

Family Emergency Excursion

Andy Buchannan loved his blades. He had a multitude of them. And he knew how to use them. In fact, he trained others how to use them. Not your normal fencing, though there was a touch of that in the instruction. Actually, he had developed his own techniques incorporating Far East Asian, Middle Eastern, European, and American West methods of using swords, long knives, and bowie knives.

It was only a sideline. Andy's main business was a law enforcement and military supplier of equipment, including firearms. He was equally adept at using the modern weapons as he was the ancient.

Fargo Thursten was probably Andy's most talented student. Fargo was also an in-law by marriage. Andy had married Cathy Abernathy and Fargo had married her twin sister Julie, just a few weeks later. The two men had similar interests and became good friends as well as brothers-in-law.

Where weaponry was Andy's forte, Fargo was an ATV and Dual Sport motorcycle fanatic. He owned a Big-Boys Toy Store, selling several lines of ATVs, UTVs, and motorcycles, along with accessories for them.

Cathy's and Julie's older brother Melvin was a camping enthusiast. Like his brothers-in-law, Melvin was in business associated with what he loved to do. He owned an outdoor equipment and supply business catering to wilderness and winter campers, re-enactors of several types, and several niche outdoor enthusiasts. His wife, Karen, was just as enthusiastic as Melvin and worked as a clerk in the store.

Andy's sister, Jo-An, was another member of the extended family. She was a doctor, specializing in Trauma Treatment. She was married to an Herbalist, Nathan Snyder. Nathan wasn't making a living as an Herbalist. He made his money playing the precious metals markets. Jo-An's younger cousin, Leslie Hamilton, stayed with Nathan and Jo-an. She'd just started medical school.

Then there were the "kids." Andy and Cathy's oldest, Matthew, sixteen, and youngest, Tess, fifteen. Casper, also fifteen, was Fargo's and Julie's only child.

They were a close knit family, with one overriding common interest. All four family groups were preppers. Andy was the eldest and had been prepping since a teen ager and was well into the self-sufficient lifestyle before he met any of the others. As the family came together and grew, each new member was brought into the fold.

The other three families had bought in on the same small working farm that Andy had purchased an interest in as his first major investment after starting the LE/Mil supply business. The farm was now fully owned by the four interrelated families. There was a resident manager in charge, with three permanent hands to work the farm.

The farm made little or no profit most years, but produced eighty-five percent of the food requirements for the four families, farm manger's family, and the hands' families, with enough left over to sell to the local stores in amounts that paid the expenses of running the farm.

With well equipped and supplied individual homes, everyone planned to stay at home, or Bug-In, for most potential disasters. But some things called for bugging out to the Farm. There was only one hitch in their plans to bug out. You sort of couldn't get from their homes to the Farm. At least not easily. There were several major obstacles between them. Two rivers, a small mountain range, and a large city. That meant they had to go somewhere else before they could head for the Farm.

It was a long way around using their Bug-out vehicles. But it was doable. There was a shorter route, but it meant leaving the road vehicles stashed and camouflaged, and heading cross country. There were a series of hiking, horse, and ATV trails through the mountains that could be used if the roads weren't passable. There were quite a few situations that would prevent the road vehicles from making it the long way around.

So, when the announcement came over the NOAA weather radio that a potential terrorist attack could leave the city, among many others, in ruins, the family decided to head for the farm. And perhaps half of the people in the area decided to head for the hills, literally, whether or not they had a place to go. They just wanted away from the city.

When Andy used the Low Band Business Band radios that all the families' were equipped with to announce the Bug-Out, everyone headed, per the plan, to Andy's store. They were all there within half an hour.

"Okay, everyone," Andy said when the families had gathered in the now locked down store. "Things have changed."

"Looking more like a general attack, now," chimed in Melvin. "Heard it coming over."

"Exactly," Andy replied. "And that changes things for us. Originally I thought we could just head out and take our time. Probably nothing will come of the terrorist attack, if there is one. But if there is a chance of all out nuclear war, I think we'd better continue with that in mind. Which means getting to the Farm as quickly as possible."

"Leave our homes behind?" asked Leslie.

A couple of people chuckled and Leslie blushed. "You know what I mean. Can't we stay and ride it out here?"

"No," Andy said carefully, not wanting to hurt Leslie's feelings. "Two reasons. One, our long term supplies are at the Farm. We'd have to go there eventually if this war talk is correct. And two, the Farm is going to need everyone there to protect it and what it contains. If we don't go there now, there might not be anything there to go to, later."

"I understand," Leslie said, sounding resigned.

“Should we chance the roads?” asked Fargo, “Or go ahead and plan on going cross country?”

Nathan was shaking his head. “When I came over the Interstate was already jammed. It could take us days to go around the long way.”

“Be a lot easier, and we can take a lot more, if we use the vehicles,” Melvin said.

“True,” Andy said. “But considering all the possibilities, I think we need to go home, secure the homes for long term absence, and then go directly to the mountain. Everyone okay with that?”

There was some minor discussion within the family units for a few seconds, but everyone agreed in the end. “Okay. Everyone take off and meet back here in three hours or less.”

There was an eerie silence as the others left the store, leaving Andy, Cathy, Mathew, and Jess to discuss what they were going to do to get ready. “Cathy,” Andy said, “You take the kids and go secure the house. Lock it down tight. There are some things I want to take care of here before we leave.”

“Okay,” Cathy replied. “Come on kids. The sooner we get this done the sooner we are on our way. I don’t trust the government to give us word on when, or even if, the missiles are launched.”

Pale, but showing the family trait of being game and ready to tackle anything, Mathew and Jess followed their mother toward the door of the store.

“You guys be careful,” said Andy, following them to the door to relock it. “It’s going to get crazy out there.”

“Already is,” said a man that just came up as Cathy and the teens left. “I need to get a few guns,” he said to Andy.

“Sorry. We’re closed.”

Andy noticed the somewhat twisted smile on the man’s face and was reaching for the Cold Steel Dragonfly O-Tanto sheathed behind his back even as the man drew a gun from his pocket. “I said I’m here to get some guns.”

It was all one motion as Andy spun, pulled the O-Tanto and slid the point between the man’s ribs, his left hand deflecting the gun. The gun went off, but the bullet flew wide, burying itself in the far wall behind Andy.

It took a solid tug to pull the fifteen inch blade from the man’s dead body. The sharp point had found the man’s heart and he’d died before he could fall to the ground. Andy took a

quick look around and then dragged the body into the store, over to one side of the door. He locked the front door again and then hurried to get done what he needed to do before he left.

He was waiting impatiently two and a half hours later, the work done and things laid out carefully on the various counters in the store. Everything he wanted protected that he couldn't take was in the vault. There were still quite a few things on the shelves, but none of them could be used against the Families.

Jo-An and Nathan, with Leslie, were the first to return. Andy had a Sig 226 .357 Sig in his hand when he went to the door to let them in. There were three other people wanting to get in. The Sig dissuaded them from trying. And, perhaps, the sight of the blood on the floor from the first attempt. Not to mention the firearms and blades that the three family members wore with confidence.

"Ewww!" Leslie said, seeing the blood and then the dead man.

"Trouble?" Nathan asked.

"None I couldn't handle," replied Andy. "You guys ready?"

