

2013



Solitude



*The Official Twilight: 2000™ 3.0
Short Stories*

TWILIGHT: 2013

Solitude is a short story designed for the
Twilight: 2013 RPG



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CREDITS

G-1 (ADMINISTRATION)

Design: Keith Taylor

G-2 (INTELLIGENCE)

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G-3 (OPERATIONS)

Written By: Peter Soper

G-4 (LOGISTICS)

Production Director: Keith Taylor

Editing: Stephen Miller

Layout & Typesetting: Keith Taylor

G-6 (COMMUNICATION)

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SOLITUDE

BY
PETER SOPER

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Solitude: Part 1

John looked down the steps. He was having a hard time ascertaining what just happened. He knew what he had just done; after all, he saw it with his own eyes, he just didn't believe it. It was totally silent except for the lone shell casing still rolling down the cold wooden staircase. John exhaled, seeing his breath. He was trying not to breathe hard as the sharp cold air stabbed at his lungs. It also seemed as if every breath was announced over a loudspeaker as he strained to listen to the silence around him. But he was exhausted; that was one hell of a run and they were very determined pursuers.

John shifted his Garand up to his shoulder, never taking his eyes off the two bodies below him. He knew that the guy on top was dead, but he wasn't sure about the bottom one. There was a pool of blood forming but that could be from the top one. There was no steam from the man's breath, but he didn't want to take any chances.

Slowly, John started walking down the stairs. His boots made each step sound like thunder in the frigid silence. When he got close enough, John used the muzzle of his M1 rifle to push the man's face so he was looking at the ceiling. The pooling blood was beginning to soak into the man's black wool cap. John carefully watched the man's chest to check for shallow breathing. That's when he saw it; a small entry wound just above the man's sternum. John sighed as he could finally believe what he just saw.

...

He spotted them about a mile from the old farm house. The weather was sunny and clear, but despite the sun, the temperature had dipped to well below freezing. It was bitter cold and the top layer of snow had crystallized, making it very reflective and tough to walk through. The sun's reflection made everything ten times brighter than normal. The snow blindness could be easily alleviated by a pair of sunglasses, but John didn't have any, and they did. Hence, he didn't see the two men until they got in close. The pursuit was hard as the snow was about shin deep and unforgiving. It took all of John's energy to stay ahead of them, and to dodge the few shots that were fired.

When John saw the old farm house he knew that it was his only chance. He saw that they had dumped their packs and were gaining on him. Plus, he could not hide the fact that he was exhausted. Despite his best efforts, his lungs were heaving heavily and loudly. The two men must have smelled blood.

When he entered the house his pursuers were only fifty feet behind. The snow caked on the bottom of his boots made the cold hardwood floors very slippery. John quickly managed to run up the stairs. He knew that he was headed into a dead end, but the stairwell was a bottleneck

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and he could use it to his advantage. When he reached the top he ran around the corner and paused. He heard the two men charge up the stairs, they must have been too excited to stop and think. John quickly swung around the corner leveling his giant rifle at chest level. The first man was only two foot away from the muzzle when John pulled the trigger. At point blank range the powerful .30-caliber round punched straight through the man's lower chest and out his back.

The planets must have been aligned because the second man was standing in the perfect spot. When the round exited the first man's back it struck the second in the upper chest. Because of the range, the heavy bullet still had more than enough energy to kill the man outright. The two then arched backwards and slid down the stairs, flopping like a pair of rag dolls.

...

John tilted his head a little. *Huh, two birds with one stone. That will never happen again.* He reached over and pushed the top body to the side so that the two were lying next to each other. He looked the man in the face, seeing his reflection in the dead man's sunglasses. John reached down, pulled them off his lifeless head, and slid the glasses over his own eyes.

These will help with the snow blindness.

John also remembered that there were two rucksacks out in the woods about a half-mile away.

For John, days like that don't come along too often. He had gotten very lucky. One of the men had been carrying a .30-06 Remington bolt-action hunting rifle, the same caliber as John's Garand. This netted him an extra nineteen rounds of ammo. The M1 had been his only firearm; before that it had belonged to his father. John had grown up firing the thing out back, and he knew it's every curve and quirk. Sometimes he liked to joke that he had a permanent impression of the rifle's butt plate in his shoulder. It was hard for John as he gripped the rifle's wooden stock. He could feel his father presence, which was comforting. However, he could also hear the screams.

He also got two handguns: a .38-caliber Smith & Wesson revolver and a 9mm Glock 17. John decided to keep them both, putting them on his belt. The only problem was that they both had right handed holsters, so the revolver on his left side had the grip facing forward. This didn't bother John, he just wanted to be able to get at it.

The two rucksacks out in the woods had proved fruitful. For the most part, however, the two men were carrying things that John already had. A few months back he had come across a box of camping supplies in an old basement. John evaluated each piece and swapped out anything that was of better quality. As for the rest, he bundled it up with the hunting rifle for easy transport. This would get him some good food at the market, and equally as important, a good nights sleep.

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Being alone, John never slept well. His nerves continually woke him up throughout the night. The day's excitement had spent all of John's energy, such as it was, so maybe he would sleep better tonight. But he doubted it. He managed to eat every day, just not enough. Between his lack of good sleep and food, fatigue began to come easier. The farm house was a good spot to bunker down for the night.

After sorting through his loot, John spent the rest of the day ripping the fabric off of some old chairs and couches. He then used the old furniture tacks to put the cloth over the living room windows. He used the wood from the furniture and started a fire in the old fireplace. When night finally descended, no light was escaping the building. Out in the country it was so dark that the smallest light could be seen for miles. John didn't want any visitors.

He wrapped himself in an old wool blanket that he had found some time back. He had to evict a rat that had previously laid claim to it, but he didn't mind as it was kind of tasty. The rat was not very filling, but it was tasty once burnt. The warmth of the fire felt good on his face, this contrasted sharply with the cold he felt on his back. John shimmied closer to the fire and began thinking about the market.

The market was an old mall controlled by the city government. While the government was rotten to the core and tended toward totalitarianism, it kept the market safe and profitable. Gold and silver had regained value and were widely used in the market. This had become wildly successful for the government as it controlled the weights and measures station. A person could get his or hers precious metals officially valued for a fee of 5% of the total weight. Because the government owns the market, the vendors can only accept officially valued metals. Many people do not like this, but instead think of it as the price you pay. The market is huge after all; a person could seemingly find anything they wanted. Vendors fill the old stores as well as the hallways, and the second floor of the old Macy's has been turned into a hotel with all the services. Most of all the market was safe. Government troops control the corridors with an iron fist. As long as you don't act up, you can relax and let down your guard a bit. That was what John wanted.

Relaxation...relaxation and some food...relaxation, food, and some good sleep. Maybe I'll go to the brothel too. Relaxation, food, sleep, and sex.

John closed his eyes and felt the warmth of the fire. He would have to get there first.

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Solitude: Part 2

It had started snowing again. It was that big, light, dry, fluffy kind of snow, and it was really coming down. This wasn't very good. Visibility was bad and he could easily stray off in the wrong direction. John shifted the white bed sheet he was wearing as a camouflage poncho and listened to the clucking as he walked down the old road.

John lifted the chicken and looked it in the eyes. The bird tilted its head and softly clucked as it looked back at him; it seemed to be studying its adversary. The chicken was wrapped up in a large cloth with only its head sticking out next to the knot. *You will taste good.* John had just made a profitable deal with a farmer down the road.

Both men had come out ahead in the barter. John had traded his extra rucksack and hunting rifle for a chicken, eggs, and some gold. The gold itself equaled what the pack and rifle were worth, so in essence John got the chicken and eggs for free. The farmer also came out ahead as gold was not worth very much out in the countryside. Out here manufactured goods are what counted. Gold increased in value the closer one got to the trading centers, and that was where John was going. Not only was the gold going to get him some good food and sleep, it was also easier to carry than the extra pack.

John's eyebrows furrowed as he thought he heard something. He looked at the chicken, "shhh." As if the bird somehow knew what that meant. John slowly turned his head listening into the snow. His eye twitched as a snowflake came in behind his sunglasses and hit his lash. He closed his eyes as if to cut off the visuals and amplify his hearing. There was the sound.

Horses...shit. It's the farmer's ranch hands. This is gonna suck.

That was one of the problems of traveling alone. People were more apt to see you as a target than a threat. The farmer had probably decided that John was an easy score, now he wanted his stuff back, plus a little extra. John quickly started running for the woods. Unless they wanted a high speed close encounter with a branch they would not be able to ride their horses in the forest.

John was almost to the trees when he quickly glanced over his shoulder. He tensed up as he saw four riders emerge from the snowfall. This is gonna suck. John rushed through the tree line, busting through a multitude of smaller branches in the process. Over the years a lot of brush had built up along the forest edge as that was the only place the smaller plants could get any light. Losing them was going to be difficult. Not only was he leaving them a trail to follow in the snow, but his dinner was complaining loudly.

John heard a shot ring out. He didn't know where it went, but thankfully not near him. John

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continued to dodge through the trees kicking up the light snow as he weaved in and out. He didn't know how far back his pursuers were, but he could hear their gear rattling as they ran around behind him.

