

Tales of the Chërnyi Lyle Elkins

His sideswiper rattled away. "QRU?" Now that he had cleared all of his traffic, in and out bound, it was time shut things down and pull the plug.

"QRU THX." Nothing more! He could go home a bit early after finishing his station chores. That meant his dinner would be warm, or warmer anyway.

"NNBD QRT SK 73 CL" Clearing off the net and indicating the station was shutting down was the last bit he had to send over the air. Now on to tonight's station tasks. The extra work was uncompensated - he got paid strictly for the amount of traffic he handled. But performing the tasks was a prerequisite for being a station operator. Shrugging, there never had been a free lunch as father often told him.

Setting his headphones on their peg, he methodically shut down the station. Pushing back from the operator's console, he stood, walking over to the antenna patch panel. Shunting the station receiver input to the station master ground and ensuring all the antennas were set for local ground took just a minute. It would be windy tonight, if the Metro folks were on their game.

Outside, he tipped the solar panels down and carefully wiped the surface of each. With a grunt, they went upright and he pinned the rack to hold the panels in place. Pulling the main cog release, he swung the panels back east, wound the clockwork, and then set the trip solenoid. When the sun came up enough to trip the brake, the panels would track the sun, maximizing the station battery charge.

"Well, Lyle, you did good tonight!" he said excitedly. Over 30 incoming messages, and that he only had to split off 25% of his fee to the delivery boy was exciting. With 54 outgoing messages, and able to keep 90% of the full rate for those, had made for a profitable night indeed. Back inside the station, he rolled a message form into the mill and typed away. Even flipping each form and putting the delivery address on the back, folding and sealing the message, his work lasted less than a half hour. Taking the time to split the messages out into their correct baskets only took a few minutes, but it ensured he would keep his night shift position for the rest of the semester. He would have to wait to see what the summer would bring.

In the outer office of the station, he chalked in tomorrow's forecast, and then hung the board back in the window, almost a shutter. The station did this as a goodwill effort for the community. It also ensured everyone in town had a stake in keeping the station in operation. Grabbing his bike from behind the counter, he rolled it out the door. Double locking the door, he sped away. A late dinner would complete the day and then his next trip would be to school in the morning.

The sky was clear, stars filling the sky. The moon wouldn't be up tonight, so care was required once he hit the edge of the village limits. It had been just over seven years since Rockfall, and yet trying to recall how everything looked with lights that would stay on all night and automobiles scurrying about were harder each season. The ride was mercifully short. Winter wasn't fully gone and he'd forgotten his gloves, again.

Locking the bicycle away, he entered the house from the kitchen door. The smell of fresh bread, roast and potatoes filled his senses. Although they were clean, he washed his hands at the kitchen sink once again to avoid Mother's reminder.

Lifting the cover from the insulated box revealed a plate holding a huge mound of mashed potatoes, two thick slices of beef and a helping of carrots. Father must have been working the cold frames early this year - all the better for him. The food was quickly gone and the plate rinsed and set aside for a washing tomorrow.

Walking into the great room he discovered Mother reading by the powerful white light of the kerosene lantern, and on the other side of the table, Father was carefully assembling ...something. "What are you working on tonight?" he asked.

His mother answered first - "Hello, dear. Busy at work tonight?"

Sitting next to her - giving, and getting a hug, his answer surprised them. "Should be a twenty dollar month, maybe a bit more. I worked 30 inbound and almost twice that outbound."

"Keep that pace up and your next semester will be paid for before the summer is here!" She couldn't keep the delight out of her voice. "Speaking of summer - you received a letter today. It's on the sideboard." Father had wisely remained silent.

The letter was addressed to him, with the return address down state. Must be important enough to spend a nickel to send it but not important enough for a radiogram. The return address showed it was from Mr. Lewis. Tending to his sheep had been a good enough way to while away last summer, the pay however, that had been less than stellar. To be fair, it had been his first year herding, but he had dreams...dreams that didn't include watching sheep wandering around and getting fat.

It took but a minute to read the letter - and to puzzle over the message.

Father's deep voice broke the silence, "Well?"

Lyle looked up, "Well, Mr. Lewis would like me back for this season; he's willing to pay more - but..."

"But what, Lyle?" The smile was a pleasant punctuation to the question.

"He's willing to pay more - a lot more really, but he wants to run the herd at a place right on the Frontier."

"How close?" this said in a serious, low voice.

"East of Gabbs, outside of Kingston."

"That doesn't make a lot of sense, how can he afford to truck the sheep all that way west?"

Lyle replied simply, "The letter says that the PMA is going to reopen the silver mines in Austin, and they want mutton to feed the miners." Lyle made a face. Ely and the ranges north were nice in the summer, he'd spent his time following the herd along the edge of the Ruby Mountains, lots of water, good grass and the hunting was good. He'd even been able to make almost two hundred pounds of deer and elk jerky to bring home for the winter. Bailed in green buckskin, it was a welcome load when he boarded the Flatliner in Delta for the trip north.

"Damn." Father didn't automatically apologize - odd for him. "That's more than a tad close...of course, since the Battle of Walker Lake; nobody from Nuevo Mexico has been seen in the area."

Mother's comment caught them both by surprise, "Don't mean a thing. You know my brother was in the 9th Western Division, he fought the raiders, they killed the lot - just let a few go to spread the word, the US is a bad place for bandits."

"Technically, they were brigands, Dear. There were a lot of Vet's on their side as well. The area's is pretty much worthless, outside of the mining." Pausing, he added, "Did Lewis mention anything about protection or the like?"

"No, Sir. Just wanted me to run the herd and track how much the PMA took to feed the miners." Frowning, he continued, "He did say since the hunting would be bad, I could have any wool they were able to shear on site." Lyle shook his head, he might be young, but he was no fool - "Can't spent promises or maybes."

"How soon do you have to let him know?" Her question seemed - strange, why wasn't she telling him to reject the offer outright?

