in Ed's pasture every year. He and Ed would always get up a group of men and we'd make a day out of it. He was never much of one for gardening or farming but he surely did love to hunt and fish."

Luke took a swallow of his coffee and asked, "Do you know what sort of arrangements your father would have wanted?"

The other man nodded his head, "Yes, I know what he wanted. We were both of the same mind about such things. He hated the whole funeral industry. Always said he wanted to be buried unembalmed in a plain pine box in the bare ground. Of course, in Florida you're required to have a concrete vault and all that crap so he told me long ago to just cremate him and scatter his ashes. It's what I want myself, to be burned and scattered out right here on the farm."

Luke buttoned up his coat and said, "Cremation is going to be a problem right now John. Crematories use natural gas and right now that's strictly rationed. The government isn't allowing it to be used for cremations. This has created something of a stink with people who can't get their loved ones handled the way they want them but it's the way it is."

John sighed, "Well, I suppose that's to be expected. Just hadn't thought about the mechanics of it. Reckon he'll have to be buried. He wouldn't have wanted that. He did have a small life insurance policy to cover expenses but what with the insurance industry washed out to sea I don't know if we'll be able to get a payoff on that policy or not. I wonder what a burial plot is going for these days? Going to be mighty expensive no matter what I do."

They stared out across the fields for a time again then John spoke with a tone of resolution. "NO. The State be damned! I'm the master of Horne farm and I'll not commit my father to some bone yard that he'd have hated. The State can take a flying leap. We'll bury him right here. There's a holly tree in the back pasture that he liked to sit under in the Fall of the year we'll put him there. I'd give him a funeral pyre if we didn't need the wood so bad. Reckon I'd better call over to Mike's and see if I can get Jake or Stevie to help me dig the hole. Six by six by three is a lot of dirt."

The doctor looked at him for a moment then said, "I haven't dug a hole that big in a long, long time but I think my hands will still fit the handle of a spade. Why don't we keep this in the family so to speak?"

November 30 - Vita brevis - Part One

John stooped and picked up a handful of damp earth from the pile under the holly tree and cast it into the grave as he began to read from an old and worn leather bound book -

"Unto Almighty God we commend the soul of Robert Joshua Horne and we commit his body to the ground; earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust; in sure and certain hope of the Resurrection unto eternal life, through our Lord Jesus Christ; at whose coming in glorious majesty to judge the world, the earth and sea shall give up their dead; and the corruptible bodies of those who sleep in him shall be changed, and made like unto his own glorious body; accordingly to the mighty working whereby he is able to subdue all things unto himself."

Ed, Luke, Miguel, and Mike began to shovel the earthen pile into the grave as John finished the reading.

"The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Ghost, be with us all evermore. Amen."

He gently closed the book, then handed it to Ann. Taking up a spade of his own he began to assist the others in filling the grave so that it was soon filled with a softly rising mound. The labor finished the five men shouldered their tools and accompanied the small gathering back to the house and went inside to the welcome warmth.

Ed poured a cup of coffee for John and said, "That was a mighty nice service you did there John. Sounded like you'd done it before. Robert decide he didn't want a regular preacher for his burying?"

John took a sip of the warming fluid, "Actually, he never mentioned it at all. You know he never darkened the door of a church. Never seemed to have much use for them, leastwise not for the last thirty years or so. It just struck me that he'd find it hypocritical to have a preacher come out for his burial so I decided to do it myself. He'll make it through the Pearly Gates on his own merits or not, I can't see how someone who's been ordained will affect that."

"Well, you're probably right about that. Never did see him go to church in all the years I've known him." Ed opened the door of the stove and stoked the fire. "I think he'd have been pleased with you reading and all. You did a pretty fair job of building his coffin for not having any longer than you did."

"I gave him what he always said he wanted. A simple pine box. I did get it more or less coffin shaped and not looking too much like a packing crate. I think he'd be pleased."

Ellie stuck her head through the kitchen door and said, "Y'all come on. Lunch is ready."

The gathering filed through the kitchen door to share the communal meal the mourners had brought. There were so many they split up between the kitchen, dining room, and living room. John sat in the dining room with Ann, Luke, Lisa, Ed and Ellie. In an attempt to keep the conversation light for the meal talk turned to day-to-day subjects like the weather and farming.

"John, how's that crown vetch coming you seeded into your ryegrass?" Ed asked as he passed the salt.

"Well, it's growing but not very much. Don't know if it's because of the weather or not." John replied.

With a soft chuckle Ed continued, "About what I figured. Ever so often them extension boys want to try something new to see if it'll do any better than the last time. Reckon they figure we're going to get so much cold weather maybe some of those northern forages will do better here. Mitchell ever tell you he talked me into planting that vetch once back in the sixties? He'd just started there at the college and I'd just inherited the ranch from my dad and we thought we were gonna conquer the world. Lost my butt on that one and I learned to listen to the seasoned ranchers around here as well as the extension service and make up my own mind. Now next year you over seed your pastures in ryegrass and white clover and you'll do much better."

Ann said, "Well, if no one ever experiments how are we to make new discoveries?"

"Oh, I wouldn't say never try anything new" Ed qualified, "Ever once in a while I still let Mitchell talk me into one thing or another. Sometimes it even pays off too. The ones that don't I just write off to the cost of an education. Old Mitchell knows what he's about most times, he's done me a world of good in improving my haying over the years. He's the one that talked me into putting in that new strain of Bermuda grass along about seven or eight years ago. Some of the best damn hay I've ever seen."

Ellie grinned, "It's not all one sided. Ed talked Mitchell into trying his hand at bull riding the year after he came to the college from North Carolina. He stayed on that bull for a good five seconds then it about threw him to the moon! Broke his leg when he hit the ground and the bull stepped on him. It must have been ten years before he let Ed forget about that one, I can tell you."

Everyone at the table grinned at this. Luke asked, "John, you ever tried bull riding?"

He glanced at his wife first before John replied, "Me? No. Never have. Thought I'd give it a go once but Ann said flat out she'd divorce me on the spot if I climbed into that chute. Seemed a steep price to pay for eight seconds of glory so I let it go. Besides, who'd take care of me after the bull stomped all over me?"

"Ha! Bull riding is a cowboy intelligence test" Ellie said jeeringly. "If you're fool enough to get on one you're an idiot. If you don't you might have sense enough to pour water out of a boot."

With a hangdog grin Ed said, "Well, I don't know about that. I've rode my share as a young man and I made out alright."

The three women looked at each other and speaking together quoted one of Ellie's favorite aphorisms, "Behind every successful man stands a woman with her foot up his butt!"

November 30 - Vita brevis - Part Two

"Dear, is there anything I can get you?" Ann asked John who was sitting in a chair next to the wood stove listening to the shortwave.

"No, darling. I reckon I'm OK. Go on to bed if you like." He replied.

She bent over to kiss him good night and said as she walked towards their bedroom door, "Well then, don't stay up all night listening to that radio. You've got work to do tomorrow. Good night."

"Good night" he said as she closed the door. He took another deep sip of the bourbon and water in his glass, feeling melancholy and hoping for a news broadcast to distract him. Tuning into Radio Moscow he caught the last few minutes of their English language North American broadcast.

...Mexican officials restated today that further talks on the Mexican-American petroleum agreement would be dependent on the beginning of talks concerning the status of the Aztlan territory in the U.S. Southwest. President Bush has thus far declined to discuss the issue and declared that further delays in completing the agreement would jeopardize the U.S.'s participation in the North American Free Trade Agreement as it applies to United States and Mexico.

Widespread fighting has broken out again between the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and the Colombian military in the capitol city of Bogota with FARC forces now thought to control nearly one third of the city. A spokesperson for the organization in Caracas, Venezuela stated today that the left leaning revolutionaries are expected to take the city within the week and that the present Colombian government will be forced to capitulate within the month. Colombian President Andres Pastrana blasted the statement as being beneath contempt and that the Colombian army will soon begin a counterattack to oust the FARC rebels from the city. The Colombian president also decried the continued withdrawal of American troops and equipment from the beleaguered nation stating that without their help it would be impossible for Colombia to stem the tide of illicit drugs flowing from that nation into the U.S.

This is the English Language Service of Radio Moscow. We will bring you more news at 0400 Greenwich Mean Time.

John took another long pull from his drink, studied his frequency list and punched in a new frequency set into the radio. A moment's static then a cultured British voice came from the speaker -

In Russia today there has been continued fighting in several Northern provinces today between central government troops and provincial forces as struggles over food and fuels shipments continue in the face of an increasingly bitter Russian winter. Repeated rumors of war crimes and massacres have made their way out of the snow bound nation but none as of yet have been verifiable. The Kremlin has declined to comment. Attempts at contacting any northern provincial governor's offices have proved unsuccessful so correspondents have been dispatched to the scene to report in person. We will bring you word as soon as they have arrived.

European Union officials report that with internal European relief efforts becoming better organized it will be possible to increase the amount of aid being sent to the disaster stricken United States as soon

as President Bush agrees to allow EU officials administrative authority over the distribution of the aid. The Denver White House has not yet commented on this latest request.

Repeated rumors have reached the BBC of the death of Chinese President Jiang Zemin but as of yet we have not been able to obtain confirmation. Articles in the Hong Kong, Macao, and Shanghai papers have made allusion to his death but they have thus far not published news confirming the premier is indeed dead.

John took another pull from his glass. His eyes felt grainy so he closed them and laid his head back to rest them for a while before trying another station. Presently he began to softly snore.

In the Middle East Iranian President Mohammad Khatami stated today that further machinations on the part of the Russian Federation to squeeze Iran out of the rich Caspian seafloor oil fields will only drive his nation further into the arms of the more hard line elements of the OPEC nations. The Iranian president did not clarify his remarks when he was speaking before the Iranian state assembly.

In Breaking News Al Jazeera television in Qatar has just now broadcast that it has received confirmation that President Saddam Hussein of Iraq has indeed been assassinated. There is no word as yet who is responsible. Turkey has placed its troops on full alert as has Iran, Syria, Jordan, Kuwait, and Saudi Arabia. The U.S. has ordered two carrier battle groups to stations along the Iraqi coast. Further news as it becomes available.

This is the BBC World Service. Further news at the top of the hour.

December 15 - Certamen eternus - Part One

CRACK! The rifle blast rolled like thunder across the ice covered field. One hundred fifty yards away the middle sized of the three dogs flipped sideways, kicked once and was still. "Damn!" John swore. The largest of the three dogs he'd been aiming at had lunged forward at a doe goat the instant his finger broke the trigger. Working the bolt as fast as he could without taking the gun from his shoulder he lined up the cross hairs on the fleeing dog, leading it a bit - the canine appeared to be a mixed breed of some sort with a lot of mastiff in it - and squeezed off another shot. CRACK! The dog's backend slew around so quickly that he was nearly facing back the way it had come. The dog began screaming and snapping at its hindquarters.

John quickly worked the bolt again scanning the pasture and its tree line for the third dog but it was nowhere to be seen. "Well, it'd be a bit much to expect to down all three of them with just one rifle" he muttered to himself. He sighted in again on the writhing wounded dog, the rifle spoke once more and the dog flipped sideways and was still. "Hate to waste a shell on it but I'm damn sure not going to get within arm's reach of a dog that sized to try and cut its throat!" Working the bolt to chamber another shell he stood up from the fence post he'd been leaning on to steady his rifle and began to walk across the frozen, crunchy grass. "I ever get a chance I'm going to get some real livestock guardian dogs. These damned old yard dogs are about useless. I oughta just shoot the lot of them and save the feed! Well, maybe not Jake, Mel would holler blue blazes about her dog but Andy and Bad would be no loss."

The radio on his hip crackled and Ann's voice came out. "John, we just got a call about your gunfire. Is everything alright?"

He took the radio off and spoke into it, "Yeah, everything's alright - NOW. Just killed two damned old feral dogs and lost a third. One of them is about the biggest damned dog I've ever seen. If that's Ed, Mike, or Rick calling let them know that one got away and to be looking for it. It was maybe shepherd sized, large enough to be a problem for goats, calves or young cows. Looks like they managed to kill one of our young billies and looks from here like we've got at least a doe wounded, maybe more. I'll know better when I can get a bucket of feed and call them all in. Looks like cabrito for supper tomorrow, make up some of that mustard sauce you did that time. I liked it right well. Over."

"I copy. Over" Ann replied.

He crossed the pasture and examined the scene. As he'd seen from a distance they had killed one of the young male goats - fortunately not the one he most wanted to breed next year - and one of his young does had a chewed up left rear haunch but he thought it might heal with some proper attention. He examined the two dogs. One was a blackish colored mixed breed, looked like a lot of Labrador in it with maybe some bull terrier. The other dog was enormous and would have been bigger still were it not so gaunt. "Reckon that explains why you lasted so long" John said to the cooling carcass. "You're big enough to whip most any challenger and big enough to take down cows by yourself. Still looks like you about starved to death though which is probably why you jumped my goats in broad daylight. Glad to have put paid to you!"

Crossing the pasture again he filled a feed bucket with grain in the barn and set it in the back of his truck then opened the pasture gate and drove through. The goat flock ran to meet him when he got out again and shook the bucket. He scattered grain on the ground at his feet and when they surged forward he reached out and grabbed the wounded doe. With a quick motion he bound her feet and laid her in the

back, then picked up the dead billy and the two dogs and put them in the back as well. Driving back through the gate he stopped outside the barn and picked up the radio. "Ann, ask one of the girls to come out and help me with this goat. She's going to need doctoring." The clouds were darkening and settling lower so that once the grain had been consumed the rest of the flock began drifting towards the barn.

A moment later Brittany came out and walked across the yard towards him, "Mel and Heather are making a cake. I said I'd come and help."

The man reached into the back of the truck and picked up the doe. "OK," he said, "Blood going to bother you any?"

"No sir" the girl replied.

"Good. Let's get her inside where it's warmer. She's acting a little shocky." They went into the barn over to the milking area. "This'll do. The stand's clean and we've got water. Get that pan over there and run to the house and fill it about a quarter full of hot water then come back here."

"OK" Brittany said picking up the pan and disappearing out the door.

John began to gently probe the wound. Speaking to the goat that watched him with big eyes he said, "Not as bad as it first appeared. We'll clean this out, pack it with some antibiotic goo and put in a few stitches and you should be OK in a few days." Waiting on Brittany to return he went into the feed room to get the rest of his necessary gear. By the time he'd gathered it all she'd returned with a pan of steaming water and set it down on the stand.

He looked into the pan and said, "That's just what I wanted. He picked it up and ran some cold water from the tap into it until it was just cool enough that he could put his hands in it then ran in some disinfectant soap. He dipped in a soft bristled brush and began to gently scrub the wounded area. The goat barked loudly. Quickly finishing he rinsed the wound with some cool water and said, "The blood made it look worse than it is. Britt, open that tube of goo there and squeeze a gob out on my finger here."

The girl picked up the vet med, took off the cap and squeezed a large blob out onto his finger. He gently rubbed it into the wound and the goat subsided somewhat in her struggling. He picked up a small curved needle already threaded with some plain cotton thread and told Brittany to squeeze some more ointment onto his finger. When she'd done what he'd requested he ran the needle and thread through the ointment until it was all coated. He began suturing up the wounds, not very neatly but closing the gaps well enough for them to heal. "This is really Lisa's or Luke's department" he said to the wide eyed girl, "but they're both in town until tonight. I'm too big fingered and clumsy to do neat work but it should get the job done nonetheless. How about while I'm finishing here go over to the last stall there on the left and put down some clean fresh bedding, then fill a water bucket and hang it inside. We'll keep young Miss Goat inside for a few days until we can see if the wound's going to heal proper or not. If it goes and gets infected then we'll have to see if Lisa or Luke can physic a goat as well as they can a person."

Brittany went off to find a pitchfork and prepare the stall as John tied off his last suture then began to coat the wound outside with ointment. With that finished he cleaned up in the pan of soapy water then poured it down the sink and cleaned up the general area. The girl was hanging the water bucket as he finished so he took the goat over and untied her then shut the stall gate. She went to the water bucket

and began to drink. "Good" he said. "Must not be too shocky then." He filled the hayrack and said to Brittany, "I reckon that's it then. I'll take care of the rest in the truck."

He stood for a moment examining the two dog carcasses before deciding that both of them were too poor and gaunt looking to be worth skinning for their pelts. Without pigs to feed them to he didn't have much use for the dogs so he decided to bury them in the orchard so they could provide nutrients for the trees come Spring. Taking out his pocket knife he began to skin the young goat and soon had it out of its skin. It was damaged to the point there didn't seem to be much point in trying to tan it so he threw it onto the dogs along with the guts they wouldn't be eating. He put the rest back into the ribcage of the skinned carcass and took it up to the back porch where he kicked the back door with his boot. Heather came to the door and he said, "Get a big pan out of the pantry for me to put this into. Ann will know what to do with it. I've got to dispose of the waste and clean up."

After a moment the girl came back with the pan and he put the meat into it and she took it off into the kitchen. He came inside long enough to wash his hands with warm water and dry them, then went back outside to the truck. Gas was still in short supply so he decided against driving to the orchard so he fetched a wheel barrow from the workshop and loaded up the carcasses, skin and guts along with a spade and crossed the yard. He buried one dog under a pear tree, the second under an apple, and the goat remains under a young chestnut. Crossing the yard again he screwed a hose onto a tap and washed the wheelbarrow out then up-ended it under the eaves to dry. He his hands were going numb from the cold and wet so he decided to go into the house.

December 15 - Certamen eternus - Part Two

As he passed through the kitchen he encountered the delicious smell of the cake the girls were baking for supper that night and shook his head. Ever since the cold weather had set in they had been baking up a storm, so much so that Ann and Lisa had to carefully regulate the amount of supplies they used lest they run short. Food was regularly coming into the markets now, Miguel had even managed to reopen his store, so it wasn't like you couldn't restock what was used but it was very expensive and getting more so by the week. There was much speculation that the dollar revaluation scheduled to happen next month would relieve the spiraling inflation but John wasn't so sure. In any case they were being very careful with their food stores until matters settled down and they could replenish what they used.

He passed through the dining room where Ann was going over Brittany's algebra work and explaining how to work the word problem she'd given her. He was quite happy to leave them to it and grateful he didn't have to try to explain it himself. "Never was any good at them word problems. Kids nowadays run circles around me with a pencil and paper."

In the living room he opened the door on the stove and stoked the fire then stood for a few moments warming his hands. To no one in particular he said, "This cold is really starting to get to my hands. I wonder if I'm starting to get a little arthritis or rheumatism?"

When he had sufficiently warmed himself he put his hat on again and headed back out the door. On the back porch he saw scattered fat flakes of wet snow falling. "Well, ain't that just great." He stepped off and crunched across the yard towards the splitting block where he'd been producing stove wood before he'd heard the commotion with the goats. He picked up his splitting maul then looked towards the sky, a fat snowflake landing on his face. "Was a time that snow in Florida was a big deal. Now it's just another pain in the ass. Well, it's not a snow storm at least." With a grunt he swung the maul and split a round of oak. Swing after swing the pile of split wood gradually began to grow. Growing tired of the movement he put the maul down and piled the billets into the wheelbarrow to take them into the small woodshed to be stacked. When he returned he found the splitting stump in a coat of white. Looking around he noticed snow was beginning to stick and deepen everywhere and that he could now barely see the far pasture fence. "Damned if we aren't going to get the heaviest snowfall I've ever seen in Florida."

His shoulder muscles protested when he picked up the maul again so he stood for a moment with the tool on his shoulder looking out across the pasture, garden, and orchard. The snow steadily increased and he watched it fascinated. A breeze began to slant the falling snow slightly but also sending penetrating fingers of cold searching his collar, sleeves, and pants cuffs. "Sure doesn't take much wind to make itself felt when it's twenty five degrees outside" he muttered to himself. "Clouds getting so thick that it's going to be too dark to see soon. Think I'll do the sensible thing and call it a day." He laid the maul in the barrow and picked up the sledge hammer and wedges to go with it and took it all into the shop. He stopped by the barn on his way out to make sure that all was in order. One of the girls would be out after supper to milk. On his way to the house the snow seemed to be falling even heavier and was not seriously beginning to pile up on any surface not steep enough to shed it. "If it were drier the wind would probably be pushing it around more. Temperature drops anymore it won't be wet for long." A gust of wind seemed to thrust itself down his neck. He stepped onto the porch and eyed the thermometer which read twenty two degrees. Shaking his head he opened the door and stepped into the fragrant warmth of the kitchen.

Heather looked up from the cake she was icing and said, "Hi Uncle John! Supper won't be ready for another half-hour or so. There's hot chocolate on the stove if you'd like some."

With a grin he replied, "I do believe I will." He poured himself a cup and went through the dining room where Ann, Brittany, and Melinda were working on their Spanish. "Hola Senora Horne" he said, "und los ninos!" His wife wrinkled her nose at him and said, "Sounds like you need to be cracking a book yourself! 'Und los ninos!' indeed!" He laughed as he passed into the living room

Glancing at the mantle clock he picked up his frequency list for his short wave receiver to decide what he might have a chance of catching. Not really being dark yet he thought Voice of America might be the best choice. Carefully punching in the frequency number he caught the end of an interview seemingly concerned with grain production in Central Europe but it ended before he could determine who was being interviewed or where. The news came on next.

At the NATO meeting in Brussels today tensions remained high as Turkey adamantly refused to recall its troops from Northern Iraq. Satellite and reconnaissance drones reveal Turkish army troops in active and open conflict with forces of the two major Kurdish groups that control the northern Iraqi "No Fly" zone and disorganized units of the Iraqi army. Turkish military spokesmen have repeatedly stated that Turkey will not allow a Kurdish Free State to form in the chaos that Iraq now represents and will use whatever military force it must in order to carry this out. U.S. and NATO officials are negotiating with Turkey at this moment to find a workable solution. Units of the Syrian army are also alleged to have crossed the Iraqi frontier but no confirming evidence is available at this time. Both Turkey and Syria have had long standing concerns about the formation of a Kurdish state.

Also in Iraq units of the U.S. Army and Marines are continuing make good northern progress along the Tigris and Euphrates rivers in their drive to reach Baghdad and link up with the 82nd and 101st airborne divisions now occupying that city. An Nasinyah, Al Basrah, and Umm Qasr have fallen in the last week and the cities of Al Kut and An Najaf are expected to fall within the next forty eight hours. Representatives of the Russian Federation strongly protested this use of American military forces to intervene in what they contend is strictly an internal Iraqi matter. Meanwhile, American military intelligence continues to report a build up of military forces and supplies along the Iranian border. President Bush has been in telephone contact with Iranian President Khatami allegedly warning him not to allow Iranian forces to cross the border.

In Latin America the nation of Colombia seems to be sinking deeper into civil war as FARC forces are now said to be in control of half of the capitol city of Bogota after the failure of the second counteroffensive by the Colombian army to dislodge the rebels from their control of the business areas of the city.

In the U.S. fresh reports of raids along the southwestern border... "Uncle John! Supper's ready!" Heather's voice cut through the radio. ...killed, twenty two wounded. Hours later three Mexican nationals were lynched in the town of... Click. John turned off the radio and stood up. "Would it hurt them to broadcast some GOOD news once in a while? These people could drive Pollyanna into despair!"

Stepping through the door he spied an elegant chocolate frosted cake on the counter then said, "Well, at least there's something to live for."

December 17 – Impending - Part One

“Thank you Eddy” John said, “I’ll be by to get them and part of the feed about dark on Christmas Eve.”

The man in the overalls and heavy brown coat shook his head and grinned, “It’s the kind of thing my dad would have done when I was their age but you sure your girls will go for this? Seems like today’s kids would rather flip burgers at the mall or something than do any sort of real work on the land.”

John shrugged. “Don’t know for sure but we’ve always raised a couple of feeder pigs every year and Mel helped me a lot with them this year so it’s not like it’ll be a completely new experience for her. The girls do the milking every day and Mel’s been the one doing most of the work with feeding the hens and egg gathering for the last couple of years so they should do OK handling pigs with me to advise them. Come spring when your birds start to lay I’ll pick up the geese. Never fooled with them before but if the girls raise them from day old goslings we shouldn’t have too much trouble. If locally produced food becomes as popular as I think it will they’ll likely sell all they can raise and geese will feed themselves out of a pasture more than anything but a cow. If it doesn’t work out we’re not out much and we can simply eat them ourselves. If it does work they’ll make a little money and it’ll be something they’ll have done for themselves. Don’t think you can give a better lesson in self-reliance and work ethic than that.”

“Well, I wish you luck then! Sure wish I could get my grandkids interested. Not that I expect them to take up farming but they don’t seem to want to do anything productive, just sit on their butts all day in front of the TV.” The old man and John shook hands then John went on down the row at the market looking for other possibilities. Except for the inspiration of giving the girls their own stock to raise and sell he hated Christmas shopping. Didn’t like Christmas in general for that matter. As he did every year when he shopped for gifts he wondered why he held such antipathy for a day that most others truly looked forward to and as always failed to come up with an answer that really satisfied him. Whatever the reason he just didn’t like it and that was that. If it weren’t for the girls he’d not bother with it at all but he’d fought and lost that battle with Ann long ago and had no taste for hashing it out again. “Humbug!” he said passionately as he strolled along looking at the tables. Several people nearby smiled when they heard him.

After another hour had passed he’d found several more gifts that he thought would serve and that he wouldn’t feel too bad about giving. He was trying to find as much as he could at the Archer market because one could trade here rather than spending cash money. Ann’s salary only went so far and with the dollar devaluation coming next month they were being as frugal as they could with what they had because no one was sure what the future would hold. Prices in paper dollars were steep but many folks were willing to make reasonable trades if you had any kind of decent trade goods. He’d worked out the deal for the dozen goslings, two young sows, the services of one of Eddy’s boars, and two feeder pigs for six bricks of Winchester .22 cartridges and three boxes of #6 shotgun shells for a twelve gauge. Ammunition was one commodity that simply had not come back onto the civilian market and no one knew when, if ever, it would reappear so it was extremely valuable as a trade item in its own right. It was also an item that John was slow to offer for that very reason, no matter that he had a healthy supply remaining.

The dense gray cloud cover had been steadily lowering all morning and was now beginning to drop a cold misty rain on the Earth below. The chilly precipitation caused him to feel even more morose than he’d been before so he decided that he’d exhausted the possibilities of the market and went to his truck. He felt guilty looking at it, he really should have hooked up one of the bike trailers and ridden it in but

more than a few miles of pedaling made his knee ache for hours. He didn't know how much of a load he might end up with to carry home so he'd decided against riding Cricket into town which left the truck. It only cost a little over a half-gallon of gas in and back but come January he'd be losing his fuel ration paid by the sheriff's department as the sector deputy program went into mothballs. He could apply for his own ration card but even with one gas was \$7.00 a gallon on the open market – when it was available – and rising. He got in, shut the door and started the motor, “Well,” he grumbled out loud to himself, “it's Christmas. It's not like I hardly go anywhere anymore. Ann, Lisa, or Luke bring me out most anything I need from town. Going into Archer is beginning to feel like I'm really stepping out!”

He turned the truck around and headed down U.S. 27 towards the county road. As he approached the intersection he saw the lights in Miguel's store looked warm and inviting. “It must be the cold and gray that's getting to me. Probably should have let Ann put in those special bulbs last year like she wanted.” Without really thinking about it he pulled into the small parking lot, got out and walked up to the door. He stepped through into the scented warmth of the interior smelling of coffee and Carolita Alvarez's cooking. She was spooning food onto a plate for Miguel's lunch. The shopkeeper looked up and said, “Buenos tardes John! Sit down and have lunch with us. There's plenty.”

John looked at his watch and decided he would, he'd told Ann he might be late getting back from the market so they wouldn't be waiting lunch on him. “Thanks Miguel! Reckon I will. You were very fortunate that you married such an excellent cook. Is that Carolita's chicken and yellow rice?”

The woman smiled and said, “Yes, it is. I remember how much you like it. Come and set with us. We haven't seen much of you lately. Are you ready this front coming in? The weatherman says it will turn to freezing sleet by this afternoon.”

