

Claude – A Vignette

Claude turned off the computer at midnight. He had to get some sleep. But those PAW stories on the emergency preparedness forum sites he loved were just so interesting. “One of these days I’ll be like one of the characters in one of those stories. One of these days I’ll have preps, too. I’ll start tomorrow. I really will.”

To those that knew Claude McMillan, every one of them would have been surprised to know that Claude did, in fact ‘start tomorrow.’

He’d been wanting a Leatherman tool ever since he saw his foreman at work use one to make a minor repair on the warehouse forklift. But as the new models continued to come out, he kept putting off the purchase, always waiting for the perfect deal.

Claude was killing time at the mall after work, watching the girls. He decided to go by the knife shop and drool over the Leatherman tools on display. The gum chewing, Gothic made up and dressed, iPod listening female clerk frowned when Claude came in. He was a pest, always wanting to handle the goods, but never buying.

Totally ignoring the girl, Claude went down the cases of cheap knives, and then the more expensive ones, saving the multi-tools for last. He knew a lot of guys had Gerbers and other brands of multi-tools, but he preferred the Leatherman brand.

“Wow,” he muttered, seeing the Leatherman Surge. He’d read about it, but it was so new he hadn’t seen one until just now. “That’s the one,” he muttered. “That’s the one I want.” He hadn’t even looked at the price, fearful of what it might be.

“I want to see this new one,” Claude told the clerk.

Slowly, belligerently, the clerk got up from her stool and came over to the case. “You keep doing this,” she said, “wasting my time, and I’m going to start charging you to handle the goods.”

Claude just looked at her. After a long eye battle the clerk opened the case and took out the Leatherman Surge, handing it to Claude. As much to annoy the clerk as to really inspect the tool, Claude took his time, opening and closing each blade or feature of the multi-tool twice or more.

Finally he looked at the tag hanging from the Surge. He couldn’t believe his eyes. He quickly looked at the clerk and then back down at that price tag. He knew it had to be a mistake. But would the clerk realize it? She didn’t know knives or care about knives. She just put in her time to get a paycheck.

“I’ll take it,” Claude said, handing the Surge back to the girl. Her eyes, heavily made up, widened in surprise.

“Really?” she asked.

Claude nodded and pulled out his wallet.

Claude held his breath, but the clerk rang up the price listed on the tag. He slowly counted out the cash and had to dig into his right front pocket to pull out enough coins to have enough to pay for the Surge, after the tax was added to the price on the sticker.

The clerk took one of the boxed tools from the cabinet under the display case, put it in a bag and handed it to Claude. He literally ran out of the shop, clutching the bag in his hand. He had to walk all the way home. He didn't have enough money left for the bus.

Like a badge of triumph, Claude wore the Leatherman in its leather case on his belt the next day at work. He pulled it out at every opportunity to show people his new acquisition. Claude secretly considered himself a real prepper now. Fortunately it was payday and he was able to get his check, cash it, and get a twenty-four pack of beer, some deli bologna, and bread for the weekend.

Usually Claude didn't fry his bologna, but he did that evening, using the Surge to cut six slits in each of the two slices of bologna so it wouldn't curl up. He handled the Surge every few minutes after he got on the computer and logged into first one prep forum and then another, proudly listing the Surge in a new weekly acquisition post on every one of them.

He fell asleep with the multi-tool in his hand. Claude went shopping that weekend. He was a prepper now for sure. He had a knife. Sure it was in a multi-tool, which was even better. Claude even went down to the surplus store and spent a couple of hours browsing, handling item after item that he'd read about in the forums. He finally left, acutely aware of how much money he had in his wallet.

Claude went to Wal-Mart on Sunday, to get toilet paper, intending to get one of the big multi-packs, since he was a prepper now. He wound up with a four roll package of the no-name stuff at the register. Then he saw the rack of Bic lighters. "Fire," he whispered to himself. "They always talk about a way to make fire."

He splurged. He got three butane lighters. No name, not the Bics. He made sure to state the fact that he got three, not one, butane lighters when he got on the forums that evening. Claude made sure that he put one of the lighters in his pocket before he left for work on Monday.

When their first break came, Claude was the first one out to the smoking area. He didn't smoke. Hated to be around it in fact, but he was able offer up lights to any of the smokers that didn't already have matches or lighters out when their cigarette was in their mouth.

Claude walked tall and proud for the next couple of weeks, wishing he had something else to list in the new acquisitions entries on the forums. It just never seemed to occur to him to buy a little extra food. Shelfstable food. He walked right past the Hormel stuff in the Wal-Mart one Sunday on the way to the sporting goods area.

He looked at the rifles and shotguns, handling the Ruger 10/22 for probably the fiftieth time, but put it back, knowing it was a pipe dream. He walked the aisles of camping goods but left without buying anything.

Instead, he went down to the surplus shop again. The clerk saw him enter and muttered to himself, much as the knife shop clerk in the mall had. Claude was about to leave when he spotted some new items.

There was a whole sale table filled with used GI ponchos and liners. The sign said buy a poncho and liner and get a hundred foot hank of 550 paracord for free. "Wow!" Claude muttered, picking through the ponchos. He found one in ACU camouflage and set it aside. Going through the liners he found several in ACU, too, and set one aside with the poncho. But he kept going through them, looking for a better one.

"Huh?" he said, finding another liner in ACU that was in better shape than the one he'd already picked out. But it had two zippers on it, not just tie strings. He'd never heard of a poncho liner with zippers.

He looked through the ponchos again, but couldn't find one with zippers in it. The one he'd picked out was the best of the lot. He'd figure out about the liner later. But every prepper needed a poncho and liner and 550 paracord and he was going to get all three for the regular price of just a new poncho.

Claude surreptitiously counted his money. He had enough, even without the soda pop change in his pocket. He wavered for several minutes, tucking the poncho and zippered liner under the stack while he wandered around the shop for a few more minutes trying to decide whether or not to get the package.

He was about to leave the shop without the goods when two other guys began looking at the sale table. On impulse, out of fear one of the guys would take what he'd picked out before he could make up his mind, Claude rushed over and pulled the two items out from under the stack, just shoving his way between the two men.

Claude had the items paid for, plus his hank of free 550 paracord, and an entirely unintended cheapo windup flashlight radio combination that was already on the check out stand, and was out the door before he had a rational thought again. He berated himself all the way home. He was going to have to skip a couple of dinners this week until he got paid again. But he finally started to grin and was almost dancing when he entered his tiny apartment.

Immediately he got on the computer and got into the forums to list his newest acquisitions. Still not sure about the zippers on the poncho liner, he still listed it as if it was an important option.

After adding the information to all the forums, Claude began checking the poncho and liner in detail. He finally figured the liner out. One of the zippers made the liner into sort of a sleeping bag. The other, short zipper, allowed you to wear the poncho with the liner tied in it normally.