Two more shots rang out. John heard the high pitched zing as one of the rounds passed near him. *Shit.* His asshole instinctively puckered up and his neck shrunk down as John's body tensed in reaction to the sound. There was only one thing that he could do.

This is gonna suck.

John flung the chicken through the air ahead of him. He could see the bird's eyes and beak wide open as it loudly expressed its dismay. He planted his right foot in the ground and swung the Garand up to his shoulder as he spun around to the left. John took a knee and slid to a stop, the rifle's sights and target came into line as they had done all his life. The report was deafening in the close confines of the forest. He saw the snow pulse off the man's clothing as the round impacted his chest. John continued moving his rifle left and loosed another bullet. This time, however, his target was diving to the ground and the round struck a tree. He continued swinging around to the left and stood up running in the direction he had been.

The chicken let out a loud "brawk" as John grabbed the cloth knot near its neck. Three more shots rang out, two of them striking the tree next to John. He continued running with all of his might. John had seen all the men dive to the ground, so now he was putting some space between him and them. He had remembered the old saying that sometimes you have to turn and punch a bully in the face to make him think twice about chasing you.

While they might be thinking twice, John knew that they wouldn't stop. At least two of them were going to get up and continue tracking him. If the man he hit was wounded then one would stay to help. If not, then all three would be on his tail, but at least now John had some breathing room. The chance that there was another abandoned farmhouse around here was pretty slim and they would eventually catch up. John still had all his gear on and they were relatively unencumbered. The way he saw it he only had one choice.

The horses.

John had to make a wide circle and hope that he beat them there. If the man he hit was wounded then someone would be dragging him that way, the others would still be following his tracks. Eventually, the trackers would realize that John was making a circle and head straight back to their horses. Anyway he looked at it, it was a race.

This sucks.

John broke through the tree line back out into the clearing. He glanced around and realized

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that he was the only one there. Looking to his left he saw the horses waiting patiently for their masters to return. John immediately began running towards the nearest one. He could hear his pursuers gear rattling around in the woods and could tell that they were close.

John clenched the chicken's tote in his teeth and tossed his rifle into his left hand. With a single motion he stuck his left foot in the horse's stirrup, grabbed the saddle horn and slung himself up on top of the animal. However, John did not factor in the weight of his back pack and he kept moving right over the other side. He impacted the ground with a thud. John's teeth shook and the powdery snow flew up into the air.

Fuck, this sucks.

He scrambled to his feet and raced to the next nearest horse. A shot rang out but missed. John could hear one of them yell something about hitting the horses. He leaped to the top of another horse, this time more carefully, and kicked it into action. John made sure to lead the horse away at an angle so that his pursuers would be forced to aim at a moving silhouette. Two more shots rang out but then everything fell silent.

John rode hard for a few minutes and then doubled back behind some pine trees. He leapt off the beast and tied its harness to the branches. Carefully John crept forward, lay down, and aimed his rifle back along his path. If the men were smart, they would realize that John was going to set a trap and just go home. If they were stupid, he would see them come down this path shortly. All was silent.

After about twenty minutes John saw that his tracks were filling with snow. He decided that the men were smart, and besides, in another five minutes no one would be able to see the tracks anyway. He stood up and walked back to the horse. It looked like a pretty good beast, strong and healthy with lots of meat on its bones. He grabbed the harness next to the bit and looked into the animal's eyes. It let out a snort and the steam engulfed John's face.

Hmmm.

John turned the meat over on the fire. He was going to eat well tonight. John was starving and couldn't wait to devour the food. However, he didn't want salmonella poisoning, so the chicken had to be cooked thoroughly. John looked up at the horse. It was jamming its nose down into the snow in an attempt to eat the grass below. The beast was managing to pull up some food, but not much. This was going to be a problem. If he was going to keep the horse he would need to find some hay somewhere. This was going to have to happen soon or its health would decline. If that happened he wouldn't be able to trade it.

He reached over and shifted one of the logs further into the fire. I could eat it.

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He scratched the whiskers on the side of his face and thought about that for a moment. *Only if I can't find it any food and it starts to decline. But it still needs to be healthy, don't want to eat a diseased animal.* John coughed up a bit of phlegm and spit it into the fire.

John had found a small clearing in a thicket of pine trees not too far from a small community. The people there were widely known to be strong isolationists and they patrolled the surrounding areas to make sure that remained the case. The community still, of course, traded with outside people, but you had to approach on the main road and stay outside the gate.

For John this offered a kind of protection. The town's patrolling and reputation had created a sphere around the village where bandits and raiders would not go. But being alone, John could sneak in relatively close and take advantage of the community's protection for the night. He just had to make sure that he was out of the area by morning.

He had also found a sizable pine tree that had branches right down to the ground. This meant that the snow had drifted up on the outside of the tree and there was clear ground with nothing but pine needles near the stump. After cutting off a few of the lowest branches with his hatchet John had made a nice impromptu shelter for the night.

John's eye twitched a little as a snowflake hit his upper cheekbone. He looked up into the dark sky. It's snowing again. John decided that he had better bed down soon.

The horse lifted its head and looked at John.

"What are you lookin' at?"

He lifted his hand and pointed at the chicken, "This one looked at me too. Do you want to end up like him?"

The horse snorted and went back to searching for grass.

"That's what I thought." He reached out, tore a piece of meat off the bird, and placed it in his mouth. *I told you that you would taste good.*

He looked at the horse again. *I'll look for some hay tomorrow.*

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Solitude: Part 3

John held the reins and brushed the horse's neck with his hand. He noticed a little stick caught up in its mane and pulled it out. He empathized with the beast, he knew it was hungry. John had not been able to find any hay and it had been a couple of days. The animal had been pulling up the grass that it could from under the snow, and that wasn't much.

Let's see, what are the pros? I can cover more ground faster... I won't be as tired... I'll be able to outrun people easier. That's a big pro right there. If I keep him until he croaks I can eat him. John didn't really believe that one.

Ok, what are the cons? Food. I have a hard enough time finding enough food for myself. Every scrap of fodder has already been scooped up by someone else for the winter. I would have to barter for it or steal it. If I barter for it, it takes away my funds for the market. Stealing it can be dangerous and I would probably have to do it often; I don't want to temp fate unless I have too. What else... He's hard to hide...He stinks. John knew the horse smelled the same as any other.

John sighed, looked over the entire animal, and paused. *I can't feed him. He'll die if he stays with me.*

"You've got a deal."

"Excellent," said the merchant.

The woman turned around and snapped her fingers. "Ned, get the chest." She then looked at a small fifteen year old slave girl, "you, pack this food in a bag."

A large, well armed, man who was in the merchant woman's wagon stood up from a foot locker and slid it to the edge. Another man carrying a scoped lever action .30-30 continued to keep watch. The woman shifted the MP5 that was hanging down the center of her chest and pulled out a set of keys from inside her jacket. She unlocked the large box and pulled out a small scale. The merchant then reached back in and started pulling out various gold rings and necklaces.

"Wait a minute," said John.

The woman stopped and looked back at him. John pulled off his rucksack and reached into one of the outside pockets. After rummaging a little he pulled out a small two pound exercise weight. The woman stepped aside and waved her hand up towards the scale. John placed the weight on the device and looked at the dial. *Two pounds on the dot.* Since gold had come back

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into vogue as currency, it became common practice for people to carry their own weights to test scales with. John nodded his head and removed the weight. The merchant then preceded measure out his gold.

Once John got his pack back on, the young girl walked up and handed him the bag of food. He took hold of it without diverting his eyes from the scale and slung it over his shoulder. The woman then placed all the jewelry into a bag and handed it over.

“Where you coming from?” asked John. It had also become the norm to pass along relevant information about the local area after making a deal. This practice started among the merchants so that they could safely navigate the trade routes. After some time it spread to everyone as a way to keep both merchant and customer alive. Additionally, if one got a helpful reputation among the merchants they were more apt to cut you a deal.

“Northwest.”

“From the market?”

“Yeah, I was there about two weeks ago. Nothin new there, ‘cept that Gus has added a water tank to the weigh station.” The name Gus was a slang term that evolved from the word government, and refers to it or anyone working for it.

“Water tank?”

“Yeah, some brain figured out how to see if gold and silver was solid by weighing it, then dipping it in a water tank, and then doing a bunch of math.”

John looked at her.

“Yes, the gold I gave you is solid.”

“I believe you.” He mostly did. “There is a farmer south of here. He has three or four people working for him. He’s a prick. He sent his thugs after me after we cut a deal to get his stuff back.”

“Really? I heard there was a farm down that way. I was headed that direction, I’ll watch my back. Thanks.”

“No problem.”

The merchant woman was about to turn away when she stopped. “If you’re lookin’ for a place to stay the night, there’s a good abandoned house about four miles north a here. There’ll

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be a road that branches off to the east. I think it's called Washington Road or sumt'n like that. Take that for about a mile. It's about five hundred feet off the road on the left, in the trees, lots a brush, hard ta see. We were there last night. It's a good spot."

"Thanks." John shook her hand and walked by the other merchant wagons. Every so often small markets would spring up along the trade routes when merchants crossed paths. It wouldn't take long before more people arrived and started dealing. These would last for the rest of the day before breaking up a few hours before nightfall. If you could get to one while it was in full swing you could get some pretty good deals.