John sighed. “Yeah, we're as ready as we can be I suppose. The stock will come in on their own and I've got a big stack of wood on the porch. I expect we'll probably lose power again like we've done the last two times. I hate ice storms! I'd rather have ten degrees and snow up to my behind than an ice storm at thirty.”

December 17 – Impending - Part Two

Everyone sat to the table and Miguel gave the grace. John spooned food onto his plate as Carolita poured his coffee. Continuing with the conversation he said, “No, haven’t been into town much. Too much work to do around the place. Luke’s only home on the weekends and not always then so all the heavy work falls to me alone since dad died. Besides, there’s not much reason to go anywhere.”

Miguel sipped his coffee and said, “Maybe you should have one of Mike’s boys come out and help you. Jake and Stevie are big, they could do a lot of work.”

“Yes, they could.” John agreed. “But Jake’s gone off and joined the Recovery. Think he was feeling pretty confined at home having turned eighteen back in April and his chances of going to college washed away with the tsunami. Probably do him some good. He was getting a little wild there for a time. Stevie would probably be happy to help but...ahh, it would be impolitic right now to have him over. In another couple of weeks I’ll do it anyway because I’m going to need the help felling trees.”

Carolita looked puzzled and asked, “Why would it be impolitic for Steve to come to your place? He’s a good boy isn’t he?”

John would really rather have not answered that question but the woman looked expectantly at him so he finally said, “Well, he’s pretty sweet on Heather and just now I think Lisa would prefer he not see too much of her.”

Her eyes widened slightly. “I see.” she said and spoke no more about it.

Casting about for something other than the problems of the kids in his household to talk about he asked Miguel, “How business been? You getting regular shipments again?”

The other man shrugged, “It’s been better but we’re getting by. One cannot buy through the official channels without the necessary permits and the prices are steep but what choice does anyone have? I buy what I must and mark my prices up accordingly. The fluff products like prepared foods are scarce and very expensive if you can get them but the staples everyone must have to survive can be bought. Only fuel, dairy products, eggs and meats are rationed but I suppose you wouldn’t have to concern yourself much about those since you produce them yourself except for fuel. In fact, if ever you have a surplus I’d be happy to buy it from you direct.”

John grinned, “Well, next year we’ll have surplus eggs at least. I don’t usually put a chick order in until right about now for a January delivery but with things being the way they are and all we cleaned up our old incubator a couple of weeks ago and fired her up. I expect our first batch of eggs to hatch starting next week sometime if we did it right. We’re going to hatch out at least a couple of hundred over the next two months, maybe more if we can find folks that want to buy chicks. Come the end of April, beginning of May we’ll have cockerels for the table and not long after that the first pullet eggs will start coming in. Of course, these aren’t meat breeds so they’re not going to be the fat birds like Tyson sells.”

Carolita smiled, “The bird from which I made this arroz con pollo was one of our old hens. I don’t think you’ll have any problems selling those young roosters even if they’re not as meaty as what the Colonel offers. I think it’s going to be a while before we see rationing end so people will not be as discriminating as once they were. I’ll buy some of them myself. A good free range bird makes the best tasting chicken. We have always raised our own birds because they taste so much better. In fact, I’ll buy

some of your chicks. Our hatchery that we buy from is in Texas so who knows if we'll be able to order from them again?"

Her husband asked, "You going to expand your flock in a big way? That takes a lot of time doesn't it?"

John shrugged, "Well, time is about all I have now. The university is steadily calling people back to work as they get the campus rehabilitated for the new semester starting next year but they haven't called me. From talking to Ann, Luke and a couple of others the Federal government is preoccupied with other things than funding research the way they did before the Impact so there's not much call for grant writers now. Personally, between you and me, I think a lot of that's going to go back to the states. You've heard how resistant Tallahassee has been to being told what to do by Denver. We just may be starting to see a resurgence of state's rights and authority. Did you hear that Maine, New Hampshire, and Vermont told the National Recovery Command to pack their bags and get out? They're making them do it too. National media isn't giving it much play but it's on the shortwave. Folks up there are really angry about the high handed way General Steiner treated them. A good many of the Western states have told the Bureau of Land Management to take a hike too and are taking over administrative authority of everything but National Parks, Monuments, and Forests. I expect the Supreme Court is going to have its hands full for a long time to come sorting it all out"

The other man smiled, "Well, it would not break my heart to see our Dear Uncle Sam have his sails trimmed a bit but if the States force the Federal Government back into some nineteenth century model it will mean a very great change in the way the nation conducts its affairs. Many people will be out of work.."

Swallowing a mouthful of rice and washing it down with some coffee John replied, "Reckon we've already seen that happen. In fact, an asteroid impact, nuclear war, or some other such major catastrophe would be the only thing I can think of that would cause it to come about. The Federal government will still be in charge of the military, at least the non-National Guard parts of it, international affairs, and the sorts of things that a national government should be responsible for but for many of the states I think they're beginning to realize the Impact is the best chance they've got, maybe ever will have, to lighten the yoke of Federal authority. You know that Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, and California took control of their National Guard units back from the President after he tried to Federalize them? They're being deployed along the Mexican border instead of going overseas. Can't imagine the contention that must have caused. Likely couldn't have done it if the Guard officers and troops themselves didn't support what their states were trying to do. The Governor of New Mexico said flat out that if the Mexican governor didn't do something about keeping those Villaists on their side of the border he'd send his troops across the border himself to take the fight to them. In fact, the four governors of the border states are supposedly signing an agreement about just that, though it's not certain if California will play or not. I think those raids have been a lot worse than the media has been letting on."

Miguel shrugged, "To be expected I suppose. There are so many Americans out of work now that the jobs the illegals once held are being sought after by citizens leaving little or nothing for them. If they get desperate enough and think the government can't protect the border some will decide to come and take what they can no longer work to get. Naturally, the residents of those states are going to resist."

Carolita asked, "I've been too busy these last couple of days to keep up with the news. You said the government wanted to send National Guard troops overseas? Where to?"

John shrugged, "I'm not sure, but I suspect they'd go to the Middle East. Iraq has come apart at the

seams with Turkey, Syria, Saudi Arabia and Iran all claiming pieces for themselves and the President seems determined not to let them have it all. I think the Saudi Arabia/United Arab Emirates thing has him spooked since that Al Saladin fella seems to be really gaining a lot of popular support among the poorer classes and the fundamentalists. If they get away with grabbing a big part of Iraq that will make his party that much stronger. Probably got a lot of the moderate Gulf states spooked too. Sure seems like a bad time to be sending our National Guard troops overseas though when we're still not out of the woods here."

Miguel looked sour. "We should let them fight it out among themselves. Does it matter to us who is in charge there? They have to sell their oil regardless and there's too many other competing oil nations for them to raise their prices too much."

"It would seem the President does not agree. I find it hard to believe he's not taking the Mexican border situation more seriously." John ate his last bite of rice. "He threatened to send troops across the border but since has done seemingly nothing. Can't say I blame the border state governors for forcing the issue about their Guard troops."

He was about to say something else when the CB base station behind the cash register counter suddenly split the air. "Base to John Horne! Base to John Horne! Oh God, John come in! Come in!" Anne's voice sounded nearly hysterical. John's chair fell over as he leapt from the table and leaned over the counter to snatch the microphone from the counter.

"John to base! I'm here! What's wrong? Over." He spoke as evenly as he could, alarmed by the hysteria in his wife's voice.

"Oh thank God!" She came back. "John, you have to come back right now! Brittany just came home alone. She says that Melinda has been kidnapped!"

December 14 - Realization - Part One

A cold hand gripped John's heart as the import of his wife's words over the radio came to him. He took a deep breath to steady his voice then spoke into the microphone again. "Ann, calm down. What exactly has happened with Melinda and Brittany? Take it from the beginning and give me the details. Over."

For a moment there was dead air then his wife came back. "I'm okay. This is what happened - Melinda and Brittany had gone over to play with Judy Starling, Rick's niece this morning. I told them to be back by lunch since that front is moving in. A few minutes ago Brittany came running back to the house by herself in a hysterical state. She said three men had stopped them at the intersection of the county road and the lane leading up to Rick's. She said at first they asked for directions on how to get to the church until they got within ten feet or so when they jumped and grabbed the girls. They took the shotgun and Melinda's pistol then asked if she was Melinda Horne. When she said she was the older of the three men then looked at Brittany and asked, 'are you that orphan girl John Horne took in?' Britt said she was and said the man smiled at that. He told her to run home and tell you that he had your daughter and you'd be hearing from him directly. John, what are we going to do?!!"

The man paused to consider for a moment then spoke into the microphone again. "Ann, put Brittany on the radio. I want to talk to her. While I'm doing that you call the Sheriff's Office right now and apprise them of what has happened then start calling Ed, Rick, Jimmy, and Mike. Tell them I'll meet them at the house in a few minutes. Do you copy that? Over."

With a plan of action coming together Ann's voice became steadier. "I copy. Here's Brittany. We're phoning now. Over."

Another voice came from the speaker. "I'm here Uncle John. I'm so sorry! They took us by surprise! I'm so sorry!"

John spoke firmly into the mike, "Britt, steady yourself and calm down. I need you to tell me exactly what you saw and what you heard. What did these men look like? When you left them did they get into a vehicle of some kind? Did you see them go down the road in a particular direction? Over."

Over the air he could hear the frightened girl take a deep breath then she spoke. "They were three white men, Uncle John. Uhhmmm, the one who spoke to me was older than the other two, about your age I think. He was wearing an army cap but you could tell his hair was cut really short, kinda like the way you see Marines wear it, brown but with some gray on the sides. He had a lot of tattoos on his arms that I didn't recognize except for one that looked like one of those German symbols - I can't remember what they're called but you see them on the flags on Hogan's Heroes. He wasn't wearing a coat, but just a short sleeved blue work shirt like you wear sometime. He had on blue jeans, pretty faded. He wore brown boots. I couldn't take my eyes off him when he spoke so I remember him. I didn't look at the others too well but they were both younger, one maybe about Jackie's age, the other one was older but not a lot older. One had a camouflage Army jacket on, the other one had a brown coat of some sort. I don't think I remember anything else about them. Oh, the youngest one was wearing a black cowboy hat."

He nodded his head, trying to commit the details of her description to memory. "That's very good Brittany, very good. Just stay calm and work with me here. Now, did you see what direction they went in? Did they get into a vehicle of some sort? Over."

The girl replied, "No, Uncle John, I didn't see a car or truck or anything. They just turned and walked into the woods away from the direction of your house. I couldn't see them very good after they went more than a few feet, you know how thick the pine trees are there at that corner. I ran straight home as soon as they were outta sight."

He closed his eyes and tried to visualize a map of the area in his mind. "You say they walked into the planted pines there at the corner? Where they heading in the direction of Rick's place or where they going away from both roads?"

"Uhhh, they weren't heading towards Rick's and they didn't seem to be walking alongside the big road, they looked like they were heading straight out through the woods to me. Do you think maybe they've got a camp or something in there?"

A faint hope began to blossom in him and rage began to burn within his heart. "Brittany, I want you to listen carefully to me and do exactly as I tell you. As soon as you put down the microphone go out on the porch and call the dogs into the dooryard and shut the gate so they'll stay in. Tell Ann to get a lead out and put Jake on it. Then tell her to get the jeans that Mel was wearing yesterday and put them in a plastic bag but NOT to handle them with her bare hands. Then I want you, Ann, and Lisa to lock the doors and windows in the house and all of you are to be armed. Do you have all of that? Over."

"Yes sir," she replied, "call in the dogs and keep them in the yard, put Jake on a leash. Put the jeans that Mel wore yesterday in a plastic bag but not to touch them with our hands. Lock up the doors and windows and get out the guns. Is that it?"

"Yes Britt," he said, "Now tell Ann I'm leaving right now for the house. Over."

"I copy, Uncle John. I'll tell her."

He hung up the mike and turned around to see Miguel and Carolita looking at him with grave concern. Miguel immediately said, "John, what do you want us to do?"

John replied, "Miguel, I'm leaving for the house right now. Try to contact Ed Harris by phone. Tell him I think they're making for U.S. 27, it's the nearest road in the direction Brittany said they were headed in. They'll either be on foot or on horseback. Either way, they're a good three or four miles from the road and it's thick as hell through there and the weather's crapping out so they're not going to make good time. If he can get men strung out down 27 they have a good chance of spotting them if they try to cross the road. County Central will likely send men out as well. Once you're off the phone with Ed, get your truck and whatever men you can find that you trust and come to the house. Between Ed's crew on 27 and ours coming behind them I think we'll be able to drive them like we did the dogs. That front is on top of us so tell everyone to get out their foul weather gear. I'll see you to the house."

"Vaya con Dios, my brother" the storeowner said, "I'll meet you at your house as soon as I'm off the phone with Ed." The screen door slammed before he had finished speaking.

December 14 - Realization - Part Two

John braked hard to a stop in front of his gate. He could see Ed's truck already in the drive and Jimmy came up behind him. He leapt out of the truck and ran up onto the porch. Ann came out the door to meet him followed by the rest. It was plain the women had been crying and he gave his wife a tight hug and a kiss. "I'll get her back darling, I swear to you that I WILL get her back."

Ann wiped away her tears and said, "I know you will John. Mike called and said he's on his way but he's coming from north of Newberry. County Central called and said the Sheriff is coming too but he's in Ocala. You're to take charge until he arrives."

John nodded and said, "OK." Just then Rick came up on a bicycle and Stevie Daniels ran up carrying a lever action rifle. John said he wanted to wait a few minutes before making their plans to give Miguel and the others a chance to arrive. The rain began to fall harder and the temperature was dropping steadily so he went inside to round up his foul weather gear. When he came back out he dumped his lined military poncho on a porch chair and finished belting on his big revolver, an SKS was slung over his back.

Ann gave him the bag with Melinda's jeans in it. "Are you going to try to use Jake to track Mel? Will he do that?"

Her husband said, "I don't know. I do know that she raised that dog from a pup five years ago when dad gave him to her and he'll follow her anywhere that she'll let him. It can't hurt to try."

Miguel pulled up in his truck with his two sons and several other men. The radio crackled and John answered, it was Ed Harris advising he had six men on the road and more coming so that he expected to be able to keep a long portion of U.S. 27 in sight. The assembled men discussed the best placements for Ed's men according to where they thought the kidnappers were likely to go and would extend the surveillance line as more people became available.

Over the next fifteen minutes twenty men had arrived so John decided they had enough to get started. They'd incorporate newcomers as they went along over the radio.

Before they left John turned to Ann, Lisa, Ellie and Brittany then said, "Until we eliminate these predators the rest of you could be in danger so this is what I want you to do. Listen carefully because I am dead serious about what I say. Until I tell you differently if ANYONE other than myself, Mike, or the sheriff tries to come through that gate without your permission you SHOOT them. Don't try to reason with them and for damn sure don't let them get within twenty feet of any of you. Just shoot them. The bastards already have my daughter. They're NOT getting anyone else. Do you understand?"

"Yes dear, I understand. Get her back John!"

"Darling, I WILL get her back! Believe it darling, I WILL get her back!"

The Posse donned their gear and weapons, loaded up onto Miguel's and John's trucks and headed for the intersection where the girl had been taken.

December 14 - Realization - Part Three

They arrived a minute later. John assembled the Posse to address them. "OK, here's the plan. This is going to be just like our dog hunts except this time the dogs can shoot back. If you make contact back off but stay in sight and call on the radio. The rest of us will come running. Brittany only saw three but there may be more. I don't think there'll be a lot more so we should have them outnumbered by at least three or four to one once we pin them down. So long as we have them boxed within a general area then time is on our side because we'll have more and more men steadily coming in. All we have to do is keep them from getting out of the box and we'll eventually run them to ground. Move quietly as you can, keep your radios on, try not to be seen, and don't get yourself into a firefight. Spot them and call it in, the rest of us will come running. It'll be all over not long after that."

Everyone nodded and Jimmy went first to try to pick up what sign he could. The group of men trailed the kidnapers through the planted pine, scuffed up needles leading them onwards through the dense stand. Four hundred yards in they came to the end of the trees and into a pasture where they lost the trail. Mike called them on the radio and said he was at the road with another dozen men and was expecting a dozen more to arrive shortly along with the sheriff. John told them where they were at and said they'd wait on them to arrive. Using Jimmy's radio he called Ed Harris who told him that he'd put another ten men on the road and more volunteers were coming.

When the new men arrived Jimmy told the searchers to spread out in a wide line and walk towards the other fence. The rain fell steadily and was turning to sleet. It would be dark early this day. They reached the far fence a quarter mile away with no sign. "Ground's firm and the grass is short enough in this pasture not to show much sign" Jimmy said, "We'd best spread out. It's pretty thick woods in front of us. Put about fifty yards between each man and we'll move forward in a line. Unless they've doubled back on us we ought to have a pretty good chance of someone seeing them before we hit the road."

Mike spoke into his radio and ordered a surveillance line of men along the county road and the lane running to Rick's place. More men were arriving as news that John Horne's daughter had been taken and the ongoing search for her spread through the community and the sector deputies in the west side of the county. The sheriff arrived and took up station with Ed Harris on the federal highway. He said they'd have the departmental helicopter in the air as soon as it could be arranged but it had been down for maintenance when the situation broke.

The men began to spread out into their line. John took out the plastic bag, opened it carefully and rubbed the blue jeans across Jake's nose. "Find Mel Jake! Find Mel!" With that he slipped the leash and let the dog go. Jake seemed excited and ran back and forth across the pasture for a time then ran under the fence into the brush. John climbed the wire and followed as best he could but passage through the thick brush and trees was difficult and the freezing sleet made visibility difficult. His right knee began to send sharp, shooting pains upward.

He'd completely lost the dog and wasn't sure what direction to head in when he heard a bark far ahead to his left so he began to move in that direction. "Hope that dog isn't chasing a squirrel" he grunted as he stepped tall over a fallen tree. His boot came down into a deep pothole and icy water flooded in over the top. He pushed on. Twenty minutes later he'd neither seen nor heard the dog. He pulled out his compass and took a reading and continued to head in a generally southwestern direction. He thought he might be ahead of the search line but he wasn't sure.

A dense thicket of blackberry briars was impeding his progress when the radio suddenly crackled.

Rick's voice broke through, high pitched in excitement - "Contact! I've made..." A shot crackled through the trees soon followed by many more. They were to his left and close by. John lunged mightily through the tangled briars and began to run as fast as he could through the trees.

He soon broke through into a clearing of gallberry bushes about twenty yards across then caught sight of a brown canvas coat leading to the realization that three men were standing just inside the far edge of the waist high brush. The men quickly looked up from the ground in front of them and a fourth man hurriedly stood in front of them. One of the men in a camouflage BDU jacket was holding Melinda, a knife in his hand laying on her shoulder. John's SKS came up in his hands pointing at the men. "You men just hold right where you are." He said loudly. Melinda looked up, saw John and shouted "Daddy!"

The man who'd stood up was wearing a brownish civilian camouflage and a BDU cap. John knew instantly it was the man Brittany had described. "You'd be John Horne then?" the man asked. He glanced at the girl for confirmation. "I reckon you would be at that." With a smile he continued, "Well then, it seems our mission has not gone totally awry after all. Our guest-of-honor has arrived."

John's eyes narrowed as he looked at the man. "Just put those rifles on the ground right there in front of you and let go of the girl. You're all under arrest."

"Ah, the genuine article for sure. I'm proud to meet you Deputy Horne, I've come a long way for the pleasure." The man seemed in no way distressed at the rifle pointing in his direction.

"Shut up and throw down those guns like I told you" John said harshly.

"No, I don't think so, Deputy. You see, you've got a rifle on us and we have your daughter." He slid a pistol out of his holster. "I don't think you're going to take a chance of hitting her are you? Why don't you just put down your rifle there and we'll get to know each other better. Just drop it right there in that pot hole in front of you. Now."

The deputy said nothing for a moment as he eyed each of the men in front of him, finally he said, "No. No deal."

Again the lazy insolent smile crept across the man's face, "Surely daddy you wouldn't want to see your daughter's pretty face cut would you? You know we've got nothing left to lose, but you have. Put down that rifle and we'll let the girl go. Otherwise we'll just have to kill her in front of you and then kill you. Surely you wouldn't want it to come to that now."

"The first one of you makes a move against my daughter will die as sure as I'm standing here in front of you. Put your guns down NOW!"

"But if you shoot old Wayne here," the man nodded towards the other man holding Mel without taking his eyes off of John, "I'll shoot you. If you try to shoot me, Wayne here will cut her throat. If somehow you take us both, then Denny or Sandy here will kill you both. Your options here are few deputy, put down your rifle and we'll let your daughter go. Surely you want her to live, don't you?"

John thought furiously, trying to play for time. He knew that the shots had to have been heard by the others and they'd come running but these woods were deep, tangled, and after the rains of the previous months, quite wet with a lot of standing water so their progress would be slowed if they had to come

any distance.

"You know as well as I do that you'll kill her too..." he never got to finish the sentence as a dark gold blur shot from a thicket of young pine saplings and hit the man holding Melinda. He screamed as canine teeth met through the wrist and palm of the hand holding the knife. The older man snapped his head to his right at the scream and John slapped his rifle against his hip and fired off three rapid fire shots towards him causing him to suddenly spasm forward and fall to the ground. John pivoted to his left and fired another three quick shots at the man to the right of the one who had been holding Melinda. That man spun and John leapt behind an ancient live oak to his right and bark leapt from the tree as rifle bullets slapped it. He could hear Melinda screaming, Jakes growls, a man's gassy wheezing scream, shouting and rifle fire. He belly crawled around the tree on the other side looking for targets, trying to keep trees in between him and the men he'd seen on the other side.

In the distance he could hear men shouting and knew the rest of the Posse were fast approaching. He'd just come around a large pine when a bullet slapped the tree next to his head and he dropped. Dropping into as low a crouch as he could manage he sprinted to his right further into the trees and cut back to his left. The wet camouflage of his poncho breaking up his outline in the failing light. A small caliber pistol sounded, once, twice, three times, then a man leapt up and ran from behind a bristly palm tree. John sighted in and fired, dropping him. He low crouched across to his left again when a bullet slammed him to the ground, he rolled over, unable to feel anything on his left side. Melinda screamed in a register so high that he nearly could not understand her - "Daddy!!!" He'd dropped his rifle when he fell and could not see it. He was desperately clawing his poncho out of the way to get at his pistol when a man in a camo BDU jacket stood up from behind a stump, a lever action rifle in his hands pointing at him bringing it to his shoulder, squinting down the barrel. John was desperately rolling to his left when he heard a shot from very close.

December 14 - Realization - Part Four

For a second he felt nothing...

Then realized how badly his knee hurt...

Then he realized how badly the rest of him hurt but not the way he thought being shot by a rifle would hurt.

He rolled over again and saw a BDU clad body lying on the ground. Stepping out of the brush from ten yards away was Miguel with an auto-shotgun in his hand looking directly at the body on the ground. John laid his head down on the ground and let out a long, long sigh.

Miguel carefully crept up to him and said, "John, can you hear me?"

The man opened his eyes and spoke, "I'm here Miguel. For the moment at least. My left side hurts like hell." No shots could be heard and they could hear the sounds of running feet crashing through the brush. In the near distance they could hear a man whimpering in pain.

Miguel put out his hand and helped John up. They walked towards the sounds of the man and Melinda ran up to them "Daddy! Daddy!" She wrapped her arms around his waist so tightly he could not get her loose. Finally he pulled her arms free and picked her up.

"I'm all right honey. Are you hurt? Did they hurt you?"

The girl stopped sobbing long enough to say, "I'm OK daddy. They didn't hurt me. I was just scared to death! They were going to kill you!"

"Well, they didn't kill me honey. I'm still here. Let it out until you can pull yourself together. Miguel and I have to look around a bit. How many men were there?"

"Four daddy. There were only four. There's another man they were going back to meet, in Archer I think."

"That's very good Mel. Very good. You just keep holding my hand and you'll be alright. Let's go look around." The men and the girl began to walk towards the sound of the whimpering. Melinda's tears continued to roll down her face to be lost in the freezing rain interspersed with the occasional sob.

They found the man who'd been holding a knife on Melinda lying on the ground, clutching his bloody left arm between his legs, his left ear torn and bleeding profusely with Jake standing over him, blood on his muzzle and face. Looking around they found the rest - the older man laying where John had shot him. Just in front of him Rick lay on the ground, dead. The second man was at a distance from where he'd been when John had rapid fired at him, laying face down. This left only the fifth man still unaccounted for - the one who was still back at where ever they'd come from.

Posse members were arriving, Jimmy, Mike, others. John ignored them when he walked up to the surviving kidnapper. He squatted down and took a pistol out of the man's holster and handed it to Miguel. Then he took the fellow by the chin and raised his face so they could look at each other.

"Where's the fifth man?" He asked.

The man let out a whimper of pain then said, "There ain't no fifth man! It was just us four! You done killed us all!"

"There's another man back from where ever it was you came from." John persisted. "Where is he?"

The man began to marshal himself better and repeated, "I told you, there AIN'T no fifth man!"

John said nothing but stood then stomped his booted foot down onto the man's mangled hand and ground it into the dirt under his heel. The man let out a gassy scream and John shouted over it. "I ASKED YOU WHERE HE WAS YOU SON OF A BITCH!"

The man lay panting trying to form words, "Ple... Please, mister! Don't do that again! There ain't no fifth man! I swear to you!"

The folding knife went 'snick' as it left John's pockets and before anyone realized what he was doing he reached down and sliced a strip off of the man's mangled left ear. The man screamed again and the rage filled father repeated, "WHERE IS HE!"

"Oh God! Please! Oh God! Please, you got to understand! You don't know what they'll do to me if I tell you! Oh God! Please, don't hurt me no more! Please!"

John quickly sliced off another piece of the man's ear invoking another scream. "I don't care what they'll do to you! You'd better worry about what I'M going to do to you! You goddamned piece of filth! I'll whittle pieces off of you all night if I have to! WHERE IS HE!!!"

The wounded man looked up at the men encircling him, staring at him with eyes of cold stone, none of whom spoke a word. The man in the deputy's uniform equally silent. John bent over with the knife again.

"NO!!! Please!!! Oh God!!! I'll tell you!!! His name is Lucius! I don't know his last name! He lives down on the county line road!!! A white trailer with brown trim! Please! Don't cut me no more!" The man began to sob. Mike began to question him more closely about the precise location of the trailer the man named Lucius lived in. When he finished he spoke into his radio, relaying the information to the sheriff out on 27 who said he'd have a couple of cruisers go there immediately.

Their immediate questions answered the men wrapped cloth around the dog chewed arm and hand of the man then cuffed him. After conferring with Jimmy they decided they were closer to the federal highway and would go out that way. Men began to cut poles and rig litters to transport the dead.

John helped lift the leader of the kidnapers onto a litter and winced. Miguel looked at him and asked, "didn't you say you were hit? I don't see any blood on you but you seem to be hurt. Turn around."

John did as he'd been told and Miguel whistled, "Madre Dios! There's a hole in and out of your jacket here John! Take it off!"

He unbuttoned his jacket, wincing as he pulled it off his shoulders, afraid to see what lay underneath. Miguel scrutinized him closely and frowned.

"What is it?" John asked, afraid that he was going to tell him.

"John, there is no hole in your shirt but there's two holes in your jacket. No sign of blood either? I don't understand this. Let me see your jacket."

As tension bled off John began to shiver in the rain and wind but he handed his jacket over to the other man. Miguel stuck his finger in one hole and poked it out another then said, "ahh!" Reaching into the inside pocket he took out a stainless steel flask, turning it over in his hands while he examined it, then handed it to John with the statement, "Here is the secret of our iron man!"

John took the flask and turned it over finding a long deep groove streaked with copper across its middle. "Son of a bitch!" he said with a sigh of relief. "Must have hit at a fairly shallow angle to have only ricocheted across the outside like that instead of penetrating. I'd have been in a bad way if it hadn't hit this flask. Glad it didn't hole it, was a birthday gift from my dad last year. Still not sure it didn't crack a rib though. That was quite a wallop."