“Wow! Cool!” Claude went back into each of the forum posts he’d just made to add the facts of what he’d figured out about the liner. Somewhat to his disappointment someone had already posted in one of the forums that he probably had a Ranger Rick modified poncho liner.

Claude looked it up on the internet and had to agree. Someone had bought the kit from Ranger Rick and sewn the zippers to a regular liner. But Claude put the disappointment out of mind. He used the liner as a sleeping bag on the bed that night, just to try it out.

It, the poncho, and the windup radio/flashlight went into his rather large daypack, along with the couple of bottles of water he always carried, since he was a prepper now. Riding high as a newly, but well equipped, prepper, Claude decided he should take a look at the news a little more often. He bought the local paper a couple of weeks in a row, but stopped after two issues. “I’ll read up on the news on the internet,” he told himself.

That didn’t last long either. But he was being exposed to news by virtue of reading the prep forums. He seldom actually read the news articles posted, but just reading the header bar for the entries gave him more information on prep related possibilities than many people that read the news regularly. He just didn’t think about it much.

He started saving some money, to get more preps, but that didn’t go very well. It seemed like he was always out of beer and needed a fresh twenty-four pack. And a guy couldn’t live on bologna all the time. A real man had to have steak once in a while. Of course that meant eating out. He couldn’t fix a steak on the one-burner hotplate in his one room apartment. And besides, the little under counter refrigerator wouldn’t hold much more than the dispenser carton of beer.

Claude was taking out the trash one day and remembered something from the forums. Trash bags. When he came back inside the apartment he added to the day pack four of the big, heavy duty trash bags that the previous resident of the apartment had left behind when she moved out.

Thinking in the same line, Claude took out his box of cheap zip-lock quart bags and added half a dozen to an outside pocket of the day pack.

Claude was admiring the Leatherman Surge one day on break at work when he felt the earth move under his feet. He looked up at the high ceiling of the warehouse and saw the dust began to fall in tremendous cascades. Like the rest of the workers, Claude ran out of the warehouse to the large parking lot.

The huge mushroom cloud was immediately visible. Claude stared for just a second, but dived for the cover of the decorative landscaping around the parking lot. A hot wind passed over him, causing his ears to ache and his chest to hurt. A few moments later and the same thing happened, only the wind was toward the mushroom cloud, not away from it.

Claude looked around and saw the paint burning on the warehouse. Not even thinking about it Claude jumped onto his feet and ran back into the warehouse to grab his backpack hanging on a hook near the loading doors.

He was back out in moments, trying to think. Seemingly without his thinking about it, Claude's feet carried him at a run toward the Quick-Shop down the street on the corner. People were milling around all over the place, looking at the mushroom cloud and mostly screaming.

Claude went to the small food section of the shop and began raking cans of Vienna Sausage and other canned meat into his back pack. "Crackers," he muttered, grabbing the two two-stick packages of saltines on the shelf. "Oh, yeah! Ketchup!" He added a bottle of Heinz to the daypack.

Whirling around, Claude went to the cooler and pulled out all the water that would fit in the back pack with the food, plus two six packs in his hands. Claude headed for the checkout stand, but saw the single rolls of toilet paper. He crammed one into the pack.

The clerk had come back into the store and was trying to use the telephone when Claude walked up to the counter. It hadn't occurred to him to just walk out of the shop without paying.

He set the day pack and water down on the counter and pulled out his wallet. The clerk was hysterical so Claude just pulled out half the money in the wallet and threw it down on the counter. He shrugged into the shoulder straps of the overloaded day pack, picked up the water, and ran out of the store. He turned left, away from the mushroom cloud, which was much larger now.

It registered, vaguely, that the wind was rushing toward the growing cloud as Claude ran away from the cloud, his mind racing. He was a prepper. He knew what to do. He knew what to do. "Shelter!" he screamed. "I have to find shelter!" The street ahead was blocked with cars dead in the street, hundreds of people running in the same direction as he was. Only they weren't really running. It was a very slow mad rush, just because of the number of people.

Claude cut into an alley, headed for another street with less people. It didn't make any difference. The next street over had as many people and vehicles blocking it as the first one had. He headed up it anyway, making a rather remarkable leap considering the load he was carrying, to get up on the hood of the closest car. He ran and jumped from car to car, making much faster progress than those on the ground.

He ran until he couldn't run anymore. He leaped off the car he was on into the edge of another alley. He had to stop and rest, hands on knees, staring back at the cloud. Other people were still running and screaming in panic. Claude kept telling himself, "I'm a prepper! I'm a prepper!"

Finally Claude picked up the extra water and began to run again, staying on the ground as people began to thin out, many of them going into the nearby buildings. Claude didn't hesitate. He kept going, at a slower pace, in a shuffling run at times, but moving all the while away from the mushroom cloud that was beginning to loom over him.

Claude thought about EMP for a moment when he came up on an old pickup truck that was working its way through the stalled cars. It wasn't moving much faster than he was on foot,

but Claude decided a rest while still moving was a good idea. He jumped up on the bumper of the truck and rolled over the tailgate, landing on lawn care tools.

The guy driving started cursing in Spanish, shouting at Claude what was obviously the words in Spanish for Claude to get out of his truck. Claude ignored him, but did do the man the service of preventing anyone else from doing what Claude had done.

When the truck turned onto the on-ramp of the closest interstate intersection, Claude hunkered down and held on. The driver was a maniac, weaving at high speed around the stalled cars, obviously headed out of the city as fast as the truck would go.

Claude had intended only to ride for a few minutes to rest some, but he didn't dare try to get off the truck now. It was moving way too fast. Holding on tightly, Claude surveyed the items in the back of the truck. He saw what had hurt so bad when he fell into the back of the truck. A garden rake, teeth up, was lying with the other tools. Noting the two long handled, round point shovels, and one D-handle round point, Claude looked around the bed of the truck some more.

He fell again, against the front of the bed of the truck, when the driver suddenly slammed on the brakes. The overpass ahead was being redone, and down to one lane each way. They were well out of the city. The driver of the truck took the off ramp when he saw the way was blocked.

An idea suddenly occurring to Claude, he scrambled up, grabbed the D-handle shovel and threw it out of the truck. He grabbed the six packs of water and leaped. The truck had slowed enough that Claude was able to land on his feet, and stagger several steps before regaining his balance without falling down.

He ran back and picked up the shovel, looking around the area. There were still people leaving their cars and the equipment from the worksite. All were headed away from the city and the mushroom cloud. Most of the workmen had just left their equipment where it was. Several pieces were even still running.