John sat down off the side of the road and opened the bag of food. He pulled out a potato and his knife and began eating slices. *Tastes like crap.* Despite this, John didn't mind. He was now officially rich. Between the gold that he originally had, the gold he got for the pack, and now for the horse, John had enough to sit in the lap of luxury for about a week once he got to the market. *This is gonna rock.*

John walked up the old driveway with the snow crunching under his feet. The tracks from her wagon weren't totally filled in by that afternoon's snowfall. *She was right, the brush is thick in here. You can't see jack.* He walked another thirty feet and the house started to come into view through the trees. John paused, took a knee, and listened. He didn't want to walk in on anyone. After a few minutes of silence he felt confident enough to check the house out further.

As John approached the house he could see where they had covered the windows to obscure any light from the fire. He looked to the front door, it was wide open and the storm door was only hanging on its bottom hinge. John paused again and listened for any activity in the house.

After a few minutes of silence John slung his Garand over his right shoulder and held the leather strap with his left hand. He then drew the Glock 17 from its holster and slowly approached the door. He paused again at the threshold to listen inside, he could hear something. *Scratching.* John lifted his pistol and stepped quietly through the door. His foot ground a small rock into the hardwood floor. The noise stopped.

John froze in place trying to determine from which room the noise had been coming. He could see the living room to the left. It was the only one that was dark from the windows being covered. *In there.* John slowly proceeded.

As he rounded the corner, the hearth came into view and he could see something moving. John smiled and rushed across the room kicking him in the stomach. He jammed the Glock back into its holster and unslung his rifle. Using the giant rifle's stock, John smashed his head repeatedly until he was satisfied the raccoon was dead. *The merchant must have left some food scraps behind.* He grabbed the animal by its tail and took it outside to skin.

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John reached over and pushed one of the logs further into the fire. John pulled his sleeping bag up around his face. He was warm but awake. Again. *I think I slept an hour that time, must be a new record.* John had eaten a fairly decent meal of burnt raccoon and sliced potatoes but he was still hungry. Just the thought of the market was beginning to burn at John. He wanted to unwind and couldn't wait to get there. *I should have run that horse into the ground.*

John's head suddenly jolted up. The fire had snapped, but something else had too. He looked around the room. *Nerves. Just go to sleep.* He knew he couldn't. John clutched the .38-caliber Smith & Wesson that he kept inside his sleeping bag and pulled back the hammer. He unzipped the bag and lifted himself out. Despite the fire the cold hit him hard and his muscle tensed.

John stood up and pointed the weapon towards the door. Without taking his eyes away from the entryway he slipped his feet into his boots. John carefully crept to the corner next to the door. He crouched to waist level and looked around. Most people train their weapons at chest and head level. By getting closer to the floor John knew that he could gain an extra fraction of a second on his opponent as they lowered their weapon.

It was dark but he could make someone out. John trained his weapon. The person turned towards him.

Son of a bitch.

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Solitude: Part 4

“Don’t shoot.”

“What are you doin’ here?”

“I need help.”

John uncocked the .38, stood up, and walked back to his sleeping bag. The young slave girl from the merchant woman’s wagon stepped inside the house. John pulled his wool blanket out from the sleeping bag, wrapped himself in it, and sat down close to the fire to get his heat back. The girl slowly walked into the living room. John could tell that she was scared and hesitant. She stopped and after a brief pause the girl finally spoke up.

“I need help.”

John coughed up a bit of phlegm and spit it into the fire.

“Please?”

By this point John was visibly irritated. “Why did you come here?”

The girl looked confused. “I need help.”

“You’re not listening to me. Why did you come here?” To exaggerate his point John pressed his finger to the floor. “You heard your owner tell me about this place. You knew I was going to be here. You could have gone anywhere when you escaped but you chose to come here. So tell me, why did you come here? Why me?”

“Because you’re not like other people.”

“What!” John looked directly into her eyes. “You saw me for what? Twenty minutes this afternoon? What makes you the expert on me, huh? What makes you think I give a damn about you?”

“I’ve been up and down the trade routes and to a shitload of markets. I’ve seen a hell of a lot of people.”

John interrupted, “Wow, so you’re fuckin’ worldly. What’s that got to do with me?”

The girl paused for a moment. “Nearly all of those other people were only concerned with themselves.”

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“And rightly so.”

“You are different.”

“Oh this is rich. So tell me. How am I different?”

The girl was about to speak when John interrupted. “Wait, wait, wait. What are you? Fourteen? Fifteen?”

“I’m sixteen.”

“You don’t know jack-shit. You’re too young to know your ass from anything.” John paused, shook his head and looked back at the fire. “Why am I even talking to you?”

The girl piped up, “I may not know as much as you, but I know what I want.”

John raised his eyebrows and looked back at her. “Ok, I’ll bite. What do you want?”

“Freedom.”

John began to get a little riled up. “What! You want freedom? You’ve been a slave. You don’t even know what freedom is.”

“Yes I do! I was free before!”

“Yeah, before all this crap went down.” John waved his hand across the room. “Back when America still existed and mommy and daddy took care of your every need. Ya know what freedom is now a days? It’s getting’ shot at. It’s cold. It’s hunger. It’s no sleep. It’s a fuckin’ stomach ulcer from all the stress. Freedom is pain.”

“Since you know what freedom is, tell me what you want,” The girl challenged.

John’s eyebrows rose again. “You want to know what I want?”

“Yeah.”

John got a wild look in his eye. “I want good food, a fuckin’ steak, medium rare. With a fuckin’ potato, one that has lotsa fuckin’ butter melted all over it. For once I want...to...be...full.” John took a breath. “I wanna sleep. I don’t want to have to worry that someone is gonna come and kill me in the middle of the night. I want to sleep in a bed, with fuckin’ sheets and a fuckin’ pillow. I want to take a dump in a clean toilet. The big Sunday paper, ya gotta flush three times, and beat it down with the plunger kinda dump. I wanna relax. I want to take a fuckin’ bath. I wanna lay

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in the tub with nice warm water.” John raised both his hands and put them together to form a cup. “The kind of warm water that soaks up around your nuts and massages them.” John started to wiggle his fingers as the girl then shifted her head backwards. “I want to soak until I become some giant prune. And I also want some pooontaaaaang. The kind that historians will write about, and your grandkids will still feel. THAT is what I want.”

The girl paused for a moment and then spoke, “Don’t hold back, tell me how you really feel.”

“Shut the fuck up. You’re a slave, you don’t know shit. You’ve been taken care of. Someone else was invested in you. They had a vested interest in keeping you fed and healthy. You didn’t have to worry about being hungry or cold. They needed you to be healthy.” John looked back at the fire. “I don’t know what you were thinking when you came here, but I am not Mel Gibson and I do not want to be another hero.”

“Would you want to be a slave?”

“Fuck no!”

“You’re a hypocrite!”

“No, I’m not. I just prefer to be alone.”

The girl just stared at John. She had that look on her face like she felt she had made a big mistake.

John looked back at the girl and let out a long breath. “Here, take this blanket. You can sleep here by the fire for the night. But in the morning you’re on your own.”

The girl just nodded and took the blanket.

John stared into the fire. He was sitting up in his sleeping bag with it zipped up to his chin. The girl was able to fall asleep, but he could not. This was not unusual, except that this time it was not his nerves keeping him awake.

John looked over at the girl. He could remember the screams with exceptional clarity.

The morning sky was clear. However, the sun was obstructed by the thick woods. Hence, there was a significant chill in the air. John had been walking through the brush collecting the snares he set out the prior night. The small trek had proven fruitful as he snagged a rabbit.

With the rabbit slung over his left shoulder John began to walk back towards the house. He

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would make sure that the girl was awake and ready so that he could get his blanket back, and then head north.

John stopped in his tracks. What was that? Something happened in the house. *Son of a bitch, some of my stuff is still in there. Damn it, this is what I get for being lazy.*

John jogged up to the front door, dropped the rabbit on the ground, and pulled his Glock. John could hear the girl struggling against someone. *A man's voice.* John slowly stepped in the door and raised his pistol, pointing it towards the living room. The girl was now screaming at her assailant. John heard a loud thud as if the man had slammed her against the wall. Despite that, the girl was still cursing and struggling. Then he saw them.

It was one of the men from the merchant woman's wagon, the one with the lever action .30-30. The girl was still standing with her face bloodied, the man was pulling her towards the front door. When the man looked toward the door a startled look came over his face. He wasn't expecting to see John there pointing a pistol at him. The man froze but did not release his grip on the girl. Eventually he spoke, "Hey man, this is not your business."

John cocked his head slightly to play up the drama, "I know. I just want my stuff."

"Stuff?"

"Yeah, that stuff over there. On the floor."

The man had a nervous look on his face, "Then we don't have problem with each other."

"I guess not." John lowered his pistol and the color started to return to the man's face.

John looked at the girl as she stared right at him. "Please help me?"

The man pulled a large revolver and yelled, "Shut up, bitch!" The revolver slammed into the girl's forehead and her eyes immediately rolled back.

It was surreal. As she fell to the floor John's world suddenly began moving in slow motion. There was no thought, only action. His arm rose with the Glock pistol, before the weapon was even on target he could feel his finger pulling back on the trigger. He could see the other man's Colt Python swinging towards him just a few feet away.

The gun shot was deafening.