"End of the month; that gives me two weeks before I have to post something."

That statement earned nothing but silence. Rather than wonder what this was all about,

he just said - "I'm hitting the rack, have an early class tomorrow." And that was that.

Until Saturday morning - and a knock on the door. Closest to the door, Mother opened it to find a man in a uniform.

"Good morning, Ma'm. Mrs. Elkins, may I assume?"

"Without being rude, you are? She asked"

"Ah. I beg your pardon. Major William Perkins, US Army Signal Corps. Official business today, I'm afraid. I'm told Mr. Lyle Elkins lives here? I have business with him."

"Well, that *is* interesting. Yes, I'm Mrs. Elkins, and please come in."

"Thank you." At least the uniformed man was polite.

"Please have a seat, I'll go and fetch Lyle."

"Thank you so much, Ma'm." He sat, notebook on his knees, hat in hand.

She found Lyle in the kitchen, helping his father clean up the dishes; they always had a large, if late, breakfast on Saturday. Mother cooked, they cleaned, a fair trade for a fantastic breakfast. "Lyle, you have a gentleman from the Army in the parlor who would like to talk with you. Said he had business for you."

Wiping his hands, he said, "Father, would you please come with me? I could use advice, whatever the Army might want." That earned a nod. They took a moment to straighten up their clothes, and then went into the parlor.

Major Perkins introduced himself again, and then sat back on the sofa. Lyle and his father did the same in the chairs across from him. All three say silent, unsure of who should start the conversation. The Major saved them from the dilemma - "Mr. Elkins, Lyle? - I understand you are the night shift operator at the radiotelegraph station NNBD?"

"You are correct in that, Sir. Is there an issue with my operating?"

His smile defused the situation, "No, not in the least. In fact, my Inspectors and Monitors tell me you're one of the sharper young men working in the system. First rate fist, very high speed, very low error rate. Best operator in the State, in fact. That brings me to the point of my visit." He let that hang for a second. "The Army wants to hire you. Sort of."

A glance from Lyle showed Father with his 'It's your game' face on. "Could you be any more specific?"

"My sources tell me you have a job offer from a Mr. Lewis, to herd sheep in the area around Austin, Old Nevada."

Lyle looked at the Army man, hard - "And how did you come by that information, if I may be so bold as to ask."

Another smile. "Indeed. Very private. Mr. Lewis is a retired Captain from the 6th Western Veteran Corps. And a very good friend of mine. I had asked him to see if he could arrange a situation where we could find a bright young man, trainable in radio operations, to be in the area for this summer." A very big smile, "It would seem that Captain Lewis is still very good at what he does."

"You still haven't explained what this all has to do with me."

This earned an outright laugh. "Goodness. Phil was right; you are a very bright fellow." The Major took a deep breath, putting on a very serious face. "The PMA will be opening the silver mines in Austin, we can use the silver, but we are mostly doing this to establish, no, make that reinforce, our sovereign border, and then, perhaps, to push that border back to the Pacific." His father broke the silence with a sharp intake of breath.

"I'll be frank. Nuevo Mexico got a free ride right after Rockfall. The US Government was in disarray, in truth, all but falling apart. The Mexicans used that to move in and take US territory. Given the situation in southern California and parts of Arizona at the time, we were willing to let it go. All of our diplomatic work to date has been rebuffed. We want our southern ports back, we need them to move forward as a Nation. That is where you come in."

The Major leaned forward, "We need an observer in the area, with radio skills to report what they do, and do not see. We've had reports of incursions all the way to Tonopah and armed patrols as far north as Fallon. The last thing we want is for them to take over the old Naval facilities and use them as a base for projecting forces further east." He sat back, opening his notebook.

"So far, they haven't bothered anyone. Just walk in, look around, walk back out. Scouting we assume. We envision you as being in the area, making a few trips into Hawthorne to purchase supplies, and then reporting back to us what you have observed and what others have told you what they have noticed." He paused, as if thinking. "We have two sleeper agents in town, but no means to contact them with any rapidity."

"With all due respect, Major, it sounds like something outside of my experience."

"I beg to differ, Lyle. You have proven to be very able in bush craft, as most young men are these days - of necessity. You maintain your own bicycle and commute some distance both to work and school. You have proven responsible enough to be trusted with an entire commercial radiotelegraph station, as Chief Night Operator." Another smile, "Captain Lewis tells me you are a dead shot with a Mauser, taking game at distances he had trouble even seeing. You sound *exactly* like the man for our work this summer."

He pulled a paper from his notebook, handing it to Lyle. "Before you read that, I must tell you that document is covered by the Secrets Act. In fact, should you choose to read it, your father must leave the room." He turned, "I am sorry Mr. Elkins, it is no reflection on you or your family - but it is the law. I must suspend enough of the Act to

allow your son full disclosure in order to make an informed decision. You cannot be part of that decision."

Father spoke at last. "You're correct, Sir. Lyle is sixteen and has his majority. And with no disrespect intended, I only ask that you not lie to my son. Explain the real risks, if you hold ethics dear."

"You have my solemn word as both an Officer and as a father of my own fifteen year old daughter."

"Please let me know what you two decide." Without another word, he walked out of his own living room, wondering what his son would decide.

The Major sat as Lyle read the document, twice. When Lyle looked up, he simply said, "I think you will have to agree that our terms are more than generous. We will ensure your work is applied for credit against your degree, as appropriate. We will also cover your tuition costs through a Masters, should you wish to pursue that."

"Yes, generous, but all in the future. What of my family? My pay goes to help support all of us."

"You will receive the amount specified by Captain Lewis, in advance; we will double that pay for our part. We will also pay a bonus for each report sent. The Army will provide your kit, you will need to attend a maintenance school for the specific radio equipment you will use, and while at radio school, we will provide some additional marksmanship training. This will cover weapons most likely held by the Neuvo Mexico forces. We do not foresee any threats to you, or even any remote chance of hostile contact - but it is only fair to provide training should the circumstances change."