Claude taught himself, in three easy lessons, how to run a backhoe. He dug a trench, four feet wide, four feet deep, and ten feet long, with a narrow right angle turn at one end, at the edge of the overpass embankment. Leaving the backhoe out of the way, Claude ran over to one of the big semi trucks with a dump trailer and climbed up into the cab. The truck wasn't running, but the keys were still in it.

He managed to start the truck. Several times, since he kept killing the engine trying to get the truck to move. He finally found the brake release and was able to move the truck. He parked it beside the trench, running the truck and trailer up onto the strip of earth he'd dug from the trench.

Dust began to come down out of the sky and Claude took his poncho out of the backpack, which he was still wearing, and put it on. He tried for a couple of minutes, but couldn't unhook the truck from the trailer he parked by the trench.

Giving up, he ran back to the backhoe, moved it next to the trailer and used the front loader to lift the near side of the trailer until it, and the truck, turned over on their sides. The action broke the trailer away from the truck and it was an easy task to turn the trailer the rest of the way over to cover the trench.

Claude put the front end loader bucket under the front end of the overturned truck and drug it around until it was laying across the L-section of the trench, the top of the cab against the trailer.

Working as quickly as he could, with no experience with the backhoe, except that he was getting at the moment, Claude covered the upside down trailer and the overturned truck with the dirt he'd removed from the trench.

He decided it wasn't enough and sloughed down more dirt from the overpass embankment, completely covering the trailer and truck, including both ends of the trailer. There was at least five feet of earth covering the truck and trailer.

Deciding it was the best he could do, Claude jumped down out of the backhoe, the fallout beginning to come down more heavily. It took a couple of minutes with the D-handle shovel to open a small hole under the truck to get into the L-section of the trench.

Claude threw in the two six-packs of water, took off the poncho, shook it off, and dragged it and the shovel into the trench after him, turned the corner in the trench and scrambled to the far end of the long section and hunkered down in the dark, shaking.

It was several moments before he took out the windup combo from the daypack and cranked it enough to get some light. He looked around. It looked pretty much like what it was. The inside of an upside down dump trailer, sitting over a four foot deep trench.

He blanched a bit when he saw that one edge of the trailer was only a couple of inches from the edge of the trench. But the trench appeared to be holding up, even with the weight of the dirt on the trailer.

Claude moved away from that spot in the trench. He wasn't sure why he was shaking so hard, but Claude laid out the poncho, took out the poncho liner and zipped it into its sleeping bag form. He put the bag on the poncho and got in the poncho liner sleeping bag.

He didn't know how long he slept, after falling into the exhausted sleep, since he didn't know when he fell asleep, but he did know he was hungry. Claude sat up and reached for his daypack. He slowly unpacked everything, stacking the items on the shelf of dirt between the edge of the trench and wall of the up-side-down trailer, beside the combo windup.

A dozen cans of regular Vienna sausage. Nine small cans of tuna. Fourteen small cans of potted meat. Two big cans of corned beef hash. Half a dozen microwavable Hormel single serving soups. A bottle of ketchup. The two two-stack pack of crackers. Seven half-liter and two one-liter bottles of water.

Claude added the two six-packs of one-liter bottles of water to the shelf. A hundred-foot hank of 550 paracord. Two butane lighters. Three bandanas. Claude wondered when he'd put the bandanas in the pack. He couldn't remember. The four big heavy-duty trash bags and six zip-locks. A roll of toilet paper. Claude didn't really pray, but he said a reverent thanks to the powers that be that he'd seen the toilet paper on the way out of the Quick-Shop.

He took a couple of minutes to dig a big hole in the bottom of the trench at the far end and used the toilet paper after he did his business. He went back to taking stock. It suddenly dawned on him that not all the small cans of meat were zip top.

Claude suddenly slapped his hip and breathed a sigh of relief. The Leatherman Surge was still there. It had a can opener on it. He checked his pants pockets. Almost three dollars in soda pop money. The third butane lighter. A fourth bandana. His apartment key and mailbox key on a simple key ring. His wallet with forty-four dollars; his driver's license, social security card, and company health insurance card; his spare apartment key.

He felt of his head. Sure enough, his St. Louis Cardinals baseball cap was in place. He marveled at that, considering the wild ride in the pickup truck. "Let's see," Claude said, touching the pockets of the Dickies work shirt that matched the Dickies work pants. The notebook, company supplied Bic ink pen and Sharpie for marking the papers in the warehouse. The credit card sized LED lighted magnifier his brother had given him so he could read the small print on some of the goods he handled. His cell phone. He opened it up and tried it. Nothing. He turned it off and put it back in his shirt pocket.

Claude also had one nice money belt style leather belt, also thanks to his brother, that he always intended to put money in, but never had. Company supplied hard toe high top running shoe style work shoes, just broken in, over double layers of socks. Of course the jocky shorts and undershirt. Oh. And a five dollar K-Mart digital watch.

Claude opened a can of Vienna Sausage, added some ketchup to the can, and ate the contents with three crackers. He reached for another can, but remembered having read in some of the PAW stories that it could be two, three, or more weeks in the fallout shelter before it would be safe to go out. "And how am I supposed to know when it's safe?" he asked aloud. "All the preppers in the stories had Geiger counters."

With the thought in mind, Claude limited his drink of water to three decent sips. Both food and water were going to have to last. And the toilet paper. Have to be careful with it, too.

Claude had always considered himself a bit lazy, but even he didn't know how much one person could sleep when there was absolutely nothing to do, except eat, sleep, and go to the bathroom.

He didn't even bother with the radio function of the windup combo. In the stories it was always days at least before radios would work. But curiosity finally got the better of him and he wound up the thing and went to the access hole to the outside. He pulled up the antenna and stuck the radio up as high as he could without leaving the protection of the shelter.

Nothing. He tried it a few days later. Still nothing. On the fourteenth day he finally heard something after scanning the dial half a dozen times. "Hey! That's the local guy!" Claude listened eagerly. There were instructions to stay indoors in the best shelter possible as the average radiation level in the area was still too high to be safe for more than a few minutes exposure. The estimate was one more week. There was an announcement when the next broadcast would be and the station signed off.

"There are survivors! Just like in the stories," Claude said, moving well back into his shelter. He quickly looked over his supplies. He was doing okay. There was another week's worth of food and water, easy. And enough toilet paper.

Claude listened to every broadcast, waiting for the word that he could leave his shelter. It was more than a week in coming, but thinking he should be careful, Claude had cut his rations even further and still had a few cans of food left and a six-pack of the one-liter bottles of water.

He was achy all the time and wondered if it was the radiation, or maybe dehydration. He was drinking enough to stay alive, obviously, but the forums all said you needed more water than he was drinking to stay healthy long term.

Right after the announcement that people could leave shelters for limited times Claude had gone out and looked around. Things were pretty much as they were when he went into the shelter. All the construction equipment was still there, as were the dozens of cars on and off the interstate and the side roads.