He unscrewed the cap and took a deep swallow then passed it to the other man who grinned at him, took a deep swallow himself, then said "The Lord looks after drunks and fools, it is said. Today, my friend, you should be glad!" He laughed as John winced himself back into his jacket.

John didn't try to load anymore bodies onto litters but as they lifted one man on to a litter he stared at him, then asked the men moving him to roll him over. He poked around the dead man's jacket then said, "I thought I'd heard a small caliber in there, that's what killed this fellow. Three shots from behind." He looked around then spotted the pistol in Melinda's holster. "I thought Brittany told me they took your little pistol when they grabbed you?"

Melinda looked at him wide eyed, her chin quivering. "They did daddy. It was in that man's belt." She pointed at their prisoner. "It fell out when Jake attacked him. I picked it up while he was fighting with Jake and I shot that man."

"I did right, didn't I daddy? He was about to shoot you."

December 18 - Renewal - Part One

"The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Ghost, be with us all evermore. Amen." The man in black holding the book nodded to the men with shovels and they began to fill the grave as large flakes of snow began to fall thickly about them. John would have as soon used the backhoe to put the dirt back like it had been used to take it out but the other men thought it more fitting that Rick's fellow posse members do it themselves.

When the hole was filled and the carefully cut squares of sod replaced over the top the men put their shovels in the cart. "I'll be glad never to have to do this again" Sheriff Freed said. "I carry these men like weights on my soul."

Miguel put on his coat and began to button it. "My friend, every man of good conscience who must involve himself in such matters feels the same. It is not given to us in times such as these that we may be safe from all hazards. Our friend Richard chose to join the posse of his own free will knowing there would be dangers but knowing as well that men must band together in unsettled times to protect their loved ones. It could have been any of us."

The men walked out of the graveyard towards the church. A community meal had been collected and large pots of hot coffee to warm those chilled by the fifteen degree weather and falling snow. John, Mike, and the Sheriff collected cups of the steaming brew and went to a table to go over the paperwork. As Mike began to sort the papers John asked "So how many brothers does Archie Lauren have and where are they?"

The Sheriff quirked an eyebrow and replied, "So you figured that one out did you?"

"Hell Sheriff," John said tersely, "he looked like him and who else would it have been? Doesn't take a rocket scientist to put two and two together."

"Well, fortunately for us there were only two Lauren brothers and we've accounted for them both now. The father died a few years ago, their mother is in a home, or was anyway. They've got one sister who moved to Idaho. The brother you killed yesterday was Heath Lauren. FDLE has a file on him as well as Archie. Heath lived up to Perry in Taylor county. He came down from there with Wayne Stukeey, Kenny Sanders, and Denny Redman, members of his Klan cell we believe. Lucius Nelson was a member of Archie's cell and we think the last one not yet in custody or dead. Denny is the one you took into custody yesterday and he's been singing sweetly so it may be that FDLE and the Taylor county sheriff might be able to pick up a few more up there to account for some arson, home shootings, and a lynching they're investigating. He seems pretty resigned. Your... dog... seems to have taken the starch out of him."

John studied the photos of the men in the file, then said, "It's a pity we couldn't have taken Heath alive as well. I'd like to see him and his brother swing side by side. That may sound bloodthirsty, but I won't apologize. These predators struck at my family and I won't be happy until they've all hanged."

"Reckon I can understand that John. If it were my family I might feel the same way. You may well get to see Archie Lauren literally swing. We're going to force a vote on the public execution issue in Tuesday night's county commission meeting and I think this incident will put us over the top on it. Them university bleeding hearts are about to find themselves outmaneuvered."

Reading down to the bottom of the page, John signed the report then looked up at the Sheriff. "Good. I'll be there. I don't know if I'll bring Melinda or not. Ann and I will have to discuss it. Might give her some tangible closure." Looking up he saw Rick's sister, Sally Starling, come into the room. "Sheriff, if you'll excuse me I think I'd better go and speak to Sally. She's Rick's sister. She and her two kids have been living at his place with him since the Impact."

The man got up and crossed the room to greet the woman. The Sheriff studied her for a moment then asked Mike, "Was she a dependent of Rick's?"

The deputy looked at her as well and said, "Well, she and her two kids were living with him. I think she was working out to the mall before the Impact so I expect she's out of a job now. I guess you could say she was his dependent in a manner of speaking. Rick was divorced, along about ten or twelve years ago as I recall he told me once. Don't think there were any children. So far as I know Sally will inherit his place but how she's going to support those kids I don't know."

Taking a deep drink of the cooling coffee in his cup the Sheriff said, "Probably going to be difficult to make the case but I feel an obligation here. Rick Young was acting on my behalf as a member of my posse while it was conducting its official business. We owe him something for that. I don't know rightly what I can do for her but there's got to be something. I'll look into it when I get into the office on Monday."

The line began to form at the tables so the Sheriff stood and walked over to give his condolences to Sally then he and Mike got into their cruiser and went back into Gainesville. Miguel, Ed, and Jimmy came and sat at John's table to eat. "How's Mel taking it John?" Ed asked.

"Pretty well I think. She was pretty shaky for a time after we got her home both from the fright of the thing and the cold. She hadn't taken any rain gear with her over to Rick's so she was soaked through when we found her. I think she'll come back from it alright. Personally, between us I think shooting that fella had a lot to do with that. She got some of her own back."

Miguel asked, "Do you think we're going to see more of these men? Perhaps you should send Ann and Melinda away for a while."

John's jaw took a set and he said nothing for a moment. "No, I think we probably won't see anymore of these people. The Klan has lost ten men in this affair. They've never had a lot that would actually get out and do something more than parade around in a sheet. I think they'll cut their losses. Their hard-core true-believers are very few in number thankfully and they don't expose themselves lightly. I couldn't think of a safer place for Ann and Mel to be than right here in a community that knows them and will look out for them. Look how fast we reacted when they grabbed Mel. That was their undoing actually. I don't think Heath Lauren expected us to be able to react nearly as quickly as we did. If he'd made it back to the federal highway with Mel before we could get ourselves organized things might have turned out much differently."

Jimmy smiled and said, "Hell, if it hadn't been for those dog hunts your dad and Ed here put together we'd never have been organized enough to move so fast. When the deal went down we already had our communications set up and men willing to participate. We'd cut off his line of retreat and was putting pressure on him from the other side before he even knew what was going on. Even if he'd had a radio or scanner to listen in on our traffic he couldn't have done much differently than what actually happened."

Ed joined in, "Them dog hunts and the posse tracking down them rustlers did a world of good. A big part of the reason we had so little trouble around here I'd bet. Word gets around and the low-lifes on the make will go elsewhere looking for easier pickings."

The meal gradually wound down and the men took their plates to the kitchen for the clean up. When the kitchen and meeting room had been squared away they all shrugged into their coats and went outside to go home. "Porch thermometer said fifteen degrees this morning when I left to come here this morning and the weather man said it would go to at least ten degrees tonight and it's only mid-December. January is going to be mighty chilly!" He cranked up the truck, let it warm for a few minutes and drove off.

December 18 - Renewal - Part Two

He pulled up to the house, went through the gate, and parked the truck under the barn shelter behind the tractor. Smoke rose from the stack and he smiled at the sight of it. He walked up to the house and stepped through the door. The girls were taking loaf pans out of the oven. "What's cooking?" he asked.

Mel grinned and said, "Raisin bread! And it came out great! Would you like us to bring you a couple of slices with some butter when it cools?"

"That would be nice, darling. Throw in a cup of coffee and that will very nice." Her father tousled her hair then asked, "How are you feeling today?"

The girl shrugged her shoulders than said, "I'm a little tired but OK I guess."

He nodded. "Well, that's fine. It will pass. That bread looks very good! It'll make great toast for breakfast tomorrow."

Heather said, "Thanks. It's the first time we've tried something like this. I wasn't sure how it would turn out. You've got so much wheat in buckets we decided to grind it and start making more yeast raised breads. We're even trying to develop our own sourdough starter."

"Well, that's definitely something to look forward to! I like sourdough but we never could keep a starter going very well."

John took off his hat then said, "I'm going into the living room and catch some news."

He walked into the next room and found Ann and Lisa there mending clothes and talking. Seating himself in what he'd come to call his radio chair John turned to face the women then said, "Mel seems to be recovering from yesterday as well as can be hoped."

Ann looked up from the button she was working with and replied, "I was afraid she was going to be ill after the way she got soaked and half-frozen and the fright she went through. A long hot bath and a tiny taste of your whisky seems to have melted the cold out of her. She slept until ten this morning. Brittany didn't stop shaking all afternoon but she eventually calmed down. She's very upset that she let those men get close enough to grab the shotgun. She said she didn't like the looks of them as soon as she saw them. It's going to take a few days but I think they'll both come through it."

"Children like Mel and Britt often do come back from these sorts of experiences if they're not actually seriously injured or lose anyone that is close to them." Lisa explained, "Mel may well have nightmares for a time as her subconscious hashes it all out but I expect those will fade in time. Keeping them busy and active will help a lot. Looks like Heather will take care of that. She's on a real tear with this baking thing lately. It seems to have really fired her imagination. I wish I'd have tried to get her interested in cooking years ago! At the rate those three are going they'll be wanting to set up their own catering business."

John grinned, "Well, I don't know about catering but if they're willing to make a go of it I'm willing to set them up in business. At least a small one anyways. With the excitement of the day yesterday I wasn't able to tell you I made the deal with Eddy. I'll pick up the hogs Christmas Eve night. The goslings we'll get come Spring. We're getting enough corn to carry them through till next summer but

the rest of their needs we'll have to come up with ourselves. The feral dogs left around here had better watch out - they've suddenly become a resource to be exploited."

The women smiled and looked at each other. "What will you have?" Ann asked Lisa, "The goose girl or the pig girl?"

Lisa giggled. "This isn't what I envisioned Heather doing last Spring but this may do them some good. Her grandfather would be pleased."

The women fell to discussing the possibilities so John turned to his radio, punched the power button and began to scan the frequencies. Radio Moscow was midway through their English language news service.

...fighting in Northern Iraq between Turkish military forces and combined Kurdish and Iraqi forces is being hindered by deep snow over the battle area. In a terse communiqué released by the foreign ministry the Turkish government rebuffed the demands by the United States to withdraw troops from the disputed region stating that Turkish military action there was in response to viable threats to the internal security of that nation. Iranian government officials have not yet responded to the latest American communiqué on the subject of their troops inside of Iraq. Russian foreign ministry officials are acting as intermediaries between the two nations.

In a statement released today the foreign ministry of the United Arab Emirates the newly risen leader of that nation Sheikh Saladin bluntly stated "The internal problems of the nation of Iraq should be left to the people of Iraq and to her neighbors. The United States has no role to play in this area and should withdraw its forces." No response to this statement has yet been released by the U.S. Government.

In Brazil military strongman General Juan de Leon, acting at spokesman for the military junta now in charge of that beleaguered nation, again stated that trials of suspected rioters and resistance figures by military tribunals will continue. The governments of Chile, Peru, Ecuador, Bolivia, and Paraguay have protested the high handed tactics of the new military regime in Brazil. The government of the United States has released no statement about the matter. It is thought the new Brazilian government may be officially recognized by the U.S. as early as next week.

Others matters concerning the U.S. is the ongoing struggle between the U.S. Federal government and the state governments of a number of Western U.S. states such as Idaho, Montana, Wyoming, Nevada, Colorado, North and South Dakota over administrative control of lands owned by the Federal government. Sketchy reports have reached Europe of open strife between groups in favor of direct administration of these areas and Federal forces with rumors of a number of deaths being unconfirmed at this time.

"Ha!" John snorted, "You can trust the Russians to try to maximize any little division within the U.S. they can find. Probably nothing more than a fist fight in Nye county, Nevada and they'll have it as the beginning of a civil war."

Further reports from the U.S. indicate that vigilante forces from the states of New Mexico and Arizona have passed into Mexico on missions of retribution and plunder. The Mexican government has strongly protested these actions to the new U.S. Federal capitol in Denver. Mexican President Vincente' Fox stated that if necessary he would station Mexican army troops on the border to stop these raids. "These

American banditos are not citizens of the Aztlan principality and have no legal business within the Mexican state. If they continue their depredations we will be forced to bring them to justice."

This has been the English language service of Radio Moscow. Further news will be broadcast 2000 hours Greenwich Mean Time.

December 25 - Christmas - Part One

“Cool!” said Melinda and Brittany as they examined the pigs in their stall in the barn. “They’re all for us?”

“For us?”, Heather said dubiously as she eyed the squealing hogs pushing against each other to get their share of the feed that John had just put down.

John grinned and said, “Well, actually just the two females. The other two are castrated males and they’re for the family. As soon as the sows come into heat Eddy will bring over one of his boars to breed them. When they litter you’ll be in business.”

“We’re going to be pig farmers?” Heather asked incredulously.

“Oh Heather” Melinda said exasperated. “Pigs are sooo cool! You should see the little piglets when they’re young! They’re sooo cute. You’ll like them. And WE get to keep the money! Butcher pigs sell for a lot don’t they daddy?”

“Well, we can hope, darlin’.” Her father replied. “You three will get to keep the PROFITS once the expenses have been deducted. How well you manage them will determine how much profit y’all make.”

“But they stink worse than the goats do!” Heather lamented.

Her mother and father laughed and Lisa said, “That’s the smell of money dear. Just keep reminding yourself that’s the smell of money. You’re lucky Uncle John is letting you keep the profits. When I was your age I had to feed the stock for just my normal allowance – not that it amounted to much, I can tell you that! Your grandfather was a big believer on keeping children short on pocket money but long on hugs and kisses.”

“When do we get the goslings daddy?” Melinda asked excitedly.

“Well, that rather depends on the geese, sugar” Her father explained. “Eddy – that’s Mr. Morganstern to you three – says we can expect them in late March or Early April. They’re Chinese Weeder Geese. Supposed to be very efficient at getting most of their feed from range with only a little grain on the side. I’m not sure what they’ll butcher out to but he says they lay well.”

“How come you changed your mind daddy? I thought you said we weren’t never going to have geese?”

John’s faced clouded up at the question and he hesitated a moment before answering. “Well, Mel, I reckon you can thank your mother for that. She insisted that y’all should have a backup plan in addition to the pigs and since we’re already doing chickens and I won’t have a guinea on the place she and Lisa decided geese were the answer. I was outvoted. All I can say is that Mr. Gander had BETTER be a perfect gentleman if you want to stay in the goose breeding business. Do you understand?”

Melinda cut her eyes at Brittany and Heather then said, “Yes sir, I understand.”

Her father looked down into his coffee mug and observed, “I think I’m about due for a refill. How about you guys?”

“We ought to be checking on that ham and getting the turkey ready to go into the oven Lisa” Ann said, “At least this year it’s cold enough that cooking a big meal will feel good. Going to be quite a crowd for Christmas dinner this year.”

“It certainly will be by the time Judy and her kids show up, the Stricklands, and Mike’s family. We’re going to be bursting at the seams!” Lisa smiled, “I have to admit, I’m kind of excited. I’ve always loved big Christmases like we used to have when I was a girl. The house full of people, a smell of wood smoke in the air, snow on the ground. It’ll be just like back home in Ohio.”

John grunted, “I wish all of this snow was IN Ohio, but it’ll be good regardless.”

The parents left the barn for the house leaving the three girls to observe their new charges. After the door shut Brittany asked Melinda, “Are the geese something we shouldn’t ask Uncle John about? He seems a little touchy about them.”

Melinda giggled then said, “Well, you probably shouldn’t. Daddy is embarrassed about it and never discusses them but if you’ll both promise NEVER to say anything in front of him I’ll tell you why.”

The girl refused to say anything further until both the other girls had solemnly promised never to say a word to anyone.

“Well,” she explained, “it’s like this. Dad has this friend by the name of Pete Finnegan who lives up in High Springs. They’re always trying to talk each other into trying new things and once about five years ago Mr. Pete up and got geese. I can’t recall what breed they were now but they were really big and snow white. They were really beautiful and they’d eat corn out of my hand. Then when they were about a year old the gander – that’s the male goose – started feeling his oats and getting really mean. He never bothered me or mama but every time we went up there he tried to attack daddy. Well Mr. Pete kept telling daddy that if he’d just be friendlier with him he wouldn’t attack him so much. He said the gander never attacked him because he fed him every day. So one time when we were there he gave daddy a bucket of corn and told him to let the gander eat some out of his hand. Daddy threw some on the ground then bent over and stuck his hand out full of corn at the gander. Well, the gander acted like he was going to take some of the corn out of his hand but then reached up and bit daddy’s nose!”

The girl started laughing so hard she couldn’t go on. After a moment she collected herself enough to finish her story. “You should have SEEN that! Daddy was using language that mama always scolds him for using and chasing the gander all over the yard with an axe in his hand! Mr. Pete was chasing after daddy yelling at him not to hurt his bird. Mama and Miss Jeanie, Mr. Pete’s wife, were chasing after Mr. Pete yelling at him not to chase an angry man with an axe in his hand! Everyone but daddy was laughing so hard that we could hardly stand up. Daddy never did hit the bird. Said his eyes were watering too bad to see clearly. Later Miss Jeanie told mama that the gander attacked Mr. Pete all the time and they were planning on eating him for Christmas. Mr. Pete had told daddy a story as a joke. I’m not sure if mama ever told him the truth or not. You should have seen daddy’s nose. It was all black and blue and looked like he’d been in a fight or something. After that daddy always swore we’d NEVER have geese for as long as he lived. I was really surprised when he said he was giving us goslings.”

December 25 - Christmas - Part Two

Heather eyed the pigs suspiciously and asked, “Do you really think we can make money from raising and selling pigs and geese?”

Brittany spoke up and said, “Well, I used to make money with my rabbits. Oh, it was never a lot but I paid for all of my expenses and had enough left over to pay my own way to Disney World last year when my church group went. Probably could have made more but daddy, my daddy, wouldn’t let me keep more. I’ve never raised pigs but I’ve seen what goslings sell for and they go for a lot. MaryBeth at church used to decorate eggs, not Easter eggs but really fancy decorations on blown eggs. She called it ‘pysanky’ or something like that. She used goose eggs and said she paid over a dollar piece for them. That’s what a whole dozen chicken eggs used to bring.”

“Daddy paid fifty dollars apiece for our two feeder pigs last year.” Melinda explained. “That was before the Impact so I’m not sure what they’ll bring now but if we can find a way to feed the sows until they litter I’d be willing to bet feeders would bring a good price. If you pasture them they way we do pigs aren’t a lot of work really. While the weather’s really cold we’ll have to keep them in the barn more so we’ll have to muck out their stall when it needs it but that and feeding is about all we’ll have to do. Come Spring the heavy work will be a lot less. I bet we can use the buttermilk and cheese whey to mix with their corn. Maybe any left over skim milk too.”

The older girl shrugged her shoulders and decided to accept the situation. “Well, maybe we will make some money from it. Mama and daddy seems to be on a real kick for me to have a ‘farm life’ like mama had when she was a girl. At least it’ll give me a reason to come over and see you guys a lot.”

“Will you and Aunt Lisa be moving back home soon?” Melinda asked.

“Well, maybe not really soon but dad’s got workmen repairing the house. The looters did a lot of damage but dad says the house is still basically sound. He think they’ll have it repaired before long but the contractor is having a hard time getting materials so he can’t say for sure when he’ll be done. I’m not sure if we’ll actually move back or not. Daddy and mama are dead set on selling the place and moving out here somewhere as soon as they can.”

“I sure hope it’ll be somewhere close by” Brittany said, “I’d miss you if you moved far away. Maybe your parents will buy my parents house – my house now I guess. Though with your dad being a doctor and all it might be too small.”

“Don’t you want to move back into your house Britt?” Melinda asked.

“Well, no, not really. Not with mama.... Well, not after what happened and all. I’m not sure what’s gong to become of it though. Uncle John said he figures it’s going to come to me but the court has to decide. He’s trying to get me a ‘guardian and lightem’ or some such to speak for me to help me get everything straightened out. I told him I’d rather have him speak for me but he said some people might think there was a ‘conflicting interests’ and it would be better that someone who wasn’t responsible for me to speak for me so that no one would think that he tried to take advantage of me. Aunt Ann and Aunt Lisa have been trying to get in contact with my Uncle Joe and Aunt Sarah in Maryland but they haven’t been able to reach them. Uncle John said he’d try to have the sheriff contact them but I haven’t heard if anything’s come of it or not.” Brittany looked unhappy at the recollection of her vanished family leading the other girls to cast about for something to distract her.

“Maybe mom and dad would buy your house.” Heather said, “Then you’d have a lot of money to go to college with! Mom always complained about how long it took to pay off dad’s student loans. You could go to college and not have to take any loans.”

“Me go to college?” Brittany said incredulously. “Nobody in my family ever went to college, I don’t think.”

Heather shook her head with a rueful grin. “I never had a choice. Mom and dad have always said I was going. They’re always pushing me to take the most difficult classes because they said they’d be good preparation for going to college. I told them I didn’t want to go and they said, ‘you can go to college or you can go to jail. Those are your choices.’ After some of those math tests I’ve wondered if going to jail would be better.”

“Mama and daddy say I’m going too. Daddy says that by the time I’m his age life in America will be segregating into serfs and aristocracy and I’d doggone well better be an aristocrat which meant I had to go to college. They’re always pushing me to learn math too. College must be nothing but math and science to hear daddy talk about it. Oh, and languages. Mama is always pestering me to learn some language or other.”

“Your parents are mighty particular about schoolwork” Brittany observed. “Aunt Ann is a lot pushier about it than my parents were. I kind of like it in a way but it’s hard sometimes. I’m two years older than you but you’re doing the same math and English work that I am. Do you really think I can go to college?”

Melinda said proudly, “Daddy says that anyone who really applies themselves can go to college. Then he really leans on you to get your work done. He keeps saying that self-discipline is the only discipline but he seems pretty handy with it if I slack off.”

Brittany said, “He seems like he doesn’t much care to me, other than encouraging us to do our work.”

“That’s because he’s been so busy these last few months.” Mel explained, “When things start to slow down he’ll drag us all into one thing after another. He’s big on what he calls ‘practical everyday problems.’ By this he means making you do all the thinking around the place and he just checks behind you to make sure you haven’t made a mistake. This year I had to figure all the feed formulas, how much of what to mix together to get the right proportions. Then I had to figure how much per day per animal we should feed, then had to figure how much we should buy per animal and had to divide that by how much we could store. He showed me how to do it all, then checked my work. When I had it all figured out he took me to the feed mill and had me explain it all to the miller and make our orders. It tickled him so much he brought his wife and two sons out, I think they were a bit older, and asked me to explain it all again. When I did he looked at them and said, ‘how come you two can’t do that?’ I was kind of embarrassed but daddy just sort of grinned like he does sometimes when I make him proud then we stopped in town on the way back and he bought me this huge banana split. I was pretty proud too because the miller said he couldn’t find any mistakes in my figuring.”

Heather said, “Well, it’s got to beat doing word problems out of a textbook. I bet we could do all sorts of school problems in the kitchen! I wonder why I didn’t think of that?”

“I was kind of surprised that mama and daddy haven’t had us doing that already” Mel said, “Mama

makes me do all kinds of math problems in the kitchen. Maybe because she's gone all week and daddy works outside of the house so much. With the weather going like it is I bet that won't last though. Before the Impact it seemed like I spent as much time with a pencil and paper in the kitchen as I did with a mixing bowl. And NO calculators either! Daddy says if you can't do it on paper with a pencil then you don't know how to do it. Mama thinks that's old-fashioned but she won't buck him. I had to do the paper planning for the garden this year too. How many of what we wanted to plant, how much space per plant which determined how many rows. Then had to figure out how to plant everything so nothing would shade something else and how to make rotations and all that. It was kind of hard, but fun at the same time. Daddy and I went through books and stuff from the Extension service and we talked to the county agent. Daddy says he's getting old and his brain don't work too well anymore but it's really just his way of teaching me stuff and trying to make it fun too. I like it because we get to spend time together instead of him being outside by himself and me stuck at the kitchen table."

Heather turned and looked at the pigs once more. "Well, if nothing else, when we finally do get to college I suppose we can major in agriculture. We'll certainly have a lot of experience by the time we get there."

January 24 - Departures - Part One

John walked out of the courthouse buttoning up his winter coat. It felt strange to him to be openly wearing a pistol in the courtroom but the Sheriff had insisted on it. "You're a sworn deputy, John, you need to look the part. Wear a suit, polish your boots, pin your badge to your lapel and strap on that hogleg you favor. Them folks in the jury box need to know you're a law man, not some jumped up vigilante." Given the rapidity at which the jury had reached its verdict he figured the Sheriff must have known what he was talking about. The trial had started promptly at 8:00 a.m. that morning and by 4:30 that afternoon the jury had judged and condemned Archie Lauren and his accomplices. Their appeal would be heard the next week. If denied John expected to be back in Gainesville day after tomorrow to witness their hanging. The Sheriff had been right about that too. After a stormy and prolonged meeting of the county commission the likes of which no one could ever recall having seen before the decision had been in favor of permitting public executions in Gainesville for the first time in nearly a century. He found this nothing short of astonishing given the liberal nature of the major university town. Many institutions had been leveled by the Impact, some of which were only now starting to crash.

The snow was beginning to fall again, heavily enough to limit visibility in the declining light. He reached the truck and started it, giving private thanks it caught. Neither the truck nor the battery was really up to the kind of winter weather normally found much closer to the Mason-Dixon line. There was little vehicular traffic so leaving the downtown area proved to be easy even in spite of the impending darkness and snow. Gasoline prices were showing signs of stabilizing since the dollar revaluation (dollar DEvaluation as most called it) and was now at approximately fifty cents a gallon if you had a ration card, seventy five cents a gallon if you had to buy on the free-market. John had developed the habit of shifting the decimal point in the price one place to the right so he could determine the "real price" even though wages, dividends, and every other form of income had been revalued as well. Supposedly he was supposed to be reimbursed for his official travel but he wasn't sure if he'd ever really see it or not. If it meant seeing Lauren and his cohorts hang he'd write off the cost gladly enough.

Within a few minutes he reached the university campus and crossed it to reach the agricultural research labs and teaching halls hoping to catch Ann before she hopped the bus home. She was just putting her suitcase outside the outer door of her building when he pulled up. He got out and crossed the snow covered sidewalk and picked up her bag. "Hey lady, you goin' my way?"

Ann adjusted her hat and then gave her husband a kiss. "I thought you'd be in court longer. Are they through for the day?"

He smiled and said, "Yep. They're finished for the day. In fact, they're finished altogether. He's going to hang."

She absorbed the news for a moment then said, "I suppose it would be unseemly to shout 'hurray' but I can't help it. I never thought I'd ever hear myself say something like that but after they threatened to murder my child so they could murder my husband I won't feel bad for thinking it. It's the honest truth."

John led her to the truck just as the bus pulled up with a wheeze of brakes and a belch of wood smoke. Ann walked over and told the driver she was riding home with her husband. The bus pulled out and they followed, then went down the hill towards the health center. "How'd you get Luke to come out this weekend? Seems like he spends every weekend at his place supervising the work on his house."

"Well, wouldn't you if you were in his place?" Ann asked. "But I think there isn't any working going on this weekend. Luke said something about being hung up waiting on some plumbing. They're not very far from being done I think, the basic parts anyway. The kitchen plumbing, some drywall to be hung, and then painting."

"In a way I'll be sad to see them move out." John observed, "I'll miss all that cooking energy that Heather has been putting out. I think Mel and Brittany will miss her a lot too."

"I wouldn't miss them too fast darling. Lisa has really been doing yeoman's work on looking for a country place. In fact, I think she really is interested in buying Brittany's house. It's got the acreage they're looking for, good outbuildings and the house is basically sound. She's figuring they can just clean it up and work on developing the property into a homestead and then maybe expand the house when materials and labor become more reasonable. It's for sure they're not going to get the kind of return on their house they'd have gotten before the Impact. Do you think the courts will move on it before long?"