The man stumbled back a little and John pulled the trigger again. John had shot men before but this time was different. Most of the time when he pulled the trigger on someone he was

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scared, in the process of protecting his life. In those instances he was killing people out of necessity. This time he was mad. John pulled the trigger a third time.

The man fell to the ground, pulling at his coat as if to tear it from his body. He began gasping and kicking at the wall in a futile effort to force himself to live. Suddenly, the man's expression changed from pain to one of disbelief, as if he couldn't accept that he had somehow lost and was going to die. He stopped kicking at the wall and concentrated only on breathing. The man looked at John and his expression betrayed his final thought. *Why did you kill me?* He stopped breathing and his muscles went limp.

John's anger washed away as he studied the man's face. He lowered his pistol and stood motionless, the silence was oppressive. John let out a deep breath and rubbed his hand over his face. He then looked over at the girl.

He leaned over and turned her head toward the ceiling. A large knot was forming in the middle of her forehead. She was alive, but unconscious. John stood back up.

Walk away. Walk away now John. Let her take all of this guy's stuff, just walk away.

This is no time to atone for your sins.

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Solitude: Part 5

John looked over the fresh coat of snow that had fallen overnight. The morning sun reflected off seemingly thousands of individual crystals creating one of those moments that one simply has to stop and look at for awhile. John scratched at his beard and yawned. He was starved. Food had always been a scarce commodity, but now John had to share.

“Come on, get moving.”

Jennifer slowly got to her feet and picked up the .30-30 rifle. It was obvious that all of her muscles were aching. “Damn this sucks.”

“You don’t know the half of it kid.”

“I know. You keep letting me in on that news bulletin every day.”

The two began walking down the road. John had taken the dead man’s boot laces and modified the sling on his Garand so it now hung across his chest with the stock near his shoulder. This was a much easier way of carrying it. Additionally, he no longer had to hold on to the sling when he pulled his pistol.

The girl suddenly stopped. “Hey, wait a minute.”

John turned. “This is a new record. We’ve been walking for fifteen seconds and you already need a break.”

Jennifer gave him a pissed off look. “Very funny. Look, if there are only three of them back there, why don’t we just ambush them? You can kill two of them and I can kill one.” She hefted the rifle up a little.

“Have you ever killed someone? Much less shot a rifle?”

“No.”

“Keep walking.”

“Wait. Why can’t we just shoot them?”

“Listen kid, the general rule out here is that if you can avoid a fight; Do it. There are no doctors to go to if you get hurt. So I’m going to take any chance I can to stay healthy. Besides, we’ll be at the market soon. When we get there all we have to do is get lost in the crowd and move on. She’s

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a business woman. She can't chase us forever. Eventually she will have to get back to making money. She'll chalk up her losses and move on."

"Not really."

"What do you mean, not really?"

"She'll keep chasing us."

John shifted his weight from one leg to the other. "Ok kid, what kind of information do you know that you should have told me a few days ago?"

Jennifer got a meek look on her face.

John's expression became stressed. "That guy I shot. He was family wasn't he?"

"Yes."

He turned around. "Son of a bitch." John put both his hands on his hips and looked up in the sky. "It would have helped me to know that EARLIER!"

"Sorry."

"You're just full of sorry aren't you?" John turned back around. "We can't get out of this fight. They're gonna keep chasin' us. Had I known that before, I would have sniped at them days ago, before we tried to outrun them. Now I'm twice as tired and hungry." John shifted his weight again. "Damn."

Jennifer continued her meek look.

This is a fine mess you're in John.

John rotated his head to pull the stress out of his neck muscles.

I've got to fight them now.

"Ok kid, let's start from the top. Tell me again who it is we are dealing with, and how many there are. This time include all the minor details, like for instance...relationships."

Jennifer took in a deep breath and let it out. "Alright, you know about Margaret and you've seen Ned on the wagon. Ned is Margaret's cousin. It's a family business. You didn't see Kevin; he was the one standing guard about thirty feet away from the wagon, just outside the crowd. He's a hired hand. And you killed Thomas, he was Margaret's brother."

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“What about weapons?”

“Well, I don’t know what they are. Margaret has a small machine gun and a pistol. Ned has two pistols and a machine gun, and Kevin has a pistol and a machine gun lookin’ rifle.”

“A machine gun lookin’ rifle?”

“Yeah, it looks kinda like your rifle, but it holds a lot of bullets. Oh, and there is a box of bombs in the back of the wagon.”

“Grenades?”

“I don’t know. I saw Kevin throw one into a building once and there was an explosion.”

“How many are in the box?”

“I don’t know.”

John scratched his neck and then stared at the ground. A multitude of scenarios began flooding through his brain.

“Oh, and then there’s Harold.”

John looked up, “Harold?”

“Yeah, Harold is Margaret’s husband. He manages their stand at the market. Margaret goes out on the road to get stuff and then Harold sells it at the market. He’s there with his brother Mac and a hired hand named Greg.”

“So we could have as many as six of them on our tail.”

“I suppose.”

Son of a bitch. If they get to the market and hook up with Harold, I’m screwed. I’ve got to stop them somehow. This is fucked up. It’s three against one. This is stupid. I can’t believe I’m actually going to do this. This is a fine mess you’re in John.

John started walking right past Jennifer, back along the way they had come. “Come on, get moving.”

John shifted around a little. The log he was sitting on was anything but comfortable. He had found a good spot that overlooked a field the two of them had crossed earlier. Their tracks were

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still clearly visible in the snow. John was on the back side of a hill, such that he could see over the top but still remain hidden.

John rubbed his back against the tree he was leaning against to scratch an itch. He had been waiting for a little over an hour and had become quite bored. This made it very difficult to stay awake. His head had tipped forward only to be jerked back up more than just a few times.

He looked into the clear blue sky and estimated that it was about 11:00 in the morning. The sun felt good on his face. This made staying awake that much more difficult. *What's that?* John shook his head and looked into the far wood line. *Movement.*

Making sure to stay low John crouched down and moved behind the tree he had been leaning against. He rested the muzzle of the scoped .30-30 on a branch at neck level with the butt on his hip. John focused his attention on the movement and waited.

It was not long before a wagon and one horseman came into view. That's them, they were closer to us than I thought. *Let's see, two in the wagon and one on horseback. Gotta wait till they're in the field.*

John watched the group as they slowly moved along following the tracks in the snow. He began flexing the fingers on his right hand to work the cold out of them.

The horseman first, that must be Kevin. He can react the fastest, then the two on the wagon. This is insane.

He slid the rifle up on the branch, rested the butt on his shoulder, and looked through the scope. *Hello Kevin.*

What the?

Through the scope John saw the horseman look directly at him. *Shit. How? He sees me.*

The wagon driver whipped the reigns on the horses.

John pulled the trigger. The recoil of the .30-30 rocked John back; it was a lot sharper than the Garand. The round impacted the horseman and sent him over the opposite side of his steed. John's hand jerked downward unlocking the rifles bolt and shooting the empty shell casing out the side. He then slammed the lever back up reseating it against the stock.

John quickly shifted his aim to the wagon. The driver was turning it around and the whole thing was shaking everywhere. *Shit, I can't get off a good shot.* His stress level shot up as he realized they were going to get away.

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The horses! Bigger and easier targets.

John shifted the rifle and loosed another round. He saw the bullet impact the closer of the two animals pulling the wagon. John worked the lever action and shot at the second horse to no avail. His third shot was aimed at the beast hitched to the back of the wagon; the one he had traded them just a few days earlier. The round impacted its ribcage. *Sorry.*

The wagon reentered the far wood line.

John shifted his attention to Kevin's horse, which was running straight away from his position. *Easy shot.* He pulled the trigger; the bullet impacted the beast on the back of its head. The horse stumbled forward planting its face into the snow, its hind legs violently shot up into the air and then dropped down to the ground.

John looked back at the motionless body in the middle of the field. *Shit, only got one. How did they see me?*

He looked around the field and then at his position. John did not see anything unusual and certainly nothing that would have given his position away. *Hmm.* He then looked up at the sun. *Son of a bitch.* John realized that it was in just the right spot. When he brought the rifle up the sun had reflected off of the scope, signaling the trio to both his position and intention.

Shit, that was a new guy mistake. Well, with two wounded horses they will be a lot slower.

He turned around and began walking down the hill towards Jennifer's hiding spot. The hillside was a little slick as the warm sun had begun melting the snow. When he reached the bottom John saw her head poke out from behind a tree.

"Did ya get em? I heard a lot of shots."

"Only got one."

"You only got one with all those shots."

"I couldn't get a good shot off at the people so I shot the horses."

"The horses."

"Yeah, they'll be a lot slower now."

"How'd they get away? What did they see you or sumpin?"

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“No, they didn’t see me. I think they sensed a trap. It’s happened to me before, you stay out here long enough and you get a feel for these things. It’s pretty weird.”

“Huh... Which one ya get?”

“Kevin, I think. I didn’t recognize him. The other two were in the wagon.”

John handed the .30-30 back to the girl and took his Garand. “We need to get moving.”

“What are we going to do?”

“No change in plan. We get to the market before them, get lost in the crowd, pick up supplies, and move on. They won’t leave their wagon behind, so we will be able to get a good jump on them. I’m hopin’ that by the time they get back to Harold we will be long gone. They’ll have no idea which direction we went.”

