

The Jenkins Family Dilemma

Sunlight glistened off bright shiny metal. A stream of identical vehicles cruised down the winding mountain highway. Something seemed strange to the observers; uniformity was rare in the post Reset world. Everything had to be handmade or cobbled together from pieces left over from the collapse. These armored trucks were identical to each other, all the way down to the tan paint jobs, making them look as out of place in the modern world as a jet airliner.

Lamar Jenkins Jr. observed each one through his priceless field binoculars, picked up from a Cog officer brave enough to lead a scout squad up into the mountains years before. He used the magnified glass to pick out the unit numbers from the side of the trucks, whispering the digits to a younger man lying beside him with a pencil and notebook.

“1205th is the unit number, and I count ten of the six wheeled transport trucks and two escort Humvees,” Lamar said to his cousin. The visibility wasn’t perfect though most of the morning mountain mist had faded by now. “All of them have the knot symbol on the side.” He subconsciously made the sign of a figure eight, the infinity knot, in the air with one finger. The teenager quickly scribbled onto the paper, his young face twisted with concern. The expression made him look a little older, though not old enough to hide the fact his face only required the occasional shave.

“Lamar, why do we need to know this stuff? You’ve had us out here for years recording numbers and unit strength. But nothing ever happens,” he challenged, in the way that only family can.

Lamar considered his relative for a moment. Tyrone was a good kid, a first cousin from his mother’s side. Like all the Congregation’s young men and women, Ty was encouraged to ask questions. Even when the annoyance of their elders was clear, the next generation pursued reasons behind decisions.

“Something is going on, Ty. Without the numbers we’ve been recording all this time, I would have never noticed it,” Lamar instructed. His dark brown eyes narrowed, aiming to bring the point home to his subordinate. “Cog soldiers are splitting town, heading somewhere south in bunches.”

“Isn’t that a good thing? We should just be happy to be rid of them. Maybe they got sick of getting their butts whooped and are high tailin’ it out,” Ty said with the confidence only sky high testosterone afforded.

Lamar knew better. The Cogs were the remnants of the Federal government. In fact, their nickname came from Continuity of Government; the plan put into place when all the lights went out years before. Soldiers had attempted to force Lamar’s parents into camps. Refusing to break up the community they built with their Church, the Congregation fled the Federal District together. Lamar’s namesake father, plus his father’s best friend, had given their lives to see everyone else make it to the safety of the mountains of western Virginia. With the time they bought, Lamar’s mother Charlotte led everyone safely to their new home. She alone managed to keep everyone organized and focused on the task at hand even while overcoming her own grief.

“Let’s get this information back home. It’s time to make some decisions about what to do,” Lamar said. He was a leader in the Congregation, but not *the* leader of the Congregation. Not even Pastor claimed that title. This decision would have to be made by Charlotte herself.

Ty packed his notebook and rolled onto his back to check his rifle. A buzzing noise invaded the solitude of the woods and instinctually he froze. Up through the tree canopy he watched a metallic bird hover overhead. “Lamar?” he said slowly and softly.

“Hold still little man,” Lamar whispered, trying to assure his cousin and himself. Lamar hadn’t seen anything airborne except God’s own creatures since before the power shut off. He had been just a teenager then, and only remembered such things as dreams of a past life.

Like science fiction, maybe aliens? Then he smiled inside his head for a brief moment. Might be aliens alright, but probably not little green men. Probably Cog tricks, and somehow related to the fancy trucks he spotted down on the highway.

Slowly, the drone - *yes that’s what they were called, drones* he remembered – pulled away from their sight, the buzzing tailing off into the distance.

“What in God’s name was that,” Ty asked with shock. He was shaking a little, something Lamar had never witnessed.

“Don’t worry cousin. It’s not a demon or something. Unless you count those Cogs as demons, which I guess we should, huh? That was something called a drone. They used to deliver stuff back when we had electricity. Federals had weapons on some of them, used them for spying and blowing up terrorists, too...”

Lamar froze at the meaning of his own words. The Cogs probably considered the Congregation to be terrorists now. Which meant that at the very least, the drone was probably looking for anything out of the ordinary.

“We got to move, Ty. Let’s go, right now. Quick like.” Before Lamar could finish, an explosion ripped through the trees just 50 yards away from where they sat. Both threw themselves down on the ground. Instinctually Lamar jumped back up and grabbed his cousin, half dragging him while running down the hill. A second explosion ripped into the spot they had just left, then they were both sliding more than running as they tumbled down towards the interstate below.

They came to rest in a drainage ditch cut along the westbound lanes. Long since overgrown with no highway maintenance staff to look after it, the spot Lamar landed was a swampy mess of neglect. He felt around, “Ty you there?”

“Yeah Lamar, I’m here. And yes, I’m ok.” There was a pause and then a panting question, “What should we do now?”

How am I supposed to know? Lamar thought bitterly, letting despair creep into his mind for a moment. *How do I fight something I can’t even see?*

The sound of tires gripping the decaying pavement interrupted his thoughts, snapping him back to the moment. He heard the tire speed slow down then come to a stop right past the tall grass where he lay. A door creaked open, and he could hear swearing from a man’s voice. Then another door, and a voice more clearly defined like someone used to giving orders. “Can’t we just pull through the median and get on the other side?” the voice asked.

Lamar couldn’t exactly make out what the other voice said, but it clearly was a no for some reason.

“Ok, then we’ll just have to go back to the turnaround a few miles back,” the commander voice replied.

“Freeze, we’ve got you surrounded!” *They got Ty!* Lamar thought in horror, then felt a different dread as he realized Ty’s voice was the one who made the demand.

A rifle went off a few yards away, and Lamar jumped up raising his own rifle and firing in the direction he thought the vehicle sat. He took one step forward and could make out the top of a gray colored Humvee, with a uniformed figure slumped down beside the passenger side door. Another man in camouflaged fatigues had his hands in the air, with a look of shock and disgust on his face.

A rock slide, likely caused by the explosions chasing Lamar and Ty down the mountain side, lay scattered across the pavement. The road was impassible even to the Humvee’s high clearance.

“Son, you’ve made a big mistake. This place is going to be crawling with my soldiers any second. I’d suggest you let me go and get as far away as you can,” the man shouted. “You do know my people can track me anywhere, right?” Clearly he was a senior officer, both by demeanor and the fact that he called the soldiers his.

“If that was the case, you would have already called for help,” Lamar said as he approached the man, his battle rifle still in ready position. The appearance of a second weapon pointed his direction seemed to take a little confidence away from the puffed out uniform shouting orders.

The corner of his eye caught movement in the back of the Humvee. “Out of the vehicle, now!” Lamar demanded. The officer looked back and nodded, and a woman dressed in a matching set of fatigues stepped out of the door. “Anybody else in there?” Lamar asked.

“No, just us. But I don’t know what you hope to gain by holding us. What are you going to do, kill us?” the officer asked with disdain.

“No, we’re not like you. We don’t just kill unarmed people for the fun of it. In fact you’re going to come with us. And if you don’t, we won’t consider you unarmed anymore,” Lamar said with a growl.

“What about him?” the officer said as he nodded toward the slumped man next to the Humvee.

“Too late for him now. You two walk over here and kneel. Ty grab anything useful you can find out of the vehicle. Food, first aid kit, weapons. Thirty seconds, go!” Lamar commanded.

In less than a minute, Lamar had his two hostages back on their feet. Heading up into the trees and on the way back to the Congregation, still not sure what he was doing or why.

Lamar and Ty could smell a cook fire as they approached their camp. Here in the safety of Jefferson National Forest Congregation folk felt safe enough to cook, wrapped in the protection of thick forest and broken country. It had been over two years since any soldiers made the attempt to find them. The Elders of the Congregation warned their folk against complacency, but human nature was difficult to overcome when comfort was involved.

“Halt, who goes there?” a deep voice shouted from a hidden blind.

Ty froze and raised his hands, unable to see Lamar smile at the reaction of his apprentice.

“Relax, Ty. If Roy wanted you dead or captured, you’d already be on the ground. Roy, come out before you give my cousin a heart attack,” Lamar said with a shout.

