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The Trades People

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The Trades People - Chapter 1

Jim finished checking the sales slip against the palletized goods. Everything was loaded on Bob's fifth-wheel trailer. Between them, they had the load tarped and ready to go in ten minutes. With a wave to the workers that had loaded the trailer from the warehouse, Bob put the truck in gear and they headed for Jim's home.

Walton's had good deals, but if you provided your own transportation, they were even better. Fortunately, three other people wanted to order from Walton's, including Bob, so he was willing to go after the goods for a reasonable fee. Jim didn't want anything for riding along. He'd even pay his own way for the two over-night stops each way.

When they got back home in northeast Missouri, they stopped at Abbi's place first to unload her portion of the order. Then came Patrick and Drusilla's. They unloaded at Bob's house next to last and then went to Jim's, out in the country side.

Bob took off his St. Louis Cardinals baseball cap and wiped his forehead with his sleeve. "I swear, Jim! Doesn't seem like we've unloaded any at all and I'm all tuckered out."

Jim had to admit, his order was larger than the combined order of the other four. "Yeah, but mine is easy. Let down the ramp." Jim went into his garage and hit the button to open it. When it was high enough Jim laid the dolly down on the concrete and gave it a shove with his foot. It hit the ramp and went part way up. Jim pushed it the rest of the way.

"Can't get the pallets on," he said, "But we can stack and roll. Won't have to carry like we did the other places."

Bob had a look of relieve on his face. The others, including him, had ordered mostly stuff in #10 and #2 ½ cans. The six-can cartons had not been that hard to carry. Jim's order consisted mostly of 6-gallon buckets.

He'd really been worried about Jim, because Jim couldn't do much, due to his health. Bob had admitted to himself that he was dreading the unloading at Jim's. Now it wouldn't be so hard. And Jim could help.

"We just have to be careful and ease them down the ramp." Jim undid the stretch wrap on the first pallet and moved a bucket of beans. Pintos, to be exact. The bucket was a heavy plastic 6-gallon bucket and contained the beans inside a Mylar bag with an oxygen absorbent. The Mylar bag was then heat sealed and the gasketed lid of the bucket put on.

Made for the best available long term bulk storage at the cheapest price. Which was what Jim wanted. It would be cheaper to buy everything in larger quantity packaging and break it down to seal it in the buckets himself, but he knew he just wasn't up to it."

Halfway through the un-loading process they took a break and Bob said, "Well, there's no doubt about it. You have the one year of food required to be a member of the MAG. I can attest to it. More than a year. Much more. You expecting relatives?" Bob asked, moving another bucket onto the dolly.

"Something like that," Jim said with a wave of dismissal.

Finally they were done and Bob asked, "You want me to help you get them to their final resting place? I'm sure it's not in the garage there."

"No. I'll plant them later. One or two at a time."

His friend grinned at him. "Smart man. Look. I need to take off. It's Betty's league game this evening. My wife will kill me if I miss it."

Jim took out his wallet and was opening it when Bob quickly said, "Leave that 'til the MAG meeting. I'll collect from everyone then."

“Sure,” replied Jim, replacing his wallet and holding out his hand to shake Bob’s. “Thanks a million for helping out. I couldn’t have done it alone.”

“No problem. I wanted to check the trailer out and see how it tracks. Clyde guarantied it and it tracks like a charm. Shouldn’t have doubted him. I think I annoyed him a little bit.”

“Just talk it up at the next meeting. He’ll get over it.”

“Yeah. Probably so. I got to watch my mouth more at the meetings. Strained relationships is not what we want in a mutual aid group for preparedness issues.”

Jim helped Bob lift the ramp and latch it into place and then waved once more as Bob went down Jim’s long driveway to the county road. Jim was about as remote as one could get in this part of the country and he liked it. The other’s all lived in town, and Jim had to admit it was a good town. Even for preppers.

There were actually two mutual aid groups for people into emergency preparedness centered on the town. When Jim had been seeking out others to get their bulk buying power and the wider resource base a MAG had, his contacts with the other group had been somewhat disappointing. They were way too militant for his taste. Jim wasn’t even sure they would have let him join, anyway, with his disabilities. They were a healthy, sturdy bunch, Jim had to admit. At least the ones that had interviewed him were, as well as those that were with them.

The bunch Jim was in with were a lot more laid back. Which had its own problems. So did the other group. It was just different problems.

He’d heard all about them from Abbi at a Little League fund raiser. She’d made Jim her personal project after he’d first made contact with the MAG. Not romantically. She wasn’t interested in Jim that way. But

she wanted him indoctrinated just so, for her own reasons.

Being the reasonably intelligent person he was, Jim learned what he wanted, and let the rest slide. She had a serious bone to pick about the G3 MAG. “A little play on words there,” Abbi had told him on their first meeting. “You know. The G3 MBR and a MAGazine for it.”

“I got it,” Jim had replied. She went on to tell him how she’d been a member of G3 for a while but they kicked her out for not following all their special rules for single women.

“Have to have a male sponsor and all kinds of crappy things. I’m glad I got out of there and started up ours.” She went on to describe quite a bit of G3’s inner workings. It confirmed the feeling that Jim had about them. One of the things he hadn’t liked was their focus on weaponry.

Satisfied that she had indoctrinated him enough, she turned him over to Bob for the official follow-up interview while they manned a cookie sale booth. Apparently he passed that last hurdle, for Bob had shaken his hand and taken him around to meet the other members that were at the fundraiser while Bob’s wife watched the booth for a while.

There were curt nods to people here and there. Bob tilted his head over slightly and said, “G3. Okay bunch, but real cliquey. You know what I mean. They sort of stick to their side and we stick to ours.”

“Cliquey,” Jim said in agreement.

“Yeah.”

Jim met most of the MAG members that night, and the rest on their regularly scheduled meeting for the month the following night. There were a total of five families, two couples, and four singles, including Jim. Thirty-four people ranging in age from just under a year to sixty-seven.

Of the thirty-four people there were two single parent households, one headed by a mother, the other by a father. All the kids seemed well enough behaved and comfortable with the preparedness life style. For the most part. A couple of the younger teens did seem to resent the family time, as well as the personal time they spent on preparedness issues.

As time passed, Jim had learned more about the individual members of the group and their approach to the MAG. It was much more laid back than what Abbi reported G3 as being. Just a loose association of people that planned to help each other out however they could in any sort of emergency. There were certain qualifying criteria that each person or family had to meet to stay in the MAG.

Everyone had a year from the time of joining to obtain a year's supply of food for each member of their family. There was no inspection. Just the statement of the head of the household that they had met that goal.

Group communications were standardized using Motorola FRS/GMRS radios, with CB's for longer ranges. They deemed the CB range adequate since they had arrangements with a farm some distance away as a retreat point. Part of the MAG dues went to pay the farmer for the privilege of using one of the old farm buildings that he no longer used. The CB's would reach from there to town.

Though bugging out was an option way down on their list. Primarily they would shelter in place for most things. The barn was only for the last ditch have-to case of leaving their homes. But the MAG kept it as a real option. The first monthly exercise Jim experienced was a bug-out scenario to the farm.

They accomplished quite a bit, using the parts of the two days to make some needed improvements to the barn for their use. The main thing accomplished, however, was where to improve their bug-out procedures.

The last family in had taken over four hours to get there, and that was with prior notice of the drill.

Jim had been first on site, and met the farmer, who was aware of the drill. They talked a little bit and Jim took an instant dislike to the man. He was very condescending and rather derogatory about the group and their goals. He had no compunction about taking their money for a while. When Jim asked him if he was a Prepper, the man laughed and said, "Are you crazy? I'm way too smart to fall for all that malarkey."

Being new to the group Jim kept silent. Perhaps it was just him. The others seemed to get along with Ralph Narlperson just fine. Jim pitched in where he could as Bob and some of the others patched up the more obvious holes in the sheet metal covering the pole frame style barn.

From what Bob had said, Ralph was supposed to have moved what old hay was still in the barn to another point on his farm, but it had not been done yet. Bob used Ralph's catchall tractor with a set of bale forks to do it. Ralph charged him a few dollars for the use of the tractor. Jim, with Bob when Bob made the deal, pulled out his wallet to pay, but Bob waved him away. It was his idea to move the hay, so he'd pay.

Jim did get a chance to use some of his equipment, setting up his tent inside the barn, like a couple of the others. Two members had brought travel trailers, and there was one Class C motorhome. A few had relatively simple BOB's and strung up makeshift shelters. The other single male didn't have anything to use for shelter. He used the bottom shelf of a long built-in open cabinet to lay out his sleeping bag.

At the discussion time on Sunday afternoon, Rob accepted the advice to have some type of shelter in his BOB for the next time. He said he would. Other things that weren't quite right were discussed and possible solutions discussed. Jim was glad to see that the positive aspects of the trial were also discussed and commented upon.

