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The Hermit

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The Hermit - Chapter 1

Neal Grant watched silently as the cemetery workers began to fill the graves of his entire family. It was just him now. Alone. Something he'd never been before. First his parents and siblings. Then his wife and three wonderful children. All that was gone forever, now. All dead at the same time because of a drunk driver and a foggy road.

He'd been told countless times since the accident how lucky he'd been. Neal didn't see it that way. He should have died with the rest of the members of his family. Almost had. And had given up in the hospital when he came to and was given the news about the multi-car accident that had taken his family that fall day.

But the doctors and nurses hadn't given up and he survived. It would be another six months before he was back to his old, physical, self. Neal knew he'd never be the same mentally. Turning toward the waiting limousine, Neal walked slowly toward it through the falling snow, leaning heavily on the cane that supported the left side of his body.

The driver, huddled in his great coat, opened the passenger door and then closed it after Neal worked his way inside. When Mark was back inside, Neal finally spoke. "Home, I suppose, Mark."

The limo was already running and Mark put it in gear. But before he reached the exit of the cemetery, Neal spoke again. "Never mind home, Mark. Take me to the office."

Concerned about his boss, Mark asked, "Are you sure, Sir? You've only been out of the hospital for a few hours."

"I'm sure, Mark. I just don't want to go home right now."

Mark looked at Neal in the rearview mirror for a moment, but turned the car toward downtown St. Louis, without protesting further. He pulled

into the parking garage, stopping right at the elevators and hurried around to help Mark out of the limo. He pressed the elevator call button and waited until Neal was in the elevator and on his way up to his offices on the top floor.

He took the car for service and cleaning, and then parked it again in the garage, ready for Neal when he did decide to go home.

The office staff gathered around Neal like, in his thoughts only, not voiced, a bunch of mother hens. He waved them away politely and went into his office, collapsing back into the heavy leather office chair with a grunt of pain.

Neal just sat there, looking out the window, hands tented under his chin, lost in thought. It was suddenly after five in the afternoon and the staff gathered at the open office door.

“Sir?” Cathleen O’Connor said rather tentatively.

“Yes, Cathleen?” Neal asked, turning the chair around to face the door.

“It’s five o’clock sir. Would you like me to notify Mark you’re ready to go?” It was said hopefully.

“No. Just close up shop and I’ll see you tomorrow. I’ve a little more to do before I go home.”

Reluctantly the small office staff left the office, worried more about their boss than any would say. When he was sure the staff was gone, Neal buzzed Mark. Eagerly Mark answered. “Ready to go sir?”

“No, Mark. I won’t need you this evening. And feel free to sleep in tomorrow morning. I won’t need you until late morning, if then.”

All Mark could do was say, “Yes Sir.”

Next Neal called home and told the housekeeper that he wouldn't be home and she could leave until the next day.

It was another hour before Neal got up from the chair and hobbled to the bathroom that was part of his personal office suite. The suite included a bedroom for workday pick me up naps. That's where Neal spent the night, unwilling to go home to a house without his family.

The one thought of suicide had come and passed shortly after the doctors told about his family. There was no way he was going to risk not seeing them in the afterlife, so suicide was out of the question.

But what was he going to do for the rest of his natural life? Everything he'd done his entire life had been preparing for a family, or having a family. What did all the possessions and wealth mean now, with no one with whom to share them?

The thoughts, and the pain, caused Neal to toss and turn all night, despite the comfortable mattress. He kept spare clothes in the bedroom and was able to dress in fresh clothing the next morning. Neal even had coffee going for the staff when they arrived just before nine.

Ignoring the donuts that were a morning tradition in the office, Neal nodded a hello and left the office without a word. He took the elevator down to street level, and again leaning heavily on his new cane, began walking toward a nearby breakfast place. Despite not having any appetite he knew he had to eat. At least enough to keep alive.

He was automatically polite to service people. It had been drilled into him since birth that being rich didn't mean you were better than anyone else. It only meant you had more money than most. Nothing less, nothing more.

Pushing away his plate, breakfast only half eaten, Neal asked for the

check and left the restaurant still feeling restless, and more than somewhat useless. Instead of turning back toward the office, Neal turned the other way and began to limp along aimlessly. Noting one of the small shops lining the sidewalk Neal had to smile. The shop was tiny, nestled amongst the other major stores in the area. Rather like a small cave in the side of a mountain.

“That’s what I ought to do,” Neal said to himself, a tiny element of his usual ready humor coming to the fore. “Become a hermit. Fondle my gold in the back of a cave. Live out my years in seclusion, until the end.”

Perhaps it was fate, destiny, or just a coincidence. One of the regularly seen and ignored people on the street carrying a “The End of the World Is Near!” sign passed by just then. And Neal noticed that the shop that reminded him of a cave was, in fact, a coin shop.

On impulse, Neal went in, having to stop, press a button, and wait for the owner of the shop to release the door lock. He had a bit of trouble with the heavy door, which was on a heavy-duty closer, but Neal made it in without any further injury.

“And what can I do for you sir?” asked the elderly gentleman behind the glass display counter. Neal felt his eyes widen slightly at the sight of what seemed to be a very large pistol in a holster on the rather frail looking man.

“Gold,” Neal said. “I was thinking of buying some gold.”

“Numismatic coins or bullion?” asked the man.

“I... don’t know,” Neal replied. “What’s the difference?”

Patently the store owner explained the difference between numismatic coins and bullion coins. “Numismatic gold coins,” he said, “have a value over and above the value of the gold they contain due to rarity of the

specific type of coin, age, special circumstances of the coin, and other factors that have nothing to do with the gold itself.

“Bullion coins, on the other hand, are priced simply on the amount of gold in the coin, based on the spot quotes of the gold market. They can vary from day to day, even hour to hour. Numismatic coins are held for their uniqueness. Bullion coins are held for their immediate value.”

“I think I want bullion coins then. Something that I would spend if things were different.” Neal didn’t say different how. He was still thinking of life as a miser, not spending anything, just counting the coins.

“I have a selection. You prefer American Eagles, Canadian Maple Leaves, or South African Kruggerrands? I have a few of each in one-ten ounce, one-quarter ounce, one-half ounce, and one-ounce denominations.”

“Let’s keep it American,” Neal said rather automatically. He was a firm believer in supporting the US economy in any way he could.

“How many of each do you want?” the man asked.

“I don’t know. How many of the Eagles do you have?”

“One-ounce?”

“No. All of them.”

The man’s eyes widened in surprise. It took him a couple of minutes to check his actual inventory and calculate the value. He told Neal the number of each type of coin and the total value, without ever bringing all the coins out at once. “That is a great deal of money, Sir. Are you sure you are prepared to pay for all of them?”

“You take American Express?” Neal asked, reaching into the inside breast pocket of his suit coat. He brought out a slim vertical wallet and handed the shop owner the card. “It’s platinum, if that makes a difference.”

“Trust it like a bank. For now, anyway.” The man took the card, but before he swiped it through the machine he asked Neal, “Are you sure you want this purchase on the books? Could raise a few eyebrows down the line.”

“Really? How?” Neal asked, his curiosity getting the better of him.

“Well, in some circles, there are people that believe there will be another gold recall. If they know you have it, through financial records, they’ll look until they find it or take it out of your hide in some way.”

“Oh. Don’t think much of our government, do you?”

The man simply smiled. “Do you?”

“Of course I...” Neal started to firmly state that he did. But did he really?

Instead, Neal asked, “Do you sell mostly for cash?”

The owner nodded. “Gold bullion and pre-1965 US silver coins both. Most of the numismatic stuff is on a card or check. People want a record of their ownership for insurance reasons.”

“What’s this about pre-1965 silver coins?” Neal found himself asking.

“Those that aren’t numismatic quality, for various reasons, are simply bought and sold for their silver bullion value. You’ll hear different amounts for a one-thousand-dollar face value bag. From seven-hundred-fifteen ounces to seven-hundred-twenty ounces of silver content,

depending on the degree of wear of the coins. Originally they contained seven-hundred-twenty-three and a fraction ounces.

“I don’t sell many bags, mostly a roll of dimes, quarters, or halves, here and there.”

“What about silver dollars?” Neal asked, remembering that his father had given him a couple when Neal was only a boy.

“Different situation in a way. The proportion of silver in them is the same as it is in the other coins, but they contain a bit more, in relation to the other silver coins. They are not directly exchangeable between one another. Dollars don’t have exactly ten dimes’ worth of silver in them. They have more. Same with quarters and halves. There were a few forty percent silver dollars minted in the seventies, as were some forty percent halves. I’d stay away from them.

And then there are the US Silver Eagle one-ounce silver rounds, too. Personally, I’d skip the silver dollars and go with the one-ounce rounds if I was going to get silver bullion coins. When the balloon goes up I think they’ll be easier to use for trade.”

“Really?” Neal couldn’t help it. This was interesting. “What balloon?”

“The end of the world balloon. I don’t use the rather graphic term some people use. Some call it TEOTWAWKI, or the end of the world as we know it, or even some sticklers, TEOCAWKI, the end of civilization as we know it. If the world is destroyed, not much way to survive. If it’s just civilization, then all bets are off. People will survive and eventually triumph over whatever adversity does actually happen. Aren’t you one of them preppers, getting ready for the end, if you don’t mind me asking? Some of them are kinda touchy about the situation.”

“No. I’ve never thought anything about it,” Neal said, “I just saw your shop and thought about gold.”

Neal suddenly realized that the end of civilization was what had actually happened to him. The loss of his family was the equivalent of all civilization to him. Family was what his world orbited around.

Neal usually had cash on him, and did now, but it was nowhere near enough to pay for the gold. And now, silver, that he was going to add to the order. Just because. “Let me go get the cash. How much more for a couple of bags of the pre-1965 silver coins, and oh... say... a hundred of the Silver Eagles? Do you have that many?”

“No, but I can get them for you by Thursday... No... That’s Christmas. Friday.”

“Double the order for the gold coins and get them when you get the silver, and make it a thousand of the Silver eagles and add a bag of halves and one of dollars, too. I’ll be back in a little while for this first purchase of gold coins.”

The door clicked as Neal stepped up to it and he went outside. One of the banks he used regularly was down the street and over two. Neal hesitated, and almost called Mark to come get him, but gritted his teeth and continued walking. He needed to exercise the leg. The therapist had told him to use it, but only to a moderate pain level. Too much was as bad as too little. Neal decided to edge it up to almost too much.

Neal was exhausted when he got back to the office just before noon, and it showed. The staff flitted around and he finally agreed to lie down for a while before he had some lunch. There was a small safe for important papers in his office. Neal locked the plastic tubes of gold coins inside before he went to the bedroom and took a needed rest.

Mark was in the office when Neal woke up and checked for messages from the staff. There were messages of condolence from business acquaintances. The few friends he had on his own had already offered

theirs the day before.

After Mark asked him if he wanted to be driven somewhere to lunch, Neal asked him to come into the office. “Mark, I’m not going out for lunch. But I do have a project for you.”

“Yes, Sir.”

“I need you to go to the house and help Mrs. Bairns start taking down the Christmas decorations. We didn’t have a chance to wrap any presents. We were going to do that today,” Neal said, steeling himself at the memory of the Christmas planning he and his wife had done just hours before the accident.

“The receipts for everything are there in the study. You shouldn’t have any trouble finding them. Take everything back and give the money to the Salvation Army.”

“But, Sir! Don’t you think...”

“Please Mark. This is what I want to do.”

Mark sighed slightly and nodded. “Yes, Sir. I’ll take care of it.”

The words of the coin shop owner, whose name Neal still didn’t know, came back to him. Neal made himself comfortable at his desk and opened up Windows Internet Explorer to his company home page. He called up Yahoo! and typed TEOTWAWKI into the search bar.

“Holy Mackerel!” Neal said softly. There were thousands of hits indicated. An experienced internet user, Neal began to surf, one thing leading to another. He popped up a Word window and began making notes of things he wanted to investigate more thoroughly, after he’d gone where this chase was taking him.

Again he ushered his staff out of the office and to their homes at quitting time. He would stay at the office again. And again he didn't get much sleep. This time, however, it was due to the late hours he put in on the internet.

The next morning he made several decisions that would affect the rest of his life. He committed himself to the solitary, hermit-like lifestyle. He couldn't really say he was going to be a miser. At least not yet.

It took virtually no time at all to reconcile his wish to join his family, with making preparations to survive the balloon going up, or TEOTWAWKI, or TEOCAWKI, or any other way you wanted to describe the changes that a not so small group of people were forecasting for the world in the not so distant future. He would have to join his family after making the best try possible of extending his life. They wouldn't want him to be with them otherwise.

The decisions made, Neal set about making them facts. First was the house. "Mrs. Bairns," he said on the telephone the next morning, "I have a project for you. And be assured, when the project is done, you will be taken care of just as if I had died with the rest of the family."

Clueless as to what she could do to bring her employer out of the mood he was in, Mrs. Bairns simply did as she was told. Using her own judgment she packed up everything she thought might be a keepsake for a man like Neal. She had a roomful of items when she was finished, and realized she'd kept things that she would keep, but that Neal probably had no interest in. She went through the room and reduced the contents by half. She was crying when she finished and simply couldn't reduce it any more.

As instructed, Mark made arrangements to have the items packed up and put into climate controlled long term storage. Like Mrs. Bairns, Mark could think of nothing to help Neal in his time of mental pain, except carry out his wishes to the best of his ability.

Personal items that weren't keepsakes were given to charity. Neal had a few clothes and other personal items brought to the office bedroom. The rest went to charity. The house was listed on the market as furnished.

With the soft market, and Neal's intention of getting rid of it quickly with as little hassle as possible, the price was lowball and absolutely firm. Less than a month later and a buyer put the money in escrow for immediate closure.

Neal set up a trust for Mrs. Bairns so she wouldn't have to try and find another position. With the rest of the money from the sale of the house and property, and the money returned from the trusts he'd set up for his family members, Neal set up trust funds and lifetime annuities for himself, using companies with at least one-hundred years of successful business, and had highly diversified investments. Companies that had survived the depressions and recessions in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

He might become a hermit, and even miserly in the future, but learning to be prepared, he was finding out, often meant making sure one had options. As many as possible in many cases.

He began to look for a place to live. He couldn't live in the office for long. For one thing, it wasn't a legal residence, for another, the business would soon be sold, anyway. With his soon to be hermit existence in mind, Neal had the same real estate agent that handled the sale of the house begin looking for a small, out of the way place, well outside the city.

Knowing the probabilities of actually finding a property with a hermit's cave on it, he specified property with an undeveloped cave anyway, and began making arrangements to sell the business. He also quit having his hair trimmed weekly and shaving daily. If he was going to be a hermit he needed to start looking the part.

He made similar arrangements for his office staff and Mark that he'd made for Mrs. Bairns. All were young enough to seek out and find other gainful employment, but reading more and more of the internet sites advocating preparedness, Neal thought it only fair to set them up so he wouldn't feel responsible for them if something did happen.

Neal was good at what he did, and his competitors were eager to pick up his client list. It didn't take long for the business to sell. Mark's last duty was to transport Neal from the office to a small residential motel. Mark had already taken care of the arrangements to store what goods Neal still had in another climate controlled storage unit, taking only his clothes and a few personal effects to the motel.

Mark had been with Neal for a long time and it was difficult to say good-bye. In addition to the trust he'd set up for him, Neal gave Mark a generous bonus check, and just as they shook hands, Neal reached into one pant's pocket and pulled out one of the Gold Eagles he'd taken to carrying around. It was a full ounce coin. He handed it to Mark and said, "I hope this brings you good luck, Mark. I can't thank you properly, but, Thank you."

"Yes, sir. Thank you. If you ever need me, you know where to find me."

Neal nodded and the two men turned away, both a little saddened, but both determined to secure their futures, each in their own way.

Much to his surprise, the real estate agent called less than two months into the search for the property for Neal. "Mr. Grant, I think I've found something you might be interested in checking."

A time and place was set for them to meet. The limo had gone with the business so Neal met Joe Sherman outside of Sullivan, Missouri still driving his classic Corvette. "I don't think that will make it up to where we need to go," said the real estate agent.

“I plan to pick something else up,” Neal said, locking the door of the Corvette and walking over to the agent’s Jeep Grand Cherokee. “Is it all right if I ride up with you?”

The man smiled. “Not much choice. Hop in.”

Neal, still hampered with the cane and not quite healed leg, did so, with a grunt of pain as he settled himself in the vehicle. He was careful to take note of the terrain and the roads as they traveled out of Sullivan and into the surrounding countryside.

They left the paved roads and were on a gravel road deep in the forest. Finally they stopped at a dirt track. The way was barred by a gate, a simple horizontal pipe, swiveled at one end and locked at the other, on identical heavy steel posts. There were trees growing thickly right up to the edges of the gate.

Jim, the real estate agent got out and unlocked the gate. He drove through, leaving the gate open. “Not much further,” Jim said. “You said you wanted as remote as possible, with a cave. This is about as remote as you can find around here. You’ve got State Forest on three sides of you, and you saw where we came in. The gravel road just loops back to the main road a couple of miles past the gate.”

“And there is a cave?” Neal asked.

“There is. You said undeveloped. I hope you don’t want to develop this one. It’s not much of a cave, the way some are in this area. I don’t think you’d do well opening it up as a commercial operation.”

“No intent of doing that,” Neal said, and left it at that when Jim looked over at him.

Jim stopped the Cherokee and both men got out, Neal hobbling a bit on

the cane. “Not much to it,” Jim said, standing in front of the vehicle. “There is just under twenty-five acres of second growth forest, on rolling terrain. A couple of bluffs. No services available, though you could bring in electrical power for a couple hundred thousand.”

Neal took it as the humor it was, despite being perfectly capable of paying such a price. But he didn’t want commercial power. He did want water and sewer, but on-site would be fine for them. If it was doable. Neal asked as much.

“I’ve handled other properties in the area and a well and septic system were no problem on any of them. I see no reason this would be different, though to make sure you might want to bring in a well driller and plumber to give you official confirmation.”

“Let’s see the cave,” Neal said.

Jim looked at Neal’s leg and said, “I’m not sure you will be able to navigate the terrain. It’s back a ways on the property and on one of the steeper areas.”

“I’ll make it,” Neal replied.

Jim got a topographical map and a compass from the Cherokee and led the way, checking map and compass several times on the short trip. Neal declined a helping hand on the jaunt, making it on his own devices, despite the pain.

Neal took a moment to catch his breath on the small ledge in front of the cave opening. It wasn’t at all what he pictured as the entrance to a miser’s cave, but it sure enough was a cave entrance. There was heavy vegetation hanging down over the entrance, growing out of the short bluff in which the cave was located.

There was a trickle of water coming under the vines. It flowed, or rather

oozed, over the rocks, down the face of the bluff to the slope below the bluff and disappeared in the woods. Jim saw Neal looking that way and said, "It's just a trickle for the most part, I'm told, unless we have a rainy year, and then it flows perhaps twice as much, down a shallow ravine off the property and into a creek on State property. It's not even on the map for more than just down the slope."

"I see," Neal said, and then took the flashlight he'd brought from his pocket and moved the hanging vines aside with his cane. Jim handed Neal a key and Neal unlocked the padlock securing the heavy door placed there years ago, when the area was logged, to keep out kids for safety's sake.

Neal struggled, but got the door open a bit. He looked into the cave. He had to duck slightly, and really watch his footing for the bare rock outside the door was a bit slick with damp leaves. But, aside from the trickle of water off on the lower slope of the cave floor, once Neal got inside the cave, the floor was dry, with only a little dust that had blown into the cave through the small cracks in the wooden door. There were no signs of bats or any other wildlife having used the cave.

Going in about ten feet the entrance opened up slightly. The floor rose, but the roof rose slightly faster. There was a nearly right angle turn in the cave, and it narrowed down again, still climbing, finally opening into a much larger room. The room was perhaps forty feet long, ten feet high, and varied from ten feet wide to twenty feet. There were two smaller openings at the far end of the room.

Neal shone the light down the passage from which the little trickle of water was coming. It tapered down to nothing, the water coming from a small fracture in the distant wall, perhaps fifteen feet in.

The second passage slowly curved out of sight getting narrower and lower the further in the light shone. Neal, wasn't ready to explore further and turned around. Jim was waiting for him at the entrance. He hadn't

come in with Neal.

“Sorry,” Jim said when Neal came back out into the sunlight and relocked the cave door. “I thought I’d be able to go in. I’m a little more claustrophobic than I thought. Is it what you were hoping for?”

“Not exactly,” Neal replied. “But it will do. I’ll take it for the stated price.” Neal didn’t want to dicker. He wanted the property as soon as he could take title.

It took Neal some time to make it back to Jim’s Jeep Grand Cherokee and Jim was glancing at his watch from time to time. Neal climbed into the passenger seat of the Cherokee gratefully and rode silently as Jim took him back to his Corvette.

Neal had to wait until he got back to the residence motel before he could take a pain pill, but he did so forthwith and lay down to rest his leg, hoping he hadn’t set back the healing process by overdoing it getting to the cave. He fell asleep with a smile on his face, the pain medication taking affect and the memory of his cave in his thoughts.

He rested for a couple of days, doing research on a suitable vehicle for a miser living in a cave preparing for the end of civilization, as he was beginning to think of his future. With the money to buy anything he wanted off the showroom floor, or order from a manufacturer, Neal decided to heed the advice he found on the preparedness sites.

The big stickler was whether to consider EMP. If he didn’t, the choices really opened up. If he considered a stand alone HEMP attack, or a general nuclear attack with or without HEMP weapons, then there was a risk of the disablement of electronics in vehicles as well as other electronics connected to long antennas, long control cables, or an electrical grid. There was still a lot of uncertainty about how much effect EMP’s would have.

The second major decision was whether to go with a diesel or gasoline engine. Both were available with and without possibly EMP sensitive electronic controls. Neal mulled it over in his mind for a couple more days and then made his decision.

Neal pinned down the basic make as GM. The Suburban model. The vehicle would be a highly customized creation, though it would use as many stock Chevy/GMC parts as possible to make it easily repairable.

It would take a year to build what he wanted, Neal found out. He needed something in the interim. Neal appreciated quality and function and found a factory option that suited him, at least temporarily.

The Mercedes Benz G55 AMG wasn't the largest of SUV's, for sure, nor the smallest. It was rather boxy, not at all sexy. It did have power to spare, and fairly unique among factory available SUV's, all three differentials had lockers. It would go anywhere Neal was likely to want to go until he got his custom creature. Or EMP took out the electronics, or gasoline became unavailable.

Some aftermarket equipment and accessories and he was good to go. The sale of the Corvette and the other three family vehicles paid for the fully equipped Mercedes-Benz and bought the base vehicle that would be customized. Neal would decide later whether he would sell the G55 AMG to finish paying for the new vehicle.

Neal's next order of business was to get utilities set up on the new property. Two wells went in, at Neal's insistence, despite the quality and quantity of the water coming from the first one.

The plumber installed a septic system close to the spot Neal intended to build a small cabin. Another, larger system was installed on the lowest point of the property that had good drainage, so if he decided to build something anywhere else on the property, the septic system would be ready, and there would be no need for septic pumps to get the raw

sewage to the treatment system, even if he put in a basement. Or, left unspoken, if he put in a conventional bathroom in the cave.

One of the wells was on the highest point of the property and a solar powered pump filled an underground storage tank, with runoff from the tank into a large pond that Neal had constructed. The pond was carefully located so any runoff from it would follow the natural path that connected it to small amount of runoff from the spring in the cave. Pressure water was supplied by a solar powered pump in the storage tank, with a large pressure storage tank.

The second well also had an attendant underground storage tank, but the top of the well was in a concealed, buried concrete chamber in which the solar pump, solar PV panels and mounts, batteries, and controller, and a pressure pump were stored for future use. The batteries were dry store types, with the acid needed to activate them also stored.

For electrical power, Neal did much as he had with the water. A concealed concrete pit was constructed and solar panels, mounts, batteries, battery acid, controllers, and a distribution system were stored for future use. For immediate use, a single multi-panel array was installed on a metal mast that was painted in camouflage colors, which carried the array above the forest canopy. The batteries and controller were in yet another concealed concrete pit with several heavy extension cords to tap into the power.

Twice Neal went to the property after he got the G55 AMG and just walked over the land, staying out of the difficult areas. He learned something very useful for the cave living, miserly hermit he was to become.

There was a great deal of game in the forests. At different times he saw rabbits, squirrels, deer, and turkey. There were also predators. Fox, coyote, and bobcat. There were myriad game and non-game birds. Dove, grouse, pheasant, and quail game birds. There were more crows than

Neal cared to count

He made a few inquiries at the Missouri Department of Conservation and learned that the area was reputed to have a few black bears, and at least enough cougar to maintain a viable reproductive population. “Do not, under any circumstances,” said the agent, “except true life and death, kill any of these animals. The penalties will be harsh.”

Neal made a few more inquiries. Migratory birds and waterfowl were hunted in the area, on the local streams and lakes, though the harvest was much smaller than it was on the larger lakes and on the Mississippi.

“I should learn to hunt and fish,” Neal decided after his investigative trip. He decided to get a hunting gun before he took the required hunter safety course. So he went shopping. Essentially clueless, Neal did some research on the internet. He wasn’t finding what he wanted. There were special guns for this, that, and the other, but no multi-purpose hunt anything guns. Neal made a trip to the Cabela’s in Hazlewood, Missouri and asked for help.

He got plenty of it. And found that, in fact, there was something similar to what he wanted. Not at all common in the US, there were a series of guns seen in Europe that would do what he wanted.

Combination guns with two barrels, one rifled and one shotgun.

Drillings with three barrels, usually two side-by-side shotgun with a rifle barrel below, but that wasn’t an absolute. There seemed to be a German name for every combination and configuration of drillings.

Four barrel vierlings, again usually two side by side shotgun barrels with over and under rifle barrels of different calibers. Again, that was the general configuration. Other four barrel vierlings existed including all shotgun barrels and all rifle barrels and every combination in between.

And the rarest of all one-off production firearms, the five-barrel Fünfling. Just about any practical combination was available. For a price and a wait. A very high price and a very long wait.

But the collector weapons specialist said, “Give me a few minutes and I’ll see what I can find. Kreighoff, Heym, and Hofer all usually have something in stock, though none may be exactly what you want.”

Neal looked around the rest of the store while he waited and found a few intriguing things. Things that he wasn’t looking for, but the sight of which gave him ideas. An hour later the clerk found Neal and took him back to his office.

“Okay. I have to tell you I didn’t have much luck for what you want. Common American chamberings to hunt anything in Missouri. Found one Kreighoff drilling double 12 gauge over .30-’06, and a Heym Veirling in side by side 3” 20 gauge with .308 over .22 Hornet. That’s close, but you said you wanted twelve gauge.”

The man winced. “There is one other option, that would fit perfectly, but... well, to be honest, it’s an incomplete gun.”

Neal was shaking his head. He didn’t have the skills to finish making a gun. But the clerk quickly continued. “It’s certainly functional. And it is finished in terms that it has a brilliant blue finish, but it is completely unadorned. The original buyer is... was... a master engraver. He was going to engrave it himself.

“It’s a Hofer, and it will be months before he can get on it to complete it himself. And, it is a bit over powered for Missouri. The man wanted the ultimate gun for everything in the world except the African Big Five. He was going to do a second gun for that capability.

“You don’t need much more than a .308 or .30-’06 for Missouri big game. The Fünfling is a .375 H&H Magnum over .308 Winchester over

.22 Hornet, with 12 gauge 3 ½ inch magnum side by side barrels. It would actually take lion and leopard of the African Big Five, but would be marginal on elephant, rhino, and water buffalo. Though they too, have fallen to the .375 H&H Magnum You just don't have that second big bore rifle follow up shot that is sometime needed."

"But it is available?" Neal asked.

"Reluctantly, yes. But even without the engraving and gold and silver inlay the engraver was going to do himself it's thirty-one thousand. It would be worth over a hundred thousand if completed the way the original customer envisioned. It's a shame what happened to him. Died in that horrible multi-car accident last fall between Thanksgiving and Christmas.

A chill ran down Neal's spine. That was some coincidence. "I'll take it, as is." Neal took out his American Express Platinum Card. "When can I pick it up?"

"Two weeks," said the clerk, taking the card without a second thought. "By the way, I know that Andrew had contracted to have custom ammunition made for it, including specially drawn 12 gauge 3 ½ inch magnum brass cases. He was also talking about field reloading tools for the rifle cartridges and well as the shot shells.

"There was to be a glass topped black walnut and leather case for the gun, several rounds of ammunition, a custom cleaning kit, and the reloading tools and components. There were to be custom leather field cases for all of it, too."

"If you can connect me with those providers, I'd like to complete the collection. And do you know an engraver whose work is quality enough for such a gun?"

"I think so. He's retired, but might come out of retirement for this."

Two weeks later Neal had the gun. Two months later he had all the ammunition and accoutrements. But the engraver decided not to do the engraving. He didn't feel he could do it justice, with the slight palsy he had in his hands now.

Neal decided, after seeing the gun, that it didn't really need any engraving, but deserved it. With the clerk's help at Cabela's, he found an up and coming engraver and sent the gun off to have, not the elaborate game scenes the original engraver had envisioned, but a simple geometric design, inlaid with silver and gold. After seeing the design the engraver came up with, Neal approved it, and six months later had the finished gun in his hands. Just in time for the fall hunting seasons in Missouri.

Neal hadn't been idle in the mean time. A factory built Tumbleweed Tiny House, the Lusby 120 square foot model, was delivered, set up, and connected to the off-grid water, sewer, and power. The heater was charcoal briquette or wood fired and Neal laid in a large supply of both, which he stored on the pallets on which they came, covered securely with tarps, near the door of the house. Telephone service was cellular, and TV and Internet was a small dish satellite system.

Neal could not find a propane tank larger than one-thousand gallons, to supply the cook top in the Lusby. So he ordered three of them, from three different propane companies, and had them installed at different times. All three of them were underground tanks, with independent lines run to the Lusby. All three were also stubbed off underground, with valves and plugs on the end of the lines, for future use. The cook top was kept supplied from a pair of one-hundred pound tanks, with ten tanks in reserve.

Using the Hofer Fünfling, Neal found he enjoyed the solitude of the forests, streams, and lakes of the area while hunting, and doing a bit of fishing. He thought about life and death, the past and the future. And

made more plans.

The Fünfling was all he could ask for in a hunting gun, but, according to the prep sites, it was very likely he might need to defend himself physically in the future. After much research on the internet, and several visits to gun shops more defense oriented than Cabela's excellent hunting guns selection, Neal tried a variety of highly touted combat suitable guns. Rifles, pistols, and shotguns.

The main carry pistol choice was easy for Neal. He tried the Glock 21 once and decided on it immediately, already having chosen to use a high capacity .45 ACP pistol as a personal defense weapon. He picked up a couple and plenty of magazines.

As a backup he got the Glock 30 which used the same magazines the Glock 21 did. For last ditch, hideout use, Neal picked up two Bond Arms Company .45 ACP derringers.

The shotgun issue was a bit more difficult. The choice was between a Remington semi-auto 11-87P with ghost-ring sights and a Benelli M-4 semiauto equipped similarly. The fact that he could have a ventilated Poly-choke mounted on the Remington a bit more easily swung the deal for him. He bought two and sent the barrels off to Poly-choke for the choke installations. Neal ordered pistol grip shoulder stocks for them and managed to install them himself, much to his delight.

The real stickler was a primary combat rifle. Since it would be him alone, without the support weapons a US soldier had to do what the M-4 5.56mm x 45mm carbine cartridge wouldn't do well or at all, Neal decided to get something in a more versatile .308 Winchester/7.62mm x 51mm NATO compatible weapon. But which one?

There were significant pros for each of the available MBR's. M1A/M14 clone, AR-10 and clones, FN/FAL and clones, HK-91 and clones, and AK-47 style rifles in .308. There was one more that really intrigued him,

especially after finding, buying, and reading a copy of Mel Tappan's "Survival Guns". The Berretta BM-59 series of rifles. It had most of the pros that each of the others had one or two of, plus a couple more. The major con was availability of the rifles, and especially magazines.

But when you have money to melt, many, though certainly not all, problems can be overcome. One of the gun shop owners from which he'd bought several of his new firearms was more than willing to do the legwork to find what Neal decided he wanted.

In the end, after three months of searching, and a great deal of money, Neal owned two nearly pristine BM-59 semi-auto rifles, and two very good BM-59 rifles, all with the tri-compensator, bipod, pistol grip stock, and bayonet lug, with a total of two-hundred and twelve 20-round Beretta factory magazines. There were almost twenty-five pounds of spare parts to keep the rifles serviceable for many years.

His maternal grandfather having been a master machinist, Neal knew that for the right amount of money, the right talent with the right tools could make just about anything. Neal bought twenty Beta C-Mag 100-round .308 dual drum magazines originally configured for the M1A and M14 clones, and had replacement magazine towers made for them so he could use them in the BM-59's.

Another step taken to bring the BM-59's into the 21st Century, was a set of picatinny rails mounted on a receiver adapter the machinist made, that still left the stripper clip charger useable, and allowed the use of easily mounted accessories.

The same machinist made bayonet attachments for the Remington 11-87P's that would allow the use of a BM-59 bayonet, of which he had several. The bayonets were included in the parts set he bought for the rifles. The attachment also had three short pieces of picatinny rail attached. One piece on each side of the magazine tube and one below, for attachment of combat lights or lasers.

The shotguns and BM-59's were full size weapons. Neal felt the need for something compact he could use for short range fire from a moving vehicle. He wanted more firepower than a pistol, but didn't want the hassles of full automatic weapons, such as a submachine gun. Which would be pistol caliber anyway. The remaining option was the one Neal chose. A semi-auto bull-pup carbine in .223/5.56mm x 45mm. Namely, a pair of Steyr AUG's. with several Beta C-Mag 100-round dual drums in addition to plenty of 30-round and 42-round box magazines.

And because Neal could see the tactical advantage of having a real long range rifle, and a short and medium range anti-material weapon, he plunked down the money and bought a scoped Barrett M82A1 .50 BMG semi-auto rifle with plenty of magazines and ammunition.

Deciding he had enough weapons and ammunition for self-defense, having bought cases of each caliber and gauge of ammunition when he bought the firearms, at least for the moment, Neal decided he'd better get them secured better than he had them at the moment.

There really was no room in the tiny Lusby plan cabin for a gun safe, so Neal made arrangements to get the protection he wanted. He had to get three smaller gun safes to put in the cave, as a large one would have been impossible to get into it. He rented a compact battery powered pallet handler to make it easier. As it was, there were a couple of close calls getting the three crated safes, and three independent vault doors that he bought from the same company, down the narrow ledge and into the cave by himself after they had been dropped off at the Lusby by the delivery company.

It took two weeks for Neal to recover enough to do much else but eat, sleep, and do research on the internet. But he had more plans to implement when the time had passed. He'd had a lengthy debate with himself over whether he should bring in outside contractors, even from a distance, to work on the cave, or do it all himself. It would certainly be

slower if he did it all, but it would be good skills training for living alone the rest of his life. And no one would know about the cave. Which was the deciding factor.

With hard copy books bought on-line, and more research on the Internet, Neal began the process of turning the cave into a permanent home for a miserly hermit. There was no reason not to be comfortable, he decided, and began the process of building a structure within the cave, much like the Tumbleweed Tiny House Lusby, though bigger.

It was heavily insulated and had the same charcoal/wood burning fireplace heater the Lusby had. Though he managed the construction over several months, running the utility lines from the cave to the various off-grid utility connections Neal found was impractical for him to do alone. So was setting the three vault doors into the openings he'd been able to construct for them by himself. And there were a couple more projects he wanted done that he couldn't handle alone.

He knew what to do, and had the equipment and supplies with which to do the job. What he needed was labor. Instead of even going to St. Louis, Neal went to Kansas City to find three out of work men willing to live in a rental motorhome Neal would provide for the time it would take for them to do the manual labor for him.

Neal wasn't too worried about them ever coming back to haunt him. All three were barely sober enough to do the simple labor, and Neal had brought them out one night, when all three were drunk and sleeping it off in the motorhome, which he drove, towing the G55 AMG on a trailer behind it.

He took them back the same way, paid a cleaning service to clean up the motorhome before he returned it, and then went home to his new, fully functional, very secure, cave of a home. Neal left his cane behind for the first time since he'd started using it after the accident when he took the G55 AUG in to pick up his new vehicle.

It had started life as a brand-spanking-new, fully accessorized, three-quarter ton, four-wheel-drive Chevrolet Suburban. Though he wanted to be able to drive it whether there was an EMP attack or not, Neal also wanted the use of all the other modern electronics incorporated into the Suburban, even if they might be destroyed at some distant point in the future by EMP. The new Suburban, with the custom work done to it provided Neal with the best of both worlds.

The body shell of the Suburban had been removed in its entirety and sent to a customizing shop. It was stripped down to the treated sheet metal. A complete roll cage was built inside, as were some special compartments. A high capacity rack was built onto the exterior of the roof, and then the entire assembly treated again for long life.

The additional wiring and piping that other specialist shops need was installed for the improvements and accessories Neal had mandated. Next, the shell was insulated and lined with Level III fabric armor and new leather upholstery was installed over the linings.

All the fixed glass was replaced with thick bullet resistant Lexan panels. That included the rear door assembly, which was a custom creation. The bottom half of the gate would open downward or open in two sections, one to each side. The upper section would open upward together with the lexan panel, but the panel would open separately, as well.

Another change in the structure of the rear body was the incorporation of a conformed, partially inlet, high efficiency cyclone air pre-filter on the driver's side. The outlet was routed as a conformed contoured pipe along the roof rack to the front of the roofline where it was turned downward, following the windshield post, to the engine compartment.

In a similar fashion, insulated exhaust pipes were conformed into the bodywork behind the rear passenger doors, run up to the just above the roof rack and turned outward, to keep the exhaust as far from anything

on the roof as possible.

All the original outside air intakes were blocked and a CBRN filter system installed to provide clean interior air under dangerous conditions. It was mounted on the roof and piped to the normal HVAC vents. A cyclone air pre-filter like the one for engine air was piped from the right rear of the Suburban to the CBRN filter system air intake.

The lift glass in the doors was replaced with thicker, specially coated glass that was bullet resistant, but not to the degree of the fixed glass, with heavier duty electric window lifts installed.

The factory dash was removed and a fully customized one installed, which included complete faraday cage protection for all the factory electronics, which were going to be relocated, with space for the aftermarket additions that the electrical shop would install.

The original front bucket seats were re-installed, as were the matching second row bucket seats. The third optional bench seat was deleted to have the maximum storage space.

The body work was primed and then painted in several steps, using a dull grey/dull tan scheme that had various shades of light to medium grays and tans feathered into each other. The windows got matching appliqués.

The body was very difficult to identify as anything except a large expanse of colors, except for the driver's side window, front passenger window, and windshield, which couldn't legally have the appliqués. But there were cloth shades in the same color scheme incorporated into the roof rack that could be pulled down to cover the windshield and those windows when the vehicle wasn't in motion.

With that work done, the body shell had been sent to the other shops in turn, and the custom dash and then the lighting and electronics installed

and tested.

While all that was being done the chassis work was, too. The entire original drive train and chassis was sold for parts. A completely new, two-ton class heavy-duty frame and chassis was constructed to carry the new drive train and customized body.

The chassis incorporated five separate diesel fuel tanks, which would give the completed vehicle an un-refueled range of over three thousand miles. All were coated with self-repairing interior linings to seal any leaks caused by punctures.

The chassis was the support structure for the drive train and suspension. The two-ton capacity portal axles provided significant ground clearance, without raising the center of gravity significantly, which most other lift systems did.

They were attached with heavy-duty hangers using a dual coil-spring-in-a-spring, four shock absorber suspension, with wrap-over preventers. Both axles were hydraulic steering axles, with tire-air adjustment system plumbing and huge disk brakes. The axle differentials had hydraulic lockers, as did the transfer case. The tires were run-flat types, on double bead-lock wheels. The front and rear drivelines had remote actuated disconnects in them so the vehicle could be towed without problems.