The two began walking north toward the market. John turned his head back to look at the girl. “Did you get any sleep while you were waiting?”

“Yeah.”

“Good, then we’ll be able to walk all day.”

“Son of a bitch.”



Solitude: Part 6

John looked up at the tower next to the gate. The chain link fence surrounding the tower was beginning to rust. The builders wanted something to predetonate incoming rockets, and beggars can't be choosers. The town's gate was very well fortified, with Gus sitting just past the entrance.

The town was actually an old rail yard. As the trade routes began to take shape after all hell broke loose, the rail yard happen to be where two of them merged before leading into the market. At first the merchants would use the old box cars to take shelter in, after a while stores and makeshift restaurants started forming. Now the place is a bustling trade center, sort of a miniature version of the market.

There are two or three of these smaller trade centers surrounding the market. Like this one they formed where a couple of trade routes merged. However, none of them compare in size to the market. The market is where multiple trade routes intersect, including the river. Generally, people can get more for their money out here at the smaller trade centers, because the government doesn't have as big of a footprint, but the selection doesn't even compare to the market.

John walked through the gate and looked over at Gus. There were a bunch of them standing around a M113A2 armored personnel carrier with a trailer attached. They wore what seemed like every form of camouflage known to exist, from woodland, to real tree, to tiger stripe. One soldier was even wearing Flecktarn. However, they all had a certain look that identified them as Gus. Each was wearing some sort of body armor or tactical vest and a helmet, either steel pot or Kevlar. Additionally, they all wore knee pads and carried some sort of M16 or AR-15 derivative.

The M113A2 had been "up-armored" with sandbags on the roof. Additionally, someone had welded metal frames with multiple layers of chain link fence to each side and the front to make spaced armor. One soldier was putting on his best "tough guy" face as he sat in the armored turret behind the .50-caliber machine gun. John had to laugh to himself a little, but he probably would be acting the same if he had a heavy machine gun too.

The soldier closest to John looked at him to size up his belongings. That was why they were there. Not to guard the entrance, but to collect "emergency appropriations." Sometimes traders reserve high value items to trade at these smaller markets so that they don't have to pay the government fees. The politicians don't like people getting around the system, so they used the old "State of Emergency" declaration to come out to these towns to collect goods. They claim they are being fair by paying the merchant a small pittance for his or her goods. So instead of feeling like they have been raped the merchants, just feel like they have been through a rough

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prostate exam. Not seeing anything he wanted, the soldier waved John and the girl past.

As they continued down the semi-crowded street John looked back at the girl to make sure she was still there. Jennifer stumbled a little on the railroad tracks and grabbed John's back pack. John quickly shifted his weight in order to keep from falling. "What the?"

"Sorry."

John grimaced and turned back around.

"Hey, can we sit down for a while? I'm exhausted."

John turned back around and rubbed his jawbone. He was worn out too, not to mention hungry. "Let's go up the street a little further. I can hear the town crier and I wanna hear what's goin' on."

"We're tired and hungry and you wanna listen to the news."

"Hey, information is important."

The two slowly began walking again. Large cloth awnings extended over the street making the already overcast day even darker. Occasionally an awning was retracted so that a burn barrel could be placed there; it was around these that people collected. The shop owners were always competing for the limited number of burn barrels so that they could attract people to their venues. Eventually the street opened up into the town square where the crier could be heard.

John turned to the girl, "You can find a seat over there, and don't fall asleep. You'll get robbed blind."

Jennifer walked over to the small bench and nearly collapsed on it.

John turned around again and walked over to the crowd. The crier was loudly reading from the *Trade Center Times*, a newspaper published out of the market.

He looked at the man next to him, "How old is the paper?"

The man looked back, "He said the date on it was January 16th."

John scratched his neck, "What month is it?"

The man shrugged.

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As John stood and listened to the news something began to hit him. The smell of good cooked food began to permeate his senses, causing his hunger to intensify. John began to wake up a little more as a small shot of adrenalin hit him. The smell of cooked meat with spices, beer, and tobacco surrounded his senses. John's mind began to flood with the things that he wanted most but had set aside. Thoughts of relaxation, sleep, and good food dominated John's thinking such that he could no longer hear the crier. He turned and looked at Jennifer resting on the bench. *Leave her now. Just run. Get yourself out of this mess and take what you want, take what you deserve.*

John looked away down the railroad tracks leading to the market and then back to Jennifer. *When do I get what I want?* He looked back down the tracks. *Forget redemption, just walk away. Take what you want. John took a few steps and then stopped.* Something in John's subconscious had made him kill Thomas that morning and it was stopping him again now. Since that moment he had accepted a path to redemption and had forgotten about his previous desires. The memories of his sins had been tearing at his brain for too long, and even if he didn't want to admit it, he wanted to absolve them. Now he wanted to escape from reality just as much.

John stood on the tracks looking in the direction of the market. His body felt used and torn from constant stress, and his soul felt the same way from the evils he had committed. *I WANT to relax. I've been out here too long and I can't take it anymore.* John took his hat off and rubbed his hand through his hair, the stress was visible on his face.

John knew he was a selfish man; either way he looked at it he was doing this for himself. Above all things he wanted relief from his burdens. On one hand he wanted to relieve his mind of the burdens of his past. On the other hand he wanted to relieve his mind of the burdens of his present. If all he wanted was absolution, he could risk bringing the girl to the market, getting lost in the crowd, and moving on. Mission complete. Conversely, if all he wanted was relaxation, he could ditch her for the market now, but that came with the risk of being seen by Margaret later.

Shit, eventually Margaret will get to the market and if she sees me there I'm in for it. Even if I am alone. She's a merchant, she'll have some pull with Gus and then I'm screwed. John scratched the top of his head as his eyes clenched shut. *Harold is at the market now, if I take Jennifer with me as planned and he sees her, I'm just as screwed.* He looked back at Jennifer, the stress he was feeling began to pull memories of his sins into the present.

If I stick with the plan and escape through the market crowd I won't get to relax, and I won't be able to return to the market later to relax either. Damn it I want a vacation; I want food, sex, beer, and sleep. John rubbed his chin as an idea struck him. *If I kill Margaret and her whole gang I'll have my redemption and a vacation.* He shook his head. *What the fuck. That's insane. What the fuck have I gotten myself into? I can't possibly take all of them on and win.* The stress started to overtake John and he looked up into the sky. *What if I kept them split up*

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and on my terms? After a few moments he looked back down at the ground and became calm once more. If I'm going to get what I want I'm going to have to finish this. Kill them all. It's the only way I'm going to get relief, both past and present.

John stood and thought a little bit and walked over to where Jennifer was sitting. He sat down hard on the bench right next to her, waking her up.

"I thought I told you not to fall asleep."

"Fuck you."

"You have such a way with words."

"Can we find someplace to sleep here?"

"Yes, and we need to get some food as well. Because tomorrow we will be heading back to finish off Margaret and Ned. Then after that we'll have to figure out a way to get Harold, Mac, and Greg."

Jennifer rolled her head across her shoulder's to look at John, it was obvious that her brain was half asleep. "I thought we were going to blend in with the market crowd and escape out the other side."

"You want freedom don't you?"

"Yes."

"What is freedom if you are always on the run?" John paused for a second. "If you are going to be free then we will have to finish this."

Jennifer wearily looked out into the crowd and then back at John. "But how? We don't know where they are back there. They won't be following our tracks any more."

"Sure we know where they are. There are only two trade routes leading into this town. The one that we came in on and the other leading straight back along those railroad tracks. With only one horse pulling that wagon they will have to stick with the well traveled surfaces. Now I know of a pass that connects the two routes back there a-ways. After the ambush I bet they shifted over to the tracks to try and beat us here, we obviously won the race. So, all we have to do is go straight down those tracks and we'll find them."

Jennifer smiled and rolled her head back over to her opposite shoulder. "I knew I was right about you."

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John raised his eyebrows. “What do you mean?”

“The first night we talked I tried to tell you, but you, but you interrupted me and wouldn’t let me talk.” She paused and rolled her head back towards John; her eyes were half closed. “When you sold that horse to Margaret, I saw the way you looked at it. You didn’t want it to die. You cared for it. Most people would have ridden it to death, but you accepted the hardship so that it could live. It was in your eyes. That was why I came to you for help, because you care.”

I should have ridden that thing into the ground.

John crept through the woods. It was pretty thick in this area. The only real clearing was the railroad track. His body felt a lot better after getting a good night sleep and a hot meal. He used a little bit of his gold to rent a room with a door that locked. For the first time in what seemed like ages he was able to let down his guard a little, and he slept like a rock. In the morning he bought a breakfast of hot bacon and eggs. He was convinced that he had never tasted anything better in his life.

Even though John felt better, ultimately it only fueled his desire for more. He wanted a luxury room at the market with gourmet meals and a television. All he had to do was kill five people. After that the world was his oyster. *I’m going to have my cake and eat it too.* John smiled.

He slowly shifted his head so he could see around some trees. *There you are.* John could see the wagon parked off the side of the tracks with Ned walking around its rear. This was a good place to park. A person has to get close to get off a good shot. *Wait a minute, why aren’t they on the move?* John looked a little longer. *Where’s the horse? Wait, where’s Margaret?* John strained his eyes to see the wagon more clearly as if to will Margaret and the horse into existence. *Fuck.*

John looked at Jennifer and whispered, “We have a problem.”

