

HALL BROTHERS ENTERTAINMENT PRESENTS
INDEPENDENCE DAY 2011

The Patriot Awakened
By Martin T. Ingham

The wooden plow pushed through the soggy soil in mid-April. The one-wheeled, two-bladed contraption was all Noah could afford, though he wasn't one to complain. He had spent his life working this land for his lord, and felt no shame in being poor. His toil produced enough for his wife and son to eat, and the excess was graciously given to the Crown. What else could he ask for, than the humble fare at his table and the thatched-roof cottage to keep him warm in winter?

The world had always been this way, as the great men of learning would profess at Sunday meeting. We work for the glory of God, and provide for our betters, so they might explore the wonders of His creation in ways beyond the understanding of common man. So, Noah didn't let his mind wander, and took comfort in his simple existence.

That was, until the stranger came.

Noah had scraped up his third row of the day, and was ready to sow peas when a figure caught his eye on the horizon. The distraction gave him reason to pause and catch his breath, so he stopped to watch the shadow coming over the hill. As he stood there, leaning against his plow, he watched as a man walked toward him, and it wasn't long before Noah could see he was no ordinary wanderer.

The stranger wore clothes with splotches of brown and green, and when he came closer the holster at his hip became evident. Though Noah knew few members of the higher classes, he recognized the power of firearms. Realizing that only knights and noblemen possessed such things, he lowered his head in supplication as the stranger neared, showing the humility of a humble farmer. He hoped the High One would pass him by, and leave him to his work, though that was not to be. The stranger stopped right in front of him, even as he kept his gaze

upon the ground.

"Beautiful day, my lord," Noah said meekly, too terrified to wonder what this man could want from him.

"Oh, good, you speak English," the stranger replied.

The tone of voice wasn't angry or hostile, as Noah would have expected, so he dared to raise his eyes ever so slightly.

"You wouldn't happen to know where a man can find a good meal and a bed around here, would you?" the stranger asked.

"The nearest public house is nearly twenty kilometers, my lord," Noah said, returning his gaze to the man's feet. He feared his reply would displease the High One, and spur retribution, though that was not to be.

"Kilometers, eh? Sounds pretty far," the stranger mentioned.

"Almost a day's walk on foot, my lord," Noah said, as his mind searched for a satisfactory solution. He knew what happened to others who failed to provide satisfactory answers and displeased the High Ones; a painful flogging, or worse. He had to pass this stranger's test, or face perilous consequences. Only, how could he hope to satisfy him?

"If it please my lord, I'd share the fare of my own home," Noah blurted out, wondering if his offer would be deemed suitable.

"That's very kind, thank you," the stranger said, giving Noah reason to lift his eyes again, hearing the man's conciliatory tone. "I've been walking all night and morning, so I could use a rest."

"Right this way, my lord," Noah said, bowing before leading the way to his little cottage amidst the fields. The stone structure sat on the side of a slight hill, and large tracts of mucky soil stretched out toward the horizon. Other homes dotted the landscape across these farmlands, and other workers could be seen digging into the soil with hand tools. A few cattle were grazing in the distance, though nobody in Noah's impoverished township could afford a horse.

Noah could imagine the sort of work he could accomplish with a simple beast of burden. Why, he could till greater tracts of land, plant larger crops, and buy more horses. Then, he would need help to handle his expanding farm, and that would place other men under his employ. Dare he dream of such bold ambition?

No, it was foolish. This land was not his at all, but the property of Lord Jarrod, Duke of Berrington. Any such expansion would be for the Duke's benefit, so Noah put the thoughts aside. Better to serve as his family had always served, without unwarranted ambition.

The heavy leather hinges made no sound as Noah opened the wooden door to his little cottage, though the door sagged and the bottom board scraped against the ground. The commotion drew the attention of his wife, who was sitting by the stove, peeling wrinkled potatoes.

"Raetha, we have a guest," Noah announced, as he waved the stranger inside.

The cottage wasn't much to look at. Half of the central room contained a brick stove that served to heat the air and cook the meals, and the other half contained a small dining table with a couple of unlit candles melted into a wooden bowl. A curtain hung toward the back of the room, hiding the single, cramped sleeping area for the family. *Cozy* was a generous description.

As Noah ushered in the stranger, Raetha stepped away from the stove to greet him. The small, unassuming woman with dark hair and freckled skin curtsied slightly, which elicited a reassuring smile from the guest.

Noah's initial fear was fading fast, but new concerns were flooding in. He wondered how far he'd have to extend his hospitality for this High One. They were not the sort to be denied any worldly desire, and many a wife had her bed stolen for their insatiable appetites. There was nothing he could do if this stranger sought her companionship, yet a commoner could be stoned for violating matrimonial bonds so blatantly.

Noah often wondered how God could have two sets of standards for His people, though he had to accept it. This was the way of things, as it always had been, so how could he think it was wrong?

Raetha invited the stranger to sit at the head of their small table as she went to check on the midday meal. A slight smell from the watery stew wafted through the air as she dipped a ladle into the crock pot atop the brick range. The poor family was fortunate to have enough for this *extra* meal each day. Many of their neighbors could scarcely spare enough food for one.

"Where's Samuel," Noah asked as he noticed his son was not present.