There were four steering modes available with the front and rear steering axles. Regular front steer for highway and regular off-road use. Next, there was four-wheel steer in which the rear tires were turned in the opposite direction from the front, resulting in the rear wheels following in the same track as the front wheels.

There was a crab-steer mode in which all four wheels turned in the same direction so the vehicle could go at an angle sideways. Finally, the rear wheels could be steered independently from the front wheels, allowing extremely tight maneuvering.

Other than conventional steering, the steering modes had a limited speed range. Four-wheel steering was available at speeds under fifteen miles an hour. Crab-steer and independent rear-wheel steer were limited to less than five miles per hour.

The power train started with a new GM 6.5L diesel crate engine. It was mechanically injected, to be operable in an EMP environment, with a non-electronic six-speed automatic transmission coupled to it through a heavy-duty torque converter.

The set up would generate, conservatively, three-hundred and fifty horsepower, with plenty of torque, with good response at all speeds due to the supercharger, which Neal preferred to the optional turbocharger. Oversize mufflers were mounted to the chassis. The exhaust pipes on the bodywork would be connected when the body was mounted.

The engine carried an air compressor, A/C compressor, power steering pump, twelve volt DC generator as opposed to an alternator, a 110/220v AC generator, an old board welding alternator, and a hydraulic pump. Pressure tanks for the air compressor and an oil tank for the hydraulic pump were built into the frame, as were mounts for two large deep cycle batteries. The AC generator was on an electric clutch so it could be kept off unless AC power was needed.

The engine didn't need a starting battery, as it used a well muffled air starter. In a worst case scenario, with no air pressure already stored for some reason, there were both a 12vdc air compressor and a manual air pump to build up initial pressure.

An oversize radiator was mounted directly to the frame, along with coolers for engine oil, transmission fluid, and the air conditioning condenser.

All grease points on the chassis and running gear, that didn't rotate, were

run to four common greasing points, one at each corner of the chassis. All axle and chassis breathers had snorkel lines attached. They would be run up to the engine compartment and secured when the bodywork was re-installed.

Rock rails were a part of the chassis extensions to the sides. They were extended up and over, to protect the wheel well sheet metal. A double layer of lengths of high tensile chain were fastened to the rock rails over the wheels to offer some protection for the tires from projectiles.

The shop fabricated front and rear bumpers, again to Neal's specifications of features he seen on the internet. There were permanent mount front and rear twelve-thousand pound hydraulic winches, front and rear two-inch receiver hitches, outlets for compressed air and hydraulic power.

The front bumper also carried a spare tire, tow bar, and a knock down roller similar in style to those on World War Two half tracks. There were toolboxes built into the front bumper for winch accessories and recovery equipment. Brush bars and headlight protectors also carried additional lighting.

The rear bumper carried twin swing away half racks for another spare tire, pioneer tools, a Hi-Lift jack, and three jerry can carriers. A pair of built-in toolboxes in the bumper carried small items.

One set of modifications that had stumped all the workers were the airlines run to the head lights, tail lights, and a whole set of them set at the bottom of the outside of the windshield. All the outlets had flattened tips. The air would come out in a fan shape.

When Neal drove up in the G55 AMG, he literally did not see the customized Suburban parked at the side of the shop. The owner had drawn down the shades on front door windows and windshield. Matt was grinning when Neal got out of the Mercedes and asked, "Where is

it?” Matt simply pointed.

Once he knew it was there, it wasn't all that difficult to see, against the background of the shop wall, but it sure tended to elude the eye with the paint scheme it carried. “I'm going to have to run several auxiliary lights all the time just to not be run over on the roads,” Neal said, his grin matching Matt's.

“Okay,” Neal said. “Let's go inside and settle up.”

Matt was eager to do so. Things were tough and he needed the cash. The economy was turning worse every day and customizing cars, vans, and trucks were getting low on the list of hard strapped consumers' needs.

“If there is ever anything else you want done, you be sure and let me know,” Matt said as they shook hands after Neal had paid him.

“Actually, I was wondering about a tandem wheel utility trailer to carry bulky cargo, with some fuel tanks to extend the range of the rig even more. High clearance and the same tires and all.”

“Consider it done,” Matt said eagerly. “I'll get started on it as soon as you fax me the spec's.”

Neal nodded and walked over to the Suburban after Matt gave him the keys and three identical remotes. The engine was running, the AC on, and the doors unlocked when Neal got to it, a huge grin on his face. After retracting the window shades, Neal climbed up into the Suburban and looked things over. Everything in the forward section was just as he'd requested.

He got out, opened and looked in each of the other side doors, and then the rear doors. Only some time in use would tell, but Neal was as certain as he could be that the rig would perform just as he'd wanted.

Making sure he had plenty of lights on, Neal took the truck on a test run around town. While not quite the rocket off the line the G55 AMG was, the Suburban could hold its own in both high speed, and stop and go traffic.

When he got back to the shop, he asked Matt, “Do you happen to know anyone in the market for a fully equipped, used, Mercedes top of the line SUV? I don’t think I’ll be needing it now.”

“You know,” Matt said with a snap of his fingers, “I just might. If you want to leave it and the keys here, I’ll get ahold of the guy and see. How much are you asking?”

Matt whistled when he heard the amount. “I don’t know. I’ll ask, anyway.”

Neal went back home and two days later Matt called him. “The guy wants it.” Neal could hear the wonder in his voice. “I think the cost being more than a Hummer was actually a selling point to this guy. He loves his toys.”

A few days later Neal went back to St. Louis and met the buyer at Matt’s shop. The man had a cashier’s check for the total amount Neal had asked. Matt looked on in amazement as the check changed hands and the two men went their separate ways. The buyer out to load the G55 AMG on a trailer behind an H1 Hummer, and Neal, with Matt, into the shop. Neal had a set of computer generated drawings and a list of specifications for the trailer.

“It shall be done,” Matt said, after looking over the drawings and specifications. “So,” he continued, “how is the Suburban doing?”

“That creature is doing even better than I’d hoped. I have to drive very defensively, however, because it is actually difficult to see on the road.”

“Yeah. But just think in the woods. You could sit just out side of it and a deer might walk right up to it. Into it, even!” Matt laughed and Neal joined him.

“I don’t think so,” Neal said, “but it’s a humorous thought.” Again the two men shook hands and Matt turned to start work on Neal’s new trailer, and Neal to go to the bank and cash the check.

The amount, equal to what Neal had originally paid for the G55 AMG, before equipping it, more than paid for the Suburban. He was financially in the same spot as he’d been when he started the process. Except, of course, for the inflation, which was becoming rampant.

Rather than putting the money in the bank he used, Neal did what he was doing as a matter of course. He converted the cash to gold, silver, and prep goods before the cash lost more of its value. Then he went back to his miserly hermit’s cave. He didn’t leave again until he got the call from Matt that the trailer was ready.

When Neal went into the city to pick up the trailer, he was amazed at the changes that had taken place in just those few weeks. There were many more closed down businesses, their doors and windows boarded over, than he ever remembered seeing.

Neal noticed the look on Matt’s face as soon as he entered the office of the shop. “What’s up, Matt? You don’t look good.”

“Kind of short rations lately. And Neal... about the cost of the trailer... materials went up. A lot. And my labor... with the inflation... I went ahead and finished it...”

“Don’t worry, Matt. I’ll pay for value received,” Neal said. “How much, factoring in everything?”

Matt hesitated, but then handed Neal an itemized list. “I know it is much

more than we agreed on, but my family...”

“It’s all right, Matt. Not a problem. Let’s go down to my bank and get you cash. I would suggest you spend it as quickly as you can, on necessities, before it loses even more value. It’s what I’m doing.”

Neal looked over the trailer and was as pleased with it as he had been with the Suburban. They hooked it up and Neal headed for his bank.

A very relieved look on his face when Neal dropped him off back at the shop, Matt said. “Thanks, Neal. You really didn’t have to do this. I would have honored our agreement.”

“I know. But the agreement implied value for value. I believe we each got equal value out of the deal.” Matt nodded and Neal drove away.

Stopping in Sullivan to pick up his mail at the mail service business he used to receive his regular mail and packages, Neal was pleased to see the large order he’d placed for prep items was in. Having the trailer made it much easier to handle the shipment than loading it into the back of the Suburban.

When he got home, he unloaded the trailer and moved everything to the cave, using the powered pallet handler he had wound up buying to use permanently for moving goods to and from the cave safely.

He had ramps to get the pallet carrier over the door lip of the vault door he’d installed just behind the original door. Neal’s judicious use of an electric jack hammer had smoothed the floor of the cave enough for the powered pallet handler to maneuver from the front entrance through the essentially unchanged passage to the main room, which was now securely blocked by a second vault door.

It, too, had a set of ramps and Neal took the load into the main room and began to unload it, taking some of the items through the third vault door,

which secured the passage that led from the main room of the cave. It was essentially just a long narrow passage that tapered down to nothing another hundred feet into the bluff.

It was completely dry and had plenty of ventilation, the air coming from the front entrance, through the hidden, baffled vents Neal had incorporated into the vault door framing, leaving the far end of the passage through what had at one time had been another spring outlet. Now it carried only a steady flow of air out of the cave, including smoke from the heater in the house and an open fire

Neal's small, low-rpm diesel generator used to charge the batteries when the sun couldn't keep up with use was located right by the air outlet. It seemed to receive plenty of engine and cooling air, and the exhaust, piped into the outlet, never backed up. Neal had tried to find where the opening, or openings, were on the surface, with the generator running, but had never found them. There was, perhaps, just a hint of diesel exhaust in the air at several places on the property, but Neal wasn't sure that they weren't just his imagination.

Neal began to pay a bit more attention to the news on television, and on the Internet news sites. He'd had a general idea of the slow failing of the economy, but the news now was sounding, for those news agencies, not just gloomy, but like there was a downright possibility of catastrophic collapse.

With everything set up the way he'd envisioned, Neal found himself taking on a true miserly way. He extended his stocks of freeze-dried, dehydrated, and shelf-stable foods to a thirty year supply for himself. But Neal also found himself placing a large order to Walton Feed for Super Pails of basic staples.

He would never be able to eat all of it in an entire lifetime, but he just couldn't stop buying, in that miserly way, partly triggered by the refusal to loose any value of the deposits to his checking accounts from the

annuities. He only quit buying the staples when there was no more room in the storage passageway.

He picked up another, smaller, gun safe, putting it into the storage room, rather than the main room where his other safes were, to hold his increasing stock of gold and silver bullion coins. Neal went so far as to hide the entrance to the storage room with a large, movable cabinet.

It was the two-year anniversary of the accident in which he'd lost his family, and began turning into a hermit and a miser. And prepper. There were tears in his eyes when he went to bed.

But he felt fine when he got up the next morning and went hunting before he had breakfast. He always went some ways into the State Forest to hunt, to leave the game close to him alone, in case he ever needed it. He kept salt and mineral blocks out on his property and did a little judicious planting of appropriate feed for many of the animals.

Along with the specific planting for the animals, Neal started a guerrilla garden, by planting many self-propagating vegetables here and there throughout the forest, wherever he thought they would grow. He left them to their own devices after planting them, and harvested what grew, not worrying about the loss of any given plant.

He did the same with fruit trees, planting several varieties. There were black walnut trees, hickory trees, strawberries, blackberries, and roses, with their annual crop of rose hips, growing wild in the forest. He spread a few seed around from each of them, to increase production, but again, let nature determine how well they did.

Along with two quail, a rabbit, and a squirrel, Neal took home a few potatoes, onions, carrots, turnips, and stalks of asparagus that morning. It was only after he'd cleaned the game and fixed breakfast that he turned on the satellite television to watch the news while he ate.

It was worse than 1929. The US stock and bond markets were crashing, despite safeguards. And, despite the recent flee from the dollar by many nations; other markets began crashing on the heels of the US markets.

Gold went from just under one-thousand dollars an ounce spot price, to over two-thousand dollars an ounce in just four hours.

The New York Stock Exchange cut off trading at noon. By four pm New York time, runs on the banks by panicked people getting cash out stopped when all the banks were closed by executive order.

Neal continued to watch into the night, feeling very little emotion. He finally went to bed, wondering what the next day would bring.

Up early, Neal found out. More of the same. The New York Stock Exchange was only open fifteen minutes before it was closed down again, with all sellers and no buyers. The banks reopened about noon local time in the different time zones, but, again by executive order, withdrawals were limited to five-hundred dollars total and safe deposit boxes were off-limits.

Neal shook his head, and curiosity getting the best of him, called each of his trust fund managers. He got the same reply from each one. They were holding what they had, with the belief, which Neal agreed with, that the economy would recover and the prime investments that the trusts were holding would once again be the best investments possible. All had hedged and despite paper losses of value, the sound investments were still sound.

He would even continue to get the life annuity payments. They just wouldn't be worth as much due to the runaway inflation that seemed likely to come. Neal put down the cell phone and went back to watching television, still unmoved by what he was seeing.

For a year, once a month, Neal collected his mail, and traveled into St.

Louis to take out the latest deposits of the annuities, leaving only a minimum balance to keep the accounts open. He had to start showing his ID again, with his long hair and full beard, he looked much different than he had when the accounts were set up. He immediately converted the dollars into goods.

He'd get a good meal, stay in a motel for the night, and then go shopping the next day for quality goods that would have long service lives. Going back to Sullivan, just before heading back to the cave, he would pick up some fresh foods, if they were available, with the rest of the cash, leaving only the reserve he kept, for cash fixable emergencies only. The amount of the reserve was growing each month as the value of the dollar continued to drop, but the reserve increases barely kept the same purchase value.

When the anniversary of the crash rolled around again, one day after the third anniversary of the loss of his family, Neal compared things as they were now to what they were then. Besides his hair and beard being longer, and the cave being full, things were, for him, much the same. He still hunted every two or three days, picked nuts, fruits, berries, and vegetables from the naturally occurring growth he'd enhanced with his guerrilla plantings.

Neal was seeing a drop in the game population in the State Forest, and a slight increase on his property. He decided the additional hunting the State Forest was getting was reducing the populations significantly, while driving some game onto his protected land, with his feeding, salting, and improved animal habitat efforts he'd learned about from Missouri Department of Conservation. Though he didn't know anyone that might ask him to hunt, he did have the land posted. Not with 'No Hunting' signs, but with 'Hunting by Permission Only', with his cellular phone number and his Sullivan mail address on the signs.

He'd never had a call or letter requesting any permissions, and had not seen any evidence of hunting incursions, until just recently. Perhaps,

because it wasn't strictly ruled out, hunters that saw the signs may have respected them more than simple 'No Hunting' signs. Perhaps because the State lands had been of sufficient resources that hunters didn't need to take advantage of his small game refuge.

The Fünfling was a great hunting weapon, but lacked seriously as a self defense weapon. Neal took to carrying one of the Glock 21's religiously, all the time he was outside the cave. Than included the time he spent in the Lusby tiny house, which was considerable, and while hunting, just in case he ran into a hunter that wasn't willing to follow the rules, and might make trouble.

He ran into the first hunter he'd ever seen while out hunting, and it was on State land. Neal was out for a turkey for Christmas dinner and was at one of his many selected hunting spots he'd developed over the few years he'd been hunting.

He heard movement in the forest and knew immediately it wasn't a game animal. He stayed still and watched in the direction of the sound. Sure enough, a few minutes later, two men carrying shotguns came into view. Neal noted immediately that neither man was wearing the required hunter orange clothing. Both were in complete camouflage, including their shotguns.

Neal hunkered down and stayed quiet, hoping the men wouldn't see him due to his orange clothing. They seemed more inclined to continue on their way than look around, for game, or anything else.

He was back in hunting mode when he heard more sounds coming from where the men had appeared, though not nearly as much. In only a few seconds a man appeared. He was in a game and wildlife protection officer's uniform.

Neal whistled lightly and the man turned toward Neal immediately. The Fünfling cradled in one arm, Neal waved with his free hand. The officer

immediately began approaching Neal and asked all the standard questions about what he was doing, despite, Neal thought, the fact was rather obvious. He asked Neal for his licenses, permits, and guns, checked them and handed them back.

His duties toward Neal taken care of, the officer then asked, “Have you seen two men moving through this area? Full camo, shotguns?”

Neal described them and pointed the officer in the direction they had been traveling when he last saw them. “Be careful,” the officer said. “Those two can be pretty ornery. They’ve always poached some, for their own use. Now they are taking anything and everything they can to sell, due to the hard times.”

Nodding, Neal said, “I’ll be careful. You, too.”

The two men shook hands and the officer headed off on the track of the poachers. Neal called it a day and went back to the house. He did a bit of online research and purchasing. He headed for Cabela’s the next day.

When he came back, Neal set up several game trail cameras. A few days later, he went in to Sullivan and picked up a package from an online source. He set out the trip flares in tactical locations on the property that humans would probably use, but not animals.

Neal had set things up with night photoflash cameras, rather than low-light-level cameras, so anyone tripping them would know it from the flash. The same thing with the trip flares. They were flash flares, not sound flares. He didn’t want to disturb the animals very much, just trespassers and potential poachers.

It was about all he could do to secure the area. Try to scare any timid souls off. Neal didn’t think it would really be a deterrent to serious poachers. He added the signs he’d also bought to the mounts where his ‘Hunting By Permission Only’ were. They were ‘No Trespassing’ signs

and by posting them, Neal had some legal recourse in case something happened.

He began spending more time in the cabin, carefully returning the approach to the cave entrance to its normal appearance. Though he'd been careful to lay down thick plywood on which to run the powered pallet handler, a distinct trail was beginning to appear.

Neal went hunting again the day before Christmas. It was snowing lightly and Neal didn't really care if he got a bird for Christmas dinner or not. He had one duck left from a duck hunting trip earlier in the season. He was just enjoying being out in the weather. He loved the snow. Had loved playing with his family whenever they got one of the occasional seasonal falls.

Shaking off the sudden melancholy, Neal eased into his preferred turkey ambush spot on State land. One of the local flocks used the path thirty feet away to and from their watering and feeding points.

Settled in, Neal found himself nodding off, as he sat on the seat of the hunting bucket he'd brought with him. His quality clothing kept him comfortable in the dropping temperature and snow. The slight sounds of the flock of turkeys approaching brought Neal to attention and he brought the Fünfling up in readiness. Two minutes and one shot later Neal was walking up to the small turkey he'd shot. He'd let the bigger ones go. He liked turkey, but didn't like eating it for a week at a time, which he would have to do if he'd bagged one of the bigger birds.

Slinging the Fünfling, Neal picked up the turkey and headed for home, whistling tunelessly as he walked, thinking about the world situation. After the worldwide economic breakdown, many countries were looking for ways to turn their citizens' thoughts from their domestic problems. One of the ways was political adventuring in foreign places.

While the US was slowly reducing its overseas presence, other

countries, most notably France, Italy, Spain, Germany, Japan, India, Russia, and China, were extending their presence in various parts of the world.

In the Middle East, a new Persian Empire was forming, with Iran at its core.

The explosion in gold prices, and other monetary hedges, like investment diamonds, had resulted in a set of small wars in South Africa, over ownership and control of those resources. In the process, several of the major producers, huge underground operations, were damaged to the point of inoperability.

South Africa was in the midst of civil war, and having border skirmishes with several entities that would like to take over the country for its resources, and to avenge ancient wrongs, real or perceived. Being white in the country meant you had a target on your back. Even larger white migrations began to occur, many of the white South African farmers, ranchers, and business people going to Australia, under new emigration guidelines established because of the situation. Australia was coming out of its drought, and the economy was beginning to expand, one of the few places where it was happening.

With increasingly bad weather everywhere else, Russia, China, and India were all turning loose some of their gold stocks to get badly needed grains from the few places still producing exportable amounts. The influx of the gold into the system more than made up for the loss of the South African production and the gold price was actually dropping slowly, as more and more international transactions were being calculated in ounces of gold rather than dollars, euros, yen, yuan, or Swiss francs.

Neal suspected that the United States government leaders had the same idea as Russia, China, and India. Not gold for grain, but gold for oil. Not at all surprised, Neal watched, just after the New Year's start, the live

Presidential broadcast of the announcement of a new recall of gold, silver, platinum, palladium, and rhodium in industrial, commercial and private hands. This time the recall included all but small working amounts for industrial and commercial users. Further usage would have to be on a government approved as needed bases, the precious metals purchased from the government at a price fixed by the government.

The recall this time also included numismatic coins, though with the assurance they would not be melted down, but held as a bullion reserve, leaving true bullion to be used any way the government wanted.

Neal felt sorry for all those people that had tried to get a hedge for themselves, but had used credit cards or left some other paper trail of the purchases. They would lose it all. The announcement had not said what the buyback price would be, but Neal suspected it would be far less than the average price of precious metals the last few years. There would probably be hundreds of coins shops and Internet dealers go out of business, ruined financially by the recall.

He had no qualms about not turning his in. Thanks to the information the coin dealer where he'd made his first purchase had given him, none of the precious metals he owned were traceable, except for just a few that he wanted to have to allay any suspicion when he did use some. He'd willingly lose a couple ounces to convince the authorities that, yes, he'd bought some, but not much, and here's what's left.

Waiting a week, to make it look good, Neal went in to St. Louis, to one of the official collection stations. He wasn't at all surprised that though the London Spot price was at \$1,200.00 per ounce, the government was giving \$500.00 per ounce for the first ten ounces, and \$250.00 per ounce over that. There was no New York spot. Trading in precious metals was now illegal for Americans.

More than one person was escorted out by the large contingent of police there to handle problems. Neal saw people crying as they gave up

collections of numismatic coins, getting what was only a token payment in relation to the actual value of the coins on the open market.

Gritting his teeth, Neal, when he finally got up to the window, took his voucher for the twenty-seven one-tenth ounce Gold Eagles he turned in. They weren't even giving out cash. Only the vouchers that were to be taken to the individuals regular bank, where a deposit for the amount would be recorded.

A week later Neal wasn't at all surprised to see the President giving another speech, this one about resisting or not complying with the gold recall being a major crime, with resisting it with a firearm being a capital offense. Apparently people were resisting. With firearms. Only a few reports made the news, and then the issue was no longer discussed.

A week after that a bill to ban all firearms except those especially suitable for hunting was rushed through both houses of Congress, passing by only one vote in each house, and signed into law, effective immediately. The determination of suitability for hunting was left in the hands of BATFE field agents. There was a huge outcry and the legal proceedings were started to strike down the law.

Neal suddenly smiled. He had paperwork that all the traceable firearms he had purchased had been sold off slowly, starting a year after he bought them. He had the Bills of Sale to prove it.

Of course, over that same time period he'd picked up a few other firearms with a clear paper trail that it wouldn't bother him to turn in, especially if they were bought back and not just confiscated. With firearms suitable for hunting exempted he even had a good chance of keeping a couple of them. Fortunately he didn't have to risk the Fünfling.

He had a bill of sale from one Mathew McConnell, of Houston, Texas, indicating a sale price of \$75,000. That amount had been deposited, in

cash, on the day after the bill of sale was dated. All the hidden weapons had been done the same way, with funds matching the amounts of the bills of sale being deposited in Neal's main bank within a few days of the date on one of the Bills of Sale. Many of those Bills of Sale matched dates of gun shows that Neal could have been attending. He actually had attended a couple of them.

Neal called the St. Louis office of the BATFE and asked what he should do. No collection points had been indicated in the days following the passage of the law. The round up was being done house-to-house by BATFE agents with 4473 forms in hand.

"I have a shipping address in Sullivan," Neal explained. "I'm way out in the boondocks. I'm not sure your agents can find where I am. Can I just bring in my guns?"

The woman was adamant and demanded precise directions to Neal's physical location. Two days later two black Suburban's arrived and four agents got out of each one. Neal was working in one of the three three-sided log sheds with metal roofs that had been part of the construction projects done by the laborers from Kansas City.

"Can I help you?" Neal asked, careful to keep his hands in sight

"BATFE! Keep your hands in sight! Turn around and lean against the wall!" barked the man in the lead. "Why are you out here, all alone?" asked the leader of the group.

"Lost my family a few years ago. I guess I've turned into something of a hermit."

"Where's your cave?" asked one of the other men.

Fortunately none of them could see the startled flash in his eyes at the accuracy of the flippant remark. He managed something of a sick smile

and replied, “Yeah, right.” The others laughed.

Neal was thoroughly searched, as the other agents began searching the tiny cabin and the shed.

“If this is about the guns I can get...” Neal started to say over his shoulder, but cut off his words when he was jabbed over a kidney with the muzzle of an MP-5 sub machinegun.

A “Shut Up!” came with the jab and Neal decided he’d follow orders. That little jab had hurt all out of proportion to its minimal motion.

They looked for hours, including two hours using metal detectors around the house and grounds. They found the working well pit and there was a flurry of activity around it for several minutes, including climbing into the water tank through the access hatch. Neal was finally asked, “Why the pit and tank?”

“I wasn’t here early on. The well was put in long before the house. The well pump only pumps a little bit. I needed the tank to have enough useable water. And I was afraid of vandalism. And besides, the well driller said it was safer to have everything in the pit to avoid freezing in a situation like out here.”

It seemed to satisfy them and they quit looking around the property, now more concerned with the paperwork they’d found in a small fire safe in one of the cabinets in the house than in the actual guns and small amount of ammunition they’d found stuck in nooks and crannies inside. They never even found any of the propane tanks.

After a while of matching receipts and Form 4473’s to the guns they found, they began to question Neal about the Bills of Sale of the other guns for which they had Form 4473’s.

Neal just shrugged and said, “I got hooked for a while, but I don’t have

room for all of those and with the profit I made, I couldn't pass up the sales. I'm a CPA. I know the importance of documentation. Didn't the new owners register the guns?"

"Apparently not," said the leader of the group, looking hard at Neal.

"Not even one of them? They all said they would. I was really careful about whom I sold to. Did the best I could to make sure they weren't terrorists or criminals. They all had people vouch for them."

"They would," said one of the other agents, "to get some of these items. Looks like you made a killing. So to speak." He wasn't smiling.

The leader glared at the other man for a moment, and then finally motioned for Neal to turn around and put his hands down by his sides.

"Okay," the man said. "The two bolt action rifles are sniper rifles. You can't keep them and no compensation. The double barrel shotgun is a weapon of terror. You can't keep it, either, nor be compensated for it. The two revolvers are concealable weapons. You can't have them, but you will be compensated for them. Twenty-five dollars apiece.

Neal figured he'd better show some emotion when he heard the price he was being given for guns worth two to three hundred dollars. The agents would be expecting it. Neal didn't have to fake it. "That's all? I mean I got them at bargain prices, but they were both over two-hundred dollars!"

"Take it up with the Attorney General." The others laughed.

The leader chuckled at his own joke, then quit smiling and said, "The two over and under combination guns are legal. They are obviously only suited for hunting. You can keep them." He wrote out the voucher for the two revolvers and handed it to Neal.

With that, they gathered up the other guns and the paperwork, got back into the black Suburban's and took off. Neal watched them go, his face expressionless. Finally he picked up the old, but serviceable Savage 24 .22 Hornet over 20 gauge combo, and the recent model Charles Daly Superior Over/Under 12 gauge over .30-'06 from the ground where the agents had carelessly dropped them.

Neal took the two guns inside and leaned one in each of the nooks where he kept them, wondering how many people were being treated the way he'd just been treated. The news had indicated that there was some resistance to the gun confiscation, but there had been no reports lately. Neal assumed they were being suppressed.

He called the gun shop he used the most in St. Louis. There was a recorded message that the store was closed until further notice.

He checked the internet. All the gun related sites he'd occasionally visited were down. A few had notification pages saying so. Many of the addresses just showed a 'Can't find' message. A similar check for some of the preparedness sites resulted in the same finding. Some of the milder of the sites were still up, but the hardcore preparation sites were down. So were the prep supplier sites. Neal wondered what other activities were going on that were unreported.

Neal didn't even approach the cave, much less go in, for weeks, wondering if the BATFE might be keeping an eye on him, because of the history of the weapons he'd bought early on. He stayed in the Lusby, hunting, fishing, and foraging almost every day, maintaining his hermit status. Neal missed using the Hofer, using the two combination guns instead.

He would go into Sullivan every two to three weeks to buy a few basics, and some fresh foods, using the debit card from one of his banks. Many places were no longer taking credit cards, but would take debit cards since they got the money into their accounts immediately. The shelves

weren't anywhere near as full as they had been only six months before. Food supplies, Neal decided, were one of the things not being talked about in the Main Stream Media. What was available now cost three times what it had six months previous.

For that reason, Neal let the balance in that bank rise a bit intentionally. He waited a full two months before he went in to St. Louis and drew down all three bank accounts of cash, leaving the slightly higher balance in the one.

The money wasn't worth much, and most of it went to refuel the tanks in the Suburban and the trailer. The rest went for a pair of chainsaws and the accoutrements, including a large stock of bar oil and two-cycle engine oil, plus several jerry cans of gasoline, which he treated with Pri-G.

With the amounts of wood he was using, Neal had been buying what he needed. He'd decided, to help maintain the hermit image, and for actual practical reasons, to judiciously cut his own firewood, getting permits to take marked trees from the State Forest.

One of the impulse buys at Cabela's on that first trip came in very handy. He'd bought the deluxe game cart, knowing how difficult it would be to get a deer home from hunting on State land, since he walked there and didn't drive. He'd used it a few times for its intended purpose, but the seven-hundred pound capacity of its dual wheels made it quite useful to move the firewood he cut in remote areas to wherever he'd parked the Suburban and trailer.

He could easily have maneuvered the Suburban alone to most of the places where he cut the wood, with its independent rear wheel steering capability. But the trailer complicated that. And he really didn't want to leave a lot of vehicle tracks on the property.

Concerned about diesel fuel and gasoline availability, Neal began

considering, again, as he had several times in the past, having diesel fuel tanks installed, much as he had the propane tanks. But having a large propane tank in a remote area was one thing. It didn't raise many eyebrows. Buying and installing, and then filling, large diesel tanks more than likely would. Neal didn't want that much attention brought to the property, the same decision he'd made each time before. But the situation was pressing, and he came up with another plan.

Neal went to St. Louis on one of his banking and buying runs and stopped in to see Matt. The shop and grounds had a different look to it. Rather than the fancy custom rigs in various states of completion, only relatively old vehicles were visible.

Going into the office, Neal found Matt on the telephone, ordering parts for the vehicle up on one of the lifts in the garage area. Matt held up a finger, a big grin on his face, and finished the telephone conversation. He rose and shook Neal's hand. "It's great to see you, Neal. Been a long time."

"Yeah. What's going on here?"

Matt's smile faded. "Work. Not getting any custom work. Lots of old vehicle repair jobs. Mostly people wanting things done on the cheap. It's a struggle, but I'm making it."

"I see. Any chance of working a pair of custom fuel trailers into the queue?"

Matt's smile was back. "If I can get the materials, you betcha. I could even get Tim back for a while. He's struggling, too. But I have to tell you, Neal, that it's going to have to be cash up front. I don't have the spare cash to carry the parts and all until the thing is done."

"I understand," Neal said. "I expected that." He handed Matt a bundle of hundreds, almost the total amount of his bank withdrawals on this trip.

“That enough to get started?”

“I’ll say it is!” Matt replied. “Okay if I take labor out of it as I go along, along with the parts purchases?”

“Absolutely. You can do this pretty slow if you need to. I can pay about that much each month for the next three months, say.”

“Yeah. That will be better. Some of this work I’m doing, if I don’t do it, people may actually starve. I don’t want to cut them off.”

“That’s good, Matt. You’re a good guy.”

They discussed the project for a few minutes and then Neal left, satisfied he’d have what he wanted in several weeks, four month’s tops. He hoped that would be soon enough to be able to get the fuel to fill the mobile storage tanks.

After giving Matt the money for the trailers, Neal had enough to top off the tanks in the Suburban and cargo trailer there in St. Louis, and get a few fresh food items in Sullivan on the way back.

Neal wasn’t idle during the time the tanks were being built. Buying, rather than renting a Bobcat 5600T utility work machine with bucket, fork, and backhoe attachments, he picked a place with terrain to make it easy to do what he wanted. Using the new equipment Neal dug out the toe of a slope and constructed a retaining wall to hold the rest of the slope in place, getting and using laborers from Kansas City the same way he had before.

The retaining wall contained drainage measures to carry all run off from the slope around and past the cut.

With a combination of trees he cut on State property, and on his own property, surplus used power poles, used steel beams and pipes from

junk yards, dozens of sheets of new and used galvanized roofing panels, and a whole lot of sheet plastic, Neal roofed over the cut he'd made. He maintained the contour of the original slope, and covered it all back up with the material he dug out, creating irregular triangle shaped tunnel.

Neal built concrete block ends for the tunnel and then bermed earth against them, using more retaining wall blocks to make near vertical walls on each side of the approaches to the heavy-duty rollup doors installed in each end wall.

The facility was basically in the middle of nowhere on the property, with no signs of it being other than the slope, except for the two access points. Neal had carefully removed all signs of the activity of building the thing. Only if one stumbled onto them would the air vents on the slope, camouflaged by carefully placed rock formations, be discovered. The PV panels mounted on tall, camouflaged poles, were more visible, but still not obvious.

He parked the first of the new fuel trailers inside after he picked it up nine weeks after he'd contacted Matt. It had taken several trips to the various local towns to get the tank trailer filled. Almost all stations were limiting fuel purchases. But when he was done, Neal had nine-hundred gallons of Pri-D stabilized diesel, one-hundred gallons of Pri-G stabilized gasoline, and several cases of lubricants in almost hidden storage.

Six weeks later and he had another, identical, trailer of stabilized fuel in storage. The tanks on the Suburban and the cargo trailer were also full when he parked the Suburban by the house that cold mid-November day, having left the cargo trailer with the tank trailers in the tunnel. Much of the rest of the space in the tunnel was taken up with pallets of miscellaneous equipment and supplies.

Thanksgiving passed again, as it always did, and Neal had the melancholies as the anniversary of the death of his family approached.

Satisfied that he was not being watched, he finally went back into the cave for the first time in months and locked himself in.

Tears in his eyes, Neal fell asleep the evening of that anniversary and then slept through *The End Of Civilization As We Know It*.

Feeling gloomy because of the memories of his missing family, Neal didn't bother to turn on the TV or get on the Internet for several days, just puttering around the cave, which was slowly cheering him up. No one could ask for a nicer miserly hermit's cave, he decided.

Finally, after a week, feeling much better, Neal turned on the TV to see what new situations were being reported on the news.

"That's funny," Neal said. The TV screen was just white noise. He tried another channel. Same thing. Neal checked the connections for the satellite dish box and TV and couldn't find anything wrong.

Firing up his laptop, Neal decided to see if he could find out what was wrong with satellite TV. He couldn't get a connection. "Well, Crimeny!" Neal said, rather annoyed. He was going to have to go check the dish. A deer had pushed it over once. "Probably happened again," he said aloud, glancing over at one of the outside camera monitors. It was snowing heavily and there seemed to be quite a bit on the ground. "Could be the snow, too," Neal said aloud. "Might be too much for the dish heater."

Hating the fact that he would be leaving tracks, Neal bundled up and went outside. The dish was fine and clear of snow. Neal traipsed up to the Lusby and went inside. Everything was normal. He closed and locked the door again and went back to the cave. He stopped on the way to look up at the several different radio antennas mounted in the trees on the top of the bluff. All seemed fine.

Neal only started to become alarmed when he got back in the cave and hooked up the outside antenna for the AM/FM radio and turned it on.

And got nothing but static on every channel. “What is going on?” he asked himself, switching to a shortwave radio, reconnecting its grounded antenna lead to the radio. Nothing there, either. Same on the Amateur radio bands. Even the frequencies for Time Standard Signals were silent.

Trying the NOAA radio next, he found the same slight hissing of dead air. “This is not good,” Neal said, sitting back for a moment to think. After a few minutes, Neal turned on and tuned up his unlicensed Amateur Radio station. He set the same frequency on the transceiver as he did on one of the independent broadband receivers and keyed the mike.

The signal strength meter jumped and Neal’s “Test, test, test,” sounded eerily on the receiving radio. The radios and antennas were working. Bundling up again, Neal went outside once more, this time going over to the Suburban. He tried his cell phone on the way. No signal. Suddenly remembering his keychain radiation alarm he pulled it out and looked at it. It was not signaling by sight or sound. There was no radiation. At least not where he was.

Neal took the camouflage custom made car cover he’d paid an awning company to make for him off the Suburban and stowed it away. Neal got into the truck and started it up with the remote. It fired right up and Neal tried its radios. The same result as the cave radios. Nothing. Neal looked over at the blue On-star button. He’d never used it, though he kept up the subscription, it being paid automatically out of one of his checking accounts, the same way the auto insurance was.

A press of the button and several moments of waiting for a response, Neal turned off the Suburban and then sat there in the driver’s seat, thinking. Something was going on. It was obvious. Neal suspected a HEMP attack at the very least. All of his gear was operated in an EMP safe manner, and the Suburban electronics were in the faraday cages, so they had likely survived. It wasn’t his equipment failing. There were no electronic emissions to be received.

It suddenly hit Neal. He really was a hermit now. Before it had all been pretend. He'd had his connections with the rest of the world at his fingertips all the time, through the telephone, Internet, and television.

They were no more. At least not for a while, depending on what had actually happened.

Neal took mental stock of his situation. He had food for years. The 2,700 gallons of propane in the underground tanks would last decades. Even the twelve one-hundred-pound capacity tanks would last years.

There was 1,800 gallons of stabilized diesel in the two tank trailers, plus another two-hundred in the cargo trailer, and fifty in cans. Two-hundred gallons of stabilized gasoline in the tank trailers, fifty gallons in the cargo trailer and fifty more gallons in jerry cans. How long the fuels would last was entirely dependent on how much Neal drove and used gasoline powered equipment. There were oil products for years.

There were thirty cords of cut and stacked firewood under cover, and three-hundred 20-pound bags of premium charcoal briquettes for the furnace/fireplaces in the Lusby and cave.

Essentially unlimited amounts of water were available from the two wells, and sanitation was more than covered by the two treatment systems, with unlimited back up by use of chemical toilets in storage.

There was plenty of game and fish in the local forests, streams, and lakes. Or had been. Neal couldn't know that for certain, now.

Neal had the means with which to protect himself in any small scale encounter, with thousands of rounds of ammunition available and replacement components for reloading the cases several times each.

And of course the black powder arms that BATFE had never even

questioned Neal about, since none of them were papered.

Yes. Neal was in good shape. But he was totally clueless about the rest of the world. It took an hour for Neal to come to the conclusion he needed to go into the outside world and see if he could gather any information on what was happening.

It took another hour for Neal to decide what to take and get the Suburban loaded and ready. Careful to do as good of a job of removing his tracks to and from the cave, Neal hoped the continuing heavy snow would completely wipe them out shortly.

Neal left his property, not knowing what he might find out in the real world, if anything.

The Hermit - Chapter 2

Neal took his time, keeping an eye out for anything unexpected, not having to worry about making his way through the accumulated snow. The Suburban was made especially for such things.

He had the heater going, but Neal kept the front windows down, for better visibility, ignoring the small amount of snow that entered the cab of the Suburban. When he reached the gate at the end of the drive to his property Neal triggered the remote for the new gate he had installed.

With its own solar panel and battery bank, the opener for the gate rolled the heavy gate to one side and Neal drove through, triggering the gate to close behind him. There were no tracks on the gravel road. Nor any on the pavement when he reached it. There were abandoned vehicles.

Neal drove at a slow, economical speed, conscious that there might not be any more fuel available if he ran out on the road before getting back to the property. It was almost inconceivable, with the 3,000 mile un-

refueled range of the Suburban, but Neal was well into prep mode and was making decisions as if it was confirmed that he was living in a PAW.

Going into Sullivan Neal still saw no signs in the snow of vehicles, but he did see smoke coming from chimneys here and there. He decided not to stop at any of the houses. It was too risky until he found out what was going on.

He went to the grocery store he usually used for his local purchases. There were signs in the snow in the parking lot and near the front doors of the store of activity. Mostly boot prints, though there was one set of tire tracks that went close to the doors and past.