“What?” She whispered back.

“Margaret took the horse and left. Ned is there alone guarding the wagon.”

“That’s good isn’t it? He’s all alone. We can pick him off from here and get Margaret when she comes back.”

“No it’s not good. Margaret probably took off ahead to get Harold and the others. They’re probably heading back along the trade route from the market hoping to intercept us. She won’t get back here alone.”

John crouched down and started thinking. Jennifer craned her head around to get a better look. She stared at Ned for a minute and then turned to John, “Why don’t we just shoot him now anyways?”

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John looked up at the girl only to hear a shot go off and see her quickly duck.

“Shit.” John quickly rolled to his left and leveled the Garand. He could see Ned running for cover as Jennifer snapped off rounds at him with the Marlin .30-30.

John brought the sight to his eye and snapped off two bullets to no avail. Ned began firing his rifle wildly in their direction causing Jennifer to duck again. Ned apparently had a lot of ammunition that he wanted to get rid of.

John pushed himself up and ran past Jennifer as she began reloading her rifle. He dove behind a tree and swung the M1 around its opposite side. *There you are.* He could see that Ned was still looking in Jennifer’s direction. John pulled the trigger twice in rapid succession.

Ned dove behind the wagon wheel and started firing rapidly at John’s tree. John quickly pulled himself behind its cover. “Shit shit shit.”

John looked over at Jennifer. She was still standing with the .30-30 at her shoulder, craning her neck around to find Ned. John waved his hand with his palm hitting the snow. “Get down damn it.”

Without taking her eyes off the wagon, Jennifer shifted behind a tree and continued looking for Ned.

Ned’s firing stopped for a moment. *He’s reloading.* John swung his rifle back around the tree and looked at the wagon. Ned wasn’t there. John looked harder. *There you are.* He could see Ned’s knee sticking out from behind the wagon wheel.

John quickly aimed the giant rifle and loosed a bullet. Screaming erupted through the woods. He lowered the Garand a little and saw Ned rolling around with snow flying up everywhere.

John quickly stood up and ran forward. He could see Ned struggling to get up again and pull a pistol from his holster. John dove toward a tree. When he hit the ground he kept sliding, smashing his head into its trunk. “AHHH, SON OF A...” With one hand clutching the top of his head he swung the Garand around the tree and looked at Ned, who was stumbling away while firing off rounds at Jennifer. He could hear the loud report of the Marlin as well.

He took his hand off his head and aimed the rifle. Its recoil jarred John’s aching head and he winced in pain. When he opened his eyes again he could see Ned curled up in the fetal position. John waited a moment and then stood up.

John looked over at Jennifer through the woods to see her lift the lever action rifle to her shoulder.

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“Stop.”

She looked at him.

“He’s dead in the water. No use wasting the ammo.”

She lowered the rifle and the two began walking.

The two approached the wounded man as he was watching them, unable to act. The look in his eyes betrayed his fear. John stopped about five or six feet short of him and leveled his rifle. However, Jennifer kept walking past John. Before he could react the girl kicked Ned onto his back, leveled the .30-30 at his face, and pulled the trigger. The blood and brain matter splashed all over the snow and her pants.

“What the fuck was that?”

Jennifer didn’t take her eyes off the body. “Just deserts.”

John stood silent for a minute to let her cool down. “How much ammunition do you have left for that thing?”

Jennifer stepped back and turned towards John ratcheting the lever down on the rifle, ejecting the spent casing. She worked the action a second time throwing a single bullet into the snow. She worked the action a third time with no results. “One bullet.” She said sternly.

John reached down into the snow, picked up the single round, and stared at it for a moment, then rolled it between his fingers. He then answered in a calm and level voice, “Don’t waste your ammo. There’s not much of it left out here and they don’t make as much as they used to.” John extended his hand with the bullet towards her. “Always be sure of your target.”

Jennifer sighed and grabbed the bullet. “Yeah, sure of your target. Right.”

John turned and picked up Ned’s AR-15A2 rifle and handed it to Jennifer. “I don’t think he’ll need this anymore.”

“Cool.” She stuffed the bullet in her pocket and grabbed the rifle.

John turned toward the wagon as Jennifer began pulling Ned’s gear off his body. He rubbed the top of his head and examined the snow. *There they are.* He looked at the horse tracks leading across the railroad tracks and into the woods on the other side. *Margaret is taking the direct route to the market.* John crouched down and ran his finger through the curved print in the snow. *She’s avoiding the town we were just in and going cross country.* John thought

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about the local terrain for a moment. *If she knows where she's going she'll get there quicker than following the trade route.*

John stood up with a small rock in his hand and looked at the woods. The only long distance shot was straight down the tracks. He threw the rock in that direction. John could get one but then the others would turn into the woods and he would lose track of them. He couldn't move to a more open area to snipe at them because he wasn't sure where they would be coming from. He couldn't lure them away to an ambush location using his tracks; they learned not to follow them. There was only one spot John was sure they would come to. He rubbed the top of his head again and looked around the wagon. Only one option.

He turned to look at Jennifer. She was wearing a Chicom AK-47 chest rig with M16 magazines crammed in it and a new looking gun belt with two pistols. John raised his eyebrows. "Hey Sarah Connor, you said they had bombs in this wagon didn't you?"

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Solitude: Part 7

For the first time in what seemed like forever, John had an overfull stomach. The two of them found out what Ned and Margaret had done with the wounded horses. He shifted his weight a little on the small stool in the back of the wagon and closed the lid to the merchant's foot locker. John figured that he could take a nice long vacation with all the gold and silver in there.

With his stomach full and more money than he could count, John was aching to finish off Margaret and get to the market. The pains in his back and legs took on a new meaning, as they only fueled his desires for relaxation. Unlike before, the lap of luxury was now within his reach. He was going to say goodbye to this hellish world and be treated like a human again.

John stood up, stretched his legs, bounced a racket ball that he had found on the wagon, and stuck it in his pocket. He then jumped out the back. John stood there a moment watching the trees flicker in the light of the camp fire and listening to the darkness beyond them. He looked down at Jennifer as she tore off another piece of meat and began chewing. She extended some of the food towards John. He waved his hand and shook his head. Jennifer placed the food back on the pan and looked back up at John. "Ya know I've been thinkin'."

John looked into the fire. *Uh oh.*

She looked around the woods and then back at John. "Why are you doing this?"

"Huh?"

"I know you've been helping me, but ever since we met all you've been doing is driving me into the ground and telling me how worthless I am. I felt like you hated me and that I was some kind of burden. Now you've turned on a dime and are suddenly concerned with my freedom."

John stared past her and into the snow covered ground. He could hear the screams returning from the back of his head.

Jennifer spoke again, "With only one exception, we've been running from them for... how long? Shit I can't tell. It's such a blur I don't know. Now suddenly you want to kill Margaret and the others. What happened to avoiding fights?"

John stared into space for a few moments, sighed, and then sat down. He couldn't think of a lie, even he had to admit that his little line about freedom was lame considering the way he had treated her. It was only a matter of time before she saw through it.

"Well are you going to say something or just sit there?"

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John's thoughts raced around but ended up nowhere. Somehow saying that he was helping her so that he could take a vacation didn't seem like a good reply. He continued to sit silent.

"Look, I'm grateful to you. You've helped me. You put your life on the line for me. Most people would have run away." She paused for a moment. "But something is going on in that head of yours. I believe that you care, but there is something else motivating you. Something else is driving you to take the offensive."

John's head felt scrambled, he could feel the acute pain of his memories. He shifted his head to look straight at Jennifer. "We all have to pay for our sins sometime."

John was bored. He had been keeping himself amused by creating small stick figures out of twist ties. But now the bag he found in the back of the wagon was empty and all he could do was stare at the small army of people in front of him. Some figures had guns, some didn't, and some were in more lurid positions.

The two of them had left the wagon earlier that morning and made a wide circle such that they were now on its opposite side. John didn't want any tracks to lead directly to their positions. John and Jennifer were about fifteen meters apart, each of them lying on a blanket from the merchant's wagon and then covered with a white sheet for camouflage. John left a small opening through which he could observe the wagon and surrounding area.

Hiding under the sheet made John feel like he was ten years old and in need of a flashlight to read his comic books. He decided to build something new and began disassembling his figures. *This would be better if they were Legos.*

As John began twisting the segments back together he looked up at the two grenades in front of him. One was a real grenade and the other was homemade. The homemade one kind of resembled an old German potato masher grenade; it was a soup can with nails tied around it and a piece of broom stick attached to the bottom. John was a little worried about that one; one never knew just when homemade grenades would explode after pulling the pin. He had given Jennifer the one other real grenade.

After some time John finally gave up on making a 1969 Chevrolet Camaro out of twist ties and tossed the mangled mess down in front of him. *Fuck, this is boring.* John looked back at the twist ties and picked them back up. *What was that?* John slowly set the confused mess down as if it would create some loud noise if he dropped it, and began scanning the area. He strained his ears to somehow listen more clearly. *Footsteps.*

John slowly moved his hand over to the grenade. He could hear more than one person approaching. He listened and thought for a moment. It wasn't the sound of people casually walking; they were doing quick dashes in separate intervals.