John shook his head. "I don't know but it could be. I ran into Brittany and Hank Gartner this morning in the court coffee shop since there was a hearing about Brittany's parents estate on the floor below me. He thinks they'll clear her inheritance fairly fast, it's pretty straightforward. Her parents had the place about half-paid for so if it's sold that's what she'll get, along with anything in the house that she wants to keep. He said he's willing to put the house on the market right away since Brittany has no desire to try to keep it and couldn't make the mortgage payments anyway. The bank her parents financed the mortgage through expressed a willingness to wait on the sale. I imagine the court wouldn't look too favorably on them trying to lean on Brittany. The Hatcher's willingness to buy the place would make everything much easier. Hank's pretty sharp though so Luke had best be willing to do some serious dickering."

Pulling up behind the health center John had no problems finding a parking space. "Well, I'm sure Luke will enjoy his country squire role if they do buy it." Ann said, "I hope they do. It would be nice to have them within a short bike ride of us. Luke's probably head down into his dictation again so I'll go and bang on his office door. Keep the truck warm!" She got out and walked across the snow covered driveway into the health center. John turned on the radio for something to pass the time while he waited. The local NPR station was in the middle of its evening news coverage.

January 24 - Departures - Part Two

Repercussions continue to reverberate between Denver and Mexico City over last week's battle outside of the Northern Mexican town of Ciudad Juarez between Texan and New Mexican National Guard units, Texas Rangers and groups thought to be comprised of Villaist raiders and Aztlan revolutionaries. Several areas on the western side of the city were severely damaged in the fighting. Mexican President Vincente' Fox has demanded that President Bush immediately stop all cross border actions by U.S. forces or he will be forced to instruct the Mexican Army to neutralize future cross border incursions by what he has termed "New Mexican and Texan adventurers." President Bush after meeting with the governors of the border states yesterday released a statement this morning attempting to ameliorate the state of tension between the southwestern U.S. states and Mexico. "We should give diplomacy a chance to lower the tension between our nations before our ability to trade under the terms of the North American Free Trade Agreement are compromised." When asked for comment the Governor of New Mexico replied "we'll be happy to trade with anyone just as soon as we've hanged the bandits who are preying on it." The Governor of Texas declined comment pending a closed door meeting of the Texas legislature today.

In other domestic news Energy Secretary Robert Hayes announced today that emergency shipment of home heating oil would be increased to the Northern Tier and New England states as the record breaking cold of the Asteroid Impact winter weather continues unabated. Priority on road and rail shipments have been given to these areas following the loss of the Great Lake ports due to the inability to keep the St. Lawrence Seaway free of ice. Department of Transportation spokespersons indicate that supplemental ice breaking ships and machinery are being rushed to the area but scarcity of such equipment due to the global nature of the problem is hampering the effort. Minnesota National Guard troops are continuing their house to house efforts to locate stranded and freezing residents in need of evacuation in the wake of yesterday's record breaking blizzard. Snowfall this winter in that state has exceeded all others since records were first kept there.

Army Corp of Engineers representatives testified before Congress today in Denver that they expect to have most Mississippi river ports cleared of debris from Memphis nearly to the sunken city of New Orleans which will allow the many oil terminals there to begin receiving shipments again as the oil companies are able to bring them back on line. Work on the terminals themselves has been hampered by the severe winter weather. Some grain shipments are already being received.

Internationally Saudi Arabia announced today that it had reached agreement with the United Arab Emirates, Sudan, Syria, and Libya on what they are calling "a set of Common Cause Accords" though details of what are in these accords were not released. Official representatives from Egypt, Afghanistan, Yemen, and Pakistan attended but have not indicated if they will also sign on to the accords. Unofficial representatives from Jordan, Qatar, Bahrain, Oman, and Indonesia also attended. The State Department declined comment pending receipt of details about the nature of the accord.

Radio Moscow announced today that a skirmish broke out along the Russian/Chinese border in a densely forested area west of the port city of Vladivostok. Chinese Army officials indicated the matter was nothing more than a large patrol becoming lost and inadvertently crossing the border. Russian army officials in Vladivostok state the Chinese crossed the border in force and were repulsed. Russia and China have had a long history of skirmishes along their many thousand mile border. Increases in border skirmishes usually reflect increasing tension between those two nations, which heretofore have had a long period of quiet. People's Liberation Army officials in Beijing stated the responsible commander would be severely disciplined for his carelessness.

Also in Asia today Philippine Navy officials report increasing frequencies of skirmishes between Chinese gun boats and armed fishing vessels in the Spratley Islands. The Philippine government is sending naval reinforcements to the area as tensions increase. The Vietnamese government is also sen... " Ann opened the door and Luke climbed into the jump seat in the back, then his wife loaded up. "I had to drag him away from his dictation again." She sighed. "You should see his office!"

The doctor grinned ruefully. "I'm afraid the profession of medicine is practiced nearly as much on paper as it is in the clinic or operating room. I see my scheduled patients in clinic or the O.R., emergency patients on an as necessary basis, and in the cracks I have to keep up with the paperwork. Somewhere in there I sleep, eat, and have a life. With the economy being the way it is the hospital has had to cut the housekeeping staff to the bone so non-vital areas like offices don't get cleaned much."

Ann laughed, "That's the truth. While I was badgering him to stop I went around his office picking up cups, wrappers, napkins, plates and some stuff that I couldn't identify and dumped it all in this office trash can and then dumped it in the can out in the hall. Well, anyway, I'm glad we're on the way home now. My office has been FREEZING. They've cut the maximum temperature down to sixty six and would cut it down further if it wouldn't cause condensation problems in the computers! I sleep with two pairs of socks on in the dorm. I don't think I've been warm all week!"

John grinned. "Well, the girls said they were going to whomp up a mighty pot of beans and bread for supper tonight. Heather's really getting this sourdough thing down. We had sourdough pancakes for breakfast this morning. Which reminds me, we're about out of syrup so I want to stop at the grocery and see what they've got. Likely won't have any real cane syrup but plain old table syrup will do for the kids. We need more hot sauce too. Beans we've got, condiments we're running short on."

Luke said, "That's serious. I like beans well enough but I need Tabasco to get them down. We'd better stock up."

John pulled away from the health center, spinning his tires slightly at the uphill light onto Archer road but quickly getting traction enough to move forward. He was getting more experience at driving on snow and ice than he'd ever wanted.

Three miles down Archer road he pulled into the parking lot of the Albertsons supermarket there were only a half-dozen cars to be seen. He stared at the front of the building, no longer boarded up but well lit and open for business. "We haven't been in here since before the Impact. Last time I really noticed the place was that riot that happened here the night we brought Mel home from the hospital. You can still see a few bullet holes there over the windows. "

The doctor scrutinized the building then said, "You can see bullet holes. I remember that riot, the police were afraid it was getting out of hand when it spread across the street to the neighboring shopping center. First we knew of it was when several truckloads of troops pulled up to secure the hospital. Captain Swift was not a pleasant man to be sure but he did keep things from getting too far out of hand in the early days."

January 24 - Departures - Part Three

The three climbed out of the truck and walked through the snow to the doors. John noticed the adjoining Albertson's liquor store was gone and now being occupied by a new company. As they approached closer he could read the sign in the window which said, "Australian Relief Authority." This struck his curiosity so he said, "Let's go in. I want to see what they're about."

Stepping through the doors he found a clean, well lit area largely empty of furnishings but with a half dozen desks and plenty of chairs. In the back of the store space he saw many pallets stacked with bags which he assumed were various food supplies. A young woman with an Australian accent that John found very pleasant greeted them at the door. "G'day! You look like this is your first time. Have you come to apply?"

Somewhat taken aback by the idea John said, "Uhm, I'm not sure. Apply for what?"

The girl looked at him rather quizzically and said, "Why, for aid and assistance, of course. Have a seat here at this desk and we'll get you started."

He looked at Ann and Luke who both shrugged their shoulders so he sat down in the indicated chair.

"Right then." She said very industriously, "Let's have your name."

"I'm John Horne. That's my wife Ann. This is Luke Hatcher, he and his family live with us."

"Very good. Do you have any children or other dependents? How many are in Mr. Hatcher's family?"

John replied, "That's Dr. Hatcher, actually, he's a surgeon. We have a ten year old daughter whose name is Melinda and another twelve year old girl named Brittany Tiersdale who is our ward. Dr. Hatcher's wife and daughter live with us as well."

"Very good" The girl said absently as she entered the information on her laptop computer. "You say Dr. Hatcher's a surgeon. We don't get many doctors in here but we've had everything else! Is anyone else in the household employed?"

He was beginning to regret letting his curiosity get the better of him and leading him into this but the idea of applying for foreign aid in his own hometown just struck him as so odd that he went on. "Yes, my wife here works for the university as an agricultural librarian. Dr. Hatcher's wife works as a trauma nurse at the clinic in Archer. I haven't been called back to work yet. No one else is employed."

"OK then" the girl tapped away on her keyboard. "This girl, Brittany Tiersdale, is she receiving any support from the state?"

"No. We've applied for it but the system is badly overwhelmed since the Impact. I have no idea when we'll hear anything about that."

The girl sniffed, "I'm afraid I'm not surprised. The social service agencies here are hopeless. Now then, all I need from you now is your home address and telephone number, if you have one."

He'd never had much use for Florida's social service agencies in any regard but somehow hearing this

pretty young girl from another nation slighting them made his hackles stand up. The fact that she was right seemed to make it even worse. He gave her their address and contact information and she entered the data and then apparently went through a series of steps in whatever program was recording their information on her computer.

"It'll just be a moment, Mr. Horne. There's a bit of a lag as the data bounces off the satellites back to home where the main offices works its magic on it then bounces it back here. While we're waiting may I ask if you are in need of heating assistance? That's not our balliwick actually but we scout for your Red Cross and United Way mates when we process our clients."

The entire process was starting to embarrass him so he said "no" rather more curtly than he really intended. Her laptop gave a musical little jingle then the printer it was linked to begin to work. A single sheet of paper rolled out and she picked it up and scrutinized it.

"Very good! The Home Office has interfaced with your national records and everything checks out. Often enough it doesn't. I have your monthly issue right here. If you'll follow me we'll get one of the carts in the back and load it up. I'm afraid we haven't anyway to deliver it for you but you can make multiple trips if necessary. I won't let anyone touch your issue before you can move it all."

They followed the girl into the back of the store where she pulled out an Albertson's grocery cart. "Doesn't this compete with the grocery store?" John asked, "Seems like they'd object to y'all using their storefront and carts and what not."

"Oh no! Mr. Horne, not at all." The girl reassured him. "It's actually in their interest. As I'm sure you know the free-market prices in the stores are quite steep, even with the devaluation of your American dollar. The welfare ration your government can issue doesn't really cover the amount that the people unable to pay free-market prices need so the foreign relief agencies like us, the Japanese, the Germans, Chile, Peru, and some of the other nations are helping to cover the shortfall until you Yanks can get back on your feet again. This keeps the hard feelings that many would otherwise have against your merchants to a minimum and also keeps your food merchants from being totally nationalized by your government. By next fall we'll probably phase out but this winter we are definitely needed."

He nodded his head, "I see" he said, his mind awchirl with the implications of what she'd told him.

"Now I'm afraid your issue is rather small for the number of people in your household due to your having a doctor and nurse living with you but your ward - Brittany did you say her name was? - helps to balance that out. She's in your state records as being fostered to you. If this amount will be a hardship for your household you can apply for a special circumstances waiver."

John asked, "Your home office seems to have a pretty complete access to American records. How did they arrange this?"

"Oh that," she said, "your government arranged that through the relevant United Nations relief agencies so that the various National Relief Authorities and Non-Governmental Relief Organizations like the Red Cross could more quickly speed aid to the necessary people in need here in the U.S. while minimizing fraud and abuse. I'm sorry to say we've had a bit of a problem along those lines but your local authorities have been very helpful in dealing with it."

"I see" he said as she indicated bags and parcels to a young man in a shop apron who began to load

them onto John's cart.

"Now then" the girl smiled brightly, "I think we've got you about ready to go. There's your powdered milk, your flour, your rice, your sugar, your dry beans, your cooking fat and because you have children in your household your powdered eggs. There's also a powdered fruit drink which contains the daily requirements of vitamins A & C. Tastes rather like your American Hawaiian Punch I'm told."

John said nothing at first but just stared at the food in the cart. He then turned and looked at Luke and Ann. Luke was stone faced, Ann looked at him expectantly like she was waiting on him to tell her something. A knot grew inside his chest and he felt his face burning. Finally he turned back to the young girl and said, "Miss, I'm sorry. I can't do this. I really do appreciate what your people are trying to do here for those folks who need it but I just can't. I'm sorry to have wasted your time. Thank you, just the same." He turned and began to walk away.

"Mr. Horne!" The girl said and he turned around. She had a sympathetic look on her face. She spoke gently, "I understand. Really, I do. You're not the first who has had... reservations. I won't try to force this on you but if you should change your mind it will be here for you if you want it."

Shame burned through him but he kept his voice gentle as well. "Thank you miss. If I change my mind I'll be back. You've been nothing but kind." He turned again and walked out, Luke and Ann following.

Outside the store Ann touched her husband on the arm and said, "John, why didn't you take that food? It could really help us get through this winter! It's not like we're stealing it. They checked us out, even with Luke and Lisa being with us we're entitled to it."

John shook his head. "Darling, I've never really thought of myself as a proud man before but just then I realized how proud I really am. These people mean well, they really do. They're not doing anything for us that we haven't done for many, many nations around this world in our time when disaster fell upon them but just now I've come to realize what a gall bitter pill such aid must be to anyone accustomed to providing for their families through the fruits of their own efforts. The fact that she was nothing but kind just made it all the worse. We're hard up compared to what we had before the Impact but we're not that hard up and by God so long as I live the Horne family never will be! I bear these people no ill will but WE will take care of our OWN. We came here to buy condiments for God's sake, not ask for charity, no matter how kindly it is offered."

Ann looked him in the face and said nothing for a moment then spoke, "Those whom the Gods would destroy they first make proud."

He said nothing for a moment, his jaw working then finally let out, "I won't deny the truth in what you have said, but a man's got to stand for something or he is no man at all. These folks aren't going anywhere anytime soon. If worst comes to worst I'll swallow my pride and walk in here hat in hand but we're not there yet. By the Grace of God we never will be. Now let's go get that goddamned Tabasco sauce."

January 24 - Departures - Part Four

The unbroken snow in front of the gate crunched as John pulled up. Ann got out, opened the gate and he pulled through. She closed it and walked up to the house. Inside they began to take off their hats and coats, the smell of baking bread and beans filling the room.

"Oh my, but that smells GOOD!" John said, "That scrawny sandwich I had for lunch at the courthouse gave up the ghost hours ago. I could eat a bear, hide and all!"

Heather came into the room to fetch the plates to set the table with. "Did you come through Archer on the way back?" She asked.

"No hon, we didn't" her father asked. "Why?"

"Well, because mom hasn't come home yet. She called a half-hour ago and said she was leaving right then but she made it home yet. I'm starting to get kind of worried. "

Luke looked at John. "Reckon we'd better go look for her then" John said, "Hopefully she's just stuck in a ditch but I reckon we'd better get a couple of rifles just in case. Stay close to the radio in case we need you."

January 24 - Arrivals - Part One

"John to base, radio check. Over." John unkeyed the mike and waited.

"Base to Uncle John. I read you five by five. Over" Heather's voice came out of the truck radio speaker a moment later.

The truck went out the gate and turned right towards Archer. After a few hundred yards John forced himself to slow his speed after he hit a patch of ice and went into a slide, narrowly avoiding leaving the pavement. "Damn it!" he growled, "I hate driving on this crap. How did y'all get through the winter up north every year Luke?"

The doctor grinned, "Mainly we tried not to drive when the roads were icy until after the plows and salt trucks had gotten out. If we did have to drive on ice or snow we had studded tires or chains, neither of which you're likely to find here I admit."

The truck crept along, the headlights reflecting from the snow covered road and trees. Finally, about a mile out of Archer they came upon Miguel's flat bed truck perpendicular in the road with its flashers blinking. Behind the truck stood the man tying a rope underneath a small red car they immediately recognized as Lisa's. John carefully pulled over to the shoulder and the two men got out. The passenger door of the flatbed opened and Lisa got out.

"Hi!" she said, embarrassment plain on her face. "I, uhmm, slid off the road into the ditch when I hit a patch of ice. Miguel was kind enough to come to my rescue."

She walked around the front of the truck and joined the two men as they walked over to where Miguel was finishing his knotwork.

"Buenos noches John" Miguel said, a wide grin on his face. "I'm rescuing one of your females - again. You should keep better track of them!"

John's face went red then he grinned himself. "Well, you know how it is Miguel. They go to school and get ideas about being independent and all. Besides, she's Luke's female, not mine!"

Luke laughed and said, "Looks like I've been remiss in my duties."

Lisa cast a level gaze at them and said, "OK, you guys. That'll be enough of that!"

Miguel said, "I think the rope will hold. John, if you'd get behind the wheel of the car I'll pull you out. I've spread sand over the pavement for traction. Really should use salt, but who has that much of it in Florida?"

The men took their respective positions and with a groaning of the big motor Miguel dropped his truck into first gear and powered the little red car out of the ditch. Once they were both on the pavement he stopped and got out. He untied the rope as John and Luke looked over the back of Lisa's car. The bumper was pushed in slightly but the vehicle was otherwise drivable.

They were considering the situation when Lisa looked up at Luke and said, "Uhhm, honey, you're not angry with me are you?"

Luke looked at her and said, "No, why? It was an accident. We nearly went off the road ourselves getting here. There's a lot of ice on the road since it doesn't see much traffic now."

His wife looked relieved. "There is a lot of ice, more than there was when I came in this morning. I suppose the dark surface of the road must have warmed enough to melt the snow this afternoon and it froze again as the sun went down. If it's still icy on Monday I'll drive more slowly."

John said, "I'm glad to see it was just some ice! I have to admit my heart was in my mouth there for a while wondering if we were going to have... trouble... again. Slick roads we can handle."

With a look of surprise Lisa said, "Oh! I'm so sorry John! It never occurred to me that my failure to come home on time might be interpreted that way. I should have had Miguel call the house for me."

"It's no big deal" John replied. "But in the future I think it would be a good idea to check in as soon as possible. Probably be a good idea for you put a radio or bag phone in your car. We're a little too far out for those tiny handheld cell phones to hit a tower."

"That's a good idea John." Luke said. "We both have the little handhelds but have gotten out of the habit of using them here in the county because they don't have enough power to get a reliable signal. If we buy a house out here we're going to have to have a stronger phone."

Miguel looked interested. "Luke are you planning on moving out of town to live with your rustic cousins?"

The doctor grinned and said, "Yes, we are. As soon as possible in fact. Nothing like a brush with disaster to show you what's important and what's not. As soon as we can get the materials to finish the repairs on the house we're going to put it on the market and look for something out in the country, on this side of the county. John's been a very gracious host but it's getting to be time we find our own place and become a more solid part of the community."

"Well then" the shopkeeper said, "I will keep my eyes open for places for you. I think there will be many homes on the market soon as the economy struggles to revive itself. Now that the government has... rejuvenated... the dollar and allowed the banks to reopen there will be many forced to sell their homes I believe. I may have something to offer you myself in a couple of weeks."

Lisa asked, "Do you think the banks are going to foreclose on mortgages? Surely that would be bad with so many people out of work?"

The man shrugged. "I think the banks must try to recoup something from their investments but whether the government will allow them to take people's homes from them for failure to meet their mortgages I cannot say. Personally, I think we will see many, many banks fail in the near future now that the economy is trying to start breathing again. The shock and paralysis of the Impact is beginning to wear off but the economic impact we are only just now starting to feel. I would not keep anything I would mind losing in any sort of institution. Eventually the failures will slow, then stop and a new world will begin to unfold but we are not there yet."

John said, "Well, I don't know about you but I'm about to freeze. Miguel, you want to come to the house and have supper with us? It's the least we can offer after rescuing our wayward nurse here."

Miguel smiled. "My friend, I accept your kind offer! Carolita and the boys have gone to her sister's place in Otter Creek for the weekend so I was left having to fend for myself. Running a store and rescuing damsels in distress I have some talent for but I'm afraid my cooking is rather barbarous."

"Very good!" John laughed, "Then let's put Lisa's little crackerbox in the middle and we'll head to the house. That bread the girl's were baking smelled mighty fine when we pulled in a while ago!"

January 24 - Arrivals - Part Two

Miguel stood and gave the assembled girls a low sweeping bow. "Senoritas, that was a most excellent repast! You have saved me from a terrible fate of eating my own cooking tonight. I am deeply in your debt!"

The girls giggled then Heather said, "But Mr. Miguel, we're not done yet! There's still dessert to come."

John's eyebrow quirked and he said, "Dessert? Sounds like an capital idea to me!"

Melinda giggled and went into the kitchen with Brittany. They returned moments later with a tall, dark chocolate cake studded with precisely ordered pecan halves. Brittany had a capped metal can that she unlidded to reveal a straw colored home made ice cream.

Miguel's eyes widened and then exclaimed "Carumba! What a cake! You made it yourselves? And the ice cream too?"

John laughed, "You should see what these girls get up to being trapped in the house for so long by the weather. I have to limit how much baking they do to keep from running through our stores too fast. If we didn't all work so hard we'd be positively rotund. Nothing like having your own cow for making ice cream. Too bad we don't have more vanilla."

"Uhh, actually Uncle John" Heather hesitantly spoke, "that's not straight vanilla ice cream. We're getting low on extract so this time we used a little of your whisky and made vanilla-bourbon flavor. You were in court so I called aunt Ann at work and she said that it would be OK."

With a look of mock outrage on his face the man whirled to confront his wife and she laughed. "Oh, don't you look annoyed at me John Horne! If you'd bought more extract instead of spending it all on whisky we'd have plenty for the ice cream."

He grinned and looked pointedly at the girls, "All I can say is that it had better be good. Now don't stand there looking smug, start passing out the goods before the ice cream melts!"

Heather sliced the cake while Brittany dipped the ice cream and Melinda handed round the bowls, giving the first to Miguel. He took a bite of the deep dark cake and closed his eyes. "Ah, yes. What a cake." He looked at John then said, "My friend, what a fortunate man you are to have such children in your household! But you are woefully short of strong backs to help you in your labors. Perhaps you'd care to trade say... Heather for my youngest son Alberto? He could help you with the heavy work and Heather could make cakes for me!" He winked at Heather's father.

Lisa spoke up and said, "On no you don't Miguel Alvarez! I've heard about Latin men! Besides, what would Carolita say?"

Miguel adopted a tragic expression and said, "Alas, but you are right senora. Carolita, she is a strong willed and hot tempered woman. It would soon lead to tragedy for the Alvarez men, I'm afraid."

Luke smiled broadly and cut his eyes at Lisa briefly while facing away from Heather. "Oh, I don't know Miguel. There may be a solution to your problem after all. Is not Roberto a man now and marriageable? Perhaps something could be arranged?"

Heather looked thunderstruck, "Daddy!" she said in a horrified tone.

"Exactamento!" Miguel said, "Perhaps such an arrangement can be made. Traditionally the girl's father would provide a dowry. What do you suggest?"

A crafty look came over the doctor's face. "Well, actually, in this case with Heather being such an excellent cook, and having somewhat less than plain features..."

"Daddy! 'less than plain features' my foot!" his daughter snorted, "Why..."

"Hush daughter!" Her father commanded, "I am bargaining with the father of a potential suitor."

The faces of all of the women around the table began to cloud but Luke pressed on intrepidly. "Actually, in view of the circumstances I suggest that it is YOU who should offer a groom's price for the bride."

Miguel looked disconsolate and said, "Very well, what must be must be. Will you accept an offer in cattle or do you require camels or sheep? Such livestock will take time to collect."

"Cattle!" Heather said in outrage, "Camels? Sheep? Daddy, you are NOT going to... to... trade me off for livestock!"

"Never did like camels" Luke responded, "Had one spit on me in Egypt once. Cattle will do. Twelve young heifers in exchange for my prime young heifer would suffice I believe..." The rest of his words were lost as dish towels and napkins thrown by the females wrapped around his head and the men burst out laughing.

"Really mom!" Heather said exasperatedly, "Did you hear that! Trade me off for cattle and sheep!"

Her mother gazed levelly at her husband, a glint in her eye. "It's just an unfortunate trait when it comes to boys, I mean men, that breaks out from time to time. If we hadn't stopped it when we did they'd be growing hair all over and grunting before long. It's just a cross that we women must bear in order to perpetuate the species."

John took another spoonful of cake and ice cream and said, "Heather, you are quite forgiven for taking liberties with my whiskey. This is excellent!"

Miguel looked thoughtful as he ate more of his cake then finally said, "I have a real proposition I would like to make to Heather, and Melinda and Brittany as well."

Heather looked sharply at him as did Brittany and Melinda but Lisa and Ann looked interested. "What have you got in mind Miguel?"

"It's a business proposition, actually. This cake is excellent as was the bread we had with our meal. As you know it is very difficult to get convenience foods of any description now. Many times I have problems even getting ordinary loaf bread. What I am proposing is to give your girls here a chance to earn some money if they like. I will supply the necessary ingredients, perhaps even some of the equipment if necessary, and the girls make them into such items as cakes, pies, and other comestibles as

would be good to sell in my store. I believe I could get quite a mark-up on something as good as that cake which would allow us both to profit in the venture. I would, of course, pay them for their work and something to Ann and John for the use of their kitchen. The girls would be able to cook to their heart's content, make a little money on the side, and I would get very desirable convenience foods to sell. What do you think?"

Heather looked excited as well as Brittany and Melinda. Lisa and Ann looked thoughtful. "Well," Ann said, "I like the sound of it but what about the health department? Aren't there regulations about home kitchens being used to make commercial foods? I'm quite sure we could not pass an inspection. I'm not sure any home kitchen would."

Miguel nodded his head. He considered for a moment then said, "I do not think it will be a problem. At least not for a while yet. Conditions being unsettled as they are many are doing things that would ordinarily be frowned upon by our health police. I will run interference for the girls should any bureaucrats become ruffled. During hard times in the past many people have prepared and sold food from their home kitchens and I am sure it is happening across the nation even now. I believe our health police will simply have to bow to the inevitable until conditions become more normal."

John had been considering the idea since Miguel mentioned it and joined in the discussion. "I think you may have something there Miguel. This could be a real family effort. I supply the physical plant so to speak and the girls supply the skilled labor while you supply the raw materials and do the marketing. For the girl's part we can deal in cash but for the house I'd like to work out a barter deal. Ann here brought home some very detailed schematics and materials lists for a small-scale methane production plant that was developed in India some time ago which have been languishing in their archives for years. I'd like to go over it with you and see what you can come up with in the way of materials for building it. You help us build and expand our plant here and we'll use it to produce your baked goods."

Miguel rubbed his chin and said, "My friend. I think we have the basis for an understanding here. Allow me to source the necessary supplies and determine how much product I'll be able to sell and we can all of us sit down and bargain over the details. I'll be happy to help you build your gas plant. Such an installation could serve as a prototype for others to be built in the community as well. A bit of capitalistic self-interest and a public service at the same time!"

John looked at the girls and asked, "Does this sound like something you want to involve yourself in? It'll be a regular job, a must be done on time and done right kind of thing? Are you up to it?"

They looked at each other for reassurance and each slowly nodded. Heather turned to look at John and said, "Yes sir, I think we're up to it. We'd like to hear Mr. Miguel's detailed presentation when he's got it worked out."

"Very well then" John said as he put his hand out to Miguel and they shook. "Looks like we have the basis for an understanding. Get back with us when you've got your data and we'll discuss this in earnest."

Miguel stood and said, "Excellent! Senoritas, that was a most excellent meal. Ladies, I thank you for your company. It's growing late so I should be off before the snow gets any deeper." John walked him to the front door where he retrieved his coat, put it on and went outside. John came back into the kitchen and said, "Well, that was a fortunate accident you had there Lisa!"

She smiled and said, "Well, I suppose it did come out alright but I've still got to get my car fixed. I'm glad to be home and out of that snow."