Ready at a moment's notice to hit the accelerator, Neal tapped the horn ever so slightly, producing just a beep, and watched the doors of the store. One of the glass doors opened slightly. Neal couldn't see through the glass as the light was wrong. He did see the barrel of a shotgun and tensed.

"What do you want?" came the words, without an accompanying sound of a gunshot.

"Information, if you have it," Neal said.

"Not supplies?" came the question. There was an element of disbelief in the sound of the man's voice.

"No. Well, I'd get some, if you have them, but I mainly want information."

"Okay. You alone? I can't see into your rig."

"I'm alone," replied Neal.

“Keep your hands where I can see them and come to the door.”

Neal exited the Suburban, after killing the engine, the remote in his hand. He triggered it and heard the slight sounds of the various locking systems of the Suburban activate. Keeping his hands well away from the Glock 21 he wore openly on his hip, Neal walked toward the store doors, not liking the feeling of having a shotgun pointed at his belly, but desperate for information.

“Stop there,” said the man. The door opened slightly wide. “It’s you. Neal, isn’t it?”

“Yes, sir. Neal Grant. I buy groceries here from time to time.”

“You’re that loner up in the forest somewhere.”

“That would probably be me, yes,” Neal replied.

“Okay. Come on in. But keep your hands away from that pistol.”

When Neal went inside he stopped. “I’d kind of like to stay where I can keep an eye on the truck,” he said.

“Can’t blame you there. Aren’t many rigs running now.”

“Yeah. Why is that, do you know? No radio or TV or anything. I’m trying to find out why,” Neal said, glancing out the glass of the door from time to time as he spoke.

“What? You live in a cave up there or something? We’ve done had a nuclear war, mister,” the man said.

Neal’s lips only curled slightly at the man’s mention of a cave. He was trying to remember the man’s name. Of course. Same as the store. “Mr. Carmello, I must admit I haven’t been keeping up on the news lately.

What exactly can you tell me about what's happened?"

"Not much. There was a new Kingdom Of Persia, which I guess was most of the Mid-East, announced one day and the next somebody blew up the Saudi oil fields. Kind of sketchy after that. Somebody used a nuke, I don't know who. The President came on and had just opened his mouth and everything went black and then white and then went off. There's no power, phone, natural gas, water, sewer... anything. Haven't had a delivery since and I'm out of just about everything a person needs to survive. I thought I was going to have to shoot people a couple of times.

"Couple guys I know, they have an old jalopy kind of car they told me it was one time, and they were coming back from KC and said they saw a mushroom cloud behind them. Tells me there was nuke war. Wouldn't take a hit like that without hitting back.

"Now," he said, "You going to buy something?"

Neal couldn't hide his surprise. "Thought you were out."

"I'm out to people that got nothing I want in return. What are you offering?"

"Kind of depends on what you have I might want. And what you're asking."

Carmello knew his inventory by heart. He reeled off a list of items of food. A short list consisting mostly of one or two cans or packages of the less desirable food options. Besides not particularly liking any of the offerings, Neal couldn't bring himself to take food that other people were going to be desperate for, when he had so much stored.

Neal shook his head. "Batteries? Toilet paper? Bottled water? Butane lighters?"

Carmello shook his head no at each item until he got to the lighters. “Those I have some of. Three packages of six each.” A crafty look came over his face. If Neal asked for them, they must be important. “Got any canned food to trade to me?”

Neal shook his head. “What else do you have? Any salt?”

“Just ice cream freezer salt and some water filter salt. No food salt.”

“Okay,” Neal said carefully. “Tobacco?”

“No cigs, but got some roll your own stuff. You want it?”

“Let’s see what all you have before we talk money,” Neal replied, and then added, “Booze?”

This time it was a disappointed look on Carmello’s face. Not much. Let what I had go way too cheap.”

Neal named off many more things as he thought of them. Carmello had some, but not others, and no great amount of any of them. Finally Neal asked, “What will you take for all those items I asked about, that you have?”

With eyes opened wide in surprise, Carmello asked, “All of it?” And then the crafty look was back. “Don’t suppose you got a couple women stashed? I got some good bedroom action for stuff yesterday.”

It turned Neal’s stomach, but he didn’t turn and leave the way the comment made him want to do. “Sorry. No women.” Neal almost offered fuel, but quickly changed his mind. It was just too valuable to trade away for just some other goods Neal could use for trading at some point if the situation turned out to be what it was looking like.

“Be kind of dangerous thing, if a person offered gold, with it being illegal and all, now,” Neal said softly.

Catching on immediately Carmello said, “Sure would be. Person would have to know that they wouldn’t be turned in for passing it. But it’d be worth a lot.”

Neal knew he had the man marked when Carmello added, “A little bit would buy a lot. If it’s available.”

“Say, just for discussion, of course,” Neal said and Carmello grinned, “What would those things I mentioned be worth in gold coins?”

“That’s a lot of stuff,” Carmello said, not at all sure why Neal wanted some of the items. They must be worth something, if he wanted them. “Couple of ounces, easy,” he finally told Neal.

“Silver or gold?” Neal asked, more to annoy Carmello than any other reason.

“Gold! For crying out loud!” He huffed. “Two ounces of silver? What kind of idiot do you take me for? Two ounces of gold! American gold, too. Don’t want none of that foreign stuff.”

Neal managed to not ask him how many kinds of idiot there are. Instead he said, slowly, using what acting skills he had to convince Carmello he was reluctant, “I don’t know. That’s about all I have available. Can you give me a minute to think about it?”

Carmello looked worried. But Neal couldn’t pretend for long. “Okay. But I have to go get it out of the truck. I’m not stupid enough to carry it on me. You start gathering things up.”

With a quick nod, the shotgun set aside, totally forgotten by Carmello, Carmello grabbed a couple of carts and began gathering the items up

while Neal went back to the Suburban, to make it look like he was retrieving something, while actually palming two of the Gold Eagles he'd stashed in different pockets of his heavy clothing.

He took a careful look around before he went back into the store. There was no one to be seen, but Neal didn't want to take any chances.

"You want to help me here?" called Carmello.

"I have to watch the truck. Somebody might try to steal it."

Carmello's eyes cut to the shotgun, laying on the checkout counter right next to where Neal stood, watching the Suburban. Watching with his hand on the grips of the Glock. Carmello suddenly wondered what he'd gotten himself into, but continued to gather up items. Neal took a quick glance into each cart as Carmello brought it forward.

More than once Carmello was tempted to go for the shotgun and make a few changes in the deal, but Neal looked like he could handle himself, with that long hair and full beard, and heavy clothing, he looked like something out of the Rocky Mountains in the 1800's.

When Carmello wheeled up one last cart Neal looked it over and said, "I think you might have forgotten the tobacco and booze," knowing full well Carmello hadn't.

"Oh, yeah. One more cart," with a lingering gaze at the shotgun, Carmello pulled another cart and went to the locked tobacco and liquor cabinet. There really wasn't all that much, but Carmello put it all in the cart, after one more look to see if Neal was watching him. Neal was.

Disconcerted enough not to remember that Neal hadn't really said anything about lighter fuel, wicks, and flints for Zippo lighters, he tossed all of the containers and packages of each into the cart.

“Don’t have any boxes or bags left,” Carmello said, lying through his teeth, just to try to get some of his own back. Neal ignored the fact that there were plastic grocery bags in plain sight at one of the checkout stands.

“No problem,” Neal said, grabbing two of the carts. “After you,” he said, and waited for Carmello to get behind one of the carts and push it against the door.

Carmello went as far as he could in the snow on the parking lot and turned around. “I’ll go get another cart.”

“That’s fine. You just see if you can’t get that one a bit closer to the truck.” Neal left the two carts he was handling, pulling one and pushing the other, and went back for two more of the loaded carts. Carmello was still struggling with the first cart but was nearly to the Suburban when Neal came back outside. He left those two carts and quickly went back inside for the last two.

When he made it to the rear of the Suburban Carmello was standing there with a very stubborn look on his face. “You don’t really expect me to load all this stuff up without being paid first, do you?”

“Oh, of course not,” Neal said, not having expected Carmello to load any of it at all. He produced the two gold coins and flipped them to Carmello one at a time. Knowing he was getting more than just a good value, Neal muttered something about being a bad miser, reached into another pocket and brought out a tenth ounce coin. He flipped that to Carmello, too, who looked at it in surprise. “Consider it a tip. Now let’s get this stuff loaded. I’ve been in one place too long already.”

The third coin seemed to have appeased Carmello and he pitched right in to transfer everything from the carts to the back of the Suburban. Even though Carmello didn’t have the shotgun, Neal never turned his back to him, waiting just a moment for him to head back to the store with one of

the carts before he went to the driver's door and climbed into the truck, having started it with the remote when they unloaded the last cart.

Watching in the rearview mirror, Neal saw Carmello leave the cart and start to run toward the store. But he suddenly slowed, turned around, and began taking the carts back to the store, the thought of trying to take the Suburban and everything else from Neal pushed out of his mind as quickly as it had entered.

Neal's head was like it was on a swivel, as he checked all around for any signs of people approaching the area, lured by the sight of the Suburban being loaded. But he saw no one, and was not interfered with.

He drove to the Interstate junction, not seeing anyone, but seeing more abandoned cars and trucks. Having read about salvaging goods from abandoned vehicles in some of the stories on the old Internet Prep sites, Neal checked several of the semi rigs, skipping those that were obviously not carrying anything he might want. A couple of marked grocery trucks were standing with rear doors open, empty for the most part. Someone had beaten Neal to the punch. Though he wasn't really sure what he would have done with any of the goods if they'd been any usable ones left.

It was the same with the fuel tankers. He saw two. Both were empty and Neal surmised that they'd made deliveries and were on their way to pick up more. There were no signs of fuel having been transferred from them where they sat.

Putting salvage out of his mind, Neal parked on the on-ramp to I-44 and took stock. He adjusted some of the things in the back of the Suburban so they would ride better, in case he had to maneuver violently, and took the time to eat a thermos of soup he'd made before leaving the property.

He'd chosen the spot for its safety and only decided after he parked that he might as well head for St. Louis to see if he could find out anything

else. Especially if St. Louis was still there. If Kansas City had been hit, it was likely that St. Louis had been as well.

Neal passed hundreds of cars on the way, most having been steered to the shoulder when they lost power, but with a few right in the middle of the lanes. Half expecting to run into blockades on the Interstate, which was a common occurrence in PAW fiction, Neal drove carefully, ready to stop and retreat if he did come up on one.

But there was nothing like that between Sullivan and the Pacific Exits. That was when his keychain radiation alarm started sounding off loudly, the LED blinking rapidly. Neal couldn't see anything out of the ordinary, but turned the Suburban around quickly and drove much faster going back to the southwest than he had been driving northeast toward the city. If the radiation was this far out, St. Louis undoubtedly had been hit.

The destruction of Kansas City and St. Louis did not necessarily mean full scale nuclear war, but it sure didn't mean that it hadn't occurred. Without running across any more people, Neal went back to the property and parked the Suburban by the Lusby. He plugged the retracting electrical cord from the Suburban to an outlet on the outside wall of the tiny house.

The off-grid electrical system, which had obviously survived, would provide power to electrical heaters in the Suburban. Neal wouldn't have to unload the Suburban until he was ready. And the truck would be ready on a moment's notice, even if got much colder than normal in the area. The retractable cord also fed oil pan and block heaters on the diesel engine, and a circulating heater pump to keep the coolant at a reasonable temperature to help starting and to have warm air inside as quickly as possible.

Neal decided to stay in the Lusby for a few days, for the snow had covered up the tracks in the snow to and from the cave and he didn't

want to make more. Depending on the extent of the attack and the number of local survivors, Neal was sure there would be hunters in his woods looking for any game they could find as food ran out. He doubted his signs would stop anyone from hunting on his land now.

He settled in to stay at least several days in the Lusby. The snow continued off and on the next several days and Neal wondered if it was due to Nuclear Winter.

He went out exploring his property two days later, when the snow had stopped for a while and the sun was shining through a slight high altitude haze. Neal was sure the haze was the remaining superfine fallout particles that could take years to fall to earth.

He kept the keychain radiation alarm with him all the time and it hadn't sounded off since his approach to St. Louis. If he didn't get any radiation where he was, all the better.

Neal went directly to the nearest point of his property line from the home site and made a circle of the property, carefully cleaning off each warning sign that was covered with snow, looking for tracks. He checked his trail cameras and tripwires. All were intact. Neal cleaned the camera lenses and called it good.

He didn't find any tracks that first time, but he did hear two clear gunshots coming from the State Forest lands. Neal stayed out of the State Forest, feeling like it belonged to everyone, and again he didn't want to take food from someone else when he had his own. He did, without compunction, take a deer right at the edge of his property, within sight of one of his warning signs.

Rather than the game cart, Neal was using a pulk sled for the same reason and loaded the field dressed carcass of the deer onto it, in preparation of going back to the house to finish the butchering process.

He heard something, and quickly crouched down. The BM-59 he had slung over his back coming around into his hands. Though he was carrying the Charles Daly combination gun and had taken the deer with it, Neal had started carrying the BM-59 and a couple of spare magazines whenever he went out on the property.

Neal watched for a long time, but he saw and heard nothing. Finally getting up, a slight catch in his left leg from the cold and squatting position that was affecting the old injuries to the leg, Neal took the drawbar of the pulk and went back to the house.

Keeping the BM-59 handy, Neal butchered out the deer carcass and stretched the hide for later processing. He'd always taken his hides in to a taxidermist for tanning, but had learned the process on the internet and decided to try it.

Nothing untoward happened and Neal put the meat in the large chest freezer in one of the log sheds. There was a companion refrigerator to supplement the tiny one in the Lusby. He didn't bother wrapping it since he planned to make jerky out of most of the venison in a couple of days. But that evening Neal enjoyed a nice portion of a venison roast with potatoes, carrots, and onions, all gleaned from his guerrilla garden during the trip around his property.

Usually he waited for a couple of days before checking the property after each trip, but it didn't snow that night and Neal went back to where he'd shot the deer. Fox and coyote had been at the entrails, and the crows were cleaning up the rest. Neal didn't bother the crows, though he hated their raucous racket.

He walked around the area and found human tracks that stopped at one of his signs. Someone had come up to it and then backtracked. Neal began to walk the property on an irregular basis, never going more than four days between trips, and often doing two days in a row.

But the snow was gone for a while and it was hard to tell if anyone was still coming onto the property. He heard a few shots, some rifle and some shotgun, and at least two or three .22's. But all were off his property, the best he could tell.

Neal decided he would stay in the Lusby for a while longer, but took advantage of the snow being gone, and therefore no tracks visible to and from the cave, to bring out quite a few items, which he stashed in the lofts in the Lusby and the log sheds. He decided to start using the Hofer Fünfling again, since he was using the BM-59 and Glock 21, anyway. Chances were that BATFE wouldn't be back for them.

Using the Bobcat Toolcat with the bucket attached, Neal moved many of the rocks he'd slowly gathered up around the open area of the property and stockpiled, to the start of the ledge on the face of the bluff that led to the cave entrance. The rocks didn't completely block the ledge, but one would need to be looking for it to see it now. But the powered pallet handler couldn't be used until the rocks were cleared.

After several days of not hearing shots and not seeing anything, it snowed again, beginning as a light dusting about noon, while Neal was having a bowl of venison stew. He looked up at the sound of a shot, one much nearer than any of the others had been. It had to have been on his property.

Looking out the window at the snow, which was beginning to get heavy, Neal made a snap decision. He set the stew aside, put on his heavy snow gear, grabbed the BM-59 and went out to the Suburban. With the room in the Lusby so limited, Neal had taken to using the Suburban as a closet.

Opening one of the rear doors, Neal pulled out an already loaded large Kifaru military pack and shrugged into the shoulder straps. He closed and locked the Suburban and then headed out onto the property, getting a better feel for where he was going when the sound of another shot

came. Though he couldn't place it exactly, just from the two isolated shots, the general direction made Neal think he might know where the shooter was.

He headed that way, as the snow swirled more heavily around the solitary figure, dressed in light brown Carhartt Arctic bibs and parka, LaCrosse snowpacks on his feet and warm thinsulate insulated gloves on his hands. The hood of the parka was tucked back out of the way for better hearing, but Neal had an Orvis wide brimmed felt hat on his head to keep the snow out of his eyes.

Forty-five minutes later and Neal knew he was right. There were not one, but two gut piles from, by the contents, one white tail buck and one doe. And slowly filling tracks of two people leading away from them. It was one of Neal's favorite hunting spots, having taken deer himself here over the years.

Adjusting the pack's ride slightly, Neal began following the tracks, hurrying slightly, not wanting to lose them in the continuing snowfall. He didn't think he'd have much trouble anyway. The two were obviously using deer drags, which left a distinct trail. He was moving faster than they could dragging the deer. But he didn't want to be too far behind them when they reached their vehicle. It would take them a couple of minutes or so to load the carcasses. That should give him a chance to scope out the situation and decide what to do.

Neal was very surprised when he cut one of the snow covered fire roads on the state property and the trail crossed it. There was no vehicle. He'd fully expected them to have parked where they crossed the fire road.

Picking up the pace just a notch, Neal continued following the tracks, muttering, "Must be at the other trail."

But he followed the trail for another hour, and it cut across the second fire road, too. Totally confused as to what was going on in the minds of

the pair, Neal kept going. When he caught up with them he was taken aback by what he saw.

The two weren't heading for a vehicle. They were headed for a camp. A camp set up just outside the confines of the State Forest Campground. Neal stopped where he was, backed up slowly and found a good spot to study the camp without being seen himself.

It was quite a camp. A long fifth-wheel travel trailer with slideouts was at the base of an inverted U-shaped camp, still connected to a Dodge Crew Cab Dually pickup, with the opening of the U on the downhill side of the slight slope the camp occupied.

There was a mixture of family tents and tarp windbreaks forming the legs of the U, with two surprising large leanto's build of local materials at the ends of the U. There was a trench type campfire in the middle of the U, with a metal grate over part of it, and a tripod with large cast iron pot, as well.

The two men stopped at one of the leanto's and were met by several other people, including, by their size, several children, all bundled up in a variety of clothing.

Neal got a good look through his binoculars at the smaller of the two people that had taken the deer when both threw back the hoods on their coats and leaned their rifles up against the leanto wall. Another surprise. It was a woman. A young woman. Probably late teens, certainly not older than mid twenties.

The other person was a late middle-aged man, by Neal's estimation. He scanned the rest of the camp. There appeared to be three adult women, one carrying a baby; another teenaged girl; three teenaged boys; and five smaller children.

Then one of the doors of the travel trailer opened and a young man came

out. He was joined a few seconds later by another man, who came from one of the large tents. Everyone was gathered at the leanto. Neal couldn't quite make out the words, but they sounded cheerful, and grateful, both the hunters getting handshakes and slaps on the back, obviously for bringing in some much needed food for the camp.

Neal stood up and made a slow circle of the camp. There were no signs of any tracks in the snow except for two places. Both sets of tracks led to crude latrines, one with a tarp and brush partial enclosure, the other with a much less complete enclosure. Neal assumed the first was for the use of the women and girls, and the second for the men and boys.

Then he found another set of tracks. These led to a small spring that, when Neal checked his topo map of the area he found it marked as year round. There had been an enclosure that protected the outlet, but that was missing, and the spring had been dug out to allow better access to get water from it. Neal figured the rest of the fence and enclosure was now part of the windbreaks protecting the center of the camp.

Completing the circle, Neal found another pickup truck, an SUV, and a mini-van. He couldn't tell for sure, but he had a feeling that the vehicles hadn't been moved in some time. "Probably the EMP," he said under his breath.

Back at his original spot, Neal watched the camp for a little while longer, thinking. He was covered with a coating of snow when he finally stood up and made his way back to the men's latrine.

Pulling a Write-in-the-rain notebook from a pocket Neal wrote a short note and fastened it on the enclosure where it would be found. Then he made his way back to the house, shrugged out of the pack, and put it back into the Suburban. Minus one layer of clothing, Neal went out to one of the log structures and went around behind it.

He opened a hatch and went down into the small root cellar he'd put in

so he would have a place to keep some of the guerrilla garden surpluses. He'd taken to harvesting more than he needed for immediate use and used out of root cellar when he didn't want to be accessing the cave. Plus, it explained how he was able to feed himself without having an outside source of supply. One less reason for people to expect anything other than a hermit in cabin in the woods.

Neal took stock of the supplies, and gathered a few things up in a handmade woven basket. Neal shook his head. He'd actually bought craft store woven baskets. He never would have thought he would, but had found them on sale at a store, before the war, and decided they were just the thing for his root cellar storage. They were. Both for storage and carrying purposes.

The snow had slowed to a flurry when Neal came out of the root cellar and closed the hatch. A few minutes later and the sky was clearing. By the time the sun set a bit later the temperature was dropping rapidly.

Neal slept restlessly, sure that the note he'd left would bring visitors to the place. He just wasn't sure when, or how friendly they'd be. He found out early the next morning.

After breakfast, Neal was out clearing some of the snow accumulation around the house and out buildings, a BM-59 slung over his back and a Glock 21 holstered on his hip. He paused often to look around and listen carefully. He was glad he did when he heard the crunch of boots on snow approaching.

Unslinging the rifle, Neal stepped over beside one of the log structures. It gave him concealment, and a bit of cover, as he waited for what might come next.

Neal breathed a sigh of relief when he heard a loud voice call, "Hello the house! Can we approach?"

Staying close to the log shed Neal answered. "Come on in. Keep your hands off your weapons where I can see them. Are you alone?"

It was the same pair that had taken the deer. Neal relaxed a bit more, seeing the girl. To him it was less likely there would be trouble if she was there, and not two or more of the men.

"Just the two of us," said the man, walking slowly from the forest into the small open area of Neal's compound. "I take it was you that left the note?" The girl stayed silent, but watchful. She had a rifle slung over her shoulder, as did the man, but if either planned to use them, unslinging them would give Neal more than the time needed to lift his own rifle.

He continued to listen carefully in the cold, crisp air for sounds of an ambush being prepared. Still hearing nothing, Neal motioned for the two to come closer.

The man started talking rapidly. "Look. I know we were hunting on your land. But I've got to feed my family and there just isn't any more game in the park and..."

"Slow down," Neal said. "Would you like to get a cup of coffee and sit down and discuss the situation?"

The girl couldn't help herself. "You have coffee?"

"A little," Neal said, cautiously. He decided that she was a woman and not a girl, upon hearing her voice and getting a much better look at her face. She was a small, petite woman, but she was a woman.

"That would be most welcome," the man said. "And what should we call you? I'm David Magnew, and this is my sister, Elizabeth." Neal found himself wondering if it was still Elizabeth Magnew, or née Magnew. He put the thought out of his mind quickly and concentrated on what was going on.

“Neal Grant,” Neal replied, and after just a short hesitation, reached out his gloved hand. David took it and they shook hands. Neal offered his hand to Elizabeth, and she, too, shook hands with Neal, though there was yet to be a smile on any of their faces, all relaxed somewhat with the official introductions.

Neal ushered the two into the Lusby and motioned to the two chairs, one on each side of the small table. “But you don’t have a chair,” said Elizabeth.

“I’ll stand. Think nothing of it,” replied Neal. He took down two more cups and refilled the one he’d used that morning.

“Sugar? Milk?” He asked, setting the cups on the table.

“Really?” asked Elizabeth.

Neal smiled and nodded, setting a sugar dish on the table, along with a small plate and a couple of teaspoons. He opened the small under counter refrigerator and took out a small milk pitcher.

“Powdered, I’m afraid,” Neal said, setting the container down on the table. “Help yourselves,” Neal said, noting their hesitation.

“It’s just... things are so hard to get,” Elizabeth said. “We don’t want to impose.”

“You’re not. I have enough for myself. I can share. A little.”

“Thank you,” both said, almost as one, each adding sugar and milk to their coffee cups.

“Oh,” Elizabeth said, “This is so good!”

“Nice,” said David. “Haven’t had coffee since right after the attack.”

Neal nodded and took a sip of his coffee. He liked it black, but added both sugar and milk to his, to make it easier for the other two.

Elizabeth put down her cup. “Do you... Do you have an outhouse?”

Neal shook his head. “No. Bathroom is in there. Feel free.”

“There’s really a bathroom in here?” Elizabeth asked.

Neal had to grin at Elizabeth’s surprised look. “Really. It’s tiny, like the rest of the house, but it’s really there.”

Elizabeth turned slightly red, but rose and went through the door Neal indicated. Neal and David sipped coffee silently while Elizabeth was in the bathroom. She came out a couple of minutes later and said, “He has toilet tissue, too.”

David nodded. “I think Mr. Grant knows how to take care of himself.”

“That, I do,” Neal said evenly. “And please, call me Neal.”

“As you wish, Neal,” David replied. “About yesterday...”

“Having seen your camp, I think I can understand. I’ll not stand in the way of someone providing for their family, but the signs were clear. You should have contacted me before you hunted on my land.”

“Come, now,” David said, “Things have changed. The old rules don’t apply.”

Elizabeth was looking down at her cup of coffee, hands clutched around it tightly.

“I would say, at the very least, that The Golden Rule still applies,” Neal said. “Common decency. Many things are, or should be, in my opinion, no different than they were before the war. There are fewer people, obviously, and times are tough, but things always work better when people cooperate than when they are at loggerheads.”

David rubbed his forehead. “Yes. Yes, of course. You are right. It’s just difficult. As a man of God I’m afraid I’ve fallen far from the path.”

“You’re a priest?” Neal asked, very surprised.

“No. We’re Baptist. I’m... was... still am, I suppose, a minister, though I don’t feel much like one at times.”

Elizabeth reached over and put a hand on David’s shoulder. “You are still a minister. And a good one. It has been your faith, and your guidance, in part, that have allowed us to continue in this existence after the terrible things that have happened.”

David sighed, but said nothing.

“How did you come to be where you are?” Neal asked, his curiosity coming to the fore, once more.

When David didn’t speak immediately, Elizabeth said, “We were lucky, in a way. Most of the family had come to St. Louis for an early Christmas when the trouble in Saudi Arab happened, and then the nuclear attack on Israel, we all decided to get out of St. Louis. We loaded up our camping gear in our vehicles, and John, another brother, had come in his travel trailer, so of course it was part of the convoy.

“We stopped at every store we found open and bought everything we could think of to last us for as long as possible. We got out of the city just in time, I guess. We were planning to go to the Ozarks... My uncle has a place there... but we couldn’t get enough fuel.

“We’ve camped in the park here before, so knew about it and the spring. We stopped, with the intention of continuing when things settled down. But none of the vehicles would start when we tried later.”

“Probably the EMP fried their electronics. They all looked fairly new.”

Elizabeth shrugged. “I don’t know. I guess there were a lot of people with the same idea. About staying at the park anyway. I don’t think many, if any, knew about the spring. There were a bunch of them, at first, but they slowly began to disappear...”

Elizabeth’s voice tapered off for a moment. “Or die... We buried many, as we found them, to help prevent disease. Some of them died of dehydration and hypothermia... Starvation... And there were some that were killed, their possessions gone through, and everything useful taken...”

“I see,” Neal said softly. “That must have been difficult.”

“You don’t know...” David said. “What they did to some of the women...”

“Fortunately, many of us are hunters and comfortable in the outdoors. And are pretty well armed,” Elizabeth continued. “There were incidents... But we managed to run off everyone that posed a threat to us.

“We started hunting early on, to supplement the supplies we picked up on the way, but a lot of other people did, too, out of necessity, I guess. The really bad thing is that not many of them were experienced hunters.

“There was a lot of game wounded that got away to die later. We found a couple of deer that way not long after they died and were able to salvage some of the meat. But there were a lot of others that were too far

gone for human consumption. The predators and scavengers had good times, though. Such a waste! It wasn't just deer. We found rabbits and squirrels, too."

Elizabeth shook her head. "And then game got really hard to find. We widened our hunting area and... well..." She looked over at David.

He said, "And we poached on your land. So, back to the subject. What do you plan to do?"

Neal didn't answer the question directly. Instead he asked, "Your group is really starting to struggle, isn't it?"

Both David and Elizabeth nodded, and Elizabeth said, "We're getting really low on basics, now. Those two deer will keep us going for several days... But after that..."

David cut in. "We have some material possessions... My wife's jewelry... Investments..."

"But even if anyone would take them in trade for food," Elizabeth said, "I don't know if we could walk to where someone might trade, and then get back with any useful amount of food."

Neal's original intention of simply telling them it was all right to hunt on his property, telling them about the guerrilla garden, and give them some of his surplus fresh food, was slowly changing. On impulse, one he hoped he wouldn't regret in the future as soon as he made the decision, Neal said, "I can get you to town. My Suburban runs. And I have enough fuel to get there and back."

David and Elizabeth both looked hopeful. Neal refilled their coffee cups from the pot and both immediately add rather larger measures of sugar and milk to the cups than they had the first cup.

“But I have serious doubt about anyone trading food for what you have to offer,” added softly.

“We are worried about that, too,” Elizabeth said. “We’re afraid to try to trade off some of our extra guns, in case they are turned on us.”

“And since they don’t run, we can’t trade off any of the vehicles,” David added. “The trailer might be worth something, but we need it too badly to do that, even if someone could come get it.”

“Well,” Neal said slowly, “I have some things that I think would be pretty good trade items...”

“But we don’t have anything to trade to you, for them,” David protested.

“You do, one thing.” Neal made sure he wasn’t looking at Elizabeth when he spoke, a second idea coming to him uninvited that he quickly put out of his mind. “Security,” Neal quickly added.

“I’m alone here, and I lose sleep over being come upon by accident when I’m asleep or out hunting or scouting. Or having the place discovered when I make a trip to town. I haven’t gone since right after I discovered something was wrong.”

“I’m not sure I understand,” David said. “You want to trade those items to us to stand guard for you when you need it?”

“No,” Neal said. “I’m talking about moving your camp here and setting up a mutual aid group. I’d be able to sleep nights, and you would have a better camp. I have tools and things that you would be able to use to make life easier. Like chainsaws for cutting wood.”

“Really?” David asked, really perking up at the mention of the chainsaws. “We have a small chainsaw suitable for trimming trees, but it’s almost useless for gathering firewood. We’ve just been picking up

deadfall. Have to go further and further afield for it, just like the hunting.”

“Speaking of which,” Elizabeth asked, a firm look on her face, “Would we be able to hunt?”

“Yes,” Neal replied. “And I have a guerrilla garden that produces more than I can use on my own.”

“What is a guerrilla garden?” asked both of them, again almost as one.

“I’ve planted food plants in various suitable places in the forest on my property. Mostly root foods like potatoes, carrots, onions, turnips. Some other things. Asparagus. And there are wild blackberries and wild strawberries, if you know where to look. Black walnuts and hickory nuts. Acorns. I have some fruit trees here and there. Of course much of that is moot at this season of the year. And wild roses, for the rose hips.”

Both looked amazed, but Elizabeth asked, “Rose hips? What are they?”

“The fruit of the rose bush. Very high in vitamin C and iron. Prevent scurvy and iron deficiency in women.”

“I didn’t know that,” Elizabeth said. “Are we in danger of scurvy? We haven’t had orange juice, fresh fruit, and certainly no other citrus in quite a while.”

“It takes a while,” Neal said. “Purplish spots, especially on the legs, spongy gums, bleeding from the mucous membranes. Those are a few symptoms. Any of you have any of those symptoms?”

David and Elizabeth looked at one another and then back at Neal, both shaking their heads. “No. Not yet,” Elizabeth said.

“I have some stored,” Neal said.

“Back to this... option... you are giving us... What are the strings?” David asked.

“I’d expect everyone to respect my property and my privacy. Stay away from some things. Use only the areas agreed upon. Hunt responsibly, taking only what is needed and doing everything possible to avoid injuring animals and not recovering them. The same with the guerrilla garden. Take only what is needed and help in propagating it further. Keep the children under control.”

Neal saw Elizabeth start to protest. He raised his hand up to stop her. “I know children will be children. I had children once. But I expect the best behavior that can be expected in well-raised children.”

Elizabeth’s sudden tension eased with Neal’s clarification. “That’s not unreasonable. My nieces and nephews have been raised well, as you put it.”

“But... If we even consider this,” David said, drawing a quick glance from Elizabeth, “How would we do it? That trailer is the core of our camp. How would we move it? Your Suburban can’t tow it.”

Neal smiled. “Well, if we can’t get the parts to fix it, I’ll just tow truck and trailer together.”

“With just a Suburban?” Elizabeth asked, obviously skeptical. “On this kind of ground? In the winter?”

“You might be surprised at what the Suburban can do. It isn’t stock. It can do it. But hopefully won’t have to. When do you want to go to Sullivan?”

The sudden question startled both of Neal’s visitors and they exchanged another quick glance. After a moment David said, “We would need to

talk it over with the rest of the family, first.”

“Okay,” Neal said. “Fair enough.” He picked up the jacket he’d taken off, signaling the end of the meeting. “Let me show you around the place, to help in your decision making process, and then you talk things over. Do you have a radio? CB or anything? Or did EMP zap everything?”

“I don’t know about the EMP you’re talking about. There is a CB in the Dodge,” David said. “Don’t know if there is enough juice left in the battery to run it or not.”

“Okay,” Neal said, as they left the house. He went over to the Suburban and opened the front passenger door. Taking out one of the stored business band hand held radios he handed it to David.

“The charge is good for eight hours. Just turn it on if you want to talk to me. Channel one. I’ll monitor it, starting as soon as you leave. Give it a test.”

David turned the radio on and brought it to his lips. Pressing the transmit switch, he said, “Test. Test. Test.”

He came through clearly on the radio in the truck. He pulled out another of the handhelds and put it on his belt using the built in belt clip. Neal began to show them the basics of the compound. The first thing Neal showed them was the approach to the bluff. “Completely off limits. Kids and adults. I don’t want anyone falling off the bluff.”

After showing them around the things around the house, he walked over to the spot he thought would be best for their camp. “There are sewer, water, and electrical connections in a concrete box here,” Neal said, pointing to a point on the ground.

“You mean we’d have running water, a working bathroom, and

electricity?” Elizabeth asked breathlessly.

Neal smiled and nodded. “And if we can find, or trade for, the parts, we can build a flushing toilet outhouse to supplement the one in your trailer. Do you have any propane left?”

David immediately said, “Just a quarter of a forty pound tank. We’ve quit using it for cooking and heating. Keeping it in reserve.”

“Okay,” Neal said, “I’ll throw in a one-hundred pound tank of propane for you to use. We can dicker over what it’s worth later. The other utilities aren’t costing me anything out of pocket. They’re already in place and paid for.”

“Were you expecting something like this?” Elizabeth asked Neal, nodding at the spot on the ground he’d indicated were the hookups.

“Not exactly. Just... trying to be prepared for things. Thought I might have visitors in a motorhome or travel trailer and wanted to have accommodations for them. You can see that there isn’t room in the house for guests.”

“That’s an understatement for sure,” David said. “Come along, Elizabeth. We have much to discuss with the rest of the family.”

“Come on back to the shed,” Neal said. He handed the large basket of vegetables to David.

“Well,” David replied, looking at the food, “This certainly wasn’t expected. None of it was.”

“We didn’t know what to expect,” Elizabeth said.

“We will pray for you,” David said. He turned and the two walked away.

Neal watched the two trudge away, disappearing into the forest in just a minute or two. He sighed. What had he gotten himself into? And why the reaction to Elizabeth. He was supposed to be a hermit. No interest in women.

Neal was surprised to hear the walky-talky break squelch early the next morning. It was David. When Neal acknowledged the call, David said, "We've considered your offer. If your offer for a ride into Sullivan still holds, we'd like to try to trade for some things before we commit to your other offers."

Just a bit disappointed, but understanding the reluctance to move the camp and become partially dependent on someone else, Neal replied. "Absolutely. Just name the time."

"Tomorrow? About nine?" David asked.

Neal keyed the radio again and said, "That is fine. Tomorrow at nine."

"We'll be there," David said. "Elizabeth and I, with Dwayne to keep an eye on your place while you are gone."

Neal wasn't sure he liked that idea, but wasn't sure how to get out of it this time. He had said he wanted someone to help with security.

"Very good," he replied and put the radio back on his belt.

He worked around the place for a bit and finally went back into the house to make lunch. On a whim, he turned on the CB. He hadn't tried any radio communications for several days. He noted there was much less static than there had been right after the war. He switched to the channel he knew a lot of CBers in Sullivan used and listened for a few minutes while he ate a bowl of stew.

Hearing nothing, Neal almost turned the radio off, but decided there was

no harm in trying. “Breaker, breaker. Anyone on this channel?”

He had the volume way too loud. The voice that came out of the speaker was almost unintelligible. “Got you five by five, good buddy. What’s your twenty?”

“Up in the hills,” Neal said, having quickly turned down the volume to a reasonable level. He wasn’t about to say exactly where he was.

“Looking to do a bit of trading. Is there anything going on in Sullivan?”

“You betcha, buddy. Got a regular open air market going. You know where Carmello’s is?”

“I do,” Neal shot back. “That the new trading center?”

“You got it. I’m the biggest trader. Watcha got to trade?”

“A few small things,” Neal said, again wary of giving up too much information. “Is there any food available?”

“Some. Goes high though. Best bring in some good stuff if you want anything in return.”

“Going to be anyone there tomorrow?”

“I’m here every day. The others, mostly Saturday.”

Neal had to check. Tomorrow was a Saturday. He had a feeling that the man would like to get first shot at anything Neal had to trade.

“Maybe I’ll see you in a couple of days, then,” Neal said, after keying the mike again. “Who should I ask for?”

“Just ask for the King. Anyone can point me out. Who might you be?”

“Just a hermit in the hills,” Neal replied. “I’m gone.” He waited for a few minutes, but nothing else was said. He checked the other channels. Nothing. But having had the one positive contact, Neal turned on the broadband receiver in the house and began scanning the frequencies. Sure enough, he heard a little activity. Almost all of it was Amateur Radio Operators. Apparently, many had survived the war and the early days of its aftermath. But nothing he could pinpoint as a local.

Neal tried a few government stations. Nothing on any of them. Nothing on the AM or FM broadcast bands. Neal switched back to the Amateur bands and listened for a while, hoping for something that would identify their locations. But they all seemed to be reluctant to give out that information.

Having finished his lunch, Neal turned off the radios and went outside. He got a shovel from one of the outbuildings and went down to uncover the RV connection point. He uncovered and took out one of his one-hundred pound propane tanks from where he had them hidden in one of the log sheds, setting it aside, but handy.

He went to bed in the house that night again wondering what he was getting himself into. Up early the next morning, he started up the Suburban and took out the things that had accumulated over the last few weeks.

Neal was ready when David, Elizabeth, and a third person showed up about 8:30. David quickly introduced Neal to Dwayne, the oldest of the teenage boys, he was told. Neal had to admit, the boy looked like he could handle himself and the hunting rifle slung over one shoulder. There was a holstered revolver on his hip. He wore a small backpack, compared to David’s and Elizabeth’s much larger ones.

“There’s some sliced venison in the fridge and...”

“Thank you, sir,” Dwayne said, “But I brought a lunch, and a dinner. I

won't be needing in the house at all."

"But..." Neal started to say, but David cut him off.

"Dwayne will keep an eye on the place from the forest. He won't come back into the camp until he sees us return, unless there is trouble."

"I don't expect any kind of trouble, but having you here while I'm gone makes me feel better," Neal said, shaking the young man's hand when he offered it up.

The three adults watched Dwayne fade into the forest and then turned to the Suburban when Neal said, "I guess we can go. I have everything I need. You want to put your gear in the back?"

Both put their packs into the back of the Suburban, and both kept their rifles with them. David got into the bucket seat in front beside Neal, and Elizabeth took the bucket seat behind him. Elizabeth took David's rifle when he handed it back to her and she leaned his and hers against the other bucket seat, keeping them close at hand.

Neal put the vehicle in gear and headed for the opening in the forest that was the driveway. The weather was clear and cold when they started, but had clouded up and started to snow before they arrived in Sullivan. Neal told them about the conversation he'd had on the CB the day before, having traveled the entire distance in silence.