When he got home to his place he was overall pleased with the way things had gone. He could be a participant even if limited in some ways. Now he was a fully fledged member. He'd just let Bob continue to think that the Walton's order he'd put in was his year of LTS food. There'd been enough hesitation in a few remarks over the past months that convinced him that not everyone was fully exposing their entire preparations to the others in the group. He considered playing your cards close to your chest was a good idea. Where he meshed with the MAG he'd be forthcoming. Where he didn't... Well, they didn't have to know everything about his preparations.

Jim was on a disability retirement, so had time to help with quite a few of the MAG's smaller projects. He was good with computers and set up a used computer to handle the MAG's record keeping needs, while maintaining their paper records for them. Though limited physically, his mind was in perfect working order and he used it to his own benefit as well as that of the MAG.

More and more people were turning to him first when a question would come up. Bob and Larry, another of the members that had been the go-to guy with Bob, didn't seem to mind, so he filled that role, always keeping everyone required in the loop to avoid strained feelings.

Even with the disability status with Social Security, he was allowed to generate some additional income, which he did providing office temporary work through an agency. He didn't get a great deal of work, but enough to keep him occupied, without it getting him into trouble with Social Security. A couple days here and there would get him down, but he could recover in a day or two, so it worked out for him just fine.

Though the group tried to maintain a relatively low profile in the community, most of the participants became known for their involvement with preparedness, and in some cases, with the MAG. It was similar to the G3 group, though fewer of them were known, and those that were known, were thought to be much more intense about

preparedness than Jim's group.

Some of the others were a little annoyed with that, particularly Abbi, but it suited Jim just fine. He tried to explain it to the others that G3 would catch more of the questions and aggravation when things happened than their own group would.

"Yes," said Abbi, "but we can answer the questions just as well as G3 can. Better in a lot of cases. With the exception of weapons. They do have us beat there."

"We all have self-defense weapons," protested Harvey. He was the single father with three older children. They were off helping entertain the younger children.

"Of course we do," Abbi said. "But they just do a better job of it. They meet at least once a month to shoot together and practice tactics. Some of them shoot a lot more than that. I think we should practice more, too."

There was quite a bit of discussion and the consensus was to do more, but no real plan was set, much to Abbi's vocal disappointment.

She fell silent when Jim said, "Practicing weapon handling skills and tactics puts you awfully close to being a militia. Homeland security is really cracking down on militias."

"They're not going to bust us," Abbi rebutted. "We're just a bunch of down home folks looking out for number one."

"I'm sure that is how G3 thinks of themselves. Just looking out for number one." Everyone looked at Abbi. She finally relented, rather ungraciously.

So they had target practice, using bulls-eye and gong targets, while G3 used tactical targets. Jim's MAG practiced evacuation drills and radio

skills while G3 practiced tactical maneuvering and ambushing.

A shy six months after that discussion news came out of the White House that Homeland Security had thwarted a major al-Qaeda plot. The target or targets were not named, nor was the method of attack planned released.

A few days later black helicopters and black Suburban's showed up in several places in town. Members of G3 were rounded up, as was the major portion of their equipment and supplies. Everything disappeared for several days. They were released a few days later, though their equipment and supplies were not. None of the people involved would talk about what happened, but G3 was no more.

Jim's MAG re-evaluated their status. Much had been learned. Friendships had been forged. The MAG was disbanded with plans that everyone would stay in touch, but individually. And everyone knows how those promises go. The few that had been friends before the MAG were still friends. Those that had been strangers fell to acquaintance status, saying hi when they met somewhere, but no more.

Jim tried to maintain contact, and was successful with Bob, but the others, while pleasant, tended to avoid him. He finally asked Bob about it.

"Well, Gee, Jim... It's like this, you see... Well, to be honest, some of the guys think you're a narc."

"That's nuts! I'm no narc!" Jim protested. "I don't have anything to do with the government."

"You did show up here, don't really have a job. Not a real one. And you were always interested in what G3 was up to. You live out here by yourself. Some of those black helicopters could have landed here to meet with you and we'd never know it. Most of the guys think you

turned them in.”

Jim’s indignation faded away. What could he say that any of them would believe? A rumor like that has a life of its own. After a long silence Jim finally asked Bob, “What do you think? Do you think I’m a narc?”

“You could be. But I don’t care. If you are, you could have directed us into getting more like G3, but you didn’t. That counts in my book. You cut us a break when you didn’t have to do so.”

With a sigh, Jim nodded his head. Bob at least halfway believed it, too. But because Jim had been the one that steered the MAG away from trouble, he was letting bygones be bygones. “I’m not, you know. But I don’t know how I can prove it to you.”

“Well, if you hang around, that will be something in your favor on that score. They’re not going to let a narc just sit around.” Bob looked thoughtful. “Unless they just have you keep up the undercover operation until you’re needed again somewhere on another job. You could be here quite a while before you’re used again.” Bob looked at Jim sheepishly. “I guess it might be quite a while before they can be sure. But you’re welcome here, either way. You’re good people in my book. I don’t think G3 was all that big of a danger, but you never can tell.”

“That’s right,” Jim replied. “And it’s amazing what being under suspicion can do to you. Makes you suspicious of everyone and everything around you.”

“Yeah. I guess it could.” Bob slapped Jim on the back. “Look. I have to take off. Anything you need me to do before I go? Any heavy lifting or anything?”

“No, not this time. But thanks for helping me with those water barrels the other day. I could have finally got them unloaded, but you helping sure saved me a lot of time. They’re all filled now. I have five hundred

gallons of water stored in them.”

“You sure do things right,” Bob said. “But I guess if the government is paying...” He laughed and climbed into his truck. A wry look on his face, Jim waved as Bob drove away.

“Jiminy Cricket,” Jim muttered. “Me an informant. What’ll they think of next? And I scrimped and saved to get all my preparations. Nuts!”

Feeling a little depressed, Jim went in and took a nap until late that afternoon. He’d be up most of the night because of it, but that was okay. He didn’t have any temp assignment until the following week. He would listen to the shortwave for a while during the night when reception was best.

The next morning Jim was mulling over the news he’d heard the night before, listening to the BBC on the Grundig YachtBoy YB400PE radio. The news wasn’t good. Bad as things were here in the US, they were worse elsewhere. Between the severe weather that had become more the norm than the exception, people all around the world seemed to be in dire straits.

The exception was China. The country seemed to be booming. They were buying munitions right and left, increasing their already large military organization. The Russian republics didn’t seem to be bothered by China’s militancy. They had conducted joint maneuvers on the month before.

Europe, on the other hand, was restless, talking sanctions if China didn’t settle down. Switzerland, as always, was strictly neutral. Africa was in the midst of another set of tribal wars in several countries. South Africa remained aloof, wheeling and dealing with anyone and everyone that had a market for their products. They were cracking down heavily on internal disorder.

South America was probably in the worst economic turmoil. Argentina had already gone through a collapse and was trying to rebuild their economy. Only Brazil was prospering in South America. Mexico was encouraging and supporting ever more illegal immigration across the southern US border to generate as much return home dollars as possible.

For the next several days Jim monitored the news about China. They were building up militarily along the coast facing Taiwan. The US had reiterated that they would back Taiwan if China invaded.

Jim considered the situation. He'd been careful with his money since the industrial accident that had put him in the condition he was in. He still had settlement money he hadn't touched, and his retirement plan. His living expenses weren't too high. The little bungalow he'd had built when he moved from St. Louis to the northeast section of Missouri he'd paid cash for from the sale of his condo.

Since he'd had the fallout shelter built in during the initial construction of the house, it had only cost him ten percent more for the house. Which besides the shelter that took up one fourth of the basement, the three car garage instead of two car had been included in that ten percent premium.

His retirement and savings wouldn't mean much if there was war between the United States and China, for he was convinced that it would go nuclear, quickly. One Saturday morning he went on-line and checked all his various accounts. Banking, investment, and retirement. He checked the computer record of his emergency preparations. He studied the numbers all weekend, checking the news from time to time. Things seemed to be settling down a little.

Monday Jim went into town to do a one day temp job. It turned into a three day stay. By Thursday Jim was ready for a break. He'd been watching the news every night. China news had been replaced by the latest natural disaster. And gold and silver had been dropping all week. When Jim woke up Friday morning, he'd made up his mind.

The news still had no mention of China, and gold and silver had both dropped a little during the trading overseas during the night. Jim sat down at the computer and began to manipulate his finances.

By Wednesday of the following week he'd converted all his financial holdings to cash equivalents, except for one 401(k) account which he had in gold. Then he went on a buying spree.