Branches and leaves in human form rose up from beside a blackberry thicket. Then with one fluid motion a large man with a shaved head appeared from under a camouflage gunny hat.

“Glad to see you home, Lamar,” Roy Mason said with a nod. “You too, Ty.” He eyed the strangers in Cog uniforms walking between his two friends. “I see you brought company for dinner.”

“How long have you been watching us?” Ty demanded. The young man’s irritation at being tracked without his knowledge was clear.

Lamar broke in before Roy could answer. “He started shadowing us about two miles back. I’m assuming he was testing us, is that right Roy?”

Roy nodded. “And myself, chief. I wanted to see if I could track the best without being seen.”

Lamar smiled at the man. Roy was a couple years older, but always respected Lamar’s woodland skills. Roy’s father had been an Army Ranger and developed some of the first field training programs used to sharpen the skills of Congregation sentries. Lamar learned quick and exhibited a special aptitude for the craft. To have his mentor’s son seek his approval spoke well of his achievements.

“You did real good, Roy. Honest. Your gear gave you away is all. Couple of noises here and there let me know something out of place was around. We need to work on that for the entire Ranger team. How long have you been out here?” Lamar asked.

“Just since yesterday afternoon. I’m pulling a 24 and then heading back in. Dad says that we shouldn’t try 48s right now. We need to keep everyone rotating,” Roy answered.

Lamar nodded his head. “What have you seen?”

“Animals are moving strange. Lots of deer headed up our way. Birds, too. And every once in a while I hear what sounds like a big bee buzzing overhead. But I haven’t seen anything clear. How about you?”

Lamar grimaced. “We had our own run in with that buzzing noise. That led us to these two,” he replied and nodded towards his two captives. “Not sure what’s going on,” he replied to his friend. “We’re heading in to speak with the Elders now. Let’s get your relief out here so you can join in.”

Roy and Lamar walked slowly towards the Congregation’s main camp. Even with the relative peace and safety of the woods, friendly fire was still a threat.

Small but tidy huts scattered throughout the hillside. Most were single room dwellings, though occasionally multiple levels were present. Each were built around a large tree, adding both stability and camouflage to the community. Smaller dwellings were designed to be disassembled and moved in less than an hour, relying on the natural anchor of the trees as the structural foundation. You had to literally stumble into the camp to find it. Even then a stranger would be hard pressed to guess the number of people sheltered there.

Roy veered off to one of the inner huts, being careful to sit and remove his irreplaceable lace up boots on a wooden stool just outside the door. Even with the scavenging the group had done since the exodus from DC, they were running out of factory produced foot wear. Roy set the boots aside to be meticulously cleaned and repair later, then removed the camouflage harness he wore. Underneath he wore a full set of thermal underwear, long handles some of the Elders called them. He slipped on a pair of buckskin moccasins as he ducked his six foot tall frame into the hut he shared with his wife and infant daughter.

He returned with a set of olive green coveralls on zipped all the way to top. They shepherded their prisoners to a large rock, winding their way around to the back side toward a narrow entrance braced by solid stone. They slipped inside, making the transition from the sun’s natural light to the glow of a tallow candle. They climbed up a narrow path, rising continually in elevation, the path illuminated by more candles set every ten feet or so. Voices grew louder up ahead and more light flowed onto the

path until he arrived in a cavernous room. People milled about, stepping in and out of small rooms structures around the outside walls. The ceiling soared up above the reach of the freestanding lamps that burned brightly in the center courtyard.

He waved the two prisoners to sit down in the corner of the room, and Roy tied their hands behind their back.

“Lamar!” he heard someone shout, and then he was surrounded by family and friends. Pats on the back and hugs enveloped him until the group parted. Through the warm faces a confident woman limped up to greet him. Charlotte Jenkins seemed to swallow her son up in a hug, though he was a head taller with shoulders that dwarfed her own. “Next time, don’t stay out so long son,” she said in his ear.

Her words were met with a smile, and then a somber “We need to talk. All of us.”

Charlotte simply nodded, a mixture of pride and sadness in her eyes. Every day her son became more like his father, and every day she missed her soulmate more than before. People were wrong, time didn’t heal all wounds.

Word spread quickly for the Elders to assemble in the courtyard, and folks from inside and outside gathered over the next hour. The excitement of returning scouts with news of the outside world drew every resident in. Young people especially longed for adventure, boys and girls dreamed about the day they could be out on patrol. Lamar and Ty were heroes envied by anyone foolish enough to think that being chased through the woods by armed men was something to wish for. Strangers seated in the corner only caused more curiosity to stir. That those strangers wore Cog uniforms drove the crowd to a near fevered pitch.

There were no private meetings in the Congregation, though some of the younger leaders wished it might be so sometimes. Deliberation brought delay, frustrating to the young men who longed for action instead of discussion. And there was always plenty of discussion in this group. Loud and boisterous, at time obnoxious and unreasonable.

Lamar and Charlotte sat next to one another as the others gathered over the next half hour. Animated expressions might have given the appearance of argument to any outsiders. But outside of the two captured soldiers in the corner, everyone here was family in one way or another.

"I can't believe you would bring those people here! This area is going to be crawling with Cogs!" a voice shouted.

"Nah, we've been worried about Cog invasion for years. The last time they came up here they got whooped, and it'll happen again. They know it!" another replied.

"Right, they're not going to risk coming up here for just a couple of soldiers. Life ain't worth that to those kind of folk," someone agreed.

Charlotte waited as people had their say. "Bring that lady over here," she said, pointing to the captured female soldier. Two men quickly complied, positioning the frightened woman in the center of the circle.

"Listen young lady," Charlotte said firmly. "I don't know what they've filled your head with about us, but we're good folks here. We don't kill for fun, and we don't torture. Understood?"

A mixture of defiance and terror spilled out of the woman's mouth, "Tell that to our driver. You killed him!"

Lamar cut in, "That's war, Ma'am. We told him to freeze, and he didn't. That's his choice."

The woman sobbed as she stared down. "I told them we should wait for another convoy! That we shouldn't be out here alone!"

"Silence you fool!" the other prisoner shouted from the corner. "Don't tell them anything!"

"I'm not one of your soldiers to be ordered around, Ferguson! Herman's going to have you shot if we make it out of here alive!" she said hysterically.

Charlotte smile a little. Her motherly side felt a bit sorry for the woman's anguish. But the leader in her could spot a talker. And this woman was going to tell her everything she needed to know.

"Untie the poor girl," Charlotte said in her most soothing voice. "She's scared and alone. That man over there is more worried about his precious army than her life."

Lamar stood up and offered the woman a chair, and Charlotte patted her leg as the offer was accepted. "Now, tell me your name child. There's no harm in that."

"Nancy. Nancy Clinton," the woman replied.

“Very good, Nancy. My name is Charlotte. I know you’re scared, and I understand. We’re scared too. We’re afraid that soldiers are going to come here and hurt our family. Do you have a family, Nancy?”

She shook her head. “No. Well, I have a mom and dad. But they were a long way away from here when the Reset hit. I don’t know where they are.”

“That’s too bad. What about Herman? Sounds like he might be a close friend, yes? You told Mr. Ferguson over there that he’d be very upset.”

Nancy nodded her head, but was beginning to regain some composure.

“Nancy, I’m guessing that as an important person, you are used to trading information. Am I right about that? Well, I understand, and I’m will to trade. And please remember, you’re worth a lot more to me alive and fine, than dead and silent. I believe we have a soul, and that God Himself judges that soul. So you’ll learn that my word is good when I make you a promise. My first promise to you is that I won’t hurt you, okay?”

Nancy nodded, finally able to look up into the deep eyes of Charlotte. “Okay.” She stammered. “I’m not sure what I can tell you that will help you. I’m just a staff person. General Ferguson is probably the one you should be talking to.”

“Nancy, do you understand what ‘shut up’ means? She’s just trying to get you to...*Oof!*” Ferguson flew up to his feet with two strong arms under each of his. “We’re going to take General Ferguson for a walk, Miss Charlotte, let him get some fresh air,” Roy told the room.