When David asked for it, Elizabeth handed him his rifle again, as they neared the town. Neal asked Elizabeth to hand him the AUG sitting on the other passenger seat. She grunted slightly when she picked it up. It had a drum magazine in it. Neal set it across his lap.

"I'm going to take a roundabout route to make sure we're not driving into an ambush. All eyes scanned the area around the Suburban as Neal drove around some. They were seeing people on the move, alone and in

small groups. Most seemed to have long guns, but not all, and none were making any threatening moves. All carried packs or pushed or pulled some type of cart.

There was even the occasional older model car or pickup and several people mounted on horses. All seemed headed to the same point. Carmello's grocery store. Neal looked at the other two and said, "I think we'll be okay. You game to go in?"

David nodded and so did Elizabeth. Neal took the next turn and headed for Carmello's, carefully avoiding those on horseback and on foot. All three looked on in amazement as fully one hundred individuals congregated on the parking lot of the grocery store when they got there.

Neal saw where the vehicles were parked and drove over. There were two heavily armed young men walking around. "We'll keep an eye on your rig if you promise to remember us before you leave," one of them said when Neal stopped by them.

"Such as?" he asked.

"Couple cans of food. Cigarettes, Booze. Food or anything we can trade for more food."

Neal nodded. "You'll get something. Take a look at all of us. Only we three would be getting into the rig."

One of the men looked over at David and then Elizabeth. His eyes lingered on her more than Neal liked. "Yeah. Just the three of us." The man looked at Neal again and then stepped back when Neal started to open the door.

"As a matter of fact," Neal said as he opened the back of the Suburban, "here's a down payment." He handed the two men each a pouch of tobacco and a pad of cigarette papers."

“Yes siree bob!” said one of the men. “Everything will be just like you left it when you get back.”

“That’s good,” Neal said. “If it is, you’ll get some food. If not... Well... I wouldn’t want to be the one to try to steal this rig. Could be fatal. If you get my drift.”

“Sir,” said the second man, standing up very straight. “We’re US Marines! Everything will be just as you left it.”

“Very good, then. In that case,” Neal said, reaching into the back of the Suburban, “Thank you gentlemen.” He handed each of them a bottle of vodka. “In case we have to leave in a hurry.”

David and Elizabeth had shouldered their backpacks. Neal slung the shoulder strap of a large duffle style bag over one shoulder, and the BM-59 over the other. David and Elizabeth added their rifles to their shoulders and headed for the mass of people and the tables and small stands that held their trade goods.

“Oh,” Neal said, turning toward one of the men. “Where do I find King?”

Both men got sour looks on their faces. “You mean ‘The King’? You really want to be careful around him.”

“That’s kind of what I thought,” Neal replied. He waited for one of them to answer in question.

It was the second man that said, “He’s in the store. It’s his now, and everything in it.”

“What happened to Carmello?”

“Gone as far as anyone knows. That’s what The King says. I think he’s probably dead.”

Neal nodded. “Good thing to know. Thanks.”

The three went to join the crowd. About half were doing what Neal, Elizabeth, and David were doing. Carrying what they had to trade with them and circulating to see what was available from those that had tables or booths set up.

Gradually, as trades were made, or weren’t made, those circulating began to find open spots to lay down a blanket and set out what they had for trade. Neal, David, and Elizabeth split up, to look for specifics each wanted.

Neal made the rounds of the set booths and tables, noting a few things he wanted. He didn’t want to buy until he’d seen everything. He then began to check as additional people set out their goods. He was surprised to see Elizabeth already opening her pack to lay out a blanket. When he walked up he saw tears in her eyes as she began to set out several items of women’s clothing. Everything looked like high quality goods, to Neal, but he knew they weren’t very suited to the current environment.

Then she put down half a dozen jewelry boxes and opened each one. More high quality goods. But just not useful in the current situation. David came over and began to do the same thing. He, too, looked very disappointed at his lack of success.

Going back through the booths and tables, Neal made deals for the few things he’d found that he wanted, and then took up a position, out of David’s and Elizabeth’s lines of sight, to keep an eye on them. People began to pass by, with many looking at the goods, but Neal didn’t see any trades made. People would like to have the goods, but were not willing to trade away things that would help one continue to survive for things that it would be nice to have.

It wasn't long before the two gathered up their things and repacked them. Elizabeth caught sight of Neal and gave him a small wave. He walked over to join her. David was moving away, toward an open area.

A few minutes later and Neal noticed a crowd had gathered around him. Neal and Elizabeth walked over. "I'd bet," Elizabeth said, "He's turned into a minister again."

Sure enough, when Neal and Elizabeth got close enough, they could hear him reading from the bible. Elizabeth turned away and Neal followed her, surprised at her actions. She stopped suddenly and Neal saw her shoulders slump. She was crying.

"Elizabeth, please," Neal said, stepping up to her and putting one hand on her shoulder. "Is there anything I can do?"

She turned further away from him and shook her head. Neal just waited, hand on her shoulder, for a couple of minutes. She stopped crying and hurriedly wiped her eyes, still turned away from Neal. "I'm sorry," she said, when she did face them. "We just need so much, and have so little that other people want. We have plenty of expensive things. Just not what people need."

"No one want any of what you have?" Neal asked. "Not even the jewelry?"

"There were some interested, but nobody trusts what it is." Elizabeth was suddenly very adamant. "It's all real silver and eighteen carat gold with real gemstones. My late husband believed in getting the best he could for me, within his means."

The point that Neal noted was that Elizabeth had once been married. The fact about the quality of the jewelry was of secondary importance to him suddenly. "Well, there is one more option. Let's see what The King has

to trade, and what he wants for it.”

Neal noticed that Elizabeth detoured slightly from the most direct path to the store doors. She stopped at one of the booths and asked the elderly woman, “Are you sure you won’t reconsider? The jewelry really is just what it looks like. The pearls...”

“Go along honey. There are plenty of women that need my menstrual products.”

Elizabeth turned away, her dejection obvious. “Wait,” Neal suddenly said. He leaned down whispered into Elizabeth’s ear. “All the women and girls are in need, aren’t they?”

Elizabeth nodded. “We bought extra, but it’s been a while, and with the stress... We’re almost out. The younger women... They are on the verge of panic.”

Neal stood up and turned toward the woman. “What are you asking? For all of it?”

Elizabeth took Neal’s arm. “Neal,” she said urgently, “We don’t have any way to repay you.”

Neal looked over and said, “You still might move that jewelry in the store.”

“You watch out for that King fellow,” the old woman said. “He’s a mean one. I’m sure he’ll take your jewelry, for a pittance in return. What he will want, if you go in, is you.” She was looking at Elizabeth.

Elizabeth’s eyes widened. “Me?”

“He’s buying and selling women. Some for himself, some for future trade.”

“That’s disgusting! It’s slavery, and worse!”

“Well, I don’t think he’s actually bought or sold anyone, but the word is out.” The woman looked over at Neal then. “What’cha got to trade, sonny boy? I don’t need no jewelry. Don’t drink and don’t smoke. What else do you have?”

“I have some salt,” Neal said softly, so just Elizabeth and the woman could hear.

“Salt?” whispered back the woman. “How much?”

“More importantly,” Neal replied, “How much would you want for your collection of products?”

Elizabeth and Neal could see the uncertainty in the woman’s face, especially her eyes. She really wanted the salt, as much as possible. But how much was that? What if she asked for less than they were willing to give? Better to ask for too much and bargain down than not get everything she could. She didn’t need her own products any more, but she remembered when she did. They were crucial to a woman now. If this was his woman, he’d pay a good price to keep her happy. She decided she would go for the big score. “Ten pounds.”

“Don’t have table salt,” Neal said and the old woman looked as incensed as she was.

“Why did you even...” she said, but Neal cut her off.

“How about fifteen pounds of ice cream salt instead?” Neal asked.

The old woman changed her attitude quickly. “Yes. Yes, of course.”

“Stay here,” Neal instructed Elizabeth. “while I go get it out of the

truck.”

Elizabeth nodded and Neal hurried off. He had one of the five pound bags in his pack, but he decided to get three more out of the Suburban and keep the one in his pack.

Neal nodded to the two Marines and opened the back of the Suburban with the remote. He gathered up three of the five pound bags of salt and hurried back to the old woman’s booth. He set the bags on the lip of the stand and she quickly moved them out of sight.

“You really don’t want all of my stock, do you?” the woman asked as she began to gather up the home sewn menstrual pads and other items she made for women. “Just the one of you...”

“There are five of us using the products,” Elizabeth said.

Neal winced. He wished she hadn’t let loose that small piece of information.

Eagerly the old woman said, “There really aren’t enough for five. I’ll have more made up next Saturday. Same price.”

Neal was impressed with the sweet smile Elizabeth gave the woman as she said, “That’s okay. I’ll take one of these apart and make more myself. We have the fabric. Just didn’t think of it before.”

The woman said a curse word or two, but handed the packet of goods she’d bundled up with a bit of string to Elizabeth.

As they moved away, Neal asked Elizabeth, “Do you really have that fabric? You don’t really know how they are made.”

“No. But I wasn’t going to let her gouge us again. You shouldn’t have done what you did, though I am thankful you did so. The younger girls

are really freaked out about running out of feminine hygiene products.”

“I can imagine.” Neal didn’t mention that he had a few supplies hidden away in the cave. At some point, Neal realized, he would have broken security and opened the cave up to get some of the things the group needed. But for the moment, he’d just help out with what he had out in the open.

“We’ll figure out some way to repay you,” Elizabeth was saying as they headed for the front door of the store. Neal didn’t reply. Neal looked over toward where David was. There was still a crowd around him. Neal held the door open to let Elizabeth precede him into the rather dark store.

“Hello there, sweetness,” came a voice from the just a few steps away.

It took a couple of seconds for Elizabeth’s and Neal’s eyes to adjust from the snow white brightness of outside, to the dimness of inside the store. When they could see all right, both looked at the man that had spoken. If he could be called a man.

Neal doubted he was even twenty-one. More likely eighteen or nineteen. He had a multicolored spiked Mohawk hairdo. But what Neal saw first were the two tied down holsters on his thighs with a semi-auto pistol in each. Neal couldn’t tell what make the guns were, but the kid had his hands close to them. He wore a day glow T-shirt that said, ‘The King’.

“I take it you’re here to trade her off for what you can get,” said The King.

“I don’t think so,” Neal said quickly, putting one hand on Elizabeth’s wrist before she could speak out angrily. “She has some jewelry to trade, and I have a few other things. We’re looking for food, mostly.”

“Well now,” said The King, as Neal took stock of the three men standing

nearby. They were obviously The King's men. All were armed with what Neal recognized from his weapons research days as Hi-Point carbines. Probably nine-millimeter. They each wore a handgun. Neal suspected that the handguns were also Hi-Points. Probably The King's were, too.

Hi-Points had something of a mixed reputation before the war, but Neal knew that any gun, at close range, could be lethal. He was careful to keep his hand clear of his own holstered Glock.

The King continued his words, still leering at Elizabeth. She moved fractionally closer to Neal's side. "I had the great good fortune of acquiring some food, as a matter of fact." The other men laughed.

"Found a grocery truck, did you?" Neal asked, on a hunch.

"I did, wise guy." The grin was gone. "You sure you want to be mouthing off to me? I'm the King here, you see. I have what people want."

"Sorry. Just a slip of the tongue," Neal replied, keeping his cool.

Smiling again at the perceived acquiescence, The King spoke again.

"Let's see the jewelry the babe has and I'll tell you what I'll give for it."

Neal watched carefully as The King took the jewelry boxes and opened them one by one as Elizabeth handed them to him. The King's eyes gleamed with greed at the bright gold and gems that sparkled even in the dim light coming from the front door.

"A case of vegetables for all of it," The King said, looking up at Neal, not Elizabeth, as he handed the boxes to one of his cronies.

Elizabeth started to protest, but again Neal pressed her wrist. "Not enough. Those are the real goods. Two cases of vegetables, two of fruit,

and a case of tuna or salmon. And a case of candy. Any kind.”

“Look, you,” The King said, coming partially off the tall bar stool style chair he apparently considered his throne. “I make the deals.”

“We’ll take the jewelry back,” Elizabeth.

“Now, don’t be hasty,” The King said, relaxing again.

Neal could tell he preferred to deal with women. He felt superior, Neal suspected.

“I know the good stuff when I see it,” he boasted, “and yeah, I guess I low balled it a bit. But I’m not about to give out that much food for some jewelry, good or otherwise. You have any real gold coins?”

Elizabeth shook her head. Neal stayed still. He didn’t want to lie. He might need to use the coins he had later and didn’t want The King to remember him actually saying he didn’t have any.

“What’s that rifle on your shoulder,” The King suddenly said, looking over at Neal.

“BM-59,” Neal replied evenly.

“Like to take a look at it,” The King suggested.

“Sorry,” Neal said. “A man in your position understands gun handling etiquette in times like these.”

The implied praise mollified The King. He didn’t press the matter of handling it. However, he did ask, “What do you want for it?”

Neal smiled slightly and shook his head. “Not for sale. A good gun is like a good woman, good horse, or good dog. You don’t trade them

away.”

“Yeah,” The Kind said, liking the fact that Neal was treating him as an equal if not quite a superior. “We have to take care of our possessions.”

Neal could tell Elizabeth didn’t like the way the conversation was going, but with Neal’s constant touch on her wrist she continued to hold her tongue.

After a quick glance at the other three men behind The King, Neal said. “I’d be willing to throw in some good liquor and some tobacco to sweeten the deal.”

The three men stirred slightly, obviously liking the offer. King glanced at them and frowned for a second.

But Neal added, “Man needs some of the finer things in life, even in a situation like this.”

“That’s true,” The King replied, his attention back on Neal. “A case of booze and ten cartons of cigarettes. Any brand will do.”

“No can do,” Neal replied evenly. “Two bottles of brandy, and four packets of tobacco with papers. I’ll throw in a six pack of lighters.”

The King didn’t like being bargained with, that was obvious. But he did have to try to keep his men happy. And a good shot of the good stuff and a smoke would be nice. But... “You have any grass?”

Neal shook his head.

“Too bad. I’d have doubled the offer for some quality grass. Make it four bottles of the good stuff and we have a deal.”

Neal nodded in acceptance.

“I’ll help your men bring the goods outside while she goes and gets the rig.”

The King hesitated for a moment, not quite liking the idea, but not sure why. He nodded. Let the guy do a little grunt work, too. “Have at it,” he said, sitting back regally, he thought, on the tall bar stool.

Neal was able to whisper to Elizabeth as he handed her the remote for the Suburban, “Stay in the rig!”

The three goons didn’t know what to do when Neal began swapping cans from different cases with the items in the two cases each of vegetables and fruits, getting a variety instead of all of two kinds each. Neal also mixed the case of large cans of tuna and salmon. The three let him do it and then carried the cases toward the front of the store, stacking them just outside the door and came back for another load.

Neal checked several of the boxes that contained candy and found one that was bags of a variety of individual candies. He picked it up himself and went to the front of the store, accompanied by the three men, two of whom were carrying the other two cases of food.

Elizabeth drove up, and Neal went outside and opened the back of the Suburban. He put the box of candy in and then took out the booze and tobacco. He handed them to one of the three men as the other two put their boxes in the truck.

The King frowned from inside the store as his men picked up the other three cases they put down by the door and put them in the truck for Neal. The girl hadn’t come out of the truck, either. Hesitating, trying to decide what to do, the situation simply not what The King had envisioned, he finally got off the bar stool and headed for the doors to protest. Even cancel the deal. His part of the deal, anyway. He’d keep the jewelry, booze, and tobacco.

But he was too late. Neal closed the weird rear doors of the Suburban and was in the passenger seat of the Suburban. Elizabeth pulled away, headed directly toward where David's sermon was winding down.

"Look," David said, when Elizabeth stopped the Suburban and Neal jumped out, opened the second row passenger door and ushered David into it. Neal grabbed the items David indicated, placing them carefully, but quickly, into the cargo area of the Suburban.

"Go!" Neal said, getting back into the passenger seat, and switching the BM-59 for the AUG. He watched The King standing at the doors of the store. The King was looking at the Suburban. Neal was certain that The King suddenly realized the opportunity he'd just lost as he raised a fist and shook it at the departing truck.

"Did you see the chickens?" David asked eagerly. "Two different parishioners gave me a chicken each. And there were a couple cans of food, and..." David's words faded away. "What's wrong?" he asked. "We got something, just for my preaching, by the grace of God. It's more than we thought we would get, after a little while here. And I still have Margery's jewelry.

"Oh, we did okay," Neal said slowly, softly, as Elizabeth steered around an abandoned vehicle, headed for the state road. "But I think we just made a serious enemy." The snow had been falling off and on during their time at the trading post, but it began to get heavy as they headed for home.

Neal watched their back track on the rear camera monitor mounted in the dash, grateful for the falling snow. It would cover their tracks quickly. Neal had Elizabeth take a different, but just as roundabout, route as he'd taken coming in.

"This is some rig," Elizabeth said as she parked it where it had been

when they left that morning.

All three got out of the Suburban and looked around. It was several minutes before Dwayne showed himself. “Just wanted to make sure there wasn’t someone on your back track,” he said in explanation of his delay in coming in. “How did we do?”

“Pretty good, all things considered,” Neal said. “Don’t you think, Elizabeth?”

“I suppose so. But that was a most degrading thing in the store. How could you treat me like a second class citizen that way?”

David and Dwayne looked on, without a clue as to what was going on.

“I’m sorry,” Neal said. “But that situation could have turned ugly in a hurry. That ‘King’ is a few cards short of a full deck, unless I miss my guess. He’s going to be trouble in the future. I’m sure of it. I didn’t want anything starting that I couldn’t handle.”

“Well, I didn’t like it. Don’t do it again,” Elizabeth responded. Opening the rear hatch of the Suburban, she asked, “How are we going to get these things to the camp?”

“Well, why not just leave them here. I’ll come over tomorrow and we can start moving the camp.”

“We really haven’t decided to do that,” David said.

“I see,” Neal replied, hiding his disappointment. “You can use my pulk. Bring it back later.”

“What’s a pulk?” asked Dwayne.

Neal took him over to log shed where he kept the game cart and pulk.

“It’s just a term for a cargo snow sled. It’ll handle the food easily.” Before they loaded the pulk Neal opened his pack and took out two boxes. He handed them to David. “New electronics for the mini-van. It was all I could find. Nothing for the Dodge, though the guy is going to try to find the parts for it, the truck and the SUV.”

“Neal!” Elizabeth said sharply. “How are we going to repay your for all of this?”

“It’s all included as part of the deal for our mutual security,” Neal said. Elizabeth frowned but didn’t pursue the matter.

It took only a few moments to transfer the cases of food from the Suburban to the cart and then Neal was watching the three disappear into the forest as the snow began to ease off. Dwayne was pulling the pulk. It was good that the snow had stopped. It was almost to the point of needing snowshoes to get around in it. But not quite.

Neal fixed himself some supper, suddenly wondering about the weather. It wasn’t unusual to get snow in this area from time to time. But not this much. Not at all.

The next morning, after breakfast, anticipating a yes on the move of the Magnew camp, Neal moved the firewood that was stacked around the Bobcat Toolcat to hide it and got it started. It had survived the EMP without any problems. Using the bucket, he cleared the snow from the area where the camp would be and smoothed it off, leaving a very slight slope for drainage.

It was noon when the business band radio broke squelch and David’s voice came out of the speaker. “Neal, the family has discussed the move and is in agreement to accept your offer. What do we need to do to get ready?”

“Considering the weather,” Neal replied, a smile on his face he didn’t

know was there, “we’d better do it in stages. Make sure everyone has shelter and food in case the weather stops the move for a day or two. The main thing, I think, is to get the trailer moved and hooked up. We can do that, today.”

“Are you sure? The snow...”

“Is only a few inches deep. The Suburban will handle it. I’ll be over in a little while and we can discuss it further.”

Neal fired up the Suburban, and rather than going out the track that connected the clearing to the road, turned into the forest. He had to be very careful, and use the rear wheel steering several times to get through tight places, but Neal, very much to the surprise of those in the camp, pulled into the open from the forest at noon.

“How did you get through there?” Elizabeth asked, looking at the tire tracks in the snow disappearing into the deep forest.

“I told you the Suburban is capable. Where you able to get the min-van going?”

“Yes,” Elizabeth said. “Dwayne is a pretty good mechanic. But we don’t have much gas for it.”

“I have a can on the back of the Suburban. But I’m not sure it will make it with the snow this deep.”

“I know it won’t make it through the forest,” David said, “How...”

“Oh, no. I just came over here that way. We’ll use the regular roads to move the vehicles.”

“Oh. Okay. That sounds doable. We will move all the vehicles? We use them for storage right now.”

“No reason not to. I’ll just tow them around on the road. I don’t think the short trip will hurt the transmissions any.”

“I didn’t think about that,” David said. “I remember now that you shouldn’t tow some vehicles with automatic transmissions.”

“I think we’ll be okay,” Neal insisted. “We won’t be towing at anything approaching high speed. Five to ten miles an hour at best.”

“Okay, I suppose,” David said, “If you are sure.”

The entire population of the camp pitched in to get the trailer ready to move. The wind breaks attached to it were removed, and it was set down on its wheels, off the leveling jacks. David tried the big Dodge again. Even with the last of the power in the battery, it wouldn’t start.

Neal maneuvered the Suburban in front of the Dodge and attached the heavy tow strap he took out of the bumper toolbox. “Who’s steering the Dodge?” Neal asked.

“Dwayne will,” David said. “I want to stay here with the rest in the camp. Mathew, Gene, and Helen will ride with him. They’ll hook up the trailer when it gets there. They know what to do. We should have what we need in the way of connections.”

“Okay, then,” Neal said, “lets go. Elizabeth? Could you ride with me and be the eyes in the back of my head?”

“I was going to stay and help David.” She looked over at David.

“No problem. He’s right. Should be someone else to watch behind him.”

Neal got with Dwayne and they settled on a set of hand signals for braking and what not, as a back up to the pair of FRS radios Neal had in

the Suburban. He gave one of them to Mathew and the other to Elizabeth. They would be the main communications method.

Everyone was amazed, except Neal, when he put the Suburban in gear and eased away from the Dodge until the tow strap went tight and then stretched slightly. Suddenly the Dodge and trailer were moving and Neal was steering toward the opening in the forest that led to the State Park proper.

There were a few times on the trip that Neal had to activate the differential lockers and go with hard drive, mostly getting the rig up the road to his place from the access gate. But the move was done in three hours on the back roads and a short stretch of county road. Neal didn't like leaving the tracks, but there was no way to avoid it. There might be snow on the ground for weeks more.

The two groups stayed where they were that night. Those with David using just the tents, and those that had come with Neal, staying in the once again fully operating travel trailer.

The other vehicles were used as cargo trailers when the rest of the move was made the following day, with what wouldn't fit in them going into the back of the Suburban, which Neal took through the forest after he'd towed all the vehicles to his place. That included the mini-van. It would start and run just fine, but it got stuck as soon as driver put it in gear.

Again Neal took a group on a tour, pointing out, and adamantly insisting, that people stay away from the bluff. He showed the group the log sheds and the root cellar, which he said they could use.

That evening Neal thought about things as he ate his supper alone, in the Lusby. He knew he was being selfish for allowing part of the family to live in tents rather than letting them have the run of the cave. But he just couldn't bring himself to reveal the cave and its contents.

Instead, he made the decision to look for additional housing of some type for the rest of the Magnew clan. A thought woke him up shortly after midnight and he laid in bed, thinking it over for a while before he fell asleep again, a plan in mind for the next day.

He was up early, had his breakfast, and then started up the Suburban. He was in the forest, on his way to where the Magnews had been camped. He didn't stop there, picking up the tracks the vehicles had made getting onto the Park campground roads.

Neal had remembered during the night that Elizabeth had mentioned burying some of the people they'd found in the campground. She hadn't mentioned other RV's, and Neal had wondered if it was because they had no good way to move them. Or perhaps because they considered it stealing. Or for both reasons. Neal was reluctant to bring the subject up, so decided to find out on his own if there were suitable RV's to make life easier for the family.

He drove around the Campground. He found mostly empty camp spots, but there were a couple of abandoned tent camps. Neal checked them closely. There wasn't much to salvage. The tents were ripped from fallen branches or damaged by animals. Neal was losing hope when he found another road in the Campground. There was the normal woodsy looking sign that indicated what was in that direction. In this case, it was marked 'RV's.

The campground had a separate section for RV's apparently. Neal turned up the road and went to see what he could find. The first thing he saw was a burned out and bullet ridden Class A motorhome. One of the diesel pushers. Around another turn and a few empty parking slots for the RV's and Neal found more what he was looking for.

There was a big ford truck parked by the tandem wheel, single slide out, conventional tow travel trailer, but not connected to it. Being cautious, Neal got out of the Suburban and looked around the area before

checking the truck first. The doors were unlocked, one of them standing open a fraction of an inch. The keys were in the ignition and Neal tried to start the truck.

The battery was still good, for it spun the starter. But the truck didn't even try to start. Neal left it and moved to the trailer. He checked the trailer's entrance door. Unlocked. Glock 21 in hand before he thought about it, Neal eased the door open and looked inside. There was no one inside and Neal went in.

There were signs of hasty packing, with cabinet doors and drawers open, but Neal couldn't see any damage anywhere. He was smiling when he left the trailer. Neal got back into the Suburban to see what else he could find.

It was all he could do to not get sick at what he found in the next RV. It, too, was a conventional travel trailer, tandem wheeled, but shorter than the first one he'd found. What must have been the tow vehicle, a mid sized four wheel drive pickup had numerous bullet holes in it. It was still attached to the trailer.

Neal didn't get sick until he went into the trailer. It was trash and there was blood all over everything. He saw a couple of bullet holes, but found a bloody knife that he suspected had done most of the damage to the three bodies. It was a grisly sight. The man, woman, and young girl had all been butchered. Neal staggered out of the trailer and went to his knees, barely avoiding throwing up.

Taking a few deep breaths, Neal got up and continued his search in the Suburban, going through the entire RV section of the camp. He found over a dozen RV's in various states of being, including another trailer of dead bodies. It held the remains of five people. All looked like they had died peacefully in their sleep.

Neal got one more huge surprise. He'd been trying to start the engines of

the tow vehicles of the trailers, and the engines in the motorhomes. None had started. Except for one. It was the diesel engine in an older model Winnebago. It fired right up. When Neal checked the fuel gauge he saw that it had more than a quarter of a tank. He tried the onboard generator. It too was a diesel and started right up. The rig was old, but it was very well cared for.

Neal looked all around the area and couldn't figure out any reason for the vehicle, in operating condition, to still be there. He stopped both diesel engines and continued his search.

He drove back around to get the best of the conventional tow trailers. Like several of the others, the tow vehicle was parked beside the trailer. It took Neal a bit to get the Suburban in position, even with the rear camera, to hook up to the load equalizing hitch, but he managed and was well on his way back to his property, taking the same route he'd used to move the Magnews.

There was a mixture of joy and consternation when Neal appeared in the mouth of the track into the clearing when Neal returned with the trailer. He'd been only partially correct in his assumption that there had been two reasons the Magnew clan hadn't salvaged any of the RV's. Not only did David consider it stealing, and they didn't have a way to move them anyway, there was also the reason that they didn't know about most of them.

They'd had near lethal encounters when they'd approached that section of the campground and had avoided it from then on. "I don't suppose there are any more rigs up there, are there?" asked one of the Magnew uncles. Neal still didn't have all the names and faces set to memory.

Neal's big grin gave the man the answer before Neal spoke it. David was suddenly speaking. "I don't know about taking such things. It's stealing. That doesn't sit well with me."

“It’s salvage,” Neal said evenly. “From every indication, this rig, and several others were intentionally abandoned. Do you really think that the true owners will suddenly appear and ask for them back?”

“If they do,” David said, “We would have to give them back.” That was enough of a ‘yes, do it,’ from David that the others quickly began asking questions about the other RV’s and when they could bring them here.

“Right now. I need a couple of people to help me and we can have the other four units here this evening.”

“Four more?” Elizabeth asked, excitedly.

Neal nodded. He had plenty of volunteers to go with him, including Elizabeth. It took longer than Neal had hoped. They didn’t have the last unit set in place until almost midnight. There were only four people to help with the outside work when the temperatures started to drop. The Magnews didn’t have enough cold weather clothing to go around.

They moved another large conventional trailer, one large three-axle fifth-wheel trailer that had to be moved the same way the Magnew’s was, the old Winnebago motorhome, and an almost new forty-foot Holiday Rambler diesel pusher motorhome. All were fully functional in a couple of days, after some wiring and plumbing were salvaged from some of the units still left in the Campground and used to install the ones that had been moved.

Neal decided to breakout and install the second PV system to provide electrical power to all the units. The first system just didn’t have enough power, but between the two of them, there was plenty. With help from the others, Neal moved five more of the one-hundred pound propane tanks to where the trailers were and hooked them up.

The tents and tarp windbreaks were taken down, after only having been up a couple of days, but it was done eagerly. Their tiny chicken coup

and tractor for the two chickens David had been given was constructed behind the base of the U. Neal left the clan to decide who would occupy each unit. He was smiling when he walked slowly up to his Tumbleweed Tiny Home after everything was finished.

The next morning Neal came out of the Lusby, dressed for the bad weather that his weather station said the area was in for, the Fünfling in hand. He was going hunting again. It had been several days and he wanted to make sure the stocks of meat were adequate in case the weather kept them from hunting for several days.

When Elizabeth, who was already outside, saw him, she came hurrying over. "Going hunting?"

Before he could give the obvious answer, Elizabeth did so herself. "Yes. Of course you are. Silly me. Would it be all right if I tag along? I'd like to get at least a couple of rabbits or squirrels to stretch things out a bit."

Neal had never hunted with anyone before, and was a bit reluctant, but found himself agreeing to wait while Elizabeth went to get a heavier coat, her hunting pack, and one of the families' twenty-two rifles.

When she had rejoined him, Neal headed toward the forest, pulling the game cart behind him. Elizabeth followed along silently beside him. Most of the previous snows had melted away during the last two much warmer days, leaving only patches here and there on the north sides of large trees and rock outcroppings.

"You always carry two guns?" Elizabeth asked when they stopped to get a drink of water. She pointed at the BM-59 slung across Neal's back, and the Fünfling he had slung over his other shoulder.

"Good hunting gun, not as good for self-defense. I'm worried about others being up here, hunting. Things are getting tough."

“I suppose I should have brought something more than my twenty-two,” Elizabeth said. “I will be sure to do so next time.”

Neal didn't remark on her using the term 'next time.'

After a while, Neal changed his pace, slowing down and moving much more carefully. Elizabeth did the same, taking the cue from him. Suddenly the Fünfling was at his shoulder and Neal fired two quick shots and two squirrels tumbled out of the trees.

“Wow,” Elizabeth said softly. “You are a good shot.” Then she grinned. “Of course it is a twelve gauge. Though come to think of it, there sure wasn't much of a report for a twelve gauge.”

Neal opened the action and showed Elizabeth the two twelve gauge to .410 bore shotgun shell adapters in the chambers. He removed the two spent shells, added two more, closed the action and said, “No point in wasting ammunition better suited for something else on what a .410 will take adequately.”

“What kind of gun is that?” Elizabeth asked, looking at the open action closely.

Neal handed it to her and went to pick up the squirrels as he explained what drillings, vierlings, and Fünflings were.

“Never heard of any of them before. Uncle Chuck has an old Savage 24 over under twenty-two four ten combo.

“I have a couple of combo guns, too. But this is my all around gun, now that the BATFE isn't looking to take it away from me.”

“Oh. Okay. Looks beautiful. How much is something like this worth?”

Neal didn't see Elizabeth's shocked face when he replied, “Oh, I don't

know... pre-war, probably seventy-five thousand. Now... It's just a good working gun. Couple ounces of gold... couple cases of canned meat... a big buck..."

Neal looked over at Elizabeth. She'd controlled her surprised look. "But I would never trade it away for that. For anything. It means a lot to me." Neal took the gun back when Elizabeth handed it to him. He checked the chambers, just as he always did when he picked it, just as he'd been trained just those few years previously.

"You really are a good shot, seeing as that was .410's you were using."

Neal grinned over at her. "I'm pretty sure you can hold your own with me. Here's your chance to show me." Neal crouched down, so Elizabeth did the same. He pointed off toward a patch of snow perhaps sixty yards away.

Elizabeth raised her twenty-two and sighted in on one of the cottontail rabbits that were standing side by side in the snow, ears up, noses twitching.

She didn't see Neal raise the Fünfling at the same time. She would have chided him about the rabbits being out of range for the .410 if she had. Instead, she steadied and then fired, and nearly jumped out of her skin when Neal fired too, a fraction of a second after her, at the second rabbit, which had made one quick jump at the sound of Elizabeth's rifle.

"What?" she asked. "That wasn't the .410's."

"The twenty-two Hornet," Neal replied, again opening the action to take out the spent shell. He put it in a pocket, as he had the .410's he'd shot earlier.

Both stood and went over to pick up the rabbits. "I hope you aren't mad," Neal said. "You probably could have taken the second one, too."

“Not with this single shot,” Elizabeth replied, reloading the bolt action twenty-two with another .22 Short. “But I almost always get the first one with it,” she replied, slipping the rabbit into the game pouch of her hunting coat.

“You ready to go back? I’ve got what I wanted.”

“No. I’m going to continue. I’d like to get a deer, if possible. Feel free to take the squirrels and rabbits back with you, if you want to go back.”

“No,” Elizabeth said slowly. “I’d like to tag along the rest of the way. And see how you do. You’re a lot better hunter than I would have ever guessed. You’ve been hunting since you were a kid, I bet.”

Neal shook his head, took the handle of the game cart, and headed deeper into the forest. “Just took it up a couple of years ago. Neal smiled a bit at the slightly annoyed look that flitted across Elizabeth’s face.

Leaving the cart in the forest at one point, Neal walked a bit further, and then sat down on an insulated, waterproof pad he took out of his pack.

“All the luxuries,” Elizabeth said, crouching down beside him.

“Here,” Neal said, handing her a folded black garbage bag he took from a pouch on his pack.

Elizabeth sat down cross-legged beside him and the two waited in companionable silence for the twenty minutes or so it took for a large doe to begin moving cautiously along the game path Neal had found early on in his explorations of the property.

Neal lifted the Fünfling’s barrels up slowly, the butt stock already against his shoulder. He fired and the deer dropped without ever knowing a hunter was close. “Nice shot,” Elizabeth said, and watched

Neal go through the same routine of unloading and reloading the Fünfling as he studied the area.

“I think that’s it,” Neal said after a few moments and turned around to go get the game cart.

“You want me to start the field dressing?” Elizabeth asked.

“No. I always go quite a ways from the known trails to dress them out. Don’t want to spook the rest of the herd from using the trail.”

Elizabeth helped Neal roll the doe onto the cart, and then worked beside him to gut and skin the deer after Neal had strung it up by its hind legs using a small block and tackle he carried in his pack.

It took less than half the time it usually took Neal alone. Elizabeth was rather more skilled at the dressing process than Neal was.

The two walked back home, each with a hand pulling the game cart, though Neal certainly didn’t need the help. When they arrived, Neal took care of the deer hide and let Elizabeth take the deer meat, two squirrels, and the rabbits to finish dealing with them.

Neal worked with the hide after he had a light lunch, watching the children playing inside the confines of the Magnew camp. It was set up much the same way as the other camp. An open-ended U, with the opening pointed toward Neal’s house, which was up the rise slightly from them.

Every once in a while one of the children would look up and wave at Neal. He always waved back. A very small wave, but a wave, none the less.

That evening, just before Neal was going to go in and fix supper, Elizabeth came walking up the slight slope, carrying something in two

hands. One of the older girls was with her, carrying something, as well.

With a smile, she handed the towel wrapped bowl. "Venison chili," she said. Some of the RV's had some spices." She nodded at Amanda. "And a forequarter."

"You didn't have to do this. I was just planning on getting a deer for myself, later."

"Oh, I think it's better to share as we go," Elizabeth said. She held the bowl of chili forward and Neal took it automatically.

"Come on in," Neal said and stepped up onto the small front porch of the Lusby. With his hands full, Elizabeth reached around him and opened the door.

When Neal went in, Elizabeth turned around and took the other package from Amanda. "Thanks Amanda,"

"Can I see the house?" Amanda asked.

"Oh, I don't know," Elizabeth said, glancing at Neal.

He shrugged and said, "Sure. Not much to see."

Amanda edged inside and took the nickel tour. It didn't take long. "It's tiny," Amanda said. "Almost like a doll house. But it's a real house."

"Yes it is," Neal said with a smile. "Suits me just fine."

"Okay, Amanda. You've seen the house. Go on back to our place."

"Yes, Elizabeth," Amanda replied and immediately did so.

"Very well behaved children, I've noticed," Neal said, setting the towel

wrapped bowl of chili on the counter. Elizabeth put the venison beside it. "I'll wrap that and put it in the freezer in the shed in a bit."

Elizabeth nodded and turned toward the door. "I'd better go so you can eat that while it is hot. She had her hand on the doorknob as Neal said, "Thank you, Elizabeth. This was kind of you."

"Just evening up the debt a bit," she replied without turning around. Neal found himself a bit disappointed by her response, but shrugged it off and enjoyed the excellent chili.

Nothing much changed over the next couple of months, as the Magnew clan became settled in their new camp. They dug another small open trench fire pit and installed the grates and pot hangers, to do much of their cooking with the plentiful firewood, rather than use the precious propane.

David and Elizabeth came up to Neal one bright day that hopefully signaled that spring had actually arrived, despite the date being well after the date it should have come. "Neal, can we talk to you? It's important," David said.

"Sure. You want to get a cup of tea in the house?"

"I'm a little uncomfortable taking such things without the others being able to enjoy them," David said. Elizabeth nodded in agreement. "This will just take a moment."

"Okay," Neal said, turning around and leaning against the work counter in the log shed where he'd been working.

"We're getting desperately low on vegetables, fruits, and staples again," David said. "We were wondering if you would be able to tow the mini-van down to the gate. I think we can make it from there to the trade center at the store in Sullivan and back. We'd just walk back the rest of

the way.”

Neal hesitated before he spoke. “I can certainly do that. But I think I should go in with you.”

“We cannot keep depending on you, Neal,” Elizabeth said.

“You don’t know how much your family’s presence here has increased my feelings of security. That is worth a lot to me. I know that if I was to get sick and couldn’t hunt, I would be provided for. I have help to cut wood, which is much safer, and besides, I could use a few items myself.”

Elizabeth sighed. So did David, who said, “Well, we certainly wouldn’t try to stop you from going in, and it is probably safer if we go as one larger group rather than one small group and an individual. If you are certain you wish to accompany us, we won’t object. But please allow us to do our own trading.”

“Of course,” Neal said.

Elizabeth eyed him as if she wasn’t quite sure if he was being completely forthright, but she said nothing.

“Tomorrow at eight?” Neal asked.

“As you wish,” David replied. He and Elizabeth turned and went back to their small enclave. Neal finished up what he was doing and took stock of what he would take in to trade with.

He loaded the Suburban with everything except some venison and small game he had in the freezer. He’d load that the following morning. Early in the morning, Neal got up and made his first trip to the cave in many weeks. He rounded up a few items and hurried back to the Lusby. There was no snow left around the compound. He’d left no tracks on the frozen

earth and solid rock.

It didn't take long to hook the tow strap between the Suburban and mini-van the next morning. It was to be David and Elizabeth going in again. Neal wished he could have dissuaded Elizabeth and have David take another of the grown men with them, but didn't even try, knowing it would be fruitless. He did ask if Dwayne could accompany him in the Suburban and was granted his wish.

They refused additional gasoline, believing they had enough to get there and back, even if they didn't find more. Gasoline was one of the things on their 'shopping list'. Neal had great doubts about any being available. If it was, it would be very precious.

Neal stopped the Suburban outside the gate to his road and they unhooked the mini-van. Neal offered to lead the way, to break through the snowdrifts that they discovered still existed, despite the warmer weather. They just hadn't had time to melt away the way the un-drifted snow had.