Claude walked around, checking the vehicles. Many were sitting with their doors open. A few were locked. There wasn't a soul around. He thought about starting to hike... somewhere... for a while, but Claude went back to his shelter and settled in for the night.

When his rations were down to only three days, Claude packed up and started walking, after debating whether to go back to the city or head for the hills. There'd probably be more people fighting over more resources than would be available in the wild, but Claude decided to take his chances away from the city. There was a small town not too far ahead and Claude headed for it. He wasn't sure why, but he carried the shovel with him.

Claude decided he was glad he had it when he realized how cold it was. The attack had occurred in late September. It was now the middle of October. Fall was definitely in the air. He just hadn't noticed it in the shelter.

As soon as he got to a patch of woods after the sun had reached its zenith, Claude decided to stop and make camp for the day, since it was looking like rain. Thankful for the Leatherman Surge, Claude used the wood cutting blade to cut off some dead branches on standing trees. He gathered up all the down dead stuff he could find before he took one of the dead branches and used the knife blade of the Surge to shave a mound of shavings in the center of the small fire pit he'd dug with the shovel.

He split some more of the dry limbs to make kindling and teepeed them over the shavings. Finally, Claude pulled the butane lighter from his pocket and put the flame to the

shavings. They caught immediately and Claude carefully coaxed the kindling into flame and began to add the smallest twigs to the fire. When he had a good flame he added some larger sticks and finally larger pieces of wood.

Claude kept the fire small, putting the ends of the larger pieces of wood in the center of the fire, creating a five leg star pattern. That way he didn't need to try to cut the big stuff. It would just burn up as he pushed the pieces in as they burned.

With the small fire going well, he used the trusty Surge again to cut some saplings to make a framework for a lean-to. He tied the pieces together using lengths of the 550 paracord. After throwing the poncho over the frame Claude tied it to the frame with the poncho's attached cords.

It was really threatening rain and Claude hurriedly gathered up all the dry leaves he could find and spread them out under the poncho, glad he'd thought to add the trash bags to the day pack. It made gathering the leaves easier. Claude moved the pile of firewood under the edge of the poncho shelter.

He scrambled under the poncho when it started to rain, and stoked up the fire some, to keep it from going out in the light rain. He ate his last can of Vienna Sausage and took a long drink of water before wrapping the poncho liner around him.

Claude took his spare apartment key from his wallet and used the file blade of the Surge to start shaping the key into a point. It was a brass key and didn't take long. He even filed in barbs. He'd found one nice long sapling and a shorter one, and kept both aside when he was gathering the wood for the shelter. He whittled a slot to mount the head of the key in the short one, and then drilled a hole in the wood with the awl blade of the Surge.

Slipping the key into the slot, Claude fed a piece of paracord through the hole in the wood, through the hole in the head of the key, and out through the hole in the wood on the other side.

Working carefully as the rain fell, Claude secured the key to the sapling. Cutting three slits at the other end of the sapling, he took a page from his pocket notebook, trimmed it with the scissors on the Surge, and doubled over the make shift fletching for the arrow he was making.

Claude cut another length of the 550 paracord, stripped the inner lines from the braided sheath, and used the fine lines to wrap the shaft to secure the fletching. When he was done, Claude had made a relatively straight, metal tipped arrow.

Next he carved notches near the ends of the longer sapling he'd set back. Using a piece of paracord, Claude made a bow string and strung the bow. Finally, zipping up the poncho liner into its sleeping bag form, he crawled in and was almost immediately asleep.

Claude woke up often enough to keep the fire fed to a very low flame after the rain quit about midnight that night. He was stiff and sore the next morning so he built up the fire, for psychological comfort, as he ate a bit of breakfast and drank more water.

He finally decided to get started toward the town again and covered over the fire with the shovel. Claude put all the smaller firewood good for starting fires in his day pack, along with the poncho and liner after he dismantled the poncho shelter. All the short pieces of paracord he bundled up and put in an outside pocket of the pack.

Shovel in one hand and bow and arrow in the other, Claude started walking in the forest, parallel to the road. He moved slowly, quietly, like they said to in the forums when stalking game. "I guess I'm not really stalking," he muttered, since he wasn't after a specific animal. "Just looking for whatever I can find." Every so often Claude would take sight on a likely soft spot ahead of him and try to hit it with the arrow, shooting the bow as accurately as he could. He was getting better with each launch.

Finally, he did see something move in forest up ahead. Claude stopped and crouched down, watching for the movement again. There it was. A rabbit. It was moving every so often, to nibble on the freshest growth it could find to nibble on.

Slowly, one quiet step at a time, Claude advanced on the rabbit, reaching the point where he thought he might hit it with an arrow, and fearful if he tried to get closer he would spook the thing.

Claude set down the shovel, nocked his arrow and drew the bow. He released the arrow, following through the way it was described in the forums. He couldn't believe it. He didn't hit the rabbit, but the arrow tip hit the ground just under the it. The rabbit ran off, but Claude was satisfied with his action. He'd been a lot closer than he thought he would be on his first real attempt.

Hoping for another chance, Claude continued his trip toward town, but hadn't seen anything else when he decided to stop for the night. With the practice he'd had the day before, his camp was set up quickly, small fire burning nicely. Sighing, Claude used the Surge can opener to open the last can of corned beef hash.

After eating half of it, he shoved the lid back down inside the can, on top of the remaining food and put it in a zip-lock to keep for the next morning. He had it and two pop-top cans of tuna left for food.

He'd heard a coyote he was sure the night before and kept the bow and arrow and the Surge handy when he went to bed. The clip point knife blade was open on the Surge. Nothing showed up during the night and Claude slept easily through the night. The tight rations and limited water was wearing him down. He was even slower getting up the next morning than he had been on the first.

But that morning he made it to the small town. He didn't see anyone at first, and then he still didn't see anyone when he heard a shot ring out. He ran for a building and ducked behind it when another shot sounded.

"What do you want?" Claude called out.

“Everything you got, mister!” came the reply, followed by a loud laughter and the sound of another shot. Claude ducked again and looked behind him, deciding negotiation was probably out of the question. Best not to give away his position by speaking from this point on.

Claude ran to the back of the building and turned the corner, staying crouched down, though he wasn't quite certain why. The man called out several more times, but Claude continued his vow of silence as he moved from building to building, trying to get away from the voice. His feeble bow and arrow were no kind of match against a gun.

But the man seemed to sense where Claude was, as he sounded just as close each time he yelled or laughed. Claude was quickly running out of places to hide behind and then suddenly found himself in a blind alley.

Claude said a bad word and crouched down behind a dumpster, frantically thinking to try and come up with a way out of the situation. If he'd been in one of the PAW stories he be armed with all manner of guns and ammunition and could just shoot the guy.