Charlotte nodded and continued as though nothing happened. “Sweetie look at me. I promise my boys are not going to hurt the general. I’m in charge here, and they won’t do anything without my permission. I promise. Now, let’s get back to what’s going on here. Can’t hurt anything to tell me. We’re just simple folk who want to keep our family safe. We’re not going to attack anyone.”

“If I tell you, will you promise to let me go?”

“Not right away, sweet heart. I’m sure you understand we’ll have to keep you awhile. You know I’d be lyin’ if I said I would, right? Once I feel like we’re safe, you have my word I’ll let you go unharmed.”

“What about the General?” Nancy asked.

“That will be up to him. His soldiers are responsible for the death of some of my kin, you understand,” Charlotte finished.

Nancy thought for a moment and nodded. “Will you tell me who you are?”

“I will, of course. You have landed smack dab in the middle of what we refer to as the Congregation. We once lived in Federal DC. I’m sure you did too right? Probably in a different neighborhood though!” Charlotte said with a hearty laugh. “Anyway, we ended up out here in the woods when some soldiers ran us out of our home. Ordered us to report to FEMA camps. But we figured we’d just come out here and live instead.”

“You said soldiers were responsible for killing your family?” Nancy asked.

“Some of my family, yes. My husband included. I’ll tell you all about it if you want. But out here we’ve built a new life based on the Bible and the land. The townsfolk out here welcomed us when we arrived,” Charlotte replied.

“But I thought all of these towns were abandoned?”

“Oh they are now, child. After the Cogs, that’s what we call the soldiers is Cogs, after the Cogs tried to take the young people from there, we helped the towns fight back. Well, unfortunately, we lost.”

“Weren’t they just trying to help relocate people to safer places where the food was? The young people I mean?”

Charlotte’s demeanor changed. “Exactly who were they to make that decision for them? What if they were happy where they were at? Had food and shelter already?”

Nancy shrunk back in the chair, back to feeling very small and frightened. The faces of those in the circle looked frightening with the shadows of the wall torches. “I thought we were trying to help people.”

“Who’s ‘we’ Nancy? I told you who we are. Now tell me who you are,” Charlotte demanded.

“Continuity of Government. That’s why you call them Cogs right? You probably saw the C.O.G. acronym on the vehicles. We use the infinity symbol that looks like a figure eight on its side. That’s who I

was a part of...Continuity of Government I mean. Once GRAPEVINE shut down, we stepped in to keep the government running and the country from collapsing.”

“I’d say it didn’t work,” Lamar said, breaking his silence. All the Elders nodded in agreement.

“Go on, girl,” Charlotte said with another pat on Nancy’s leg.

“We’ve done our best to keep people fed and warm.”

“Then where are you going now?” Lamar asked. “We’ve been watching trucks leaving. They’re not on patrol, because they never come back.”

“How do you know that,” Nancy asked with suspicion. “Have you captured anyone else?”

“We log each and every truck unit number. Got notebooks full of them. For the last few weeks, convoys have been leaving and not returning,” Lamar replied.

Nancy nodded a begrudging respect. She even surprised them with a faint smile. “Yeah, that’s what I would have done if I was in your shoes. Well, I don’t know why I’m telling you this, but we’re moving south. Leaving the District behind for warmer climates.”

“Uh, you telling me that the government can’t afford coats?” one of the Elder said with disgust.

“No coats are going to help what’s coming. It’s going to get colder and colder here, until eventually you won’t be able to stand it.”

The crowd roared with outbursts, each person trying to be heard over the others. Charlotte quieted them, giving Lamar a chance to ask a question. “Does this have something to do with the electricity going out? I mean, obviously you all have power back now. One of your drones chased us this morning.”

“Did it follow you?” Charlotte burst in.

“Sorry I didn’t have a chance to tell you yet. Everything happened so quickly...no I don’t think so. I didn’t hear the buzz anyway. That’s how we knew something was up above, and then the attack started,” Lamar replied. “But I remember Ferguson telling Ty that his men could track him wherever he was.”

His mind started racing as Charlotte commanded, "Get that man back in here. They won't be able to track him under this rock!"

She turned to Lamar, "Son, get everyone ready to evacuate. We have to assume they're going to know where we are now. And I think that Herman she was talking about is Herman Johnson. I remember the soldiers who ran us out of DC talking about a 'President Johnson', even though that wasn't the real president's name. Apparently we have a couple of very high profile prisoners here."

"Okay ma, I'm sorry. I should have thought that through," Lamar apologized.

"Time for that later. Get our folks moving, now! She said the Cogs are headed south. They're based in the north, and there's only trouble and ocean to the east. So we'll be heading west, over the mountains. Now go!" Charlotte said.

As Lamar and the rest of the younger folks moved to get the evacuation started, Nancy began to stand. Charlotte grabbed her, firmly but without spite. "Oh no sweetheart. The young folks know what to do. We here," she nodded to the rest of the Elders still seated patiently, "still have some questions for you. I'm going to give either you or the general a chance to stay behind after we leave. So your Herman's men can find you. The other will have to come with us. It all depends on who's more helpful to us, understand?"

Nancy sat back down, sheepishly looking at the collective Elders, now seeming much harder.

Charlotte continued. "You need to tell us girl, what other surprises do your Cog friends have. How do they track you?"

"We have implants."

"You mean like, plastic surgery?" one of the Elders asked curiously.

"No, no. Not like that. There are chips implanted in our body. You remember how everyone had the Wristband that they used to get access to food and housing and medicine? I mean before the Reset. Well, the next step in that was an implant with all that same information. Just a lot more secure and convenient. Measures all of our vital signs also. Well, the government has given those to all of us," Nancy replied.

"I thought all that technology died when the power went out?"

“Sort of. Our stuff, the government stuff I mean was updated to keep the shutdown from affecting the new technology. The government had some updated stuff hidden in the shelters. Once they moved us out there we’ve spent the last few years getting things organized. Now that we have the means to recreate a decent civilization, it’s time to move south to our new capital.”

Charlotte looked confused for a moment. “What do you mean ‘new capital’? Where’s this new capital supposed to be.”

Nancy thought for a moment, suddenly realizing she had said too much. Probably already enough talk to get her convicted of treason in the eyes of the Federal government. Her years of experience of the political infighting in DC hadn’t prepared her for a real life and death experience here in the woods of rural Virginia. She was finally beginning to regain her wits and get a handle on who the people she faced really were.

She was evaluating her options when Lamar and Roy burst back into the dim light of the cave. “We need to go Ma. Roy thought he heard the buzzing again! That could mean drones in the air!”

“Lamar, can you come here for a moment? Roy, will you take our guest to the ladies latrine? I’m sure she’d like to freshen up before the trip,” Charlotte said with a flash of the warm smile.

Lamar stood impatiently beside his mother, trying to move her along without being disrespectful. “Son, we’re not going,” she stated firmly.

“You just told me to make preparations. Now you’re telling me we’re not going?”

“No, you’re still going. But *we’re* not going,” she said as she made a large circular motion around the circle of Elders.

“Ma I don’t understand. And we don’t have time to argue. They’re coming to get these people! And they’ll kill you all when they find you!”

“I don’t believe they’ll find us. And you’re going to take our ‘guests’ with you, anyway,” Charlotte said.

Lamar just stood and stared at his beloved mother. “Ma, we talked about this before. We can handle the Elders. We can get you all across the mountains,” he implored.

“You know that’s not right. This ain’t like the exodus. We had surprise and chaos on our side. There’s no buses to take us over the mountain, Junior. We older folks are just as dead on the mountain side as we would be if the soldiers found us here. This is the best chance for both us, even if it means saying good bye for a while,” she said with tears welling in her eyes.

“But the trackers...they’ll still find us.”

“They might know where you are, generally. But they won’t shoot at you as long as the General and that Nancy woman are with you. I don’t think their weapons are that accurate, or else they wouldn’t have missed when they first took a shot at you and Ty.”

“If these two are that important, they’ll never stop chasing us,” Lamar said with a shrug.

“I think they will. Those drones can’t carry soldiers, and I’d be willing to bet they only have a limited range. So eventually they’ll have to decide what to do. I’m sorry to bet with your life, son. But the Elders and I just think it’s the best chance for all of us.”