"Yeah. We the first back?"

Andy nodded. "Got some stuff I want to take to keep it from getting into the wrong hands. Follow me."

Nathan let out a low whistle when he saw the things on the counters.

"Order for the Sheriff's Department just came in this morning," Andy explained, handing things to the three. "Patriot Ordnance Factory P416-7 .223 AR style PDWs. 7" barrels, select fire, with Redi-Mag carrier. Two C-Products 40-round magazines on the gun. Got FMCO vests set up for eight 40-round magazines. Unfortunately the new body armor order is delayed, or I'd be handing them out, too.

Andy handed Jo-An and Leslie the PDWs. He picked up another gun and handed it to Nathan. "Another POF weapon," he explained. "P308-20 .308 rifle. 25-round magazine in the weapon and eight in the vests."

"I didn't think you liked the AR platform," Nathan said, checking the rifle the same way his wife and niece were checking the PDWs.

"Don't. Especially in .223. But these are the exception."

"I like it," Leslie said, slipping the magazine back into the PDW. She set it down and put on the vest. "All loaded up. Heavy."

“Yeah. I equipped them all the same. You can switch to your other gear if you want, but I thought these would give us interoperability. I’m beginning to think we’re going to have some trouble getting out of town.”

There was a banging on the door and Andy went to answer it. Jo-An, Nathan, and Leslie all took up defensive positions, and Andy had the 226 in hand when he opened the door. “Open up!” came a shout from outside when someone saw Andy approaching the door from inside.

“Closed!” Andy yelled through the door. He lunged back when someone outside fired a shotgun at him, expecting the birdshot to blow through the door. But all the windows in the store were armored glass. Some of the birdshot stuck in the outer face of the thick glass, but none even came close to penetrating.

Suddenly more shots rang out and the three men outside took off running. Fargo, Julie, and Casper were at the door, guns in hand. Andy let them in and quickly locked the door again.

“Getting wild out there,” Fargo said. He saw the others with their new weapons and glanced at Andy.

“I’ve got some for you, too,” Andy said, seeing the look.

“I’m pretty happy with what I have,” Fargo said.

“Yeah. Take a look at these.” Andy began handing out the Patriot Ordnance Factory guns to the Thursten’s. A .308 rifle to Fargo and .223 PDWs to Julie and Casper.

“Wow!” Casper said, “Full auto!”

“And you know how to not use it if it isn’t necessary,” Fargo said. He was checking out the 20” barreled .308 rifle. The iron sights were folded down and a Bushnell Elite 4200 2.5-10x40mm scope on QD mount was in place.

Andy pointed to the ATN Otis-17 night vision scope that could quickly replace the Bushnell for night time. The PDWs were similarly equipped, only with an ATN Ultra Digital reflex sight instead of the Bushnell. An Otis-17 was available for each one of them, too.

“You rob a bank?” Fargo asked. He seemed satisfied with the rifle.

“Sheriff’s department. They just came in. Didn’t have a chance to call them. I’d rather have them in our hands than take a chance of them falling into someone else’s.”

“Good point.” Fargo turned around. Leslie was watching the door and said, “It’s Cathy, Mathew, and Jess. Hurry. There’s some others out there that look like they want in.”

When Andy opened the door, Fargo was right there with the rifle to his shoulder. Those following Cathy and the teens shrank back.”

“Any sign of Melvin and Karen?” Cathy asked.

“Here they come.” It was Leslie again.

This time Fargo had to shoot over the heads of the mob that was forming outside the store to keep them back so the Abernathy’s could get inside.

Andy quickly distributed the rest of the eight PDWs and four P308s. Quick explanations, and some switching around of gear and the twelve family members got ready to leave. “I’m going to leave the door open,” Andy said when the group was ready.

“But everything else...” Casper said, looking around at the shelves.

“Nothing I don’t mind losing,” Andy said. “It should distract those outside so we can leave with the fewest hassles possible.”

“Oh. Okay. I just noticed there aren’t any guns or ammo or anything. Just some clothes and camping gear and stuff.”

“Yep,” Andy said. “Everyone ready?” When the nods came, Andy unlocked the door and Fargo led the way out of the store, the rest moving close behind him. There were a few people around the locked vehicles, but when Andy called out, “It’s all yours!” and pointed to the open door, the three different groups headed inside, just as Andy thought they would.

He thought he heard gunshots as he was pulling away from the store, the big one-ton Dodge diesel crew cab pickup bellowing slightly as he tromped the accelerator. He wanted to be long gone before the mob discovered there wasn’t much useful left in the store.

Melvin, in a three-quarter ton Suburban, was next in line with Karen, followed by Nathan, Jo-An, and Leslie in their Suburban, with Fargo, Julie, and Casper bringing up the rear in a Ford three quarter ton crew cab pickup truck. All four pulled identical trailers loaded to the gills with ATVs, motorcycles, and gear.

It took quite a while to get to the point where they would leave the road vehicles and switch to the off-road gear. The going got rough at the end, but the trucks and SUVs made it, with the trailers. They parked in the midst of tall brush. It was unlikely anyone would be looking for vehicles in the spot, but after the trailers were unloaded, the rigs were covered with camouflage tarps and brush thrown over them in a random pattern.

“Okay. Listen up, everyone,” Andy said after the trailers were unloaded. “We should be okay for a bit. Until we hit the first fire road. From there on, we could run into people. And they are going to be desperate people. Anything could happen.

“We are not going to take chances. We go armed at all times, and keep a sharp lookout. We avoid any and all confrontations we can. When we can’t, we hit the problem with everything we have. It’ll take a couple of days to get there. More if we have to take alternate routes because of dangerous situations.

“Now, we’ll travel in the same order as we came up here, except the kids will be between Melvin and Karen, and Nathan and Jo-An.”

“Shouldn’t I ride point?” Mathew asked.

“Thanks, Mathew,” Fargo said quickly. “But for the moment, we’d better let your Dad take the lead. He knows this end of this trail better.”

“Yes, Son,” Andy added. “I have a feeling you’ll have more than one chance to take point.”

“Okay,” said the 16-year old. “I’ll do whatever is best for the group.”

“We all will,” said Leslie. She had no wish to take point or tail end Charlie, but would if asked. She’d trained with the families for such a need.

Jess and Casper both stayed silent. There was no way any of the adults or Mathew would let them take any unnecessary risks. They’d be in the middle most, if not all, of the time.

After a few minutes to gear up, getting helmets, radios, gloves and LBE on and adjusted, they were ready to go. Andy climbed aboard the Bombardier Can-Am Outlander Max ATV. It was well equipped with cargo bags. Cathy got on behind him and gripped the passenger handles firmly. Without a word, Andy pulled away, checking the ride of the loaded MIG tent trailer hitched to the back of the Outlander.

Melvin and Karen were next, on a Suzuki V-Strom 1000cc dual sport bike. It too was outfitted with a set of cargo bags and had a trailer. A Bunkhouse Lil’B motorcycle tent trailer, also loaded with supplies and gear.

Following them, spaced evenly apart, came Mathew, Jess, Casper, and Leslie, on identical Suzuki V-Strom 650 ABS dual sports. Like the bigger bikes, each one carried cargo bags loaded with supplies.