"He went over to see the Bachmans," Raetha replied, dishing out the stew into wooden bowls. She walked over to the table and set them down.

Noah said no more, but gave her a stern glance. He didn't like Raetha mentioning the Bachmanns in front of the High One, considering their heretical beliefs. They dared to speak of self-determination, and that all men were born free, to live and learn however they saw fit. They denied the God King's *Edicts of Order*, and dared to read and teach written language reserved only for the Nobility!

Noah didn't like the idea of his son associating with such dissidents, fearing that they'd all be hanged. Though, his wife was of a different opinion, so he had to allow their son to associate with the radicals in the name of matrimonial bliss.

Why did she question Divine Right and deny God's will?

Considering such things renewed Noah's fear, as he looked at the noble stranger sitting at his dinner table. What if this man had come to expose the heretics? Would he take Samuel away for being tainted by associating with heretics? Could it go even further, and cause the parents' lives to be forfeit?

Noah pushed the worry aside. He couldn't allow fear to cloud his judgment. Not now! He had to find out who this stranger was, and why he had come, so he might do his best to allay any ill feelings as quickly as possible.

"My lord, if it pleases you, might I ask your name and title?" Noah began.

The stranger dropped a spoon into the bowl and looked up from the meal. "Oh, here I am, about to eat at your table, and we haven't even been properly introduced," he said. "Sergeant Matt Davis, United States Army."

The rank was unfamiliar to Noah, and it did nothing to quell his concerns. All he knew of the military caste was that they were anointed servants of the nobles, just the sort to investigate heresy.

"What brings you this way, Sergeant?" Raetha asked, sounding less than concerned. She clearly didn't share Noah's paranoia.

"Call me Matt," he requested. "It's a long story, and I'm still piecing it together. Maybe you folks can help me understand a few things."

Chills continued to roll down Noah's spine, as he sensed a trap. The High Ones were fond of toying with dissidents, he knew. He could not help but wait for the other shoe to drop.

"We'll be glad to help however we can," Raetha replied, maintaining her regular, amicable calm.

The questions came in short bursts, as Matt Davis ate his meal. Such strange things he asked, Noah thought, though he answered intermittently, when Raetha gave him the opportunity. What year was it? What country was this? Who was in charge of this land, and what sort of government was in place? Such bizarre queries!

What questions Noah and Raetha could answer were common knowledge, and those they couldn't belonged with the High Ones alone, and were best left unknown.

After finishing his stew and hearing what his hosts could tell him, Matt stood up and shook Noah's hand. "Well, you've been very helpful, but it seems if I want to get any concrete answers, I'd better see this Duke Berrington."

Noah had many questions of his own about this curious sergeant, though he didn't dare to pry. It was still uncertain why this stranger had come, and if this were some sort of Noble test, it was best to let it pass; allow this man to go on his way, hoping he would find what he sought elsewhere and not return for undisclosed retribution.

Sergeant Matt Davis left the small cottage as he had come, swiftly and without ceremony. Raetha took the empty dishes and brought them to the washing basin beside the stove, while Noah ventured out to tend his plantings, praying that his simple life would not be disturbed again.

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As the cool rain of spring gave way to the parching sun of summer, Noah resumed his standard routine, tending his crops and serving his family as best he could. A crop of root vegetables was ready for harvest by July, and he was there with his son, pulling up carrots and parsnips, as the riders appeared over the western hills.

The colors of their uniforms were the first thing Noah noticed, the familiar blue and brown of Duke Berrington's Men at Arms. They were in a hurry, as always,

urging their horses to race down the road, stirring up a cloud of dust in their wake. It wasn't often that the soldiers rode through the outlying areas of the duke's realm, so it caused quite a stir.

Noah urged his son to keep picking at the parsnips, hoping the soldiers would keep riding past. No suck luck. The Men at Arms pulled their horses to a screeching halt right in front of the small farm. Two of the dozen men dismounted and marched over to the farmer.

"Noah Burrows," one of the soldiers shouted. The gold bars on his shoulders and the tasseled hat on his head identified him as a captain.

"Lord Captain," Noah replied, standing up and bowing his head in supplication. "How may I serve you?"

"You and your son shall come with us," the captain ordered.

Noah knew the price of disobedience, so he did as he was told. Grabbing his son by the arm, he followed the captain over to the horde of mounted men and mounted the saddle of a spare horse. It was a rare treat to avoid the walk, so there was some pleasure in this frightening event. Though, their destination would likely counter any positives.

Once Noah and Samuel were comfortable on the horse, the captain mounted his own ride and led the group of men back to the road. The dozen soldiers corralled their captives, making sure they could not escape.

They didn't ride long, and once they reached their destination Noah knew why they had come. This farm belonged to the Bachmanns, the bold dissidents who practiced heresy with their teachings. It was no surprise they were finally being called out for their actions.

"Dismount!" the captain shouted, and all of his men complied. He eyed Noah and Samuel bitterly, and they both got down, as well.

The captain stuck his arm out to point at the house, and his men jumped into action. Running up to the small cottage, they smashed through the door and roused all those in current residence. Five people, two adults and three children, came out with a soldier's hand clamped to their arms. The children were scared and whimpering, but the adults held their wits about them. They didn't look very happy, nor humble.