“How will you survive?”

“We’re not entirely indigent you know. We just have to hide out long enough for all the Cogs to move on south. Then we’ll be able to hunt and garden. Maybe even move on down to the towns again.” Charlotte stood and hugged her son. “I will see you again, Junior. This isn’t goodbye forever, God tells me so. But you have to go right now for this to work. Trust me okay?”

For the first time in a week Lamar allowed a small camp fire. Like they had every night, he split the 68 men and women of the Congregation’s newest exodus into smaller groups, scattered just far enough away that one well aimed blast couldn’t take them all out at once.

The ridge they selected for shelter jutted out just enough to provide an overhang for each group, and small fires were warming the stone wall as campfire coffee boiled over the coals. It had been two days since they last heard buzzing and three since anyone had caught a glimpse of the drone trailing them. Lamar had decided it was worth the risk of camp fires to raise group morale.

Nancy was huddled under a blanket, radiating misery and near despair. Lamar had kept her and General Ferguson separated since they left the safety of the Congregation hideout. He wasn’t sure how

many miles they had trekked so far, but he was confident it was further than the government bureaucrat had ever walked in her life.

“They gave up on us,” Nancy mumbled staring into the little fire.

“Why do you say that?” Lamar asked. He had been waiting for this moment to start pressing for more information. Once there was no hope of rescue from her own people, human nature would force her to start searching for new allies.

“You’re a smart guy. If you thought they were still following us, you wouldn’t have allowed the fire.”

“I’m impressed. We’ll make a woodsman out of you yet,” Lamar joked.

“So you’re not going to kill us?” Nancy asked.

Lamar was taken back by the question, surprised by the tone and words. “Of course not. Why would you ask that?”

“We’re not worth anything as human shields anymore. I just figured that made me a liability instead of an asset.”

“Nancy, what do we have to do to prove to you that we’re not like that?” Lamar pleaded. He found himself actually liking her, and did feel a little sorry for her being in this situation. It wounded his soul a bit that she assumed he was capable of doing something like killing a hostage.

“You could let me go,” she said hopefully, finally looking up at Lamar.

“Is that really what you want? For us to set you lose out here in the woods by yourself? I said we would make a woodsmen out of you, not that you already were one,” he chuckled.

“Just assume a pretty little lady can’t make it on her own, mister big tough super man?” she said sarcastically.

“I’m pretty sure you met my mother. Is that how you think I was raised?” Silence fell as Nancy watched sadness creep across Lamar’s face. He was still in pain from the thought of leaving his mother behind.

None of this seemed real yet. He felt as though this was just an extended hunting trip. But there was no way to go back now. The Cogs may not be looking for them anymore this far out, but he had no doubt they'd be sitting and watching the camp for a long time. Whoever was in charge would assume that eventually they'd have to come back.

"You think she's okay," Nancy asked Lamar.

"Yes I do. The Elders had this planned ever since we moved into the caves. They put up enough supplies to last an entire year for all of us in that cave. They won't get bored and restless like the rest of us, try to make a move outside before they should. They've got their Bibles and other books, games and they can tell stories for days at a time. We just have to keep your Cogs away from there as much as possible," Lamar told her.

"Think that will work?"

Lamar shrugged. "After our exodus - that's what we call it when we fled the District - we formed close ties to the people of the small towns along the foot of the mountains. The first year or two were peaceful as we adjusted to new lives in a natural world. No one knew why the electricity and all communications disappeared, but there hadn't been much time to speculate. Hours of endless toil yielded us a hard won harvest. Hunting parties spent days or even weeks at a time in the forest to bring back game.

"Against the urging of the Congregation, many of the townsfolk decided to make the journey into the city after the harshness of the first winter lifted into spring. Living without government rations or a steady supply of heat was a hard life. Suicide claimed some during that first winter, lack of medicine claimed others.

"We realized the human brain had morphed into a fly trapped in a jar, never able to rest and in constant motion. An endless stream of entertainment and information and medication fed the fly like sugar keeping everyone restless and always looking for the next rush. In one night, that sugar was cut off and multiple generations of electron junkies went cold turkey. Many couldn't make the transition from a constant buzz to the new deafening quiet.

"Even some of the Congregation fell prey to the idea that it might be better back in the District. Ma quoted Bible passages to them, relating our situation to the Israelites. Even after all the miracles God gave them, the Jewish people were weak and afraid. Just like our folk got after a while. She

convinced most to stay, but a fair number joined townfolk one spring day to begin the walk towards the assumed safety of civilization. But none were ever heard from again,” Lamar told her.

“I’m surprised we, I mean the Federals, didn’t send out some patrols to locate people. We did a lot of rescuing communities like that,” Nancy told him.

“Oh yeah, if you want to call it rescuing,” Lamar spit out. “Motorized patrols flying American flags made their way into the surrounding towns not long after that. Many townspeople hailed the sight of American soldiers with delight, disregarding the warnings of the Congregation to be wary of the uniforms and the intentions of those who wore them. The lure of the flag and the promise of order proved irresistible. Soon one town after another ceded their governance to the troops, until all that was left were folk who joined the Congregation in the mountains.

“Stragglers from the towns reported that the young people, male and female, had been bussed under gunpoint to join the Cogs in the capital. Soon all that was left in the towns were the weakest of the survivors, forced to live on shorter and less frequent rations. The Congregation did what they could to help, sneaking in food under the cover of darkness. But hard decisions had to be made about risking lives and protecting resources.

“Anyway we lived in fear each day of another Cog invasion up into the mountains, but none ever came. In fact, the last couple of years we’ve seen fewer and fewer patrols out our way. Then all those trucks started heading south,” Lamar concluded.

“So we’re really not going back?” Nancy asked, desperate now to change the subject.

“No. Can’t now. We’re committed.”

“Committed to where?” Nancy asked with a sweet smile.

Lamar laughed at her and grabbed the coffee pot. He poured a cup for her, then filled his own. He laughed again as her face twisted at the taste of the hot liquid. “Not used to campfire coffee in the Federal Zone?”

“What is in this crap?” she asked.

“That, Miss Nancy, is just as much a secret as where we’re headed,” Lamar answered.

A loud wale of an air horn pierced the chilly night air. "Fires out!" Lamar shouted. Dirt kicked on to the coals as everyone grabbed their weapons and scrambled to shallow fox holes set out around the camps. The air horn was a warning from one of the outlier scouts, and wouldn't have been used without a very good reason.

Automatic gun fire ripped through the night, pulling Lamar's attention nearly straight out from his position. *That's not one of ours* Lamar thought, subconsciously taking inventory of the weapons his scouts carried.

Another rifle fired from the group to his right, nearly giving them all night blindness from the flash. "Hold your fire!" came an order before Lamar could get the words out himself. Each of the smaller groups were led by a veteran of the Congregation's scout training. Firing blind in the dark simply gave away your own position, and concealment might be the only thing saving them right now. Besides, their own people were out there, too.

Roy slid to a stop beside Lamar; respect swirled with irritation that he hadn't heard the man coming. "Scarecrows on the wire," he said, half shouting half whispering.

"How many? Better be a bunch to be giving away our position like that," Lamar replied.

"Can't tell for sure, but they're already past the sentries. I do know for sure, there's enough that we're completely surrounded."

Lamar did some quick calculations, figuring up how many enemy it would take to surround their group; he decided at least 50 and probably more like 100. Plus his adversary possessed the tactical advantage of knowing the terrain. It all added up to one thing, this was bad.

"Okay listen, the sentries will stand on their own at this point, we've trained them for this. Pull everyone else in together so there's no friendly fire," Lamar ordered. "Then we can shoot at anything that moves in front of us."

"That means we'll be trapped," Roy said, half questioning the plan.

"We're trapped anyway," Lamar answered. "We've got to play for time. When daylight comes, we'll be able to tell what we're up against."

Satisfied with the answer, Roy slipped away into the darkness to pass orders to the rest of the groups. "How do you know it's not Cogs finally finding us? Instead of this scarecrow group." Nancy asked from the side.