There were no signs of any traffic on the county road, though there was some on the state road. Neal knew they were leaving tracks on the muddy gravel road, even without the tracks through the snowdrifts. Once on pavement Neal quit worrying about it.

Again he took a roundabout way into Sullivan, but once there, went directly to Carmello's store. It was Saturday, and the place was packed with people looking for all sorts of items. The same two Marines were watching vehicles and horses for a fee and Neal willingly paid them with a venison roast, over Dwayne's objections that he could watch the Suburban for nothing.

"I want you and your firepower handy, with me," Neal told Dwayne.

“You expecting trouble?” Dwayne asked.

“I always expect trouble,” Neal said with a small laugh. “I’m a hermit, or didn’t you know. We worry.”

Dwayne laughed in return. David and Elizabeth had come prepared for the Marines, too. Four individual freshly baked dried fruit pies were more than adequate for them to secure the mini-van.

Elizabeth gave Neal a telling look. He wasn’t to accompany them. He was to go do his own business and leave her and David to do theirs.

With Dwayne tagging along behind, just keeping an eye on things for Neal, Neal did a bit of trading and a lot of information gathering. Despite Elizabeth’s warning look, Neal made it a point to keep her and David visible out of the corners of his eyes, as they made the rounds the same way Neal was.

David cut away and began a prayer gathering, much the same way he had the first time. Neal saw Elizabeth standing by herself and looking toward the store. From the looks of it, she had not had much luck finding the food items she wanted. Almost everyone there wanted food in return for their goods.

When she resolutely started toward the store, Neal hurried over and joined her.

“Now Neal,” she said, “You said you wouldn’t interfere.”

“I know,” he replied. “But do you really want to go in there unescorted? Having seen what The King is like?”

“I know, I know!” Elizabeth’s voice was strained. “But some of the other people here said he still has canned and packaged food. Apparently he found another truck of food. And some say he’s holding gasoline and

diesel fuel. That's his truck over there." Elizabeth, Neal, and Dwayne all looked at the fancy, rock crawling style modified Jeep Wrangler. There were four motorcycles of various types, too, Neal noticed.

Neal had heard the same information. "Let me go in with you. Please." Neal said.

Elizabeth bit her lip for a moment, considering Neal's offer. Finally she just nodded and began walking toward the store. "Wait out of sight, by the doors," Neal whispered to Dwayne, who walked away, taking a different path to the store. One that anyone inside wouldn't be able to see him approach.

Neal opened and held the door for Elizabeth to enter. Both stopped and let their eyes adjust to the dim light. There was actually more light than the first time. The King had found some wind-up flashlights and had several hanging here and there.

The King was on his tall bar stool, three men behind him. Neal looked carefully. Only one of the hangers-on was the same. The other two were new faces.

"Well, well, well, if it isn't the hermit and his woman, Sweetness," said The King.

Neal saw Elizabeth tense, but she didn't say anything.

The King turned hard eyes on Neal. He wasn't about to admit that he thought Neal had gotten the best of the deal the time before. He did say, "Some good deals the last time. What are you offering up? Sweetness this time, maybe?" His grin was directed at Neal first, and then Elizabeth.

Neal knew Elizabeth was furious inside but she was still holding her tongue, standing stiff as a board.

Looking back at Neal, The King said, “I know you had salt. Don’t need any of it. Got plenty, now.”

“Well,” Neal said, “You said you make the deals. What are you asking for canned or packaged vegetables and fruits, and for... Elizabeth, you were wanting?”

Through clenched teeth Elizabeth said, “Flour, cornmeal, oil or shortening, some spices, pasta, dry beans, rice...”

“Whoa! Whoa! Whoa!” The King said with an aggravating laugh. “Why don’t you just say you want everything I have? I doubt you have enough for half of what you’ve already named. I wouldn’t even give you half of it for a couple of hours in bed with you.”

“How dare you!” Elizabeth said coldly. “I wouldn’t give you the time of day if I saw you on the street, much less even consider sleeping with you!”

Neal didn’t like the look in The King’s eyes. The King slid from the tall bar stool and his hands hovered over the twin pistols on his thighs. His goons shifted nervously, the Hi-Point carbines shifting from a casual hold to a ready hold.

“Easy now,” Neal said. “No need to get riled. She’s a woman to speak her mind. I’m sure you can understand that.”

“None of your talking tricks like last time,” The King growled. “Anything you want is going to cost you big time.” He looked at Elizabeth and sneered. “Got a good look at you this time in the better light. Doubt if I’d touch you with a ten foot pole. You’re ugly.”

It was a little boy’s reaction to rejection, Elizabeth and Neal both knew. Elizabeth took it much better than Neal did.

“Be very careful what you say,” Neal said, his voice cold. “We’re here to deal. She isn’t part of the deal in any way. State what you want, besides her and any weapons and ammunition.” Neal had seen The King’s eyes go to the BM-59 slung over Neal’s shoulder.

“I don’t like being threatened,” The King said. His hands were shaking, held just above his pistols. It infuriated him that Neal was ignoring how close The King was to drawing the pistols and killing him and just taking the woman.

“I didn’t threaten you, King,” Neal replied, his voice still cold. “If you want to trade, we will, for something reasonable. Otherwise we’ll take our trade goods and leave.”

“I said don’t threaten me!”

It was a very near thing. Someone else came into the store and The King looked over angrily to see who it was. It didn’t matter. The person sensed the tension and hurriedly turned around and left.

The interruption was just enough for The King to calm down enough to not draw his weapons. “Okay, smart guy. You have one option. Gold. The previous owner took gold, before his untimely death...” His cronies laughed and The King, calmer now, grinned and continued. “So will I. You don’t have it, turn around and walk out of here.”

Elizabeth gasped and hurriedly spoke up. “I have more jewelry! My sister-in-law’s things. They’re even nicer than what I...”

The King cut her off. “Sure. I’ll take it, too. But there has to be gold coins in the deal.”

“How much, for how much?” Neal asked.

“You just gather up what you want, and I’ll tell you how many coins it will take. Give me the jewelry. All of it.” The King was smiling now. He hopped back up onto the barstool.

Rather reluctantly Elizabeth took several jewelry cases out of her pack and handed them to The King and stepped back quickly.

“Dwayne,” Neal said, only slightly louder than they’d been talking.

Dwayne came into the store immediately, surprising The King and his cronies no end. None had even suspected he was out there.

“Help Elizabeth gather up what she wants. Everything she wants.”

“It’s going to cost you if we have to restock all this stuff,” The King warned. He took what was intended as a cursory, ‘Big Deal’ look, but wound up admiring the fine jewelry in detail.

When he looked up again Rebecca and Dwayne each had a shopping basket loaded down with cases of food.

“They’re just getting started,” Neal said when The King started to speak. Elizabeth and Dwayne both looked at Neal for a fraction of a second, but both grabbed another cart each and went back into the depths of the store.

“You realize, I hope, that you are digging three graves here,” The King said, eyes and voice cold and venomous as he tried to stare down Neal. “It’s going to be fun with Sweetness before I kill her. There is no way you have enough gold, real gold, for any of this. You’re bluffing.”

Neal stood silently, where he could dive for cover if The King or any of his three men tried anything.

The King was beginning to sweat, worried despite holding the upper

hand. At least what he considered the upper hand. “You can’t possibly think you can take all four of us,” he said, voice showing just a hint of unsureness.

“Just sit there calmly and we won’t have to find out,” Neal said. “I’m not going to steal your goods, no matter how you acquired them. You’ll get your gold. A reasonable amount.”

“You really have gold?” The King asked, incredulous.

“Some. That was probably my gold you took off Carmello.”

“How’d you know...” The King’s words faded away as quickly as he’d started them.

Elizabeth and Dwayne were back with overloaded carts again. “One more time,” Neal said, “Two carts apiece this time,” his eyes still on The King.

The King squirmed on his throne of a bar stool, but didn’t make a move towards his weapons. Despite the insult he was feeling, he wanted to see the gold before he killed Neal and Dwayne and took the woman.

The three goons started to move around and Neal told The King. “Have your goons chill out or I kill you first.”

“You can’t talk to me like that!” The King half screamed, sliding down off of the barstool. But Neal already had the Glock 21 out, pointed toward The King’s chest.

“Tell them, or die right now,” Neal said, steel in his voice and eyes.

The King didn’t like it. That was obvious. But he did it. “Take it easy guys. Don’t do anything until I tell you. And when I do, don’t kill the woman. I want her alive.”

“You really push it,” Neal said, his finger tightening slightly on the trigger of the Glock. It was probably good that The King didn’t know how close the gun was to going off in Neal’s hand. All the slack had been taken up on the trigger safety, and the trigger was tensioned. Another pound of finger pressure and the gun would go off. And Neal was holding it steady on The King’s chest.

It seemed like a long time to Neal, and he thought it probably seemed even longer to The King, before Elizabeth and Dwayne showed up again, with the four carts just as overloaded as the first four. Both took in the changes in the situation quickly.

“Now,” Neal told The King, “Say what you want for eight carts of groceries.”

“All the gold you have,” The King said immediately.

“Sorry,” Neal said. “You don’t know how much I have. Might not even have enough and will have to go get more. Just give a price and I’ll see if I agree with it. I gave Carmello two ounces for six cartloads. Figure from there.”

“Things are worse now,” The King said, his voice much more of a normal tone. Neal suddenly realized that it wasn’t a good sign. The King was about to explode with anger.

“Triple what you gave him!”

Neal nodded. “That’s fair.” Using his left hand, Neal slipped six one-ounce US Gold Eagles out of the pocket of his jacket and tossed them to The King, one at a time.

The King looked at each one closely and then started at Neal malevolently. He’d said he’d make a deal. Now he had to back out of it.

That wasn't good. But Neal and Dwayne weren't going to leave alive, and the woman was staying permanently.

With a nod of his head, Neal motioned Dwayne and Elizabeth to take the baskets outside. "Get the truck and load up. David, too. And if something happens in the meantime, just keep going. Don't stop for me."

Elizabeth and Dwayne didn't like it much. Neither did The King or his men. It sounded like Neal was more than ready to die over the transaction. But The King began to smile slightly when the Suburban came to a stop outside. Neal didn't like that.

Edging over to the doors, still keeping his pistol pointed at The King, Neal said, loud enough for Dwayne and Elizabeth to hear him, "He's got an ace in the hole. Keep an eye peeled out there."

Dwayne and Elizabeth redoubled their efforts to load the Suburban from the carts, tossing things in willy-nilly. The King as much as snarled.

Dwayne was in the Suburban driver's seat, and Elizabeth took off at a run to get David into the mini-van and on the road. Neal backed out of the store, as Dwayne backed the Suburban enough to put the passenger door right by Neal, having already set the AUG handy.

It seemed to Dwayne that everything happened in slow motion the next few seconds. Neal jumped for the door of the Suburban and climbed in. Dwayne floored the accelerator to pull away from the store. A man with a Hi-Point carbine stepped out from behind an overflowing dumpster near the corner of the store building and raised it to fire.

Neal lifted the Glock and fired one shot and the man went down. He set the Glock on the center console and picked up the AUG, turning in the seat to aim toward the store doors through the open window of the Suburban.

The four men in the store boiled out, The King in front, a pistol in each hand. His gunmen had their carbines shouldered and began to fire at the Suburban. Neal began to fire the AUG as quickly as he could accurately.

Two of the gunmen went down almost immediately and Neal knew he hadn't hit one of them. Someone else was shooting at The King and his men. Several more shots and the other gunman went down, riddled with at least half a dozen bullets. The King went to his knees, still firing the two guns alternately at the Suburban. Then he fell over face first.

"Stop!" Neal said, and hopped out of the Suburban. "Stay ready," he told Dwayne.

Itching to get out and see what was going on himself, Dwayne did as he was told. Neal seemed to know how to handle a situation. Neal was the first one to the bodies, followed closely by Elizabeth and David. Elizabeth's face was white and she held her hunting rifle in her hands.

"I shot one of them," Elizabeth said.

"Get her to the van," Neal instructed David rather harshly.

Suddenly there was a crowd gathered around. Neal reached into The King's pocket and withdrew the gold coins The King had slipped into that pocket. A quick search and he found the jewelry boxes in The King's hip pockets. "We paid what he asked," Neal said, holding up the coins and jewelry. And he attacked anyway. We all need to get together and decide how to distribute the..."

That was as far as he got. The group rushed the doors of the store and Neal watched in dismay as the people began to grab everything they could carry and run back outside. Almost silently he said, "I was going to include what we bought for distribution." No one heard, or cared if they did hear. A budding monster and his goons were dead and there

was food for the taking.

Bending down, Neal gathered up the guns and all the magazines he could find, moved over to the dead man behind the dumpster and did the same.

Neal saw some of the group eyeing the Suburban and he walked quickly over to it. "Let's go," he told Dwayne as soon as he was in the passenger seat. He looked for and finally saw the mini-van. David was driving, just leaving the parking lot of the store, Elizabeth sitting in the front passenger seat, her head down.

David drove directly back to the county road, not attempting to confuse the route, much to Neal's disappointment. Neal triggered the remote for the gate when they got to his road and the mini-van went through without stopping. David managed to get it halfway to the camp before it bogged down.

Dwayne drove past, and then reversed so Neal could hook up the tow strap. Neal looked through the windshield of the mini-van at Elizabeth. She was still slumped back, head down. He cut his eyes over at David, behind the wheel of the mini-van. David shrugged his shoulders.

When Dwayne pulled into the compound, and Elizabeth and David got out of the mini-van, Elizabeth ran around to David. He opened his arms and she slipped into them, sobbing heavily.

"I'll get her to Margery," David said and half carried his sister over to the big motorhome and then inside. Neal watched, but turned to help Dwayne when he opened the back of the Suburban.

"Well," Dwayne said, "You paid for this, even if you did get everything back. Where do you want it?"

Neal was shaking his head. "We used David's wife's jewelry, too. At

least half of everything is your family's, too."

"Got to tell you, bro," Dwayne said, looking at Neal looking at the motorhome containing Elizabeth. "I know them. Elizabeth and David aren't going to want to take any of this stuff. Going to consider it blood stained."

Neal sighed. "How do things suddenly get so complicated?"

"Hey, man! Don't ask me. I just know that when there is a woman in the mix, things get complicated, fast or slow."

With a quick glance at Dwayne to try and determine just what Dwayne meant, Neal just had to ignore the cryptic statement. There wasn't a clue on Dwayne's face, and he was already unloading things. He would have answered if Neal asked him outright and Neal knew it. He started unloading, too.

"Let's take it to the big shed and sort it out," Neal said, heading that way with his first load.

Elizabeth and Dwayne had picked thoughtfully, Neal decided as they moved everything to the shed work counter. After the Suburban was unloaded, Dwayne went to unload the mini-van. He held up two more chickens so Neal could see them. "Another hen and a rooster! Woo-hoo! More eggs and chicken real soon!"

Neal didn't see what else David and Elizabeth might have traded for, lost in his own thoughts as he re-sorted the items from the Suburban into one large and one small group. He put away in the sheds or in the Lusby, the things in the smaller group.

Waving Dwayne over, Neal said, "Get some of the others and you distribute the rest of this among yourselves. Margery's jewelry is there, too."

“David and Elizabeth aren’t going to like it,” Dwayne said. But it didn’t stop him from doing exactly what Neal had said. Ten minutes later and the shed was just as it had been when they’d returned.

It wasn’t until the next morning that Elizabeth and David came to the Lusby and knocked on the door. Neal set the laptop computer he was using aside and opened the door.

“Neal,” David said, “we have to talk about what happened yesterday and the goods that changed hands.”

Elizabeth was still pale. “I don’t feel right about taking things at gunpoint. Yes, I disliked The King. But I didn’t wish him dead. Any of them. Not even the one I killed.”

“We paid him exactly what he asked for,” Neal said softly. “He’s the one that changed his mind, took umbrage, and shot first to get back things that had been paid for. He wasn’t going to give the coins and jewelry back. He would have kept them. And you, too, after killing David, Dwayne, and me.”

Elizabeth was shaking her head. “We could have handled it differently. No one need have died.”

“Violence settles nothing,” David said. “I should have intervened in some way. Brought the Good Book into the equation.”

“Wouldn’t have helped,” Neal said. “The King was on the road to destruction long before the events of today. I picked up much information while I was making a few trades. The others of the trading group were planning to... displace... The King from his position of authority.”

“Still,” David said, “a group like that... perhaps they had jurisdiction.

We don't live in the town... Perhaps it was none of our concern."

Firmly Neal said, "I am keeping my portion of what we acquired yesterday. If you want, I will take your portion and return it to the store to let the others fight over it."

David and Elizabeth both looked at him and realized he was serious. "Perhaps..." David said, "Perhaps you are right. Ill gotten gains..."

"No," Elizabeth suddenly said. "Neal is right. We did give him what he wanted. And if he would have had the chance, he would have taken me, without a second thought. It's good he is dead. Better for everybody. We're keeping the things, David, and that is it."

"But Elizabeth..."

"No buts, except one. The distribution was unequal," Elizabeth said, cutting off her brother. "You gave us too much and didn't keep enough for yourself." Elizabeth was giving Neal a hard look.

"I'm perfectly happy with the split. Margery's jewelry was worth far more than my gold coins, back in the day when gold was only three-hundred-dollars an ounce. I suspect that one necklace was worth at least two-thousand dollars."

"But things are different now! And gold was worth more than three-hundred-dollars an ounce when the war happened!" protested Elizabeth.

"Yep, things are different now. And gold was higher at the start of the war. In inflated dollars."

"But people don't want jewelry. They want food or fuel or medicines."

"Sure they do. At least some of them. The King did. And there will be others. In time. There are people now that won't take gold or silver

coins. But some will. I'll willing to work any kind of trade I can that I believe I will come out in equal value. Or better. And I think I'm way ahead on our deal here."

Elizabeth sighed. Neal had a ready answer for everything. "Come along, David," she said. "I don't think we're going to win the battle and I'm not prepared to dispose of the food or let a mob take it. Better to use it ourselves and help people in some other way, or keep it and give it back a bit at a time."

"Very well, Elizabeth," David said, rising from his chair. "If you think it best."

"I do." She, too, rose, from the other chair.

"About that helping others," Neal said, "I have an idea."

"What?" Elizabeth asked. "Something to really help people?"

Her words and tone stung Neal a bit. "Yes. To really help people. I made some inquiries about greenhouses. There are a few in town, but smaller hobby ones. I'm thinking that if we put in one or two big ones, plus a conventional garden, we could produce more than enough for the group here and have an excess to trade. Or even give away, if the situation called for it."

Both sat back down. "Where would we get these greenhouses?" David asked.

"Up in Union. If they still have any. If not, perhaps Rolla. There is a greenhouse dealer and nursery there, too."

"What about seed?" Elizabeth asked. "There weren't any in the stocks at the store. I looked."

“I have quite a bit of seed stored away. Open pollinated types that we can recover seed from for future years. And if any hybrids do happen to be available we’d plant those first and save the open pollinated for use later.”

“How would we get them here?” David asked. “I don’t think anything of a size you’re talking about would fit in the back of the Suburban, much less the mini-van.”

“You have something in mind, don’t you?” Elizabeth asked, almost accusingly.

“I made contact with someone at the trade meet that has a semi truck that runs, and any kind of trailer we might ever need. What he doesn’t have is a supply of fuel. I have some fuel stored, and a line on a renewable source.”

“How did you do that?” David asked.

“Just by asking. Especially after small trades that put the trading partner in a good mood to talk. I got leads on several possibilities. But they all involve your family. That’s why I’m not very concerned about exactly even trades between us right now.”

“Are you going to explain some of these other ideas?” Elizabeth asked.

“Not until I get more information and can be more sure of the success of the endeavors.”

“At least a hint?” Elizabeth asked.

Neal smiled and shook his head. Elizabeth smiled back and all the previous tension was gone.

“Should I pursue the greenhouse project?” Neal asked. “There is no

point in doing it without your help. I can't do it alone."

David thought for only a moment. "Yes. We will help you. If you can get the greenhouses."

"Okay! I'll get right on it. Spring is coming up fast. We need to get the guerrilla garden renewed and a regular garden started whether we get the greenhouses or not."

"What do we need to do?" Elizabeth asked.

The three took another hour to discuss the coming spring projects. When David and Elizabeth left, everyone was smiling and eager for things to progress. Neal sat down and sighed a huge sigh of relief at the way things had finally gone. Now to get on with the plans.

The Hermit - Chapter 3

Neal debated for a while whether to show anyone the tunnel and the items stored in it. He took Dwayne aside one day and asked him, "You've been out and about on the property quite a bit. Tell me what you've found."

Dwayne grinned. "The garage, you mean? Just the outside. Don't have a clue to what's inside."

"You told anyone else about it?"

"I started to. David is the head honcho of the family... But I got to thinking. This is your place. You're entitled to have secrets if you want to. Others are bound to find it eventually. We're an adventuresome bunch."

“So I’ve noticed. Well, since you know, you might as well know more about it, in case something were to happen to me.”

“Don’t joke about things like that. You can jinx it.”

Neal laughed and the two headed to the Suburban, when Neal nodded toward it. Neal drove into the woods. Both men were armed, not for hunting, but for trouble, just in case. Neal unlocked one of the end doors of the tunnel when they got to it and slid it up high enough for the Suburban to get into the tunnel.

Neal stopped the truck and got out, going over to the near vertical wall. He tripped a switch and the lights came on. He flipped another switch and the wind-up door behind them lowered to a close. Neal said, “Has its own PV power system.”

“Um,” Dwayne grunted. “Didn’t spot it. I’m slipping.”

Pointing out the trailers, Neal explained what each one was for. He didn’t say anything about the tarp covered items stored on plastic pallets that took up much of the additional space, leaving only a lane wide enough to drive the Suburban through, with one of the trailers attached.

Dwayne helped Neal connect up the utility trailer and Neal showed him how to transfer fuel from the trailer directly to the Suburban’s tanks through a hose that was part of the hitch hook-up package. With that done, Neal drove out of the tunnel after Dwayne opened the opposite end door. Dwayne killed the lights and tripped the door closer before ducking out beneath the door as it closed.

He got into the Suburban and Neal took the roundabout route required to access the tunnel from this end. Turning back onto the track into the clear, Neal parked and the two of them got out, as a small group gathered around, curious about the appearance of the trailer.

“Had it hidden out in the woods,” was all Dwayne would say.

“I thought you were going to hire a truck and trailer,” Elizabeth said, standing nearby. “A big rig.”

“I am,” Neal replied. “This trailer isn’t big enough for the size greenhouses I’m thinking about, but it carries spare fuel. More than enough for what I want to do.”

“Oh,” was all Elizabeth said, looking over the trailer with interest, just as the others were.

“Dwayne,” Neal said, “Let me get a few things out of the house and one of the sheds and we can go see what we can do about getting those greenhouses.”

“I think Dwayne better stay here and help with security,” Elizabeth immediately said. “Maybe get a deer when he’s out scouting around. I’ll go with you. I’m sure I can do anything you had planned for him.”

Dwayne knew better than to argue. He disappeared in a hurry, leaving Neal to deal with the situation on his own.

“Are you sure you want to go back to Sullivan this soon after what’s happened?”

“I’m fine. What do you want me to bring along?”

“You’ll probably need a heavier coat. We might be gone for a while. Work gloves. Bring a gun, just in case.”

Elizabeth paled just slightly as Neal’s final words, but turned away and headed for the big motorhome. She was back in a few minutes, with a small backpack, over which was lashed a heavy coat. Her favorite center fire rifle was slung over one shoulder. “I guess I’m ready,” she said,

going to the front passenger door of the Suburban.

Neal got in the driver's seat, without a word. There was very little talk during the drive to Sullivan. Neal consulted the write-in-the-rain notebook he habitually carried in his shirt pocket to find the address of the man with the operating semi truck.

When they arrived at the place, which was actually a mile outside of Sullivan proper, Neal tooted the horn when he stopped in front of a four horizontal pipe gate in a chain link fence. A few moments later Neal and Elizabeth saw someone come out of a large garage/workshop building.

The man looked at the Suburban a long time before he approached the gate. "What do you want?" he asked, one hand out of sight behind his back. Neal assumed he had a pistol or revolver in the small o f his back.

"I'm Neal Grant," Neal said, stepping halfway out of the Suburban. "I heard you have an operating rig and some trailers. I may have a job for you."

"Got no fuel, mister. Can't go more'n five miles and back."

"I have fuel," Neal said. Enough for what I want you to do initially, and a little more, for your time and trouble."

The man perked up slightly. "Okay. Come on in. We can discuss it." He swung the heavy gate open and Neal drove inside the man's small truck compound. There were half a dozen trucks and something over fifteen trailers, of several different kinds.

Neal and Elizabeth got out of the Suburban, leaving their rifles behind. But Neal had his Glock on his hip. "George Hansen," the man said, holding out a hand for Neal to shake. He didn't offer it to Elizabeth. "What's this about fuel? Is it some of that rotgut The King had? Don't want any of it. Had to pull and clean the entire fuel system on my truck

after running a couple of gallons of it.”

That The King had found some fuel was news to Neal. He made a mental note, but said nothing about it. “No,” he replied. “This is stabilized fuel from just before the war. I will guarantee it is good. I’m running it in my truck right now.”

“Well, you got here... from somewhere... so it should be good. How much do you have?”

“Like I said,” Neal replied, “Enough for what I want you to do initially, and a little more, for your time and trouble.”

“Yeah. Sure. Now, what is it you want me to do?”

“If I can find what I’m looking for, I want you to haul it back from Union.”

“What is it? What kind of trailer would I need?” George asked.

“Flat bed I would think. It’s greenhouse parts, again, if I can find them.”

“That shouldn’t be a problem. You going to be along for protection? It’s not real safe out there.”

“I would. Probably three, maybe four, of us.”

“Okay. When?”

“We’re going up there now to find out if the greenhouses are there. If they are, we’d make the deal, and then come back for you. If you’re willing we can fill your tanks now.”

“You’ll trust me with the fuel? What if there aren’t any greenhouses there?”

“I’ve heard you’re trustworthy. If we can’t get greenhouses in Union, we try Rolla,” answered Neal. Elizabeth was taking it all in.

“Well, if you’re game, and you can guarantee my safety and the safety of the truck then I’ll go.”

“You understand I can’t guarantee anything unequivocally, just that we’d do everything possible to protect you and the equipment.”

“I suppose that’s only reasonable. The big danger is gone. That kid that called himself ‘The King’ is dead, burned, and his ashes blown away. That was one mean, sick, puppy. Somebody did the world a favor when they killed him. Almost did it myself. Wanted time with my daughter for some food. Angelique is only thirteen.”

Neither Neal nor Elizabeth commented.

“So,” George continued, “Let’s get this show on the road. Pull the trailer over here by this truck.” George walked over to an older model MACK ten wheel truck equipped with a fifth-wheel.

Neal did so and they filled the twin fifty gallon saddle tanks from the utility trailer. “Nice rig you have here,” George said, looking the trailer over carefully. “And that Suburban isn’t stock, either, is it?”

Neal shook his head. “A few modifications.” He didn’t go into details, despite the hopeful look on George’s face.

With the fueling done, Neal and Elizabeth got back into the Suburban and left George’s, heading for Union to look for the greenhouse sales and nursery that had been there before the war. Hopefully it would still be there.

Neal picked up I-44 and they were on their way. He was able to make fairly good speed, even weaving in and out of the EMP stalled vehicles.

All the overpasses and bridges were intact, though Neal slowed down and then stopped to inspect them before crossing.

The only people they saw were what looked like two keeping an eye on three head of cattle in a field adjacent to the Interstate. It was eerie when they got off the Interstate onto the local road to Union, which was north of the Interstate a few miles. There weren't any signs of life anywhere until they got into Union.

And then, no one indicated they wanted anything to do with Neal, Elizabeth, or the Suburban. Everyone that Neal and Elizabeth saw either just stood and stared, or scurried away out of sight.

Neal made a couple of turns and they were on the edge of the town again. They saw the sign at the same time. Elizabeth pointed in that direction and Neal started slowing down. The place occupied a few acres of fenced ground. Neal stopped at the double roll apart chain link fence gates.

The two sat and looked for a few moments at the entrance. They couldn't really see much as various sized trees were everywhere. Neal got out of the Suburban, carrying his BM-59. Elizabeth had her rifle. Walking up to the closed gates carefully, Neal noticed that there was a chain, with a lock on it, but the chain wasn't wrapped and the lock was open.

"Hello!" Neal called out, startling Elizabeth slightly. "Anyone here?"

"Wait here," Neal told Elizabeth. He opened the gates slightly and slipped through.

Elizabeth began to get nervous when she hadn't seen or heard anything for a good fifteen minutes. But Neal appeared from out of the trees. He had a smile on his face. "Found someone," he told Elizabeth and began to push one of the gates open.

Elizabeth hurried forward and opened the other one enough for them to get the Suburban through. Both got back into the truck and Neal drove forward, leaving the gate open behind them. He pulled around the side of the building Elizabeth finally saw, turned the rig around, and parked beside a roll up door that was being raised. Elizabeth saw a middle aged man and woman step outside.

The woman carried a double barrel shotgun, and the man had a pistol of some kind in a full flap holster on his left hip. Neal got out and introduced Elizabeth. "Elizabeth, this is Rachael and Hiram Golden. They own and operate this place."

A quick round of handshakes and Rachael stepped back beside the door opening and stood there, the shotgun cradled in her arms.

Hiram led Neal and Elizabeth toward the back of the property. "What you want is back here."

There wasn't much to see. Just two dozen tarp covered pallets stacked behind the nursery's large commercial greenhouse. "Two of them. Bigger than the hobbyists want around here and too small for a real commercial operation. Didn't have any luck selling them before. You sure caught me by surprise wanting them now. Had forgotten all about them until you asked."

Hiram looked at Neal anxiously. "We're doing okay with our original plant stocks and seeds, but I know it won't reproduce true, if at all. You really have those open pollinated seeds the way you say you do?"

"I do for a fact, Neal said. "A full case of six number ten cans, all non-hybrid seeds. Plus I'll throw in starters from my garden. They're all non-hybrid, too."

"One would think a nursery would be better prepared for something like

this,” Hiram said sadly. “Having to buy seeds from the customers. Sad.”

“To be honest, I’m a bit surprised you still have any stock at all,” Neal said, as he and Elizabeth followed Hiram into the standing greenhouse. They could tell that Hiram loved his plants. While there were still some ornamentals and tree seedlings, the entire remaining growing area was dedicated to vegetables, with the exception of what Neal first took to be an herb garden. Upon seeing some of the name stakes by the plants, he realized it was both a cooking herb garden as well as a medicinal plant garden.

“I think people know that I can produce so much more here, with all my equipment and supplies, than they could by taking it over and dispersing things to individuals or operating here, themselves. There is a whole group that come in and help me, for some of the vegetables. The rest we have no trouble trading away for our other needs. Meat and such. Just don’t have anyone here today.”

“That’s good,” Neal replied. “Not every community can pull together like that. So. Do we have a deal?”

Hiram nodded and shook Neal’s hand when he held it out. “If you’ll help me, we can load the rototillers and other things you want into your trailer.”

Elizabeth went along and carried what she could from the storeroom to the trailer. Hiram and Neal used a propane pallet truck to load four pallets onto the trailer, making the trailer squat some on its suspension.

When the load was strapped down, Neal went over to Hiram carrying the case of LTS canned seeds. Hiram took it in one hand and shook hands again with Neal, with his other.

“We’ll be back tomorrow, probably, for the greenhouses,” Neal said. With that, he pulled the Suburban and trailer out of the compound,

Elizabeth rolled the gates closed, but didn't lock them, and got in the passenger seat beside Neal.

"That was relatively easy," Neal said as he headed for the Interstate.

"Sure seems so," Elizabeth replied. She got out and helped Neal check the tie downs on the trailer when they got to the Interstate. Everything was fine and they set off again.

Both were on alert the whole time until Neal parked the Suburban and trailer by the Lusby.

To Elizabeth's surprise, Neal had her help him unstack some firewood, exposing the Bobcat Toolcat. She hadn't been looking forward to moving everything on the pallets by hand. The Toolcat made quick work of it, using the pallet forks. Neal stacked the pallets out of the way, as most of the Magnew clan watched the interesting vehicle at work. No one, except Dwayne, had known it was there.

Elizabeth helped Neal gather up some seed potatoes, and dig out a few of his guerrilla garden plants to take the next day to give to Hiram, and then the two went their own ways for the evening. But Elizabeth was up and ready to go the next morning.

Uncle Chuck and Dwayne would be the other two going, using the minivan, refueled from the trailer. The ground was firm enough and dry enough that Chuck was able to drive it out, though it was a bit iffy in a couple of places on Neal's track of a road.

After stopping at George's and helping him connect a flatbed trailer to the MACK truck, the three vehicles headed for Union, with Neal in the lead again, and Chuck and Dwayne bringing up the rear. Neal had handed out FRS radios so everyone had one. Though anyone attempting to interfere with them would probably be disappointed in the take, they wouldn't know that until after the fact. The group kept a good watch out,

just in case.

There was more interest taken in them when they went through Union this time. When Neal stopped at the gate of the nursery and greenhouse sales yard, he noticed a few people were walking toward them, all still at some distance.

“Would you close up the gate after we’re all inside?” he asked Elizabeth.

She saw the people, too. “Lock it?” Elizabeth asked.

“Not my call. I’ll find Hiram and ask. Hang by the gate, if you will, until I call you on the radio.”

Elizabeth nodded and hopped out of the Suburban, taking her rifle with her. Neal drove forward after she had the gate pushed open. He hurriedly pulled forward, around the side of the nursery warehouse and got out.

The commotion and sound of the semi going through the gears had brought Hiram and Rachael outside. “Hiram,” Neal quickly said, taking the offered hand for a quick shake, “there are several other people approaching. Should I have Elizabeth lock the gate?”

“No. I’m sure it’s just some of the townspeople curious about the activity.”

Neal hesitated, but he let it go and called Elizabeth on the radio. “Hiram says to leave it be. Come on back here.”

“Okay,” Elizabeth replied and headed back to join the others.

Hiram was already on the forklift when Elizabeth came up. Neal motioned her over to join Rachael, just inside the door of the shop. She couldn’t see Dwayne or Chuck and decided that Neal had positioned them in tactical positions, in case there was trouble.

Neal himself was on the semi trailer, guiding Hiram with the placement of the pallets on it. Three pallets were loaded when six people, five men and a woman, came around from the front of the building and walked up to the forklift. Hiram stopped it and began to talk to the six.

Jumping off the trailer, Neal joined them. "What's going on," he asked, coming up on the forklift on the side opposite the group.

"That's what we'd like to know," said one of the men.

"I was telling them that you had bought the old greenhouse kits."

"And?" Neal asked.

The same man spoke again. "I'm not sure we should allow that. The town may need that equipment sometime."

"Isn't it Hiram's, not the town's?"

"Technically. But things have changed," said the woman. "The needs of the many outweigh the needs of one."

"Is that what you think, Hiram?" asked Neal.

"Now, see here," Hiram responded, "I've been feeding this town since the beginning, just for a little bit of help. Now this man has brought us the means to grow not only more now, but to grow at all in the future. Without the open-pollinated seeds he has, I wouldn't get more than another year's crop, if that."

"Is that so?" asked the second of the five men in the group.

Neal nodded. "It is."

“Well, I don’t like it!” the woman said, her voice rising somewhat.
“Everything in the town should belong to the townspeople now.”

“I’m not even in town, actually,” Hiram interjected.

The woman scowled at him.

“Just another technicality,” came from the third man.

“You do plan on sharing your good fortune with the town, don’t you, Hiram?” It was the fourth man speaking this time. He was the shortest of the men, and the heaviest. But he had a quiet authority about him that Neal picked up on immediately.

“Of course I do!” Hiram was a bit indignant. “Haven’t I since the start of all this?”

“You have. And it is most appreciated. We won’t interfere in this transaction you’ve made. But Hiram, do consult us in the future before you trade away our goods.”

Neal was happy that there appeared that there wouldn’t be any trouble, but he didn’t like the way Hiram was being treated. And from the look on his face, Hiram didn’t much care for it, either.

“Then, if you don’t mind,” Hiram said, “Get out of the way and let me go about taking care of this particular trade.”

“Of course, said the short man. “But just remember what I’ve said.” The six turned as one and marched off.

With a head motion, Neal sent Dwayne after them to verify they left the property. A few moments later and Dwayne’s voice came over the radio.
“They’re gone.”

“Ask him to lock the gate,” a very annoyed Hiram said.

“Lock it down,” Neal said into the radio. Dwayne didn’t respond, but Neal knew that the gate was now well secured.

“Let me tell you something,” Hiram said. Neal rather wished he would start the forklift again rather than talk, but said nothing and just listened. “I don’t care for being told what to do. No siree!” Hiram had been looking at the edge of the building the six had gone around. He looked back at Neal. “So why don’t you just look around and select anything you want that you can get on this trailer and the one yon behind your truck.”

“That’s not necessary,” Neal said.

“Is in my book. It is my stuff. Not just technically. And I’ll dispose of it myself, any way I’m a mind.”

“Okay. But let’s get the greenhouses loaded first.”

Hiram grinned at Neal suddenly. “Sure thing. First things first.”

Hiram didn’t speed up on the forklift any, as he was very good with it anyway. The pallets were loaded a few minutes later and Hiram killed the forklift and motioned Neal over to him.

“Let’s see what else is here that you just can’t live without.”

A bit reluctantly, but understanding Hiram’s desire, and intending to sweeten the pot anyway, Neal went with him. Ten minutes later, with Elizabeth looking on questioningly, Hiram was back on the forklift, adding six pallets to the semi-trailer, along with fully ten large tree saplings. Four pallets went onto Neal’s trailer. She saw Hiram seem to argue with Neal, and try to refuse to take something, but then take whatever it was and shake Neal’s hand.

The two walked over to the Suburban and Elizabeth hurried forward to help unload the rest of the items they'd brought as part of the trade for the greenhouses. "I'll go get the gate," Hiram said, after everything was inside the building and Rachael was cranking down the door.

Neal gathered his small group together and told them, "We could have a little trouble when we leave. I doubt there'll be any shooting, but be ready, none the less."

Everyone nodded and went to their vehicles, with Elizabeth joining George in the semi. Neal motioned for Chuck, driving the mini-van to go first and then George, in the semi. He would take up the rear position. If anything happened it would probably take a few seconds to develop and Neal wanted the others out of the way.

When they went around the building and were in the open lane between the other saplings Neal saw Hiram standing defiantly beside the gatepost. Chuck shot through the open gate, George right on his tail, running up the gears expertly to gain speed as quickly as possible.

The small group was reacting, and not favorably. They moved to block Neal inside the property, since he hadn't sped through the way the others had. Neal came to a stop, the driver's window down, and the muzzle of the AUG pointed out.

"If I find out anything has happened to Hiram, you'll want to make yourselves scarce, whether you are responsible or not. Because I am holding you responsible."

One of the men made move with his hand toward the small of his back and Neal triggered two quick rounds past his head. "Don't," Neal said, voice and eyes hard. "I won't fire a warning shot next time. 'bye, Hiram."

“See ya, Neal,” a grinning Hiram replied, with a wave, as Neal tromped the accelerator and took off. Hiram began closing one of the gates when the short man turned toward him.

“You’re on notice, Hiram,” said the man. “You do anything we don’t like and you are dead and we take over the operation ourselves.”

“I otta just let you do it anyway and watch you slowly starve yourselves to death.” Hiram finished closing the gates and locked them with something of a flourish and a triumphant grin.

Neal got on the radio as soon as he was far enough away from the nursery not to have to worry about getting shot and answered the continuing radio calls about what had happened and if he was all right. He finally got Elizabeth settled down and the short convoy headed for Sullivan, and then Neal’s.

There was no way George’s truck would make it all the way in to the compound, the ground was just too soft and the road too rough. George stopped at place he could see that he could turn around and stopped.

Neal sent Chuck and Dwayne the rest of the way in to get the Toolcat and bring it back. “We’ll unload here and then move the pallets and trees in my trailer the rest of the way.”

“Sorry I couldn’t go any further. I just can’t risk the truck,” George said in apology.