All five were placed in front of the captain, who spit at them. "Reginald and Emily Bachmann, you are hereby accused of spreading the sacred knowledge of the Nobility amongst the lower classes. What is your plea?"

A bald man with otherwise youthful features looked up at the mounted captain, not with fear, but defiance in his expression. Noah knew what the stubborn fellow would say, and thought a quick prayer in his head for the man's eternal soul.

"If it is a crime to teach children to read and write, then I'm guilty!" Reginald said.

"As am I," his wife said. She was a rather plain woman, with a large nose and graying black hair, though she made up for her commonplace features with a proud spirit, the sort that complimented that of her husband.

"So be it," the captain said, stabbing a finger at the captives. "You have been convicted by the court of Lord Jerrod, and by his royal decree you shall pay for your crimes."

The captain drew the short sword at his hip, and as he came within range of the restrained Bachmanns he stabbed the blade into their abdomens, twice each. On the second stab, the captain pulled up and twisted the sword, essentially disemboweling the couple. The children screamed and cried, though the parents bore their deaths well, which didn't seem to please the captain in the least.

"Damn you and your false prophets," Reginald gasped, resistant to the end.

Hearing the defiant words, the captain's face turned red. Infuriated by the insolence, he began hacking Reginald with the sword. Blood and bits of flesh sprayed out of the man's stomach as the captain exorcised his fury.

Once the life faded from Reginald's eyes, the captain turned to Emily who cried silently in her final moments. He let her be, and turned to the three children, who continued to weep at the horror they'd witnessed.

"Do not fear," the captain said, wiping his bloody sword on his sleeve. "Your share of the punishment does not warrant death, but the damage your parents have done to you is sadly irreversible. As such, you shall be remanded to the custody of the Church, for training in the Godly arts. Take them!"

The soldiers dragged the three boys over to the horses, and tied all of them to a single mount. The oldest was ten, the youngest three, so their weight was no

trouble for the powerful animal.

With the Bachmann children dealt with, the captain turned to Noah and Samuel. "Now, what shall we do with you, my boy?" he asked the youngster.

"Lord Captain," Noah said, daring to speak to his better. "We're loyal subjects who've committed no crime."

"Really?" the captain asked dubiously. He removed a piece of parchment from beneath his chain mail shirt and shoved it in front of Samuel. "Read it."

Samuel said nothing and feigned ignorance.

The captain drew his sword with his free hand and stuck the tip under Samuel's chin. "Read it, or die!"

Samuel shivered and stuttered as he read the first sentence printed on the page. "By order of his anointed majesty, Lord Jerrod, Duke of Berrington, the following judgment has been issued upon the family Bachmann, in the village of Knox, this County of Walden, in the Kingdom of Greater New England."

"Enough," the captain said, dropping his threatening stance. Sheathing his sword, and stuffing the paper back under his shirt, he smiled appreciatively. "Of course, your guilt was known, young man. The same information which told us of the Bachmanns' sins also revealed your frequent visits to their household."

Waving his arm about again, the captain ordered his guards to grab Samuel and put him with the other children. Noah stood quietly and watched, filled with an overwhelming dread. Would he pay the price for his son's education, as the Bachmanns had for theirs? And what would happen to Samuel?

"Fear not, Noah, I am feeling magnanimous," the captain exclaimed, seeming in a far better mood after chopping the Bachmanns to death. "You have served as a loyal subject for many years, and I am certain you had no knowledge of what your neighbors were doing to your son. I regret having to take him, but no judgment shall be set against you... but remember what you have witnessed here."

"I shall," Noah said, feeling his fear fading, replaced with a sense of disgust and anger. He knew it was wrong to question the High Ones, but this action could not stand. His son did not deserve to be taken away, but what could he do? These men would waste no time dispatching him if he dared to show the slightest defiance.

The captain jumped onto his horse, and tipped his hat to Noah, wishing him a good day. The armed entourage escorted Samuel Burrows and the Bachmann children down the road, off to an unknown life of servitude.

Noah was left to walk home, a short distance down the road. He wondered what he would tell Raetha, and what she would think of the whole thing. She was responsible for this. It had been her decision to let the Bachmanns teach Samuel. Noah had been against it, but he hadn't put his foot down. He'd given in to his wife's wishes, and was therefore equally to blame.

As he came into his humble home, Noah's expression revealed the truth before he could even speak. Raetha broke into tears as he slumped down in a chair, and they did little else for the rest of the day. It was not a time to labor, but to mourn.

Hours passed, and when dusk arrived a knock came at the door. Noah moved to answer it, but with no great exuberance. It was likely a neighbor coming to give superficial moral support, possibly even the same neighbor who had exposed the Bachmanns to the Royal Court. It was impossible to tell who among the community had ratted them out, though a careful inspection at harvest time could reveal the answer. Whoever got to keep an extra share of their crop would be known as the snitch, though none would blame them for upholding the duke's law and seeking a significant reward.

Answering the door, Noah was shocked to see Sergeant Matt Davis standing there. The stranger who had visited a few months ago had left a memorable impression, and his presence here and now caused a stir. Noah had to assume he was somehow involved with the day's horrific events. Even so, he invited the armed man to sit at the dinner table, though no food had been prepared.