January 24 - Arrivals - Part Three

The family cleared away the dishes and the girls began to clean the kitchen. Luke said, "I've got some notes that I simply must go over while it's still fresh in my mind" and excused himself. Lisa helped with the dishes. John went into the living room and turned on the radio to try to find some news.

In Los Angeles today rioting broke out in the south side barrios in response to the Immigration Service sweeps rounding up undocumented aliens. President Bush made a statement about the effort... Ann came into the room and sat down next to her husband. "John, I've got some news of my own tonight."

There was something about the way she said that which made him uneasy but he kept his voice light when he asked, "Oh? What's up?"

"I got an e-mail from Carla yesterday. She's at the base in San Diego." He was sure that something serious was going down now. Ann usually spoke much more lightly when communicating family news.

"Well, I'm glad we've heard from her again. Been a long time since that first letter! How is she? And the kids and Aaron too?"

She stared at the fire in the stove for a moment then said, "It was partially about Aaron that she wrote me. She found my work address through the university web site. She never received the letter you wrote her about your dad dying and there's at least one letter that followed the first one she sent that never made it here. She's been hopping all over the country these last few months as the military moves its assets around. She said they were really trying to disperse as much of their critical functions as they could which meant dislocating a lot of people."

John considered this, "I'll bet they're worried about some sort of mass destruction attack and want to be able to cut their losses if a base is hit. She wouldn't be able to say that outright because it's a near certainty that all electronic communications are monitored now. May be why those letters disappeared too for all we know."

"One of the things she tried to tell us in the missing letters is that Aaron has never been found. She's said the scene at the wharves was chaotic at the time of the evacuation and no one has any idea what may have become of him but he wasn't on any of the ships that made it out of Norfolk, nor does he seem to have made it onto one of the planes that evacuated. As near as anyone can tell he was still in Norfolk when the tsunami hit. Officially he's still listed as 'missing' but she thinks he's dead."

He let out a long sigh, a somber expression cast over his features. "Well, I suppose it was too much to hope to think we'd be entirely untouched by the disaster. We should count ourselves lucky that Carla and the kids survived."

She hesitated a moment then continued, "Surviving is the problem now John. She says the Navy is really stripping itself in order to carry out its mission and is jettisoning everything that might slow it down. She's facing a mandatory hardship discharge because there isn't anyone to be responsible for Cindy and Neil since Aaron was lost. She wants to know if she can come here until she can get her feet under her. I told her that I'd have to talk to you. She's got to have an answer by Monday."

John closed his eyes and leaned back into his chair, hands rubbing his temples. "Jesus. When it comes, it comes in waves doesn't it? I figure that if we make a maximum effort to utilize all of our resources

we'll get through the winter and far enough into spring to start getting some real food coming in without anyone here having to go on short rations and without having to ask for charity. There's just no way we'll be able to do that if we have to add three more mouths to feed to that equation."

"She's your sister, John. They're family!" Ann looked somewhat bewildered at his response.

"Damn it! I know that!" he said harshly, "I know that. I didn't say they couldn't come here. I was just pointing out the hardship it was going to impose on everyone and... and... trying to resign myself to the inevitable. We're going to have to accept relief charity if everyone is going to eat. We've always put away more than we actually needed for just you, Mel, and myself and the livestock contribute even more but every bit of that surplus was taken up when we took in the Hatchers and Brittany. We're tapped out... Like it or not, I reckon I'll have to go down hat in hand and take that relief after all. I'll get over it... eventually... I suppose."

"Hon, I know it's hard but we're entitled to it." She said as soothingly as she could. "We won't be asking for anything that everyone else isn't entitled to. The government has always stepped in during times of disaster and we've done it for other countries for longer than you or I have been alive. It's only fair that they should do the same for us in our time of need."

He let out a long, long sigh. "Yeah, you're right. Doesn't make it any easier to swallow just the same. Going to be crowded here for a spell if they show up before the Hatchers are able to move out but we'll get by. It'll take more than that to knock us out of the race."

Neither said anything for a time but just watched the fire burn through the glass doors of the stove. Finally Ann spoke up and said, "There may be a partial answer to the problem, if you're willing to offer it to Carla. She didn't ask but she might be willing to consider it. We could let her just send the kids so that she could stay in the service. That way she'd still be employed in a good job and making a decent wage and we'd have one less person here to feed. Fostering your niece and nephew I guess you'd call it."

He said nothing for a time then replied, "It's an idea. She doesn't have to have an answer until Monday when you go back to work. Let's chew it over until then and make up our mind Sunday night. Taking in her kids would give us one less mouth to feed but it would mean I'd have FIVE kids to cope with during the week when the rest of you are at work. When the Hatchers move out we'll be down to just four but Heather's the oldest and the one who'd be the most help riding herd on the rest. But if Carla was able to stay in she'd be able to help us out monetarily and possibly benefits wise, I don't know. Of course, she could get killed too. Let us not fool ourselves about the amount of fighting our military is going to find itself involved in before matters get back to normal - if they ever get back to normal at all."

He fell silent and they stared into the fire again. John gave a rueful grin and turned to his wife and said, "Well, just when I thought we were finally seeing a clear path to the end we discover there's a valley full of problems still ahead. Let's think about it."

February 14 – Valentines - Part One

John turned his collar up as snow tried to sift down the back of his neck. The wind was beginning to pick up after a brief lull and the clouds looked pregnant with snow. The fat Navy transport appeared to float down out of the cloud ceiling like a monstrous snowflake and touched the ground in a white puff. The roar of the turbines crossed the distance and washed over him. The plane shed most of its forward velocity before taxiing up to the flight line buildings to John's left. The engines slowed into idle and a fuselage hatch opened, lowering a ladder. A crew member hopped out then put his hand up to assist those coming behind. A woman in naval uniform climbed out then helped out two children. The crew member pointed at the building in front of them. Another crew member in the plane began to hand out luggage, two duffel bags. The woman picked up the smaller bag and took the younger child by the hand. The older child picked up the other bag and they moved towards the building. John began walking towards them as they made their way to the door.

When he'd approached within fifty feet the woman looked up and recognized him. She and the children stopped as he closed the distance. He opened the door and they all passed inside. In the warmth of the building she put the bag down in one of the waiting room chairs and the older child did the same. The woman turned and said, "Hello John. I'm glad you were able to come meet us. I'm sorry I wasn't able to arrange anything closer. It was either here or Atlanta and I remember how much you dislike large cities. Pensacola has only been open for about a month."

He hugged his sister tightly and then picked up his nephew Neil and gave his niece Cindy a big hug. "It's OK Carla. Just now I imagine arranging any sort of air transport without some sort of priority must be difficult. It's a pretty straight shot from Gainesville to Pensacola. First time I've ever been to the base though. They've done an excellent job of cleaning up the damage it seems or the tsunami didn't come in very far here."

With an air of excitement the children closely examined their uncle whom they had not seen for nearly four years. He examined them as well. He was shocked at the years he saw in Carla's face and her thinness. The family did not run to thin and it looked unnatural and unhealthy on her. To his eye the children looked thin too. "Do you really have cows and goats Uncle John?" Neil asked. He'd never seen the Horne homestead.

The man smiled. "Yes, Neil, I really do. Chickens, pigs, turkeys, and a horse too. You'll see them all tomorrow."

"Wow!" the boy said excitedly.

He led them all to a table at the far end of the room away from the doors. There were vending machines in the corner and he began to drop coins into the coffee machine and punching the hot chocolate button for the kids, coffee for himself and his sister. Carrying the cups back to the table he handed them out and sat down.

"How was the trip?" he asked.

"Not too bad except for stopping at every little air patch between here and San Diego." She replied. "Ride gets a little bumpy on the way up and down." Both of them seemed to be having difficulty starting a conversation.

“You look thin. Can’t the Navy feed it’s people? Even the kids look thin.” He reached out and took her hand, turning it over to examine it.

“Well, we’ve bounced around a lot and it’s been tough a time or two.” She explained, “It’s not in the news so much but things are really tight in the military just now. Between the Middle East and Taiwan the Navy is badly stretched. It’s not always the most interesting food, but we’ve been able to eat. It’s mostly stress I think. We’ve moved eight times since we evacuated out of Norfolk. The powers that be have decided to disperse as much as they can out of the fixed bases. They don’t come out and say so but everyone knows it’s because they’re afraid we’ll be attacked here in the States. With all the base closures of the last twenty years the remaining bases had a lot crammed into them meaning that the complete loss of one could be a serious blow to our ability to wage war. With the loss of the East coast bases and most of the Gulf bases sustaining some degree of damage there’s not a lot of places for the Navy to spread out to. There’s a lot of reserve bases and other facilities being pressed into service like they haven’t seen since Vietnam from what some of the senior chiefs tell me.”

He glanced at the duffel bags in the chairs and asked, “Is there more to come later or is that all of their stuff?”

Carla looked at the at the kids for a moment before replying. “That’s it I’m afraid. Of course, all we got out with was what we were wearing when we fled Norfolk and there hasn’t been much opportunity to replace what we lost.” Her eyes glistened and she did not look at anyone but she kept her voice low and steady. “It was just as well, with all the bouncing around we’ve done we probably couldn’t have carried much more with us. The kids both have a fair amount of clothing, extra shoes, their toiletries, some toys and a few books.” She reached inside her coat and took out an envelope. She pushed it across the table to him. “Here. There’s a hundred dollars in there for whatever the kids may need. Still doesn’t sound like much to me but it should be enough until I can get the paperwork arranged for regular money to come to you. I advise you not to deposit that and to draw all future transfers out in cash as soon as possible.”

“Oh?” he asked, “Why do you say that?”

“Because I’m expecting a large number of the remaining banks in the U.S. to fail before the year is out and the survivors to be badly damaged. Information management is what I do John, I’m good at it. I see things that the news media doesn’t and wouldn’t report if they did. Just now the Treasury and Federal Reserve are moving mountains trying to keep the U.S. financial system from imploding. Personally, I don’t think they can. The dollar devaluation helped a lot but there’s too many interrelated forces at work here to forestall it for long. Don’t take on any secured debts, don’t keep anything in any financial institution that you absolutely don’t have to, and don’t keep too much paper money on hand. Keep whatever wealth you have in tangible goods. Our economic roller coaster hasn’t made it to the big drop yet.”

He smiled faintly. “Pretty much what we’re doing now. Not that we have much cash anyway. That’ll change a little now that I’ve agreed to let Luke give us cash directly. Ann and Lisa finally wore me down on that one. Their house is repaired and on the market so it’s not a burden for them. The only secured debts we have are the mortgage on the farm and Ann’s car neither of which we can quickly pay off. We’ve prepared about as well for an economic meltdown as we can prepare.”

“Good.” She tried to return the smile, not quite making it. “I’ll be throwing into the house kitty as well. Three quarters of my take home pay will be coming to you every month. Whatever you don’t need for

the kids, keep half for the house and put the other half in a canning jar or something for me, preferably in silver or gold if you can find it.”

He shook his head, “That doesn’t leave much for you to live on Carla! We can get by on a lot less than that.”

She gave him a genuine grin this time and said, “What do I need money for, stupid! I’m single and will be living in the women’s barracks or on a ship when I get back. Other than some minor expenses for toiletries, clothes and what not I won’t have anything to spend it on and no place to spend it most likely if I did want to buy something. I want it to go to the kids. If there’s anything left over you can hold it for me until I get back.”

“OK” he smiled, “I’ll let you know when the first one comes in. Is there anything special I should know about the kids?”

She looked at them for a long time before saying anything. “No, I guess not. Cindy has been a real trooper in helping out. She’s got a good level head on her shoulders and is wise beyond her years. Had to be. Neil has grown up... a lot... since the Impact. They’re good students. They’ll do what you tell them. I’m sure they’ll get along fine with Melinda, Brittany, and Heather... I’d really like to see them all playing together.”

The outside door opened and one of the transport crew members came in, looked around until he saw them at their table and walked across the room. He was a young man, red haired with freckles and reminded John strongly of Radar O’Reilly without the glasses. He looked like he wasn’t old enough to have a driver’s license. “Ma’am” he said to Carla, “Skipper said to tell you he’s about to lift.” Looking around the empty room he continued, “I can probably give you a few more minutes. I’ll tell him you were in the lady’s – if that’s alright with you ma’am.”

Carla nodded her head and replied, “That’ll be fine. Thank you. Carry on.”

“Yes ma’am” he said and walked across to the vending machines to buy candy bars.

John tousled Neil’s hair saying to the children, “How about you two keep an eye on your bags for me for a moment after you finish your goodbyes with your mother. I’ll walk her back to the plane when you’re done.”

February 14 – Valentines - Part Two

Tears ran down Neil's face as he tightly gripped his mother but he didn't bawl which impressed John. Cindy tried to sniff her tears back as she wrapped her arms around her mother as well. Carla clutched them to herself as if afraid they would be snatched away. No one spoke for a time then finally their mother said, "Now you two mind what Uncle John and Aunt Ann tell you! I want you both to keep up on your schoolwork! Aunt Ann runs a tight ship on education. I'll write you every week but mail may be spotty so don't freak out if you don't get one every week. I'll come back for you as soon as I can. I love you both very much."

"I love you too mommy" Neil snuffled, burying his face in her coat. "Me too mama. We'll miss you. Come back to us as soon as you can!" Cindy said, tears rolling down her cheeks.

She gave them a last squeeze and then gently detached them from her person. "You two stay here like Uncle John asked." She buttoned up her coat, then she and John walked outside.

As they crossed the snow covered concrete John asked Carla, "Is there anything you need to tell me that you didn't want to say in front of the kids?"

She took a tissue out of her pocket and wiped her eyes, then blew her nose. "Thank you for sparing me a scene in there big brother. I wasn't sure how much longer I was going to be able to keep myself together."

He smiled then said, "Well, I figured it would be easier on everyone like this."

Putting the tissue back in her pocket. "I don't know where I'll end up after I get back but I'm pretty sure I won't be in San Diego long. Likely I'll go back on board ship or to an overseas posting. No deceptions between us John. We're in for a fight. We slapped China down hard and she won't cross us so openly again I think but every ten cent tyrant in the world is going to try us from time to time just to see if we still can. I don't think we'll see a lot of peace for America for the rest of my career. Taiwan will probably settle but China is going to make a hard push for the Spratley's because she needs that oil. The Middle East is getting worse with every passing month if that's possible. Al Saladin is proving to be a force to be reckoned with. There's some in Mecca openly proclaiming him the Savior – no matter how many heads the Saudis lop off. Prince Sultan thinks he's doing the manipulating but Naval Intelligence thinks Saladin will topple the House of Saud sometime in the relatively near future. All I know is that he's put the wind up Naval Ops pretty bad. Bahrain, Oman, and Qatar are showing signs of getting squishy on us so our holdings in Iraq may not be secure."

John frowned. "I've been halfway expecting it to bust loose over there for years. If not this Saladin fella it would be someone else."

On familiar turf her tears were drying up and she continued with her debriefing. "It wouldn't be so bad for the U.S. if we did lose the Middle East but Fox in Mexico is beginning to think he's got the us by the short and curlies and is going to get very pushy about Aztlan. We can't come out and say it but the President is very soft on that issue. If things get really tight some of us think he may roll over on the border states."

John snorted, "Well, California may do any damn fool thing but I can't see the other border states tolerating that. They've already taken back their National Guard troops, they'll fight if they have to."

“That’s what we figure as well, but no one can see how it will come out.” She continued, “If we lose the Middle East and Mexico refuses to sell us oil we’re going to be in an energy hurt because Venezuela may decide to back Mexico’s play. We’re not well loved in the Latin world.”

He rubbed his chin for a moment considering. “Well, you know? It’ll hurt like hell for a while, I’m sure as the economy re-evolves but in the long run I think it may be good for us. It’s a fool thing to do becoming vitally dependent on a foreign resource we don’t, or can’t, control. The University has three busses running on wood burners now and working on improvements to build more. We’re building our own methane digester. They just had a story in the news yesterday about building nuclear plants over to Cape Canaveral to power launching lasers for the space program. Apparently the lasers are coming from developments out of the missile defense program. I reckon they’ll probably build nukes all over. May be that we’re finally going to have to learn to stand on our own national feet again when it comes to energy.”

She nodded her head, “You’re right. But it’s going to be a rough ride for a while. War’s coming and energy and materials are going to be tight for a long time to come. We won’t be seeing things like we saw them before the Impact perhaps ever again in our lifetimes.”

The young crewman came out the door of the building and another one leaned out the open plane hatch and waved at them. Carla wrapped herself around her older brother’s chest and squeezed him surprisingly hard. Tears began to leak out of her eyes again. “Take care of my babies for me John. Tell them that I love them everyday. See that they grow up tall and strong! They’re going to have to make their way in a hard world one day.” She let go suddenly, turned, and began to walk towards the plane. She climbed the ladder and disappeared inside without looking back. The engine sound began to build as the turbines whirled and blew loose snow around behind them. Gradually the plane began to turn and taxied towards the runway. At the end it paused momentarily and then with a rising whine it started forward moving faster and faster until at last the front wheels, then the rear left the ground and it rose into the infinite sky where it soon disappeared into the low leaden cloud cover.

After a time he turned and walked back towards the building. Inside he saw Cindy holding a tissue for Neil to blow his nose. He forced a smile as he entered the door, walked across the room, then said, “Are you kids hungry? Heather packed a lunch for you and it’s waiting in the truck. It’s a fair piece back to the house so if you want to sleep after you eat that’s OK.” He stooped and picked up their duffel bags and they headed towards the door.

“Will we be riding in a wagon to get home Uncle John?” Neil asked as they moved towards the parking lot.

“A wagon?!” John laughed, “Good lord no! At least not yet anyways. Might come to that before the end but not yet. That’s the truck right there and it’s got a good heater. I’ve had enough of my feet being cold for today.” He loaded their bags into the back of the cab then checked on the gas cans in the truck bed. It was seven hours from Gainesville to Pensacola and you still couldn’t always count on finding gasoline on the way so he’d brought enough to make it here and back without buying any. He’d also been sure to bring a rifle in addition to his pistol both of which he’d pick up from the SP’s at the gate. That much gasoline was worthy of a roadside hold up if someone knew you had it.

He loaded the kids into the truck and got out the cooler of food Heather had packed and handed out the sandwiches, cookies, and milk it contained which they received gladly. He unbuttoned his coat, got in

and started the motor.

Pulling out of the lot with the new members of his family he started the long drive home.

March 15 – Ides of March - Part One

“Daddy, would you look in the oven and see if that pan of cookies is about done? I’ve got a rack of bread pans ready to go in.” Melinda spoke over her shoulder standing at the sink washing up.

“Breakfast will be on the table in a few minutes.”

Her father walked over to the oven and opened the door. The spicy smell of oatmeal raisin cookies washed over him and his stomach growled. He took a pot holder and slid the pan out into the light, judged they were a nice shade of gold and set them on an iron trivet on the counter. He then slid the rack out of the oven and slid the rack of bread pans in. He was glad the girls only did Miguel’s baking twice a week, the place was just too frenetic with activity otherwise. He poured himself a cup of coffee and went into the dining room to join the others. With ten people sitting down every day now they were too large a group for the kitchen table anymore and had to put the company table leaf in the dining room table to seat everyone.

A moment later Heather and Cindy came in with big bowls of grits and biscuits, followed by Brittany with the sausage then came Neil with the big bowl of scrambled eggs. They were just taking their seats when Melinda came in with a big glass pitcher of cold milk. John gave the grace and the group set into to filling their plates.

John was buttering a biscuit, looking at the big bowl of grits in front of him and said, “I’ve gotten right accustomed to the farm house atmosphere of a big family all sitting to the table together. Almost like a family reunion everyday. Going to miss that when y’all move out Luke.”

The doctor smiled as he spooned sugar into his coffee and replied, “Yes, it is nice isn’t it? We’ll just have to have each other over for breakfast occasionally for the nostalgia.”

Lisa said, “Well, I for one can’t wait to get moved in. You and Ann have been very gracious hosts but a woman wants a home of her own! I am going to miss having this crew doing the cooking though. Looks like I’ll have to resign myself to being assistant cook and back up to Heather. The way she’s blossomed these last few months I think there’s no question who’s the boss cook now!”

“You just want me to do all the cooking, that’s all.” Heather poked at her mother.

“And you’d be right!” He mother replied sticking her tongue out at daughter. “You’ve shown yourself capable of doing professional work my dear, I’d be a fool not to take advantage of it. Besides, with your dad and I both working full time and more, few restaurants having reopened and very little convenience foods in the grocery stores somebody’s got to do some real cooking again if we’re to eat at all. I’ve seen what Miguel is charging for your bakery goodies in his store, we can’t afford a steady diet of that stuff.”

“Well, I don’t know” her husband interjected, “I think the girls will still need objective opinions on their work. In order to advance their craft you know.”

“In order to advance your waistline you mean!” His wife retorted, “I’ve seen the way you and John can go through that stuff. It’s only because John said they can’t use the gas stove for their commercial baking and the girls are having to learn how to finesse a woodstove that you get to eat so much of their product. They’re getting better at it by the day, so you’re snacking ways are coming to an end mister!”

John and Luke's faces fell at this but the conversation rolled on. Ann asked, "Have they set the date for the closing then? How exciting!"

Lisa beamed. "Yes, they have. It's this coming Friday. Hank Gartner is meeting us at the title insurance place at noon and is going to bring Brittany. She's very graciously allowed us to buy the furnishings except for her room with the caveat that we replace them all as soon as possible for which I don't blame her. Hank's agreeable with that. He's setting up a trust fund for her with her share of the proceeds, but I expect you all already know that. Over the weekend we'll have everything in the house moved out and the place completely repainted on the inside so it'll look very different when it's done. When the weather warms we'll have the outside of the house painted. We'll have those things that Brittany wants to keep brought here and then everything moved back in."

She looked wistful for a moment then continued, "When we bought our first house we painted it ourselves. With circumstances being what they are neither of us can take the time from work now. We did find a painter who came well recommended who gave us a very good price for the job though. Things being the way they are there's not a lot of work available so you can get skilled labor pretty cheap just now – if you can pay for it."

Luke grinned ruefully. "Well John, you said Hank was sharp and you were right! He drove a hard bargain but seeing as how it was Brittany who was getting the real benefit of it that takes some of the sting out. The mortgage lender was going to get their share regardless. It still burns me though to have to sell our old place in town so cheaply. Ordinarily I'd have sat on it longer but we're getting anxious about the financial system and were afraid if we waited much longer we might not be able to sell at all. It clinched the matter when I ran the thought past the agent and she agreed it was a good idea. That meant a substantial reduction in her commission. I'm thinking she felt a half a loaf was better than no loaf at all."

Ann frowned at this and asked her husband, "John, if the bottom is going to fall out of the economy again what will this mean for Brittany's trust? You met with Hank yesterday, is he worried?"

"Well" he replied, "actually, yes. He is. That's what he wanted to see me about. We had a conference with the judge in his chambers about Brittany's trust fund. He wanted us both involved. I was rather astonished when Hank said he wanted Brittany's trust to be invested in gold – real gold as in bullion – rather than paper investments or some form of savings account. Hank's pretty well off you know, he's an architect by profession but he told me he made his real money in the stock market once he started making decent commissions. Said he thought we weren't finished with the economic aftermath of the Impact and didn't want Brittany to lose everything or most everything in the case of another market collapse or another dollar devaluation. When the judge agreed I thought I'd fallen through the looking glass! He said it was irregular but he felt it was within his authority to allow it and if neither of us contested the decision then there wouldn't be any problems. He did stipulate though that it had to be kept in a safe deposit box of a bank agreeable to us both and that it could not be withdrawn without both of our signatures or those who might be appointed by the court in the future. Hank's already locked in a quote from a bullion dealer in Orlando and will wire him the money after the close Friday afternoon. The dealer will be shipping the gold directly to the First National Bank of Gainesville the following Monday. I was astonished at the price of gold right now even taking into account the dollar devaluation so it's only going to be a small box, I'm afraid. Hank was anxious to close the deal with the dealer quickly because he said the price has been steadily rising ever since the devaluation."

"Uncle John, I'm glad you and Mr. Gartner are doing this for me. I don't know how I'll ever be able to

repay either of you.”

Her ‘uncle’ smiled and said, “Brittany, you don’t have to pay either of us anything. We’re doing this because we feel it’s the right thing for us to do. It’s in both of our greater self-interests as we see it. Besides, one doesn’t pay these sorts of debts back, you pay them forward.”

“Forward?” she asked. “I don’t understand.”

“What I mean is that one day you’ll have an opportunity to do something for someone else that you’ll realize is in your own greater self-interest to do. That’s when you’ll pay off that debt. This is not to say you have to go out and spend your life in public service but from time to time there might come an opportunity to help someone who deserves the help and you’ll do it because it makes your own world a bit better. I’m explaining this really badly I think. I’m beginning to sound like some sort of charitable appeal. I think I’ll stop while I’m behind.” He chuckled and took a swallow of his coffee.

“That’s OK Uncle John.” The girl replied, “I understand, or at least I think I do.”

“John, if Carla, Hank, and even the judge thinks we’re going to go through more economic turmoil is there anything we can do to make ourselves financially safer?” Ann looked very concerned.

He shrugged his shoulders. “Not much, I’m afraid. I’ve moved all of our money out of the bank other than what we have to have in there to pay immediate bills and keep the accounts open. The university insists on staying with electronic pay deposits so we have to stay with the bank. Same for Luke and Lisa. Except for my retirement we don’t have any paper investments and your retirement is the traditional state plan so it can’t be touched until you reach retirement age. It’s been over six months since the Impact and the university hasn’t called me back yet so I believe I have full control over my retirement accounts now so I suppose we could pay the penalty and withdraw it but we’d take a terrible beating to do it. Between the early withdrawal penalty and the loss of value of the various funds I’m in since the Impact we’d lose years of past growth. It has been on my mind though and I’d like to discuss it with you later.”

The prospects of yet more economic gloom brought conversation at the table to a standstill so everyone attended to their plates for a time.

March 15 – Ides of March - Part Two

Eventually Ann spoke, “I forgot to tell you my news last night. Edna Glass who works over in Publications lives in Archer. She asked if we could car pool in to work together. It’s been a real burden on her family for her to stay in town all week. With gas prices beginning to stabilize and us having ration cards we could carpool into work together. Yesterday morning she found another woman, Rachel Cartwright, who works in the College of Engineering who lives just south of Archer on U.S. 27 who will carpool with us. That leaves one empty seat so we’re looking for a fourth rider. Even at fifty cents a gallon for gas with at least three of us splitting the costs we could ride in to work together and come home every night! What do you think?”

The faces of all the children brightened at the prospect but John rubbed his chin. “Well, that’ll still be a buck, maybe even a buck and a half out of our pockets every week.” Ann’s jaw began to set.

“John...” she said in a firm tone but he interrupted and said, “but I reckon it’ll be alright.” He winked at the kids and said, “I’m sure I’m not the only one who’s been missing your company in the evenings.”

“You’re a stinker.” his aggrieved wife said as she smiled at him.

“I will be by the time Luke and I get through splitting that wood this morning!” John lamented, “Sure wish I’d never cut up that old live oak out in the pasture. That big limb wood is the twistiest stuff you ever saw. It’d give a hydraulic splitter a toothache and here all poor old Luke and I have is a maul, wedges, and a sledgehammer! Even at twenty degrees we’re going to work up a sweat!”

“It’ll do you good” his wife said eying his waist critically. “Lisa’s right. You two have been eating entirely too much of that stuff the girls have been making. You were starting to look like you did when I married you until they started baking on a commercial scale. I expect to get just years and years of wear out of you yet so you need to stay in shape!”

A tragic look came over her husband’s face and he said “yes, dear.”

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THUNK - the maul sank handle deep into the oak round and stuck, the wood stubbornly refusing to split. John tiredly swore at it while Luke set a wedge into the crack it had opened. He brought the sledgehammer smartly down on it - once, twice, and on the third blow the wood sprang apart. They turned one of the halves and split it again into fourths. The pile of split wood had been steadily growing all morning. When that round had been completely split the put down their tools and took a break, basking in the sun.

“Well Luke, I was sure hoping that oak would split easier once it was frozen but I reckon not.” John sat down on a stack of yet to be split rounds.