Nathan and Jo-An were also on a Suzuki V-Strom 1000cc dual sport bike, equipped nearly identically as Melvin and Karen’s. Taking up the tail end Charlie position were Fargo and Julie, on a rig the same as Andy and Cathy’s. Another Outlander Max ATV with MIG trailer.

Unlike many bikes and ATVs used in the wild, all of the families’ vehicles were equipped with extra quite mufflers. They could be heard, of course, especially if really wound up, but for the most part, the group was about as quiet as a group of six motorcycles and two ATVs could be.

Andy set a good pace. Slow enough for the trailers to ride easily, but fast enough to get some distance behind them. There was little chatter among the group. Each had a Rider Link ORV-1 communication system in their helmets which allowed communication between rider and passenger on the two place rigs, and intercommunication between all the rigs using Dakota Alert

M538HT MURS radios connected to the ORV-1 systems. Motorola HT-750 low band business band handy-talkies would be substituted for the MURS radios if the group separated and needed longer distance communications.

It was nearing dark when Andy pulled off the trail into an opening in the forest. The others followed, spacing the rigs out in a circle, just like the wagon trains of the western expansion.

Off came the helmets. "Mathew," Andy said, "I want you to run up the trail for a half mile or so. That should be where we intersect the fire road. Get close enough to see if anyone is about, but don't be seen."

"Okay, Dad," Mathew said eagerly as he put the helmet back on.

"You want us to start setting up camp?" Leslie asked.

"Let's wait for Mathew's scouting report. "Might go ahead and get a latrine ready."

"Okay," replied the young woman. She started to unslung the P416-7 but Andy spoke up.

"Better you keep it with you all the time, for the time being."

Leslie nodded, slinging the gun into a more comfortable position.

"I'll go with you, Leslie," Jess said. "I need to go."

The two had become close since Leslie had moved in with Jo-An and Nathan to attend the local medical school.

Casper went off in another direction to set up the men's latrine, e-tool in hand. An experienced camper, he knew exactly what to do.

Adult eyes drifted toward the narrow trail as they talked softly among themselves, discussing the possibilities that they might encounter. All breathed a sigh of relief when Mathew eased the Suzuki back into the open area quietly.

"Fire road is there, just where you said, Dad. Saw only one person. I feel bad. The guy only had a day pack on him and was wearing city clothes. He might have a rough time of it tonight if it gets as cold as the forecast this morning said it will."

All eyes were on Andy. "He's on his own, unless he hooks up with someone else on the road. We can't take in and care for every person we see."

"I understand, Dad," Mathew said softly. "It was just... hard... to not lend a hand."

"You did the right thing," Andy replied. "There are going to be many hard decisions made over the next few weeks and perhaps months. I'm not saying we won't ever help anyone,

but we are going to have to be very selective about who we do help and who we don't. Let's go ahead and get camp set up."

The sounds of setting up the tent trailers, and the two separate tents the teens would use were subdued, as the group practiced strict sound discipline. It wasn't long before hot water was available to rehydrate the Mountain House campers' meals that would be everyone's supper, with tea, coffee, or hot chocolate afterwards with a handful of gorp for desert.

Andy hesitated for a moment as everyone got ready to go to bed, but after a few second said, "You have the first watch, Mathew. Leslie, you're next. I'll take the third. Fargo? Melvin? Nathan?"

"I'll take the last watch," Melvin said immediately.

Andy nodded, and group paired off, going to their tent trailers, with Mathew and Casper sharing one on-the-ground tent, and Leslie and Jess another. Mathew put his gear inside the tent, and then went back to the spot that had been picked out for the sentries to be during the night.

A stressful day and a tiring one, the occasional gunshot heard during the night kept everyone from sleeping all that well, except for Jess and Casper.

Melvin had hot water ready the next morning when Andy got up just before dawn. The two talked quietly over cups of coffee as they waited a bit longer to wake the others. But the wakeups weren't needed. Even Jess and Casper were up and about shortly after first light.

Everyone was in a heavy sweater or light jacket for breakfast. The temperature had dropped significantly during the night. Breakfast went quickly and the group was ready to get back on the trail by the time the sun began to warm the mountain slightly.

Again Andy led the way. He was keeping a close eye on the GPS navigation system installed on the Outlander Max. When he was sure he was a few yards away from the fire road he stopped and keyed the M538HT and spoke into the boom microphone in his helmet. "Give it a look, Mathew."

Andy felt Cathy touch his shoulder in question. Through the intercom he told his wife, "He'll be okay. Mathew took to the training like a duck to water. He knows what to do and how to do it."

"I know, Honey. But these times now..."

"We just have to depend on the fact that we raised and taught him well."

Cathy leaned forward and put her arms around Andy, pressing against his back.

Mathew went past on the Suzuki V-Strom 650 ABS slowly and quietly. He was still in sight when he stopped and got off the back. He disappeared from sight for what seemed an eternity to Cathy, but he was suddenly on the radio and sounded just fine to her.

“Fire road is here okay. But there are half a dozen people camping right at the junction. And they have guns aplenty. Mostly hunting rifles and shotguns though.”

“Ease on back here,” Andy transmitted. “We need to palaver.”

When Mathew made it back, Nathan gestured to Leslie and she and Mathew took up watch positions for the group as the adults got together to discuss options. It didn't take long. They would avoid the group currently on the fire road.

“Mathew, go back and keep an eye on the group. Leslie, go look for a path the Outlanders can take to intersect the fire road to the west. Start back at that opening about a quarter mile back. The rest of us will wait here until we hear from you.”

Her eyes wide, Leslie looked at Nathan and Jo-An. Jo-An gave a slight nod.

“You can do it, Leslie,” Jess said reassuringly.

Still a bit unsure, Leslie turned the bike around and headed back down the track they'd come up. It was some time before Leslie reported in by radio. “Okay. I think I found a route. I blazed it as I traveled. I was afraid I wouldn't be able to find it again, once I did find it. Orange survey tape. Little pieces, so look carefully.”

“Good work, Leslie,” Andy said. “Ease on back, Mathew. Keep an eye on the back trail. Pull the blazes as you come. We're heading out now.” With that, Andy started the Outlander Max and headed back down the trail, the others following closely.”

When they were all together again, just off the fire road, Mathew handed Leslie a handful of survey tape pieces. She stuffed them in a pocket for use later, if needed.

The families had an easy run for almost an hour. Andy suddenly stopped in the middle of the fire road. “Something is wrong,” he said over the radio. “Mathew?”

“I'm on it, Dad.”

“Be careful, Son,” Andy said quietly. “This could be a problem.”

“Will do.” Mathew passed those ahead of him and then slowed down as he continued up the fire road. He went around a curve and Andy felt himself tense. When it came, it was a shock, even to Andy, who half expected it.

The sudden gunfire was loud and intense.

“Andy?” Cathy asked, clutching her husband in fear for her oldest child.

“Ambush! Ambush!” Mathew's voice was loud in the helmet speakers of all the family members.

Andy recognized the sound of Mathew's P416-7 on full auto. Even as he ordered the others to leave the vehicles and take cover in the forest on each side of the fire road, Andy admired the short, even bursts of fire his son was using.

A few seconds later, the PDW slung down his chest, Mathew came charging back on the Suzuki to join the others. He stopped the bike and took up a position in the forest. He was breathing hard, but sounded calm when he said, "About fifteen or twenty. Not sure. But they have a lot of guns. Not just hunting guns, this time."