Christmas was rolling around and Jim was beginning to have second thoughts about his decision to liquidate most of his financial accounts and stock up on emergency preparedness items. He'd had the basics covered, anyway, when he bought this time. Most of what he bought was food and other consumables, many strictly for barter and trade that he was sure would take place after a civilization changing event.

He knew that with his health, he wasn't going to be able to do much of the work that would need to be done in the aftermath of such an event. He'd known it for a long time and his preparations had reflected it, even before his last purchases. The purchase had made it even more obvious.

Jim, if the worst happened, and he survived, would be a grocer, he could live for at least ten years on his supplies, and have plenty more for trade for other things he might need. In ten years, things should be making a comeback. If not, he might be in a serious pickle.

The Trades People – Chapter 2

Jim had confirmed his direct deposits from Social Security Disability and his settlement trust that morning. He decided to go to St. Louis for a couple of days, drift around the malls and soak up some Christmas spirit since he didn't really celebrate the holiday. He was glad other people did, however, and enjoyed seeing them enjoy it. It had been a while since he'd been in and he needed to plan carefully, for several reasons.

Not the least of which was that he was on a strict budget now.

Another reason was he had started going armed every place he could. Or at least have a firearm available relatively quickly. When he was outside the house on his own property he carried his Para-Ordinance P-14 in a hip holster on a gun belt. There was a dual magazine holder on the belt as well.

When driving, he kept the P-14 in the console of his hard top Jeep Wrangler converted to a diesel engine using a Cummins 4BT engine. Jim could eject the magazine and cartridge in the chamber, slip them and the two spare magazines into a lockbox behind the passenger seat at a moment's notice and have it locked up and inaccessible.

He wouldn't wear it out on the street, even concealed. There were too many places that had restriction signs. It made it awkward to go about his business. He did have an inside-the-waistband holster and dual magazine pouch in the console as well, just in case he did decide to carry.

The lockbox behind the passenger seat of the Jeep already contained a MEC-TEC CCU carbine with a Para-Ordinance P-14 frame for use as a pistol caliber carbine. There were an additional seven magazines in the lock box.

It was a normal day for Christmas time in St. Louis. Cold and blustery. But Jim was prepared for it. He wore silk insulating underwear, under the khaki 5.11 shirt and pants he wore. There were wool socks on over the silk liners, topped with Red Wing slip on boots.

To top it off, he wore a well broken in Out Back sheepskin lined drover's coat and a brown Stetson cowboy hat. The cowboy hat was fairly well broken in, too. There was a pair of insulated pigskin work gloves in a pocket of the coat. He made his first two stops at the two banks he used downtown and withdrew all but a minimum of cash from

both accounts.

Next stop was the coin dealer he dealt with. Half of the cash was converted to gold and silver coin. That left the other half for his shopping and the rest of the month's expenses. His other stop for the day was a mall not too far away. He'd go to the hotel after a little people watching.

Jim slept in the next morning and went about getting a nice, leisurely breakfast. Today he'd go to another of the big malls and window shop. The closest thing he came to celebrating Christmas was to buy himself a present if he found something that drew his attention. It was a fun morning, but he didn't find anything he particularly wanted, except the time with people.

He was well on his way out of town when traffic went completely crazy. Vehicles going off in every direction. The only car that wasn't either stopping or veering wildly was an old pickup truck. Jim had to concentrate for a moment to avoid an accident. Then it suddenly hit him. The cars engines had quit and the people lost their power steering. EMP.

Jim slowed but kept going, dodging around the stalled vehicles and people climbing out of them to try to find out what had happened. In open areas Jim sped up. As he left the city environs the spaces between stopped vehicles widened and he was able to maintain some speed. Several people tried to flag him down but he only slowed enough to avoid hitting them and continued on his way at the fastest possible speed. He was twenty miles out of town as the crow flies when all three mirrors brightened enough to nearly blind him and the surroundings were lighted unnaturally bright.

There was an overpass directly ahead. He gunned the Jeep to get past it and then drove down into the deep median ditch. He leapt out of the Jeep and threw himself on the ground away from it. He felt the ground beneath him shake. It faded, but he stayed where he was.

Moments later he felt the terrific wind buffet him from the direction of St. Louis and then a moment later the back blast buffeted him the other way. Jim scrambled up and jumped back in the jeep before those around him, dazed by the nuclear blast, could recover and take the Jeep. He rolled both windows down despite the cold.

Now people made concerted efforts to stop him. He took the P-14 out of the console and held it in his lap. When someone tried to block him and he didn't have enough speed up to make them leap out of his way he would fire a round from the pistol, not trying to hit anyone, just make them move.

As time passed people got more desperate to stop him. Not everyone jumped out of the way of the Jeep. He quit not trying to hit people when he fired. By the time he got home he was sick to his stomach with what had gone on. His eyes scanned the northwest. The nuclear device at St. Louis wasn't a danger to him as far as fallout went. The missile fields in Montana and the Dakotas would be. He should have plenty of time to prepare everything outside for the fallout. He had his Nuk-Alert on his keychain. It would sound a warning when the radiation arrived. He'd probably see the fallout cloud long before the fallout actually got to him.

Jim made himself take a few minutes to make something warm to drink. He didn't want much on his stomach, it was still queasy, but he had to pace himself. The nervous energy it had taken just to get home had taken a toll on him.

Then Jim began to prepare his place. With the Jeep in the garage he used his hand trucks to take several rolls of heavy plastic out of the garage. He unrolled and unfolded each one, pinning it into place with large spikes with a washer under the head, using a hammer to drive them into the ground. It was frozen, but only a couple inches deep. The spikes were easy to drive.

When he had used all the plastic he had he took another break. He could see the dark cloud on the northwest horizon. Jim closed all the security shutters on the doors and windows. Next he began to move 4" x 8" x 16" solid concrete blocks from where they were at one side of the garage to in front of the garage door. He built a wall sixteen inches thick, five feet high across the nine foot wide door opening, overlapping the opening slightly.

It was all he could do, and besides, the Nuk-Alert was chirping and had been for a few minutes. Jim staggered into the house, and then down into the basement. He checked a couple of things in the basement and then went into the shelter. He was beat. He fell onto one of the bunks in the shelter and rested.

When he no longer felt like he was about to die from exertion, Jim rose and went over to the communications desk in the shelter. He opened the large faraday cage on the table and took out a CCTV monitor. He made sure to close the door on the cage. It was the work of moments to unhook a cable from the grounding plate on the wall beside the desk and hook it up to the monitor. He had several of the inexpensive cameras around the house, but wanted to know if the key one, and most useful, had survived the EMP with the protection he'd applied to them all.

It worked. Jim worked the pan and tilt of the camera near the top of his radio antenna tower. It was getting dark, but there was enough light yet for him to discern that there was no one and nothing out there besides the falling dust, now, it seemed, mixed with some snow. He disconnected the monitor and put it back into the cage.

There was nothing left to do except wait. Jim fixed a light meal from the shelter's resources and then went to bed, the P-14 under his pillow.

The shelter stay wasn't hard on Jim, except for the not knowing what was going on elsewhere. He had actually done two trial fourteen day runs in the shelter before, just for practice and to make sure he had

everything in it that he wanted.

Jim had four CD V-717 radiation survey meters. They were hooked up to monitor radiation levels remotely. One sensor was in the basement, one in the kitchen of the house, one in the garage, and one outside. He recorded the readings on a paper form and then entered them into the lap-top, taken out of the faraday cage for each quick use.

The radiation peaked two days after the initial start and began its steady decline. The 7/10 rule held close to true. He could go out into the basement after a few days, and then up into the house several days after that.

The bungalow was built with an insulated concrete form system with a poured concrete basement floor, twelve foot basement walls, basement roof on columns, a two foot fill, rat slab, thirty-inch crawlspace, twelve foot house walls, and poured concrete ceiling on columns over the columns in the basement. The walls were thick stucco. A conventional hip roof was constructed, with four foot overhang, using copper panel roofing. The center of the roofline sported a tall cupola.

There were two basement rooms outside the foot print of the house, accessible from the shelter. One housed the battery bank for the rack of photovoltaic panels on the south side of the bungalow. An adjacent room housed a pair of 12KVA diesel gensets synchronized together to allow either or both to run to provide electrical power to the house, including the shelter. Both rooms were set up to be dug out and the roofs removed in sections to change out the batteries and gensets when the need eventually arose.

There had been some question as to the survivability of photovoltaic panels so Jim had a second set in storage in the basement. There was a thousand gallon diesel tank to feed the gensets. Jim kept it full, replacing the fuel he used in the monthly test runs and occasional actual use of the gensets. The fuel was protected with Pri-D

The shelter had a calculated protection factor of 12,000. The basement had a decent PF rating on its own, with the house less, and the garage less than that. Jim used the cameras, most of which had survived the EMP, to keep an eye on the outside. A heavy snow storm blew through on the third day of the new year, thirteen days after the first blasts. There were no tracks of any kind to be seen when Jim checked the cameras after the snow stopped falling.