“Don’t worry about it,” Neal said. I didn’t think you’d be able to make it. It’s not a problem.”

When George’s trailer was unloaded and he was ready to leave, he shook Neal’s hand and said. “Thanks. I’ve got plenty of fuel to do some other jobs now. They’ll get me and my family some groceries. Thanks. And If I can help again, I’m willing to do so for the same deal.”

“I’ll keep it in mind,” Neal said. He and Elizabeth got into the Suburban, and with Dwayne carrying one pallet on the forks of the Toolcat following, they headed for the compound.

It took a couple of hours to get everything moved and situated, and almost a week to get the fruit and nut trees that had become part of the bargain planted with the backhoe attachment on the Toolcat.

It took another two days to clear the area chosen for the greenhouses, grade it, and otherwise get it ready to erect the two greenhouses. Though it wouldn’t have passed an OSHA inspection, one of the wooden pallets, with four more fastened securely to it and each other as an enclosure, worked adequately with the Toolcat forks as a work platform to help erect the structures. It took three weeks to complete them.

The rest of the inhabitants of the compound didn’t sit idly by as six of them worked on the greenhouses. Another area had been cleared for a large conventional garden, and, under David’s guidance, was tilled and prepared for planting. As is always the case, the young children walked the garden plot, picking up and moving the rocks the tilling turned up.

When things were ready to plant, Elizabeth got slightly upset when Neal brought out the hybrid seeds that he had stored, plus some that were in the deal with Hiram. “If you didn’t have more non-hybrid seeds, why did you trade all those off to Hiram? What are we going to do long term.”

“Elizabeth, please,” David said, trying to calm his sister down. “I’m sure Neal has a reason.” David’s voice didn’t match his stated assurance.

“Of course I do. I have plenty more non-hybrids. But they are packed to keep long term. We’ll lose these if they aren’t used. We’ll use hybrid until they run out and switch the following year to the LTS seeds.”

“Oh,” Elizabeth said, hanging her head. She finally looked up at Neal and said, “I’m sorry. It’s just things are going to be so close this year. We aren’t going to have the luxury of another grocery truck showing up in the nick of time this fall. If the garden and greenhouses don’t produce, some of us could starve.”

“I won’t let that happen,” Neal said softly.

“There might not be anything you can do about it,” Elizabeth said.

“I promise,” Neal said, in a very insistent tone of voice. Elizabeth found herself believing him implicitly.

Everyone worked the rest of that month and into the next, getting the gardens established, including the guerrilla garden that Neal insisted on continuing. Neal had learned what gardening he knew from the Internet and from books. David was an avid gardener, as was his wife, though she tended more toward flowers. Neal was left to do most of the hunting while the Magnews handled the gardening.

Another of Neal’s early enquiries came to light when he showed up after a solo trip to Sullivan, with the trailer. He came back with some building materials, four more chickens, six piglets, a rabbit buck and four rabbit does.

The children were given a few additional duties, once the rabbit hutches and the pigpen and shelter were completed. The rabbits were fun. The pigs were a chore. Four more chickens didn’t make that much difference in their workload.

Elizabeth asked, her annoyance obvious, what Neal had traded away for everything. “Doesn’t matter,” he replied with a smile known to get her dander up. “Your family is doing all the work. I just sit back and eat. More than even trade, in my book.”

“You are just absolutely impossible sometimes!” she replied and stalked off.

Much as the winter had been much worse than normal before the war, the summer was, as well. Hot and dry. Fortunately, they had plenty of water. They were able to give the gardens and greenhouses all the water they needed. They even hauled water in buckets in the back of the Toolcat to the established fruit and nut trees as well as the newly planted ones. The same with the berry patches.

Neal rigged up a fountain and a mister system by the pond. Elizabeth and the other women managed to come up with bathing suits for the clan, including trading for some one Saturday when Neal didn't go in, going hunting instead. When he got back with several squirrels and quail they were just arriving in the mini-van.

Elizabeth gave him a triumphant look and Neal didn't bawl her out the way he wanted to. Things were still too dangerous for women traveling alone. Especially if they were only armed with bolt-action hunting rifles and a .32 H&R revolver.

But Neal was more than appreciative of the sight of the women in their bikinis, particularly Elizabeth. Enough so that he avoided it.

Things were going quite well, except for running low on sugar. Neal went shopping, alone again, to the trading post that was still being held in Sullivan at Carmello's store every Saturday. There wasn't much to be found. However, Neal did find a ready supply of honey, in return for some of the early fresh vegetables and fruits that were now appearing on Neal's property.

Another set of deals garnered two large pressure canners, a remarkable number of canning jars, plenty of rings, and a disappointing number of lids, along with a Ball Blue Book of canning instructions and recipes.

Neal put the word out he was in the market for the lids and would pay a premium in trade goods, gold, or silver. He knew, that if push came to shove, he'd break out some of those he had stored in the tunnel and the cave.

He was getting over confident, not having encountered any sign of trouble for two months going back and forth to town. Enough trips were made, observed by enough people, that the compound's general location became known to the wrong set of people. Words of his trades had also spread.

It was about three in the afternoon when a radio call came in from Dwayne. As usual, when he wasn't doing something specific, he was out keeping an eye on the place from outside. The voice was hushed and Neal had to put his walky-talky right up to his ear to hear.

"Trouble, Neal," he said quickly but calmly. "That rock climber Jeep and the motorcycles of The King's have fallen into different hands. But I don't think better ones. There're eight guys, all armed, just now busting through the fence. You want me to start sniping?"

Neal almost said yes, but suddenly changed his mind. "No. Not till we know for sure their intentions."

"Don't dawdle," came the reply and the radio fell silent.

Neal had insisted on some tactical drills, and everyone knew what to do. Up to a point. Non-combatants were to be rounded up and hidden in the best place possible. Neal had left that place rather vague. No longer. He ran to Elizabeth, gave her a key to the tunnel, along with precise directions how to get there. "Get everyone locked in down there. Dwayne, Chuck, and I will take care of this."

Elizabeth looked into Neal's eyes and she saw the determination there to protect her and her family. She nodded and turned to the RV's to get

everyone moving.

Neal yelled at Chuck and he came running with his hunting rifle. Neal grabbed the BM-59, put a 100-round dual drum in it, and handed it and a musette bag of more magazines to Chuck, saying, "Use this. I'll use the AUG."

"Absolutely!" Chuck said. He'd been one of several that Neal had allowed to use the BM-59 for some practice. Chuck knew how to handle it. Neal drove probably faster than he should have, to get as far away from the compound as possible, before he encountered the Jeep. But there the Jeep suddenly was, just coming around a sharp curve in track as Neal came around one at the other end of one of the few straight stretches in the road. Both vehicles stopped.

Neal reached down and picked up the microphone of the PA system the Suburban had built in. "What do you want? You're trespassing! Turn around and go back and there won't be any problems!"

Neal could barely hear the shouted reply. "You gonna die, Man! We want your stuff! All of it!"

A shot rang out. Neal knew it wasn't him, Chuck, or Dwayne. It had to be the trespassers. In less time than it took to Neal come to the conclusion, another shot rang out and one of the men in the back of the Jeep fell out of it. "Dwayne," Neal whispered.

Chuck opened his door and stepped out of the Suburban, staying behind the door. He fired round after round. Between him and Dwayne the odds were whittled down to three to three in short order. Two in the Jeep and one on a motorcycle. The other three cyclists were down, as were two of the Jeep passengers, and the trespassers had fired only twice more. But one of those two rounds found a target. It hit Chuck in the lower leg and he went down.

“Go! Go! Go!” Chuck yelled, kicking the passenger door closed. “I’m okay for now.”

The Jeep was turning around and Neal slid behind the wheel of the Suburban, dropped it in gear and took off after it, not seeing the final motorcycle rider, and a bit worried about that fact. He needn’t have.

The motorcycle came charging out of the forest on Neal’s front left side. The rider was pointing a shotgun one handed toward Neal. Before Neal could twitch the steering wheel to try and avoid the shot the motorcyclist fell over the handlebars and he and the motorcycle tumbled half a dozen times, ending up in a tangled mess.

Dwayne stepped out of the forest and pointed frantically several times in the direction the Jeep had disappeared into the forest.

“Is he crazy?” Neal asked, gunning the Suburban and heading for the narrow opening through which the Jeep had gone. Neal had to slow significantly to maneuver in the forest, barely able to get between some of the trees the Jeep had gone between.

The Jeep was as wide as the Suburban, but barely half as long. The driver of the Jeep had underestimated the maneuverability of the Suburban. Though he had to go slow, Neal took the Suburban everywhere the Jeep went, using the rear steering to swing the rear of the truck around into a straight shot in the tightest of the turns.

Neal began to wonder if he shouldn’t just get out and run to try to catch up with the Jeep, the going was so slow. But he kept getting glimpses of the Jeep not that far ahead of him. Every once in a while a shot would ring out, but Neal never saw where any of them went. None hit the Suburban, so he didn’t care about the others.

Almost ready to try a quick one handled shot with the AUG, the Jeep broke into one of the small clearings that were located here and there on

Neal's twenty-six acres. Except, Neal suddenly realized, they were now on State land, not his.

He almost stopped, but another shot came and it hit the snorkel pipe running down the windshield post. So Neal gunned the Suburban again and burst out of the forest not far behind the Jeep. The man shooting was standing in the front passenger seat, trying to brace against the highly modified Jeep's roll cage. But the terrain was just too rough for any kind of accuracy.

The man suddenly dropped the rifle he'd been using to grab onto the roll cage when he almost fell out of the Jeep when the driver swerved sharply. Neal swerved even sharper and made up most of the space between the two vehicles, now approaching at a moderate angle.

Neal floored the accelerator and was able to catch the Jeep enough to put the tree pusher roller into the left rear corner of the Jeep. With the high lift the Jeep had, and the huge, soft tires, the Jeep bounced, swerved, bounced twice more and then went tumbling, tires and suspension parts going flying, in best monster truck racing fashion.

The Jeep passenger, much like the last motorcyclist, tumbled with the Jeep, finally being flipped twenty feet away as the vehicle came to a stop, lying on the passenger side. Neal stopped the Suburban and ran forward to the Jeep, drawing his Glock as he did so, the AUG having slid off the passenger seat of the truck to land on the floor.

Neal slowed down when he got close to the Jeep. The way the driver was hanging in the harness, Neal was sure he was dead. Sure enough, when Neal stepped up and checked, the man was dead from a broken neck.

Running over to where the Jeep passenger had landed, Neal checked him, too. There was no way to tell what had actually killed him. The body was a limp mass of pink, bloody flesh. Worried about Chuck, Neal

quickly went back to the Suburban and headed back to check on him. Dwayne was already there, tending to the injured ankle.

Neal got out the Suburban's extensive first-aid kit and handed it to Dwayne. Neal had taken some training, but Dwayne seemed to know exactly what to do for the dangerous injury. "You have narcotics in here! Morphine! And antibiotics! Even Tamiflu!" Dwayne said, taking out an all-in-one blood stopper type bandage.

"I knew a good doctor. He set me up for bad times."

"Well, good. This will help. He's going to be in a lot of pain for a little while. I got to tell you, Chuck. You're one lucky man."

"Oh, yeah?" Chuck groaned, "How do you figure that?"

"Bullet went right between the tibia and fibula and out the back side. You lost some blood, but Neal has some Normal Saline Solution we can get into you to expand your blood and reduce shock. But I can't do that out here. Neal, let's get him in the back of the Suburban. This is going to hurt, Chuck."

"Oh... Yeah... Any chance of that morphine yet?"

"Not yet," Dwayne said. "Soon. Hang in there, Uncle Chuck."

Neal helped Dwayne get Chuck into the back of the Suburban, ran back for the first-aid kit, and then drove carefully back to the compound. Neal helped Dwayne again, to get Chuck into the trailer he shared with a couple of others.

"I'll go get Elizabeth and the others. I sent them down to the tunnel."

Dwayne's eyes cut over to Neal, and then back, without saying anything. Neal would find out soon enough.

And Neal did. He trotted all the way to the tunnel. When he knocked on the roll-up door and yelled, "It's me! Neal! Open up."

As soon as the door lifted and he saw the look on Elizabeth's face and in her eyes he cringed. "Uh... Everything is all right... Except Chuck. He's been shot."

At the multiple cries of alarm, Neal quickly added. "In the lower leg. Dwayne says he'll be fine."

Totally ignoring Neal, Elizabeth turned to the others and said. "Come along. Here, Ellie. Let me take little June." With a rifle over one shoulder and the baby in her arms, Elizabeth led the way back to the compound, David bringing up the rear, carrying one of the rifles.

Following Elizabeth's lead, the other Magnews ignored Neal and he went about seeing to the animals and the garden. Dwayne was waiting for him at the Lusby when Neal finally went back there.

"He's going to be fine, Neal. You've got a good first-aid kit and I'm a good medic. Between the two, things will be fine. And it's not your fault."

"I think Elizabeth and the others think it is."

There was a wry smile on Dwayne's face when he said, "Oh, she and the other adults understand how Chuck got shot and don't blame you after I explained what happened. It's the not knowing about the tunnel that has her so upset."

Neal got a slightly stubborn look on his face. "Well, now see here, I don't..."

Dwayne lifted a hand and smiled. "Hey. Don't tell me. I knew about it. I

got no quarrel with you.”

Neal fell silent. “Of course not. Sorry. Oh. There is a pair of crutches on one of the pallets in the tunnel. Get them whenever Chuck needs them.”

“Sure thing, pal. Good luck.”

“Good luck? With what?”

Again that smile. “Whatever.” A small wave and Dwayne was walking away.

Neal turned and almost stomped into the Lusby. And almost banged pans around to fix his supper. And almost ate it before he covered the bowl and put it in the little fridge, undressed, and went to bed.

Dwayne went with him early the next morning to take care of the remains of the attackers. It was something of a grisly task. Neal was driving the Toolcat with the backhoe attached and dug the graves close to where they bodies were.

They stripped the body of the first attacker of anything useful, rolled him into his grave and Neal filled it back in with the backhoe while Dwayne watched. Dwayne rode the utility bed of the Toolcat and they went to the next body.

Two of the motorcycles were destroyed beyond repair, but would give replacement and repair parts for the other two. All four were loaded into the bed of the Toolcat. They would deal with the Jeep later.

It took a while and both were dirty and more than a bit depressed when they came back to the compound and split off, each to take a shower and wash some of the dirt and blood and bad feelings away with hot water and soap.

Neal didn't see Elizabeth for several days. At least not to talk to. She seemed to be in his peripheral vision half the time, but when he turned in her direction she was gone already or walking away.

Then one day she was putting away some tools in one of Neal's log sheds and Neal came out of the Lusby and walked around it to go to the shed himself. "Oh!" Elizabeth said, quite startled. "I didn't think you were in there."

"Just came back to get... Doesn't matter. Elizabeth, why have you been avoiding me?"

"I think you know," she replied, her eyes darting to his and then away.

"The tunnel... But I had you and the rest of your family go there so they would be safe!"

"Yes, of course," Elizabeth replied. "But why didn't I... why didn't we know about it beforehand?" Again her eyes cut to Neal's and this time they stayed there.

Neal almost told her that Dwayne knew about it, but decided that would just get Dwayne in trouble and not help the situation. Instead he said, "Because... Because I'm a miser and a hermit! And it is simply none of your business what I do or what secrets I have!" It was much harsher than he intended, out of frustration that Elizabeth wasn't even trying to understand. At least the way Neal saw it.

"I see," Elizabeth said softly, her eyes leaving Neal's. "I thought... Well, it doesn't matter what I thought. I was wrong. Excuse me. I need to get back to work."

She stood there, head down, waiting for Neal to move. Neal wracked his brains for words to correct what he'd done, but none came. He stepped aside and watched Elizabeth walk away.

When they had their first good picking a few weeks later, Elizabeth ignored him as the mini-van, Suburban, and trailer were loaded with boxes and baskets of fresh produce, and several cases of home-canned items. She got into the mini-van with David, along with two of the other women of the group.

Dwayne looked at Neal. He was watching Elizabeth. “Come on,” Dwayne said. “We don’t want them to get too far ahead of us.”

“The gate will stop them.”

“I don’t know,” Dwayne replied, controlling his slight smile. “We still haven’t gotten around to fixing that fence. They might just go through there.”

Neal started, and then hurriedly climbed into the Suburban. Dwayne had to move quickly to get in and get the passenger door closed before Neal put the Suburban in gear and headed after the mini-van.

Those locals that had survived the winter were adjusting to the PAW life. There were many more useful options in the way of trade goods as people learned what was useful and what was not.

There were a few people willing to take gold and silver coins, though none would take bullion bars of either metal. Only easily recognized, small metal content coins. Part of the reason that most of the trades were small. The large amounts of value held in multi-ounce silver and gold bars just weren’t a viable trade medium. Yet.

Most people still wanted goods for goods, goods for services, services for goods, or services for services. The deal Neal had made with David, as head of the Magnew clan, was that Neal would take his share of production directly from them at the compound. Any excess was the Magnews to do with as they chose.

With the secret out about the tunnel and its contents, which had been thoroughly inspected by Elizabeth and the others when they were inside during the attempted attack, Neal began to break out a few of those items and use them for trade purposes.

Neal wondered if Elizabeth realized that most of what he was now bringing to light could not have been effectively used or traded away until after things settled down some. Like they were now.

One of the items, in particular, was a complete bio-diesel production batch plant, with a large store of necessary chemicals to make forty-five gallon batches of diesel for years to come. Neal had even included an oil press to make useable oil from a wide variety of oil crops, when oil salvaged from local restaurants ran out.

What he'd been waiting for was a local farmer with both the means and interest to use the equipment and grow the oil crops, for which Neal had plenty of seed. He was able to cut a deal that day that would provide an ongoing supply of bio-diesel for Neal, plus one calf a year to fatten and butcher, and the regular services of a bull if Neal could find a milk cow. The farmer would furnish supplemental grain to feed the two animals, for a supply of farm hands spring and fall, for planting and harvesting.

Neal talked it over with David. Since the Magnews would be the biggest beneficiaries of the milk and meat, with the family's agreement, David told Neal to make the deal.

David continued to offer prayer services each time he went to Sullivan, and Dwayne began to do a little medical work, using improvised and adapted materials, along with some of the medical equipment Neal had in storage. He hooked up with a young woman that was knowledgeable of alternative healing practices, including the use of medicinal plants.

Purity was ecstatic when Neal suggested Dwayne ask her to come up to

the compound to take a look at his guerrilla garden, which included many naturally occurring useful plants, as well as many that he planted or transplanted to the property. Between her own garden, and this wild garden, Purity told Dwayne that she would be able to make a wide variety of preventatives and treatments.

Neal offered up some 190 proof Everclear, beeswax, petroleum jelly, mineral oil, vegetable oil, vegetable shortening, baby oil, dry bentonite clay dust, and even a small water distillation still to make distilled water for the production of remedies using herbs and minerals.

One more project, that gave the Magnews more mobility and therefore more independence, was the construction of three wood gas generators. Neal had stocked the key components and plenty of welding rod in sealed cans, to make as many as ten of them.

The three that a local welder made for some food and a little gold went on the mini-van, the second pickup truck and the SUV. All three were gasoline powered and relatively easy to adapt by another local man. He was a certified mechanic, but with some jack-leg skills.

All attempts to get the Magnews Dodge diesel truck running were fruitless. No parts could be found to replace the electronic modules fried by the EMP and it was deemed too difficult to try to convert to non-electronic operation, since other vehicles were available.

Neal didn't know for sure, but suspected that there had been considerable debate among the Magnews on whether to accept Neal's largess in getting the vehicles up and running on a sustained basis. Elizabeth didn't seem at all thrilled when one, then another, and finally the third vehicle was demonstrated over the period of a month.

Neal was out hunting, for something to do one early fall day, and found himself thinking about his family. He hadn't done so in a long time. Neal felt bad about the lapse, and then worse when his thoughts turned

to Elizabeth.

“So much for you being a miser or a hermit,” he said aloud, his eyes not seeing the rabbit that hopped rapidly past him sixty feet away.

“Time to do something. Something else. Something where you don’t have to deal with people on a daily basis like you do now.” Neal didn’t even think about just hiding away in the cave for days on end.

“What I should do,” he said to the forest, “is become a nomad. Load up the Suburban... No. Not even take the Suburban. Might be too difficult to get fuel.” Neal smiled a rather sad smile. “I can use the Cabela’s game cart. It’ll carry more than enough for camping and some trade goods that don’t take up much space. Hunt and fish along the way. Do a little trading for the necessities. Just see what the good old USA has become.”

Neal began to implement his plan immediately. He stood up, the hunt forgotten, and walked back to the Lusby, putting the Fünfling in the holders he’d put on the wall to keep it out of the way. He pulled out his computer from its case, plugged it in, and fired it up.

A few hours of updating the inventories stored on the computer, and a thorough study of what he had, Neal began to make a list. It took him three nights of carefully accessing the cave to get out everything he wanted to take with him, and another day to get the game cart and his big Kifaru EMR backpack packed the way he wanted it.

He rested up another day, wrote a long letter and sealed it in an envelope he put handy, and turned in for what he thought would probably be his last night on the property. It was early the next morning when Neal left the Lusby, fired up the Suburban and moved it and the utility trailer that was still attached from its last use to the tunnel.

When he got back to the compound, he saw David and Dwayne getting the trench fire going for the day’s canning. He was both pleased and a

little disappointed that Elizabeth wasn't with them.

Neal, wearing the EMR pack, the BM-59 riding out of the way in the gun carrier of the Kifaru pack, he uncovered the game cart where he'd concealed it from casual view and walked down to join David and Dwayne for a moment. He handed David the sealed letter and said, "If things ever get really bad... serious... desperate, you know... open that up. It has useable information."

"Going somewhere?" Dwayne asked softly.

"Yeah. Thought I'd go see how others are faring."

"Want someone to go along? Wouldn't take me but a..."

"Sorry Dwayne. This is a solo trip. But thanks. Oh. There is one thing you can do for me. There's a propane tank with a wet leg. You can fill up the one-hundred pound tanks out of it." Neal gave Dwayne specific directions on how to find the tank.

Neal turned away, without offering to shake hands. Both hands on the pull bar of the heavily loaded cart behind him, he walked away without another word. He didn't see Elizabeth come out of the motor home, speak to David, and then run after him for several steps. He didn't see her stop and look forlornly after him, and then turn back to the camp, a totally dejected look on her face.

The Hermit - Chapter 4

Neal controlled his steps initially, fighting the urge to up his speed until he was running. "I am not running away!" he said aloud. "I'm just changing my lifestyle! I'm a nomad now." So he made a little less distance than he might have that first day. He took it pretty easy the

second day, too, to let his muscles adjust to the new level of constant activity.

He had no exact destination in mind at first, but quickly decided that just random walking wasn't going to work for him. Neal decided to check out sources of salt in Arkansas near Arkadelphia. While there was still plenty stored in the tunnel and especially in the cave, having a future source would be a good idea, for use, and for trading.

In a week Neal's body was hardened to the trail. Concerned with security, Neal used the old method of stopping and preparing an evening meal fairly early at one spot, and then traveling a bit further before making camp, so as not to be tracked to a camp by fire or cooking odors.

He seldom used his fully enclosed tent, using a Baker style tent made from Siltarp material. Neal liked the open feeling and being able to see and hear what was going on outside. With no-see-um netting for the opening, he was comfortable even when the bugs were flying, which seemed all the time.

If need be, though it would compromise security somewhat, he could use the light tent in cool weather by having a small fire in front of tent opening.

In no particular hurry, Neal often took a day or two to hunt for game. He conserved his stored supplies as much as possible, depending on a mostly fresh meat diet to keep him healthy. Since hunting seasons were thing of the past, Neal took what game, birds, and fish he could, though he did avoid taking any deer fawns or obviously pregnant does, never taking more of anything than he could consume before the remainder spoiled.

He saw fewer people than he expected, even staying off the beaten track the way he was. Neal searched for wild edibles, but found he wasn't as adept at identifying them without a manual in hand as he thought he

would be.

An alternative presented itself to him and Neal took full advantage of it, while still maintaining a high level of security. There were abandoned, isolated, houses, farms, and ranches all along the route he was taking. Rather than looking for wild foods, he harvested fresh fruits, vegetables, nuts, and berries from existing orchards and gardens. Even some of the hybrid stock vegetables had volunteered as one of the original varieties the hybrid was based on. Some were fine, others inedible or of little or no production.

With the society back to primarily non-mechanized agrarian way of life, labor was in great demand. Neal was often able to supplement his food with good home cooked meals, along with the occasional score of jerky or dehydrated fruits and vegetables, by lying over and working for a few days at some of the working farms he ran across.

Though people were cautious, the early days of savagery seemed to be over. Not that there weren't brigands and such out there, for there were, one didn't have to worry too much about close neighbors turning on them for their supplies. There weren't that many close neighbors to start with, and those that there were, were much more inclined to cooperate in defense than totally isolate themselves.

So Neal made his slow way southward during the remaining days of summer and early fall. He was still debating whether to try and find a job on a farm or ranch where he could winter over, or try to continue his journey during the late fall and winter months. Though already well into Arkansas, he was expecting the weather to be as unstable and severe as it had the previous year, whether due to the effects of global warming, nuclear winter, or natural climate change.

The decision was made for him when he tripped and fell, cracking at least three ribs when the heavy game cart ran over him when he was looking for a good place to camp for a while and hunt just off Highway

95 on the Little Red River not far from Scotland, Arkansas.

He wouldn't be going any distance at all until the ribs healed. He managed to wrap his chest with an Ace bandage from his first-aid kit, and slowly maneuver the game cart to an acceptable spot on the river for a semi-permanent camp. He had to stop and rest and recover from the pain many times before the cart was moved and the camp set up.

Only when the camp was ready to be occupied did Neal dig into the first-aid kit again and take one of the prescription painkillers he'd obtained from the cooperative doctor he'd found when first getting into preps.

He had the Mountain Hardwear Trango 3.1 three-person, four-season tent set up, with the Baker tent set up facing it so he could keep his gear under cover. Though it was exceeding painful, Neal managed to take a deer a few days after he set up camp and set about jerking the meat. It was a slow process as cutting the meat was hard on his ribs.

Neal set out limb lines in the river and supplemented his red meat with fresh fish, and the occasional game bird. Each time he fired the Fünfling, except the .22 Hornet barrel, Neal wondered if he was hurting his ribs more than he was getting in return.

He had to have meat to live, so he took the pain and delayed healing in stride, tapering off the painkiller and going to willow bark tea to control the pain. It was nasty tasting stuff, but at least partially effective for the minor pain he was in when at rest. Fortunately, there was a willow tree growing on the river, right near his camp.

Lonely, hurting, and depressed, the anniversary of the death of his family was a difficult day for Neal. He stayed in the Trango 3.1 except to use the bathroom, consuming nothing except three cups of the bitter willow root tea.

Neal managed to pull himself out of the doldrums over the next few days, taking another deer, again despite the pain, which was marginally less than it had been the first time. He was even able to take a couple of Mallard ducks just before Christmas. One of them, and the last of his fresh potatoes was Christmas dinner.

With the passing of January First of the New Year, Neal began to get out a bit more. He was still keeping his ribs wrapped and was very protective of them, but he wanted to get some exercise, to at least get his legs in shape for the journey he would continue as soon as he thought the weather had broken.

March first and Neal was packing up camp, with only a few twitches from his cracked ribs. He only made a few miles that day, but was happy to be on the move again. The next day Neal began exploring areas on the back roads, looking for an abandoned place with fruit trees or volunteer garden.

It took him a few days to find what he was looking for, but when he found it, the place was a mother lode. There were plenty of root vegetables that had wintered over in the ground. Neal took the time to stock up.

When he checked the house, with crossed fingers, he found his hopes for home canned food only partially fulfilled. Most of the wet pack canning jars had frozen during this or previous winters and burst. Only the jams and jellies had survived.

But the owners of the place had not only wet pack canned in jars, they had dehydrated much of the bounty of their garden, orchard, and berry patch, and stored them in canning jars, Ziploc bags, and vacuum sealed bags, depending on the item.

Neal was surprised the place hadn't been salvaged before, but was thankful it hadn't been. Again, he took his time and stocked up

selectively, there being more than he could carry. Rather than carry the heavy glass jars, he transferred the contents of those items in jars he wanted to Ziploc freezer bags, of which the kitchen was well stocked. That included quite a bit of what Neal was sure was beef jerky. It was mostly teriyaki flavor, or peppered, neither of which he particularly cared for. But he took it all, too. The only glass jars he took were the small jars of jelly, jam, and preserves. There were four cases of them.

He added to his trade goods several boxes of canning lids, a couple of bags of sugar, some packages of pectin, packets of yeast, and over a hundred packets of seeds, a few of which were open-pollinated types.

After two days at the place, Neal called it good and got back on the road, the game cart as well stocked and heavy as it had been when he left his property.

Neal stayed well west of Little Rock, which had taken a nuke, but moved a bit closer when his keychain radiation alarm began to occasionally let out a beep when he was east of Fort Smith. It must have taken a nuke too and he was passing through the fallout zone.

The alarm only sounded occasionally, indicating a presence of radiation, but it wasn't at a level where Neal worried about it. He just edged east and then back west as he continued on his way to Arkadelphia.

Once he quit having trouble with his ribs, Neal went looking for operating farms again, to trade labor for whatever he could get out of the trade, once adding slightly to his gold and silver coins supply, which was stashed all over his person and all through his equipment. When the spring planting season was done, Neal continued south, until he picked up Interstate 30 West. The road was actually headed southwest on the stretch he was on, but Arkadelphia was just off the Interstate about half way between what was left of Little Rock and Texarkana.

Neal left the Interstate often during the summer trip, to hunt, but usually

got back on it for the easy travel. He was again in good shape and could make several miles a day, on his travel days. He began to see other people on the Interstate, many, like him, with a cart, though most carried just a pack. Some had horses, but were mostly walking, the horses carrying their possessions.

A couple of cars and trucks, under their own power, passed them by, as did three loaded down pickup trucks being pulled by six horses each. There were two people in cab of the first one, one handling the horses' reins from the passenger seat through the windshield opening while the other person steered the truck. The other two trucks were crew cabs and had five or six people in each.

Some of the people were very standoffish, but there were a few that didn't seem to know how to stop talking if there was anyone within earshot, and, Neal suspected, even when no one was.

He traveled a couple days with a family group that was traveling to Texarkana to be with additional family that had a working farm.

Many of the other people were doing similar, though some were just getting away from the colder winters up north, headed for possibilities in the rolling country of east Texas.

Neal quickly tired of the annoyances of other people and left the Interstate to travel the side roads the rest of the way to Arkadelphia. Besides, he'd seen quite a few people eyeing his cart and gear when he made camp with others. Better to travel alone, he decided.

He made a few inquiries when he got to Arkadelphia and learned where a small salt recovery operation was going on. He went out and signed up for the rest of the summer, for eats and a share of salt.

Neal set up camp near the production facility and socialized very little. He got permission to hunt on the land. It was owned by the same family

that ran the salt operation. He was able to trade the occasional bird, rabbit or squirrel he got for fresh foods from a couple of the other men that worked at the salt works, will still keeping himself in fresh meat. The jars of jellies and jams were good trade items, too. He kept the strawberry and blackberry preserves for himself.

Neal would have worked for a while longer that summer, but some of the owner's family came in from Illinois and Neal was told he was no longer needed. They did let him keep his salt on the books, to be picked up a portion at a time over the next few years. He took all he could carry with him, for trading.

For somewhere else to go, so he would have a specific destination in mind, Neal thought about various needs survivors of the war would need or want. Alcohol was pretty easy to make. Already there were stills set up here and there. At least a few home beer brewers had survived, with their equipment. Beer was available in certain areas. Ditto wine making. There was another major vice that couldn't be made or grown just anywhere. Tobacco. Never a user himself, Neal knew it was important to other people. If he remembered one of the PAW stories on the Internet, Lake City, South Carolina had a tobacco festival. What better place to find the stuff than there.

"South Carolina, here I come," Neal said as he left the salt works. He knew he couldn't make it before winter set in, and despite being this far south, Neal decided to head for the Mississippi, get across it, and then camp for the winter by the river. Consulting the atlas he carried, Neal decided to try to cross at Helena, Arkansas. It was the most direct route from where he was to where he was going.

Just below the maximum weight on the game cart and maxed out in the Kifaru EMR, Neal began his southeastward trek across Arkansas. He kept the pace up, stopping only to hunt once in a while, and to check uninhabited, abandoned farms for produce, fruits, nuts, and berries.

He was pleased with the progress he was making. Staying supplied with food just this much further south than his property was easier. More plants came up voluntarily than they did further north.

He ran into the first serious problem on the trip, other than the cracked ribs, while passing south of Monticello, Arkansas. He had cut across country and was about to cross US 495 when four vehicles, two pickup trucks, an H-3 Hummer, and a semi truck with a reefer trailer, came barreling down the highway. The H-3 was in the lead.

Neal stepped back to wait for the vehicles to pass. But they began to slow down and Neal edged back further. The H-3 stopped and the window went down.

“Who are you?” asked the driver.

“Name’s Neal Grant. I’m passing through, headed for South Carolina.”

“Quite a rig you got there. Though not to be traveling all that way. Why don’t you climb aboard one of the pickups and we’ll take you in to Monticello and see if we can’t work out a better way to get you to South Carolina.”

“I’ll pass,” Neal said. “I’m doing fine on my own.”

“I think I said for you to get in the truck.” The voice was suddenly hard and cold. Neal caught the movement out of the corner of his eyes as the driver of the semi got down out of the cab of the truck and started to move up to the H-3.

“I’m not looking for trouble,” Neal said, taking a step back, leaving the game cart where it was. His right hand went to the BM-59, on the narrow part of the stock behind the receiver. His left hand went to the release strap of the gun bearer assembly.

The semi truck driver reached for a pistol stuck cross draw fashion in the front of his pants. Neal didn't wait. He didn't know what these people were up to, but it was certainly not good.

A pull of the release strap and a quick move with his right hand and the butt of the BM-59 came out of the gun bearer pocket and Neal had the gun in his hands before the man could get the pistol clear of his pants.

The safety was flicked forward in the trigger guard and Neal snapped shot a round at the semi-truck driver. It took him in the belly and he fell forward, grabbing his stomach and screaming.

Neal heard a shot come from the H-3, but it didn't hit him and he didn't know where it went. He hit the ground and fired back, shooting at the door of the vehicle, hoping to hit the man through the sheet metal with the powerful .308 rounds.

The H-3 suddenly surged forward and off the pavement and added the sound of its horn blowing to that of the screaming man. Dirt splashed into his face from a bullet impact and Neal tried to roll over, but the EMR pack kept him from it. He snapped the quick release buckles of the pack and let it fall off so he could roll the other way as another bullet whizzed past his head. He felt it strike his hip, but he was in the process of firing back at the driver of one of the pickups that was running toward him, firing a double action revolver as fast as he could at Neal.

A fraction of a second and Neal had the peep sight centered on the man's chest. He squeezed the trigger, and the man's momentum carried him half a step further before he plowed into the ground like a bag of corn.

The other truck suddenly took off, staying on the far side of the other vehicles. Neal tried several shots, but wasn't able to hit the driver, though he did think he hit the truck somewhere. Neal scanned the area from his prone position, but there were no signs of any further

movement.

Slowly Neal stood up, wincing at the stab of pain in his right hip. But he was able to move so he didn't worry about it for the moment. He went to check the semi-truck driver. The man had quit screaming. He was unconscious, and Neal doubted he had long to live.

Neal checked the man from the pickup next. He was dead of the shot in his chest. BM-59 at the ready, Neal went to check on the pickup. Suddenly he realized the horn had quit sounding and he crouched down, scanning the area around the H-3 Hummer.

Nothing happened and Neal rose, approaching the H-3 on the driver's side very carefully. He made a near fatal mistake when he moved forward another step and the door of the H-3 swung open rapidly, catching the barrel of the BM-59 and knocking it from Neal's hands.

Neal began to back pedal, drawing the Glock from the holster on his pant's belt. But the man came boiling out of the H-3, his face covered in blood, but without a gun. However bad the big man was hurt he still had enough life in him to kick the Glock free, spinning Neal around in the process. Neal went down and the man began to kick and stomp on him.

Half crawling, half rolling away, Neal scrabbled at the left leg of his pants, raising it just enough to grab the Bond Derringer from an ankle holster. He lifted it up and fired the first barrel point blank into the man's chest as he was raising his foot to stomp Neal in the face.

The man crumbled, landing across Neal's body. It took a concerted effort to roll him off, but Neal was finally able to get the body rolled off of his own. Taking a minute to look around and catch his breath, Neal then picked up and re-holstered the Glock, and then picked up the BM-59. He checked it carefully. It was fully operable. Next Neal checked the H-3. There was no one else in it.

But he did find a small collection of firearms and ammunition, some personal items, and a cooler half filled with food. And was pretty sure he'd figured out what had happened to the man. The .308 bullet from Neal's snap shot with the BM-59 had apparently glanced off the customized Colt 1911 clone, ruining it. Bits of bullet and metal from the gun had peppered the man's face. The ruined gun was on the floorboard of the H-3.

Going to the pickup behind the semi, Neal moved more carefully, having learned a painful and dangerous lesson. There was no one else in the pickup, either. There were several containers in the back. A check of the semi truck cab and Neal decided there wasn't anyone else around. The other pick up was long gone.

Neal searched the bodies last, gathering up their weapons and ammunition. Not until he searched the big man from the H-3 did Neal find anything extraordinary. The first two men had a few fractional ounce gold coins on them, plus two one-ounce coins, too, but Neal didn't think that too odd. The big man, however, had two coin tubes in his pocket. Both were full of one ounce Krugerrands. Neal pocketed them, thinking, "Something is not right here."

He went back to the H-3 and tossed the guns and ammo he'd taken off the others inside, and then took what he wanted of the guns and ammunition already in the H-3. He sat down and ate the sandwiches and fruit that were in the cooler.

Finally, being as careful as he knew how, Neal opened the rear doors of the reefer trailer and almost fired into the mass of people grouped near the doors. But there were no shots and no sign of anyone being armed. Neal stepped back and was suddenly almost mobbed by the group of people that hurriedly got down out of the truck.

"Man! You have saved our lives!" said one of the men. "When we stopped we were afraid of what was happening. Couldn't you hear us

pounding and yelling?”

Neal shook his head. “It’s a reefer. Really good insulation. He felt bad about having left them in there all the extra time. “What is going on, here?” Neal asked.

“Slavery,” the man said, “Pure and simple and evil in all its ways. You’ve just freed all of us from a slave trader. He and his boys rounded us up one or two at a time over the last week all around and in Monticello. We were destined to be somewhere in Louisiana to work a sugar plantation. The slavers made no bones about what was going to happen to some of the women, either. Said he’d already collected half his pay for a group this size.”

One of the women came up to Neal then and was barely able to ask, “Do you have water? Some of us haven’t had water for two days.”

Neal had seen containers in the back of the pickup and indicated so. The entire group surrounded the truck and soon people were drinking and eating their fill from the supplies contained in the back of the truck.

Neal had a feeling the supplies, that were consumed completely, had probably been slated for the entire trip. Not everyone would have survived, he was sure. The man that had first spoken agreed. “Some of us would have died if you hadn’t intervened. How did you know what was going on? And where are the rest of your people.” He was looking around curiously.

“Didn’t. Just happened to be crossing the road when the convoy stopped and tried to take me. And it’s just me. No people involved.”

“You took them all on by yourself?” asked the man.

“Had too,” Neal replied. “They were trying to get me to stow my gear and ride with them. Look. The vehicles should all run. Why don’t you

load up and go back home? I'm sure you have family and friends worried about you."

"You come with us," said another of the men. Our people will want to reward you."

Neal shook his head. "I took some of their weapons and ammunition. Spoils of war. That's all I want. That and to get away from here."

The first man that had spoken reached out and shook Neal's hand. "I'm Ben Cain. You ever come back this way, look me up. I'll do whatever I can for you."

"I'm fine," Neal replied, beginning to feel the effects of the bullet wound in his hip, and the fight with the big guy from the H-3.