"Why do you come now?" Raetha asked as the sergeant sat down.

"I came to tell you your son is fine," Sergeant Davis said. "My men rescued him from the Duke's forces a few hours ago on the road to Augusta."

This strange man never ceased to bewilder. Noah would never have expected such a statement, and it took him a minute to wrap his mind around it. This man claimed to have taken Samuel from the duke's soldiers? What an unthinkable feat!

Yet, as the news began to sink in, the most probable truth sank in. This sergeant was of the High Ones; of that Noah was certain. He was most likely a

soldier from a neighboring kingdom, possibly a rival of Duke Berrington. So, this soldier's actions were predicated on serving his own lord, rather than altruism.

How had Samuel's fate changed?

"What are your intentions for my son?" Noah asked carefully.

"I hope to teach him, if that's all right," the sergeant said. "He's a good kid, with a lot of potential."

"Teach him? Teach him what?" Raetha asked bitterly. "For what purpose?"

"If you'll come with me, I'll show you," Sergeant Davis offered, standing up.

Noah didn't hesitate, eager to see his son again and learn of his new fate.

Though the sergeant's motives may not be much different than those of the duke's forces, he was at least more personable and conciliatory in his approach.

Raetha, on the other hand, didn't like the idea. She wasn't the sort to work on blind faith alone. "You show up at our door at night, tell us you are holding our son, and now you expect us to go out with you into the dark?"

Sergeant Davis slapped his hands down on the table and leaned forward, looking Raetha straight in the eyes. "I wouldn't have come if I didn't think you were worth it."

"Excuse me?" Raetha asked.

"If you stay here, the duke's men are liable to kill you."

It was understandable, assuming the sergeant was being truthful about rescuing Samuel. The duke's men would have been waylaid or killed in the process, and such action would certainly call for retribution. Noah could see himself as the initial target, since his son was at the center of the whole mess. Staying put might not be an option, though what did he and his wife have to lose? This cramped little cottage wasn't much, but it was all they knew.

The choice was the likelihood of execution or the uncertainty this curious sergeant offered. In either case, a leap of faith was required.

"We'll come with you," Noah said, making up his mind in a hurry. He looked at Raetha and she nodded agreement. It was the only sensible thing to do.

"Grab what you think you'll need for a few days," Sergeant Davis said.

Raetha hurried around the small building, gathering a few of their meager belongings. She stuffed an old, tattered bag with cooking utensils and a few

articles of clothing, but there wasn't very much else worth taking.

"How far will we be going?" Noah asked, as he saw Raetha struggle with the bag. The items may have been few, but the heavy crock pot and skillet were both heavy.

"Many miles... uh kilometers," Sergeant Davis replied. "But I have extra horses to carry whatever you wish to bring."

The prospect of horses invigorated Noah, as it would allow him to carry most of his basic tools. The shovels and rakes were right outside the door, so he began to gather the items inside first, assisting Raetha with her foraging. He grabbed a bushel basket of new potatoes and carrots he'd recently harvested and wrapped the cumbersome thing in a thick, woolen blanket. He bunched the ends together and tied it into a makeshift bag for easier carrying, and followed his wife out the door.

The darkness of night didn't hide the four horses, which stood right beside the small cottage, nor did it conceal another man atop one of the animals. "Don't worry, he's a friend," Sergeant Davis assured the Burrows after they froze in mid-stride. "Isn't that right, Jackson?"

"Yep," the rider simply said. His large body was mostly hidden by the gloom of dusk, though a full beard was apparent.

It took a few minutes to secure the ungainly sacks and hand tools to the horses. Once everything was in place, Noah and Raetha mounted the spare horses and accompanied Sergeant Davis out onto the main road, headed south.

The ride was silent. Davis didn't speak a word, and Noah was too nervous to ask him any of the questions that started to pop into his head. Never had he dreamed of venturing into the unknown like this. He'd been so content to farm his patch of dirt and live according to his lord's wishes. He would have stayed that way if circumstances had remained under his control.

It may have been self-serving, but Noah really hadn't cared about injustice until it came to threaten his little world. So long as the duke's men were persecuting others, he hadn't bothered to think about rebelling. It hadn't been his fight, until now.

It's funny how a little hostility can motivate a man. The natural instinct to stay alive and protect your family can move you in ways you'd never consider

otherwise, as Noah was discovering.

After riding a dozen kilometers, the sergeant turned the group off the main road, venturing into a patch of thick woods. This untamed wilderness was a known landmark to Noah, Searswood forest. None but the boldest of the Nobility dared to venture into these woods to hunt game, and commoners were forbidden to trespass within. If the threat of the law wasn't harsh enough, the place was said to be full of deadly predators; wolves and bears to eat the unarmed. On any other day, Noah would have turned away, but now was no time to run.

Their course became erratic, as they zigzagged through the dense woodland. There were no obvious paths, but Davis seemed to know where he was going. It would be difficult for anyone to retrace their journey, and it was easy to deduce the purpose for such a twisty route. Wherever they were headed, they weren't meant to know the way.

After several hours of riding through the forest, the underbrush thinned out, and a partial clearing appeared. Several small fires burned within that open space, and the shaded figures of people stirred as the riders came within sight. A number of them were armed, but their guard relaxed as the sergeant announced himself.