He decided praying might help and had just started to try and remember one when the voice came from just the other side of the dumpster. “Only one more street, sucker, and then you're mine!” And again that laugh.

Realizing that the man thought he was in the next alley over, Claude decided to act. He lunged against the dumpster and started it moving. The shot that hit the other side of the dumpster rang Claude's ears, but he heard the gun hit the ground when the man screamed. The dumpster had caught a shin and he went down hard, the gun flying from his hand.

Claude didn't stop. He kept pushing the dumpster until it was over the man. Claude took a quick look, it suddenly dawning on him that the man might not be alone. He didn't see anyone else and moved out from behind the dumpster. When he saw the man's head, which was the only part of him not pinned under the dumpster, Claude gagged. He was looking into the face of someone just about to die of radiation poisoning. The man's hair was in patches and his scalp was bloody. There were blood trails from his eyes and his mouth was a bloody mess, with half his teeth missing.

“You done killed me,” the man said. His head lolled to one side and a last breath blew bubbles in the blood on his lips. Claude turned away and fell to his knees, beginning to retch. He didn't stay like that for long.

He steeled himself and rolled the dumpster off the dead man and searched his body. Claude didn't find much. He didn't try all that hard. The man's clothes were nasty and he smelled to high heaven.

Claude picked up the pistol the man had been using. He couldn't believe it. The wheel of the dumpster had jammed against the pistol grip. Claude knew enough about guns from the forums that he tried to cycle the action to check it. It was jammed tight and there was no way the magazine was going to come free, either. It was useless. He started to toss it into the dumpster in

disgust, but decided to hang on to it, just in case. Just in case of what, he didn't have a clue, but he was going to keep it, anyway.

Feeling doubly vulnerable now, with having a gun that didn't work, Claude began to investigate the downtown area of the small town. The place was trashed. It looked like there had been a major gun battle, with empty brass of many different calibers spread all around.

Claude checked every place for food and bottled water. There wasn't any to be had. He tried the tap in one of the bathrooms, after taking a leak. There was a tiny trickle. Quickly Claude took out two of the empty water bottles he'd decided to keep and filled them from the tap. He sniffed the water. It didn't smell bad. He took a small sip. It didn't taste bad, but it didn't taste all that good.

Suddenly Claude remembered something he'd read on the internet. He began looking for the hot water heater. Dumping out the water from the tap, Claude refilled the bottles from the hot water tank drain when he found it. The water in the tank should be plenty safe. He filled up all six of the empty water bottles and put them back in his pack, mentally kicking himself for not having kept more of the empties.

But he had water for a few days. If he could just find some more food. He kept looking around and finally found an honor snack box in a small insurance agency that hadn't been looted. He put everything from the box in his pack. He didn't bother putting any money in the can. Instead he emptied what was in it and put the empty can in his day pack. It would make a pot for the fire.

The snack food was better than nothing, but Claude decided to start checking houses in the residential neighborhood. It turned out to be a big mistake. The third house he tried, the first two being stripped of anything useful to him, had someone still living there. And they weren't going to be looted by anyone, particularly by someone that couldn't shoot back.

Claude took off running again when the first shot rang out and didn't stop until he couldn't run anymore. He was back in the forest and began looking for a suitable campsite.

As he dug a fire pit he marveled that he had managed to hang on to not only the bow and arrow, but also the shovel during his rather hectic stay in the town. His camp was the same as the previous night. He made sure he had plenty of firewood, for it was shaping up to be a cold night.

Shaking his head just before he fell asleep, Claude decided he would be sleeping in one of the abandoned houses that seemed to be all around soon. He was very pleased with himself the next night when he did just that.

He'd left the campsite, after listening to the morning broadcast, and decided to change course and head toward another town. It was supposed to be the staging area for FEMA help in the area. So he'd cut cross country through the forest, watching the sun position to figure where west was.

Before he'd realized it, Claude had walked right up to an isolated cabin in the forest. He turned and ran back into the forest, but stopped when no one shot at him. Claude turned around and worked his way back toward the house.

There was no evidence of life and Claude finally went up to the front door and carefully tried the doorknob, half afraid it might be booby trapped. To his surprise the door wasn't locked and Claude opened it a crack. Just enough to peek in. When he still hadn't been shot at, he went ahead and opened the door wide, softly calling out, "Anybody home?"

He almost had a heart attack when he stepped further into the room and saw the two dead people sitting side-by-side in two chairs. There was a man and a woman, both very old. The corpses were holding hands. Claude didn't think they'd been dead very long. Perhaps only a couple of days.

Cautiously, Claude checked out the rustic little one-bedroom cabin. When he turned the kitchen faucet on nothing happened. He tried a light switch. Nothing.

The best he could determine, the two had probably died of dehydration. The Subaru parked by the house wouldn't start. There were only four empty water bottles in the house, all small ones. Claude checked the water heater when he found it. The couple must not have known about getting water from it when their water pump wouldn't work for lack of electricity.

He refilled his bottles, and the four at the cabin, from the water heater, and put them in his pack, in case he needed to run again. He continued to check the cabin and found a few cans of food and some packaged food, mostly Hamburger Helper. The stuff in the fridge was all spoiled.

Claude spotted a dog's food and water bowls and checked a little deeper. They must have pampered their dog, which was nowhere to be found. There were two cases of premium canned dog food in a base cabinet, plus almost another half case.

Claude shrugged his shoulders, opened one of the cans of dog food with the Surge, and tried a taste. It was better than some of the cheap store brand canned soup he'd eaten in his day. He ate the rest of the can as he continued to look around outside.

There was a small structure at the edge of the opening of the forest where the cabin was. Claude checked it. The pump house. There was a large stack of firewood against the side of the cabin.

Claude sighed and looked for a spot to dig the grave. It took him the rest of the afternoon, and he quit digging well before he was six feet deep. He felt bad having to drag the bodies from the house, one at a time, and dump them in the grave. He just wasn't strong enough to actually handle them gently. He refilled the grave before going back inside the cabin.

Without the presence of the dead bodies spooking him, Claude went over the cabin again at more leisure, hoping for, and looking for, some type of firearm. There weren't any he could find. Claude brought in plenty of firewood and started a fire in the small wood heating stove. It

had started getting cold when he finished filling the graves. And it smelled like it might snow to him, despite it still being October.

That night Claude had the first hot food he'd had in weeks. He heated up another can of that excellent dog food in a pan on the wood stove and ate it sitting in front of the stove. He changed the sheets on the bed in the tiny bedroom and undressed for the first time in weeks before slipping between the sheets. After locking all the doors and windows of the cabin.

He slept until he woke up late the next morning. Claude looked outside. There was a foot of fresh snow on the ground. Claude finished the last of his original rations for breakfast and sat by the stove after he started the fire in it again, to think.