Neal watched from the shoulder of the road as the three vehicles were turned around, and people loaded up, this time leaving the trailer doors latched open for those that couldn't fit in the H-3, pickup, or cab of the semi truck.

When they went out of sight, going northward, Neal took up the game cart and hurried away from the spot of the event. He stopped for the evening and finally treated the bullet burn on his hip. It had bled a bit, which had dried, covering the wound.

Neal used a couple of Povidone/Iodine (Betadine) scrub pads to clean the wound. He smeared on some triple antibiotic ointment, and put a small patch bandage over it. The most annoying thing was he was going to have to sew a patch on his pants where the bullet had cut a slit in them.

He fell asleep that night, berating himself for the fact that once again he'd been careless and almost lost his life. His family wanted him with them through natural causes he was sure, not through stupidity.

Stiff and sore, still angry at himself, Neal packed up camp the next morning and headed east and slightly south, headed for the US Highway 82 Mississippi River Bridge. He took it slow for a few days, stopping every three or four days to hunt for small game.

It was all of three weeks before Neal allowed himself to make contact with other humans again. He found another small town with a weekly trading day. He just happened to be there on the right day and saw several people traveling to the location. He joined the flow and was immediately engaged in conversation with a young man carrying a large backpack that drew up beside him and slowed his pace to match Neal's.

"Nice rig there, mister. You aiming to do some trading? I'd like to trade you for the cart. What are you asking?"

"Cart isn't for sale or trade," Neal said firmly. "As for trading, yes I'd like to do a little."

"What'cha trading?"

"I think I'd rather wait to get to where we're going before I start the haggling. Don't want to stop out here in the middle of everything and open up, just to repack and do it again at the trade center. Where is it, by the way? In case we get separated."

"I'll keep you on the right track," said the young man. "But to be safe, I guess, it's at the grocery store in town."

"Seems like they usually are," Neal replied, shifting the EMR pack on his back slightly and changing his grip on the game cart.

"My name is Bart, by the way," said the man. "Bart Callahan. What's yours?"

“Neal Grant.”

“Big pack. What kind is it? Where’d you get it? Did you have it before the war? Cool the way you can carry your rifle.”

Neal controlled his sigh at Bart’s constant chatter. “It’s a Kifaru EMR. Some of the pouches are from other companies. Got it shortly before the war. And yes, the gun bearer option makes it ideal for the way I travel.”

“You interested in a trade for it? I’d go pretty high, for a pack like that. My Kelty is good, but that one is bigger.”

“Same as the game cart, Bart. Not for sale or trade. I’d be foolish to trade away my means of carrying my goods, now wouldn’t I?”

“Yeah. Just rattling. People tell me I do that. Where you from? Where you going?”

“Central Missouri. Headed for South Carolina to see what I can find there.”

“Wow! That’s a long way to travel! How do you live? Where do you get your food? Do you hunt? You’re not one of those that rob people, are you? You don’t look like it.”

“No, I am not one of those that rob people!” Neal said, his annoyance at the question obvious.

“Of course not. Sorry. Just there are some of them around.”

“I know.”

“What about the other? How do you live? Where do you get your food? Do you hunt?”

“Yes. I just live out of my pack and the cart. I hunt. Stop and work for food sometimes. Forage for wild foods and sometimes get things from volunteer gardens at abandoned farms.”

“Wow! Some life! Just living off the land like that. Don’t know if I could do it.”

“I wouldn’t recommend it to anyone,” Neal said. “It suits me. Most people are much better off with a secure home base.”

“Mine is my parents’ farm. We do okay. But it sure would be interesting to see some of the country after the war. What have you found?”

“Good things and bad,” Neal replied. “Same as before, with radiation dangers. Good people, bad people, less of the first, more of the latter.”

“Yeah. Here about some of those bad people, like I said before. You run into any of them? What happened? You’re here. Must have gone okay, if you did.”

“I have run into some of the bad and have some scars to prove it. It’s not something I recommend you go out looking for.”

“Not me,” said Bart. “I’m kind of a chicken, I guess.” He tapped the Ruger 10/22 slung over his left shoulder. “Just have the Ruger, anyway. Not much to take on a bunch of bad guys with. Sure get my share of rabbits and squirrels with it, though. What kind of gun is that? Looks kind of like an M-14. Do you hunt with it?”

“It’s a Berretta BM-59. Similar to the M-14. I don’t really hunt with it, though I did take a deer once when it jumped out ahead of me on the trail. I have another gun I use for hunting.”

“What is it? Another rifle? A shotgun? I want to get a shotgun so I can

get birds better. Right now I can only get them if they're sitting."

"It's a specialized hunting gun called a Fünfling. Has three rifle barrels and two shotgun barrels."

"Holy cow! I never heard of something like that. You mean separate barrels or all together? Is it heavy? What caliber? Do you want to trade it?"

Another slight sigh and Neal responded. "No, it isn't for sale. The barrels are all together. It's a bit heavier than just a rifle or shotgun, but not much. It has two twelve-gauge, three and a half inch chamber barrels, a .375 H&H magnum barrel, a .308 Winchester barrel, and a .22 Hornet barrel. I have some chamber adapters so I can use twenty-gauge and four ten bore shotgun shells in it, too.

"I use the .22 Hornet for small game, the shotgun for small game and wing shooting, the .308 for bigger game. Haven't shot the .375 H&H much, but it's a second shot to back up the .308, and if I ever go north and run into moose or bear or elk, it'll come in handy."

"Wow! Cool! I'd like to get something like that! You get that before the war? How much did it cost? Do you know where there might be another one like that?"

"I got it before the war. It was quite expensive. Don't have a clue where there might be another. They are quite rare. And expensive."

"You must have been rich before the war, then."

"Not really. Well off, I suppose. Just another survivor, now. And the gun is just a shooter. Doesn't matter what it cost before."

"Guess not. Sure sounds nice. Can I see it? When we get to the trade center?"

Neal shook his head. “I doubt it. I probably won’t take it out. Just my trade goods.”

“What do you have to trade? Don’t want to compete with you.”

“A little of this, little of that,” Neal replied. “I’d rather wait and let you take a look when I set up.”

“Sure. No prob. I’ve got mostly some wild game jerky, some beef jerky, some dried fruit and vegetables, honey, cheese, homemade beeswax candles and bayberry candles, and homemade soap.”

“Quite a variety,” Neal said.

“My family has a farm outside of town a ways. You probably passed the driveway on your way. Mom is an herbalist, but she only comes in once a month to trade and treat people. Pop makes the jerky and the cheese. We have a couple of milk cows. I dry the fruits and vegetables with a big solar dehydrator I made. We all work making the candles.”

“Sounds like a very capable family.”

“Yeah. We do okay. So, what about you? Do you have a family?”

“Did. Don’t care to discuss it.” Neal’s voice left no doubt that the subject was off limits. Even Bart saw that.

“Hey! We’re almost there. Right around the next street corner. I want to go get a good spot. I’ll look for you later.” Bart picked up the pace and hurried ahead.

Neal shook his head at the exuberance of youth and maintained his steady pace. He’d get there when he got there, with no strain and no pain. When he did get there, he found a likely place and settled in for

some bartering.

He wasn't looking for anything specific, as he was in decent shape food wise at the moment. But he did have things people wanted, primarily his still considerable supply of salt. He traded small amounts of it for a few things, the most important of which was six pairs of home woven socks. Three pairs of cotton boot socks and three pairs of wool knee high socks.

He picked up another good cotton shirt in his size, and a pair of hair-in rabbit skin, mittens. Neal had several offers for the guns and ammunition he'd picked up from the slavers, but nothing he was interested in accepting in trade.

Bart came by two hours after Neal set up and looked over the few items Neal had sitting out on his trading blanket. "Wow! Salt! We need salt, bad! How much for all of it?"

"You really need to work on your bartering technique Neal told Bart. "Telling someone how badly you need something kind of gives the other guy an advantage, you know."

Looking chagrined, Bart said, rather sadly, "I'm not that good of a trader. Mom and Dad give me a list of things I can accept for our trade goods or give for something else. Ignoring what I said, uh... how much for the salt you have there?"

"You said you had jerky, honey, and cheese?"

Eager now, Bart took off his pack and set it down. He began to take items out, mumbling as he did so. "I traded some of it, and all the vegetables. But there's a lot of hunters and farmers around and the jerky isn't going for much..."

Bart's words faded away when Neal told him, "You're doing it again, Bart. Don't go telling people how bad the market is for something. It

might just be what they are looking for and could be worth much more than someone else would offer.”

“Oh. Yeah.” Bart set several items out on the edge of the blanket, and looked at Neal.

“For half of the salt,” Neal replied to the unasked question.

Bart added pint glass jar of honey to the goods and looked at Neal. When Neal didn’t say anything Bart reached into the pack and set out cloth drawstring bag. “Dried apricots and peaches.”

“Okay,” Neal said. “That’s a bit more than I was needing. What else would you want for what you’re showing there?”

“I don’t see any, but do you have any .22 shells?”

.22’s were one of the things that Neal had been trading for and away over the weeks. “Two fifty round boxes.”

“Okay,” Bart said.

Neal dug into one of the cargo bags on the game cart and took out the ammunition. He set it on the bag of salt. “You’re sure that’s enough?” Neal asked, feeling a little sorry for the young man. He wasn’t a great trader by any means.

“I... uh... don’t know... What else are you offering?”

“Better,” Neal said. “I’ll throw in four pre-1965 silver half dollars.”

“Really?” Bart exclaimed and then quickly controlled himself. “Yes. We have a deal.”

Neal nodded and each took their goods from the blanket and stowed

them away. Neal folded up the blanket and added it to one of the trade goods duffle bags and re-tarped the load on the game cart.

“You want to come back to the farm with me? You said you worked for food sometimes. I’d sure like to see that fun gun, you were talking about.”

“Fünfling. Pronounced Funf ling,” Neal said slowly.

“Yeah. That.”

Neal had no intention of stopping in the area, but found himself saying, “If you think your parents could use the help for a few days, I don’t see why not. I just need to get to the Mississippi before winter sets in.”

Eager again, Bart said, “I’m sure they would. It’s coming up on harvesting and butchering time. We always try to find someone needing work to help out. The river is only a few days away on foot, I’d bet.”

“Perhaps,” Neal replied, knowing it was more like two weeks at his pace. He made a snap decision he hoped he wouldn’t regret. “Sure. Why not. I could use a break from the road for a few days.”

“Great!” Bart said. “Come on. I’ll show you the way.”

“Slow down, Sport,” Neal said. “I have a steady pace that gets me where I want to go. No point in hurrying without a good reason.”

“Sorry. I’m just kind of excited. You’re a lot different than the local guys on their own. Most of them are just interested in my sisters.”

“Sisters?” Neal asked, on the verge of regretting his decision.

“Yeah. Didn’t I say? I have five sisters.”

“No, you didn’t,” Neal said.

“Don’t worry. You’re too old for them, anyway. Cindy is the youngest and she’s only sixteen. Julie is the oldest and she’s just twenty-three. But her husband died and she really doesn’t want to get married again, anyway.”

“I see,” Neal replied, still considering changing his mind. But he couldn’t think of a graceful way out of the situation, so he just followed along behind Bart, going at his own pace. A few minutes later and Bart looked back for Neal. He waited for Neal to catch up and matched his pace to Neal’s.

“It’s going to be so cool to have another guy around. Sometimes sisters can really be a thorn in a guy’s side. You know what I mean?”

“Not really,” Neal replied. “I’m an only child.”

“Too bad. I like having a big family, even if they are sisters. But sometimes a guy needs to talk to another guy. You know what I mean?”

Neal just grunted slightly.

“Yeah. I bet you do. So, did you make some other good trades before you traded with me? I did. Always trade away all the candles. They’re the best. Little surprised the cheese didn’t go before you took it.”

“Not many,” Neal replied to the question before he forgot what the question was. “Cheese usually goes quickly?”

“Yeah. But more people are learning how to make it, I guess. There was someone else trading it today, besides me. At least I was able to trade everything off, thanks to you. Getting this salt will be a big help at the farm.”

“Can’t really have too much salt,” Neal said.

“Yeah. Sugar, too. We need to find more sugar. Still have quite a bit, but like salt, you use a lot around a farm.”

Neal thought about the people he’d freed from slavers. They had been destined for a sugar plantation. Might not be a bad idea to look for a source of sugar. A source not associated with slave labor. But he was on his current journey, with South Carolina at the end of this particular leg. Sugar would wait.

Bart finally fell silent as they got closer to his family’s farm. “You know,” he said, stopping at the end of the driveway that led up to the farm, shielded from view by the trees growing along the road and driveway. “Maybe I should go talk to my Dad before I spring you on the rest of the family.”

Neal sighed. “Not quite the done deal you implied.”

Bart looked sheepish. “I’m almost sure... But I’d better ask, first.”

Neal made himself comfortable just inside the edge of the woods along the road. The EMR leaning against the game cart, Neal did the same. He leaned back and closed his eyes. He came to with a start some time later with Bart’s loud calling of his name ringing in his ears.

“Over here, Bart,” Neal said, getting up. “No need to announce to the world.”

“Oh. Sorry. Thought you might have left. Dad said to bring you on up. You’ll get at least a meal out of it.”

Neal nodded, picked up and shrugged into the Kifaru pack, grabbed the game cart, and went through the gate when Bart opened it. “How do I get myself into these things?” Neal wondered silently as he pulled the

heavy game cart up the slight slope.

They were waiting for him. Mom and Dad, and the five sisters. All looking curiously at Neal as he walked beside Bart.

“Neal Grant, Mr. Callahan,” Neal said, going over to the father. “Mrs. Callahan,” he added after shaking Mr. Callahan’s hand. Mrs. Callahan offered hers, and he shook it, too.

“That’s Cindy, Wendy, Sandy, May, and Julie,” Bart said. Each of the young women nodded in return to Neal’s nod when her name was said.

“Come on into the house,” Mrs. Callahan said. “Supper is almost ready.”

“My gear?” Neal asked.

“I imagine you want to keep it close. Bart, help Neal get the cart up here on the porch. Will that be satisfactory, Neal?” Mr. Callahan asked.

“Yes, of course,” Neal replied, taking one side of the cart and Bart the other. It was a bit heavy to actually pick up and carry, but between the two of them, the cart was eased up the stairs and then rolled over into a corner of the railed porch.

Neal took the BM-59 from the gun bearer, leaned it against the cart and then took off his pack, using it to keep the BM-59 in place. He put his wide brimmed hat on top of the pack. Neal hesitated for a moment, and then pulled the Glock from the holster on his hip and put it in one of the side pouches in the pack.

Neal neither mentioned the two derringers he still wore nor removed them. Mr. Callahan swept an arm slightly for Neal to follow his wife inside. “Your gear will be safe there, Neal,” Mr. Callahan reassured Neal. :Bart, turn the dogs loose.”

“Yes, sir!” Bart said and hopped down off the porch. A few moments later and Neal saw through the open door three Rottweilers run into the front yard. When Bart came up onto the porch the dogs did, too. They immediately went to Neal’s gear and sniffed at it curiously.

“Bart will introduce you to the dogs later,” Mrs. Callahan said, headed off to the kitchen, followed by all five daughters.

“Now, Neal,” Mr. Callahan said, indicating a chair on his left side after he sat down at the head of the dining room table. “Bart tells me you are interested in doing some work for room and board.”

“Yes, sir. Bart said you sometimes take on temporary help during harvest time.”

“That is true, but I’m afraid the room may be difficult, unless you don’t mind staying in the barn. There is no room in the house. Most of the men that have helped in the past were close enough to walk or ride to and from home each day.”

“The barn is fine, I’m sure,” Neal said. “I have an excellent camping setup.”

“You wouldn’t work a while and then let me down, will you? I’d hate to have to try to find someone else on short notice to help me finish the harvest if you left before it is done.”

“I wouldn’t do that sir. As I told Bart, I need to be across the Mississippi before winter sets in, but that won’t be for some time, yet.”

“The board we can do. You can join us for breakfasts and suppers. Lunches are usually just sandwiches and such during the harvesting season.”

“I understand. It really isn’t necessary. I can prepare my own meals if

you prefer, with supplied foodstuffs.”

“No, that is fine. We usually have the hired hand eat with us,” Mrs. Callahan said, returning from the kitchen with a large tureen. The other women all carried in something and then prepared to sit down.

Neal stood politely when the women were ready to sit. Bart hopped up and Mr. Callahan rose as well, though much more slowly than Bart.

“Thank you, Neal. I see you have learned manners in the past,” Mrs. Callahan said, taking her seat as the daughters did, too.

“From my mother,” Neal replied. “A long time ago.”

Fortunately, no one pursued the topic and Neal didn’t have to say he didn’t want to talk about it.

The bowls for the soup were passed around the table, to be filled by Mr. Callahan, and passed back. Then the platter of sliced warm bread, a pitcher of cold milk, made the rounds. When the family clasped hands for Grace Neal joined in without hesitation. He wasn’t going to show any lack of respect to the family’s beliefs.

Neal ate slowly, enjoying the hearty beef and vegetable soup, hot bread, and cold milk. “This is very good, Mrs. Callahan,” he told her halfway through the bowl of soup.

“Just plain old soup,” she said. “But thank you. Pass your bowl and the Mister will ladle you a bit more.”

“No, thank you. I’ve had enough. Can’t afford to start eating too much. Slows down the work.”

“Perhaps a piece of pie to finish with, though, Neal?” asked Mr. Callahan.

“Oh, I think I could manage that.”

The family laughed and Mrs. Callahan and the daughters cleared the table and brought back a large apple pie. Mr. Callahan sliced it, and served as the desert plates went around the table, followed by a pitcher of fresh cream to add to the pie.

“Oh, this is heavenly,” Neal said. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d had a slice of pie with cream.

But supper was over and as the family rose from the table, Neal asked, “May I help with the dishes?”

Mrs. Callahan smiled. “Thank you, Neal, for the offer, but no. I have all the help I need. I’m quite sure the Mister will keep you busy enough not to worry about the dishes.”

“Bart,” said Mr. Callahan, “Take Neal out to the barn and get him settled. Tomorrow is Sunday. We only do what we must on Sunday. Come Monday, breakfast is at five and work begins at six.”

Neal nodded and followed Bart outside. Neal geared up again, to go to the barn. Neal stopped and let the dogs get a good sniff of him while Bart waited at the ready in case of trouble. Happy with the new tenant, the dogs ran off.

It was already getting full dark. There was one lone bulb on at the personnel door of the large barn, and when they went inside, Neal saw a similar bulb, but that was all the light there was in the barn.

The animals stirred slightly at Neal’s and Bart’s presence, but settled down again when Bart took Neal into a small office. “You’ll be staying in here. The generator is only on for a couple hours in the morning and evening. The lights will go out here in a few minutes. There’s the

bathroom over there. Even has a shower, but no hot water here in the barn.

There's no more toilet paper, but we keep sanitized shop cloths... you know... the red ones? Just toss them in the bucket in the bathroom when you're done. Mom soaks them once a week, boils them with some bleach we make up from pool shock chlorine chemical and hangs them out in the sun to dry and finish sanitizing."

"I understand," Neal replied. He reached into his pack and took out a windup flashlight. He gave the crank a few turns and turned on the switch to check it. Plenty of pale white light from the three LED's.

"Wow! That's cool! Saw them advertised before the war. We never got any."

"Does come in handy," Neal said. "Especially during the winter when I can't use the solar charger to charge the batteries for my other lights and electronic gear."

"Wow!" Bart said again. "You've got some really cool stuff!"

"I don't know about how cool it is. It all works for me."

"Well... I'll leave you alone. Breakfast at six in the morning, not five, since it is Sunday."

"I'll see you then," Neal replied. He waited for Bart to leave, used the bathroom, and then went about setting up a camp inside the office. He turned in a few minutes later, his old windup travel alarm set for the next morning.

The situation was similar to what he'd done before, working for food, only somewhat more intense since it was harvest time on a large operating farm. The Callahan family's farm had fruit tree and nut tree

orchards, grape vines, berry patches, small fields of a variety of table vegetables, large fields of wheat, corn, three kinds of dry beans, and canola for oil for bio-diesel.

The animals that the family raised included chickens, milk and beef cattle, and hogs. They had a regular buyer for most of the production. One of the local grocery store owners picked up whatever was available Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays. A little was set aside for Bart's trading ventures.

It was a year round operation, but there was a time in the fall when more than could be sold before spoilage was available in the fields. That time was now. Neal began helping with the harvest and its preservation or storage. There were many twelve to sixteen hour days for him, despite the addition of two more men to help.

There were just so many things to do. Fortunately, with the bio-diesel that Mr. Callahan produced, he was able to run several pieces of diesel powered farm machinery, which helped tremendously. A working farm of this size would not have been possible without it, without dozens of laborers.

His worry about the daughters becoming an issue simply faded away, quickly. They were as busy as any of the men, and didn't fraternize with the farm hands. Bart, despite his relative youth and talkativeness, was skilled at all the farm tasks and was quite an excellent teacher. And very strict when it came to safety issues.

"Only old Doc Drayman and he's about deaf and blind. Doesn't have much left to work with when it comes to medicines. So do it safe and don't get hurt, 'cause even a little injury can become life threatening nowadays."

Bart was equally impressed with Neal's already considerable skills and his ability to learn quickly things that were new to him. Neal could

already dress out a pig as fast as Bart could, and had taken to driving the combine to harvest the canola that was destined for the presses for oil, with the remains stored as winter feed for the stock.

Neal kept an eye on the calendar and the weather. He was afraid he'd waited too long when an early snowstorm blanketed the nearly empty fields with an inch of snow. But Bart asked him to stay one more week, until they finished harvesting the canola and pressed the oil. The family had been good to Neal, so he said he would.

But the day after the last of the oil was collected and the pressed cake added to the others for feed that winter, Neal was packed up and ready to go. An additional factor was driving Neal, besides just the weather. It was approaching the anniversary of his family's death. Being around Bart's happy family during that time was more than Neal wanted to face.

So Neal waved one last time that morning, gripped the game cart handle firmly and headed down the farm driveway, walking beside Bart. Bart unlocked the driveway gate for Neal and stood there watching him stride away without a backward glance.

With a sigh, Bart walked slowly back up the driveway, feeling like he'd just lost a brother. He smiled though, at the memory of Neal showing him the Fünfling, and letting him use it hunting one day. Neal had let slip how much it had cost him, and how much it was worth just before the war.

Neal set a moderate pace, to allow those few muscles he hadn't used on the farm, that he did use traveling, to become used to the road again. But as the weather continued to threaten Neal picked up the pace just a little each day until he was once again putting the miles behind him at his old pace.

He made it to the US Highway 82 bridge over the Mississippi and breathed a sigh of relief. It was still standing. Neal looked over the

bridge abutment on his side. The bridge was still securely attached to the shore.

A freezing rain began as Neal started across the bridge, immediately making footing precarious. Taking small, careful steps, Neal made his way across, the vehicles abandoned on the bridge since the day of the war making it eerie in the near darkness. As soon as Neal was across the bridge he made his way off the highway and found a place to set up his camp near the river. As he set up his standard camp, he wondered if he should have taken the offer to stay at the farm for the winter.

But as he settled in, snug and warm, despite the freezing rain that continued, Neal decided he was better off where he was. Things had been too comfortable there at the end of his stay with the Callahan's.

The hunting was good along the river and Neal stayed where he was through December and early January. When the worst of the weather turned out to be the one ice storm when he'd first arrived, Neal started thinking about moving on in mid-January. Either the weather simply wasn't as bad this year, or it was returning to a more normal pattern, with rains this far south rather than snow.

Neal broke camp and headed east again. He'd checked his atlas and made the decision to stay on US 82 across Mississippi. He'd decide on whether to bypass some of the towns on the route, or go through them, doing a little trading when he could, depending on the circumstances he found as he approached each town.

Neal quickly fell back into the routine of travel, stopping to hunt, doing a little trading, and avoiding trouble. It stayed very cool during the days, falling to just above or below freezing during the nights, with the occasional heavy rain slowing Neal's progress.

Apparently Neal hadn't been quite careful enough and picked up a cold after a trading session he attended in a small town about two-thirds of

the way across the state. He had plenty of supplies so he just set up a long stay camp with both his tent and the leanto set up. He gathered up as much firewood as he could before his cold symptoms became too bad, using his pocket chainsaw to cut more when he couldn't find any more good downed wood.

Then he just holed up and waited the cold out, taking a hot toddy each evening made with a tablespoon or so of 190 proof Everclear he carried in his first-aid kit for the purpose. A little honey in the rose hip tea he made helped soothe his throat and upped his vitamin C intake. But with the isolation, rest, and plenty of liquids, Neal finally got over the cold. He waited another week to regain his strength, and then hit the trail again.

Shortly after reaching the Alabama state line, Neal stayed on US 82 which took him further south than he really wanted, but was worried that Birmingham might have been hit with a nuke. Every once in a while Neal's pocket radiation alarm would chirp and flash for a little while. When it did, Neal kept traveling until it stopped. The radiation was never very high, but Neal didn't want any more exposure than necessary.

He decided to stay on the southern route, bypassing Atlanta by a wide margin. There seemed to be fewer and fewer people, and the radiation alarm sounded off more and more for a while after he passed Atlanta and began to swing back toward the north slightly.

Neal stopped at J. Strom Thurmond Lake for a few days, taking a break to hunt and fish and then dry the meat for future use. He butchered the meat with radioactive contamination in mind, cutting off the meat well away from the bones and not using any of the organ meats he usually ate. He'd been finding plenty of volunteer gardens so his fruit, nut, berry, and vegetable supplies were holding up well.

Neal saw some boats out on the lake, but he stayed out of sight on shore, preferring to maintain his solitude for the moment. He was ready to

leave, but the weather changed the evening before he was planning on going. An unseasonable early and very heavy rain set in. Neal waited it out for the four days it rained, leaving the morning of the fifth day in bright sunshine, not a cloud in sight.

Angling slightly south to avoid Columbia, South Carolina, in case it had been nuked, Neal headed for Lake City. Once past Columbia, he began to make inquiries about tobacco production. He was offered trades, of cigars and pipe tobacco, but since he didn't smoke, he declined. He was after a significant amount for future trading, not small amounts for his own use.

The pocket radiation alarm began to chirp when he turned a bit further north, on track to Lake City. Neal decided the risk was too high and began looking for an alternative to Lake City as a source of tobacco. It didn't take him long to find one.

Keeping the conversations casual as he made the occasional trade, Neal again made gentle inquiries for sources for tobacco. He got the information he wanted in a roundabout way. He overheard one woman berating her husband for trading for tobacco for himself. She mentioned, among many other things, that she would like to see the place shut down.

"Bingo!" Neal said under his breath. He had a location. He headed for the spot the next day, and a week later was being shown, with pride, a small-scale tobacco operation. With no source for papers, no cigarettes were made, but plenty of cigars and pipe tobacco were produced.

The operation was in an area that was slowly recovering and was using gold and silver coins for commerce. Neal was able to acquire a large trading stock of pipe tobacco, locally carved pipes, and a variety of cigars for some of the Krugerrands he'd recovered from the slavers.

A trading and selling expedition was in the works westward. The bulk of

what Neal purchased would go on that first pack train west sometime that fall. Neal gave Harley, the owner of the operation, precise directions to Carmello's store and instructions on how to contact David. Harley assured Neal that the local area around Sullivan would be Neal's. He wouldn't sell anything in that area, except to Neal.

Having completed the task he'd set for himself, Neal rested up a couple of days, thinking about where his new nomadic life would take him next. "Sugar," Neal said aloud, just before he fell asleep in his camp in the tobacco operation's owner's back yard.

Neal shook Harley's hand the next morning and hit the road again, bound for New Iberia, Louisiana.

As spring turned to summer, Neal decided he should have gone south when he was crossing Louisiana on the way to South Carolina. It was hot and humid as he traveled south-west toward Mobile, Alabama. He intended to stay well north of the city, since he'd heard an Amateur Radio Operator near Mobile say it had been hit with a nuke during the war, when he'd been doing a lot of monitoring of the airwaves shortly after the war.

Besides the heat and humidity, or because of them, the insects were terrible. Purity had given Neal one of her herbal creations as a sample of what she could make when Neal first met her. It was a lavender based mosquito repellent. Neal was glad to have it and a no-see-um head net. Between them he was relatively comfortable despite the insects.

Neal slowed his pace and increased his water intake. It took him several weeks of uncomfortable travel to get past Mobile, Alabama. Then several more weeks to make his way around Baton Rouge and to the Gulf, west of what was left of New Orleans. Not only was it hot and humid, but the locals were none too friendly. At least, what few there were.

Houston took several hits with nuclear weapons, as did the Dallas/Ft. Worth area. The wind carried fallout from one or the other to coastal Louisiana and northward. There were few shelters and the fallout was heavy. The death toll was staggering in the area. Every so often Neal's radiation alarm would sound and he would increase his pace until the sound stopped.

Finally, he found a small trading park set up and he did a little trading. He also acquired the information he was seeking. Again he declined trades for sugar, and headed for the source. Three days later he was at the site of what had been a large scale sugar production plant, with fields of sugar cane growing all around it.

The plant wasn't running, but some of those familiar with the process had created their own small-scale processing plant. Neal was cautious when he found the place, checking it through his binoculars for some time before walking up to the gate in the fence surrounding the property. From what he could see, there was no indication of there being any slavery going on. Hot, miserable work, yes. But as far as he could tell, everyone was able to leave anytime they wanted. But to be a little more mobile, just in case, Neal cached the game cart, pack, and BM-59 in an unlikely spot and camouflaged it with grasses cut with his twenty-four inch Cold Steel machete.

Neal had to wait for a few moments before anyone noticed him and came over to the gate. "What do you want?"

"Sugar," Neal replied.

"Funny. Ha Ha. State your business."

"I want to trade for some sugar. Set things up so we can get it from here, up in Missouri."

"Oh. In that case, come in. You'll need to talk to Tiger. He's the one

running this set up.” The change in the man was remarkable.

“Hey, Tiger!” the man yelled over to another man leaving one building and headed for another.

The man turned and waited for Neal and his escort to get to him. “What is it, Lloyd? You know not to bother me with people begging for sugar.”

“No, sir, Tiger. He says he wants to trade for sugar up in Missouri.”

“I see. How much and how often?” Tiger asked, his attention on Neal now. Lloyd left to go back to what he’d been doing.

“That’s still up in the air,” Neal said hastily. “I’m scouting for sources that can supply half a dozen small communities southwest of St. Louis.”

“That far north, huh? Come on inside and lets discuss it.”

Neal was amazed at the fact that there was a working air conditioner going in the small office trailer that Tiger ushered Neal into.

“Man! That feels good!”

Tiger smiled. “Won’t find AC many places down here. Not enough juice. But I have a Lister engine on biodiesel running a good generator head. We have lights in the plant, and in here, plus the AC.” Tiger was obviously proud of the fact.

“But down to business. You say you’ll be buying for several communities?”

It wasn’t what Neal had intended, but he took it upon himself to set up the deal. Those in Missouri would have to figure out how to come up with the payments. “Yeah. What have you been selling sugar for around here?” Neal asked.

Tiger barked out a laugh. “You mean besides fish, chickens, eggs, milk, and garden produce?”

Neal smiled slightly and nodded.

“Well now, I would have taken diesel early on, but I have a good deal going there, so bio-diesel is out. I’d like to set things up to take gold, but I know not too many people have it.”

“Well, I could probably come up with enough for an initial shipment. Then your rep could make other arrangements. They’re starting to produce some excess food now.”

Tiger was shaking his head. “Got plenty of going farms around here. Don’t need food.”

“Salt?” Neal asked.

“Got that, too. Fellow evaporating saltwater down on the Gulf.”

“Tobacco?”

Tiger’s eyes perked up. “You still have tobacco?”

“Fresh,” Neal replied. “I can get you a sample in a little while. I can supply quite a bit, if you’re interested in setting up a trade agreement.”

“That’s worth considering. Let me think on it. And try that sample.”

“You said there are farms around here. How are they fixed for viable seeds?” Neal asked.

“I don’t rightly know. I have heard some people say the vegetables they’re getting aren’t all that good. Something about the seeds not

growing true.”

“Hybrids can do that. We’re producing non-hybrid crops and saving seed each year. I can supply good seed each spring.”

“I’ll consider that, too. How about that tobacco sample?” Tiger looked eager.

“I’ll be back in about an hour with the sample,” Neal said, standing up.

Tiger walked Neal to the gate and let him out. “Just yell out when you get back. I’ve got a couple of things to do.”

Neal nodded and headed for where he had his gear cached. It didn’t take long to get two cigars, a pipe, and one small cotton drawstring bag of pipe tobacco out of the gear bags on the game cart. He fished out a couple of pieces of jerky as well, and then got several gold coins from one of the stashes in the equipment, finally covering everything back up again.

He wasn’t in any hurry. Neal wanted to give the impression his cache was some distance further away from the sugar operation than it actually was. So he chewed the jerky slowly, and then headed back to see Tiger again.

Neal didn’t have to call out. Tiger was passing by when Neal walked up to the gate and let him in. “Wait in the office, Neal. I’ll be just a couple of minutes.”

A bit uneasy, Neal went into the office and sat down, checking to make sure the Glock would slide free of the holster quickly, in case he was being set up.

But Tiger was back in less than two minutes and the eager look on his face told Neal that the situation was just as it appeared. Tiger set a

container on the desk and sat down behind it. "I figured a sample deserved a sample."

Neal took out the cigars, pipe, and pipe tobacco and set them on the desk. Tiger picked up one of the cigars and ran it under his nose. "Oh, sweet!" Taking a penknife from his pocket, Tiger trimmed the cigar, and then took out a cheap butane lighter. He took a few moments to get the cigar lighted and burning to his liking and then leaned back in the chair with a sigh.

"Oh, man, is this good! I may smoke up some of the profits myself, but I can tell you, I can handle all the tobacco you can supply. What's it worth?"

It took several minutes of dickering to agree on trading prices of the sugar for tobacco, open pollinated seeds, and gold. One of the hold ups was that Neal wanted delivery of the sugar to Missouri. Tiger finally agreed to make the arrangements and the prices were adjusted accordingly.

Neal gave Tiger enough gold to get a large shipment headed north, with detailed directions to Carmello's store, and radio frequencies and times he could contact David and Elizabeth. He asked for and received a piece of paper and an envelope and wrote a note of explanation to be given to David on the first delivery.

He added enough gold to take the limit of sugar that he could carry. Both men stood and shook hands. "I'll have that sugar for you at the gate in just a minute," Tiger said, leading Neal out of the air-conditioned office into the oppressive heat and humidity.

Again Neal waited nervously, fearful of a double cross, but Tiger showed up quickly with a large cloth bag over his shoulder. "Fifty pounds," Tiger said. "Give or take. It's hard filling the bags to an exact weight. I can guarantee you that over time it will all average out."

“Good enough,” Neal said and took the bag onto his shoulder. “Oh, by the way, I was warned about someone capturing slaves for use down here. Anything I should look out for?”

A rather gruesome look twisted Tiger’s face. “Not any more. Some guys came down here from up north looking for them. Apparently, they’d raided a town in Arkansas and the slaves got away. Came down here and cleaned that place out. No survivors from what I hear. Good riddance if you ask me. Some of us around here were about ready to take care of it, after we found out what was going on, but the victims took care of it, first. Was one of my competitors. Double benefit for me.”

Neal nodded. Another handshake and he was on his way back to his cache. He immediately headed north, without a destination in mind, except to get back to cooler climes. Thoughts of his property, and the Magnews, especially Elizabeth, were suddenly in his mind. He pushed the thoughts away, but realized his steps were taking him back there.

The decision made, Neal eased into his steady traveling pace, putting the thoughts out of his mind. He’d deal with them when he got home. Neal cut over to the Mississippi River. He’d travel along it where he could. He’d have to bypass Memphis, Tennessee, since it had been hit with a nuke.

There were several advantages to traveling along the river. Reliable source of water, though he did run all his drinking and cooking water through a filter. There was almost always some game available. Small game mostly, though Neal did bag the occasional deer. And there were plenty of fish in the river.

The major problem was crossing the watershed rivers at their widest point, right where they joined the Mississippi. More than once Neal cut west, following a tributary till he found a bridge on which he could cross, and then rejoining the Mississippi a bit further north. He did make

a pair of tarp rafts a couple of times to cross at places when he didn't want to go the long way around.

Neal piled up reeds, small limbs, and long grasses, along two edges of a tarp, rolled them up like pontoons connected at the bottom, and brought the front and rear sections of the tarp up and tied them off. One for him, and one for the game cart. He always put the pulk down on the tarp and set the game cart on it to spread the weight more evenly.

He was making good time, but had to swing well west of Memphis. It had been taken out with a nuke. There were signs of skirmishes at some of the highway crossings and Neal decided to swing even wider west than he first intended. He picked up I-55 well north of Memphis and didn't run into any problems.

I-55 paralleled the Mississippi on the west side north of Memphis. There wasn't much traffic on it, but there was some. Motorized, by draft animal, bikes, and many on foot, some with carts like Neal.

Some were just adventurers, nomads like Neal, out to see the world and pick up what they could. Many were just people tired of the severe winters further north. They were headed for the milder climate of the South. There were at least some bandits, according to several people Neal spoke to. None of them had encountered the bandits, but had seen the remains of their attacks.

Neal debated with himself for another mile of travel on I-55. He decided he didn't need the hassles of bandits and turned slightly east to get to the river again. Feeling more secure than he did with many other folks around, Neal continued to camp on the river as he traveled north.

He was just south of the Missouri State Line when he stopped for a planned two day stay to hunt and fish, and see what he might recover in the way of fruits and vegetables from abandoned properties.

Neal managed to find a farm not too far from the river that had a garden spot with quite a few volunteer plants. “Hybrids,” Neal snorted in disgust when he got a good look at the corn and tomatoes. Neither had produce he would eat.

He was able to get some potatoes, carrots, onions, asparagus, and cucumbers. The few grape vines that were on the property were heavy with fruit and Neal ate his fill while picking them. When he had what he wanted, Neal made his way back to the woods bordering the river, the BM-59 slung across his back, the Fünfling in the gun bearer of the Kifaru EMR pack. He had both hands behind him on the game cart handle.

He often hunted the same way and was usually successful in hearing or seeing game before he spooked it as he traveled with as little sound as possible. Neal was moving along slowly and had just turned a corner in the slight trail that led down to the river and his camp.

It happened without warning. There were suddenly three men in the trail ahead of him, coming in his direction. It didn’t take genius to realize that before him stood the bandits that had been mentioned. Neal didn’t think. He reacted. Dropping the handle of the game cart, his right hand went to the grip of the Fünfling in the gun bearer pouch, his left going to the quick release strap. One quick tug and the gun was at his shoulder.

The triggers were set for the two shotgun barrels. He fired the left barrel at the man that was the closest to getting his weapon in play, and fired the second at the man carrying a sawed off double barrel shotgun.

Neal switched the trigger to the .375 H&H barrel and shot the third man just as he fired at Neal with a full auto M-16 or a clone. Neal wasn’t sure which. He was just glad he had dropped and rolled to his own right, as the M-16 barrel pulled up and to the shooter’s right.

The .375 H&H round broke the man’s right femur and he went down,

emptying the magazine of the M-16 into the air, his hand having tightened on the grip from the shock of being shot.

Neil didn't hesitate. He fired the .308 barrel into the man chest. His eyes going to the trail behind the men, Neil dropped the Fünfling and swung the BM-59 around on the sling and brought it up to the ready.

Keeping an eye on the trail ahead, Neal checked the three men. All were dead, the first two having taken the twelve gauge blasts in the upper chests and faces. Neal said a little prayer for having loaded the Fünfling with twelve gauge number four shot that morning, wanting the power to take down squirrels or rabbits in the heavy vegetation.

Normally he hunted with four ten bore or twenty-gauge shells in adapters to conserve the limited amount of twelve gauge hunting rounds he had. He'd picked up quite a bit of four ten and twenty-gauge in trade.

Neal eased around the next bend in the trail. Nothing. But he cocked his head slightly. There were sounds closer to the river. Close to, if not in, his camp. Neal moved quickly, cutting through the forest to come out unannounced, not from the trail, but from the heavy woods.