"This is a lot to think about."

The Major nodded. "It is indeed. You will have to work long days, but then, you will be well compensated for that work." He reached out his hand and took the document from Lyle. "I can only give you to Monday morning to tell me what you have decided. I'll be by at eleven AM to hear of your decision. Now, if you will excuse me?"

Lyle locked the door after the Major left. He really did have a lot to think about.

Back in the great room, his parents sat, silently looking up to him. He'd been nine years old, the year of Rockfall or of the Chërnyi, as many called it. As a family, they had survived, and then thrived. Father had been a thoughtful man, even back then. Their stored food had gotten them past the Famine, but only just. The cold frame farm his father had built helped put them ahead. When he turned 14, Father had explained the loss of life and the narrow escape they'd all had.

The twins moved away last year, each taking the offer to help re-settle the Colorado/Kansas border area. Goodland had been destroyed by looters and gangbangers out of Denver, then again by brigands from the KC area. The PMA had declared the area as pacified, offering remaining, and standing farmsteads for the taking, if the land was worked. That only young and heavily armed men were in the first wave was no accident. Lyle stayed in touch with his brothers via his op friend at station NNGK. Now this.

The PMA wanted him to travel to the very edge of known civilization, or at least to the edge of the rule of law. He sat next to Mother. "Is it fair to leave you?" he asked.

His Mother answered by going over to the old cedar chest in the corner and removing a small box. Back at the table, she lifted it open and pulled out a shiny metal object. Laying it on the table, she softly said, "This is my dog tag. I spent four years, on and off in Southwest Asia." Another went next to it. "This is your father's, we met in Landstuhl as he recovered."

She pulled two more. "This belonged to my father. He served in Vietnam and the Gulf. This one is grandfather Elkins'. He died in Vietnam." Removing a layer of tissue paper, she removed yet another tag. "Your great-grandfather Elkins was a young man when he parachuted over France in World War Two. He survived Inchon."

The final item was a round aluminum tag, crude numbers stamped in the face of one side. "Great-great-grandfather Kilgour, on my side of the family, was in France with the Engineers for the Great War." Eyes moist, she looked at him. "Some families, or Nations, prosper *from* the sacrifice of others. We have prospered as a family and as a Nation *because* we understand sacrifice is sometimes needed for everyone to prosper. That sacrifice may be just time spent away from family. Or" she paused, taking a deep breath; "it may mean losing your life."

She brushed away a stray lock of his red hair. Then looking into his gray-green eyes finished with, "You've come from a long line of warriors, men and women who fought for what they believed in or to save family and country. You reached majority this last year - you've lived alone, fed yourself and have the skills to support yourself and hopefully, a family. We couldn't be prouder of you, Lyle. We will support whatever decision you make - but it is *your* decision to make." She stood and left for her bedroom, shutting the door.

His father added quietly, "Lyle, you don't have to take the offer. You can work elsewhere for the summer and finish your schooling. I will offer this. You can go to school anytime, but ask yourself - are you willing, in your old age, to lay awake at night and ask in the dark, "What would I be today of I had taken the challenge?" Father stood and joined his wife, leaving Lyle alone with his thoughts and the shiny bits of memory sitting on the table.

Army training

The document had been specific; he was only to bring two changes of clothing and any boots that were fit for walking. The Major, on his request, swung by the station and allowed him to pick up his 'bug' and cans. He'd tuned each for comfort and they would be useful in his new work, or at least he hoped.

The base was small, actually an older industrial complex, left behind during the troubles. He was shown the dining hall, a small room and turned over to his instructor - one Sergeant Major Holmstead. "Call me Billy; we're going to be joined at the hip for the next three weeks, more or less. You swim?"

Outfitted in a set of short dungarees, they hit the pool. Like many his age, Lyle had never seen or been in anything larger than a bathtub or pond, so the large open pool was intimidating. Billy solved that by throwing him in. The panic stopped when he realized the water was barely five feet deep. "Lesson one, water won't kill you. Trying

to breath it will. Head to the other end. Now!" Billy was sitting on the edge of the pool, working on a clipboard when Lyle managed to struggle to the end.

"Not bad, son. Now, head to the other end, fast as you can." As Billy walked away, Lyle wondered if this is how men learned the many ways to curse... Now breathing heavily, he was happy to have made it the entire way back.

"Lesson two, working *against* water is a bitch, wear you out faster than a two dollar wh..." He coughed, "It's hard work. Grab the rail and stick your feet out." Satisfied, he said, "Kick your feet, like this," he waggled his fingers to demonstrate. "Good. Now, do that on your back. Keep kicking 'till I get back."

Only a few minutes passed when Billy returned with a fuel can. He dropped it in the pool next to Lyle. "Okay. Hold that and kick across the pool." It took Lyle several trials until he figured out that putting the can under his chest allowed him to float easily and make pretty good time back across the pool. There, Billy took the can back and handed Lyle two large plastic bottles.

"Lesson three. A lot of shit floats, if it can hold air, it'll float really good. You'll be getting some of these to carry water. Now, go back to the other end." Again, it took a bit to sort out how to best use the floatation. He settled on holding one on each side, next to his chest. The arrangement worked, but keeping his head above water was a strain. Back on the other side, Billy stood smiling.

"Okay. Swimming lessons for today are over. Let's go!" Each day, as the dawn cracked overhead, they were both back at the pool until Billy was satisfied Lyle wouldn't kill himself crossing deep water. It had never occurred to Lyle to complain about how cold the water was each day when they jumped in, Billy actually seemed to enjoy it.

The wagon was his, literally. It was the wagon he would live in while tending sheep. "Willyboy tells me you have done this before. Strip and pack the wheel bearings. Everything you need is over in the warehouse." He pointed over his shoulder and left. Lyle took the time to go through the wagon. Empty. The box that made the front seat did hold a jack, but it looked pretty sketchy. Otherwise, he was empty handed.