Luke pulled out a bright red bandanna and mopped his face. “I don’t know John. Maybe it is splitting easier because it’s frozen.”

“Lord, if it would be even harder to split when it was warm I’d say let’s just roll this damn stuff off in the weeds! Wouldn’t be any way to split it short of just sawing into quarters with the chainsaw and this

stuff'll take the new off of a chain faster than any wood I've ever seen. Need to remember to try to find some new saw chains come to think of it. I've used this old Stihl more in the last six months than in the five years previous combined I think." John reached for the big metal Thermos bottle and poured himself and Luke some hot coffee.

"The problem, my friend," the surgeon said, "is that we're getting too old for this. We should have sons to do all this splitting while you and I do the skilled work. Tis a pity that we both only had daughters. I think the women would object if we asked the girls to split wood."

John grinned, "Well, why not? We wouldn't be having to split so much if they weren't cooking so much! But I imagine you're right. Not that we're not getting something for it though. Miguel came up with the last tank we need for the digester. I think we'll start putting the system together next week. Ann's got an acquaintance from the college in the Agricultural Engineering department who's going to come out and help us assemble it all. He's working on several digesters for the university, but not our model so he wants to get some hands on with it. They're going to make a big push on building them throughout the state where ever there's enough livestock to make them feasible."

Luke thought about it for a moment then said, "Seems to me that the cities should be doing the same. Everybody excretes every day. That's a lot of raw material."

John nodded, "Yes it is, but Paul says the way our sewer systems are designed they put way too much water into the system. The sewage is too dilute to make good feedstock for a digester. He says they're working on improving the systems to make use of human wastes but wholesale changes to city sewer systems probably won't happen because the cities couldn't pay for the amount of work that would need to be done."

"Sounds like what needs to be done is to have everyone go back to using outhouses." Luke observed.

"Yep, that would do it. Plenty of raw material and not too much water. Another year or two of what we've been dealing with for the past six months and we might even see a big movement that way though some of our fellow citizens would probably rather die than develop a personal relationship with their end products so to speak." John grinned and drank deeply from his cup.

Luke shook his head and chuckled. "When they see what it's going to cost them to heat their homes this year and find themselves caught between their wallets and their social mores most of them will come to their senses I think. The government will find itself hard put to get enough trained people out to teach others how to do it RIGHT to keep from spreading disease rather than having to encourage them to do it in the first place."

"I don't know Luke" the other man said shaking his head, "I'm not sure if even a staggering heating bill would be enough to motivate a majority of the American population. They've gotten much too comfortable with having everything in plenty and having it cheap. The fox gnaws real hard and I'll bet we'll start hearing plenty of folks hollering about just going and TAKING what we need. Lebensraum can be expressed in many ways."

April 15 - Death & Taxes - Part One

"John Robert Horne you are NOT taking our child to see that... that... bloody circus!" Fire flashed from Ann's eyes as she confronted her husband.

Regretting having broached the topic but resolved to see it through to its necessary end John kept his voice low and steady as he attempted to reason with his infuriated wife. "Ann, all I'm saying is she has the RIGHT to choose for her own self if she wants to go or not. She EARNED that right when she shot dead a man who was about to kill her father. Whether we like it or not Melinda is no longer a stranger to violent death and nothing you or I can do will change that. She was THERE. If it were not for the wholly unexpected and providential attack that her dog made upon Denny Redman he would very likely have murdered her after they had murdered me. I'm not saying I WILL take her to see his execution, all I'm saying is that I will offer her the CHOICE of going or not. If she CHOOSES to go I will take her - just her - and not anyone else. In spite of our best efforts the world thrust itself upon her and took away her innocence about violence and death. If she feels the need for this sort of closure then it is her right to have it IF she so chooses. Now this is the end of the matter. I'm going to go out there and bring her back in here and explain her choices to her and she will decide for herself - without interference." He let out his breath in a long, slow exhalation then turned and walked through the door.

In the dining room he found his daughter doing her schoolwork with the other children of the household. "Mel, may I speak with you a moment please?" he asked. The girl looked up, concerned about the grave expression on her father's face. "Yes sir" she said and rose from her chair to follow him.

In the bedroom she found her mother plainly upset but silent and began to worry even more. Observing the emotions playing across his daughter's face John quickly moved to assure her there was nothing of which to be alarmed. "It's OK honey. You're not in trouble and we're not going to tell you anything bad. I just want to ask you a question and I want you to give me your honest answer and that will be the end of the matter for now and forever. Do you understand?"

The girl nodded her head gravely. "Yes sir. I understand. At least I think I do."

Her father smiled. "Good enough. What I want to ask you is this. Denny Redman, the man you testified against at his trial last month, is going to be executed today in Gainesville. If YOU choose to do so I will take you with me to see him hang. It's YOUR choice and I want your honest answer. Neither your mother or I are going to tell you to stay or go. We want you to decide as you think best in this matter. Do you want to stay here or go with me."

The girl said nothing for a time but looked at her father, then her mother, then finally coming back to look at her father. "If it's all the same to you daddy, I don't think I want to see Mr. Redman be hanged."

Her father nodded and said, "Very well. It's your choice, you earned the right to make it. If you choose not to go that is the way it will be." He bent over and kissed his daughter on her forehead then said, "Go on back and finish your schoolwork. I'll see you this evening."

She looked at her mother again, said "Yes sir" then walked out of the room.

When the door closed Ann turned to her husband and said, "Well, I'm glad of that! She's been traumatized enough without her watching such a spectacle of death as these executions have become."

John let out a long sigh. "Darlin', she's made her decision and the matter is closed." He crossed the room and took her into his arms and kissed her. "Now I've got to be going. Carla's transfer should have cleared the bank by now and I want to get it out so I need to be moving. I'll be stopping by the salvage yard and some other errands on the way back so if I'm not back by six don't wait supper on me."

She crossed her arms sternly but her face lost some of its harshness. "I'd just as soon YOU didn't go either but I know better than try to dissuade you when you're resolved in your pigheaded stubbornness to go. Be careful, the weather service said we might get some freezing rain out of this front coming through this afternoon. Before you go, you need to sign the tax forms on the desk and get them into the mail postmarked TODAY so they won't be late."

John scowled, "I swear, nothing but nothing will ever hurt the godda... uh, the government so bad that they won't have their hands out to get theirs. They should owe US this year but do you think we're likely to see any of it they way they're blowing it out their butts and the shape the economy is in?"

His wife just gave him a philosophical smile and said nothing. She'd long ago become accustomed to her husband's rants about the government, taxes, and anything else he felt impeded his ability to provide for his family.

Seeing that his wife wasn't going to give him any satisfying reaction he relented, smiled, then said, "Yes dear. I sure hope it doesn't go to freezing again. The ground looks like it's just getting dry enough to plow." He put on his coat and picked up his hat then headed for the door.

Outside he detoured to go by the barn and check on the chickens in their holding pens. Their first two attempts at incubation had been very disappointing but after having Ann consult with one of the few remaining poultry specialists left at the university they'd diagnosed the problems with their techniques and had begun to achieve acceptable hatches. They now had a couple hundred birds - Plymouth Barred Rocks, Buff Orpingtons, Rhode Island and New Hampshire Reds, White Wyandottes, Australorps, and Pearl White Leghorns steadily growing large enough to turn out onto pasture as soon as the last of the snow and ice had passed. He'd just that morning taken the Leghorns out of the brooder so that it could be cleaned and readied for the goslings he expected to get from Eddy Morganstern soon and the turkey poults he expected to take out of the incubator in another week or so. He'd been carefully explaining the ins and outs of poultry breeding to the children so they could start a program of weeding out the less desirable stock from their future breeding flock and working in a number of biology lessons for their homeschooling efforts from it as well. He'd also promised birds to both Ed Strickland and Miguel Alvarez in return for loaning him several breeds of roosters he did not have to mate with the same breeds of hens he did have. So far the project was coming along quite satisfactorily.

Reassured the birds were secure and content he quickly looked over the milking stand and equipment. The girls did a good job of milking but occasionally grew a little slack in keeping their equipment clean which is a cardinal sin when using raw, unpasteurized milk. He checked behind them often enough to keep them on their toes. He also saw that he'd soon need to muck out the stalls again which made his back twinge. "I really need another pair of hands around here to share the heavy work." He muttered to himself. "Now that the Hatcher's have a place of their own I ought to talk to Mike and Stevie about hiring him out part-time."

Satisfied there was nothing needing his urgent attention he walked over to his truck, got in, fired it up and pulled out from under the shelter moving towards the gate. As he was closing it behind him after pulling the truck through he could see Jake, Andy and Bad in the pasture, basking in the sun. He'd been

working with them for the last several months to try and improve their livestock-guardian traits but still wasn't sure if anything worthwhile was going to come of it. If it didn't he'd already talked to a man down to Williston about buying two Great Pyrenees pups from a litter due to whelp in another couple of weeks and given him deposits on them. Losing livestock to predators was much more important now than it ever had been before and he wasn't going to keep anymore non-working yard dogs. They either pulled their weight or they got fed to the pigs. Except for Jake, he'd paid his freight in full forevermore. He hoped he'd managed to communicate this to Andy and Bad, but if not their replacements would be along presently.

He looked up at the sky as he headed north towards Archer and sure enough the gray sky looked pregnant with precipitation. "Just rain, damnit, just rain. I've had enough snow and ice to last me the rest of my life." Another mile and the first drops began to spatter the windshield making him scowl as he turned on his wipers and lights. A few minutes later he pulled up in front of Miguel's store and the owner came out and got in the truck. "Buenos dias John!" he said. Looking out the window at the rainfall he continued, "Well, the weather seems to be appropriate for the occasion, no?"

John shook his head. "Maybe it'll keep the crowd a little more somber this time. When Archie Lauren took his fall I was a little appalled at the level of excitement."

Miguel shrugged. "I have read that when public executions were the norm that whole families used to watch and bring picnic lunches for the occasion. I'm glad to see that Melinda will not be there to see it."

"Heh" John gave a rueful grin. "Her mother and I had quite a battle over it this morning. I gave Mel the choice and she chose not to. About what I expected but I felt it important for her to choose for herself."

"Your daughter is wise for her years, my friend. I am glad she will not be going. Were I not so unfortunately involved I would not be attending myself but I feel a certain fatalistic compulsion to take this matter to its final end." The truck turned onto the Gainesville road and Miguel looked out across the field behind the bank, lost in his thoughts.

April 15 - Death & Taxes - Part Two

The two men shared a companionable silence for the ride into Gainesville until they passed the Albertson's grocery store where two dozen or more cars could be seen parked out front. "Looks their business is starting to pick up, at least there's more cars out front than I've seen in a while. They starting to affect you any?"

Miguel studied the store for a moment while they waited for their light to change. "No. Very little actually. It's ten miles from Archer to Gainesville and many cannot afford the gasoline to come into town to shop so they come to me. Besides, I sell many locally produced foods - such as the baked goods your girls make for me. These big chain stores have difficulty in doing that, being very dependent on centrally located distribution warehouses. In time, perhaps, that will change and they will become more competitive but then they would more closely resemble me than I would resemble them. Some foods we must all import from far away - coffee, sugar, tea, spices, and other such products but shipping is now very expensive. This greatly impacts the prices one must charge in order to make a profit. So long as fuel remains costly it will be cost competitive to produce more things nearby even if the climate isn't quite as conducive for doing so as it is somewhere else much further away."

John nodded his head. "You're right about the fuel at least. If I had to pay road fuel prices for my ag diesel I wouldn't be able to farm at all. This is going to cause a serious change in the way agriculture in America works if fuel stays expensive for a long while and it sure looks like it's going to with many of the Persian Gulf states cutting back on their output to keep prices high."

"This is true John, but were it not for their actions - short sighted in my eyes - many of the alternative fuel technologies now starting to blossom such as your methane digester would not be cost effective. Perhaps Sheik Saladin believes he is tormenting us but I think he is actually doing us a great favor. There will be pain, yes, as our economy adjusts to the new reality but we will surely learn to stand more strongly upon our own resources than his. The people must still eat, they want to stay warm, and have light to see by so they will spend their money on those things even if it means they cannot buy a new car as often as they'd like or see the latest Hollywood production as often as they'd prefer."

John stopped for another red light - with so little traffic these days why did they keep so many in use? - and rubbed the back of his neck. "Hell, I don't care if gas goes to a dollar, I mean ten cents a gallon. We're going to go right on using that gas digester regardless. As long as I can grow grass and corn and have stock to eat it I'll have the raw material to produce my own fuel. If I could produce my own fuel for vehicular use I'd do that as well. Unfortunately, no one's come up with a very efficient way to use methane for mobile use, molecular weight is too light. I'd REALLY like one of those diesel-electric hybrids they've been talking about in the news lately. They showed one last night in a NOVA documentary rigged up as a half-ton pickup truck.. They didn't mention any prices though but I imagine they'll be steep. Wouldn't surprise me if they went for \$2,000 or more."

Miguel smiled. "Mark Holloway owns the Ford agency up to Alachua. We've shot doves together on his father's farm. I'll ask him what he hears from Detroit about these vehicles."

The light turned and they pulled through heading downtown. It still surprised him to see the tall gallows scaffold in front of the courthouse even though he'd already witnessed one hanging. In spite of the light, steady rain and occasionally gusty wind a crowd of about sixty people had gathered to witness the execution. Much like the execution of Archie Lauren that had come before about half of the crowd were black. There had actually been very little racial violence in Gainesville itself but this had not

stopped rumors from running like wildfire through the black and white communities about what one group or another was plotting to do. The two men got out of the truck, put on their rain slickers, snugged down their hats and joined the crowd. A bailiff passing through the crowd recognized John and said "Good morning Deputy Horne" on his way into the courthouse. Around him he could hear muted whispering starting to spread as the fact of his identity began to circulate. Couldn't be helped so he ignored it.

After about ten minutes a slow drum began to play and the gathered spectators fell silent. John wondered again why the prison system felt the need for such martial sounding music but supposed it worked as well as anything to let the crowd know how to behave by cuing them on what was about to happen. A few seconds after the drum sounded the doors from the bottom of the courthouse opened and an assembly of corrections officers marched out, not all of them managing to stay in step, with the hooded executioner leading and the condemned man in the middle. John studied him closely. He looked now less like the murderous Klansman he'd been on the day of the shootout than he did a frightened and bewildered young man. His hair was cut very close and he could see a large, purple bruise on his right temple that had not been there when he'd last seen him on the day of his trial. The drum continued its funeral cadence as the assemblage crossed the distance from the doors to the gallows between a cordon of deputies keeping the assembled watchers at a distance. On top of the courthouse and the city offices facing it he could see Sheriff's department riflemen prominently poised to discourage any interference in the proceedings.

When the executioner reached the bottom of the steps the drum made a minute, but noticeable change to its cadence and they began to ascend the thirteen steps. John tried to recall the significance behind that number of steps on a gallows but it would not come to him. At the top the officers stood Redman on the short platform on the deck facing the noose hanging at just below head level. The guard sergeant read out the charges that he'd been convicted of, the multiple deaths of his Klan cohorts, and Melinda's kidnapping, being the most grievous of them, then he read out the sentence that had been passed upon him by the court. When he finished he asked the young man if he had any final words and with a barely perceptible shake of his head he indicated he did not. How different this one is John thought compared to Archie Lauren who had glared at the crowd and gave as his last words a poison-filled diatribe against the nation's ZOG controlled government, mud people, and ----- lovers in general until at last the sergeant had silenced him. The difference between the True Believer and a young man who had not yet completely sold his soul to fanaticism and now realizes too late the consequences of his actions.

The sergeant stepped back and a man in a clerical collar came forward with a bible in his hands. He and the young man bowed their heads and prayed, earnestness written across the face of the condemned. Finally, the prayer was finished and the holy man stepped back. The young man's face came up, resigned to his fate and clear eyed now. He looked over the crowd coming it seemed straight to John where they locked eyes for a moment until the executioner brought the black hood down over his head and carefully placed the noose, snugging it up to keep it from shifting. Lauren had done the same thing, finding and locking eyes with John out of a crowd of people numbering seemingly several hundred. He had refused a hood, shouting loudly that he wanted to look at his murderers as he died and so he had, staring at John the entire time until the rope lifted him off the platform after which he never saw anything in this world again. Perhaps we'll meet again someday John thought but at least you'll have gotten there before me.

The executioner stepped back now placing his hand on the ring pin holding up the carefully weighted sandbag and looked at the guard officer. Suddenly the drums rolled and the officer nodded his head and the executioner gave the ring a smart pull from its socket, releasing the sand bag into its long, long fall

that would jerk Redman out of this world and into the next before it came to rest at the end of its rope. The sound of a thump could be heard when the bag hit its bottom and upon the scaffold the hooded figure turned slightly in the breeze, seemingly to look more fully upon John, its legs twitching. The crowd stood silently for a few moments looking upward then without speaking John and Miguel turned and began to walk back to the truck, stripping off their slickers when they reached it.

After they'd got in and cranked the motor, it's welcome warmth playing over them from the heater vents John said, "With luck and by the Grace of God that's the last one of those I'll ever feel the need to watch."

Miguel said nothing for a moment then replied, "My friend, I devoutly hope this to be true. Witnessing more than a very few such events as that I believe would be very corrosive to the soul."

Pulling out onto the main road they headed towards East Gainesville and the Recovery Corp salvage yards to find the materials they needed to build a better life for those who still retained it.

May 1st - Spring, Sprang, Sprung - Part One

The earth was soft under his feet as John walked across the plowed field. Softly whistling the Shaker hymn "Simple Gifts" that his wife had introduced him to long ago he stopped occasionally to run his hand into the turned soil to gauge its warmth. It still smelled faintly of the manure he'd sprayed on it three days before. It had been an expensive trip up into the Florida Panhandle both in terms of fuel and trade goods to acquire the liquid manure sprayer a bankrupt hog farmer had advertised in the state market bulletin but he felt it had been worth it. The first couple of times they'd emptied the gas digester of its spent feedstock they'd had to dip the effluent out of barrels with buckets to apply it to the ground which made for a slow, tedious, stinking and nasty experience. Now he could simply pull the sprayer behind the tractor and put the entire load down in about a half-hour. The wheat that had been the first crop to be fertilized with the nutrient laden waste was now a beautiful emerald green and much denser in its stand than before the application.

He smiled every time he looked across the small waving green fields of his grain plantings and the plowed earth of plantings yet to come. In the pastures he could see the goats and the greatly expanded poultry flock happily experiencing the new Spring grass. Even Dandelion the cow would occasionally kick up her heels as she filled herself on the lush growth after months of hay. It had been a long winter that seemed to him filled with death and destruction. It felt good to see life returning and the eternal promise that every Spring held made plain once more. "Been enough killing, enough dying, enough crying to last me for my lifetime." He spoke aloud to himself. "Time to see some new life and living again."

After checking a half-dozen points across the field he decided the ground had finally warmed to the point that he could plant his corn. He didn't have enough of the yellow dent variety that he'd been conserving and improving to plant as much area as he wanted this year so he'd made another expensive deal with Bill at the Archer feed and seed store to order in enough of a different open pollinated dent corn by the name of Hickory King to make up the difference and that is what he'd be putting in first. A month later he'd put in his variety which he would one day call Horne's Dent when he'd finally attained the ear length and sturdiness of stalk he felt it was capable of achieving. By isolating the two plantings in time this way he hoped that he could avoid cross-pollination difficulties. Not that having these two particular varieties cross would be disastrous, they were both good, solid OP strains but it would mess up his development program for several years. He'd briefly considered planting a hybrid strain for the extra yield it would bring but had decided against it since it would not breed true the next season which meant he'd have to buy seed again and if it inadvertently crossed with his own variety it could take years to undo the damage.

He walked back across the field, this time heading towards the garden to check on the growth of the new tomato plants he'd put in the week before. They were an exception to his open-pollinated rule in that they were a disease resistant hybrid and so far showing remarkable growth. This pleased him greatly because they had several hundred more coming along in the greenhouse destined for the Archer market along with peppers, eggplants, and other vegetable seedlings he hoped would sell well. It would be good for the farm to begin to pay for itself at last, their outgo had far exceeded their income these last several months and the house coffers were becoming sadly depleted. After a long delay to build the tools they needed to produce the products they wanted to sell then waiting for the weather to warm enough for gardens to be put in the Horne farm was finally ready to take a place at the market to sell its wares. Ann and the children had been crafting the table presentation for days and he thought it looked pretty good. His niece Cindy had proved to be an able hand with a drawing pen and paint brush. They'd even had all of the kids dress in overalls and bright plaid shirts to make a photograph of them holding

baskets of ripe, attractive produce (from the greenhouse, truth be told) with Neil in front wearing a wide brimmed straw hat holding their most photogenic Rhode Island Red hen under one arm and a wire basket full of colorful brown and white eggs in the other. John thought the hat looked ridiculous but the females had outvoted him. Silly hat or not he fancied that photograph and had an extra copy made to hang in the living room. He'd mailed a smaller copy of the photo to Carla who he was sure would be delighted. He planned to have another photo made of just him and Ann standing in front of the house pitchfork in hand, a la American Gothic, to hang beside it.

After looking over the tomatoes he picked up an empty bucket from a fence post and started picking yellow squash then moved on to cut a few heads of cabbage. A faint rumble of thunder rolled across the pasture. He looked up to see the weak cold front which had been predicted for the day making its approach. He judged he had enough time to finish his gathering before the advancing rain made it to him so he went back to his task. When his bucket had reached its capacity he left the garden and walked to the house entering through the back door to set the bucket down on the counter next to the sink. A drink of water from the tap and then back outside again, this time heading towards the orchard. The wind was beginning to kick up stray leaves when he arrived to scrutinize the trees that had not yet leafed out. Mostly they were his citrus and other sub-tropical fruits and he knew that eventually he'd just have to grasp the nettle and root them out. Most of them were only hardy to the mid twenties with a few able to survive as low as ten degrees for short periods of time but none had been intended to survive in areas reaching zero degrees. The minus four degrees they'd achieved in January had been just too much. He shrugged his shoulders in resignation and decided that after he'd gotten the corn in he'd get out here and get them out. He was going to miss the oranges but eventually he'd have new ones. Citrus was again going to be a rare and expensive treat for everyone, even for those that lived in Florida, for years to come. This winter had broken every cold weather record in the state and he hoped that he'd never live to see a such a season again.

The rain finally arrived and began to pelt itself across the land so John started moving towards the gate. On the way out he glanced over at the apple, pear, peach, and plum trees to see if he needed to thin the fruit - not yet but soon. As disastrous as the severe winter had been for his sub-tropicals it had been good for them. He'd never seen such blossoms on the apples before and even the three plum trees which had never before been more than middling indifferent in their performance had been covered in blossoms. The usual late spring freezes had taken most of the earliest blossoms but it looked like they'd still get plenty. The blueberries and blackberries had run riot as well and the buds on the grape vines were waxing fat.

A particularly hard gust of wind took the hat off of his head so he had to trot to catch it before it ran off into the pasture and the rainwater ran cold down the back of his neck. Retrieving his hat he went into the workshop and began to service the push seeders he used for corn planting. They were two old Planet Jr. units that he'd bolted into an impromptu frame so they'd stay a uniform distance apart as he walked the rows with them dropping seed. He figured he could plant the entire five acres in just a couple of days if he worked steadily and the weather cooperated - which was never a certain proposition. If he wanted to expand the planting even more next year he'd need to look into a tractor mounted seeder but for now he thought he could get by with what he had. Come harvest picking the corn ears would be a family affair the way it used to be before mechanization rendered the practice obsolete. He was even considering having a husking bee and inviting the neighborhood to participate with a barbecue at the end. The thought made him laugh out loud and he remarked, "This is turning into Little House On the Prairie! Next thing you know Mel is going to start calling me Pa!" He grinned as he greased the axles and began to reassemble the machines.

He finished with the seeders and they made a measured tick-tick-tick sound as he pushed them across the floor. He put away his tools than began to putter about the shop sweeping the floor and generally neatening up. He really wanted to go into the house and warm up the shortwave but Heather was over today helping the kids bake a cake and make goodies for his and Ann's wedding anniversary celebration tonight. He wasn't supposed to know so he figured he'd best wait a bit before going in. Ann had observed last night when she was writing down upcoming events on the calendar in their bedroom that May 1st was now going to be the start of a chain of celebrations across the summer. Their wedding anniversary was May 1st, Mel's birthday was May 13th, Cindy's birthday May 30th, Neil's June 17th, Brittany's July 4th (a double celebration), Ann's July 21st which was going to make for a lot of celebrating this year. He had to admit he was looking forward to it though he'd have to keep up his traditional pretense of being uninterested.

May 1st - Spring, Sprang, Sprung - Part Two

The thought of birthdays reminded him so he casually looked out the door of the shop to see if any of the kids were about then closed it. He went into the lumber room in the back and moved a stack of old boards leaning against the wall to reveal a bright red mountain bike and matching bike trailer. It was Mel's birthday gift. The bike wasn't new but it looked new. He'd bought it at the Recovery Corp salvage yard, then stripped, rebuilt and painted it. The little trailer it pulled he'd built from an old baby carriage with big wheels and he figured if she kept her loads to sixty pounds or less it should hold up pretty well. At eleven she was outgrowing her old bike and was ready to step up to an adult sized machine, providing the seat was at its lowest adjustment. Her old set of wheels would be rebuilt and painted for Neil who was very close to being big enough to properly sit it. He had two more bikes similar to Mel's in the overhead rafters for Cindy and Brittany awaiting their turns on the workshop bench and was casting about for materials to build carts for their machines as well. "Beats hell out of giving them computer games and DVD players" he said to himself. The paint on Mel's bike seemed to have cured well so there was now just the matter of lubricating what needed it and it would be good to go. He carefully replaced the boards to conceal it and left the workshop.

He was walking towards the barn when a sheriff's cruiser pulled up to the gate so he went to the gate instead. Mike Daniel's got out and closed the door. "Morning John!" he said volubly.

"Good morning Deputy Daniels!" John said back. He noticed a tear in the left sleeve of Mike's uniform and asked, "You have to work for your wages last night?"

"Ha ha" Mike came back. "Yeah, we had some Recovery types in town last night drinking up their wages and getting into fights. Speaking of working, you want to pin your star back on? The Sheriff is looking for new deputies. I know you're kind of old and used up but you showed some talent for the business. He might consider your application favorably."

John laughed out loud and said, "Oh no! I am reetired from the law! I'll leave it to you young bucks. I'm a farmer now and happy for it. Getting to be too old to be busting up bar fights. I'd rather be doing the drinking."

Mike snorted, "Wouldn't half surprise me to find you've got a still tucked away in their someplace and the girls working it!" He chuckled at the thought.

"Now Mike" John said with a grin "you know I'd never do anything illegal like that! At least not before you gave me the idea anyways!"

The both laughed then John asked, "What brings you by this fine morning anyways that you have me standing out here in the rain?"

"Kate told last night you wanted to talk with me so here I am!"

"Well, as a matter of fact I do want to talk with you. Let's go up on the porch and get out of the wet." Mike stepped through the gate and they walked up to the front porch. When they'd sat down John said, "I'd like to hire Stevie part-time to help me out with some of the heavy work around here. Wanted to speak with you first before I asked him."

Mike studied the hole in his sleeve which looked more like a cut than a tear then replied. "Sounds good

to me. Lord knows we owe you anyway and it's not like he's got a ton of work to do at home. How often do you need him?"

Brittany stepped opened the front door and stuck her head out. "I thought I heard voices out here. Good morning Deputy Daniels. Uncle John, can I bring you two something to drink?"

"I think a couple of cups of coffee would be swell, Britt" John said and she closed the door to fetch them.

"Well, Mike," John continued, "I was figuring about two days a week to start would probably do the trick. Week days, we're about to start setting up at the Archer market now that the weather is warming and some of the new hens are coming into lay. Be mostly stuff like mucking out the stalls in the barn, splitting wood, helping me fell trees and any sort of heavy work that needs doing. All these girls in the house and just me to do the heavy work is starting to wear me out. I'll pay him sixty cents an hour in cash or in kind, however y'all want it and throw in meals while he's here."