The group dismounted, and Sergeant Davis escorted his guests over to one of the smoldering fires, where Samuel was waiting with a number of other children. Noah gave his son a reassuring hug, relieved to see he had not been deceived.

There was a short rest period, as Sergeant Davis left to check things around his forest camp. The Burrows settled in around the fire with their son and the Bachmann orphans. A couple of watchful guards kept their distance, but Noah saw their glaring eyes, as if looking for an excuse to attack. These were by no means gentle men, and he wondered what sort of fellows they had to be, in order to challenge the divine authority of the High Ones. Immoral savages, most likely; bloody killers and devil worshipping bandits!

Despite their nature, the men had treated Samuel fairly, and seemed to be on the level, though Noah's lifetime of obedience couldn't help but send his mind wandering.

After a while, Sergeant Davis returned, and invited Noah to walk with him around camp. It seemed unwise to refuse, so the simple farmer obeyed, as was his

habit. He looked around at the flickering fires and the shadowed tents as they moved around the wooded encampment, wondering how long he would be staying.

"What do you think of our organization?" Davis asked after they had gone a fair distance. The camp was pretty spread out among the forest, giving them plenty of room to walk without leaving sight of civilization.

"I'm not sure," Noah said honestly.

"We rescued your son. I hope that scored some points."

"I'm grateful, if that's what you mean."

"That's a start," Davis said, coming to a stop by one of the fires. There were a few men sitting there, including the gargantuan Jackson. "Have a seat."

Noah found a hunk of log comfortable enough, and did as the sergeant requested. The warmth of the small fire was hardly noticeable in the hot summer air, so he assumed it was mostly lit for lighting purposes. As he looked around at the new faces beside him, he noticed each of the men were armed. One even had a long gun on his lap, a most menacing-looking thing with a sharpened bayonet sticking out from under the muzzle. Noah had never seen the like close up, but he recognized its purpose and power.

"You must have a lot of questions," Davis said, stabbing a stick into the fire. "I'll give you some answers, though I can't guarantee you'll understand them all, and what you do with them is your business."

"Okay," Noah said nervously, feeling very out-of-place.

"We are outlaws," Sergeant Davis began. "Most of us by choice, because we will not bow down to a despot. A few here are like you, unwitting peasants forced into the fray because of unjust feudal laws. I know you've been fed the State's line about Divine Right and all that nonsense, but that's what it is; nonsense. You must understand the nobles—these High One as you call them—are no more predisposed to ruling than you or me. They're only in charge because they have the knowledge to manipulate the masses, and the strength of arms to enforce their rule."

"How do you know?" Noah dared to ask, afraid to contradict the man's assertions, but equally afraid of what God might do should he not.

"That's where things will get a little strange for you," Sergeant Davis said. "To

be honest, I still have a hard time believing it, and I've lived through it all. You see, I'm not from around here."

"That much is obvious," Noah replied.

"But I *am* from here. Rather, I'm from a little town a few miles up the road, or what used to be the road. Neither the town nor the country I lived in exists today, but it did a very long time ago."

"I'm sorry, you've lost me," Noah admitted.

"I figured as much," Davis said. "You see, I've had this conversation before a hundred times. Not once have I found someone with an open enough mind to grasp the truth, at first."

"What truth?"

"That I'm a man from the past, a refugee from a bygone era. The best I can tell, I was born a thousand years ago."

Noah couldn't fathom the claim, and his instinct was to get up and walk away right then and there. A natural defense against heretical nonsense was taking hold, fighting his desire to understand what was being said. Yet, the sergeant's benevolent actions toward his family left him with enough strength to keep an open mind.

"How could you have lived all those years?" Noah asked, eager for an explanation, something that could assure him that Davis wasn't crazy.

"That's a little hard to explain, considering your limited understanding of the universe. I was part of a security detachment, guarding a government lab experimenting with black holes. Something went wrong, and they lost containment. One minute, I'm walking to the mess hall, the next an explosion puts me on my rear. I lay there for a few seconds, or so it seemed from my perspective. In reality, over a thousand years had passed in that instant."

"But how?" Noah asked, frustrated by his own lack of understanding.

"Black holes are tricky things. From what the science boys told me during the project, their gravity has the ability to alter time. The closer you get to them, the slower time passes for you compared to the rest of the universe. I know, it sounds like a load of bunk, and I didn't quite believe it myself until I found myself here and now. At the moment of the explosion, time slowed within the laboratory

complex to a fraction of normal. The whole rest of the world kept on going, while I stayed frozen."

"It's very hard to believe," Noah said.

"I know, and someday I hope you'll understand," Davis replied. "In the meantime, just accept that I'm on your side and leave it at that."

Noah nodded his head, feeling it was a good compromise.

"Now, we can move on to our mission here, but for that you'll need to learn a little more about where I'm from. You see, I grew up in Searsmont, a little town on the mid-coast of Maine, part of the great United States of America. It was a land where there were no nobles or kings, where every man was free to determine his own fate for the most part. We had specific God-given rights, enumerated in a document called the Constitution, and it gave us the ability to create a society unlike any you might imagine. A place where any man could live like a king by the sweat of his brow, and even the poor were fat. I don't expect you to grasp the complexities of such a system right now, but learning will be easy enough, given time."