"Andy?" asked Fargo.

Andy didn't have a chance to respond. The group was after Mathew. At least ten came running around the corner of the fire road thirty yards ahead the families. He began to fire the P308-20 .308 rifle.

The rest of the family joined in. All were in prone positions, behind the nearest big tree. There was a tremendous amount of noise for a few seconds as full auto fire from the PDWs raked the approaching group. Andy, Fargo, Melvin, and Nathan were picking off individuals with the most dangerous weapons with single shots.

A second, much smaller group, came around the bend, this time more cautiously and not in the middle of the road. They were working their way up in the edges of the forest flanking the fire road.

With controlled bursts from the .223s and single shots from the .308s soon had those that were still alive hurrying back around the bend.

"Fargo! Melvin! On me!" Andy yelled and stood up. He began to advance up the fire road slowly, the rifle at the ready. As the other two kept an eye up the road, Andy checked each of the bodies, tossing weapons out of reach in case someone was faking their death.

Not all of those down were dead. There were moans and cries for help from three of them. None reached for the weapons as Andy moved them.

"Coup de grâce?" asked Melvin.

Andy shook his head. "I can't bring myself to do that. Keep an eye on them. Fargo and I'll check around the bend."

They found three more bodies of men that had managed to get back around the bend despite having been shot. There were no others in sight on the road or along the edges of the forest.

"What do you think, Andy? "High speed run, guns ready?"

"I think so. Let's get back."

“We taking the guns?”

Andy hesitated. “Yeah. I guess so. Don’t want to leave them for someone else to use against us.”

As they walked back toward their vehicles, Andy and Fargo began to collect the guns and accoutrements. Both men’s hands were full and Melvin bent over to gather up those weapons near him.

“Better let us get them,” Andy said.

Before the words were barely out of his mouth, one of the dead, that wasn’t as dead as he’d seemed before, rolled over, raising a handgun as he did so. The man had Melvin cold.

It wasn’t a conscious thought that had Andy dropping everything in his arms. With his rifle slung across his chest, his right hand automatically went to the hilt of the Cold Steel Dragonfly katana carried on his back under his pack.

One amazingly fast movement and the man on the ground screamed, his right hand, still with the pistol grasped in it, fell to the ground, severed completely just above the wrist. The screams stopped when Andy slid the point of the katana into the man’s chest, slicing the heart open.

“Sweet Mercy!” Melvin said, face pale. “I thought I was a dead man.” He was staring at the body on the ground, but then looked over at Andy. “Thanks, man. You saved my life.”

“Slickest move I ever saw you make with a blade, buddy,” Fargo said.

“Sorry, guys,” Melvin said then. “I should have been more alert.”

“Water under the bridge. Let’s get these weapons secured, clear a path, and get on the trail again.” Andy wiped the blood off the katana on the dead man’s shirt before sheathing it again. He’d clean it thoroughly that night.

The rest of the family members came out of the forest when Andy called out the okay. “Good work, Son,” he told Mathew. He turned to look at Jess. “You okay, Honey?”

“I never shot anybody before,” she said softly. “I didn’t like it.”

Cathy hugged Jess against her. “That’s good, Sweetheart. None of us like what just happened, but if we had not reacted the way we did, things would have been very much worse for us.”

Jess nodded and pulled away from her mother. Everyone began to go over their respective vehicles, looking for damage from bullets. There were a couple of scars, and the windshield of Melvin’s Suzuki had a tiny hole through it down low on the left side, but that was the limit of the

damage. The group had mostly been shooting into the edge of the forest where the family members had taken cover.

“You want me on point?” Mathew asked as everyone began to get their helmets back on and climb aboard the rigs.

“Why don’t I take his bike and run point,” Fargo said. “He can ride with Julie.”

Andy considered it. Fargo looked at him and shrugged slightly.

“I can do it, Dad,” Mathew replied to Fargo’s comment. He didn’t look at his Uncle.

“Yes. Yes, you can. Go ahead. But I want you to keep a very close eye out and be even more cautious than you have been.”

“I will. I’d much rather avoid a confrontation than be in one. I learned my lesson just now.”

“Let’s stay together until we get past their camp,” Andy said as he started the Outlander Max. “Keep your weapons ready, every other one to the right, the rest to the left.”

Mathew took the lead, and moved forward slowly, eyes darting right to left and back again, keeping the entire front 120° area under close scrutiny. There was no sign of the survivors of the group that had attacked them.

Andy had Mathew stop so Fargo could get off his Outlander Max and check the things the group had left behind at the ambush site. He shook his head at Andy, and the families moved on, Mathew out in front by fifty yards, going slowly.

“Make a right up ahead,” Andy told Mathew an hour later.

“Hold up, everyone,” Mathew replied immediately. “Got another group up here. Right at the intersection, like before.”

“Pull back. I want to look it over,” Andy said. He stopped and got off the ATV.

With the helmet in Cathy’s hands, and the POF .308 in his, Andy walked forward, meeting Mathew a few steps from the ATV. Mathew flipped the visor off his helmet up and said, “A big group. They have guns, too. But there are a bunch of women and children with them.”

“Okay. I’ll check it out. Have Fargo and Nathan come up and cover me.”

Mathew wanted to protest, but followed his father’s order after only a moment of hesitation. He spoke to his Uncles and then went back to the head of the column, his PDW at the ready.

Andy slung the POF down across his chest, but unsnapped the flap on the Sig 226 .357 Sig holster. The katana was still across his back, and the O-tanto hung from his belt on the left side. "Hello the camp!" he called out when he was in sight of them.

His eyes roved over the group. There were at least fifty people, and about a fourth of them were armed, with three of the gun holders being women. There several more women in the group, along with at least ten young children. Andy looked at the camp set up at the side of the fire road in an open area. Only six tents, two of them small solo campers' bivys.

Everyone with a gun had it leveled at Andy after he shouted. "Not here to hurt anyone or take anything," he said loudly. "Just want to move on through."

"We heard gunfire earlier. Was that you?"

Andy nodded and took a few steps forward. "A group tried to ambush us. They weren't successful."

"Stay right where you are," said the man that seemed to be in charge. Women and older children were herding the smaller children toward the tents, out of the line of fire, if trouble broke out.

"How many are you?" asked the man.

A woman called out, "Do you have any food and water to spare? We're in desperate need."

"There's a cree..." Andy started to tell them about the creek not too far away, but it was known to be infected with a couple of microorganisms and any water taken from it needed to be boiled or otherwise treated before drinking. Andy had doubts those of the group would take the time to do either.

"Yes. We can spare some water. And a bit of food for the little ones," Andy said. "But you get it after we pass through."

"What if we decide to just take it?" asked one of the men on the periphery of the group. He was of slight build, wore his hair in a short pony tail, and had a scraggly looking Van Dyke beard.

Several people told him to shut up, and the man in charge glared at him. "We don't want any trouble, mister. But we sure could use some help."

Andy lifted one of the MURS radios, identical to the ones mounted on the vehicles, and spoke into it. "Everyone come on through. Keep your guns pointed down to the ground. But be ready for anything. Real slow. I don't want any threatening moves."