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They're moving tactically. Their guard is up. John tensed a little. Okay, relax, you were expecting something like this. When they didn't find us along the trade route they must have suspected we would go after Ned. They probably left their horses a ways back.

A man finally came into John's view. He was dashing from tree to tree and stopped about thirty meters away. He was wearing an old style black, grey, and white urban camouflage jacket and carrying a SKS. *He doesn't see me, he's too focused on the wagon.* John waited and observed. The man dashed in closer to the wagon as others came into view. John counted out five people. He guessed that three of them must be Harold, Mac, and Greg. Margaret finally came into a better view. *Who's number five?* John waited a little until the man came out from behind the tree. *Shit, it's Gus. They must have arranged something to have him tag along.*

It was not uncommon for merchants to cozy up with the government if they had a dispute with someone. By including Gus in the situation the merchant would appear to the government as less like vigilantes and more like responsible, law abiding, citizens. That way if a bad situation arose in the future Gus would have a kinder opinion of them.

Shit, five on one...well five on two...no five on one and a half. Fuck, whatever. This is crazy. I can't believe I'm going to do this.

John waited. He figured that once they got to the wagon and found it empty they would eventually gather to decide what to do next. That was what the grenades were for.

One of the men jumped up on the wagon with a pump action shot gun. John could see the man relax a little as he turned and told everyone that there was nothing there. He heard Margaret yell to check the area. The group started looking around the immediate vicinity of the wagon. Gus, however, was checking the woods. John froze as the soldier slowly scanned in his direction, and then continued past him.

Few.

Eventually the men let down their guard and started gathering around the wagon. One of them was complaining loudly about how "they had gotten Ned," that everything was gone and that "they were gonna pay big time." Margaret yelled at them to shut up as she and Gus found the tracks John and Jennifer had made earlier when they circled around to their current location. John could see Margaret and Gus let down their guard and the group began to talk strategy. The only problem was that the two weren't going over to the wagon with the rest of the men. Instead they remained on the perimeter and spoke from there.

John got tense again, but waited patiently. *Wait, they will gather together, just wait.*

The five continued to talk but remained where they were standing. *Wait John, just wait.*

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After a few minutes John could tell that the conversation was winding down and that they would move on. Shit. Finally the man with the SKS picked his weapon up off the wagon as if he was going to walk away. Shit, it can't wait any longer.

John pulled the pin on the hand grenade, rolled to his non throwing side, pushing the sheet off in the process, and threw the explosive. He could see Jennifer beginning to throw her's as well. For a brief moment John was proud of the girl as she had resisted the pressure to act and waited for John to throw his grenade first. But that faded fast as he pressed himself down into his blanket.

The two explosions went off in rapid succession, immediately producing a loud ringing in John's ears. He didn't see the blast but he knew that at they had gotten at least one as a severed leg landed in front of the tree Jennifer was hiding behind. John grabbed the home made grenade, gritted his teeth, and pulled the pin. As quickly as he could John whipped the bomb through the air towards the last spot Margaret was and hit the ground.

John waited and listened to the overwhelming silence. *Shit it's a dud.* He grabbed his rifle and peered out from behind the tree. He could not see Margaret or Gus but he could see the other three men. One of the men must have been right next to the blast because he was missing more than just his leg. There was another lying on top of the wagon seat with his legs twitching; which was slightly unnerving. The last one was still alive. He was lying on his back trying to grab at his weapon. The way his arms moved one could tell that his brain was scrambled.

The woods were too quiet. John could tell that the soldier and Margaret knew they were in a bad spot. John and Jennifer had their weapons ready while their opponents were still behind cover. It was tantamount to suicide for them to expose themselves. Their only advantage was that the situation gave them time to think. John, however, was going to take his advantage, the ability to maneuver.

John slowly got up, never removing the Garand from his shoulder. Jennifer saw this and began following his lead, also keeping her weapon at the ready. She's a quick study. The two began to move laterally around the wagon in a low crouch. John could see that the wounded man was beginning to regain his wits. His movements were becoming less fluid and he began focusing on the two. John noticed that the man's weapon was still out of his reach and that he was unable to move.

Hmmm. Bait.

John glanced at Jennifer and tilted his head toward the wounded man. Jennifer got a quizzical look on her face and pointed her AR-15 at the man. John shook his head yes and readied his rifle again. Out of the corner of his eye John could see Jennifer aim her weapon. *Margaret will act.* Jennifer's weapon went off killing the man instantly.

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John suddenly saw movement from behind a tree and his instincts automatically trained the M1 to that location. He saw Margaret swing out with her MP5 yelling something that sounded like bastard. John saw the Garand's .30-caliber bullet impact Margaret's arm sending her spiraling back behind the tree. He could see that Jennifer also sent a couple of rounds in Margaret's direction, killing only snow and tree limbs. John then noticed another flash of movement.

Gus!

John instincts told him that he couldn't get his rifle over to the soldier fast enough, so he began diving toward the ground. He was right, the soldier pumped out two rounds that barely missed John's neck. When he hit the ground John immediately rolled behind the nearest tree. The soldier began advancing on John and fired two more sets of double taps as he moved. John's whole body tensed as he finished his roll and swung his rifle around the tree. He leveled the giant rifle as fast as he could and loosed three rounds. Gus, however, was too quick and dove behind another tree.

John quickly glanced over at Jennifer just in time to see the tree she was behind erupt with bullet impacts. Margaret had recovered quickly and was rapidly emptying her submachine gun at Jennifer's unsuspecting maple tree. *That woman's adrenaline level must be through the roof.* John looked back over his rifle sights at the soldier's tree. He could hear Jennifer returning fire as he reached into his pocket to pull out the racket ball. John quickly cocked his arm back and threw the ball next to Gus's position causing the soldier to jump up. *He's still got grenades fresh on his mind.*

The Garand began firing as the soldier came into view. Gus wasn't stupid though, he was also firing to throw off John's aim. John's stress level suddenly shot up as he heard the pinging sound of his M1 ejecting the empty en bloc clip. He dropped the rifle, rolled over, and pulled his Glock as fast as he could. That ping was unmistakable and John knew the soldier also heard it. Gus kept up the pressure and continued firing at John's position.

Fuckfuckfuckfuck.

Despite the shooting John still jumped a little as the explosion ripped through the air. *The dud grenade.* John whipped himself around the tree took a knee and leveled his Glock. He saw the soldier staggering forward and then both men fired relentlessly. The soldier flinched and recoiled as the 9mm rounds from John's pistol impacted his body. Gus then fell forward to the ground about ten meters to John's front.

John looked over at Jennifer. She had also taken advantage of the explosion to put two rounds into Margaret's chest. He watched her as she advanced on the body with her weapon at the ready. *Very good.*

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John then lurched forward propping himself up with his hand. He was having trouble breathing. John looked down at his abdomen and brought his other hand up to the single bullet wound. For a moment his mind was void of thought, only the feeling of disbelief. *What is this? That is not there.* John looked back up at Jennifer; she was kicking at Margaret's body to make sure that she was dead. *This can't be happening to me. How could I get shot?* He looked back down at the wound. Maybe it just grazed me. The wound, however, was right in the middle of his abdomen. *I need to get this wrapped up.* John looked up at the dead soldier. *Gus always carries bandages.*

He pushed himself up and staggered over to the soldier. John knelt down next to the body and began checking through all of his pockets and pouches. As he pulled out the man's note book he noticed a fairly new piece of paper sticking out of it. He pulled out the neatly folded paper and with shaking hands opened it.

The rage inside John began to build.

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Solitude: Part 8

John could not believe what was happening. *This can't be real.* He looked up into the sky and then back down at the paper. His feelings began to harden even more and he began breathing heavily. *That little bitch, this is all her fault.*

He stared at the wanted poster. The drawing of him was very good. Margaret had provided an apt description. John read the bottom. *Wanted on two counts of murder and one count of aiding and abetting a runaway slave.*

The lines in John's expression began to grow deep as the hate swelled up in him. *When will this end? Now I can't get my break. Instead of relaxing in a hotel I have to lie up in a doctor's bed and hope Gus doesn't find me. I can't get away. I'll never have money like this again. I'll never get my break. I'll have to pay the doctor. I need to get to a doctor. I might not make it to one. I'll die out here and never get my break. This is all that little bitch's fault.*

John craned his head painfully around to look at Jennifer. She finally finished checking the bodies and turned towards John. She immediately knew he was hurt and began running to him. "Ohmygodohmygodohmygod. Are you alright?"

John grit his teeth in both pain and anger. His hand clenched the paper and smashed it into a crumpled mess. Jennifer began shaking, "Your stomach, your stomach. You need a bandage."

She began searching rapidly through the soldiers pouches and pulled out a bandage. As she unwound the fabric John picked up his Glock from the ground next to him and pointed it at Jennifer's head.

Jennifer jolted backwards as a look of fear and confusion overcame her face.

John's expression was one of pure hatred. "This..." his voice seethed, "is all your fault."

...

John crouched down in the tall grass next to the old swing set and used the towel around his neck to wipe off the sweat. There was no wind so even the shade did not seem to cut the edge off the heat. He shifted the Garand on his leg as his stomach growled. John had had only minimal food for what seemed like forever. He looked back up at the back of his uncle's house and then turned to face his father. "We're not going to find anything here."