Jim caught up on his reading and movie watching. He had movies from the past ten years he'd never watched but always planned to some day. He watched a few of his favorites, too. The real waiting was different from the tests, he found. The not know what was going on was the difference. Shortwave was still dead, and he wasn't getting anything on the local and regional radio and TV stations.

During the tests he was able to hear the radio and shortwave, and watch TV, though he limited it to a few minutes a session, just to make the test more realistic. But in this case it hadn't been realistic. There was nothing.

But the time did eventually pass, until Jim was able to spend time in the garage, as long as he didn't stay too long. He was keeping his exposure to well under a roentgen a day. Jim used the garage time to do a service job on the Jeep. It would undoubtedly be hectic once he was able to be out and about. He had supplies to service and repair the Jeep for years. Including several sets of tires. Fuel, on the other hand, could be a different story.

He had a hundred 55-gallon drums of diesel buried in five separate caches on the property, along with a hundred drums of gasoline. He'd buried the drums empty and then filled them a drum at a time over several months. All the digging, done at night, had kept him in as good of physical shape as it was possible for him to get. He hadn't been kidding when he'd told Bob he was planting the food buckets, too. One

layer deep, wrapped in a double layer of plastic, with twelve inches of earth covering them. That didn't include everything in the basement and the two bays of the garage.

All the fuel was protected with Pri-D or Pri-G. But those supplies would eventually run out, especially with what he had in mind for three-fifths of the diesel and four-fifths of the gasoline. There was also a farm tank on a stand by the utility building that held five hundred gallons. It had a dispenser counter, hose, and nozzle to refuel the Jeep. A smaller tank under the diesel tank contained one-hundred gallons of gasoline for the various small engines around the place.

Hopefully one or more of the local farmers that survived could be persuaded to produce bio-diesel and or distill alcohol for fuel. Jim doubted there would be much new production of propane any time soon. He had four one-thousand gallon propane tanks. Two buried and two aboveground.

Each of the above ground tanks was piped together with an underground tank. Two separate propane companies serviced what they thought were two individual propane tanks. It had taken some time to slowly fill the underground tanks from the above ground tanks without either propane company knowing. As efficient as the house was, the propane would last for several years before he needed to concern himself about switching to coal and/or wood.

As it was, he had ten cords of wood in two woodsheds, and one-hundred tons of lump coal in a three sided bin with walls and floor of concrete. How Bob thought he might be leaving for another assignment, Jim couldn't figure, as the random thought came to him.

The time finally came that Jim could go outside. He suited up in a level B suit, hooked up the Millennium respirator to the OptimAir 6A PAPR, donned and taped gloves and boots, and went outside to start decontaminating.

It was relatively easy. Most of the snow had melted, and the water from the well was warm, relatively speaking, and made for quick removal of the snow and fallout from the roof to the plastic he had put down immediately after the attack.

Jim washed the combination of snow and fallout off the plastic all around the house. He would dig up and bury that narrow strip of heavily contaminated soil as soon as he could. For the moment, he had a radiation free zone at least sixty feet from the house.

Even with the powered air purifying respirator the work in the containment suit tired him and as soon as he was done with the initial decontamination of the house and surround, he decontaminated in the garage over a floor drain installed for the purpose. The contaminates ran to a dry well some distance out from the house. Carefully he put away the equipment, went to the shelter and took a nap.

His place was A-OK. The next order of business was to go into town and see what was going on there. But it would wait another day.

Jim checked the radio frequencies the MAG had agreed upon. Nothing, but that wasn't unreasonable. It was past the maximum range of the FRS/GMRS radios, even with an external antenna. Nothing on the CB, either, except static. At least he was picking up some stations on the Amateur Radio bands. The atmosphere was less ionized than it had been, but wasn't back to normal, yet. Probably the high altitude blasts to create EMP fired off by each nation, Jim supposed. He shut down the radio, disconnected it and put it back in the faraday cage. He had some duplication in communications gear, but Jim wasn't going to take any chances. There might still be a war going on. He hadn't heard otherwise.

Until he found out more, Jim didn't want to risk equipment or supplies. For the trip to town he would not use the Jeep. Instead, he would use the

ROKON bike that was stored on a ceiling hanger system. He lowered it and checked it for readiness. There wasn't much to check. It started right up.

Jim ran it for a few minutes and then shut it off. While it was running he moved a few of the concrete blocks from in front of the garage door. Just enough to allow the ROKON out. He went back into the house and began to get ready for the trip. First he stripped down to his underwear and donned the silk long handles. Over them he put on another of his sets of 5.11 khakis. Over them went a pair of coveralls. Finally the Level B environmental suit, taped gloves, taped boots, and Millennium mask/OptimAir 6A combination.

He'd been keeping the HK-91 with a 100-round dual drum magazine hanging at the head of the stairs to the basement with a set of load bearing equipment, just in case. Jim put on the LBE first, and then removed the drum magazine and inserted a thirty rounder. He transferred a few things from the hall side table he'd removed from his pockets into a utility pouch on the LBE. Jim slung the HK-91 over his shoulder and went back to the garage.

A quick pull on the starter rope and the ROKON was running again. He triggered the door opener and eased the ROKON out. Using the external keypad, Jim closed the door. Taking a careful look around, he began the journey into town, on constant alert for an ambush.

The road had only been partially cleared of snow by the winds. He had to ease around, and in a couple of instances, through some accumulated snow. Jim eased the speed up to a point where he was comfortable, temperature wise. He hadn't wanted to wear too much insulation to counter the wind while riding, for it was easy to overheat in the Level B suit.

Where the snow had melted on the pavement, there was still some dust. He kicked a little of it up when he hit a large patch of it. Jim was glad he

was wearing the protective gear. He would have breathed in a mass of it if he wasn't wearing the mask. From then on, when he saw a similar patch he slowed down. He only saw a few dead vehicles on his way in.

His face was grim when he reached the outskirts. It looked like there'd been a fire. A large one. Much of the downtown area was gone. A couple of residential areas, too. Jim headed for Bob's place in the best neighborhood in town. The houses seemed to be intact. It looked like the fire had burned itself out at a small undeveloped tract just before he got to Bob's development.

After the last curve before Jim got to the development Jim saw half a dozen cars blocking the entrance. Jim saw something move behind them and a voice rang out.

"Hold it there, you! You with the government?"

Jim made sure the voice amplifier of the mask was on. "No!" he called out. "It's Jim Longmont! I was coming to check on Bob Dalton!"

"Stay where you are and keep your hands where I can see them!" Jim left his hands on the handlebars, even when he heard the gate guard calling on the same frequency he had tuned in the FRS/GMRS radio in the pouch on his LBE.

When he heard Bob's voice give a bellowing "OK! Let him in!" Jim eased his way toward the obstruction.

The guard had also called out, "Come on in!"

Someone else was behind the barrier, for one of the cars began to roll out of the way to allow the bike into the development. When he cleared the barrier he saw Bob walking quickly toward him, a rifle slung over his shoulder, a gun belt around his waist over the jacket he wore.

Jim checked the survey meter the way he'd been doing on the way in. The radiation was down as low as it was at his place. He stopped the bike and took off his face mask, turning off the OptimAir 6A in the process.

Jim wasn't expecting the hearty hug he got from the big man. "Man! Am I glad to see you made it all right!" Bob stepped back. "Come on up to the house. We've got a pot of coffee on." Bob grinned. "Don't have any of the fancy Earl Grey you like, but we do have some Lipton's tea bags."

Keeping pace with Bob, Jim went with him to his house. Another surprise. There were scorch marks on the house. But that was all. It obviously hadn't burned. Bob saw Jim looking at the house.

"Yeah. Looters. I guess word had gotten around about me. They came at us with small arms and when they couldn't take us they firebombed the house. We were just lucky they didn't really know what they were doing. At least the shutters kept them from lobbing one through a window. That would have been a different story."

"That's why the barricade at the entrance?"

"Yeah. Let's get inside and I'll give you the whole story."

Bob didn't protest when Jim drove the ROKON right up to the entryway of the house before he stopped. Actually, he said, "Good idea. Don't want to take chances with anything now. Got a few lowlifes around. Don't think any of that bunch that hit me before the fallout came, but I can't honestly say that I trust all of my neighbors. They're starting to make noise about it not being fair that I have what I have, which they don't really know for sure, but anyway... I've got to watch it all the time."

Jim stood calmly as Bob sprayed him down with water and went over the suit with a scrub brush to decontaminate him.

When Bob gave him a nod, Jim unzipped the front opening of the Level B suit and shifted the head piece back onto his shoulders. He didn't want to take the thing off because it was such a pain to put back on.