Once again, Claude went over the little cabin, this time with a fine tooth comb mindset. He began to find things he realized he could use in the future. The small bedroom closet furnished two pairs of jeans, three sizes too big for Claude. But he had other uses for them in mind. The pair of bib overalls and blue jean jacket were also three sizes too big, but Claude decided that layering them over his Dickies for the extra warmth would work just fine.

The dead man must have had size thirteen feet, because the pair of five-buckle rubber overshoes were that size. But Claude took some of the old newspaper from the bin beside the stove, wrapped his size nine shoes with it, stuffed some in the toes of the boots, and tried them on. A bit awkward, but it would be better than just his work shoes in the snow. He took the rubber boots back off and set them, and the extra newspaper, aside for future use.

Using more of the paracord, Claude tied off the legs of both pairs of jeans. He began loading the tied off legs with the cans of dog food until one pair was full. He tied the waistband closed with another piece of the paracord. He slung the pants over one shoulder, one leg hanging down in front and one behind. He decided to tie the legs together on the opposite side from the shoulder the make-shift pack was across.

The shoulder pads of his day pack would cushion the crotch of the pants where it rested on his shoulder. Deciding it would work, Claude took off the blue jean pack and set it aside. The other pair of jeans he treated the same way, though he put only a few cans of the dog food in the legs. The rest of the space was taken up with toilet paper. The cabin was well stocked with it. He kept having a recurring dream of running out.

Since he couldn't carry all the dog food, and wasn't about to let it go to waste, Claude made the decision to stay at the cabin a few days until the food he hadn't packed ran out. That evening he had hamburger helper made with a can of the dog food. Claude decided he'd come up with a new gourmet meal.

After supper, Claude made sure the cabin was locked up tight, undressed by the stove and took a sponge bath with water heated in a pan on the stove. The man's underwear was, of course, a bit big, but he must have worn it tight, for it fit Claude all right. The T-shirts were a bit big, but that didn't bother Claude one whit. The socks tended to sag, but he could live with that, too. Claude went to bed again between clean sheets, himself clean.

When he went out the next morning to get more wood for the stove, he found the single bit axe stuck in a chopping block at the far end of the stack of firewood. He hadn't seen it on his first pass around the house.

Using it for what had to be its intended purpose, Claude split up a bunch of kindling out of a couple of the larger split pieces of firewood. He took the axe into the cabin with him with the last load of wood. It was snowing again.

Claude stayed in the cabin for four more days, until the packaged food, and the un-packed dog food were all gone. He drained the last of the water from the water heater into his empty water bottles, repacked the day pack, including a couple of changes of the dead man's underwear, plus extra socks. He remembered that clean, dry socks were important in cold and/or wet conditions, A place setting of utensils, plus a steak knife from the kitchen drawers were added, wrapped in a dish towel.

He'd decided not to take any of the cooking pots. They were all either too big, or cast iron. The woman of the house must have loved it. She'd had plenty. But Claude had cut down a wire coat hanger one evening with the Surge and made a bail for the coffee can. It was still going to be his main cook kit. He'd be able to heat his food now.

He took a last look around the place, looking for anything else he might want to take with him. Despite the butane lighters he had, Claude added the box of strike anywhere matches the couple had kept by the stove to his day pack.

Finally, with the bib overalls and jean jacket on over the Dickies, the rubber overshoes on over his work shoes, the day pack on, and the jean packs slung like bandoleers, with the lined poncho over all, Claude picked up the shovel, the axe, and bow and arrow and left the cabin, bound for the next town over, and some help from FEMA, thinking, "Surely FEMA can't be as bad as the forums say."

As much as he liked his Leatherman Surge, the small axe made things easier setting up camp and gathering firewood. Besides, it made him feel much safer than just carrying his bow with one light arrow.

He did take the time one evening, after finding another suitable sapling, to make another arrow tip from his other house key, and made a second arrow, this one even better than the first. He got his first rabbit with it the day after he made it.

Dead rabbit in hand, Claude stood with his eyes closed for several minutes, trying to remember how to prepare a rabbit for eating. He got some hair on the meat, and his hands were bloody, as was the Surge, but Claude finally had a skinned and gutted rabbit ready for roasting over the fire that evening. It was probably the best meal he'd ever had, he decided before turning in under the poncho shelter.

His shoulders sore from carrying the heavy cans of dog food in the jeans pack, Claude was really looking forward to meeting up with the rescue workers from FEMA. That dog food was good, but it wasn't what he wanted for a lifelong diet.

At least the couple of rabbits and squirrels he'd managed to kill had broken up the monotony some. And he had the huge bottle of Centrum Silver vitamins from the dead couple's cabin to supplement the food. He was feeling better since he'd started taking one of them a day.

The large jar of beef bouillon cubes had made the game better, too. He quit roasting it and cut it up and boiled the pieces with a bouillon cube to make a meat soup. He made sure to drink all the resulting broth, as well as eating the meat. The salty bouillon was satisfying a craving he hadn't been able to figure out.

Claude was back on the road, headed into the town, which was perhaps two miles away, when he heard vehicles behind him. He'd planned to stop and wait for them, but found himself taking to the woods at the side of the road, the warnings about FEMA camps coming back to him unannounced.

He was glad he'd hidden when a short military convoy passed and he saw the sad state of the civilians huddled in the backs of three open trucks. There were men, women, and children. It sure looked like they were being guarded, not protected, by the National Guardsmen carrying loaded M-4 carbines in the vehicles before and after the transport trucks.

Claude felt a chill, despite his warm clothing. He decided to do a little investigating before contacting the authorities. Staying within the confines of the forest, Claude headed toward the town again. He decided to stop and camp early, as it had started to snow again.

He kept his fire smaller even than usual, a bit fearful someone might smell it and come looking for him before he was ready to be found. At that, he kept the axe beside him, as he lay in the poncho liner sleeping bag during the night. He didn't sleep well and was up early. He started the fire again, and used one of the precious tea bags he'd liberated at the cabin to make a hot drink before eating a cold breakfast of more dog food. Maybe it wasn't as good as he'd first thought.

After he broke camp, Claude had only traveled a few hundred yards when he heard noises ahead. He hurriedly backed off, decided to cache most of his stuff, and then, when he had the hole dug, decided to add the day pack to the cache, along with the jean packs. He kept out a bottle of water and the axe. After covering the hole, Claude found a place to stash the shovel nearby. The falling snow would soon hide any sign of the cache and shovel.

Moving very carefully, Claude moved toward where he'd heard the sounds, and was soon hearing them again. There was the thrum of what Claude decided was a big generator running. Coming to the edge of a new clearing in the forest, Claude crouched down and took in the sight before him.