"Cause if it was, they wouldn't be firing on us already. And those aren't Cog issue weapons going off out there. Scarecrows aren't a group, they're just scavengers and thieves that live in packs out in these forests. They probably been tracking us for a day or so, waiting to spring the trap. Roy said a couple of sentries saw something yesterday, but I didn't figure for an organized attack like this. This shows some level of planning," Lamar said.

"I wish you would have done a better job of figuring. Because of you I'm going to die out in the boonies under a cold rock," Nancy said spitefully.

"Well Miss Nancy, I promise I'll leave a nice message on your stone. The Congregation doesn't die that easy," Lamar replied, and slipped into the shallow fox hole dug just feet from where they were.

More muzzle flashes came from their left, the direction Roy had slipped off into the dark. Shouting pierced the dark, and then several crouching figures came into view through the dim moonlight.

No one said a word as each person crouched into the exact same firing position, all pointed back towards where they came from. One of the Congregation members fired their weapon, temporarily blinding anyone looking that way. Lamar's ears started ringing from the roar. He subconsciously opened his mouth and moved his jaw around, trying to free the imaginary cotton balls filling his ears.

Another group came in from the opposite direction, and now he had about thirty of his people fanned out in a semicircle from the rock outcropping behind him.

"No one fires until I say," Lamar sound firmly. "We should have more folk coming in, we can't risk hurting them."

Eerie calm in the woods contrasted with the racing hearts Lamar felt as much as heard in his people. The shock of the attack was wearing off, now replaced with the terror of not knowing who was hunting them in the dark. Each second brought more concern for their friends and family still out there. Lamar could feel them getting edgy to go into the dark and help.

“Hold on everyone. I want to go out there, too. But right now there’s too many itchy triggers. If we see a major fight break out, I want five men with me. First five up, everyone else stay and protect each other. Understood?” No one said a word, but the message was delivered.

As if on cue, multiple rifles went off directly in front of Lamar’s position. Without thinking, he rose and began crouch running towards the fight. He could hear leaves crunching underfoot behind him confirming that he was being followed by his volunteers.

“Onward Christian Soldiers, marching as to war,

With the cross of Jesus, going on before!”

The chorus of the hymn was taken up by the men behind Lamar, using it both as encouragement in the face of death but also to let fellow Congregation members know who was coming. The powerful lyrics were used by their people in every skirmish large or small as a rallying cry. The same lines repeated again, parroted back from baritone and base voices in front of them.

In a few steps, Lamar found himself striding past familiar faces. A quick count told him at least ten more of the Congregation were here, pinned down and unsure of where to go. Using the momentum of their run, and the brief confusion of the noise created by his rush, Lamar intended to go on the attack.

In a matter of a few yards, he smelled the stench of unwashed human bodies. Movement flashed and he squeezed off a burst from his rifle. A face appeared and he instinctively swung the rifle’s butt up to hit under the chin. The shock of the impact tore the rifle from his hands, causing him to grab for the pistol at his hip. Another form came at him, seeming to be almost parallel to the ground, a long stick in one hand with something sharp that caught a glare of moonlight. Lamar fired his pistol but the creature came on, finally sliding to a stop at his feet as the last bullet left the barrel.

Then something was one his back, grabbing at his throat with wire like fingers, searching for a soft spot. He raised himself up in the air, and fell back with all his might. Two hundred pounds of muscle drove his attacker into the ground, forcing a disgusting blast of breath out of a rotted mouth. Lamar didn’t have time to gag as he sprung and spun at the same time, bringing the full force of his knee down into the soft abdomen of the scarecrow. He paused for a millisecond, staring into the distorted face of a young woman, suddenly not so scary.

A scream lashed into his ear drum and he was tackled from the side. A knife blade tore into his leg, then pulled out to try to strike again. The pain flashed like white fire, turning Lamar's survival instinct into rage. He grabbed the scarecrow's head and twisted, feeling the bones pop and the sudden limpness of disconnected nerves.

Like a leopard he was up on his feet, trying to survey the area and get a handle on the situation. He worked to calm his breath, focusing on the surroundings instead of the pain radiating from the gash in his leg. He could feel blood seeping into his pants around the wound but it still held weight for now.

"Rally to me, Congregation!" Lamar shouted. He was relatively confident the scarecrows didn't have any guns left, so there would be strength in grouping his men back together. "To me, to me!" he shouted again, his bass voice echoing through the trees. Some limped, some jogged and some just seemed to appear around him. "Weapons check," he commanded, and the ten Congregation members all grabbed for their pistols and knives. *That means at least five of my folk are still out there, probably hurt* Lamar thought to himself. That couldn't be helped right now, not in the middle of a life or death fight in the dark.

He wasn't sure how long all of this had been going on, could have been minutes or hours.

"Alright, did anyone see where the scarecrows were coming from?" Lamar asked the group.

No one answered.

"Ok, then we're going to advance a little ways out, see if we can find any of our guys hurt, okay? Any scarecrows get the mercy stroke. Can't trust any of them alive at this point," he commanded. *Pastor will be getting an ear bent because of that order...* Lamar suddenly thought of Pastor still back at the cave, probably praying for their safety right now. His two living sons were along with him on the westward trek, though Lamar wasn't quite sure just where they were right at this moment.

The men didn't sneak now, unafraid at this point to make noise. They came across two bodies intertwined; a scarecrow and a Congregation member locked in a final death struggle. Then another three scarecrows, one still moaning and laying in the fetal position. Lamar's knife flashed into the back of the man's skull, causing the sound to stop.

"Lamar stop!" a shout up ahead in the dark stopped them in their tracks. "They got me tied up, it's a trap!" then a scream of pain and the pitched howls of men running at them through the trees.

“Back to the ridge!” Lamar shouted, then turned and made sure everyone was moving before he began his own run. The wounded leg was throbbing now, barely overcome by another adrenal dump that forced his muscles to act.

His men were shouting at their friends in front not to shoot, needing a miracle and discipline to keep from being hurt by friendly fire. Crashing sounds came from behind as his pursuers made their way through the branches and leaves behind him. He detested being prey, longing to turn and fight again instead of waiting for a blade in the back. He pushed down the panic that came with flight, trying to regain his strategic plan.

He tripped and fell face first while trying to leap over a small washout, his leg finally betraying him. He grabbed at a tree’s roots, trying to pull himself back up. Debris of the forest floor gave way with each grasp robbing him of any handhold he could use. Try as he might to stay calm, panic began to set in at the thought of his pursuers right behind him.

Incredibly strong fingers dug into his neck and forced his face into one of the puddles pooled at the bottom of the washout. Shock of the wetness made him gasp, sucking mud into his mouth. Gagging with dreadful terror his mind raced - *I’m going to die here along with the rest of my people*. Infuriated, he began to thrash wildly using every last muscle to throw off his tormentor. Finally he gained footing on a rock and thrust his body forward. He heard the man on his back gasp from the force, loosening the grip just long enough to give Lamar the chance to jump up. He swung blindly, unable to see through mud caked eyes.

“Lamar wait! It’s over, we’re safe!” He could hear Nancy’s voice start to burn through his primal rage.

Why is she talking? Where is everyone else? Mind racing, he began to rub his eyes. The shock of the fight caused him to begin to sob as he sank to his knees. “I don’t understand,” he was able to finally cough out through the grimy mud still lodged in his teeth and tongue.

A familiar voice finally calmed his nerves. “Lamar, it’s Ty. I’m going to come up next to you now. Okay? It’s all safe now,” Ty told him as he walked carefully beside his still heaving cousin. “I’ve got a handkerchief to help you clean up your face.”

Lamar simply shook his head while the cloth wiped across his eyes. He grabbed it in his own hands, rubbing as hard as he could stand. There seemed to be light now, not bright but still the sky was becoming gray instead of pitch black.

“The Creek men are here,” Ty told him, anticipating the upcoming question. “They showed up just as the scarecrows got to us. You held them off the bad guys just long enough, brother.”

Roy also arrived, and now had an arm around Lamar’s shoulder and he was sobbing a bit himself.