He told Bob as much. Bob handed Jim a towel and between them they toweled off most of the moisture from the decontamination, and then went into the house. Doreen offered him tea and Jim accepted. She was resigned to the fact that the house might never be the spotless palace it had once been.

"Man," Bob said, sitting down on the sofa, motioning Jim to the recliner since it would be easier to get up from. "You were right about my truck. EMP fried part of the electronics. It runs, but not well. I've got to find the parts to replace the bad ones, but I've been reluctant to venture out of here.

The few expeditions we've made out, we've felt like we were watched. You probably were, too. How is it out at your place?"

"Came through good. No damage. I've got the house and most of the yard decontaminated. Just need to dig in the stuff I washed off the plastic."

Bob shook his head. "So that worked? You got it done before the fallout hit?"

Jim nodded. "Yes. I was on my way back from St. Louis when it happened and..."

Bob cut him off. "You'd been in St. Louis? Do you think you got a bad dose of radiation from the blast? You were obviously were able to make it back."

"No I was already quite a-ways this way." Jim shivered a bit. "It was

rough getting back. All those people on the road...”

Looking grim himself, Bob said, “Yeah. Lot’s died here in town, too. We policed up the ones here in the development. What about out there?”

Jim shook his head. Didn’t see any bodies on the streets or on the road. Everyone was probably trying to get the best shelter they could and are inside the buildings. I take it, other than that initial attempt you guys made it through okay.”

“Yep. We got into shelter when the fallout started. Once the radiation dropped a bit I’d make a quick recon. Got more than I liked, but I haven’t been sick. Some of the others here... A bunch are not going to make it. We got hit hard with radiation. Just a basement, especially some of these with walk outs, got some pretty good doses.”

“Time will tell. Have you heard from any of the others?”

Again Bob looked grim. “Yeah. Abbi made it okay. Sheila and her kids. Tom and his kids... Well, they answered roll call when the radios would work again, but I haven’t heard from him since. Most of the others are okay. What do you think about the government? They going to be any help?

“Your guess is as good as mine. I’ve been running the frequencies and haven’t heard much. Maybe in the areas that didn’t get as much fallout. I’m not counting on them.”

“Me, either,” Bob replied.

“Well, Bob, thank Doreen for the tea. I want to get back. I just wanted to check on you and the others, if I could. I want to get back. I suspect that some of the wildness will fade when those that got the intermediate doses of radiation die off. There just can’t be that many that had good shelter, that didn’t have other preps. And there should still be some food

in the stores and such.”

“Maybe,” Bob said. “Some of the others here have gone out on salvage parties and hit all the local stores. They said they didn’t leave anything useful.”

“Oh. Somehow I doubt that, but I’m not going searching to find out.” Jim stood and began to enclose himself again. When all was in readiness the two men went outside. Jim adjusted the HK-91 to hang ready in front of his chest, just in case, since he now knew there were some likely targets out there.

“I’m not going to worry about the FCC and will get on twenty meters at eight each night. I know you have the capability. I’d like to check in with you so you know I’m okay.” Jim put it that way so Bob wouldn’t realize that Jim actually wanted a way to check up on Bob and the situation in town.

“Will do.” Bob named a frequency and Jim nodded. They shook hands and Jim headed out. Bob was calling the gate on the radio to let them know. The guards had the car rolled out of the way when he got there.

If it was possible, Jim was even more alert than when he’d come in. He saw movement twice, but no one tried to stop him. When he was in open terrain again and didn’t have to worry about an ambush he stopped and watched the road from a high spot for a little while. Didn’t appear to be anyone following him. He made it home without any problems and put the bike away, and restacked the concrete blocks in front of the door.

It had been a trying, nerve wracking day. Some things were good. There were survivors. There were definitely bad things too. Some of those survivors were bad guys. They might have been before the war, but they sure were after the war. Jim laid down for a nap, but set his alarm so he would be up and have supper done by the time he needed to call Bob on the radio.

They made contact and signed off. Jim went to bed, calculating when a good time would be to go back to town, based on the probable life spans of people that hadn't had good shelter.

The month he finally planned on extended into a second month due to a late winter blizzard. And it was a true blizzard. A white out for a while, actually, at least at Jim's. Looking out a triple pane window, Jim couldn't discern anything more than a few inches past the overhanging roof. Not even that in the areas where the high winds were blowing the snow.

Jim checked his weather machine during the worst of it. Steady state winds of almost forty miles an hour, gusts to 60. Temperature hovering around 5° F. with the wind chill 22 below. The storm lasted for three days, though not, of course, at that intensity. When it finally quit snowing Jim had four feet of snow on the level, with some drifts around the house and utility building of eight feet. It took him nearly a full day just to get to the solar panels and clean them off.

Another two days to get to the utility building and the snow blower. He had not yet moved it to the garage since they'd not had much snow. He managed to clean the large concrete garage apron and the drive to the road. He still wouldn't be going anywhere. It was just as bad on the road, if not worse. He could probably bull a path with the jeep and snowplow attachment, but he didn't see the need.

Jim used the antenna camera occasionally to check for tracks, but the snow was unbroken. He enjoyed the time he considered himself snowed it, for it would have taken a remarkable effort to get to him through the snow.

The news in town wasn't so good. Bob was nursing a bullet wound to the left side of his ribs from one of his neighbors that had tried to get in Bob's house for warmth when he saw smoke from Bob's chimney

during the early hours of the storm and the temperature had already dropped to below freezing.

It was another month before Jim decided to go back into town. Bob, instead, said he'd come out to Jim's place, since he wanted to check a few things out and about, anyway. "We'll pick you and the ROKON up and you can help us. You shouldn't have any trouble getting back out there if the Ramcharger has been there and back. We found the parts to fix it." Bob had been insistent despite Jim's protest of the use of the fuel.

"I'll talk to you about that when I get out there," Bob said.

Jim acquiesced, suspecting what Bob didn't want to discuss over the radio. They used their code words for setting meetings over the radio. It would be a Bravo Lima meeting. That meant in two days hence, at noon. Anyone listening would know they were meeting at Jim's, but wouldn't know the date and time. It was safer that way.

When Bob got to Jim's he had two people in the big Dodge 1-ton, crew cab, dually four-wheel-drive pick-up. Two in the rear seats with Bob driving. It was easier to use a rifle from the back seats than the front. And everyone was armed.

"Any trouble?" Jim asked, meeting them out on the garage apron. He added, "Come on in out of the cold," before they could respond. He nodded to two former members of the MAG. "Don, Sam."

"No. No trouble. Still some drifts, but the truck didn't have any trouble getting through them. When we go back, you won't either. None of the men were wearing protective suits, just cold weather gear. There wasn't much dust to kick up at the moment. Jim led the way into the house. He served the men coffee that he'd started earlier, knowing the approximate time they'd be there. He took a cup of Earl Grey tea for himself.

"Uh... Look... Jim..." Bob was working himself up to ask Jim for

something and Jim knew it.

“You need fuel.”

Sheepishly Bob nodded. “Yeah. You know I couldn’t get a permit for a farm tank. Then I wound up getting caught with only half a tank in the cross bed tank. We’ve been using my truck around town. Haven’t found much else that will run, at least not and brave the weather. At least the factory tank was full. But I hate to get down to just that. What if something happens and I need to get my family somewhere? I’ll work a deal with you. You’re bound to need some help, puny like you are.”

Bob’s face reddened. “I didn’t mean it like... Well, you know.”

“I understand. I will need some help with things. It’s not a problem, Bob. I can let you have up to the full amount you need for the crossover tank. My jeep doesn’t use much and I just had the farm tank filled, so I’ve got five hundred gallons. We’ll have to be a bit stingy with it, but I can certainly let you get some for some labor I’m going to need.”

Bob looked greatly relieved. “Thanks, man, that means a lot. I always figured I could get fuel from stalled tankers or something, like in the stories.”

“And we may, Bob. There has to be some somewhere. It was a no warning attack. But I didn’t want to count on them. There’s still probably fuel in some of the service stations. Just can’t get to it without power to the pumps. Or has someone already thought about that.”

All three men looked stunned. “Geez!” Bob exclaimed. “I should have thought about that!”

“Aw, man! Me to,” injected Don. Sam was just shaking his head.

“We’ll need to do something quick. Someone else is bound to have the

same idea.”

“Most of those pumps are going to be three phase. You’re run of the mill portable genset won’t work, even if it has the KVA capacity. We’ll need a three phase genset. Probably be one at the rental shop.”

“I am really glad I came out here today,” Bob said. “Just for this information. If I’d had it, I wouldn’t need the fuel right now.”

“But we can’t risk it, right now. It’ll be a few days before we can get a genset and get fuel, so it’s still okay for you to fill up here. I’m serious about needing some help in the future.”

“Okay. Well, I finished my coffee, so I guess we can get started,” Bob said. Don and Sam set their cups down and stood up, too.