The warehouse was a mess. The aisles were passable, but everything else looked like it had been packed away by a madman. No matter, he knew what he needed, as he found each item, he would place it just outside the rolling door. Can of grease, large water pump pliers, a large box of cotter pins he found by accident. As he uncovered wrenches or other hand tools, they went into a small bag discovered by the door. To his delight, he uncovered a large bottle jack, rated for several tons. This went to the stack of items by door as well.

He picked up a leather apron, gloves - several sets, heavy and light leather, a folding knife and a lager knife, curved enough to be useful in skinning. If the Army was stupid enough to leave him to have run of this place, he was going to stock the wagon with everything he could get away with. It took several trips to get all of his treasure back to the wagon; his best find was a set of stainless steel buckets, ones with no seams!

Now he could begin. Blocking both back tires, he loosened the lug nuts on the right front wheel - or tried to. He returned from the warehouse with a pair of long tire irons, found together, he decided two was better than one, at least for this. With the wheel off, it was quick work to remove the axel nut and bearings. These items went into a square pan, maybe once used for baking bread.

Before he could stand, Billy walked up and dropped another fuel can next to him. "This is gasoline, so be careful. I know where a bale of rags is hiding, I'll be right back." Billy, true to his word, dropped off a massive double handful of rags, then walked away.

Pulling on rubber gloves, Lyle cleaned the bearings, bearing races and the hub, taking the time to examine each item to ensure no cracks or other defects could be found. He applied a very generous amount of grease to the spindle, packed the hub full, and then added the bearings. A new cotter pin and then tapping the dust cover over the hub finished his first wheel.

The other three took just over an hour each. He wiped all of 'his' tools clean with a rag he'd soaked in oil, and then put them into a small crate, which in turn went in the seat box. The soiled rags he bundled with a piece of twine, found holding the gloves together. He had yet to find any good rope or even any decent string.

Standing off, next to the dining area, the Major and Billy watched Lyle's progress. "What do you think, Billy? Is he going to work out?"

"He's a smart one all right, Willy. You best look over your shoulder, he'll be your own boss in five years."

"Maybe. Time will tell. Let's get him fed and then see what he wants done with the wagon. I'll send Jim over after lunch. Then we'll see what Lyle can cook tonight." He shook his head, so much to do and just three weeks to get it all in. "Oh well, he can sleep on the train."

Jim was a carpenter, a very good one. After talking at length with Lyle, he made a list of the work he would do. "So, double beams under the bed to hold a water barrel on the one side, the long box on the other. Double bows, canvas top, painted. Brake on the front wheels, if we can. I'll put your woodstove on the port side, I have a nice fat cabinet I'll put in across from it. You want a propane stove inside?"

"No. I don't know if I'll be able to get any fuel for it. Can you put in a small sink and a counter top covered in sheet metal? My father gave me an old alcohol burner years ago, should be able to get one here," jerking his thumb in the general direction of the warehouse. "if one is to be found."

"I can put in a small hood, tie that back to the woodstove flue, you can burn it inside that way. The counter top can be sheet metal all the way down to the floor, so it can be right next to the stove."

"Perfect. Any chance of a small water tank and foot pump?"

Pencil scratching, Jimmy smiled, "Rancho Deluxe, eh? I'll see what I can do. You want hinged or clamp down tops for flour, sugar and the like?"

"Clamp down. The damn bugs will get into everything otherwise. Can you run a pipe or rack down each side just under the canvas? That will give me something to tie off to when I wash my clothes and such."

"No sweat. I'll tie them back to the wagon bed at each end and the center. I'll put a set under between the cross beams and the stair hook, so you can put a spare tire and rim up under." Pencil paused, "Anything else while you are asking - no promises, just in case." He'd taken an instant liking to the young man, Lyle reminded him of his own son, many years ago.

"Just a set of cleats inside the seat box to hold a shovel, three quarters axe and pickaxe or mattock."

That got a laugh. "Get struck much?"

"Only takes once to learn a lesson, eh?"

"True, that. Okay, Lyle. I'll do what I can; maybe I can even do some dog robbing for you along the way. The Major says you start on your radio maintenance this afternoon." He laughed, "Watch out for Grumpy."

"Grumpy?"

"Everyone here calls him Grumpy. Name' Allison Scott. Old enough to have worked with Marconi himself, I'd say. Absolute best with radio communication, I have no idea how the Major got him to relocate here and teach, but pay attention to him. The man knows his stuff, inside out." He finished with another chuckle, "You best get going, I'll hit this right way."

"Thanks, uh, Mr. Jim. I appreciate the help."

"Jim Wisden. And Jim is just fine, Lyle, you've earned that by taking on a man's work." Jim watched as Lyle walked away. For some reason, he now had a strong desire to talk with his own son...

"Your primary receiver will be a triple conversion, superhet. Tunes down to one Hertz increments. IF shift, IF gain, multiple Collins filters plus DSP." The old man patted the small box. To save space, it has no speaker, and no display. All settings are either LED lights or CW annunciation." He smiled, "I designed it for a blind man. A hard core contester at that."

"Mr. Scott, what maintenance is possible for me?"

"Almost none, Lyle. Power input is fuse protected, the RF is protected by both a gas tube and a Zener diode - high and low. You can leave the antenna up in a windstorm or thunderstorm if you want - this can't be damaged." He sat back down with a grunt. "I exaggerate of course. Ground the input if the radio is not in use. Disconnect the power as well." He pulled up the other box, "This is a Master Oscillator Power Amplifier transmitter. The Army wanted it crystal controlled."

"I take it that it's not?" Lyle was cautious. The old man hadn't exploded, as he'd been warned. Actually, he just seemed to be lonely. This unit had a display, a very small screen.