There were another two men, both crouched down behind large downed trees that lay on the bank of the river. Neal's gear was spread out. It looked like the two were divvying it up in five shares. Neal fired at the man with another M-16 or clone, which was aimed at the opening of the trail. He went down with a 147 grain full metal jacket .308 caliber bullet through the brain.

The other man had a hunting rifle and shifted his aim toward Neal. Neal had stepped back and to one side after his first shot. He stepped forward again for a clear shot as the man worked the bolt action of the rifle. The man died when the bullet went through the upper two inches of the log and embedded itself in the man's left lung.

Neal waited and watched, not wanting to waste another bullet. The last man's head was lying on top of the log, in plain sight. But he seemed to be struggling. Not for long. Less than a minute more and the head slid off the log as the man's body slumped backwards in death.

Still Neal waited, in case there were more of them. After an hour Neal cautiously moved forward, BM-59 at the ready, and quickly checked the tent. Empty. He checked the bodies. They were already being fed on by turtles. The turtles scattered when Neal stepped up. It was only when he got a good look at the last man's face when Neal realized it was no man, but a boy in his late teens. "Oh, Crimeny!" he said softly.

He went to get the game cart and Fünfling from the trail and slowly packed everything up. He didn't want to stay in the camp any longer. With everything packed, but without the tarp fastened, Neal left the game cart by the river and went back to the trail to strip the men of anything useable or of value, wondering if they had wives or girl friends... "Or Mothers..." he added softly when he checked the boy. He added the items he recovered to the load and fastened the tarp

Neal decided to stay on I-55 when he crossed the Missouri State Line. The river went east in a wide loop and he saw no reason to go the extra distance. There was plenty of water available from the many rivers in the area.

He picked up his pace slightly as the temperatures started dropping at night. Fall was here and winter wouldn't be far behind. His thoughts turned to his property, and the cave. The nomadic life for a couple of years was one thing, but Neal was coming to the conclusion that the life of a hermit was preferable. It wouldn't matter who might still be at the property. He was going to get in the cave and lock the doors behind him for a while.

The decision made, Neal pushed on, keeping a weather eye out. He did a bit of trading, as well as hunting, but didn't stop for more than one day

at a time, feeling more and more anxious to get home without any more problems. The human kind or natural.

Neal left I-55 well south of St. Louis and cut west, on the last leg home. His worries about the weather were well justified. The first winter storm of the season was a dilly. He was between Fletcher and Richwoods on Highway H when the storm began. The sky darkened in just a few minutes and Neal stopped where he was and set up camp in a small clearing in a copse of woods on the north side of the highway.

He had the Trango 3.1 tent up and was working on setting up the siltarp Baker tent when the rain started. It was a light misty rain at first, but cold. But it didn't stay misty for long. There was a light rain for a few minutes as Neal put the finishing touches on the leanto and got his gear under its cover. He had a fire pit dug and had gathered up some wood. The sky seemed to open up then, with the rain coming down hard, with a mixture of sleet.

Neal was in the Trango 3.1 when the sleet turned to hail. He watched the hail through the window in the vestibule of the tent. Fortunately it didn't last long. The temperature had been dropping steadily and the rain and hail soon turned to a whiteout blizzard.

Holding the Brunton ADC Pro weather instrument outside the vestibule, Neal got a reading of thirty mile an hour winds. And that was here in the woods. He wondered what it was like in the open. He looked over at the Baker tent, four feet away and could barely make it out.

Neal settled in for the duration. He still had fuel for his MSR Whisperlite Internationale so he set it up in the vestibule and put on water for a cup of rose hip tea. When the tea was ready he sipped it and cut up some jerky into a small pan of water to make a hot meat broth. He ate it slowly when it was ready, with the last of a loaf of wheat bread he'd traded for three days earlier.

It was full dark by then and Neal cranked up one of his wind up flashlights and set up his sleep pad and sleeping bag. Before he turned in, he took his food bag out, left the tent with it, and threw the weighted line kept tied to it over a limb of a tree at the edge of the open area of the woods. He pulled the bag up and tied the line off. He didn't want any visits from bears, cougars, or even raccoons during the night.

When he returned to the tent he took off his boots and outer clothing and slipped into the sleeping bag. He was asleep in minutes, despite the slight noise the tent made in the wind.

Neal had to tromp through two feet of snow the next morning. He could still barely see to get to his food bag and get out enough for the day. The storm lasted for three days, though the blizzard lasted for only twenty-six hours. Neal packed up, pulled the game cart onto the pulk and set off two days after the storm ended. It was much warmer, and the snow was beginning to melt, but he still had to make his way through three feet of accumulation, with drifts as high as ten feet in some places.

He'd carried MSR Series 12 snowshoes the whole trip, but it was the first time he used them. It was slow going, especially getting around the drifts. He tried digging through a couple of them, but found it easier and safer to go around.

Neal resisted the urge to push his pace. Snowshoeing burned up a lot of energy. He stopped and rested often, drank plenty of water, and took what game he could find as he walked, pulling the pulk behind him.

His eagerness to get home was tempered by the unknown of what he would find when he got there. Neal came in the back way, seeing no one the last two days of travel. He was pleased to find the gate intact and locked. There were no tracks in the snow that was left. No one had been in or out since the storm.

Neal had to think to remember where he'd packed away his keys. Taking

them out he pointed the remote for the gate and it jerked, and then slid smoothly aside. Pulling the pulk through, Neal tripped the remote again and the gate slid close.

After taking, holding, and releasing a deep breath, Neal started up the driveway to his home. He heard activity when he turned the final corner in the trail and stepped into the clearing. And it was cleared. The snow had been piled around the perimeter of the compound, with a couple of gaps, where the various trails entered the clearing.

The Lusby looked fine, and the Magnews' camp was intact. Neal heard the thwack again and saw Dwayne splitting wood in front of one of the firewood stacks. Neal watched as Dwayne casually put down the axe, and then suddenly jump for his rifle, which was leaning against the stacked wood.

He dove behind the same pile of wood and had the rifle pointed at Neal in the matter of just a couple of seconds. Neal lifted his hands and held them out to the side of his body. "It's me, Dwayne," Neal said.

Dwayne looked at Neal for a long time. Neal's beard had been long before he'd left, as had Neal's hair. Now the beard was down almost to his stomach and the hair hung down almost to his waist.

"Neal?" Dwayne asked, though he was already sure it was him. Dwayne stood up and walked over as Neal dropped the towline of the pulk, stepped out of the snowshoes, and walked further into the clearing. The two shook hands warmly and firmly, for several seconds.

"Glad you're back," Dwayne said. "Place hasn't been the same since you left."

"Looks like everything is okay. You look the same."

A slight smile curved his lips. "Not quite. I'm married now and have a

year old baby.”

Neal’s eyes widened slightly. “Really? Purity?”

Dwayne was grinning. “Yep. And the baby’s name is Neal.”

“Aw! Dwayne! You didn’t have to do that!”

“Wanted to.” His smile faded. “David is dead. Elizabeth is head of the clan, now.”

“Oh, no,” Neal said, his voice soft. “What happened?”

“A crazy at one of his preaching’s just up and shot him three times in the chest before anyone could react.” A grim look on Dwayne’s face accompanied his next words. “But at least five people shot the guy twenty or thirty times when they finally did react. Never found out what the guy had against David. He was new to the community.”

“How’s...” Neal said, starting to ask about Elizabeth. But he saw her come out of the big motorhome, stop, look at him and Dwayne, and then come running toward them. She almost knocked him down when she ran straight to him and locked him in a bear hug. His arms wrapped around her in like manner.

“I am so glad you’re back! I’m sorry, Neal, for the way I acted. I never should have...”

“It’s all forgotten,” Neal said. And meant it, he realized. What had happened in the past wasn’t important. The future was. “Dwayne told me about your brother. I’m sorry.”

Elizabeth didn’t respond. She just held him, as he was holding her, for a long time. Dwayne moved away and busied himself, waiting for the two to separate. He wasn’t alone. Several more members of the family came

out and saw the two.

Finally, Neal felt Elizabeth relax slightly and begin to step back. He released her so she could and looked down into her upturned face. “I’m sorry, too,” he said. “I won’t hold things back in the future.”

Elizabeth smiled through her tears. “Nor I. I think I love you, Neal Grant.”

“I know I love you, Elizabeth. Have for a long time. Just wouldn’t admit it to myself... because of my family before...”

“You don’t have to explain...” Elizabeth said, reaching up to touch the lone tear that was trickling down his cheek.

“I do... But not now. We have an audience.”

Elizabeth turned around and the rest of her family came forward eagerly to welcome Neal back home.

Elizabeth and Dwayne finally ushered them all away and let Neal go to the Lusby. He unlocked it and went in, taking off and leaving his pack and rifle on the tiny porch. It was spotless. He turned around and looked at Elizabeth. She shrugged and said, “I knew you’d be back. I’ve cleaned it once a week since you’ve been gone.”

“Thank you,” Neal replied. “There is something that shouldn’t wait. Something I should have done a long time ago. If you’d come with me...”

Elizabeth nodded and followed Neal to the path beside the bluff that went down to the lower part of the property. “Careful,” he said, taking Elizabeth’s hand to help her over the slick, snow covered rocks at the path end of the ledge on the face of the bluff.

“Where are we going? This just tapers off past all that hanging vine.”

“I know. That hanging vine is where we’re going.” They both moved carefully on the snow covered ledge. When he reached the mass of hanging vines he lifted them away from the face of the bluff and let Elizabeth see the original door to the cave.

“A cave entrance?” she asked.

Neal nodded. “My hermit cave.” He unlocked the door and swung it open. “My very secure hermit cave.”

Neal wouldn’t look at Elizabeth, fearful of what he might see on her face, as he worked the combination of the vault door. He walked inside after he had the vault door open and took the windup flashlight that hung on a peg pounded into a crack in the rock just inside the door. A few cranks and he shone the light around the first room of the cave.

“Another safe door?” Elizabeth asked when the beam of light cut across it.

“I like my privacy,” Neal replied. He still hadn’t taken a good look at Elizabeth’s face.

“I guess!”

Neal opened the vault door into the main room of the cave and ushered Elizabeth inside. He didn’t know if the maintainer solar panels had kept the batteries of the electrical system charged, but he flipped a light switch. The room brightened and Neal turned off the crank-up light as Elizabeth looked around.

“Oh, my goodness! You have a house in here! And three safes!” Neal just let her wander around, go into the house, and come back out. Neal was standing by the fire ring and Elizabeth joined him.

“What can I say? Wow! You could have been living in here, away from everything, yet you took it upon yourself to help out everywhere you could. And I bet you did the same thing on your journeys.”

“Not really... But... well, we’re not done yet.” Neal walked over to the large cabinet that covered the third vault door and pushed it aside.

“More?” Elizabeth asked, and walked past him into the third section of the cave. Neal flipped the light switch and Elizabeth gasped. “Definitely more! You could live for years on what you have stored in here!”

“Yes,” Neal replied.

“And yet, you gave us all that propane, and had a whole truck load of sugar sent up. And enough tobacco to trade for months.”

“There is salt available, too. Just have to make arrangements to go get it.” Neal went to the safe in the room and opened it, and then stepped back. “My miserly hoard of gold and silver coins.”

Elizabeth’s eyes widened. “You’re rich!”

“In some ways,” Neal replied. “Not so much in others.”

“What do you mean?” Elizabeth asked, turning toward him and taking a step forward.

“I have material things. Since I lost my family, so many years ago, I’ve cut myself off from any meaningful relationships.”

“You didn’t... There was no one... Even on your trip?”

Neal shook his head. “No. Whenever I was tempted, which really wasn’t often, I always thought of you.”

“Rather the same situation with me,” Elizabeth said. “I guess I was just waiting for you to come back, with someone on your arm, so I could put you out of my life and thoughts. But you came back alone.”

“I should tell you... Well, I am what I am, and I don’t know if I can change,” Neal said, looking into Elizabeth’s eyes.

Elizabeth shook her head. “Don’t change. I’ve grown accustomed to you being you, secrets and all. You always come through when it’s needed.”

After only another moment of hesitation, Neal leaned down and kissed Elizabeth. She kissed him back. When they separated, Elizabeth stepped away and said, “We’d better stop while we still can.”

Neal nodded. “With your brother gone... How will we get married?” Suddenly looking chagrined, Neal asked, “You do want to get married, don’t you?”

“I must say that isn’t the most romantic request for my hand I’ve had, but yes, of course I want to get married!”

“You’ve been asked before?”

“Don’t be so shocked, Neal. I’m considered quite a catch. I was, even before the war, after my husband died.”

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean...”

Elizabeth laughed. “It’s okay, Neal. And there is another minister in Sullivan now. I’m sure he’ll be glad to marry us.” Her voice dropped. “I wish David was here to do it. He would have been pleased. He had reservations about you at first, the way I did, but he had changed his mind before he died.”

“Perhaps we should tell the others before we make too many plans. They might have objections once they know what I’ve kept from them.”

“We’re a close knit family,” Elizabeth said, “but my decisions on how I live my life are none of their business.” A slight smile curved her lips. “You should understand that.”

Neal had a rueful smile that matched Elizabeth’s. “Yes, I think I do.”

“So, I’d like to put that last conversation we had before you left behind us and start fresh. But once we’re married... no more secrets.”

It was said in a normal tone of voice, but Neal could tell how important his answer would be. “No more secrets. Starting now.”

“I can agree to that.”

They kissed again and then Neal led the way out, giving Elizabeth the combinations to each of the doors. “It’s half yours now,” he said as he locked the entrance vault door. He left the lock on the outer door open. He had another key for it, but he’d have to dig it out of his gear.

The whole Magnew clan was waiting for them on top of the bluff. “So?” Dwayne asked. He was holding his son in one arm, with Purity on his other.

“We’re getting married,” Elizabeth said calmly.

Minor pandemonium ensued, with her family gathered around her. Dwayne handed his son to Purity and walked away from the group with Neal.

“Good to hear it man. Congratulations. You’re getting a good woman in Elizabeth.”

“I know. I just wish I’d realized it sooner and not put the barrier up between us. Might have saved a lot of shoe leather.”

Dwayne smiled. “How was the trip, by the way? We got that load of sugar. You were busy while you were on the road.”

Neal nodded and gave Dwayne the highlights of the trip. “I want to get the Suburban and trailer out and go get the salt I’m due.” Both men looked up as snow began to fall. “Next spring. Elizabeth said the tobacco arrived, too?”

Dwayne nodded.

“Don’t really like contributing to people’s vices, but the market is there, I think,” Neal said.

“I know those with stills around here are doing a land office business. Can’t change people, Neal. I wouldn’t let it bother you. I’m thinking about brewing up a batch of beer for trade. Things have settled down now around here. Those that were able to survive have adapted to the new lifestyle. There isn’t much surplus, but there is some. People want their little luxuries, when they can get them.”

“True. I saw it on my trip. Things... well... they aren’t getting back to normal, as in before the war, but a new normal is being established. That includes, like you said, a few little luxuries.”

“What did Elizabeth think of your cave?” Dwayne suddenly asked.

“I thought you might know about it.” Neal smiled. “Were you able to get into it?”

Dwayne laughed. “No. Didn’t even try. It was your secret, not mine to know. Sure would like to get a look, though.”

“Might as well be now,” Neal replied. “I think the others are occupied for a while.”

“Yeah. It was the same way when Purity and I told them we were getting married.”

They two headed to the cave and Neal showed Dwayne what he’d done with it. Neal gave the vault door combinations to Dwayne. “Just in case,” Neal said.

“Quite the setup,” Dwayne said appreciatively. “I knew the cave was here and suspected you had some stuff stashed, but nothing like this.”

Neal shrugged. “I saw money becoming less and less valuable and goods becoming more and more valuable. I converted early on, while there was still some value in the money I had, and the products were available.”

Dwayne noticed a surprised look come over Neal’s face. “What?”

“I just remembered... I haven’t thought about them since the war. I set up lifetime annuities just before the war. To cover all the bases, so to speak. In case things didn’t develop the way they actually have. I wonder if those companies are still in existence.”

“I sense another trip coming on,” Dwayne said, chuckling.

Neal shook his head. “No. I think I’ll wait until a postal system is up. The longer I wait, the more I’ll get, if the companies survived. If they didn’t, then it’s a moot point. For now, I think I want to try and help the local area make a comeback. That’s enough to do for a few years.”

“Maybe you’ll get lucky and they converted everything into gold before it rained nukes.”

“Yeah, right,” Neal laughed. “I should be so lucky.”

Dwayne laughed, too, and the two men left the cave, closing it up as they did so. “Good to know we have a reserve, if something else happens.”

“Man, do not jinx us!”

Both men laughed again, having no idea of the prophetic nature of Dwayne’s words.

The Hermit - Chapter 5

For the first time since the loss of his family, Neal didn’t suffer through the anniversary of that day alone. Elizabeth was there to console him.

They were married in January, during a break in the weather, at the trading center at Carmello’s store. Neal gave Elizabeth his mother’s wedding ring during the ceremony. After spending three days isolated in the cave house, the two came out to find two feet of snow on the ground, though the compound had been cleared, thanks to Dwayne and Chuck and the Toolcat.

They were talking to Dwayne about how things went during their absence when Chuck came over and interrupted them. “Think you should take a listen to the shortwave.”

Dwayne, Neal, and Elizabeth followed Chuck back to the trailer he used and gathered around behind him when he sat down in front of a desk containing several items of communications equipment.

Chuck keyed the microphone of an amateur radio. “Hello Wyoming. Are you still there?”

“For a while, Missouri.”

“Would you repeat what you were saying a while ago? The leaders of our group are here now.”

Neal and the others listened, shocked by what they heard. The Yellowstone caldera was acting up in a big way. The locals were packing up and leaving the area, most of them heading west, actually going through Yellowstone Park to get on the west side, expecting an eruption to dump millions of tons of ash eastward, with the prevailing winds.

“Any way to estimate when, or even if, it will erupt?” Neal asked. Chuck relayed the question.

“No way to tell. But one of the experts that was here monitoring it before the war survived. He’s the one telling us to run.”

“That’s so far away,” Elizabeth said. “Would it actually affect us? Except for some orange sunsets?”

“We could get ash,” Neal replied. “Lots of it. And really bad winters for a few years.”

“Worse than we have now?” Elizabeth asked, surprised at Neal’s answer.

“Yes. Much worse. I think we’d better plan for the worst.” Then, to Chuck he said, “Tell him thanks for the warning. We’re going to take measures here for a worst case scenario. We hope he gets out or that nothing happens.”

As Chuck talked to the man in Wyoming, Neal left the trailer and Dwayne and Elizabeth followed.

“What are you thinking, Neal?” Elizabeth asked. “What else can we do,

that we haven't already done?"

"That salt. I want that salt, in Arkansas," Neal replied. "And all the wheat, corn, and hay we can get up here before anything happens. All the meat we can get butchered, dried, smoked, or canned. A couple more milk cows and a bull, if we can get enough corn and hay."

Neal had been starring off into space. He turned and looked at Dwayne and Elizabeth. "Do any of the others have people they might want to bring to the property?"

Dwayne and Elizabeth exchanged a look. "Yes. I think there are a couple of romances going on," Dwayne replied. "They may want the person, and perhaps even the person's family, to come up here."

Neal frowned. "I don't know how many we can take in."

"I think... possibly... eight or nine more. Maybe ten," Elizabeth said, looking to Dwayne for confirmation.

Dwayne nodded. "No more than that. Family, anyway. If very many find out what we're doing, they may want to be a part of it."

Neal nodded. "Okay. We'll deal with that if it happens. I'm going to get the Suburban ready, and the utility trailer, and head for Arkansas."

"I'll go with you," Elizabeth quickly said.

"No. I need you here coordinating everything. You and Dwayne and Chuck."

Elizabeth wanted to protest, but Neal had a point. The Magnews were a hard working bunch, but they tended to need strong leadership. It would be better if she stayed. "Okay," she told Neal.

When Neal turned to walk away Elizabeth and Dwayne realized he meant right now. He was off to get the Suburban ready, just as he'd said.

Four hours later, Neal corralled Dwayne and Elizabeth again. "If something happens while I'm gone, batten down the hatches and get everyone in the cave. I'd like to protect the stock in the tunnel, but I don't know if we'll have time. The other steps take precedence. I will see you in about a week." Neal kissed Elizabeth, and held her in a hug for long seconds. Then he was in the Suburban and off to Arkansas.

Neal needn't have hurried. He was back with the Suburban and trailer, both loaded to the gills with salt, in six days. Nothing had happened during that time. Chuck had not been able to give him an update while he was on the road, since the man in Wyoming had bugged out to the west and had not set up a radio again apparently.

Shortly after he drove through the gate to his property, during a heavy snow, Neal could just make out stacks of baled hay and straw here and there. There were also half a dozen semi trailers, three of which were grain trailers.

Pulling into the compound, Neal noticed three more large travel trailers and another Class A motorhome parked in the Magnew camp.

Even with the snow coming down, when he got close enough, he saw several women working around the open wood fire in the middle of the trailer compound. There were three large pressure canners suspended over the fire.

Neal parked the Suburban and went looking for Elizabeth or Dwayne. The women at the fire told him they were in the cave. Neal hurried that way. He found them in the outer chamber, discussing what to do to accommodate the family if they had to take shelter inside.

After a quick kiss of greeting, Elizabeth asked Neal, “How did it go? You get the salt?”

“All I had coming, plus I bought some more. That tobacco is more valuable than gold, to some people. You two have been busy. I saw the stuff near the gate when I came in.”

“I’m afraid I used some of your gold...” Elizabeth said.

Neal cut her off. “Our gold.”

“Well, we used some of it to get what you requested. Some of the tobacco and sugar, too. Two semi-trailer loads of corn and one of wheat.”

“That’s good,” Neal replied. “If Yellowstone goes, things are going to be tough for a couple of years. I saw some of the ladies doing some canning.”

“Yes. We were able to get quite a bit of jerked meat from Angelo,” Elizabeth said. “He’s processing a couple of hogs we got. We owe him some salt. We got one steer and butchered ourselves. That’s what we’re canning.”

“Any luck with another milk cow and a bull?” Neal asked.

“In the spring,” Dwayne said. “I couldn’t find anyone willing to trade anything that valuable now. We should be able to get a bull calf and at least one or two young cows next spring. Assuming the best.”

Neal shook his head. “Best we can do, then.”

Dwayne grinned. “Did make a deal for something else, though. You know Harry Cunningham. He’s been making dehydrators and smokers.

He's coming up tomorrow with everything needed to set us up with four big dehydrators and a large smoke house. Again, assuming the best."

"Good ideas. How's he getting up here?" Neal asked.

"He's a handy rascal. Built his own wood gas generator for his old pickup."

"Okay. I guess we've done everything we can do. I just hope we're wasting our time with all these additional preparations." No sooner were the words out of his mouth than all three felt a slight tremor.

"Did you feel that?" Neal asked the others.

"I did," said Dwayne. "New Madrid Fault Zone, you think?"

"I hope so," Neal replied, "Bad as it would be."

Another, much larger tremor rocked them. "We'd better check on the others," Neal said, heading for the cave mouth.

There was minor pandemonium at the canning fire. "I'm sorry!" said one of the women as Neal, Dwayne, and Elizabeth ran up.

"It's not your fault, Caroline," Elizabeth assured the young woman, distraught over the pressure canner now lying on its side outside the fire pit. The tripod supporting it had tipped, dumping the canner.

"Was that an earthquake?" someone asked.

"I hope so," Neal said. "But if it was Yellowstone going, we're in for some rough times, starting in a couple of days. I suggest everyone finish up what they're doing, and then start battening down the hatches for ash."

“You really think we’ll get any, that far away?” asked Chuck, who had come out of his trailer after the tremors.

“We’re around the limit of ash fall from one of the largest of the previous eruptions. I’m more worried about the affect the fine ash that doesn’t fall right away will have on the weather.”

Suddenly a deep, thunderous roaring sound enveloped them. It lasted for several seconds. People were looking around at each other.

“That would be the Yellowstone Caldera in an explosive eruption,” Neal said when the sound faded.

“What do we do?” asked one of the younger women.

“Just keep plugging along until the ash gets here, if it does. Could be a couple of days. The less we’re exposed to the ash, the better.” Neal paused, and then said, “Just do everything to close up everything to eliminate as much dust infiltration as possible in all the buildings. And we’d better move plenty of feed close to the animal sheds.”

The group broke up, to do as Neal suggested. Neal turned to Dwayne. “Let’s unload the salt and then move some of that corn, hay, and straw.”

Dwayne went to get the Toolcat, and Neal went to the Suburban. Elizabeth, without an assignment from Neal, decided to get started on a meal for everyone. It would soon be noon and with everyone hard at work, they would need food.

“I love this machine!” Dwayne said, as he loaded Neal’s utility trailer with bales of hay, and then the trailer for the Toolcat. Neal hooked up the Toolcat trailer to the Toolcat when Dwayne had it loaded, and backed up to it.

They made several trips moving the hay and some straw. Then, with the

bucket on the Toolcat instead of the forks, they began to transfer corn. Neal controlled the bottom gate of one of the corn trailers, filling the Toolcat bucket, which Dwayne then dumped into the trailers. Unlike the hay and straw, which Dwayne both loaded and unloaded with the Toolcat, the corn had to be shoveled out of the trailers by hand onto the large sheet of plastic the two laid down first. It was covered with another sheet of plastic and weighted down.

Elizabeth's lunch of soup and sandwiches was well received, as one and then another stopped what they were doing for a quick bite to eat. Everyone worked till dark, and turned in early, to be able to get up early the next morning to continue the work.

Dwayne was one of the first up. He cleared the compound of the snow accumulation that had fallen during the night, using the Toolcat, and then went down to the gate to let Harry in when he showed up.

Harry was an early bird and Dwayne didn't have to wait long. He led the way to the compound, Harry following in his truck, which had a tandem axle trailer attached. The trailer was loaded with the parts for the dehydrators and smoke house.

Neal, Dwayne, and Chuck all pitched in to help Harry. "What's the rush?" he suddenly asked.

Dwayne looked over at Neal, who nodded. "Harry," Dwayne then said, "We got word a week ago that the Yellowstone caldera was acting up. Did you feel those earthquakes and hear that sound yesterday?"

Harry nodded. "Figured it was New Madrid acting up. Though that was sure some loud sound."

"We think it was the Yellowstone Super Volcano erupting."

"What's that mean to us? New Madrid I can kind of understand. But

Yellowstone... That's what? A thousand miles from here?"

Dwayne nodded. "We might get some ash from it. But mostly Neal is worried about a weather change because of it."

"Don't make sense. But..." Harry looked around the compound. "You guys sure have done okay for yourselves after war. Must know something. What should I do?"

"Just get ready for some ash," Neal said. "It's very abrasive so don't run engines without cleaning the filter often. And if you're out in it, use a dust mask. And stock up as much food as you can. It may be difficult to grow much for a while."

Harry looked anxiously to the northwest, and then at the project he was working on. He looked at Neal then and opened his mouth to speak, but Neal spoke first.

"You finish up here and we'll double your pay, and give it to you in food that will keep for a while."

He didn't hesitate. Harry nodded and said, "Let's get this show on the road."

They picked up the pace, but Harry made sure that everything was done to his specification. Neal helped him load up his tools when they had everything installed while Dwayne and Chuck went to get the food promised Harry.

With the food loaded, Harry shook hands all around, got into his truck, and followed Dwayne to the gate. With a wave of good-bye, Dwayne closed the gate and hurried back to the compound.

The expected snow began as he parked the Toolcat. Neal was there and they covered the machine with a tarp. Suddenly Neal opened his hand

and held it palm up to catch some of the snow. He rubbed it with his fingers. "Snow mixed with ash," He told Dwayne. "Let's get all the youngsters into the cave. I don't want them getting the least little bit of ash in their lungs. It could give them problems for the rest of their lives. Everyone else wears masks and goggles outside for the duration."

Neal had a few masks in the Lusby and went to get one for himself and one for Elizabeth. She was just coming up to the little house. "There's something about the snow..." she said.

"Ash," Neal said. "Come on. I want you in a mask." The two went inside and Neal took a box of 3M P-100 masks out of a cabinet. "Here," he said, handing Elizabeth one of the masks. He took out a pair of dust goggles and handed them to Elizabeth after she had her mask on.

"What about you?" she asked, adjusting the headband of the goggles to suit her.

"There are some more goggles in the cave." Neal told Elizabeth exactly where they were in the storeroom, and more masks.

She left, but was back in just a few minutes with the goggles in hand. She handed them to Neal and he put them on. She'd brought more goggles and masks and began to hand them out to the adults that wouldn't be going into the cave immediately.

Elizabeth helped Neal get the canvas cover for the Suburban out of its storage container. They put it on and made sure it was secure. The mixture of snow and ash was coming down harder now.

It took everyone still outside to get the animals moved to the tunnel, to get them out of the ash and snowfall. Neal didn't want any of them grazing any at all until after the major ash fall was finished. More for the fact that they could inhale the ash from the ground while they were eating, than worry about the ash being ingested.

“We’ll feed them later,” Neal said. “Everybody back to the compound and inside,” Neal called out. “Keep an FRS radio on.”

Neal and Elizabeth went into the Lusby, as the others took to their trailer or motorhome. Neal checked with Dwayne, who was in the cave with Purity and a few other adults, taking care of the younger children.

“You battened down in there?” Neal asked.

“We are. Everyone has a sweater or jacket and is fine. Some of the older kids are asking about doing their chores.”

“Tell them we’ll take care of the outdoor chores,” Neal replied. “For the next few days just what chores need to be done there in the cave are all they have to worry about.”

“Okay, Neal. If you need me to help, let me know.”

“Will do.” Neal set the radio aside. He looked at Elizabeth. “Any ideas how to pass the time until we feed the stock?”

Elizabeth just smiled and sat down on his lap.

When they went out, well before sunset, though it was already quite dim out, both immediately noticed the fact that there was more ash in the mix coming down than snow. “If it doesn’t get worse than this, we’ll be in great shape,” Neal said, his voice slightly muffled by the P-100 mask.

Elizabeth nodded and the two began the job of getting feed from where it was stockpiled just outside the tunnel inside to all the animals. Hay and grain was distributed, put into the feed boxes that Dwayne had already moved to the tunnel with the Toolcat. Neal was thankful that someone had thought about the rabbits and chickens while he was gone.

There were temporary cages for the rabbits, and a fenced area for the chickens.

Neal and Elizabeth put down straw for bedding. Besides the feed boxes, Dwayne had already moved suitable water containers into the tunnel. All Elizabeth had to do was fill them from the water spigot fed from the upper well. All the animals would be able to drink their fill.

Neal was milking the cow while Elizabeth was filling the water containers. When he was done, he poured the milk into the hog slop trough to supplement the grain. He didn't want to deal with the fresh milk at the moment, and it just fattened up the pigs that much faster.

Neal left one light fixture on, and he and Elizabeth walked back up to the Lusby and settled in for the night.

The next morning, when Neal awoke, he had to look at his watch to confirm that it was, in fact, morning. There was barely any light outside. Leaving Elizabeth sleeping peacefully, Neal dressed, put on his mask and goggles, coat, then his wide brimmed hat, before going outside. The snow was dark grey with ash. What little snow there was at the moment. What was falling was mostly ash now.

Neal looked around. There was a three inch accumulation of the ash and snow mixture. Neal thought about getting the Toolcat out to clear the area, but decided it better to wait until the ash fall tapered off before doing so.

He'd just have to do it again, and he didn't want to stir the ash up any more than necessary. The snow was actually going to be a benefit in the cleanup, by keeping the ash moist. But there would still be some fines flying around. Fines that would cut up a person's lungs if enough got into them. And get into the Toolcat's engine. Better to wait.

Neal saw Chuck come out of his trailer, dressed similarly to Neal. Neal waved and Chuck came over. "Thought I'd check the animals," Chuck said. "Can you believe how dark it is?"

"I know," Neal said. "It's the ash cloud. Could be like this for days."

The two began walking toward the tunnel. "What do you think will happen to the game in the area?" Chuck asked.

"Won't be good," Neal replied.

When Neal returned to the Lusby after taking care of the animals, Elizabeth was up, making breakfast for them.

That was the norm for two more days. Days in which the ash continued to fall lightly and accumulate, with snow sometimes, and without it, others. But on third day Chuck called him on the FRS radio. "Neal. Got a problem in Sullivan. One for Purity."

"What is it?" Purity's voice came over the radio immediately.

"Must have been right by the radio," Elizabeth said, as Neal picked up the radio.

"Mrs. Marshal," Chuck said. "Willi got me on the radio for her. She's taken a turn for the worse. She'd like you to come in and do what you can for her."

"Neal?" It was Purity.

"Yes, Purity?"

"I need to go to Sullivan. How?"

Neal hadn't know Purity long. But it was long enough to know she'd

probably walk if Neal didn't come up with alternate transport.

"Okay, Purity. You get ready. I'll get the Suburban ready."

"But Neal!" protested Elizabeth. "Won't that ruin the engine? Running it in the ash that way?"

"It would just about anything else, but I have a high efficiency cyclone pre-filter on the engine air intake as well as the HVAC system. We'll wear masks and goggles, too. But we and the engine should be fine. The real problem may be the windshield. Won't be able to use the wipers for fear of scratching it up. If the air system to clean the lights and the windshield don't work, we could have a problem."

"The ash is that abrasive?" Elizabeth asked. Neal nodded. "Won't the air just be like a sandblaster then?"

Neal shook his head. "I hope not. I rigged it so there would be a cushion of air over the windshield and lights. If it works, the ash won't even touch them. I'll try it, and if it doesn't work as planned, we'll just have to stop occasionally and brush the ash off gently. I've got a long handled brush in the equipment box for snow. It'll work for the ash, as long as I'm gentle."

"Okay," Elizabeth said, "I'll help you get the Suburban uncovered." The two put on their gear, this time including Tyvek coveralls, and went outside into the gentle ash fall. Despite the protective gear they were careful not to dump the accumulation on the canvas cover over the Suburban on either one of them, or get into the cloud that the dumping created.

Neal started the Suburban up after they had stowed the cover. He flipped the switch that opened the valve to send air to the outside of the windshield. The air compressor on the engine was a high capacity one. It was able to pour a large amount of medium pressure air over the

windshield without drawing down the pressure tank.

With the Suburban at rest, the system worked just as designed. The proof in the pudding would be when they were on the move, at any speed faster than a crawl. If it worked at even moderate speeds, Neal would be happy.

It was obvious that both Elizabeth and Dwayne wanted to go in with Neal and Purity, but neither pressed the matter when Neal said he preferred they stay and take care of the place. Just in case.

Purity put her backpack in a rear seat and then climbed into the front passenger seat. Like Neal, Elizabeth, and Dwayne, she was wearing a Tyvek coverall, dust mask, and goggles. Neal got into the driver's seat and they were off into the twilight, the ash still falling gently.

Purity and Neal didn't talk much during the trip. Purity could see that Neal had to concentrate on his driving, so she kept her own council and debated on what best she could do to help Mrs. Marshal.

Neal tried various combinations of lights to see which worked best for the conditions. He wound up running some low mounted, high intensity lights. It seemed to illuminate the ash from below, without reflecting a lot of light back at him. When he hit a stretch where he was able to up his speed, Neal did so, to the point where the ash was pushing through the air curtain and impacting the windshield.

He backed off slightly and kept it at that speed most of the trip. It was about as fast as he could go, anyway, with the visibility the way it was. When they reached Sullivan Purity gave Neal the directions to Mrs. Marshal's. Neal stopped the engine and turned out the lights on the Suburban, and went to the door of the house with Purity after she got her backpack of remedies.

Neal waited with Mrs. Marshal's daughter when Purity went into the

bedroom to check on her. Willi seemed to need something to do, so when she offered Neal a cup of herbal tea, he took her up on it.

When he took his mask off to take a sip of the tea a few minutes later he immediately felt and tasted the fine dust that was infiltrating the old house. He looked at Willi closely. Her eyes were red and bloodshot. Neal would have bet money she'd been rubbing them. Not a good thing to do with abrasive ash in the air.

Purity came out of Mrs. Marshal's bedroom half an hour later. Neal was impressed with her professional demeanor when she explained that Willi's mother's single remaining lung just weren't up to coping with the dust, even the small amounts that couldn't be kept out of the house. "She has perhaps three days, I believe."

Purity handed Willi a small, brown glass bottle. "When she is hurting, give her as much of this as wants, when she wants it. Too much will kill her quickly, but a little will dull the pain. I told her the same thing. I wish I could do more. There are some things herbs just can't fix. I'm not even sure modern medicine could help her much, given this ash."

Willi started to cry, but didn't break down. She thanked Purity and showed her and Neal to the door.

Purity was just as quiet on the way back to the compound as she'd been coming down. When Neal parked the Suburban Purity looked over at him and said, "Thank you, Neal. I thought it would be a lost cause, and it was. But I needed to try."

"I understand, Purity."

She got out of the Suburban, and Dwayne was there to meet her. He wrapped an arm around her shoulder and took her back to the cave to clean up.

Elizabeth helped a quiet Neal cover the Suburban up again. “Are you all right? How did the Suburban do?”

“Flying colors. Flying colors,” Neal said, the second time he said the words fading away. “Mrs. Marshal isn’t going to make it. There are a lot of people out there that won’t. This crisis is just getting started. The ash fall is just the start. What stays in the atmosphere is going to be worse, long term.”

“Will we be okay here?” Elizabeth asked as she dusted Neal off at the Lusby.

He turned around and did the same for her, before they went inside. “I think so. We have basics for years, even for a group this size. It all comes down to how much light actually filters down. The greenhouse gives us a leg up, but the plants still need light. We could use grow lights. If we had them, and a way to power them up.”

“The PV’s won’t do it?” Elizabeth asked.

“Not even close. And they are going to lose a significant amount of efficiency with the constant low light. We may have to run the generator in the cave some, and the generators in the trailers and motorhomes that have them.”

“I see.”

“Only time will tell,” Neal said.

Time did tell. For nineteen weeks the sky rained fine ash from dark clouds. Then the ash was finer and finer, the sky lighter and lighter, until the sun shone through at approximately eighty percent of normal, based on how much electricity the PV panels were producing.

It was the middle of June and the last of the snow was just melting away. The plants in the greenhouse began to perk up with the increased light. Neal thought they would get a crop out of them, though it would be meager. The conventional garden would be planted the following day, with hopes that a decent crop would be produced, even assuming almost no fall and a very early winter.

No one had left the property in that time, nor had anyone come to it. Chuck's counterpart in Sullivan went off the air suddenly and they had no word from the town. He did talk to other survivors, mostly in the southeast of the country.

There had been no ash fall there, though the weather was similar to northern Canada before the war. Neal finally decided to go see who else might have survived locally, and how they were doing if they had. They went prepared as Neal had in the early days after the war. Well armed and ready for trouble.

They found no trouble, only a tiny handful of survivors sticking it out where they were. A few of the local people had gone east to escape the ash, but all indications were the extended winter had done them in.

Those that had survived the war and its aftermath, and prospered, were the ones that stayed and survived the initial months of the new catastrophe. Rosemont, the farmer that Neal dealt with for cattle, feed, and bio-diesel was one of those. So was Harry, the handyman. And George, with his trucks. They and their families were part of a tiny handful in and around Sullivan that Neal found on his initial trip.

All were making it, but it was tough. There was talk of abandoning the area and going to Georgia, where a large enclave of evacuees from the volcano stricken area had taken up residence. None really wanted to do that, with the investment they had in their own places. Especially Neal. From the radio conversations Chuck had with the enclave, they were already to the point of turning people away. All decided to stay and

cooperate with one another, to see that everyone's basic needs were met.

It was twenty-five years before the weather began to moderate, and people began to come back to the area. The Grant, Magnew, Rosemont, Hansen, and Cunningham families were all still well represented in the area. They had not only survived the over the years, but had prospered. Sullivan became the jumping off point for people re-populating the abandoned areas, willing and able to provide provisions for individuals or groups headed into the badlands.

End *****

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