“I’ll meet you out by the tank,” Jim replied. He took the cups and saucers back to the kitchen. None of the men had taken off their coats, only opening them up when they were inside. Jim fastened his up and headed out to join the three.

Bob had pulled the truck up and was in the back of the bed, opening the fill spout of 98-gallon cross bed tank. Jim unlocked the nozzle and the valve, handing Bob the nozzle and turning on the valve.

It took a few minutes to gravity feed the seventy-two gallons the tank needed to be refilled. Bob recapped the tank while Jim locked his tank back up. Bob pulled the truck over to the garage door Jim indicated and backed the truck up. Jim motioned him forward and over to center the truck on the edge of the door.

Bob left the cab of the truck to join Sam and Don at the rear of the truck while Jim was opening the garage door with the external keypad. “No wonder you wanted me over here,” Bob said, seeing the blocks still stacked across the opening.

Jim handed out the ramps he kept available and turned back to start up the ROKON. Jim walked the bike out and up the ramp, walking up the one ramp, with the bike on the other. He didn't believe in risking a fall riding it up a single ramp. He put the ramps back in the garage.

Bob had cargo straps and it only took a few moments to tie the bike down. "Okay, guys, I'm going in to get my gear. I'll be out in a minute."

Jim came back out a few minutes later wearing his LBE and carrying the HK-91. He had a pair of Carhartt Arctic coveralls with hood he would wear when he came back on the bike. His Sorel shoe packs would do for the trip back, but he had insulated leather gauntlets for the trip back, too.

The clothing was bundled up and put on the center of the rear seat. Jim climbed into the front passenger seat and they were headed back to town.

It was no more eventful going in than it had been coming out. They drove around town, checking the availability of many useful items. Every drug store in the local area had been hit by looters, either initially, or post shelter stay. Many grocery stores had also been looted, including those closest to Bob that people had said had nothing left of value. They checked anyway.

Jim began picking up items here and there, where things had just been thrown on the floor. Bob noticed the set of Jim's facial features. "You seem upset, Jim. Isn't it good we're finding stuff?"

"It's just that there's been such waste. Much of this stuff isn't useable because it was thrown on the floor and stepped on in people's rush to grab what they wanted.

"Oh," replied Bob. "But I guess I can understand. For so many people food and a few other things were their main priority. Still is. I'm not

making excuses, but...”

“I know, Bob,” Jim said, cutting off the somewhat hesitant Bob. Jim looked around to see where Don & Sam were and found them standing, one just inside the doorway, and the other outside, keeping an eye out.

Jim quit gathering stuff and walked back to the door. “Bob, you noticed that people aren’t approaching us. You’ve seen the same furtive movements I have on this trip. People are scared to meet up with others, because of the violence.”

“I agree. It’s been hard enough in my development, other than the people I knew well. You do catch someone out and try to talk to them it’s like their head is on a swivel. They’re looking everywhere for danger. More than one had their hand in their pocket, and I’m fairly certain more than one had that hand on a gun.”

Jim stood looking out the door. “We need to get people working together. And what needs to be done first is gather everything portable, that is useable, together so it can be distributed. Being the capitalist that I am, I’m tempted to start doing it myself and bartering it away.”

“I don’t know, Jim,” Bob said. “That don’t seem right to me. Everyone needs stuff.”

“I know,” replied Jim. “Just thinking out loud. But somebody is going to realize the importance of this stuff and start doing just that. So how do we get people together to get started doing it as a community?”

Sheepishly Bob shrugged his shoulders. “I don’t know. Don’t really have a clue. The old MAG... I’ve been able to contact a few of them. I guess we could get started.”

“That’s good, but we need more people.”

“Jim,” Bob said softly, “there aren’t that many people left. You were right about the die off. And some places where we’ve checked on people that were doing okay after the attack, died in the storm for lack of heat. Some for lack of food because they couldn’t get out and scavenge.”

“I know. I guess what I mean is, that as many of the survivors as we can get, the better.” Jim turned back inside the store and made his way to where the store had their small selection of office supplies. He picked up the four reams of paper that were there.

“Just like this,” he said, carrying the paper. “No more factory paper for a while. We need to collect and conserve as much as we can. What I want to do is print up some flyers saying what we’re doing and post them around the area. If we get a turnout, then we’ll have a starting point.”

“Hey!” Bob said, “That’s great. I know most of the MAG will join.”

“Yeah,” said Don from outside. “That’s a good idea. I know a couple of other people that will want to help and get some of the stuff. They’ve been reluctant to go out on their own.”

“Me, too,” chimed in Sam. “I know at least three over by me. And to tell you the truth, I won’t go out alone to find stuff. I think a lot more people will show if we let them know there will be armed guards.”

“But they have to know that they’ll get to keep the stuff. At least some of the stuff they want.” Bob could see the possibilities. “Where we going to take the stuff they don’t want?”

“The high school,” Jim said. “Neutral ground and plenty of space to set up a community store.”

“That means guards. Round the clock,” Bob said.

“Probably not right away,” Jim said. “All the food and immediate

necessity items will go with those that help in the collection. The other stuff isn't things people are going to want, right away, but will eventually. The potential thieves may or may not know that, depending if they come along on the journey. I understand nobody has seen the faces of most of the people doing the banditry."

"For the most part," Bob replied.

"So even if someone does break in thinking there is food or whatever, they'll be in for a disappointment. And we might as well make it easy, initially. That might tell them what's there isn't of great value. The risk is that they will be disappointed and trash what's there. But I think it's a risk worth taking."

Bob looked at Don and Sam. They both nodded. Looking back at Jim, Bob said, "Okay. That's the way we'll do it. When?"

"Two weeks from today?" Jim suggested. The three nodded.

"I'll use this paper and print out a couple hundred copies. That sound okay?" asked Jim.

Again he got three nods, and with that decision, they decided to call it a day. Bob insisted on taking Jim back to the edge of town before they unloaded the ROKON. Bob, Don, and Sam lifted the bike and set it down on the ground while Jim put on the Carhartt coveralls and put his LBE back on. With not another word said, Jim headed back to his place and the three men went back to Bob's house. Jim made it without problem. He ate and went to bed, the wording for the flyer running through his head.

When Jim got up the next morning he had the basic text in mind for the flyer. After his morning routine, which now included a thorough scan of the area with the antenna camera, Jim pulled out his laptop and began

the process of creating the flyers.

1st Community Organized Salvage Operation

You are invited to help our community and yourself by salvaging useable objects from unoccupied buildings in this area.

Individuals with operating vehicles will be provided fuel for the use of the vehicle during the search.

All search parties will have armed guards, so please bring a weapon if you are interested in being a guard. Guards will share in the distribution of goods, as will all who help with the operation to include child care and food preparation during the operation.

A hearty meal will be provided for all who participate. The equivalent of at least two packaged meals, plus other resources is guaranteed for all participants.

For more information you may contact Jim on 21.xxx around 8:00pm each evening or Bob on Channel XX throughout the day.

We will meet at the high school parking lot on April 8 at 9:00am. You are still welcome to join in if you can't make it that early.

When he was satisfied with the document he saved it and printed two hundred copies. He would take them in the next day.

Bob nearly exploded when he saw the flyers. “We didn’t discuss the giving anyone three meals! What if we don’t find enough food! And where do we get the fuel? This could be a disaster!”

“I’m guaranteeing the food and fuel,” Jim said calmly.

Bob was taken slightly aback. “What? Man, you can’t afford to be giving food away. There could be thirty or forty people there. Maybe more. That’s three month’s supply of food, at least. More probably. And diesel and gasoline are going to be like gold here right quick, as we get vehicles going.”

“Oh, I think we’ll find quite a bit of food and fuel, but even if we don’t I want to do this. We’re going to have to pull together as a community if we’re going to make it long term.”

Bob began to calm down, but he was still upset. “Well, I know that. Of course. It’s just... Well, to put it bluntly, I can’t afford to add any food to the pot.”

“I’m not asking you to, Bob. I’ll handle it all on my own.”

“But that makes me feel like a jerk.” His voice was soft.

“Don’t,” Jim said. “You’ve already contributed more to this than most will by your organizing the group here.”

“Well...”

“Come on. Cheer up. This will go well and then we can all feel good.”

“Man, if it does go well, it’ll be something to feel good about. This late spring has me worried. I’ve got canned seeds for a garden, but we’re going to need the weather to be right before we start planting. I don’t know where I’d find fuel, but I sure wish I could come up with a rototiller. Doing a garden just by shovel and rake is going to be a killer.”

“I’ve got one you can use if we don’t run across one,” Jim said.

“Oh, no,” protested Bob. “I’m not going to owe you any more than I do now.”

“Well, keep it in mind. And speaking of gardens, I need to go home and read up on it some. I’ve never tried to grow a garden.”