The other man nodded his head. "Sounds very fair to me John. How about we deduct the price of the eggs y'all have been giving us from his wages and you can give him the rest in cash. It'll do him good to work for his pocket money. He's been getting kind of wild lately. I've been half afraid he'd take off on us and go to Texas to get involved in that Mexican mess. Those media idiots make it sound way too romantic to suit me. I'll discuss it with him tonight."

A glint came into John's eye and he said in mock seriousness, "Sounds good, but just you warn him not to be chasing any more of my girls or I'll have to break out my shotgun!"

Mike burst out laughing. "Oh, you DON'T have to worry about that! When it got out what he and Heather had been up to I had him half-convinced that you and Luke were about to come right over with shotguns and a preacher! I wore a switch out on his behind so I think he'll think twice and three times before sweet talking any more of YOUR girls."

Both men were still chuckling when Brittany came back with their coffee. "What's so funny?" she asked. This made the men laugh even more and John said, "Just something between men Brittany. Heather about got that cake finished so I can come into the house? I want to hear the news before it quits raining."

A look of surprise crossed her features and she said, "You weren't supposed to know about that!"

"Child," John said laughing along with Mike, "there's a great many things I wasn't supposed to know but sooner or later the truth will out!"

June 7 - Summertime - Part One

John went down the hallway knocking on doors and saying "Time to get up! Last one up gets no hot water!" which was the truth. Their old water heater was beginning to show its age from ten months of higher than normal usage and was no longer responding as fast as it once did, even with half of the family bathing at night. At the end of the hall he went into his room and handed his wife her coffee. She stretched and yawned and looked blearily at him over the rim of her cup as she took a sip. "Is it really necessary to be up at 4:30 on a weekend John?" she asked grumpily.

Her husband grinned and poked her in the ribs causing her to squirm and nearly spill her coffee. "This is a working farm, woman! You get to sleep late on Sundays - at least till dawn anyways. We've got all the usual morning chores to get through and the truck loaded and be on the road in time to set up and ready to go for the 7:30 market open. Most of the business gets done in the first two hours so if you're late you're out of luck. Better hop to it, the kids can't get their baths until you've had yours."

Ann got up, taking another sip of her coffee and stared moving towards the bathroom muttering "grump, grump, grump" as she went. In the kitchen Heather was putting the water on for the grits and beginning to mix the biscuits. She was visiting them for a week after having a falling out with her mother over her school and social life. For all of her complaining about raising livestock John thought she missed the farm atmosphere and the large family feeling. With the household grudgingly forcing itself into motion he slipped on his hat and went out the kitchen door towards the greenhouse where the truck was backed up and ready to load. It was past the traditional time for starting gardens in North Florida but since the Impact there had been a gardening boom like had not been seen since at least the Second World War with its Victory Gardens. As a result they had not been able to keep up with the demand for vegetable bedding plants, much to their delight since they made a fair profit from the trade. The usual hot Florida June weather had also not materialized, the highs were still only reaching the low eighties, which was making for very productive gardens which he felt might account for part of the new found interest in growing your own food. That and a difficult winter of getting anything to eat that one could afford.

In the greenhouse he began slipping the trays of starts into the racks in the back of the truck. He worked steadily and soon had all of the seedlings loaded. He pulled the truck around to the barn and hooked up the stock trailer that would carry the eggs and produce then pulled around in front of the workshop where the goods were waiting to be loaded. All of their new chickens were laying now, in addition to their older birds, so they now gathered, washed, and packed two hundred eggs a day. They sold them all too, every weekend at the market except for twenty five dozen he sold to Miguel. Those were wholesale so they made less profit on them but John felt it prudent to have more than one outlet for their goods so wrote off the lost profit as insurance. He'd found a good source for ordering new egg cartons and had them custom printed with a Home Farm label that Cindy had designed. So far they were selling very well and John was beginning to consider expanding into one of the farmer's markets in Gainesville where they'd reach a more affluent clientele.

First into the trailer went four crates of live roosters - now all prime eating size. He was somewhat surprised by the number of live birds they sold but it seems that Gainesville's large ethnic population not only had no problem with butchering their own birds, many preferred to. This was fine by him because he'd never cared for plucking chickens and did so only as a necessity of disposing of spent hens and surplus cockerels. He laid a precut piece of plywood down on top of the cages then loaded cases of eggs, another layer of plywood and in went the vegetables. They didn't sell as much produce as many others did, mostly just the surplus from what they didn't eat or preserve themselves. Next year

he figured to perhaps expand that area once he'd had a chance to study it a while. He was just finishing with the last of the produce when he saw Melinda and Cindy come out of the house heading for the barn - one to milk Dandelion, the other to feed the rest of the stock.

After discussing the matter with Ann they had decided to allow the kids to set their own schedules for who milked, who fed, and when it would be done with the proviso that it had to be done regularly, the same time every day and without fail - lapses would be sternly corrected by mass denial of privileges which served to motivate everyone to make sure no one individual was slacking off. So far it was working well. Since the kids set the schedules up themselves they could not complain about having to meet them and it allowed them to negotiate amongst themselves when one needed to deviate from what had already been agreed upon. The only impact that John had made on this was that morning chores had to be done before the truck left on market days, thus the girls coming out for a five thirty a.m. milking and feeding rather than the seven o'clock operation that they'd normally perform.

With their sale goods loaded he then set the boxes of table coverings and display materials on top so they would come out first. He found much of their display to be rather kitschy in a country sort of way, even outright corny, but he had to admit that it was effective in attracting potential customers to their tables. Ann, Lisa, and the girls had spent much time in their first several working market days studying whose tables were drawing customers and deducing why. They'd even gone and visited the farmer's markets in Gainesville to research there as well. Cornball sold produce so cornball is what they presented. They'd even developed what Ann had come to call their 'farming uniforms' of overalls, straw hats, red bandanas hanging out of their rear pockets and plaid shirts. John found the whole thing to be somewhat embarrassing but it drew customers. It was a strange old world sometimes.

With everything loaded and ready to go he went back into the house. Heather, Brittany and Neil were just setting food on the table. He washed his hands at the kitchen sink and as he was sitting to the table Cindy and Mel came in with the morning's milk which they set in the refrigerator to separate. John gave the grace and the family set into their meal. As he was buttering a biscuit Ann said, "There was a story on the NPR news a few minutes ago that J.P. Morgan announced yesterday after the market closed they were going into bankruptcy. The market analyst they were interviewing said he thought there was a strong chance that Citibank and Bank America would go under as well. He also said he thought the FDIC might not be able to meet its obligations concerning insured accounts unless Congress authorizes more funds. Do you think we should do something about this?"

John took a bite of his biscuit and chewed thoughtfully for a moment before replying. "Darlin', there's just not much we can do about it. We've known for a couple of months there was going to be a slaughter in the financial community. Looks to me like they've finally hit the point they can't conceal it or stave it off any longer. We have to deal with banks because that's what the state insists on paying its employees and the military for theirs. If the banks go 'poof' then we'll have just to get by as best we can. We're already doing half our trade in barter as it is. If we have to I guess we'll barter the other half as well. It's a clumsy way to do business but it beats not doing business at all. The government doesn't have any real choice in the matter if they don't want the entire economy to collapse. Congress will simply have to authorize the funds to cover those insured bank accounts which means they'll tell the Treasury to roll the presses to pay for it and raise taxes at the same time. Leastwise they'll try to raise taxes anyways. The national mood being what it is they may soon find that to be too dangerous a solution for any politician to try, but they'll roll those presses as sure as I'm sitting here. That means the national debt will balloon even more than it already has and we're going to see inflation shooting up again. About all we can do is pull any money we have out of the banks as fast as we can and keep as much of our assets in tangible goods as possible. No way to entirely get out of dealing with cash

money. The government wants its taxes in cash, the power company, the phone company and so on. Most everyone else we can probably work out some sort of trade deal. Eventually, the rest of the financial infrastructure that was damaged by the Impact is going to crash. When the dust settles the government will be able to start building a sound currency again that we can rely on not to inflate into worthlessness before you can get into town to spend it. Until then we just hunker down and wait it out like everyone else is."

June 7 - Summertime - Part Two

Talk of economic disaster at the breakfast table was giving John heartburn so he resolved to head the conversation into a different direction. He asked, "What lessons are you kids working on today for your school work?" Neil spoke before the rest and said, "I'm working on multiplication and long division. Aunt Ann is teaching me how to figure prices, discounts, making change, and order totals. I like this a lot better than working problems in a book. This is for real."

John nodded then looked at Cindy, Brittany and Melinda. "What are you three doing?"

Cindy spoke up and said, "Mostly economics, Uncle John. We're also working up business plans for potential new businesses. Aunt Ann says if we come up with anything that looks really promising we might actually try it. We're also going to be working on our Spanish with Mrs. Alvarez. She's starting a group of homeschool kids like us that she'll work with on Saturday market days in conversational Spanish."

"And what will you be doing at the market today, John?" his wife asked, grinning at him, "Besides spending all morning talking with your cronies?"

He affected not to notice her tone and replied, "Why doing business of course. It's important to keep up with business in one's community. The kids do most of the work at the market, my toiling is mostly done here at home."

By six thirty they had worked their way through their breakfast and hurriedly cleaned up. Ann and Heather would be staying home. Heather wanted to take Latin in the Fall and had asked Ann to tutor her in the subject. The rest loaded up into the truck and pulled out, the sun just beginning to peak over the eastern horizon. Ready to cope with whatever the day presented.

"Hey John! Morning girls!" the vendor at the table next to the Hornes called out. "Couldn't ask for a better morning could you? Cool, clear, and dry. Folks out there just waiting to come in here and give us their money! If I had a load of fresh faced good looking kids like you do I'd be doing business hand over fist!"

John chuckled. Butch Two Crows was one of the talkiest men he'd ever met but he did a good business. In just about everything it seemed since his stock in trade ranged from used clothing, tools, and furniture, eggs from his hens, working on old computers, to jackleg horse doctoring. Ed Strickland had once remarked that Butch would sell you your hat if you left it laying on his table. John just couldn't bring himself to imitate Butch's style he did have to admit it was effective. He kept the girls amused with what seemed like a perpetual stream of corny jokes and Neil seemed to admire him without reservation.

"Well, after the news last night and this morning I'm not sure how much of a mood to do business folks will be in Butch" John said as he and the kids began to set up the table presentation. "Sounds like what's left of the financial structure in the country is collapsing."

"Au contraire, oh Hen King" Butch came back, "The Glorious Pipples will be all too eager to do business this day. At least those who are holding cash will be. They can already feel it losing value and

they'll want to trade it as fast as they can for something tangible they can hold in their hands - such as eggs or clothing. I predict we'll have a busy morning. I would not presume to tell you how to do business but for my part I will be raising my cash prices five percent to compensate. Tomorrow I may raise them yet again."

With a nod John digested what Butch had told them. He respected his opinion on the way the market operated. "Sounds like a good idea Butch. If sales are slow we can always lower prices again. Neil, can you figure out a five percent increase in our prices?"

"Yes Uncle John, if you'll check my answers. Aunt Ann has been teaching me how. I can figure the prices and Cindy can make the signs. Her writing is better than mine." The boy looked excited at the prospect of playing an important role in the way his family supported itself. At his age, I would have too John thought to himself. "OK, you start your figuring and I'll backstop you. Then Cindy can set to making the new signs. Britt, Mel, you two finish getting the table up while I start unloading the goods."

The family fell to getting ready to do business and the market hum began to steadily increase in anticipation of another day of business. They'd be setting up again on Sunday, in the afternoon after church. The Sunday market was slower but often times better deals could be worked, particularly at the end of the day if someone was faced with going home for the week with too little profit. By the time he'd unloaded the last of their goods Neil came running up with a pad of paper that had the prices for their stock on it and besides each one was the newly increased price. Scanning down the list he checked each figure in his head, corrected just two and handed them back to the boy with instructions to give them to Cindy. He quickly did so and returned to help him moved their stock up to the tables.

Cindy was just setting out the last of the new signs when the big iron fire bell rang out its announcement of the market opening and the gates swung wide. A steady stream of people came in and true to Butch's predictions the customers dealing in dollars were eager to buy and John soon found himself limiting egg sales to a dozen per customer so they wouldn't run out before his regular customers had their opportunity. He was new to business in this way but he knew that one treated regular customers with care if you wanted to stay in business.

June 7 - Summertime - Part Three

Their produce and bedding plants moved out quickly as well and Neil was forced to call for help in keeping up with the figuring necessary to total orders so John put Brittany on to assist him. She was still a bit slow in math and he felt she could use the practice. John had just come up to the front with a couple of more racks of plants and was talking to Butch when the Indian nodded towards the crowd and said "here comes trouble."

Trying not to look too obvious John scanned the crowd but failed to find the source of Butch's concern. "Who are you talking about?" he asked.

"That tall fella there, brown hair, blue polo shirt, blue jeans, and docksiders." Butch explained, "Don't know what flavor he is but he's government of some sort and he's way too attentive. Been watching my table pretty close these last few minutes. Bet you a cup of coffee he comes over here pretty soon."

John took a chair at the table and under the pretext of examining Neil and Brittany's figuring kept tabs on the man in the polo shirt. Sure enough, he did seem to be paying particular attention to the Two Crows Trading Post table so he was not surprised when the man walked up a minute later. "Morning." Butch said, "What can I do for you today?"

The man smiled and put out his hand which John shook. "Good morning. Are you Mr. Two Crows?"

"I am he" he responded, his smile fading slightly.

"I'm Mark Hill, State Revenue Department. I was wondering if I could speak with you for a moment?"

His face fell into a deadpan expression as Butch replied, "Do I have any choice?"

Still smiling the tax agent said, "Now Mr. Two Crows, let's not start off on the wrong foot. I'm just here to bring you up to date on your responsibility to the state."

"My responsibility to the state" the Indian said in a reflective tone "Now what responsibility would that be?"

"I understand you're fairly new to the market aren't you Mr. Two Crows?" the agent explained "It's not uncommon for businesspeople in venues such as these to be unaware that retail sales have tax obligations which are owed to the state. It's how the state stays in business and provides you with the roads you travel to get to the market and your customers as well, in addition to supplying law enforcement to protect you from those who would steal from you."

At that last John snorted and interjected, "I haven't noticed much help from the STATE when it comes to law enforcement ever since the Impact. In fact, until recently I WAS THE LAW in my area, and a number of my fellow community members along with me. Sure didn't see much in the way of road maintenance either. We had ice and snow on the roads for months without anyone ever coming to clear it off! The STATE, in fact, has been mighty shy around these parts for quite a spell. Except for you that is, you seem to have made it here alright to put your hand out for a share of the earnings that my family worked hard to collect."

"I'm sorry," the agent said, "I didn't catch your name, Mr.?"

"That's because I haven't given it" the former lawman retorted, "It's Horne, John Horne."

"Very good. Now Mr. Horne" the agent attempted to explain "be reasonable. You know as well as I do that this has been an unprecedented disaster. The state couldn't begin to cope with the ice problems on the road with the equipment we had from before the Impact when we so seldom ever received ice before that. It takes time and money to gear up to handle problems like that."

"Yeah, you guys certainly take your time doing anything once you've taken our money!" Butch Two Crows interjected. "Supposing I agreed to pay your taxes, what am I to do about the fact that half or more of the business done here at the market is barter? And it's only going to increase because the High and Mighty are trying to bail their banks out by throwing our money overboard! You government types want to serve the public, you get us a stable dollar so we can do business in dollars and you might get a better reception in these parts!"

"Uh, yes. Mr. Two Crows, well, you see the STATE can't do much about the stability of the dollar I'm afraid. That's the Federal government's responsibility. But the State government still has to function and to do that we have to be able to collect the lawful taxes on commerce. I can understand the problems you all are having with the currency but it's outside of anything the State can possibly affect. I can appreciate that much of your business is of necessity in the form of barter and the state takes no position on that. All you have to do is to calculate the dollar value of that portion of your business and pay your sales tax obligation on it."

"Well ain't that just fine!" Butch snorted. "The State takes no position on barter, just pay us your taxes on it in dollars! Half or more of my customers don't have any cash to do business with but we're supposed to pay you your percentage on the whole of our business from what cash we do take in! How are we supposed to stay in business like that?!"

The agent began once again to explain the situation to the recalcitrant traders when he realized that all conversation for many tables around had come to a stop with traders and customers alike intently attentive to their exchange. Many hard and stony gazes were being laid upon him and he began to feel their weight.

Another trader dealing in building materials spoke out. "Maybe if the government would show itself to be of some USE around here you'd got people more willing to consider paying your taxes. Far as I can tell the State ain't done diddely squat for anyone here since before that damned rock hit Bermuda! What's Tallahassee done for us since the asteroid came that we should pay it's taxes?"

A low, angry murmur began to arise from the assembled crowd of shoppers and traders. "I can't clothe my family now! If I have to pay government taxes on top of the way prices are now we'll be wearing rags!"

"Yeah!" Damn right!" "Goddamned government's got nerve to come here with its hand out." And other voices began to make themselves heard.

With the crowd growing ugly the agent said in a loud, but calm voice "I can see that I haven't done a good job of making my case. I'll come back next week when I'll be better prepared."

"You do that." Butch said.

The agent turned and began to pass through the crowd, not looking to either side and soon passed through the markets gates.

John turned to Butch and said, "And he will too. Probably at the head of a column of tax agents or state troopers. The State isn't going to take open rebellion like that lying down."

Butch grinned and said, "Yeah, don't you know it. But we got us a week didn't we? Who knows! Maybe by then the dollar will have collapsed and their won't be any money for them to collect taxes in!"

July 4th - Independence Day - Part One

The sickle bar added a not unpleasant shimmying motion to the steady drumming of the tractor as John guided it across the pasture turned hay field cutting a six foot swath through the dense forage. Behind him the girls followed with pitchforks spreading out any clumps in the mown grass so they would dry quickly and evenly. The sun shone warmly upon them but not so warm as in summers past. High temperatures were still only reaching the 90 degree mark. The weather reports gave only small probabilities for rain for the next four days so the Horne family was following the age old dictum of making hay while the sun shines.

They'd be stopping for a big Fourth of July dinner at noon. It was to be a community affair and Ellie, Heather, Ann, Lisa, and several other local women were up to the house putting the meal together. The men would come in at noon to eat and then go back to their respective work, at least those who were making their living from the land would. The kids old enough to work would do the same. That evening at dark they'd all gather together again for the fireworks. The entire community had contributed what they could towards the purchase of the sky rockets and sparklers. Such things were entirely imported so far as he could tell and the vast majority came from China so that in these post-Impact times they had become quite expensive. Still, they'd managed to acquire sufficient of them to impress the kids. John was more looking forward to the lemonade, home made ice cream and cake they'd be sharing. The lemons had been expensive as well, imported from Mexico. As he guided the tractor slowly cutting its way through the grass he wondered what could be done to lessen their reliance on imported goods to celebrate this most quintessential of American holidays. He briefly considered making his own fireworks but soon discarded the idea. He still had a small scar on his left hand from an adolescent experiment in pyrotechnic chemistry gone wrong and was concerned that if dabbled in it again it might lead one of the kids to try their own hand at the craft.

He reached the edge of the field so he slowly guided the tractor into its turn and could now see the girls walking along behind spreading the cut grass. Behind them he could see a flock of cattle egrets and the farm chicken flock working the cut forage for insects. Occasionally a rooster would chase off an egret for trespassing upon their prerogative. The wind brought the sharp, sweet smell of the cut grass to him and he realized he was smiling. He laughed and asked himself out loud, "Well, why not? We're all eating, no one's sick, we're putting food and feed up for the winter, we're not having to fight anyone, and by God, it's the Fourth of July and we're still Independent! I reckon a man's got a right to smile if he pleases!"

After a time he reached the end of the field and guided the tractor into another turn. The girls were reaching the end of the last swath and making the turn into the row he'd just left. He watched them for a time, working steadily talking and laughing amongst themselves. Being the tallest of the three he hoped that next year Brittany would achieve sufficient height that she could drive the tractor for the cutting. The fields were smooth and regular so there was little more needing to be done in the actual cutting but to guide the bar and once in a while make a small adjustment to the speed when the density of the grass changed. He'd had her try it this year but her legs were still somewhat too short to comfortably work the clutch and wheel brakes while staying in the seat. Tomorrow he'd have Ann on the tractor so that he could be doing other necessary work.

He looked across the fields and in the haze of the distance he could see Ed Strickland cutting his own fields, white egrets following behind him like drifting confetti. He and Ed had come to a cooperative arrangement in that Ed would bail John's hay in return for John and the girls helping him get his in as well. When John had finished cutting his own he'd start on the remaining uncut acreage that belonged

to Ed. It was a good arrangement since Ed had far more hay than he could put up by himself and John didn't have a bailer. In this way John would not have pay someone to bail his hay and Ed wouldn't have to pay hired help. John would probably swap Ed for some of his hay in addition if his own cuttings didn't produce enough. In the pre-Impact times John had never put up his own hay, but now things had changed. Between his own pasture and that which he rented from Ed he now had enough to keep his stock on grass and to cut some for hay too. The less feed he had to buy then the more of their hard won earnings the family would be able to keep for itself.

The tractor made its slow way down the length of the field and he turned again, the inside square of uncut grass becoming steadily smaller. From this direction John could see his wheat waving in the breeze turning from green to gold. Adam Kincaid had told him the weekend before that he figured it would be ready for harvest by next weekend and would arrange for the University combine to come out. Nicholas Smith, the faculty member he assisted for had been in poor health since the Impact and had seldom been able to come out to the test fields, but Adam had become a regular along with Mitchell Martin, the forage specialist for the agricultural college. John hoped Dr. Smith would be interested in growing more for his research projects this coming winter since the University provided the seed and harvesting equipment, otherwise he'd have to try to find someone to combine the grain for him or simply cut it for hay.

He was half done when he heard the farm bell in the distance so he looked at his wristwatch for the time. "Glad to hear it!" he said aloud. He stopped the forward motion of the tractor, backed up a few feet then raised the mower bar so no one would walk into it by accident and shut off the tractor motor. Standing, he made a long, pleasurable stretch then climbed down from the machine to join the girls heading towards the house. "I don't know about you guys, but I could do with about a half-gallon of cold water. How's everybody's feet holding out?"

"I'm alright daddy, but I think my boots are starting to get a bit small." Melinda said. "It'll be nice to sit for a while though."

"I'm beat!" Cindy added. "Do you all do this every summer?"

"No," her Uncle replied. "This is the first time, in fact. You're helping to create a new family tradition!"

The girl smiled wearily but said nothing more. "I think my sneaker's starting to come apart Uncle John. Feels like the heel is loose." Brittany said, wiggling her right foot from side to side.

John smiled then patiently spoke, "Well, we'll get used to it. It's only for a couple of days and we won't do this again for another three, maybe four weeks or so if we get some regular rain. I reckon we'd better be looking into your shoe situations shortly though. You're all growing so it's only natural that you'll be needing new shoes before long."

July 4th - Independence Day - Part Two

Reaching the edge of the field they went through the gate and headed towards the tables under the trees, stopping first at the water hose by the barn to wash their face and hands. Mike, Kate, Stevie and Timmy Daniels were already there. Ellie was opening the covers on the barbecues and removing smoking pieces of meat as Ann brought out bowls of potato salad. Lisa was lowering a big basket of sweet corn into a cauldron of boiling water hung over a wood fire - she had just broke the ears and shucked it minutes before. A whiff of smoke from the grills made John's stomach growl.

A truck pulled up at the gate and Ed got out. Behind him came Jimmy Bryant, his brother Don, Sally Starling and her two children. They had all just come through the gates when the Hatchers arrived with Miguel and his family following behind. With them came pots and bowls and coolers which they began to deploy at Ellie's direction. "Feels like old times!" John said. "Too bad there aren't any feral dogs left, we could have a hunt!"

"Give it a couple of years and we could hunt quail. I flushed two coveys this morning." Ed Strickland said, "More than I've seen in quite a while. No stray cats around to eat up the babies so they're beginning to make a come back."

"Something to look forward to." Jimmy added. "I enjoyed those hunts. Be happy never to have to ride with the posse again though. Had enough of that to last me a lifetime."

"Very true my friend" Miguel said, "I for one hope to rest upon my laurels in the man hunting business but a spot of bird hunting would suit me if ever such ammunition comes back onto the market. My distributor tells me that perhaps by the end of the year they'll have such for civilian sale again but cannot promise anything."

"Enough nostalgia!" Ellie interjected, "The food's ready! Let's eat!"

The gathering sat to the table then bowed their heads as John gave the grace. When he finished Lisa gave him the sign and he lifted the basket of corn out of the water, the smell of the ears blowing across the table and exciting many interested looks. He set the basket down into a shallow pan on the table and took his place again. Food was passed around and plates filled. Little was said as everyone sampled fresh corn, barbecue hot off the grill, home baked beans and fruit jars of cold iced tea.

Presently Ed asked John "You gonna set up at the market in the morning? Weather's supposed to be pretty clear tomorrow."

John nodded his head, "Yes, we are. I'll take the girls in, get them set up, leave the trailer and come on back to the house. The dew shouldn't be off the grass yet so I won't miss any good cutting time. Along about dinner I'll knock off, go and pick them up and bring them home. After we've eaten I'll spend the rest of the day cutting and the girls can ted out what's already been cut."

"Sounds like a plan then." Ed said, "You reckon they'll be alright there by themselves?"

"Ann will be with them. Probably working school lessons into everything like she always does" His wife stuck her tongue out at him but said nothing. "Butch will be there to help out if she needs it but the kids have the routine pretty well knocked."

Miguel chuckled and said with a grin, "After the flim-flam you all performed on our fine gentlemen from the Revenue Department I think anyone who would attempt to cheat your girls would think twice."

John grinned widely and said, "Now Miguel, that was NOT a flim-flam! We merely cooperated with the Revenue Department in carrying out our civic duty!"

Jimmy snorted, "You mean you buffaloesd them agents into treating you the way civil servants are SUPPOSED to treat people and made them like it to boot!"

A chuckle ran around the table as John denuded his ear of corn. "Why should they feel buffaloesd?" he asked when he'd finished with the ear, "Weren't we cooperative? Didn't Butch sign up to collect the sales tax like he was supposed to? Now, granted Agent Hill did seem a trifle disappointed to discover that Horne Farm sold nothing that could be taxed but he got over it. The other traders who needed to sign up did as well, all nice and cooperative just like they were supposed to."

" 'All nice and cooperative, just like they were supposed to'" Mike Daniels mimicked John's voice then continued, "While neglecting to mention the small fact that Ross Hendry, state house rep for West Alachua county and Steve Williams, state senator for Alachua and Gilchrist counties were there watching the entire proceedings. I'd have given a pretty penny to have been there to see his face when Huck Finch told that revenue agent who they were. He thought he'd be doing some buffaloesing of his own when he managed to get Huck and half the state troopers in the Gainesville barracks ordered out to accompany him to the Archer market to force you guys into compliance. Instead he had to swallow that arrogant attitude he brought with him and simply help everyone to fill out their forms properly - polite like. John, that was as fine a piece of manipulation as I've ever heard of."

"Well, why shouldn't they be there?" John asked in an innocent tone, "They represent us in Tallahassee don't they? It's only natural they'd want to get out and meet their constituency at the market to press the flesh and kiss babies. But just to be clear I didn't invite them! I'd never met the two before. You need to apply to Mr. Alvarez here for Ross Hendry being there. He's the one who gave him the heads up. It was Abel Webster who's got the building supply business that invited Senator Williams. They're first cousins it turns out."

"But who masterminded it all?" Mike persisted. "Everyone knows that you and Butch put it all together."