A minute later Andy stepped out of the way and let Mathew go past him. "Hold up about three hundred yards out."

A spot opened up and Mathew drove through it, turning up the trail that intersected the one they were on. One by one the rest of the family members passed. All could feel the eyes of the refugees on them. When Julie was well up the other trail, Andy walked forward. "We'll be back in just a few minutes with some food and water."

The big guy, the one in charge, nodded. "Don't let us down. Please. Not much we can do about it, but we have some little ones here..."

"So I see. Just remember the food is for them. The water is for everyone. Get some containers ready. I don't want to give up any of ours. Oh. Do you have a destination in mind?"

The man sighed and shook his head. "I get some containers rounded up."

Andy hurried to join the family at the vehicles.

"Where's Uncle Melvin and Uncle Fargo?" asked Jess, looking back down the trail worriedly.

"They're keeping an eye on the group. So nothing bad happens. We're going to give the group some water, and food for the kids. Help your mother get a few things ready. As things were gathered up, Andy considered for a long time, but finally dug into one of the cargo bags and took out a Katadyn Hiker Pro water filter unit and a pair of spare filter cartridges for it.

"You going to give them your filter?" Nathan asked.

"Yeah," Andy replied. "Reluctantly. It's a third line spare. The water we're giving them won't last long, and the spring is contaminated. If they discover it and drink without treating the water, some of them are going to get sick, for sure."

Nathan nodded. "Just checking."

With Mathew and Leslie helping, Andy and Cathy carried the water containers and armfuls of food back down the trail to the group.

With most of the group gathered round, Andy transferred the water to the group's containers, while Cathy handed out the food to those that said they had children.

"What about us?" asked the obnoxious little guy.

"You'll just have to wait until you get where you're going," Andy replied coldly. He turned to the big guy and handed him the water filter. "Each filter is good for about 200 gallons. There's a small creek about two hundred yards that way," Andy said, pointing into the forest. "It is contaminated, but the filter will take out the harmful bacteria. Don't let anyone drink the unfiltered water. They will most likely get sick if they do. And you don't need that."

"Okay. Thanks. Why are you doing this? You could have just kept going."

“We decided it was just the right thing to do. Sorry it can’t be more. But I won’t risk my own people.”

“Yeah. I understand. Thank you.” The man didn’t offer to shake hands, and neither did Andy.

Cathy looked back as the four of them moved back toward the vehicles. “We’ve done all we can do without serious jeopardy to our own children,” Andy said softly.

“I know. It’s just... Well... You know what it is...”

“Yeah. I’d like to take in everyone. But we can’t. If this war happens, millions are going to die, if not billions. I don’t want my family to be in that group.”

“Nor I,” replied Cathy, turning back resolutely to join her family.

Everything was repacked and ready to go a few minutes later when Melvin and Fargo appeared in the trail, having come through the forest to join them without being seen. It was Melvin that asked Andy, “You think that big guy knew Fargo and I were out there? He kept scanning the area where we were.”

“Probably. And I think it is part of the reason nothing happened. It could easily have gone badly if the guy had started something he thought he could get by with.”

“Yeah. Best we did it the way we did,” Fargo said. He was putting on his helmet and getting ready to get on the Outlander Max with Julie.

With Mathew again in the lead a few hundred feet ahead, the families began travelling again. It was slower going. The Suzuki V-Strom 650 ABS bike had no trouble. Even the big V-Strom 1000s with trailer had no trouble with the trail.

The Outlander Maxes, with their larger, tandem wheel trailers had a few tight spots they had to maneuver through. But they were able to keep going without further incident until just before nightfall.

Mathew had stopped and waited for the rest at a suitable spot for camp. As it had the night before, everything went smoothly during their overnight stay.

There was a mixture of light rain and heavy snow the next morning when Andy started up one of the stoves to get water hot, having pulled the last shift of the night. Cathy came out of the trailer tent, but turned around and went back inside. When she came out the second time she had on a heavy coat with hood.

“Nasty out,” she said when Adam handed her a cup of coffee.

That was the general consensus as the rest of the family members got up to face another day. But everyone had appropriate gear for the weather, and were bundled up nicely when they broke camp and headed on their way again. The rain had turned to sleet, with some snow. An hour later it was all snow falling. And it was falling fast and heavy.

This time when they stopped for a noon break, a couple of stoves were set up and water heated for hot drinks. The prior two days the noon stops had been quick, with only food bars, jerky, and gorp washed down with water. But Andy thought that a warming drink would cheer everyone's spirits a little. He knew it would.

So coffee, tea, and hot chocolate were prepared and handed around after the same meal they'd had during the other lunches was finished. Afterwards, the family hit the road again, with Mathew still in the lead. He kept a slow pace, to allow the Outlanders Maxes ample time to negotiate the narrow trail.

"Something... Something ahead on the trail," Mathew said on the radio. He had come to a stop and let the others come up to him. "I can't tell what it is, but... I think it is a body."

"Check it out and then I'll take a look," Jo-An remarked.

"I have a feeling whoever it is won't be needing your expertise," Andy said. He was off the Outlander Max, having removed his helmet. He took the baseball cap Cathy handed him and put it on his head.

"Nathan, come on up and give me some cover." Before Mathew could offer, Andy spoke again. "I want you on the back trail now, Mathew. I was going to switch when we hit the next fire road, but we might as well make the change now. Stop occasionally and listen for anyone that might be following."

"Okay Dad." Mathew turned the Suzuki around and eased around the others, going far enough so he could hear, but where he could still see the rest.

Nathan was ready and moved into the edge of the forest, tracking Andy as he moved forward to check on the partially snow covered body a few yards up the trail. Even the first quick look told Andy the tale. It was the man in city clothes and day pack that Mathew had seen the first day.

"Remarkable that he made it this far," Andy said after motioning Nathan forward. Andy checked the body. It was stone cold. The man had been dead for quite some time. It was a struggle to search the man's body. He'd apparently worked up a sweat, probably by keeping moving when the temperature dropped. His wet clothes had frozen stiff.

But Andy was able to get the man's wallet and opened it up. "Stanton Jones. Born 1963." Andy handed the wallet to Nathan and then worked the daypack off Jones' stiff arms. Nathan saw Andy shake his head when he opened the pack.

Andy held it out so Nathan could look inside.

“Geez! He as much as killed himself,” Nathan muttered. There were three empty 750mL bottles of Scotch in the pack. Even empty, they were carefully cushioned to protect them from breaking. A kitchen knife, can opener, spoon and fork were the only other things in the bag.

Andy started to toss the pack aside, but decided to hang onto it. Might be useful as a hand out at some point. The two men headed back to the others and the vehicles. Andy tossed the daypack up onto the top of the load on the MIG tent trailer.

Jo-An was watching the two and when she saw Nathan shake his head, she got back on the Suzuki V-Strom 1000, leaving room for Nathan to get on in front of her.

“You want me on point?” Leslie asked before Andy could let Melvin know he wanted him and Karen to take the lead.

Andy started to say no, but hesitated for a moment. She was offering, she was eighteen, and there shouldn't be too much else going on up this high. “Yeah. Take it slow and easy. And keep a sharp eye out for anything suspicious.”

“Okay Uncle Andy.” Leslie eased the Suzuki forward and pulled out into the lead, swinging well around the dead body. Andy followed, barely able to avoid clipping the frozen body.