It looked like the prison camp in the old TV comedy Hogan's Heros. Double rows of fencing with razor wire topping both, guard towers with search lights and armed guards. The

large tents were laid out barracks style. There were several mobile homes within another fenced enclosure. Claude decided they were the guard's quarters and probably the offices for the camp. Another separately fenced and guarded area contained a small motor pool.

Claude had seen enough. This wasn't for him. He started to back up when he felt something cold and hard press against the back of his neck through the hood of the poncho. "Going or coming?" asked a voice colder than the weather.

Thinking he was about to meet his maker, Claude said, "Going."

The pressure against the back of his neck eased somewhat and he felt himself being patted down. "You telling me you're up here scouting this place armed with only a single bit axe? You're crazier than I am, man."

The pressure was gone and when the man didn't say not to, Claude slowly turned around, his hands in the air. The man was wearing an old white bed sheet over his clothes, serape style. He had what looked like the biggest handgun Claude had ever seen still pointed at Claude.

"Ease on back here. I don't want to shoot you where it can be heard. And this thing is pretty loud."

Despite the terror, Claude had to ask. "What kind of gun is that?"

With a real note of pride in his voice, the man replied, "Smith and Wesson .500 Magnum double action revolver. Got it just before things went sour. Now shut up, and keep coming toward me."

The man continued to back up, moving like he had eyes in the back of his head. When they were well away from the camp, the man stopped, relaxed just a bit, but kept the big revolver loosely aimed at Claude.

"Okay. What's your name and what in the bloody blazes are you doing here?"

"I'm Claude McMillan. I was looking for FEMA for some help. I've been on my own since the bomb went off the far side of the city."

"It was a missile warhead, not a bomb," the man said, always irritated when people didn't use correct terminology.

Claude flinched at the angry look on the man's face, but relaxed when the man didn't shoot him. "How'd you manage with just that axe?" the man asked then. Much to Claude's relief, the man holstered the gun in a long shoulder holster under sheet covered heavy coat.

"Well... I just found the axe recently." Suddenly, all in a rush, Claude essentially spilled his guts, telling the astonished man the whole story, from the time the warhead went off until the man had found him.

“You are totally the luckiest man I ever met, or the smartest. I’m pretty sure you ain’t the smartest. Where’s your stuff?”

Claude dropped his eyes and hesitated. “Look, goon,” the man said, “I don’t want your stuff. I’ve got my own equipment and supplies. You’re little treasure trove is of no interest to me.”

“I cached it back a little ways further.”

“Let’s go get it and get back to my camp. You being in the area changes things for me.”

Claude didn’t really thing the man would shoot him if he refused, but he still felt like he had no choice and led the man back to the shovel, and then the cache.

“I didn’t believe it,” said the guy as Claude pulled the items out of the cache. “That really is all you have.” He gave Claude a hard look. “Unless you have a bunch more stuff cached somewhere else... Naw! No way.” The man shook his head yet again.

“What’s your name, anyway?” Claude asked, a little insulted at the man’s attitude.

“Henry J. Coombs. You can call me Jay.”

“I don’t have to call you Johnson?” Claude said, barely able to get the question out from holding back the laughter. He loved that joke.

Jay just had a blank look on his face. “Why would you call me Johnson? You’re going kind of nuts from all this, aren’t you?”

Claude tried to explain the routine he’d seen the comedian perform one time on a television retro show. It went over like a lead balloon.

“Forget it, Kid. It wasn’t funny, and it ain’t funny. Come on, let’s go. Sometime the camp puts out a roving patrol. I can’t get caught.”

Quiet and subdued, Claude followed Jay’s lead and followed him back to a well camouflaged small camp a good two miles from where they’d started. “Set up your shelter here by mine,” Jay said. The snow was getting heavier and Claude started to hurry out into the forest to get the wood he needed to set up the poncho shelter, after he dropped his packs.

“Hey! Where you going?” Jay asked, his hand going under his jacket.

“Got to get the sticks for the poncho,” Claude said. “Don’t want to get them from right here. It’ll mess up the camouflage job.”

“Oh. Okay,” Jay said, not showing he was a bit impressed with Claude’s recognition of the needs of maintaining a low profile.

Claude was back a few minutes later, a bundle of sticks in hand. He had the shelter up in no time, again impressing Jay. Claude took out the trash bags, which were beginning to show significant wear and laid them out on the snow under the poncho so he could lay out his poncho liner on them to protect it from the snow. It was a tiny shelter, but it was working for Claude.

“Okay,” Jay said, “I’ll be back in a minute.

Claude huddled over the fire, warming his hands, while Jay was gone. It was only a couple of minutes before Jay was back, with a large hunk of venison. “Got it tied up in a tree in case of bears or cougars,” Jay said, forcing a stick through the meat before setting the assembly across the fire on a pair of Y-sticks that were in the ground on each side of the fire.

Claude blanched at the mention of bears and cougars. He hadn’t given them a thought when he was camping out, more concerned about human predators than animal. He picked up the axe and held it in his lap.

Jay managed not to laugh, but reached into his tent and pulled out the coolest gun Claude thought he’d ever seen. It was one of those PTR-91’s that one of the PAW fiction writers was always touting. Claude recognized the fact that the gun had a 30-round magazine rather than the standard 20-rounder usually found with .308 rifles.

“Don’t worry, about the bears and cougars. I can take care of them if I have to. I just don’t want to.” He patted the receiver of the PTR-91.

“That’s a...” Claude started to say ‘cool gun’, but changed it to “nice weapon,” in the nick of time. He didn’t want to show his geekyness.

“You just left it in your tent while you were away from your camp? Aren’t you afraid someone would take it?”

“You didn’t notice the tripwires we crossed coming into the camp?” Jay asked.

Claude blanched again. “Uh... No.”

Jay shook his head. This guy really was a kook. He’d stepped over the trip wires, staying right in Jay’s footsteps, when they came to the camp. Jay had assumed Claude had known they would be there and saw them.

“Well, they aren’t lethal, but the shotgun noise makers should scare most people away, and the Goons aren’t coming this deep in the forest. Too many of us around taking pot shots at them.”

“There are more of you?” Claude asked. “I thought it was just you.”

“Nope. Got a retreat back higher up in the mountains to the west. Wouldn’t be anywhere near here, except the JBT’s caught one of our salvage teams and brought them to the camp over there.”

Claude was pleased that he knew what a JBT was. A jack booted thug. That's apparently what some of the National Guard units had become. There'd been no mention of it on any of the emergency broadcasts.

"All the camps like this?" Claude asked.

"No. Fortunately not," Jay said, turning the spitted venison. "Got some kin up north. They weren't preppers and had to go to one of the camps. Sure isn't the sweet life, but they're doing okay. The authorities there even let them have contact by radio hams. We've got a killer ham radio shack at the retreat. It's only how the local commanders set things up that determines if the camp is a prison camp or an aid camp. I don't think there is much federal, or even state control left."