“Oh, it’s hard work, but easy enough to do.”

“See there. You’re already ready to pay me back some. You help me with my garden and I’ll call it even for the diesel.”

“Well... I don’t know. That doesn’t sound like much payment for the amount of fuel I got, considering the circumstances.”

“I think it’s plenty, considering the circumstances.”

Bob just shook his head. He wasn’t going to win the argument, he could tell. “How do you want to do the guards?”

Jim replied, “I think two for a group of five to ten people, as long as some of the people are armed as well. I just can’t see these bandits going after a group like this if there is an indication of anyone being ready to resist. So far I haven’t seen or heard anything of big, ruthless raider bands like in the movies and stories.”

“Which is very, very good. If it holds true.”

“Man, I sure hope so. This living with the threat everyday gets old, real fast. I’m almost hoping the bad guys show up and we can deal with them once and for all.”

Bob notice the intensity of Jim’s voice when he replied, “That was no small part of the reason I wanted to do this.”

“Oh. I see. You had this in mind all along?”

“Not really, but the more I learn, the more I’m convinced we need to deal with it now, before it gets worse.”

“Well, I have to agree with you there.” They left it at that. Bob would be responsible for getting the flyers out and Jim would be responsible for running the show.

When Jim got home and made sure, as he always did, that there had been no intrusion, he went out to the utility building. It was built using the same ICF blocks and concrete system as the house. Also like the house, it had stucco walls, copper roof over concrete ceiling, and a basement. In the basement, behind a cabinet was the escape tunnel from the shelter in the basement of the house. Other than that, it was a conventional household utility building. Perhaps a bit larger than some.

Jim serviced the Troy-built roto-tiller and then took it outside. He made a few passes over the cache from which he’d already taken items. It was as good a place as any to start trying to have a garden.

The Trades People – Chapter 3

The day of the salvage operation dawned bright and clear, the temperature up to jacket comfortable temperature even this early. Over the past two weeks Jim had restacked the concrete blocks in front of the

garage door he used for the Jeep and ROKON. That wasn't all that had been accomplished. Bob's garden spot had been tilled, as had Jim's. A few seeds had been planted, but not everything. It was still too cool.

Jim had attached the small tandem wheel trailer he used with the Jeep to it. The Jeep and the trailer were both loaded with the means to make a meal for fifty people, as well as two packaged meals apiece for that same fifty people. There was a drum of diesel fuel, and one of gasoline.

Jim locked down the house and headed to town. Bob was already at the school when Jim got there. "If anyone asks," Jim told Bob, "I started early. You get the fuel siphons like we talked about?"

Bob nodded and held up a set of keys. "And the keys to the kingdom. The principal didn't make it, but his keys did." They'd come to the point where all the deaths were somewhat matter of fact situations. Jim didn't envy those in town the job they'd taken on to dispose of the bodies as they found people.

There'd been a backhoe in the area doing some work and it and the barrel of fuel that was on site with a chemical toilet, and a few other things on a trailer had been commandeered by Bob for community use. They had a slit trench open in one of the vacant lots nearby and the bodies were being lined up in it and enough earth pushed in to keep the animals left from getting to them.

Don and Sam showed up shortly with their wives and kids. Things began to get hectic then. A room in the school was set aside for the children to play in, and teen aged babysitters assigned as more people began to show up. The majority were armed and looked wary. When they saw the contents of the Jeep and trailer their eyes got large and smiles appeared on what had been grim faces.

Jim waited until the influx of people slowed significantly. It was ten o'clock. Fortunately there were half a dozen vehicles, all old, mostly

pickups. Jim motioned to a couple of people and said, “Let’s get this first load unloaded.” Many hands helped, without hesitation.

“Okay,” said Jim, as people began to gather around. He gave the closest person a small stack of paper. “Here’s a list of types of articles we want to get and bring back. Food and fuel are two of the most important, of course, but the other items are important, too. It will be easier to strip a building all at one time now, than pick through it and then go back time and again looking for more.

“If there are things you consider important, by all means, collect them and bring them along. We plan to do this several times until we’ve cleaned every useable item in the area. As the flyers indicated, everyone will get an equal share for helping out. Just so everyone is comfortable with the idea, everyone will draw a number, pick an item and everyone else will follow in turn till no one wants anything else that we’ve accumulated.

“Be sure and give your name to the women over yonder. They’re the cooks today and we need to know how many we’re cooking for and whether you want beef stew or chicken stew. We have a few alternatives for the children. Mothers or fathers, let the ladies know which dish that we have that your children would prefer.

“Remember, this is not a competition and everyone participating in whatever manner will get a share. Those with firearms we’d like you to take turns acting as lookout/guard for the party you’re with, with a couple on watch at all times and the others with their weapons carried safely. Bob is in charge of that. He’s the big guy over by the big Dodge.

“Now those of you with vehicles that we use, have Don or Sam over there record your fuel level. We’ll fill you back up to at least that and a little more for getting here and to get back. More if we find it. We’ve already got fifty gallons of diesel and fifty of gasoline, so we have a good start. Those of you with some mechanical skill get with Bob. He’s

also in charge of the fuel recovery. Let's get these preliminaries done and get started."

Well, it didn't go quite like Jim and Bob thought, but it went. There were some attempts at keeping what was found by the finder, but most sheepishly added the goods to the growing piles in the gym when their co-workers admonished them.

That's not to say there weren't any disturbances. There were. A couple of fistfights over choice bits here and there, but not many. For the most part there was cooperation. There was an emphasis on food and Jim was sure there were many useable items left behind as the individual groups went on, hoping for more food.

The fuel recovery project went well. Many vehicles had their fuel tanks exhausted with siphon hoses. A few had a small hole punched into the fuel tank and fuel taken that way, but Bob insisted each one have a small screw put into the hole, just in case. He had plenty of the screws.

Everyone enjoyed the meal. The best one some of them had eaten in quite some time. Another round of salvaging and then it was time to start dividing the spoils.

"Okay, now," Jim said, standing in the back of Bob's pickup, which now contained six barrels of gasoline. "Let's get the two meals per person out of the way. Those with people still at home sign up with the ladies to get the extra rations."

Oh, there was a little grousing, but it went fairly well, with the process being watched by everyone, thereby keeping everyone else honest, so to speak. Enough additional food had been salvaged to allow two additional trips apiece.

The selections of other goods went fairly well. There were sudden

huddles around those with operating vehicles to get rides with their stuff back home, since they couldn't carry it all. Fuel was distributed to those who had used vehicles in the searches. After a group discussion, led by and heavily endorsed by Jim, it was agreed to allow people without vehicles to claim a gallon of fuel as one of their picks on the rounds. That would give them some trading power to get other things from other people.

People finally dispersed, wanting to get home before dark. Again Jim started a movement to elect some people to be in charge of the store. Although Jim was nominated, he declined, stating he lived out of town and really couldn't do it. His nomination of Bob was quickly endorsed by several others and Bob was chosen to be in overall charge, with a couple of helpers selected by similar vote.

With the people drifting off, Bob and Jim decided to go ahead and lock the gym and post a rotation of guards inside. Bob wasn't comfortable with Jim's ideas about the security. They were still discussing it when they stepped outside, both ready to head for their respective homes.

The sound of the shot coincided with Jim falling back against the door and slowly sliding down it, without a sound. The guard came running out and he and Bob took off in the direction it seemed the shot had come from.

Finding nothing, they hurried back and found Jim slowly climbing to his feet. His face was white as a sheet. He couldn't stand fully upright, but waved off any help. He stood with his hands on his knees and took several deep breaths. Finally he did stand the rest of the way up except for a slight stoop.

"Jeez! Are you okay? You went down hard!" Bob said, stooping a little to look into Jim's eyes. "I thought you were dead."

"Protective vest and plates," Jim managed to say through clenched teeth.

“Hurt’s like the devil. He lurched around and tried to open the door to the gym. Bob quickly did it for him.

Jim was still hunched over slightly, supporting himself with a hand on Bob’s shoulder. Leaning his buttocks against the nearest support he slowly straightened his back. The guard was keeping an eye out, from the doorway, but there was no more activity as Jim eased into a more comfortable position. “Man! That hurts!”

“Where’d it hit?” Bob asked.

“Somewhere on the plate,” Jim responded, “or I’d be bleeding all over everything.” He took out a Mini-Maglite from a pouch on his harness and handed it to Bob. See if you can see it.”

Bob searched the tan cloth of the molle vest that made up part of Jim’s load bearing equipment. “Here it is.” He dug around a bit with his fingers and pulled the mushroomed bullet free. “Looks to be a .223.”

“I’d hate to think what anything larger would feel like,” Jim said, taking the bullet and turning it around in his fingers a couple of times.”