The Creek men...right, that’s who we’re looking for. They’ll help us make it west he reminded himself. “How...how many lost,” Lamar stammered.

“Not sure yet. The Creeks are helping us look for some that are missing. But we saved most...did what we could.”

Another arm settled around Lamar, this one decidedly feminine. “You saved us Lamar. Thank you,” he heard Nancy’s voice crack. There was sincerity in the statement.

Lamar nodded again and allowed the two to lead him over to a roaring camp fire. *Everything happened so quick... how long has it been? How did the fire get this big this quick?*

Confusion overcame his mind again as he began to shake. Someone placed a heavy blanket on him and then a man with a deep mountain accent was looking closely at his face. The man’s long whiskers covered most of his mouth and moved in a strange up and down movement, like he was saying something but Lamar couldn’t understand.

His gashed leg throbbed and then he felt himself being slowly being lowered to the ground. The whiskered was out of sight but Lamar could still sense his presence. Poking and prodding at the leg wound changed the throbbing to sharp pain; at once he knew where the whiskered man had gone. A flask was placed at his lips as bitter fluid flowed into his mouth. The Congregation forbade drinking alcohol but those members who scouted had enough plenty of exposure to other mountain survivors who didn’t share the same beliefs. Groups like the Creeks indulged in their own creation, and Lamar recognized the drink as moonshine. For a man with nearly zero tolerance the effect on his already cloudy mind was almost immediate.

Through the stupor he was still conscious enough to see a red hot iron raised from the campfire. *Wonder what that's for?* Indescribable pain from the wound caused him to shriek. Even his dulled senses couldn't save him from the scorching hot rod as it cauterized flesh and blood vessels. His mind surrendered and he felt himself give in to the darkness.

Crisp mountain air burned Lamar's throat a little as he woke. Eyes still sore and scratchy peered up into the sky as he lay on his back. Every inch of his body ached; some more than others but in all pieces in concert created a general feeling of agony laying on him like a sheet. He coughed out some phlegm to clear his voice enough to speak. "Roy?" he rasped.

"Roy's out on patrol, Lamar. They left me to watch you. I'm supposed to let them know when you wake up. How do you feel?" Nancy's voice had honest concern in it.

"Never better. Still didn't make a run for it?" he murmured.

"Not yet," she chuckled. "Apparently you're not the worst these woods have to offer."

He reached up and touched a bandage wrapped around his head. He didn't remember being cut there. Apparently there were plenty of wounds he hadn't discovered yet. He raised himself up to sit.

"Okay Nancy. Thanks for looking after me. Glad the Creeks got here when they did or else none of us would be here. How many of our people did we lose," Lamar asked, gasping as his leg began to throb more.

She didn't answer his question, instead replying with one of her own. "Who are these Creek people? They'll hardly even look at me, and I haven't had a chance to ask Roy or Ty. Are they friends of yours?"

"Not friends, not enemies. Not allies but not adversaries," he replied in a saying he picked up from Pastor years before. "The Creeks don't like strangers, so don't take it personal. And they probably figured out you were one of the Cog prisoners."

"They knew about us?"

Lamar nodded painfully. "They'll be taking care of the General from here. That was part of our deal. They have the supplies we need to head on west, and we'll be under their protection. This is their territory, although they don't go for things like borders."

"Wait, what will they do with the General?" Nancy gasped.

"Don't know, don't care. Probably use him for leverage against the Cogs. They butt up against them lots of places," Lamar replied.

Nancy stared at Lamar in astonishment. "You mean you used me as a bargaining chip? I thought you actually cared about what happened to me!"

"My first responsibility is to my people. Don't misunderstand my concern, you'll just be disappointed," Lamar said coldly.

"Well I'd say you failed your people pretty miserably Lamar. There's only about half of us left... wait I guess I'm not considered 'us' am I?" she demanded.

Lamar let the words sink in, wondering who had been lost and who was still part of the group. *Had they all been killed? Captured?* He allowed his mind to wonder who the attackers might have been the night before. Bands of rovers – scarecrows - were stamped out by groups like the Creeks and the Congregation wherever they found them; many would eat anything or anybody they could get their hands on. But the woods and mountains were immense, and civilized people few and far between at this point.

A Creek man interrupted the argument, approaching Lamar with a sure footed stride that spoke to comfort on the forest floor. He wore patched denim overalls, the kind made famous by farmer stereotypes from before the Reset. A dark collared long sleeve shirt was held together by large buttons that disappeared under his long beard. A large brimmed hat was pulled down to just above his eyes, and folded down over hair that covered his shoulders. Uneducated folk would see the man as a hillbilly; Lamar knew better.

"You the one that saved me last night," Lamar asked. The bearded man shook his head as he shifted a shotgun from his right hand to his left.

"That were my cousin," the man said, extending the now free right hand in friendship. "He's what we call our healer."

“I’d like to thank him for what he did. I’d like to thank all of you,” Lamar said and grabbed the man’s hand tightly. The two warriors took quick measure of the grip and both seemed satisfied by the strength and sincerity in each other.

“I’ll pass ‘at along fer ya,” the man said. “I’m Thaddeus Marshall Paul Creek, third grandson to the second daughter of the Creek himself.” The way the lineage was presented seemed as though it should mean something extra special.

Lamar quickly caught on and replied, “Lamar Jenkins Junior, first born son to the leader of the Congregation’s exodus from the Federal District. Guardian of the matriarch herself, Charlotte Jenkins.”

Thaddeus studied Lamar’s face for the honesty of such a statement, then deciding it was true seemed to leave him content. He nodded saying, “Mr. Jenkins it’s my pleasure to make good the deal we’ve had with your people. Mrs. Jenkins has kept her word and traded fairly with we Creeks since the Tribulation hit. And we’s happy to wipe out that band a rovers from last night. Kilt somma our folk a while back. Jus sorry we’s didn’t git here a bit sooner. Didn’t get your message in time, I reckon.”

“No apologies needed Cousin Creek,” Lamar said, using the friendly greeting the tight nit group used amongst each other. “The Congregation is eternally grateful for your assistance, now and in the remainder of our travels.”

Thaddeus nodded. “We should probably be headin’ on if’n yer up to it, Mr. Jenkins. Got a good piece to trek for we git to the river. We can drag yer wounded out on sleds. We’ll have plenty of boats for them to lay out on once we git there,” he finished, leaving unsaid the reason for the extra spots.

“Thank you, Cousin. I’m ready to move on.”

Nancy had never in her life been on a boat, at least not the kind without nightly entertainment and expensive ports of call. But here she was sailing, actually just floating with the current, down what the Creek men called Kanahwa. Lamar told her the common name was New River according to the maps the Congregation kept in their library.

The water here ran swiftly, hemmed in on both sides by rock walls, with narrow bands of trees and shoreline bracketing the river. Obstructions from the old world had been blasted away by the Creeks over the years, and this and other waterways served as highways throughout their territory.

Nancy peered into the dark foliage, wondering what dangers might be lurking. "Are there any more of those eaters watching us?"

"Relax. This is Creek country. They know if they're being watched. They're woodsmen, able to read signs from nature. Besides, there were no survivors after they got done with the pack that attacked us. And that was a big one."

Nancy shuddered at the thought. "You seem pretty sure about these people. How do you know they won't betray you?" she asked.

"We made acquaintance with the Creeks a few years back, when our hunting parties ran into each other by accident," Lamar told her.

"How are they going to help you get west, and why?" she asked. Her curiosity was no longer a question of gathering intelligence for the Federals. She had long given up on escaping and simply wondered what twists and turns her life would bring now.

Lamar smiled at her. "I'm amazed at how little our so called Federal government knows about what is going on in the interior. In fact, wasn't your Herman the Secretary of the Interior? That's a little ironic."

"Hey, we've been cooped up in that mountain since the Reset," she insisted.

"Why didn't you use your drones to scout further out? Too busy trying to track us?"

"Drones can't get that far out yet. Just useful to scout along our routes," she replied.

"I didn't think anything electronic worked anymore? Whatever didn't get fried in the Reset won't work because of the night lights," Lamar said, pointing up to the sky to show where the cause of the pain started for the world of his youth. That world had been totally dependent on the free flow of electricity.