"You say every man had God-given rights?" Noah asked, as a lifetime of religious doctrine contradicted the claim. The Unified Church often spoke of God's will, and the tasks of the commoners. It was His will that people serve for the glory of their divine lords, and if God hadn't desired you to be a serf, you would have been born a High One. Questioning that reasoning was blasphemy, punishable by imprisonment or death.

"I know what you've been taught, but it's wrong," Davis said, sensing his concerns. "As I said, your feudal system of laws is nothing more than the means for a few men to maintain their power, and keep everyone in line. They use and abuse the name of God to perpetuate their own sinful rule."

"How can I be certain?" Noah asked, fearful of his God.

"Look inside yourself," Davis suggested. "Then think of what you have seen, the atrocities committed by these *High Ones* of yours. Would God truly sanction such evil? Does he empower certain men to disregard His laws, and impose them on only the common castes? And if your beliefs still ring true, ask yourself if you care to serve a God who would make you a slave!"

Noah remained silent, as he considered it carefully. A large part of him wished to run, get away from this strange sergeant and his madness. Yet, where could he and his family go? They might seek to settle in a different county, or another kingdom, where Duke Berrington could not reach them. If only it were that simple!

As he thought of it, he realized the futility of the concept. To settle in another land, he would still fall under the heavy hand of the High Ones, only he would be starting out with nothing, a stranger in a new land. At best, he might find work as a common laborer, making enough to feed himself alone, never mind his wife and son. That was assuming the ruling lord didn't seek to trade him back to Duke Berrington, as nobles were oft to do. There was nowhere safe to go, so Noah had to consign himself to hear the sergeant out.

Beyond all that, Noah could not forget the faces of his friends and neighbors, the fear and torment of those in bondage. He recalled the Bachmanns as they died at the captain's hand, and wondered if there really was a God. If so, how could he accept such ruthlessness in His servants?

For so long, Noah had served dutifully, for that was all he knew to do. There hadn't been an option, so it had been a simple thing to accept the teachings of divine right without question. Even as his son was taken from him, he hadn't dared to challenge his beliefs, but everything was changing. This stranger with his generosity had given him a new perspective on life. There could be a greater truth than he'd ever known, waiting to be discovered.

Fear of damnation began to fade, as he looked at the faces of the other men; the armed brutes of the forest. They dared to challenge the High Ones, and God had not struck them down, nor assured their defeat. If they could stand up against the Crown, it threw the entire concept of divine will into question.

As the night grew long, Sergeant Davis stood up and escorted Noah back to his family. "Think of what I've told you," Davis said, "for tomorrow you'll have to make a decision."

Noah had no trouble settling in. Sleeping on the mossy ground wasn't much different than the lumpy straw bed in the corner of his cottage, and he was exhausted from the stress of this horrible day. In a single breath, he'd seen friends

murdered, his son stolen, then had his son returned to him and been told that his entire life was a lie. Such shocks would naturally send a man to madness, or sleep. Thankfully, it was the latter in Noah's case.

The dawn came suddenly with a warm breeze rustling overhead leaves. As Noah opened his eyes, he saw his wife kneeling over the campfire only a few feet away, frying potatoes for Samuel and the Bachmann orphans. Further out, he could see other people doing the same thing, and for the first time he noticed how populated this woodland really was. There had to be a hundred people within his sight, and there was no telling how many lurked elsewhere among the trees.

This was no tiny band of outlaws. It was an army!

Noah got up to stretch, finding the ground to be a little harder on his muscles, after all. Once he worked out a few knots, he sat down beside his wife, and gave her a kiss on the cheek. "How'd you sleep?" he asked.

"Pretty well," Raetha said, turning back to the cooking.

"Do you like it here?" Noah asked.

Raetha stirred the potato slabs with a spatula, and answered. "It's different, but not too bad, considering. Do you know what we're going to do out here?"

"Not yet, but I do know there's a purpose for us, something beyond the simple work of man. I think God's delivered us at last, and he's got greater works in store!"

"I hope so," Raetha said, sounding happy. Her coping skills amazed her husband to no end. He envied the peace in her voice, even as his own thoughts remained wildly uncertain.

Noah spotted Sergeant Davis approaching, and stood up to greet their benefactor.

"Get any sleep?" Davis asked, grabbing Noah's hand and shaking it.

"Some," Noah said, glancing at his hand after the sergeant released it. Shaking of hands was not something commoners did. Only the High Ones practiced such physical forms of salutation.

"Good. Let's take a walk," Davis said, moving past him.

Noah left his wife to feed the kids as he rushed to stay in lockstep with the sergeant. They walked along for quite a pace through the thicker woods, where

little tents were placed here and there, but no people were apparent.

"Have you thought of what we talked about?" Davis asked as they walked along.

"Yes. Can't say I like it much," Noah admitted.

"I know how you feel," Davis replied. "I hope it won't keep you from making the right decision."

"You keep talking about that," Noah mentioned. "What choice must I make?"