“I’ve seen pictures. You’re going to have a bruise to beat it. We’d better get you somewhere you can lay down. “Chad, help me get him to my truck.”

When Jim was in the truck, Bob made a call to Don on the radio to come get Jim’s Jeep and trailer and take them to Bob’s house. Jim handed his keys to Chad. Bob didn’t wait for Don. He fired up the truck and took Jim home with him.

Doreen fussed over Jim as Bob got Jim’s equipment and shirt off him. The bruise was a large one, but there didn’t seem to be any other wound than the blunt trauma. Jim passed out on the sofa before any major discussion could ensue about the whys and wherefores of the shooting.

Bob went out when Don showed up with Jim's Jeep and trailer. He had Don park it up close to the house, to one side. Don left for his own home and Bob went back inside. There wasn't much to do but tuck Jim in for the night and watch him for signs of trouble.

Jim woke the next morning with a groan he thought was loud enough to wake the dead. He remembered what had happened and carefully touched his chest. "Ow!" he said, half under his breath.

"Welcome back to the land of the living," Bob said, handing Jim a cup of tea. Jim set the tea on the coffee table, and with various grunts and groans, eased himself up against the arm of the sofa so he could slowly sip the tea.

Who do you think it was?" asked Bob. "Oh. Breakfast will be ready shortly. It'll be pancakes, thanks to you. What about it. Who do you think did it?"

"I don't have a clue," Jim replied honestly. "Maybe they were shooting at you and hit me by mistake."

"Nah," responded Bob. "They hit what they were aiming at. Center of mass. They just didn't know you were wearing body armor. Thank heavens you were."

"I thought it prudent, after hearing about the other attacks."

"Wish I had some," Bob said thoughtfully. "Just never got around to it, before..."

"I can't help you there. Don't have any that will fit you. Everything go okay last night?"

“Yeah. No one tried anything at the gym. There sure were a lot of happy people yesterday. That process gave them some hope.”

“Going to need to be a regular thing until we’ve salvaged everything salvageable within our limit of travel. And thanks for the tea and the offer of breakfast, but I think I just want to go home and go back to bed for about a week.”

“You need your strength. You need to eat something.”

“I’ll get something at home. Now help me up and get my gear back on.”

Neither Bob nor Doreen could persuade Jim otherwise. They had to stand by and let Jim drive off in the Jeep, towing the trailer.

“Lord, that man is more stubborn than you,” Doreen told Bob.

“Yeah. That or my powers of persuasion have faded. Either way. Let’s go enjoy those pancakes. Then it’s back to beans and rice until the garden comes in. I’ll go check on him in a day or so, and bring back the tiller.”

Bob found Jim up and about when he stopped in two days later. He could tell Jim was still in pain, since Jim’s generally laid-back self was a bit quarrelsome. But Bob brought him out of his mood when he told him he’d had several people that had not participated in the first salvage operation contact him about joining the next one. Word was getting around.

Jim brightened considerably and then offered to print up more flyers for the second event. After that it was going to need to be word of mouth. “And I think I’ll sit this one out. I’m not going to be much use for a while.”

After the flyers were printed up, Jim showed Bob where he wanted more garden area tilled up and Bob did it for him with the rototiller.

Jim laid low for a month, letting his body recover. He did do some work in the garden, both day and night, in preparation for the future. He also cleaned all his weapons and did a little practicing, and cleaned them again.

Bob told him on his visit to bring back the rototiller, that there was definitely someone out there making trouble for the survivors. A couple of people had been robbed at gun point on their ways home from the salvage operations. One of the victims said there were at least two if not three people involved. The other said definitely three.

“Okay,” Jim said. “Here’s what we’re going to do.”

Bob felt a shiver go down his back when he looked at Jim and saw the expression on his face.

Jim continued, not noticing Bob’s reaction. “Get word out, that I’m offering a month of food for the identity of the person that shot me. And that I’ll be at the next salvage operation.”

“That’s going to bring out every rat in the area giving you all kinds of false information to get that food. Not to mention make you a target for having the food. Not to mention a bigger target of whoever it was to get you dead soon, so there is no reason to turn someone in to you.”

“I know. But I’ll be on the watch. I’m expecting you and some of the others to be watching my back.”

“You know we will,” Bob assured Jim. “What are you going to do if you catch this guy?”

“Whoever it is, I don’t think will go down easily. I’m just going to have to be a better, and quicker, shot than whoever it is.”

Jim left it at that, and Bob didn’t pursue it. He was worried about his friend, but didn’t know how to express it.

Bob had been right. Jim had a few false leads to sort through. Most were simple to disprove. A couple had Jim wondering, but that they were false leads Jim figured out within a few hours. He was being careful, but the strain was beginning to tell.

When the salvage operation was winding down, Doreen came up to him and handed him an envelope. It had Jim’s name on it in large block characters. “One of the children gave this to me. She said a man had given it to her to give to me.”

“Thanks, Doreen.” Jim opened the envelope and took a single sheet of paper out. He looked at it and put it back in the envelope, which he put in his hip pocket.

He turned and started away, but Doreen stopped him and asked, “Aren’t you going to say who that one is?” He’d asked their opinion on each of the others.

“In a bit.”

Doreen frowned and went to find Bob.

When she found him and they found Jim, it was too late. The play was in motion.

Jim found Abbi and handed her the envelope. She took the paper out of the envelope and read it. “It’s a lie! I never shot at you! Why, that low down, conniving...”

Abbi's words were cut off by the sound of a gunshot, and the result of the bullet penetrating Abbi's chest. Jim stepped behind the wall he'd made sure he was near when he talked to Abbi. He paid no attention to her lifeless body. Instead he brought up the HK-91 and took a quick peek around the corner of the wall. He heard the whiz of a round going past his head.

But with Jim under the cover of the masonry corner of the gym building, the firer decided to try to get away. Jim had the rifle up in a moment and took another moment to line up the sights as the man ran. The rules of engagement were different now. Jim squeezed the trigger once, and then again.

He saw another figure get up from where he'd dived for cover when the shooting started, as had everyone in the area. Jim decided to let him go. It was just a kid. Jim had the HK at the ready position when he came up on the man he put two rounds of .308 into. People were starting to gather around.

"It's Luke Pounds," someone said. "He shot Abbi and tried to shoot Jim. I saw it all."

"So did I," called someone else. "Just like he said. The dead guy shot the woman and tried to kill him." She pointed at Jim.

An hour later Jim was explaining to Bob what had happened. And why. "It started way back before the war. When G3 was a going concern. Just from the things Abbi said on several occasions, she was carrying a grudge against him. Like a lover scorned type of grudge. But I saw them together at that first salvage operation. They were cutting long looks in my direction. I wrote up the note myself, naming Abbi as my attempted assassin and the local bandit, with young Tim Manson as her sidekick."

Jim took a deep breath and continued. "When Luke saw me talking to

Abbi about a note, he must have thought she turned him in, just like I was making her think about him. Figuring the jig was up, he nailed her and tried to get me again. Definitely head shots at me this time. So I shot him.

Someone will have to figure out what to do about Tim. With him running like he did, makes me think he was guilty of being part of the bandits. He's been bragging all day how well the G3 has been going.

"So there you have it. At least that is the way I believe it happened. Tim might be able to tell us more, but I'll leave that up to you guys. Probably time to have an election and get a mayor and a city council, a sheriff, and a judge. Hard way to get civilization back, but it is part of it. I'll be handy for any question the future sheriff might have."

With that, Jim went over to his Jeep, got in, and drove off.

A month later and the new sheriff was telling Jim, "And all the evidence points to the same conclusion you came to when you were talking to the mayor right after it happened. Just wanted you to know that."

Jim shook Harley's hand. "Thanks for letting me know, Sheriff. And how is the new mayor and the others?"

Harley grinned. "Bob's fit to be tied with everything going on. I guess every community is going through things like this. He's getting it from the townspeople to do more locally and from the state government to help out since we're doing so good here. And there is talk of Bob going for governor, when things get to that point. Or a Senator to the national congress when that gets going again."

Harley was climbing into the old Pontiac pick-up truck that was the official town vehicle when he asked, "And what about you? What are you going to be doing?"

“Next market day, drift by my booth and you’ll see.”

Saturday Harley was making his usual rounds through the rough stalls, keeping an eye on things when he saw Jim’s red Jeep and simple stall. He had his Diamant #525 grinder on the table in the booth and was grinding flour, scooping the wheat from a bucket on the ground.

He had several computer generated lists of trade goods lying on the bench. People were perusing them with interest. Harley wondered how many different buckets and barrels of stuff the man actually had. Harley shook his head and went along the neat array of the booths manned by Jim’s protégés. People of strength and character that had taken Jim’s huge library of books and started new careers for themselves. Old careers for the new age. And Jim got a piece of the action from every one of them.

End *****

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