"The solar storms don't really bother electronics anymore. Believe it or not, they never really did. The story was sort of overblown. But it gave us a chance to get some much needed upgrades to the grid paid for by Congress," Nancy answered.

Thaddeus snorted. "The Creek himself told us about that. Gave a warning about when we try to create a leader bigger than the common man. Somethin' about how they won't let no crisis go to waste."

Nancy flashed a begrudged respect at the man she considered at first blush to be a backwards hillbilly.

"Anyway, when GRAPEVINE, you know the system that controlled the grid, shut down, we had a parallel computer system that wasn't affected. So we've had heat and lights the whole time, but we had to stay underground so we didn't get caught up in the chaos afterwards. Those drones that chased you off the interstate are what's left. We've got more waiting at the new capital, but we didn't store up a lot of spare parts for anything at Continuity Mountain. That was a bit of an oversight on our part I guess," she replied without thinking of the consequences.

"So this really was planned? We figured it had to have been," Lamar said. He watched the color drain out of her face. "What's wrong, Nancy? Thinking about how many millions of people you killed?"

"I didn't kill anyone," Nancy replied defensively. She suddenly felt claustrophobic, trapped on this boat with a man who kept tricking her into saying things she didn't intend to release.

"Uh Huh," she heard from behind. Thaddeus commanded their boat, giving he and Lamar a chance to talk things over during the trip. A line of other boats, some larger, some smaller, trailed off behind them. Two scout boats had already gone ahead and were out of sight.

"What is 'Uh huh' supposed to mean?" Nancy protested. "I never hurt anyone, I was just doing my job. I had orders from the acting President of the United States! What was I supposed to do? We were trying to keep some semblance of order, save the human race! The whole world is going to be destroyed!"

Thaddeus and Lamar were hard men. They both had taken life and watched men close to them be killed. The world of their childhood spun apart when the power went out and nothing really surprised either of them anymore. But now they shared a look of amazement, clear to anyone who might know them well.

Thaddeus spoke first. "What do you mean the world is going to be destroyed? Is that why the Cogs kilt' everyone?"

“It wasn’t like that. There’s an ice age coming and we needed to make sure that humanity survived,” she answered.

Lamar didn’t have to fake the confused look on his face. “So let me get this straight, you had to destroy humanity in order to save it? I think I heard someone say something similar in a history class. Didn’t work too good.”

“Everyone was going to die. Starvation, disease, rioting...the whole planet. Even the areas that wouldn’t be under ice would be flooded with refugees from the glaciated parts. We were just making sure that humanity could survive, don’t you understand?” Nancy welled up with tears. Her cognitive dissonance faded as she faced the realization of what her actions had wrought.

Neither man spoke while they floated on. Nancy sobbed, perceiving the pain these two suffered directly because of what she been a part of.

“I’m...I’m so sorry. We thought we were...we thought we were saving civilization...how could we have been so selfish? All those people...I never thought about...” she kept stammering, holding her head in both hands.

“When we took you, something was said something about a new capital. That you were all moving out. Where were you going?” Lamar asked.

Nancy said nothing, still sobbing.

“You’re an admitted murderer, Nancy. Thaddeus and I have both killed people who committed lesser crimes. If you’re truly sorry for your sins, come clean with everything now. This information can help our communities, and other survivors. You can save lives. Make amends, help us understand what’s happening.”

She looked up at him through red eyes. Snot strings hung off her face, flushed and streaked with tears. Gathering her strength she began to unveil the entire plan. “The government needed a new settlement area in a more temperate climate. We were going to move all of our citizens from the bases around DC to Georgia. Atlanta was destroyed by the Reset of course, but we had already build the underground foundations for a new capital outside of Athens.”

“Georgia Guidestones,” Lamar mumbled to himself. “Pastor always said that was the work of a demon but I thought he was just being dramatic.”

“Part of the distractions,” Nancy answered. “We kept so many crazy conspiracy stories floating around that eventually the citizens became jaded. Truth was actually stranger than the fiction.”

“You mean like Denver Airport, aliens on the moon and all that?”

“The Denver Airport is for real. Complete underground city. There’s a tunnel connecting it to Cheyenne Mountain. The chosen citizens we saved in the Pacific Northwest were supposed to go there, and then move south to eastern Texas for their permanent residence,” Nancy said. “We lost contact with Seattle right after the Reset, but the Cheyenne Mountain group is still fine.”

“If you were trying to reduce the population why were you trying to get people like my parents to come to the camps? Why not just kill them off,” Lamar asked.

“We’d still need production workers, farmers, soldiers, those types of folks. We set up each VIP with sectors to manage in the new lands. They needed assigned assistants to help them,” Nancy replied with pride. Lamar inferred that had been part of the plan she worked on.

“You mean slaves? Plantation type arrangement?” Thaddeus broke his silence, clearly this idea touched a nerve. Nancy chose not to acknowledge the truth and went back to staring at the river bank. A deer poked its head out and then disappeared just as quickly. Little eddies swirled around the boat and insects danced around just above the water’s surface. She lost herself in the peace of it all, wondering why she had never noticed such things before.

“Whatever happened to the President before the Reset. Aguilar I think his name was?” Lamar interrupted.

Nancy jumped at the chance to change the subject. “Something happened to our bases in Chicago and Toronto. They went off line right after the Reset. So Herman sent scouts to Toronto first. Apparently a strain of tuberculosis hit pretty quick. When sanitation breaks down cities get bad in a big hurry. All those people in their own filth, nasty! A really virulent strain of TB managed to kill off a big chunk of the population and then work its way into the underground. Then Muslim patrols out of Michigan found the base by accident and looted it. Killed anyone that was left after the outbreak.”

“Muslims? What’ve they got to do with anything?” Lamar asked.

“The Detroit area was populated by refugees from the Middle East before the Reset. Muslims, you know? They lived in pretty bad conditions in their old countries, and it wasn’t much different here.

So when modern civilization collapsed, they stepped right into the gap. Formed their own Caliphate and everything.”

“You mean like their own country? Let me guess, this Caliphate is thriving and spreading and now Herman’s concerned.”

“Was concerned. Because the exact same thing happened in Minneapolis. Just Sunni Muslims there instead of Shia. Both sects put aside their differences, mostly, and teamed up to take out any survivors between them. Slaughtered anyone who stood in their way. Convert or die for every man, woman and child. They think this is Allah’s will to give them a rich fertile land to build a new kingdom in.” Nancy answered.

“What’s that got to do with Aguilar?”

“Right, well after the Reset, he and Speaker Reed agreed to turn over all their power to Herman for the sake of Continuity of Government. He got them involved in our religion so they quickly understood it was for the greater good.

“Anyway, they jumped at the chance to help in exchange for estates in the new capital. He gave them implants that can access a direct connection to our database. Gives them complete knowledge of maps, people and even religions like Islam. Pretty remarkable technology, even for us,” she bragged. “Then he gave them a company of soldiers with some of the new flexible exoskeleton suits we had saved back. A couple of VX drones killed hard core hold outs from out of sight. Muslims thought it was all God stuff or magic. By the time they were done, the Caliphate believed Aguilar was some kind of Muslim Messiah, they call him Mahdi. Then Reed took on the persona of the Muslim form of Jesus...no they really did,” she said to incredulous looks from her two boat mates. She assumed they were both Bible readers.

“Okay you probably don’t believe me. But it’s true. Now they’re the leaders of the Northern Caliphate covering all of what was Michigan, Wisconsin and Minnesota. Part of Indiana, Illinois and Iowa, too. They built the Caliphate’s capital in a city in Illinois called Aurora. None of the muzzies got the irony,” Nancy chuckled.

“You said you needed them to be slaves, okay workers or whatever. What’s the use of having the workers all the way up there if you’re going to have all your precious elites down south?” Lamar asked.

“Mass migration,” she replied. “Aguilar is going to lead them down south. They’re the perfect workers; don’t each much, used to doing without and they’ll go along with whatever you say as long as they can worship how they want. The western group will float down the Mississippi River until they get to Louisiana, and the central and eastern group will use a variety of rivers and highways to get to the land between Louisiana and Georgia. Herman figures they’ll only lose about half on the way down.”