"Only partially true actually," John explained. "We did call a meeting of all the market traders after the market closed. I was the one who suggested that we'd probably be treated with a lot more respect if we had some local authorities present to witness the proceedings but like I said, I don't know any reps or senators. It was Abel who mentioned that his cousin was our state senator. Carolita here brought up the fact that Miguel knew Ross. We just sort of laid out the plan of action. It was actually more work to convince everyone to cooperate with the revenueurs. Once we explained that paper dollars were inflating away by the day but barter goods not only held their value but many actually increased that took the sting out somewhat, particularly since it would be very difficult, maybe outright impossible for the state to check on whether appropriate sales taxes were being paid from barter deals. We all agreed to clearly mark our signs 'plus seven percent state and county sales tax' for those who had to collect such which in turn will probably start making itself felt on the political level. I'm afraid we neglected to mention that last little fact to Ross and Steve when they were there but I'm sure it will begin to come to their attention in the near future. Not that I expect anything will come of it but it may just make Agent

Hill less than popular with certain legislators in Tallahassee in the future."

John reached into the corn basket, pulled out another ear, dipped it into the can of melted butter and commenced to eating it, saying nothing more of the episode with the revenue department at the Archer market. Conversation turned to other areas and the meal was gradually consumed.

When everyone had their fill of the main course the men fished watermelons out of the ice filled washtubs they'd been placed in early and cut them up with machetes, passing out slices as they were chopped off. Ed pulled out his pocketknife and began to cut off bite sized pieces of melon and eating them. "Now this really takes me back. I can remember doing this with my dad's family every summer before the war in '41 when I was just a youngster. We'd work and sweat all morning until noon, come to the house, rinse off at the pump and eat at tables under the pecan trees. Daddy or one of the uncles would have come from town on the Fourth with big blocks of ice to chip to put in the tea or lemonade and there'd be big old water melons in washtubs chilling. No one had any money to buy anything new but we all ate, we made do with what we had and if we were poor I didn't know any better." He spit out a few seeds then continued. "That's what this feels like today. Almost like the last fifty years never happened at all. He we are cutting hay, picking fruit and vegetables and putting them up, no one's got any money but we're still having a big old picnic on the Fourth with barbecue and cold watermelons."

John nodded his head. "Yep, we do seem to be entering a strange dichotomy here. On the one hand we've got home computers, the Internet, modern medicine and on the other hand we're all out here cutting hay and putting up food for the winter."

"You know? I think I like it."

August 1st - Anniversary - Part One

“Yes ma’am, I’m sure” John said in a genial tone to the bank teller.

“We have Visa check cards now. They work just like a credit card but it’s deducted automatically from your checking account. You qualify for a \$1,000 line of credit to protect against overdrafts.” The teller persisted earnestly in her explanation. “This would save you the trouble and possible risk of carrying such a large amount of cash. It really would be no trouble to set it up for you. Miss Metzger at the Special Services desk could have you set up and card in hand in about ten minutes.”

“Yes ma’am,” John repeated genially and smiled. “I appreciate that, but I’ll take it in cash please. It was an electronic transfer from the Federal government so there shouldn’t be any waiting period. You DO have sufficient cash here in this bank to cover this don’t you?”

“Oh! Why yes Mr. Horne, of course we have enough cash to cover your withdrawal.” The teller quickly suppressed an alarmed look. “If you’ll just initial right here I’ll have your cash for you right away.”

John initialed the withdrawal form and she opened her drawer and began to count out the bills. When she finished she slipped the small pile of currency in an envelope and slid it across the counter to him along with his balance statement. “Thank you, ma’am.” He said, “You’ve been most kind.” Sliding the envelope into his pocket he turned and left the bank.

He crossed the parking lot to the truck where he met Ann and the kids. Two adults and four kids completely filled the crew-cabbed truck but they were buying shoes today so needed everyone’s feet to be present.

“You were a long time inside dear” Ann said, “Was the line long?”

“Yep” he replied, “lots of folks withdrawing money, but didn’t see anyone depositing. Of course, electronic transfer and all that means that many don’t actually have to go to the bank to make deposits anymore. Teller seemed mighty reluctant to give me the cash but even more reluctant to do anything that might attract the notice of the other bank customers.”

“What does that mean John?” A look of concern on her face. “Hasn’t the government been paying off the accounts for those banks that failed?”

“Yes they have. Even the really big ones, up to the \$10,000 limit per account anyways. Haven’t heard how much this has cost we-the-taxpayers but they’ve been paying.” He started the truck motor and pulled out onto the street before continuing. “It’s not whether the government will pay off the accounts that has the banks nervous. I think they’re very much afraid of runs. Just at the moment the Treasury, Federal Reserve, and every surviving bank, savings and loan, and credit union in the nation has got to be passing bricks about whether account holders will get the wind up them and start pulling their money out. Make that the whole world for that matter. Won’t take too much of that and they won’t be able to cover the outflow. If the U.S. financial ship really does go to the bottom she’ll take pretty much every other nation with her. I don’t know what sort of jiggery-pokery the government, Fed Reserve and the banks got up to cover their losses from the Impact so they could reopen but I’m sure that most of the dollars deposited in banks across the nation still don’t actually physically exist. They’re invested in all those things that banks and related institutions invest in to make the money to pay the pittance in interest they pay account holders, certificates of deposit, and so on. Probably wouldn’t take too much

just now for them to run out of cash money and start having to sell assets at give-away prices to come up with more if folks began to worry they would lose their money. If they have to dump assets like that it'll be impossible to get credit which means new businesses won't be able to open and current ones may not be able to stay afloat. Argentina gave the world a painful lesson in such things."

"Well, we have the cash now." Ann brought matters back to the present, "We don't have to worry about it again until my paycheck comes in next week. What can we do about it other than pull our money out as fast as it comes in?"

John shrugged his shoulders. "Not much, I'm afraid. All we can do ourselves is roll with it and try to stay afloat. The reverberations from the collapse of the intricate, interdependent financial universe that all modern nations lived in before the asteroid hit are likely going to echo back and forth for some time to come. Somehow, somehow the government – all governments really – has got to find a way to restore faith in the currency if people are to put any trust in it so that they'll leave their money in banks long enough for the banks to be able to extend credit for businesses to start, rebuild, and stay open. So long as people like us see the value of the dollar in what it will bring fading by the month or week they're going to pull it out and exchange it for items of tangible value as fast as it comes in - just like we're about to do. I don't understand the way the system worked to have a clear idea of when it will stop. One day it will, and everyone who has survived to reach the other side can begin to rebuild. But we're not there yet."

A darkness seemed to fall in the truck cab and conversation lagged for a time as John drove down to the commercial district finally pulling into a shopping center on the Archer road corridor.

"Why here?" Ann asked, "Wouldn't we get a better deal on the kid's shoes from Wal Mart?"

He shook his head negatively. "Before the Impact we would have probably. But a great deal of the stuff Wal Mart sells comes – or came I should say – from China. This time around sneakers and the like are not the priority. We want sturdy, durable shoes that won't wear out before they've outgrown them. I've been asking around at the market for a while now and this fellow here at Eagle Shoes sounds like what we're looking for. Not all American made unfortunately, but what he's got is first rate and very importantly, they're repairable. Most modern shoes are throw-aways. Something wears out or breaks on them and they're trash. We can't afford that anymore, even if we have to pay more up front to get better quality foot gear. It's going to cost big but I want to get each child a pair of shoes they can work in, a pair they can wear to church and then we'll go to Wally World, or Target, or somewhere for their cheap sneakers."

The family unloaded from the truck and went inside. When he discovered that John had come to buy shoes for the entire family the owner waited on them himself and soon each was fitted out with what they'd come for and he threw in a complimentary can of shoe polish and a pair of dress socks for each child. As he was totaling the orders the man asked "And will this be cash, check or charge?"

Several months of haggling in the marketplace had changed John's outlook on the way business was conducted so he said, "Well, I can put it all on my Visa card or if you're willing to dicker I can pay cash. What suits you?"

The man glanced at the register tape and back to John then said, "Oh, I'm sure if you're willing to pay cash we can come to some sort of mutually satisfactory arrangement" and the two men began to dicker. A minute later they'd agreed on a total price and John pulled out his roll of cash and began counting out

the bills. The children had watched the transaction silently but with interest.

Once outside they stowed their purchases in the back of the truck and got in. After he had pulled onto the highway Ann asked, "That discount he gave you was surely greater than the percentage that Visa charges for using their card. Why would he be so eager to have cash when he could have made more money by taking credit?"

"I can think of several reasons darling," her husband responded "but it's his business and not mine. Lets get on down to the hardware store, Wally World, and the other places on the list and finish spending Carla's money. I'm starting to get a bit nervous about having a bird in hand for some reason."

August 1st - Anniversary - Part Two

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Walking through the tall corn John checked his snares. The first three had been empty, though one had plainly been tripped. He was still getting the hang of using them effectively, but at least whatever had tripped it might think twice before coming back into the corn field. At the fourth snare he found a raccoon in it, dead. "Well, I knew I should have gotten out here this morning." He removed the animal from the trap and examined it closely, "Don't think we'll eat this one but I'll skin it out and feed the carcass to the pigs." He dropped it into a sack and walked on. The still green but steadily ripening corn had naturally proved attractive to the coons and he was taking advantage of this to harvest them. When soaked in salt water over night they weren't half-bad baked up with sweet potatoes. He'd also spotted some tell-tale holes in the earth that he knew had been dug there by armadillos. Tomorrow night he'd have the girls out with .22's in stands where they could look for the creatures. He'd keep Neil with him. The boy wasn't old enough yet to be given the responsibility of a firearm by himself.

Leaving the corn field he went to the barn where he skinned out the raccoon and tacked the hide on the wall, giving it a quick scraping down. He rubbed it thickly with salt and left it to dry. The late summer pelts weren't high in quality but they'd do for the kids to learn on. He was washing his hands at the milking sink when he heard a commotion outside so he walked to the goat door and looked - a coyote was in the pasture chasing hens. "Well, I reckon anything that would wipe out the coyotes" he said in the fatalistic manner of all farmers when confronted with problems that could not be wholly cured "would probably wipe us out too." His jaw clenched as he looked around for his dogs and just as he was about to go to the shop for the rifle he saw Jake leap up from under a tree and give chase. Following at a distance behind him on their short puppy legs ran Dixie and Dusty, the two Great Pyrenees livestock guardian dogs he'd bought from a breeder down to Williston. They'd been an expensive purchase, but they seemed to understand what they were supposed to do and he reinforced the idea whenever he could using the techniques the breeder had explained to him. They'd be a force to be reckoned with when they achieved their full growth. The longer legged, more lightly built coyote loped off easily outdistancing the more heavily built dog. He looked around for Andy and Bad but they were no where to be seen. "That's fine" he said, "your replacements are getting bigger by the day."

With the predator chased off he went into the greenhouse and turned on the watering system. Summer temperatures had still not broken 90 degrees which meant that gardens were staying productive all the way through and the trade in bedding plants was remaining steady. In two more weeks they'd be seeding in the cooler weather fall plants. With temperatures remaining so mild he strongly suspected they'd see another early winter this year and a cooler than normal fall. By the beginning of September they'd begin to segue from the heat loving summer vegetable plants to the cool loving fall plants. The seed was expensive but they were still managing to make a good profit. No one in a position to be able to do something about it was going to be caught short of food this winter even if it meant having to grow it themselves.

Watering finished he shut down the irrigation and went into the workshop to check the incubator. Their next batch of eggs should start hatching this weekend. Producing so many late summer and fall chicks meant having to feed them through the winter but with their market remaining steady he thought they could maintain profitability. The cull toms and roosters would bring enough to pay for the feed that went into raising them and a bit more besides and the worthwhile hens would join the production flocks. The goose project was coming along well too and they really did seem to find most of their feed out of the pasture, orchard and gardens. He scrutinized the incubator hygrometer, decided the humidity

was staying in the appropriate range, added more water to reservoir then left it alone.

Looking at his watch he decided he had enough time to move some hay down for the girls before supper so he went into the barn and began moving bales. Moving square bales was labor intensive but round bales would take more storage area than he could spare and he hated the idea of leaving the rolls out in the weather. Just seemed wasteful to him even though the hay in the roll interior supposedly stayed fresh. Maybe by next fall they'd be able to look into putting in a dedicated hay barn and he could go to using round bales. For now, he'd just have to move down the bales for the girls whenever they used up those they could easily move for themselves.

The farm bell rang out its supper call so he left and went on into the house. He hung his hat on the hook inside the door and washed up at the kitchen sink. Ann came in from the living room where she'd been working on the family finances while the girls put supper together. Tonight would be pork chops in sour cream, hot biscuits, fried squash, field peas and turnip greens with blueberry cobbler for dessert. All of it produced on the farm but for the white flour, salt and some of the spices. He grinned as he looked over it and said, "You know? My grandfather used to say this about having lived through the Great Depression – they were flat broke but so long as they had the farm no one missed a meal. It was a hard life but no one starved. There's plenty right now that can't say that." The family joined hands and he gave the grace – this night more with more passion than was his usual wont.

August 1st - Anniversary - Part Three

After the meal was over and the supper dishes were cleaned and put away the family gathered in the living room. The TV stood blank in the corner, they did watch it occasionally but for the most part neither John nor Ann cared much for it and did not encourage the children to watch it either. The kids sat around a folding card table playing Uno while Ann read and John listened to the news on the shortwave and scanned a magazine. "Sure sounds to me like some of our more hawkish Congresscritters are itching to invade Mexico. That little ambush the Mexican army mousetrapped that Texas Guard unit with while they were pursuing those Villaist raiders who attacked El Paso has really fired them up. The President is going to have to decide shortly if he's going to lead or follow."

Ann nodded her head but was not really listening. John was accustomed to this, she'd often ask him to repeat something when it filtered through whatever it was she was concentrating on at the time. "You know that Jake Daniels left the Recovery and went to Texas didn't you?"

This got her attention and she looked up from her book. "Went to Texas? Why?"

"Gonna join up I suppose. Don't know what he's going to get out of it but hard knocks and lousy pay but it probably sounds more appealing to him just now than salvaging cities. Mike's pretty mad about it but Jake's eighteen and doesn't need his permission. He's worried about Stevie going off too. I've got him working three days a week now and he's also helping Ed but when you've got those media fools showing troops on horseback chasing bandits in the badlands, guns shooting and helicopters buzzing overhead it's going to be hard to keep 'em down on the farm." John closed the magazine he'd been skimming and reached for the small pile of mail on the table. "Things keep going the way they are I think Presidente' Fox is going to realize how short-sighted he's been about not dealing with that bandit problem. Once folks get used to the idea of the U.S. Army being in Mexico it won't take much to get them cozy with the idea of just sending them on down to the Mexican oil fields. I'll bet cash money that it's going to occur to someone that this time around we might just ought to keep what we took rather than trying to work through intermediaries. Didn't seem to work too well for us in the Middle East and here they don't even half to board a ship. Just drive on down the Pan-American highway and there you are."

Ann sighed disgustedly. "There's always a ready supply of boys wanting to go off and get into romantic adventure and old men to point them in the right direction. Well, if he survives it maybe he'll be wiser for the experience and settle down. I can imagine how Kate feels about it. Mike chasing bandits at home and Jake chasing bandits in Mexico. There are times I'm glad you're a farmer and all we have is girls."

"You're forgetting Neil, darling." Her husband added with a grin, "And even us farmers find ourselves in a spot of adventure from time to time. It's my Tookish nature, don't you know?"

"Don't remind me!" She glared at him. "I want to put all that behind us. Neil's only six, we've got years and years to raise him up to be sensible."

John chuckled at this as he slit open an envelope with his name on it from the university. He chuckled again, in a different way when he read what the letter contained. Ann looked at him and asked, "What's in it?"

"It's my recall letter, darlin'." He explained with a grin, "They want me to come back. They're

reopening the grant office. Just going to be me and Patricia but they want me back.”

She examined him closely for a moment before asking “Well, how do you feel about that? It would mean a lot more income.”

He said nothing for a time as he stared at the paper in his hand. Finally he said, “I don’t think I’m going to. The more I think about it, in the greater scheme of things, I think I’m more valuable right here. In terms of pure dollars the farm may never equal what I made from the university but right now we’re very close to entirely self-sufficient in what we eat. I couldn’t do that if I had to work full time. We wouldn’t be able to homeschool the kids like we’re doing now if I weren’t home and we’d have to give up a lot of the income producing operations we’re running now. I don’t think we’re done with this roller coaster ride and if we’re going to make it through to the other side I don’t think we could do any better than to keep right on doing what we’re doing now. This family becomes more self-reliant with every passing month and I have to admit that I’m finding a sense of fulfillment in that that I’ve never found in any paycheck job before.”

He slid the letter back into its envelope and tossed it back onto the side table.

“Whatever happens” he said, “we’re going to make it though to the other side. Right here.”

August 1st, 2025 - Epilogue - Part One

The gnarled ironwood cane had a silver head in the shape of a rooster. The gray haired deeply tanned man used it to push himself to standing as the young man with the NASA public relations badge approached him.

“Good morning!” he said brightly. “Are you Mr. Horne?”

“I am he.” John answered. “This is my wife Ann, my sister Carla Johnson, my niece Brittany Daniels and her husband Stephen.”

“Ah, very good. You’re right on time.” The young man said as he made five check marks in the page on his clipboard. “If you’ll be so kind as to follow me the shuttle bus is right this way. These are your observer’s badges. Please be sure to wear them visibly at all times while you’re in the launch observation area.”

John accepted the proffered badges and distributed to their respective recipients. They followed the PR man towards the outside door, a trifle more slowly than their guide seemingly would have preferred but John’s prosthetic knee was twinging him this morning. He looked at Ann as they walked and said, “When we get home I’m going to ask Roberto to examine my knee again. That hospital fella can say what he wants but every time they fool with it the damn thing hurts me.”

His wife nodded, then cut her eyes at Brittany, but said nothing. Her husband had complained about that knee ever since they’d replaced it ten years before. She didn’t know what Roberto could do for the prosthesis that the hospital couldn’t but if having Roberto look at it made him feel better she was quite willing for him to do it even if there was no discernable difference between what he did and what the medical techs did. After years of asking Brittany to inquire privately at the medical center about what the problem could be she half suspected John insisted on it just to be able to see Miguel, who seldom left his home anymore after his wife had died eight years ago and himself suffering from a debilitating spinal deterioration.

Outside again John slowed still more as they moved towards the bus to look widely about himself. It had been twenty six years since he’d last been to Cape Canaveral, before the Impact in fact, and it was as if he’d never seen the place before. That visit had been the second time he and Ann had taken Melinda to show their daughter the glories of what Mankind could achieve when he (or she, they hoped) stretched forth his mind and will to do so. The old Vehicle Assembly Building and launch gantries dating back to the days of the Apollo program had of course disappeared in the Impact induced tsunamis so in a manner of speaking it really was his first trip. The day had not yet succumbed to August’s heat so he could see in the distance the containment domes and white plumes rising from the cooling towers of the three nuclear power plants that powered the NASA launching lasers, the rest of the Space Center, and a fair part of the northern and central areas of Brevard county which played host to NASA’s Florida outpost. There was a lift-off every twelve hours from one of the six launching bays dotted several miles apart the length of Cape Canaveral. They fed and sustained the burgeoning orbital industries that had arisen in the last fifteen years. Post-Impact the Space Center had greatly expanded its physical area on the Cape after the asteroid spawned tsunamis had washed away all human habitation from the low stretch of sand and coquina lying between the Indian river and Atlantic ocean.

Finally, the party reached their conveyance, the last to do so it seemed as the bus pulled away from the building as soon as they’d taken their seats. Five minutes later they arrived at the observation building

and went inside to take their places. When the PR man showed them to their chairs John looked at their seat mates and said, “Hello Luke! How are things in Seattle these days?”

The distinguished gray haired man looked up with an expression of surprise and said, “John Horne! And Ann, Brittany, Stevie, and you must be Carla. Cindy looks just like you. Good to see you! Damn good to see you! Glad you came. John, Ann’s told us you’ve gotten so hard to pry away from the farm she was afraid she was going to have to use dynamite.”

John grinned and said, “Well, I’m not too big on traveling anymore to be sure. Don’t ever seem to sleep well in strange beds, but this is a once in a life-time event. But what brings you here anyways? I thought Heather had a comfortable berth on L5? Coming down just to see Mel off?”

“Oh, I thought you knew.” Luke said with an air of surprise. “Kristen Hart had a skiing accident in Switzerland and badly injured her right leg. They scrubbed her from the mission but it was so close to the launch date they didn’t have time to start an entirely new search for another physician. Heather and Kristen are both female, about the same mass, Heather’s space rated and has space experience so they asked her if she’s volunteer and she did. Richard was a bit beside himself about that you can well imagine but he gave in gracefully about his wife going. You know he put in for a pilot’s slot but didn’t make the cut. Not strong enough in his secondary field it seems.”

Ann chuckled, “Well, Mel is finally starting to pay us back for all those times she had my heart in my mouth after talking her daddy into letting her take flying lessons when she was old enough. I promised John ‘till death do us part’ but that day he nearly found out what the cause of death was going to be!”

“I reckon this means that Heather and Mel have already seen each other then.” John said, “Mel tells me that the entire crew is suppose to train together so they can try to spot any irreconcilable personality conflicts.” As an afterthought he added, “Funny though that Mel didn’t mention seeing Heather in her last e-mail. Been four, five years since they last saw each other I think.”

Lisa joined the conversation for the first time. “Actually, I’m not sure they have met yet. Heather tells me they’ve had to give her such an accelerated familiarization to get her ready on time that she’s only met two of the six other crew members. She won’t meet the other four – which seems to include Mel – until they all come together on L5 before they transit to the Prometheus. The NASA human behavior people are a little bent about this but the President said the launch was to be on time – or else.”

“Well, if she’s already met two of the others then including Mel” Ann observed “that leaves only three unknowns because I certainly don’t think they’ll have any trouble with each other.”

“Heh!” John interjected, “the way that 2007 asteroid had got the country worked up I imagine the mission commander would just jettison anyone he thought was causing a problem. They’ve got back ups for their back ups.”

Carla laughed, “You could be right. Besides, there’s a LOT of national prestige in flying off in a great white space ship to literally save the world from death and destruction – on a live video feed no less – then maneuvering the rock into a parking orbit so we can mine it of its resources. I hear tell this is putting the Chinese and European space programs into a real swivet. The EU just fired their program director for lack of progress on their craft and the Chinese reportedly have redoubled their espionage of our program to try to catch up.”

Stevie spoke up to add, “Neil Stackham over to the university PD tells me they just backed up the FBI picking up a Chinese team posing as Taiwanese visiting scholars who were hacking the NASA system. Said the FBI told him they’d just picked up another team in California doing the same thing.”

John cackled, “Good! If we’ve got them on anything we’ve left the whole world sucking hind tit when it comes to space development. You can bet them Chinese fellas are just green about our bringing that rock home and the way we magnanimously offered to sell them iron from our smelting operations once we get the assembly line going! You know that’s got to be sticking in their craw for sure.”

August 1st, 2025 - Epilogue - Part Two

Shaking her head with a grin Carla said, “If you’d asked me back in those first couple of years after the Impact if we’d ever make a manned space program a serious national goal again I’d have thought you daft.” She paused for a moment then continued, “but when the astronomers spotted that four kilometer asteroid in 2007 with a small but real chance of impacting Earth in 2032 and an increasing chance every three years afterwards it was like the entire nation found its Cause all at once. Even a one in twenty chance of another asteroid impact was more than most were willing to risk again. I was convinced that the U.S. was actually moving towards a breakup but almost overnight everything changed. I still think we could have done it without the Russian Republic but if we hadn’t partnered with them they may have gone with the Europeans. Too old to change the way I think about the Russians, I suppose. After their losses in Siberia they need space resources as badly as we do.”

“Sure hope we’re not celebrating prematurely” Brittany said, “Isn’t the U.N. General Assembly voting on the space resource issue today? I was reading in the paper yesterday that the Pan Arab Republic has the votes to force the issue about endangering the Earth by bringing asteroids into orbit. They’re also yelling about the proprietary use of common resources by the space faring nations. What if they do force a vote against the mission?”

John scowled, “Won’t amount to diddly squat, Britt. The U.S./Russia, European Union, and the Chinese with Japanese help are all working on similar asteroid mining programs. That’s all the power on the U.N. Security Council – all the VETO power anyways. That rotten son-of-a-bitch Saladin may be the darling of the General Assembly but he’s dogmeat in the Security Council. He’s just doing what ever he can to forestall the inevitable. In spite of what ever he can do we’re going to render him, his oil, and his African resources obsolete in the next ten years and he knows it. From the spectroscopic analysis of 2007 alone we’ll take more iron out of that rock than we’ve mined in all of North America in the last five years. When the Columbia and the Enterprise come online to help out the Prometheus fetching asteroids back to Earth for us we’ll have more mineral resources than we’ve ever had before AND the know-how to use them! Besides, Saladin had best look to his own back yard. The Indonesians and the Iranians are not happy with him just now.”

“Enough with the politics!” Lisa interrupted, “Ann, I never heard from you about Mel’s secondary rating. Did she make it or not?”

Ann smiled the smile of a proud parent, “YES, she did. She’s tertiary reserve pilot for Prometheus. Would have made secondary if she’d had more flight time but she’s happy being the assistant life-systems engineer. She said the crew selection people all but told her that if she did well on this mission and got some more stick time in she’d be a shoe in for chief life-systems and secondary pilot on the Enterprise when she’s launched.”

“How proud you must be!” Luke said with a grin.

“Hell yes, we’re proud” John cut Ann off. “They all came out fine and I’m so tickled with the way my kids – OUR kids -” he said looking at Ann and Carla “ turned out that I’ll probably have to spend a century in purgatory getting my ego under control. Mel made it onto the Prometheus, Brittany’s gone and become an ARNP and married Stevie – still think she ought to go on to an MD but she won’t do it – Stevie’s pretty much taken over managing the farm and it’s doing fine. I’m more a farmer emeritus now. Cindy’s looking sure to make tenure at Cornell and Neil just promoted to Lieutenant in the Fifth Fleet. The world is their oyster and they’re going to eat it for sure. Damn right I’m proud. Not bad for a

redneck farm family, not bad at all.”

Whatever else he was going to say was lost when the public address system came on and announced the launch would be taking place in ten minutes. More people began to arrive, most John did not recognize but some he did from television – the governor, both Florida senators, several congressmen, senators and congressmen from other states, he noted with interest two of his favorite science fiction authors and determined to meet them after the launch. The Vice-President and other assorted dignitaries from around the world were also there but they had their own viewing room. That was OK by John, he did not consider them in his social class anyway. The President himself was in Europe for another round of negotiations between the E.U., China, Russia, Japan and the U.S. over allocation of asteroid resources. Everyone wanted the easy to reach rocks so a system of allocation was to be worked out.

Finally, the moment arrived and the voice of mission control came over the speakers announcing the status of the various necessary systems that would have to function for a successful launch. When at last they had all declared themselves in readiness the voice said, “The Cape is GO.” A second voice then cut in with the countdown in progress –

“T minus – 10, 9, 8, 7, 6, 5, 4,” a brilliant green light began to leak from beneath the launch gantry and the window through which they were watching automatically dimmed itself rendering the bright morning sunshine outside into twilight, “3, 2, 1, we have first motion. WE HAVE LIFT OFF!!!” and the ground to orbit shuttle carrying the crew of the Prometheus out of the atmosphere suddenly leapt for the sky from its gantry atop a brilliant emerald green column of light. The viewing window dimmed itself until everything outside was darkness but the launching laser and its burden rushing skyward.

Everyone in the room had come to their feet as the craft left the ground and John found himself shouting “GO BABY GO!!!” as tears unabashedly streamed down his face. All too soon the shuttle was lost to sight and the laser flicked out some time later, leaving a flat black window that gradually cleared itself to allow the natural sun to shine in once more.

John pulled out a red bandana and wiped his face. He then bent and kissed his wife. The room was still silent when he said to her, “Well, she’s off now. She’ll make it or not on her own merits but I think we gave her a damn fine set of tools to work with if I do say so myself. We’ve given them all a damn fine set of tools to work with. Nothing left for us now but to rest on our laurels.” He then added, speaking as if to no one in particular “- And wait for a few grandchildren to put in an appearance.”

Looking towards the back of the room where the PR flacks had gathered he took his wife by the hand and said, “Now them NASA folks promised us a video of the launch, let’s go see about it.”