"No, it's not. No crystals are available. Besides, the idiot that wanted that feature had never used a radio set - I suspect it was something he saw once in a book. A very old book. This unit is stable between 30 degree below zero to 120 degree above. 8 to 30 volts DC. 90 to 250 volts AC, 30 to 100 hertz power. All with technology that has been around before the 1980s."

"I see. How much power out?"

"You can set it to transmit between 1 and 50 watts. Should you need more, I have an external amplifier, it will provide 200 watts. Past that, and I doubt more power would make much of a difference. The net control station, outside of Salt Lake, can put out kilowatts and has a receiver system that can hear a whisper. I just put a parametric amplifier on the front end of that system. You transmit, they'll get it."

They spent the rest of the afternoon going over the controls and working with the radio sets - setting them up and tearing them down. Dinner was a surprise, fresh vegetables and fish.

The marksmanship training was - interesting. He was trained to load, clear, fire and reload a large number of weapons. Every one had been confirmed to have been used by the Neuvo Mexico forces at one time or another. Shaking his head - just how they could keep anyone supplied was a mystery to Lyle.

The next day, he'd been shown a room holding a large number of bolt action rifles and left to himself. The armory master had only said - "Make your pick, but remember, you'll have only that." Mr. Lewis had let him use an old 8mm Mauser last summer. It worked well enough, even with the old ammunition. In the end, he settled for an old Remington Model 600, it was lightweight, had good sights and a four round magazine. When he informed the armory master, his only answer was to take some measurements of his arms and chest, then dismiss him.

He helped Jim finish the wagon, fitting the water tank and pump. Major Perkins assisted with the installation of his radios. These would set under the bed, on either side of the slide out table top. Hidden by the drawer fronts, hitting a hidden catch would allow access to the radio equipment, but keep them hidden otherwise. On the beds headboard, they mounted a small general coverage receiver and a LED lamp, this to explain away any antennas he might have rigged - or so they hoped. As a surprise, he was presented with a new foam mattress, a far better bed than Mr. Lewis' straw stuffed bed...

He watched as the wagon was loaded for carriage to the train deport. "This will go to Delta - then the Teamsters will take it with the mining equipment to Austin." He raised a finger before Lyle could comment. "Billy and one of my Recondo teams will go with the equipment to ensure nothing falls off the truck." He grimaced, "I trust the bastards less than you do. Old habits die hard. You get to travel with the sheep and horse team."

The last two days were spent on the range. The rifle they gave him was a strange mixture, a bull barrel, counter-bored crown, threaded. The scope was mounted well forward, one to four power - it gave a clear image and the point of aim didn't shift when he changed the power setting. The iron sights were a folding buckhorn with gold dot forward. The stock was scarred, and had holes drilled in it, with a piece of knotted rope to act as a sling. The barrel had been rusted.

With the scope removed, it looked the mess. As designed. It, however, shot to point of aim past two hundred meters. A soldier showed him how to make a DOPE card for ranges out to 800 meters. He left the range with a box of National Match ammo. This went into a crate that held his footlocker, cooking gear and the other hard goods necessities he would need on the range.

Great Western Desert

Delivered to the train depot, he was in familiar territory. He pulled the handcart holding his crate down the length of the train until he got to the last flatcar. With the help of the conductor, he hoisted the crate up, next to the brake support post, and then climbed up himself. He'd sold his inside seat to the highest bidder, and then took the cheapest fare - riding on the flatcars. The difference went into his pocket as silver coin; he was ready when the locomotive blew its whistle, steam chuffing to each side as it pulled out.

Only one other rider was either brave or smart enough to take the last car of the train. The inside ride was more comfortable, what with the padded seats and all. But no electricity meant no air conditioning, and suffocating smoke at times as the wind shifted, blowing the plume of coal fueled smoke down the length of the train. A few of the diesel electric locos passed, but with the shortage of the parts needed to keep them running, the old steam engines had made a comeback, at least for lighter loads.

Folding up inside his duster, back to the crate, goggles over his eyes, hood up - he readied himself for the trip ahead. By the time they reached the West Desert, the sun was both hot and blinding. The next water stop was ahead, so he stood and relived himself off the side of the car, taking a seat on his crate when he was finished. The .357 in his duster pocket was new this trip; he'd taken some of his advance and purchased it and a box of shells from one of his father's friends.

There hadn't been a reported robbery of a Flatliner in years, but the talk at his training base had put him wise. Just because something wasn't reported didn't mean it hadn't happened. And he had to admit, this train was mixed cargo, not just the usual string of flatcars that made up a regular Flatliner. Sure enough, just as the train stopped, a yard bull - complete with shotgun, showed and up and demanded to see his pass.

When he went to the other rider, two things happened. The rider was shown to be a girl, and one without a pass at that. The yard bull took it in stride, just gestured for her to get off the train. That they were in the middle of the Great Western Desert seemed to be of no concern.

To his surprise, the rider, a woman as it turned out, just opened her shirt to expose her breasts. He couldn't hear what was said, but they both jumped off the flat car and disappeared behind a signal shed. She reappeared a few minutes later - carrying a shotgun this time. With a display of agility he could only envy, she was on the flat car just the engineer hit the whistle, pulling out seconds later. As they left the watering hole, Lyle could see the misshapen heap of what had been the yard bull. At his glance, the woman just put her finger to her lips and folded herself into the massive piece of canvas she had been under earlier.

Delta

Sitting back as before, he spent the next two hours watching her from under his hood. The canvas never moved. The next stop would be Delta. There, the crew would take on water and more fuel for the next leg - the run to Caliente and the end of the line. As the train pulled to a stop, the woman disappeared in a swirl of canvas. Finding a rolling cart took a bit, then pushing his crate worked up a sweat, before long he was alone on the rude loading dock. Pulling his load back to the old passenger station, finding a nice spot to sit and still have some shade took a bit more time.