“Lose’m to what?” Thaddeus asked.

“We got intel that there are some pretty strong groups that survived the Reset in southern Illinois and Indiana. Not just survived but are actually expanding. One of these groups discovered our base at Ft. Knox, Kentucky. Wiped them out like the original Chicago group we had to replace. So according to our spies there these holdouts have a pretty good handle on who we are and what we did. That makes their reactions to our plans unpredictable. Herman doesn’t like variables.”

“You mean he don’t like free peoples,” Thaddeus spat back.

Nancy shrugged. She couldn’t argue with the truth of the statement, Herman really *didn’t* like free people. Free people were variables, too. They wouldn’t follow plans the way it had to be done for the greater good. “Herman figured the Northern Caliphate would have to go right through these free groups. There wouldn’t be much organized resistance to trouble us by the time the horde moved through.”

“Lamar?” Thaddeus cut Nancy off. His accent drew the final syllable out longer than was customary. “Have you ever met a colder hearted group then this? I mean, we been fightin’ rovers and such for years, hated ‘em every wakin’ moment. But I guess they’s just trying to make it. Folk like this,” he pointed a long calloused finger at Nancy, “did this just outta comfort and schemes. That *just* WRONG, man.”

“Schemes within schemes,” Lamar nodded back. “Only government types got time to think this complicated stuff up. Instead of just living their lives and letting others live theirs.”

“I’m telling you guys, it wasn’t that simple. We had to act preemptively. If we just let nature take its course, civilization would have been wiped out. Maybe the human race would have become extinct even. Climate change is something we just can’t fight. Those solar storms were the warning that the Sun was going dormant, and we don’t know for how long. Could be a hundred years, could be a thousand,” she replied.

“Who got to decide who lived and who died? Who gets to play God? You really want to face your maker knowing that you helped murder so many innocent people? Lamar asked.

“I don’t believe in your God, Lamar. I follow Continuity. My mind will live forever on our Network. I already have an Elite Profile, Herman made sure of it. All of us follow that path, so even if this body dies I’ll be rebooted into another,” Nancy said. Lamar watched in amazement as her demeanor changed. Facial features softened, eyes narrowed, and a seductive smile radiated. “Open your mind to what I’m about to tell you,” she purred. “Someone like you deserves to have their Profile live on...”

Nancy pitched forward in the boat, landing with a thud. Her head struck the wooden rail, seeming to knock her out cold. Lamar looked up to see Thaddeus standing behind her. His slip on leather boot had caused the woman’s sudden jolt.

“What in the world are you doing?” Lamar shouted.

“Sorry Cousin. Hate to hit a lady. But you don’t wanna hear what was comin’ out her mouth. That’s some bad demon magic right there. The Creek himself sent word up and down the river to be on the lookout for that evil. Said the folk you’re on a mission to see warned him this Continuity group was behind shenanigans causin’ the Tribulation we’re in. Mind control or somethin’, who knows? Without there bein’ a preacher around to help guard our souls, don’t want a demon talkin’ on my boat. Mm hmm.”

“You never told us about that. What kind of demons are you talking about,” Lamar stammered.

“The Red Hawks can tell you more when you get there. But Cousin, I’m telling you, gag her if you have to. Don’t let that poison up in you head, alright?”

They floated in silence for what seemed like a couple of hours. Lamar tried to process what had happened, what Thaddeus had said. He couldn’t tell how far they’d traveled. The scouts had returned twice to relay news their path remained clear. Lamar let his mind wander letting Home and family catch up to him. He fought back desperation; a feeling he had abandoned them. His mother’s face filled his mind, a picture of her sitting inside the hideout, praying for him and the ones he led.

He was jolted out the waking dream as a geyser of water jumped up about fifty yards ahead. He watched the water come crashing back down, nearly swamping one of the lead boats. Another sprung up just a few feet from the first, this time flinging the boat and its occupants into the air. People were

flung in a whirling mass of arms and legs to either side. Three, or was it four, Congregation members came back down into the water followed by the boat, somehow still holding the Creek who was steering.

Confusion froze everyone, until a third geyser hit between Lamar's boat and the one just in front. The water drenched everyone, waking Nancy from her stupor. Suddenly the realization sunk in of what he was seeing. "Drones! They found us!"

Shock drenched Nancy's face like the water that roused her awake. Thaddeus sprung to action, hitting the ignition on an outboard motor used only in emergency situations. "We got to git to them trees!" he shouted. Half the Creek boats had such propulsion, the other half had been salvaged for just this trip, able to use the currents and oars to reach their destination. He spun the boat around, headed for those trapped in drifting craft. Lamar understood his actions and leapt to the stern, untying a tow rope from an eye loop mounted to the back. He tossed it to the first boat they reached, and Thaddeus gunned the motor, nearly causing the Creek man holding the rope to lose his balance. But strong hands held tight, and together they made the starboard shoreline.

As the rescued boat used the momentum to beach in the mud, the passengers jumped into the shallow water and fled into the trees. Thaddeus returned to the middle of the river, and Lamar repeated the toss to the next group. A great geyser sprung up just behind the craft. In an instant, Lamar could see everything on the floor of the boat they meant to rescue as it flipped into the air, perpendicular to the water. Terror was on the occupant's faces as they pitched towards him.

He flung himself onto the floor of their boat as the other crashed on top. Wood and metal popped and groaned as the two vessels destroyed one another in a crash. Water splashed around Lamar's face, briefly recalling the terrifying night in the creek. As the boat rocked and settled he could feel it slowing spinning in the river's current. He felt and heard other splashes, and suddenly the whole heap of wreckage that entangled him flipped over. He rolled inside and then felt himself flying through the air until once again he was in water.

Now free from the twisted and sinking boat, he tried to regain his head. He was gasping from water invading his mouth and nostrils. He puffed quickly, trying to blow the bitterly cold liquid out of his body. Looking around, he could see overturned boats and bodies floating in the river. A piece of debris meandered nearby, an old plastic cooler chest brought along to keep their drinking water. He quickly grabbed on and steadied himself, trying to regain his breath and his composure.

“Thaddeus! Nancy!” he cried aloud. No answer came. Searching the wreckage with his eyes, he finally found what had been his boat, and his heart sank at the sight. Denim britches, made bright blue by wetness, stuck out from the ruined vessel. He recognized the garment and knew his guide and protector was dead.

As if to apply insult to injury, a final blast obliterated all that was left of the boat, throwing bits and pieces high into the air in the water spout. Watching helplessly, Nancy’s broken body floated to the top face down and bobbing in the debris strewn waves. A drone a bit larger than the one he remembered from before hovered over the area where Nancy’s body floated. Seemingly satisfied with its work, it suddenly shot up skyward and out of site.

Lamar wept, trying to make sense of the sudden violence. *I thought we were free of the Cogs. Lord, why? What is Your purpose in letting this happen? They kill their own people along with the innocent, yet still they prosper?*

He tried to push the doubt out of his mind. He really believed there had always been a greater purpose to what the Congregation suffered through. Here floating in this river, once more surrounded by the remains of those he cared about, ones who counted on him to be a protector, he search for that purpose.

“I’m tired of running,” he said to himself, aloud as if to reinforce the point. “Running only gets you shot in the back. We’ve been running ever since we left DC.” His voice grew louder and more confident. “We’re gonna make it to the land between the rivers. The New Zion. We’re gonna team up with those Red Hawks. God gave Mama the dream, and now it’s been passed to me. We’ll tell the Red Hawks everything we know about these demons we faced. Tell them about the storm that’s heading their way! We’re gonna help those people survive Lord!”

He was still preaching to himself as Roy floated up in a boat still intact after the attack. His younger cousin Tyrone was next to him looking concerned at the sight of his hero alive but in tears. Lamar’s own spirits lifted. *We still survive* he assured himself, *and the Congregation lives.* A large hand reached down to grasp his and Roy’s relieved face managed a grim smile. “Gonna get us some help Cousin Roy. Then we’re coming back here. Lord help me keep my word, we are coming back!”