For over an hour they continued to climb at a slow pace, the snow getting heavier and heavier. “There's a good spot to camp here,” Leslie said in the late afternoon.

“Okay, Leslie. Check a little further up the trail and we'll pull in where you are.” Andy had really wanted to top the high pass and get down a ways on the other side, but Leslie was about worn out. It was primarily her nervous energy being sapped, but it was energy, and a person only had so much. Better to let her get some rest and have everyone fresh when they started down the mountain.

“Uncle Andy,” came Leslie's voice over the radio just as he turned into the open spot on the side of the trail. “I'm right at the top. Should we just go down now? Try to get out of the snow?”

Andy heard the fatigue in her voice and looked around at Jess and Casper. Both were leaning forward, resting their helmeted heads on their crossed arms atop the gas tank cargo bags. They, too, were showing their fatigue.

“No. Come on back. We'll camp here. Make the crossing in the morning.”

Even with the snow still coming down, the experienced family had camp set up quickly. When Casper asked if they could have a fire, Andy and Fargo looked at one another for a moment. Fargo nodded and Andy told Casper. “Small one should be okay. You know the drill.”

“Yes, Uncle Andy.” Happy with the decision, Casper hurried to prove his skills in fire making in adverse conditions. Fargo kept an eye on him as he helped Julie set up the tent on the MIG trailer. But Casper was well trained. He had the small fire going in a short time, with plenty of additional wood ready to feed it.

“Watch the fire, Jess?” Casper asked his cousin. “I want to get a lot more wood.”

“Okay, Casper. It feels nice. Thanks for making it.”

“Sure thing,” Casper replied. He headed off into the forest with his tomahawk, to bring in more branches off the leaning and standing deadfall timber the forest was peppered with.

No one was inclined to stay up after full dark, despite the fire. Casper carefully banked the fire, so it would be ready the next morning. Andy, Melvin, Fargo, and Nathan took the night watches, after convincing the wives that they’d have plenty to do in the future.

Nathan had the fire going when the others crawled out of the tents the next morning. The snow had stopped, and light was showing through the tops of the trees. But it was much colder than the previous evening.

The men stood around, eating their Mountain House breakfasts, discussing the situation. “What do you think, Andy? Push on, or lay up a day and let some of the snow disappear. It should warm up late this afternoon, according to the last forecast I heard.” Fargo took a swig of coffee and then began to eat again.

Andy looked at the other two. “What do you think, guys?”

“I’d rather get where we’re going, Melvin said. “As long as you think the kids can make it on their bikes. It’s going to be a struggle, but I think Nathan and I will be okay on the big bikes, even with the trailers.”

“I don’t know,” Nathan said. “Speaking as Devil’s Advocate, wouldn’t it be better to wait and see? Might not even have to continue if the situation stabilizes. I’ve been listening to the shortwave every night. Nothing has happened yet.”

Andy looked away, seeming to study the bright light as the sun climbed behind the trees. “I think we’d better push on. We know what is behind us. I don’t want to run into any of the people we’ve already had encounters with. And even if this situation does taper off, we might as well use it as an exercise.”

It was enough to convince the others. Andy was the leader of the family for a reason. All the others knew he took everything he could think of into account before he made a difficult decision.

Casper made sure the fire was out and could not reignite and spread, then forked his Suzuki and started it. Leslie went ahead and pulled forward, without waiting to be told, and Mathew waited for the others to get almost out of sight before he began to follow, stopping from

time to time, just as he had the day before, to take off his helmet and listen. In the cold, crisp air, sound would travel far, even in the forest.

As they topped the pass, Leslie pulled over in the first wide spot on the trail and let the others come up to her. "Is that the farm?" she asked, pointing toward the distant flatlands.

"Sure is," Nathan said. "Can't mistake those five big blue silos, even at this distance."

"Means we're almost there," Jess said, straining upwards slightly so she could see over the tops of the nearest trees.

"Well, closer than we were," Cathy replied. "Still a long way to go."

She looked over at Andy and Fargo. They had their heads together, looking off slightly away from the line of sight to the farm.

"What's the matter?" she asked, going over to them. All the others turned to see what was happening.

"Smoke," Fargo replied, pointing to the very faint, rising column of smoke. It was hard to see and dissipated quickly.

"Oh. Is it on our route?" Cathy asked.

"Depends on the route we take," Andy said. "It is on the route I intended to take. If we swing wide, we'll avoid them. But it will add half a day to the trip."

"Not everyone can be an enemy."

"True, Cathy," Andy said. "But right now, I'd just as soon not have any friends on the route, either."

A few seconds of silence and then Andy said, "We take the long way. Might be worse, but we'll never know for sure. Leslie, we pick up a really old and overgrown fire road ahead. Bear right when it splits."

"Okay, Uncle Andy."

Everyone put their helmet back on and Leslie led the way again. The travelling was much easier once they hit the fire road. Even though it was overgrown to a degree, it was wider than the other trail and much easier for the ATVs and bikes to traverse. And there wasn't nearly as much snow on this side of the mountain. They ran out of it just before noon.

All took advantage of the noon break to re-layer their clothing for the warmer temperatures on this side of the mountain, already down lower than they'd been the day before.

They had not travelled far after they ate when there was a loud squeal in the helmet speakers. Andy called for a halt. "Everyone gather round."

There were questions all around about if anyone else had heard the squeal. "I think we just got hit with an EMP," Andy said. "And the GPS lost all the satellites that are in view. I think someone has either taken them off-line or destroyed them. Either way, it is bad news. Everyone's rig doing okay? EMP didn't affect them?"

"I told you it wouldn't," Nathan said. "The electronics just don't have all that much wiring leading into them. Same with the MURS radios. The antennas are too short for them to get much of a pulse."

"Well," Fargo said, "If Andy is right, and you are right, as it seems both of you are, we're getting off lucky. But it also means a nuclear exchange is very, very likely. We need to get to the farm post haste."

"Right," Andy said. He took a topographic map out of the fuel tank pouch and unfolded it. "This is the route we'll take down." He pointed out the way points where they would change direction or switch from one trail to another, marking each one on the plastic overlay.

"Cathy, you'll have to do the navigating for me. Give me a head's up when a turn is coming up."

Cathy nodded and took the map. She studied it and the surrounding area as Andy continued.

"Okay. We're going to change up the convoy order a little. Leslie, I want you and Mathew to stay close on the back end. Casper and Jess still in the middle. But I'll lead, with Fargo behind me. I want to move quickly but still cautiously. We could be in the middle of a nuclear war in hours. Minutes, perhaps."

It wasn't only the teens that had white faces when Andy stopped talking. And it was worse a few moments later when a brilliant flash lighted the already sunny sky. All eyes turned toward the source. It was behind them, to the north, and well east of their position.

"That tears it," Andy said urgently. "People are going to be desperate and wild. Make sure your weapons are loaded and ready. We're going to be moving fast. If I miss the signs of an ambush, and we get caught in one, spray and pray and keep going as fast as you can to get out of the killing zone.

"It isn't likely, as I doubt anyone will be expecting someone to be coming down off the mountain. But there may be individuals like we ran into before that will shoot before asking questions. But bear in mind that we fire only if fired upon. Unless, of course, the situation dictates otherwise.