He wasn't going to bother the Sheriff. The only description he could give of the woman, of the killer, was that she had nice, if smaller breasts and wore a dull tan duster. Oh, and now had a shotgun. The railroad would figure it all out, the Pinkerton men had returned and on the line, they were the law. Good enough for him.

Pulling the old carry bag onto his lap, he took a long drink of water and decided to eat one of the pieces of jerky inside. His back was to the wall as he slowly carved bits of the meat and popped them into his mouth. The few pieces of advice his parents had shared with him, advice that had they also received in their youth - if you worked with or for the Army, you best be prepared to wait. A lot. Today proved that wisdom.

Just as the sun set, a large green truck rolled up next to the depot. The driver shouted, "You the sheepman going out to Austin?" At Lyle's nod, he pointed to the back of the rig. Since the man hadn't offered to help him load the crate, he sat in the back of the truck. A nap would pass the time better than listening to the fool driving. They got as far as Ely before stopping.

Ely, Old Nevada

The driver was pretty short when he came around back. "Pull your crap out now, this is as far as you go with me. Your next ride will meet you over to the Hotel Ely tomorrow morning." Lyle held his peace and watched as the man drove away, heading north out of town. "Man, that has to be work that really sucks. Break down somewhere and you really are SOL until someone notices." What to do now was the bigger question?

He could see the hotel from where he stood, electric lights blazing in the darkness - enough power it seemed for business, not enough for the streetlights. Settling for chaining the crate to one of those light poles, he left the duster in the crate and slung the rifle over his shoulder. The pistol went into his boot.

He was glad it had been a short walk, the pistol was cutting into his foot, so he'd need to make a holster soon or leave the weapon in the wagon. Opening the door brought a growl from his stomach. The smell was overwhelming. The desk clerk pointed to the sign on the wall behind him. Lyle nodded and pulled the bolt before handing the rifle over, putting the chit in his shirt pocket.

"What's for dinner tonight?"

"Does it matter? How are you pay'n?"

"In silver."

"Okay." almost begrudgingly, "50 cent, all you can eat. Mutton, venison, rice and maybe some potatoes. Good pie, rhubarb, for after. Mind your manners or you'll be tossed."

"No problem. Where's the wash room?"

"Off to the side as you go in. Mind you, don't try to take a bath."

Lyle just nodded. There was no doubt the warning had been from many problems over the years. The washroom was both spotless and had soap. Good to know the cook at least had the opportunity to clean up before he or she went back to work. Washing his face and hands took just a few minutes; he dried with the massive bandana from his carry bag.

Served family style, he was happy not to be in starvation corner, once the food ran out, that was it for everybody. The few people sitting around the table were hotel guests,

and they pointedly ignored him. That was fine with him, the Bascos, as some called the local herders, where a clanish lot anyway - he wasn't about to spoil their views. He ate, and ate some more. By the time the pie had arrived, he just passed the plate on the person next to him. The guests left, Lyle was in no hurry.

An older woman came out and started picking up the dishes. On her second trip, she looked at Lyle, he just smiled in return. On her next rip, she said - "You're not from around here. But you look familiar." She paused, and then snapped her fingers, "You ran an outfit for Lewis out here last summer - yes?"

"Yes, Ma'm, I did. Up to the Ruby Range."

"I thought so." She pulled out a chair and sat. "Working out of here again this summer?"

"Yes. Ma'm. Mr. Lewis was kind enough to offer me a job for the summer. Supposed to meet my ride here tomorrow."

"Well, it takes a strong man to run a large outfit." Then she said something that caught him flat footed. "Where you going to stay tonight?"

"Haven't given that much thought, truth be told. Nice enough out tonight, might find a place out to the fields."

"I've got an extra room. You can stay at my place, the deskman told me you could pay in hard money. Cost you a dollar and I even have a hot water bath. How about that?"

"Don't rightly know about that, Ma'm. Dollar is a lot for a place to sleep." She seemed eager to have him stay at her place, which could mean any number of things.

"You drive a hard bargain, 75 cent and I feed you a decent breakfast and get you here early, before the hotel opens." He could see a hint of desperation in her eyes. What that could mean was...troubling.

"You seem awful anxious to have a border on tonight. I ain't being rude, just wondering aloud."

"My place is out on McGill road a ways. In the winter I get lonely, bad lonely."

"And so?"

"Just want some company, maybe play some cards. Hell, just to have someone new to talk to would be a delight."

"Okay. How I am I going to get my kit there and back?"

"I have a truck, the PMA pays me a bit for the space to park their fuel tanks - I take my pay in motor fuel."

Fuel tanks? That was unexpected, and something he wanted to see for himself. "You win, I'll play some cards, you can show me around your place. But I got to get back here early."

"And I need to cook breakfast for everyone. Don't worry about that."

She dropped him off out in front of the hotel, even helped with his crate. The fact she did this act of kindness in front of everybody must have been like showing a trophy - it didn't matter a whit to him. She hadn't been kidding. There were several massive tanks out at her place. The tanks were full - full of some kind of diesel or at least motor fuel. Because the place was both off the road and behind a set of smaller hills, it was invisible from the road. The berming was in place to help stabilize the fuel temperature,

or so he guessed. May well have been another attempt at hiding the size of the tanks as well.

Sitting on the trunk, rifle beside him, presenting a bored expression, his mind was burning with a thousand questions. What the hell was Jenkins really up to? Was Daisy hosting some kind of fuel depot?

The truck that stopped for him was both massive and obviously a military vehicle, pulling a long flatbed trailer. He put the crate on the front of the trailer, and then used a couple of come-alongs to secure it. They were on their way as soon as his door shut. The diver just looked at a paper on a clipboard and took off. It wasn't long before they were flying down the middle of the road; the driver had run out of gears ten minutes ago.

He wasn't going to bother the driver if the man didn't start a conversation, so he fell asleep soon afterward. Daisy had spent half the night talking and beating him in hand after hand at cards. The hot bath and soft clean bed were a wonder to him, this far out from what he had considered civilization.