"You are now a defacto fugitive, dispossessed from the life you've always known. We're very much alike in that respect. Neither of us can ever go home, so we must choose to make a new one. *That* is the choice you must make, whether to join us here in fighting for justice, or taking your leave, hoping to find something different on your own."

"Some choice," Noah said, feeling there was no real option. He'd already considered leaving, and knew it would be disastrous.

"Then you're with us?" Davis asked.

"I've got no choice," Noah answered. "But why do you want me? I'm a farmer, not a soldier. I know how to grow crops, not fight battles."

"Don't worry, we'll soon take care of that," Davis said, slapping Noah on the shoulder. "Trust me, in a few weeks, you'll feel right at home among the Patriots."

Noah hoped so. Even though he wasn't certain of the particulars, working for the sergeant seemed like something worth doing, as if God Himself was calling him to service. It felt more right than anything else.

The sound of snapping twigs caught their attention, and both men turned to see a scruffy character racing toward them. He stopped in front of Davis and caught his breath before speaking. "It coming, Sarge. The bishop's carriage!"

"Which bishop?" Noah asked, feeling an instinctual twinge of fear and admiration for the clergy. Old habits die hard.

"The Bishop of Sussex," the scruffy man replied, sounding a tad annoyed.

"Excellent!" Davis said, rubbing his palms together. "Then our spy network is finally getting organized." Grabbing Noah's arm he said, "Come on, we best not keep his holiness waiting."

* * *

The sun had gone in, and the midsummer storm clouds were rolling in off the coast. Noah sat crouched in the ditch beside the rocky highway that skirted the westernmost edge of Searswood forest. This was a major road, linking all the kingdoms of northern New England to the southern strongholds. Trade caravans and royal entourages often used this route, making it the perfect place for bandits to ambush an unsuspecting traveler.

Sergeant Davis was waiting right beside Noah, keeping a watchful eye on the neophyte. He'd explained the young farmer's purpose in this raid, and it was merely to observe, and see what he was getting into. "You need to see what you'll have to do to reclaim your God-given rights. And you need to see that we can beat *them*."

Whatever the reason, Noah was glad to be present, to witness these men in action. Their boldness gave him a feeling of hope he'd never known he needed. The more he heard Davis talk about freedom and liberty, the more Noah desired it.

The rumble of the bishop's royal coach could be heard coming up the road; the thundering hooves of horses and the crunching of metal coach wheels. The trees blocked the view, but word came down the line from the forward scouts, assuring everyone that their target was approaching. A few more minutes, and they'd strike!

The noise grew louder, and Noah peeked over the bushes to see the bishop's royal carriage roll into sight. It was truly spectacular, a stylish metal box with intricate designs painted across the metal body of the vehicle. The sturdy thing was pulled by a team of 8 white stallions, and the harnesses were embroidered with colorful tassels. Two armored men sat atop the carriage, one holding the reins and the other wielding a single-shot firearm. Additional protection came in the form of a dozen armored knights, who rode their own steeds alongside the armored vehicle.

Only madmen would attempt an attack on such a target, or so the nobles believed.

"Neil, are you ready?" Sergeant Davis asked one of his men, a golden-haired lad with patchy stubble and a rifle.

Neil nodded and raised the weapon to his shoulder, taking aim at the

approaching carriage. Even as he set his sights on the target, two other men stood up and set arrows to their longbows. Firearms were in short supply, so most of these "Patriots" had conventional arms, the same swords and bows the majority of the noble knights used.

The crack of thunder sounded as Neil's rifle fired. The gun-wielding carriage rider dropped, leaving a spray of blood on his compatriot holding the reins. Before the driver could respond to the attack, an arrow caught him in the throat.

The carriage came to a stop in the middle of the road, and the dozen armed knights unsheathed their swords, prepared for battle. Several of them dismounted and ran toward the ditch, eager to catch those responsible for this foolhardy strike.

"Boo-Yaw!" Sergeant Davis exclaimed, and the men of the forest jumped into action. A dozen arrows flew out of the shrubbery, half of them hitting their targets in vulnerable points. Once the odds were diminished, the Patriots raced out to fight the remaining knights, challenging them with swords. The blades clanged and scraped as the common bandits sought to best highly-trained knights of the soldier caste. It seemed a doomed proposition, though Noah watched from the sidelines, praying for a miracle.

Divine intervention came in the form of the small firearm strapped to Sergeant Davis' hip. Standing up and chambering a round, he took aim at the nearest knight, even as the enemy soldier was distracted by a dueling Patriot. Davis put a bullet in the back of the knight's head, saving his ally from defeat. It was hardly sporting, but such was the way of warfare.

The other knights took notice of the shot, but there was nothing they could do. They were each in the midst of a swordfight, unable to respond to the threat behind them. They might have tossed down their swords in surrender, but that wasn't their way.

Davis killed four more of the knights with the underhanded trick, while the final foe fell to Jackson's blade, the large man proving himself to be a competent swordsman.

"Nicely done, Jackson," Davis mentioned as the large bandit pulled his bloody blade from the knight's torso.

"We've won!" one of the men shouted, waving his sword proudly.

"Not so fast," Jackson rebutted, turning to the carriage.

A calm had fallen upon the scene, as victory appeared to be had, though things were not always as they seemed. There were still those inside the carriage to contend with, and no telling what tricks they might have up their sleeves.