"Everyone go to the bathroom. We'll top off the fuel tanks from our cans. We won't be stopping for a long time."

It was a quiet, subdued group that went about getting ready for the hard run down the mountain. It took only a few minutes to get ready, but in that time, another flash had brightened the sky, this one in the far distance, but again well east of the farm. This one they could see the mushroom cloud, or the top of it anyway, as it climbed above the distant horizon.

Andy checked behind him one last time and then they were off. The tandem wheeled MIG trailers rode a bit better than the smaller and lighter Lil'Bs behind the Suzuki V-Strom 1000s, but everyone was an experienced rider and Andy was able to keep the speed up.

They were on a more travelled fire road in less than an hour and Andy was able to pick up more speed. The southern side of the mountain was steeper, and the valley floor was at a higher elevation than that on the north side, so the trip was shorter, despite some of the trails zigzagging due to the steepness, than the trip up.

It wasn't until they were on the home stretch down the mountain, on a steep fire road that angled just slightly across the base of the mountain, that they ran into the first panicked people. They were fleeing from their now EMP disabled vehicles, left sitting on the interstate that ran around the base of the mountain.

The man in the lead of a group of ten people stopped in the middle of the trail and began waving his arms when he saw the first ATV approaching. Andy slowed down, but he didn't stop. The man jumped out of the way at the last second and the convoy sped between the members of the group as it split toward each side of the fire road.

There was a lot of yelling and screaming, and one person tried to grab Mathew from his bike as he was passing. But Mathew kicked the man away, hardly slowing down as he did so. That was the first bunch. There were several more, the lower down the mountain they went.

Jess sounded like she was crying when she suddenly asked over the radio, "Why are all these people coming up here? Why aren't they trying to get to shelter?"

Cathy spoke soothingly to her daughter. "People panic, Sweetheart. They aren't thinking rationally. Just reacting wildly to the fact we are in the middle of a nuclear war."

"But they are going to die up there!"

"Yes. Perhaps most of them," Andy said. "But there is nothing we can do to help them."

"Okay," Jess said, sobbing slightly. But she never faulted on the bike, maintaining position and speed.

It wasn't until just before hitting the county road where the fire road they were on connected to the highway system that they ran into trouble. A group of at least a hundred people were spread out along the trail, taking up the entire width.

Andy slowed and stopped several yards from the people in the lead. "Clear the way! We're coming through!" he yelled through the opening of his helmet after he lifted the visor.

"No way!" someone screamed. "Give us those rigs! We're going up the mountain, not down!"

"Fire a burst over their heads, Cathy," Andy said, flipping the helmet visor back down.

"Andy?" Cathy asked.

But her husband just said, "Do it."

Swinging the P416-7 clear of Andy's body, and tensioning it from her shoulder with the sling, Cathy triggered a short burst well over the heads of the group. The reaction was immediate. Screaming in fear, the majority of those in front of them dived for the concealment of the forest. A couple of people stood their ground. And very foolishly drew weapons, bringing them up to fire on the convoy.

Cathy didn't hesitate. Her babies came first. She fired a long burst, this time directly at the three people beginning to aim guns at Andy. The burst was effective in getting the three to dive away, forgetting about their guns, despite only nicking one of them. But that was all the damage that was done as the gun, held one handed, even with the tension of the sling, climbed high to the right, all but one round pelting the forest well down the trail.

Andy gunned the Outlander Max, but only pulled over to one side of the road. "Go! Go! Go!" he shouted into the radio. He lifted the POF .308 rifle and began to fire over the heads of anyone that showed one, as the rest of the family rode past at high speed.

Julie, Karen, and Jo-An all had their carbines up and were firing short bursts to each side of the fire road as they traveled between the split group. As soon as Mathew and Leslie went by, Andy dropped the rifle, letting the sling catch and hold it against his chest.

He saw Mathew suddenly wobble, but Mathew didn't go down, horsing the bike back onto course. Andy accelerated and drew as close as he dared to the rear of Mathew's Suzuki.

"Oh, No!" Cathy cried out. "He's been shot!"

"I'm okay," Mathew said, keying the radio. "Just my shoulder. I'll be okay. We can't stop."

After an agonizing period of time, at least for Andy and Cathy, Fargo finally slowed down, and those following did the same. They circled the vehicles and everyone except Cathy and Jo-An had their weapons up, keeping watch around the circle. Cathy and Jo-An were with Mathew. He'd sat down heavily on the ground after stopping the bike.

The two women struggled to get his bike jacket off, and then his shirt and undershirt. “It doesn’t look too bad,” Jo-An said, opening her medical bag. It was more to reassure Cathy than Mathew.

“How is he?” Andy called over his shoulder.

“He’ll be all right,” Jo-An reassured Andy. “Bullet was a through and through, front to back, just under his armpit. Going to be sore, but he should heal without any problems. Barring the unforeseen.”

Another couple of minutes and Jo-An had the entrance and exit holes bandaged. She gave Mathew the first pill in a cycle of antibiotics to lessen the chance of infection, and a pain killer to reduce the pain that Mathew was just starting to feel.

“I’m okay. We can get back on the road,” Mathew said, climbing slowly to his feet. He reached for his bike but Andy was there.

“Hold it sport. You’re riding with your mother. I’ll take the bike.”

“But I...”

Andy didn’t have to say anything else. Mathew knew the look his father was giving him. No arguments accepted. “Okay. Mom, you want me to drive?”

“No, Mathew. You just ride quietly.”

All eyes turned to the south suddenly. The sound of gunfire was faint, but hearable. “That could be at the farm,” Fargo said, looking quickly at Andy.

“Yes, it could,” Andy replied. He took out his Motorola HT-750 from the gear on the ATV and keyed it up, all the while looking toward the horizon where the farm was.

“We’re about twelve miles out. We hear gunfire, Brandon. Is that you?”

Those close enough heard Brandon’s reply. “Yes. We’re under siege! That lousy pumpkin head Alfred brought a bunch of his buddies with him. They’re trying to take the farm.”

“We’ll be there as soon as we can,” Andy said and put the handheld back into the fuel tank bag. “We’ll scope it out when we get closer. Let’s go.”

A few seconds later and the group was on the road again. Though they met a few people on the road on the way to the Interstate, none presented any trouble, though several people did try to get them to stop. But Andy, on Mathew’s Suzuki V-Strom 650 ABS, riding in the lead, just drove around them and the rest of the family followed.

After crossing under the Interstate they didn't see anyone else until they got close to the farm. Then it was only the backs of men crouched behind a couple of pickups. One would pop up and fire a shot and then drop back down.

As soon as he saw them, Andy stopped the convoy at a small copse bordering the road. "Okay. Jo-An, you're in charge here with Leslie, Mathew, Jess, and Casper."

That look was on Andy's face again when Mathew started to speak up in protest. But he held his peace. His father wasn't going to let him join the fight. Not unless it came this way. He nodded at his father.

"Cathy, I want you and Karen on the Outlanders after we disconnect the trailers. With Karen riding behind one of you so she can provide cover fire. You'll be our rescue team in case one of us goes down.

"Fargo, you and I go in directly. Melvin, Nathan, you two keep our flanks clear once they figure out we're here. You guys ready?"