"I've been listening to the emergency broadcasts," Claude said, suddenly checking his watch and then digging the windup combo out of his day pack. "Time for one, now."

Jay stayed silent while Claude listened to the short broadcast studiously. Claude looked over at Jay after the broadcast ended. "They keep saying things area all right and getting better."

"I guess they are, in some places," Jay said, shrugging his shoulders. "There where our retreat is, we've already got a pretty thriving system going on with the two close towns and a couple more retreat groups. If my friends hadn't been taken, I'd be there right now, not here."

"Yeah," Claude said. "You mentioned that. How are you going to get them back?" Claude didn't even consider that Jay wasn't going to try.

"I was going to try to ambush a lone vehicle and crash the gates. Let everyone out and let my friends head for home on their own."

Even Jay knew it wasn't much of a plan. Claude's look confirmed that he thought the same thing.

"Got to be a better way," Claude said.

"With you here, there is."

Claude didn't like the way Jay's eyes glittered in the firelight when he looked at him.

Jay admitted as much. "You aren't going to like the new plan."

"I'm part of it?" Claude had a feeling he knew what was coming next.

"Yeah. You're going to surrender to the camp, find my friends, and get them ready for a rescue mission. It's going to be a lot easier to make a little hole in the fences than a big one in the gate. We should have time to get far enough away before the Goons can mount a good search for

us. They give up pretty quickly. Not enough fuel to follow very far, and like I said, they don't like to get too deep into these woods. There are some locals that snipe at them all the time."

Claude sighed. It probably was the best plan, considering all things. Jay surprised Claude then. "I can't make you do this," Jay said. "But all of us at the retreat would really appreciate it if you would help. You'd be welcome to join us, if you live through it."

Claude didn't like the 'live through it' part, but having a safe destination sure did sound good. And besides, in all the stories on the forums, it would be the thing to do. Claude nodded. "When?" he asked.

"Day after tomorrow," Jay said immediately.

Claude turned in after stuffing himself on the roasted venison. He gave a very thankful Jay one of the rolls of toilet paper from one of the jeans packs after he came back into camp with the shovel, after having done his own business out in the woods.

A very cold and nervous Claude walked slowly up to the main gate of the FEMA camp the morning of his third day of knowing Jay. Claude, at Jay's suggestion, had switched to just the bib overalls over two tee shirts, plus the blue jean jacket. It wasn't enough to keep him warm.

And that would be a major help in convincing the guards that he was wanting to enter the camp.

To keep from freezing. And to get some food. He carried a couple of cans of the dog food and a bottle of water in the voluminous pockets of the bibs. Claude had the makeshift bow and arrows in one hand. He felt naked without his other prep gear, especially the Leatherman Surge.

A pair of guards came running toward him as soon as he showed up in the clearing near the main gate of the camp. Claude threw up his hands, crying out, "Don't shoot! Don't shoot!" not having to fake the panic rising in his voice. He threw the bow and arrows onto the ground.

Much like he'd poured out his heart and soul to Jay, Claude told the commander of the camp what he'd been doing since the war when he was brought before him for questioning. But he'd practiced the speech over and over with Jay the day before. It was almost completely the truth, with a couple of things left out, and a couple added to what had actually occurred.

It seemed to satisfy Colonel Hamilton. "Delouse him, and put him in the general population," he told Claude's guard. The Colonel looked at Claude once more before dismissing him and said, "Work hard, keep your nose clean, don't start trouble and you'll get a decent meal once a day, all the water you can drink, and roof over your head at night. Don't and there is a graveyard plot just waiting for you."

Claude was thankful that Jay hadn't insisted that Claude immediately start trying to find Jay's friends. It would have been too suspicious. But as the first week of the tough life of a FEMA camp prisoner ended, Claude had been able to locate three of the four people he was looking for. They told him the fourth person had been killed by the guards during the periodic escape attempts.

Being as casual as they could be in meeting, Claude laid out the plan for escape that Jay had outlined for them. When they decided on the night they'd try the escape, Claude made the signal that Jay was watching for. He hung a piece of cloth on the fence near the gate. It didn't stay there long, for the guards spotted it and removed it.

The guards doubled up on their rounds for two days, assuming the cloth had been some kind of signal. But when nothing happened, the routine went back to normal. Five days after the signal, per the plan, Claude and his three new friends waited until the guards began to change shifts at eleven at night.

It was cold and it was snowing and the wind was blowing. With Claude in the lead, much to his surprise, the four made their way to the selected spot along the fence. There'd been no escape attempt in some time, since the last one had resulted in over a dozen deaths during the attempt, and six executions afterward, and the guards were getting lax again. Some of them didn't have much stomach for the job, anyway.

The four lay down and covered themselves with snow, despite the cold, and waited for Jay. Claude thought he would have a heart attack when Jay poked him through the fence. He'd been watching and hadn't seen Jay creeping between the double set of wire fencing.

Jay cut just enough fence wire to allow the four to slip through the inner fence. Staying low, they all crossed to the outer fence that Jay had already cut. Jay led the way through and then stood up and they all began running toward the forest.

A tower guard saw the movement and turned the spotlight on them and began to fire with his M-4. Either he was a really poor shot, or was one of the sympathetic guards. For whatever reason, he completely missed all five of the men.

But the gate guards were scrambling to chase them. When the escapees hit the edge of the forest, the men grabbed the weapons Jay had set out for them and began to fire at the guards as they hurried deeper into the forest, along a route that Jay had carefully laid out to give them the most protection.

The planned ambush was highly successful. When Jay reached the spot, he waved the others to their positions. All crouched down and opened fire on the guards in the lead when they got close enough.

It slowed down the other guards enough to allow the escapees to get a longer and longer lead. Jay stopped the little band and they listened quietly for some time. There were no more sounds of pursuit.

They stopped and picked up the rest of the cached gear and continued as quickly as they could. Everyone was near exhaustion when Jay finally stopped them at the base camp he'd set up weeks before fifteen miles from the FEMA camp. They rested for two days, keeping constant watch, to allow the somewhat enfeebled three members of the salvage team to recuperate.

Claude reluctantly offered to turn in the rifle and equipment Jay had provided him, as he had for the others. He was ecstatic when Jay told him it was now his, since he was now part of the retreat group. It was an old WW II mil-surp M1 Carbine, but he had a dozen magazines for it, and plenty of ammunition and the means to carry it all. But it was his. He was a real prepper now.

Claude couldn't quit grinning when he marched up to the gate of Jay's retreat a week later and was welcomed by everyone as one of their own. Almost as a hero for his part of getting their companions and friends out of the FEMA camp.

"Yep," Claude said to himself, "This is the way it's supposed to be."

End *****

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