Daisy had opened the door to ask if he wanted his 'back scrubbed', but left after he declined. She might have been fun, but he had seen the near Zombies wandering out past the station at night, their brains riddled with STD. Medicine manufacturing still hadn't come close to recovery and his father had been more than frank in warning him about possible encounters with a 'Daisy'.

Austin

They hit Austin well before lunch. The truck driver left him at the intersection, and was gone in a cloud of dust. Austin sat astride US 50, and about equidistant between I-80 and US 6. US 6 and 50 came together at Ely, making that junction and the town a natural choke point for any motorized incursion from the Western roadways, or so he assumed. Austin would make a good forward area for...what? Troops? Armor? A listening post? If so, what did that make him? A tripwire? He had some hard questions for Captain Lewis, hard questions indeed.

He'd been told someone would meet him in Austin. Sitting on the crate a few minutes, he spent the time looking around. The town, or what remained of it, lay scattered along the main road, one leading to a hill. The castle, or rather, a castle looking building, sitting on the hill was a surprise. Three stores tall, he couldn't miss it. The West was full of strange buildings, erected by men and women flush with wealth from gold or silver mining. Lyle had to assume this was yet another of the many monuments to folly and waste that mankind seemed to litter the landscape with - from time before history. Shaking his head, it was time to look for a piece of shade. Even now in early Spring, he could feel the promise of the heat to come out on the flats. The hills would be cooler, cold even, at night.

The sound of an approaching motor caused him to turn. A stake bed truck of uncertain vintage was approaching, so Lyle stepped away from the road to avoid the

inevitable cloud of dust. The truck stopped, the driver rolling down a heavily tinted window. It was Mr. Lewis!

"Sorry to be late, I had a fight with the Teamsters over where to deliver the sheep. We'll meet them down the road, at the cutoff leading to your range for this summer. Is this all you have?" he asked pointing the crate.

"It is." That Mr. Lewis helped him boost the crate in to the loaded truck was nice, but he still had a lot of questions for him to answer. "Carefully ask", he thought, "I'm in no position to walk away now." And that tempered his anger - just a bit. Mr. Lewis drove at a more conservative speed than the Teamsters, but still the blasted and rocky landscape rolled past, looking like the backside of the moon.

"The land up around Ely is a lot more...green." A bad opening, but Lyle had to start somewhere.

"Yup. Lots of black rock here, when we get past Gabbs, you'll see a lot more evidence of water. Your range will have plenty of grass."

"You have a place there?"

"No. You be grazing the herd across an abandoned ranch. I used to fly over it when I was at Fallon Naval Air Station - got to know most of Northern Nevada," he paused, "Old Nevada. Some things don't change, water and grass don't." Another pause. "Maybe the way people treat each other doesn't change all that much either." He sighed, "Look under your seat, and you'll find a notebook."

Lyle reached down; seconds later he had the object, a leather notebook, held closed by a clasp. Willing to wait to see where Lewis would go with this, he just sat holding the folder, looking out the window. "So, you were in the Navy?"

"Naval Intelligence, actually. I was working on a program, a prototype of a motorized glider in fact. An updated copy of something the Army used back in SouthEast Asia, Vietnam. We had modern drones at the time, but they were expensive, damnably so. Needed a ton of support folks, satellite links..." Looking at Lyle, he wondered just how much of this made sense. "Anyway, the thought was a couple folks in a very quiet airplane and some night vision goggles could do as well for a lot less money."

"How'd you wind up with Major Jenkins?"

"Long story short, after Rockfall, I was detailed to fly folks around in light aircraft, no sense in wasting all of my recent training, eh?" He tried really hard not to sound bitter. "Jenkins had the task of setting up radio relay stations for the PMA. When that was done, we both got detailed to help in tracking down and support the elimination the Chinese warlords that seemed to have made a mess of things out here. Then the troubles with the New Mexico lot started." Shaking his head, he finished with, "Things slowed down, and I started running sheep for fun and profit."

Lyle kept his silence. So much had changed in his world in the last two months; he didn't know how to process everything.

"Go ahead and open the notebook." He waited until Lyle had the thing open. "First photo is of Jason P. Hauert. Goes by the nickname of Stubby." A chuckle, "Damn if I know why, the man is over six foot tall. Anyway, he runs the mercantile in Hawthorne. Now that the river is running out of Walker Lake again, folks have moved back to push cattle and run a couple of small farms. What they do sell goes up to the Tahoe Confederation. Stubby gets his supplies from us, and knows which side of his bread is buttered."

"Next photo is of Sherry Dorow. She's young, I think just a year or so older than you. Shirrtail relative of Stubby's, she's shown a lot of...talent. Originally from New York, she somehow managed to survive the Flood and Famine both. Tough as nails. Good with a knife, or any weapon for that matter. Watch your ass with her, while she is friendly enough to the Greater U.S. - she looks out for Sherry, first and always."

Lyle spent some time looking at both photos. One was excellent, very detailed; the other was black and white, grainy. "Why does she work with Stubby?"

Lewis took his time in answering. "I guess you could say, Stubby is the reason she's alive. The two of them got out of the camps in Pennsylvania, made their way to Salt Lake. We found them to be a gold mine of information." He looked at Lyle. "They got us the bulk of intelligence - what we needed to clean up the areas around Kansas City." Another long pause. "From the ground. I got them out just before the first of the B-52 raids. I'd suggest that entire subject is not worth bringing up. Anyway, these are your two main contacts when you go into Hawthorne. Once back to your outfit, you pass that information on to us."

The truck slowed as it crested a hill. The road here was spotty, the rains had caused some damage, but the road was easily passable. "Questions?"