There were nods all around. All knew the price they might be paying to keep the farm in the family, but the cost of not doing so could be much worse. Even Casper and Jess understood and were checking their PDWs just in case the fight came to them.

With magazines topped off and equipment checked and ready, the four men of the family began a slow advance, using all the concealment that was available, and what cover there was. Melvin and Nathan began to swing away to each side as Andy and Fargo approached the two pickup trucks and the men hiding, they thought, behind them.

Andy simply could not bring himself to start shooting at the men's backs. Fargo looked at him when Andy hesitated, and then nodded, bringing the POF .308 rifle up to his shoulder.

"Hey!" Andy yelled. "Drop the guns and you'll..."

Andy didn't have a chance to complete the sentence. All four men began to turn around, bringing their guns up. One triggered a shot well before his gun was on line. It was enough for Andy and Fargo. Both let loose with quick bursts, taking all four men down in only fractions of a second.

Hurrying forward to kick the guns away from the fallen attackers, Andy and Fargo crouched behind the truck. Andy took out the HT-750 and contacted Brandon. "We took four out at the pickups. What else is going on?"

Andy had to hold the radio close to his ear when Brandon answered. A long volley of more than two dozen shots sounded as the rest of the attackers fired on the fortifications of the farm. They still didn't know they'd lost four people.

Slipping the radio back into a pocket, Andy leaned forward and said, "They have the place surrounded. Went over the back fence apparently and got inside the yard, but they're

pinned down from the house. You go around the other way and I'll go this. Take Nathan and see if you can get into position to cover us when Melvin and I open up on them from the fence line."

"Okay bro. You be careful."

"You too, man."

Each man nodded at the other and then turned to go in opposite directions. Fargo made it to where Nathan was and they began working their careful way around the corner of the property. One of Alfred's men spotted Fargo and realized that the four men in the front of the house were out of action. He fired several shots. Andy went from the crouch he was in to prone as Melvin cut loose with a short burst to keep the man's head down.

The two men with the one that had fired had to shift positions to avoid Melvin's fire, but that put them in sight of the house. Both were quickly taken down, leaving only the first man. He threw down his gun and raised his hands, shouting, "I give up! I give up!"

Andy muttered under his breath. He should have shot a moment before. Prisoners complicated things. "Melvin, make sure he's secured," Andy said, as they both moved forward to the man."

Andy signaled the house that the position was secure as Melvin took some 550 cord from his vest and hog tied the prisoner. "Man! That's too tight!" complained the man lying face down on the ground.

"You'd better just be glad we don't shoot prisoners," Andy said over his shoulder. "At least, not yet," he added softly.

Andy had scoped out the situation in the back yard. Five men were in various spots of concealment, using what little cover was available to them to best advantage. They were well protected from the house, but various parts of anatomy were exposed to Andy and Melvin.

"Okay, Melvin. We're going to have to go in hot and heavy. Alfred knows the defenses well enough to take good advantage of them. We either have to get them from behind or flush them out so those in the house can get a shot without hitting us. You ready?"

"As ready as I'm gonna get. Let's git'r done. I'm getting hungry."

Both men replaced partial magazines in their rifles with a full one, dropping the partials in their left side dump pouch. Andy counted down and then the two were running toward the fence, angling to get an angle behind the attackers, firing aimed shots as they ran forward. Two of the five men died where they lay, but the other three turned around and began to fire at Andy and Melvin.

Melvin went down with a cry, but Fargo and Nathan were adding their fire to that coming from the house. Two of the last three went down in the cross fire, but the third, with the best protection, was still firing.

Andy was at the fence and dropped to prone, mostly because he intended to, and partly because a bullet hit him in his left thigh, forcing him down. He fired several times, but between hitting the heavy chain link fence and his aim being disrupted by it, missed. Andy changed magazines and tried again.

The man was desperate. He rose and began to run toward the back of the property. He didn't make three steps before he went down.

Andy managed to get the MURS radio up to his lips. "Melvin and I are down. Anyone else hurt?"

"We're on our way!" Cathy shouted into her headset. The mike was still keyed when she told Karen to hang on.

Andy rolled onto his back, breathing heavily, trying to control the pain in his leg with concentration. It helped, but the leg still hurt. He turned his head and saw the two ATVs speeding toward him. He admired the driving skills of Cathy and Julie for a moment, but then passed out.

It was an hour later when he woke up, feeling queasy and needing to go to the bathroom. He opened his eyes and saw his entire extended family grouped around him. "How's Melvin? Anyone else hurt?"

"I'm fine," Melvin said. "Bullet bounced off my thick skull." Melvin was leaning rather heavily against Julie, but he was smiling.

"You're the only one with a serious injury," Jo-An said.

Cathy sat down on the edge of the bed and took one of Andy's hands in hers. "Everyone here on the farm is fine. Couple of minor things, but no serious gunshot wounds."

"Good. How is the prisoner?"

"He's fine," Jo-An said. "I checked him over. Not a scratch on him." Jo-An looked at Fargo.

"We persuaded him to leave and not come back," Fargo said. "If he survives, and I doubt he will, he won't ever come back this way."

Andy nodded and then asked, "Who got Alfred? I never did see him."

All other eyes turned to Casper, who was suddenly looking down at the floor.

"You should have seen him, Daddy! Casper saved all of us at the trees!" Jess was so excited she couldn't continue.

Andy looked at Jo-An. "She's right," Jo-An said. "We got the all clear and were coming in on the road when that monster truck of Alfred's came barreling down on us. He was going to run right over us. I grabbed Jess and pushed Mathew, trying to get them out of the way. Leslie jumped into the side ditch and began to fire, but she didn't have a good angle on Alfred. She made a sieve out of the passenger side of the truck and the tires.

But Casper stood his ground and opened up on Alfred. I don't know how many rounds hit the windshield before it finally broke, but it did break and Casper's last few rounds took Alfred in the chest and face.

"He just managed to jump clear as Alfred slumped forward, his body turning the steering wheel enough to send the truck into a skid, and then a series of rolls. It wasn't very pretty."

"Good work, Casper!" Andy said. "You okay?"

"It was scary, Uncle Andy. But Dad said I did okay."

"More than 'okay'," Fargo said proudly. "You did me and everyone else proud."

"Can I keep the carbine?" Casper asked.

Everyone laughed. "It's yours until you don't need it anymore," Andy said. "Speaking of which..."

"It's bad, Andy," Fargo said as the family went quiet. Brandon has been monitoring everything since the first day. We've taken dozens of nukes all across the country. Apparently got off our own in retaliation. It's what Tired Old Man calls GTW. Global Thermonuclear War."

"How's the farm set?"

Nathan answered. "I went over everything with Brandon. Everything went just the way we planned, except for the attack. It came much sooner than expected and the defenses just weren't all on-line when the shooting started. But the farm is okay. We'll be in a position to help with reconstruction and recovery as soon as it can be started. Fallout began just a few minutes ago."

"We sure cut this little family emergency excursion close, didn't we?" Andy asked, leaning back against the pillows. "I... ah... need to go to the bathroom. Will you guys all excuse me?"

There were nods all around and the family members began to leave, headed off to do their part to keep the farm running and a viable source of food for the entire area, once the fallout faded to safe levels.

End *****

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