One of the Patriots had already clambered atop the carriage and taken the reins, holding the snorting horses in place while his friends sought to evict the bishop and his orderlies from the vehicle. Davis hung back as Jackson and two other men stepped up to the side door and shouted orders.

"Surrender now and you won't be harmed," Jackson exclaimed.

"How can we trust the word of a murdering bandit?" a muffled voice cried out from inside the carriage.

Jackson smacked the flat of his blade against the armored door, making a loud clank. "You can either come out for a chance to live, or resist and be guaranteed death. What's your answer?"

Their reply came with a crossbow bolt streaking out from a small window. The sharpened projectile was aimed right at Jackson's face, but he was swift enough to turn his head. The tip scraped against his right ear and cheek, leaving a bloody streak.

Several of the Patriots didn't take kindly to the continued resistance, and tried to bust open the carriage door, but it didn't budge. The armor plating only served to bruise their shoulders.

"Should we burn 'em out?" Jackson asked as he dabbed a handkerchief at his bleeding cheek.

"No, it could destroy the prize," Davis answered. "I think a little persuasion is in order."

Sliding up beside the carriage, Davis loaded a fresh magazine into his pistol and placed one bullet through the tiny window beside the door. "I'd think twice about making a last stand," he shouted. "We'll kill you if we must, but I'm sure you'd just as soon have a shot at living."

After a short silence, the door swung open, and a pair of regal guards stepped out. Their boss, however, did not show himself.

"His holiness will see you, sir," one of the guards said, removing his brass-

plated helmet.

Before venturing into the carriage, Davis knelt down and picked up a spent cartridge case. "Noah, look around and pick up any of these you see."

It seemed an odd thing to ask after a heated battle, but Noah did as he was told, looking around and picking up the little hunks of brass scattered on the road. He did his best to find every one, and by the time he'd gathered them he saw Davis walking out of the carriage with a wooden crate in his hands.

"Go get the rest of it," Davis told the men. Jackson and several others rushed inside to loot the bishop's coach.

"Why did you have me gather these bits of metal?" Noah asked as Davis approached him.

"Ever seen cartridge cases like these before?"

"No."

"Of course you haven't," Davis added. "They haven't made 40 Smith & Wesson in a thousand years, which means I'm damn short of ammo, but with these cases and the right components, I'll be able to reload."

Noah had no knowledge of firearms or physics, so he had a hard time understanding. He'd seen the sergeant's pistol eject these bits of metal, so he struggled to make the connection between the pieces of brass and the weapon's function. Somehow, these bits allowed it to fire? Astonishing!

Muffled speech flowed out from the carriage, but nothing could be understood. The men were speaking softly, and the bishop was keeping his protestations quiet.

"You'll all burn for this," one of the bodyguards remarked as Jackson climbed out of the carriage with a bag of goodies. The large man paid him no mind, even as two other Patriots came out carrying heavy boxes full of untold riches.

Jackson dropped his sack at the sergeant's feet. "We picked it clean."

"You're sure?"

"Definitely."

Davis instructed the men to each pick a box or bag, so the weight could be handled comfortably over the long walk back to camp. Before disappearing into the woods, Jackson and Davis escorted the bishop's remaining bodyguards into the carriage and stacked dead bodies in front of the door. The bishop would enjoy an

extended stay in his royal transport, though someone would come along eventually to free him.

It was a two hour march back to camp, and by the time they arrived Noah was ready for a rest. Hard work was no stranger to him, but the emotional impact of watching the battle had taken a toll. As much as he wanted to take a rest, he couldn't yet; not until the loot was unpacked.

The entire camp gathered around the returning Patriots, everyone eager to see the wealth they had liberated. Daggers were used to pry open the lids of the heavy boxes, revealing a stash of valuables. Bejeweled cups, golden necklaces, and various bits of currency filled out the first two boxes, though the third disappointed many. It was merely papers, some folded, others rolled, and a few bound into books. They weren't flashy, but the sergeant took charge and began looking through them with greater vigor than he had the other riches.

After picking through the assorted documents, he growled and replaced the lid, turning to the next box. Silver goblets. He pushed the box aside and kept ripping into the boxes until he found another one containing parchments. They were all loose pages, and the sergeant took the first one right off the top, grinning with satisfaction.

"At last, you can see with your own eyes what it is we are fighting for," Davis said, holding up the old document.

"What is that?" Noah asked, confounded by the claim. Compared to all the wealth they'd captured, this ratty hunk of paper didn't seem very important.

Davis walked over and knelt down beside Noah's son. "Start reading here," he asked Samuel, handing him the parchment and pointing to the second paragraph.

Noah listened as his son recited the strange symbols scribbled on the document.

"We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness..."

Davis grabbed the parchment and held it up again. "This document signaled the founding of my country, and now, thirteen hundred years later, it shall serve as our new Declaration of Independence! With this, we shall begin anew, and assure freedom and justice for all!"

The crowd cheered, and Noah found himself raising a fist into the air with the other Patriots in triumph. All the blood they had spilled this day had given them a new spirit, one they would learn more about as the days and weeks went by, and their battle for freedom raged on.

Noah was certain he was where he wanted to be, at last.

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