"How do you know that?"

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John motioned his hand toward the kitchen window. “Look, the windows covered with flies. He’s probably dead.”

“Listen son, don’t you give up on him. Not until you know. He would do the same for you.”

John let out a beep breath; he knew his dad was right.

“Look, you go in there and check it out. I’ll stay out here and guard the rest.”

John shifted the Garand again and looked back at the two women they had picked up along the way. John’s father was a protector of sorts, a real believer in helping other people. John, however, had always been a little more selfish. He figured it was some kind of backlash against his father. His stomach grumbled again as he turned toward to house.

He scanned the area once again and ran at a low crouch across the yard. Once at the side of the house John slowly crept around to the front. He tried to push his hunger from his mind. The cicadas were especially loud; he hoped that if there was anyone there they wouldn’t be able to hear him approach.

John looked at the front door to see it about half way open. *This isn’t a good sign. Why don’t you just listen to me dad?* At a low crouch he slowly approached the door. Standing back about seven feet John began to make a wide circle around the door such that he could see inside and still be able to wield his M1 effectively. Shit, there he is. John could see his uncle lying on the kitchen floor. He estimated that it could not have happened more than a few days ago. John pushed the door all the way open with his rifle. This place is trashed. Totally looted. He looked at the kitchen cabinets. No food. Fuck I’m hungry.

He walked back around the house to where the rest of the group was crouched down. “I told you we weren’t going to find anything here.”

John’s father looked up at him, “We still needed to look.”

John got a little pissed at the statement. “You mean I needed to look.”

“What’s wrong with you son? Why are you always back talkin’ me?”

John calmed himself a little. “Nothin, don’t worry about it. Just hungry is all.” John was trying to make light of it but he was starved and it was eating away at his mind.

“Was there food in there?”

His blood pressure began to rise. “Did I stutter or sumthin? I said there was nothing in there. There’s never any food in there. Geez why don’t you listen to me? All the food for miles has been looted”

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“What’s gotten in to you?”

“What’s gotten in to me? Nothing. That’s what’s gotten into me. NO FOOD. I’m fucking hungry.”

“Hey now, we’ve been eating.”

The rage in John began to build; his stomach felt like it was in knots. The more he thought about food the more intense his hunger grew. “Not enough. We’ve been catching stuff but then we have to share it with these two leeches.” John waved his hand toward the women as they shifted backwards a little.

“Hey boy, you know we have to help them. If you don’t help people they won’t help you.”

“We don’t need any fucking help. We were doing just fine before these two showed up.” John’s mind began to spin. He had only eaten what amounted to a few scraps a day for over a week. Now his father was telling him to suck it up.

“Look son, what’s right is right. And that is what we’re gonna do. What happened to you? Your’a cop fer Christ sake.”

John’s temper broke and he swung the butt of his rifle around hitting his father in the side of his head. The crack was loud as the man went limp and hit the ground like a rag doll. “I’M NOT A COP NO MORE!” John swung the Garand back around and pointed it at one of the women. The woman began to scream as she turned to run.

“SHUT UP!” John pulled the trigger and watched as the round impacted her back.

The other woman froze in her tracks and began screaming at a high pitch. The sound rang in John’s ears as he shook his head to subdue it. “STOP SCREAMING!” John let out a blood curdling yell and brought the rifle up to her face. John watched as the shell ejected from his rifle in what seemed like slow motion.

It was quiet. He looked straight down his sights at the empty woods in front of him.

...

Jennifer took a hard swallow as she looked at the muzzle of John’s shaking pistol. John’s rage intensified as he focused in on her eyes. “You ruined my life...you’re... gonna... pay.”

Jennifer looked away from the gun and straight at John. “What about your sins?”

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John's chin began to shake a little. "Jesus Christ died for my sins."

John's anger was so intense that he couldn't even hear the gun shot; he only saw the flash.

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Solitude: Part 9 Conclusion

John stumbled out of the woods and onto the railroad track. In one hand he had his back pack and the other held his pistol and bandage. He fell over on to the track with one of the steel beams smashing into his chest. John grimaced with pain as he rolled over and stared into the sky.

He watched the steam from his breath as it pulsed up above him. *I've got to get to a doctor.* John looked over at his pack thinking about the gold inside it. *If I head away from the market on this route I'll run into a town. There's got to be someone there that can help me. I can pay them.* John looked back up at the sky. *I just need to rest a little bit.*

John felt tired and cold. He began to feel himself phase out but he forced himself awake. *I've got to fix my gut.* John raised his head and looked down; his clothes were soaked in blood. With shaking hands he began to open his jacket and shirt. John had to stop and flex his hands, they felt cold and he had a hard time making them work. Eventually his belly was fully exposed.

John's head fell back as the muscles in his neck ran out of energy. *Rest a second then get back to work.* John watched his breath for a moment and then strained his body to lift his head. His abdominal muscles burned with pain. With his left hand he swiped the blood away exposing the two bullet wounds. *That bitch shot me.* With his right hand he pressed the bandage down over them.

He heard a noise and looked down the tracks. Jennifer was returning with Margaret's old horses. John watched as she hooked them up to the wagon. He looked down at his pistol and reached over for it. His hand was not working very well so he began pawing at the weapon.

John could see her in the distance stripping the bodies of their weapons and gear. *She's not gett'n my stuff.* He managed to grasp the pistol and begin to raise it. He noticed Jennifer look at him and begin walking in his direction. John tried to pull the trigger, but he just didn't have the strength.

He looked up at her as she stopped next to him. He tried to point the pistol at her but his hand was shaking too much. Jennifer reached down, pulled it from his hands, and tossed it to the side. The pain in John's stomach intensified as she stripped his belt off and threw it next to the handgun. *Oh God, no.* John had stripped people of their gear while they were still alive before. He never thought someone would be doing it to him. Jennifer methodically checked every one of his pockets, removing their contents one by one. John then saw her stand up and look straight at him. She then reached down and pulled his sunglasses off. John's eyes squinted as he looked up at her.

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Jennifer examined the glasses, cleaned them off on her jacket and then slid them onto her face. She looked back down at him and then picked up all his gear. She then turned and began walking back to the wagon. *That asshole. How could he do that?*

Jennifer had been mad until she looked into his eyes. Now she was mad, confused, and frustrated all at the same time. Thoughts were swirling around her head. She never thought anyone could do such a thing. He was her friend. He had saved her. How could he turn on her? Why did he try to kill her? She began loading everyone's gear into the back of the wagon when she stopped.

She stepped back and looked over at John. "WHY DAMN IT!" She then turned and started kicking Harold's body. Jennifer could not stop kicking. "WHY? WHY? WHY?" Jennifer could not stop herself; she kept kicking the body relentlessly. Finally she turned around toward the wagon and grabbed the shotgun. Wielding it by the barrel she swung it over her head in a high arc smashing the butt into Harold's skull. Jennifer then pulled the weapon up and continued to bash in the body's head and upper torso. At last she stopped and stared at the mess in front of her. The steam from her breath filled the air as she attempted to catch her breath.

"Why?"

Jennifer straightened herself up a little and threw the weapon back into the wagon. She reached down, grabbed the rest of the equipment lying on the ground, and threw it in. She then walked around the front and climbed up into the seat. Jennifer had to ride down the trade route a couple hundred yards to pick up the rest of the supplies they had hidden.

She snapped the reins and the horses began to move. Jennifer could hear a low moan from John as she passed. *Don't look, just don't do it.* As she drove down the trail to the rest of the supplies her mind began to wander more through what had just happened. The anger and frustration began to fade away as the pain in her soul increased. She pulled on the reins and stopped the horses next to the supplies. As she jumped down the tears began to flow.

It took her some time to load the supplies. As she was finishing she began to hear dogs in the woods. She needed to move fast. Jennifer heaved the materials into the back of the wagon and then jumped up onto the seat. She then turned to look back at John just as the first of God's creatures jumped out of the woods onto him.

Jennifer's head flinched away for a moment as the dog's snout tore into John's abdomen. The other dogs soon joined in the fray. She saw John's mouth open as if to scream but nothing came out. His back arched upward as one of the mutts pulled what looked like a rope out of his gut and began yanking backwards with it.

Jennifer turned her head away, the tears rolled down her face. She paused for a second and then wiped the tears from her cheek. She straightened up and turned toward the gruesome

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scene. Jennifer's expression hardened as she reached down to pick up the scoped .30-30 rifle.

John was right about one thing. Freedom is pain.

She pulled the single .30-30 bullet from her pocket and looked at it for a moment. Jennifer then loaded it into the rifle's chamber and locked it shut.

But there was one thing that he never understood about the difference between a slave and a free person.

Jennifer shouldered the rifle and looked through the scope until she was sure of her target.

"I can choose to end your pain."

The shot echoed through the woods and the dogs went running. Jennifer stood for a moment and watched the motionless body in front of her. She then placed the rifle back into the wagon and sat down.

Jennifer thought for a moment about where she wanted to go. She remembered a farmer who had always been nice to her when they stopped to trade. His wife had even insinuated at one time that she would like to have Jennifer stay there. *Maybe they will take me in?* She glanced back at the contents of her wagon. *If they're hesitant, I've always got a lot to bargain with.*

She would just have to get there first.