"Where to begin?" Lyle had to think for a bit, Lewis seemed willing to give him all the time he wanted. "There's more in play than worry over Neuvo Mexico. I can at least see that much. As you said, the Tahoe Confederacy folks are friendly enough; we have everything East of the Cascades on our side, if not in fact, in practice." Lyle looked up from the folder, and directly at Lewis, "Yes?"

"I had asked if Jenkins would give you a background brief on this, it seems he was not willing to do that. Did anyone show you a current map of the Greater U.S. Union?"

"No."

Lewis muttered a curse, "I figured as much. I guess they don't know you as well as I do. Flip to the back of the notebook, and then fold out the last page - you'll have to break a piece of tape..."

Roadside, somewhere in Old Nevada.

"So you see, with over a third of our population lost on Day One of the Flood, the effects of the Famine were mostly felt in the middle US, in the major cities. Before it was all over some areas of the Union were all but depopulated. Now, seven years on, a lot of the farmland along the coast has recovered, and we have been sponsoring people to move back and start faming again." Lewis had been talking almost nonstop for a half hour.

"Okay, here's our turnoff, we'll wait here for the Teamsters."

Lyle could see that, as Lewis had said, the grass lands extended almost to the road. Here, the terrain was flatter, the road they had followed was raised just enough to force water flowing out of the hills into a few culverts and streambeds. While he hadn't seen any open water, it was obvious the water wasn't far underground.

"So now the Union is focused on the far western areas again?"

"Yes. And it has been an uphill fight - there is still a tremendous reservoir of resentment over how the Old Federal government had treated folks before Rockfall. The

stripping of some PMA Districts to send military assets back east and the resulting chaos didn't endear anyone to the east coast population, believe me."

"I'll pass on any remarks to make, I was too young to have noticed much of that, and my parents managed to shield us from the worst of what you just described. I wasn't even aware of the Chinese invasion from Canada, how did they keep the lid on that?"

"Oddly enough, Lyle, unless people lived in the area or had kin there, it was just too far down on a list of things to worry about - so, mostly the Federals just didn't say anything. We finally managed to make a link-up between Ft Lewis and Spokane, then poured what military we could into the area. The coastal areas had taken a beating from the tsunamis, so it was slow going for the first three years. When the Canadian forces finally hit from the north, we finally got that mopped up - by then California and Arizona below the Rim were pretty much lost." He sighed, "We haven't even started on the South as yet. That's still an open question at this point."

"Now I'm confused, how did the Republic of Texas get a pass?"

"I asked the same thing, Lyle. I was told, don't know if it's all true, but the Gulf Basin was spared the worst of the effects of the Flood - canceling waves, low tides, hell, magic. Bottom line, the worst of the Flood bypassed that area - maybe after cleaning off all the Caribbean islands, there just wasn't enough energy for the water to go all that far inland."

"And Nuevo Mexico?"

"Got battered pretty badly on both sides of the country. A lot of their 'forces' were already in the US by that point anyway. One thing is for certain, they figured out pretty damn quick to stay out of the Republic."

"Last question - how the hell do I play into all of this?"

"Thought you would never ask. We want you in an area where you can act as a radio relay station and to keep your eyes open - we have several folks on extended patrol all along the Frontier. While Mr. Scott has built a great communications center for the Union, we still have dead spots, you'll provide the fill. I'll be honest, Lyle. When I first met you, I thought your father had been kidding..."

"My father?"

That elicited some silence. "Ah... Your folks not talk with you about this?"

"No. They said I needed to make the decision on my own. Now I wonder just how much they kept from me..."

"Very little. What Major Jenkins outlined is exactly what we expect. You will herd sheep, keep a radio watch after dark for a bit and just before sunrise, times you would be up and working anyway. You have the skills, and we are paying more than a fair amount for your work. The only real risk to you, and that's small, is when you go into Hawthorne." He paused again.

"The Union desperately needs young men like you, Lyle - trained and ready to support the Nation, such as it is right now. To be honest, I was hoping that if this worked out, we could offer... Further assignments. I'm getting too old for field work, most of the Vet brigands are well past fighting age now - and we have gotten things settled to where there should be little of that left." He sighed again. "Now it's a battle between politicians, crooks and thugs trying to carve up things into little empires. A lot of us want to stop that."

Before Lyle could speak, the unmistakable stuttering sound of a Jake brake broke the silence of the desert. "Looks like our livestock is here."

Into the Valley of Grass

It took no real time to get the sheep offloaded, the grass off the road was enough incentive to get the herd moved. The horses were backed out of the trailer, hobbled, and moved to feed near the sheep. Mr. Lewis had to do a bit of arguing, but with the drivers helping the Recondo crew, they were all able to push his wagon off the last flatbed. At that, everyone but Lewis and Lyle loaded up and left in a massive cloud of dust.

Unloading the tack from the stakebed and rigging the wagon took them nearly to darkness. Settling for moving the wagon and sheep up toward the valley just a mile was good enough for the day. While Lyle put the tack up, Lewis put out food and water for the dogs. That settled, they could make dinner for themselves.

Breakfast was fry bread from the night before. Watching as Mr. Lewis drove off - Lyle was finally alone. He still didn't understand how running the Teamsters and Recondo crew through Hawthorne, then up the border of the Tahoe enclave would prove anything. Shrugging, "Guess some mysteries still have to be explained," he muttered. There was a lot to do and sitting here was wasting good daylight.

Once the horse was harnessed, he mounted the other, leading the wagon. He'd gotten stuck once for the better part of a week, and damn if he was going to go through that again. This way he could watch well ahead of the heavily laden wagon, steering clear of muddy spots or soft ground. Once he knew the area cold, then he could be less cautious.

The Border Collies were the pair he'd had the summer before, so it was simple to keep the entire circus train moving, even if it was a slow pace. A slow, slightly uphill slog, they made the gap leading into the valley just about mid-day. He watered the horses, allowing them to rest for a bit. His midday meal was a double handful of cornmeal, mixed with a bit of sugar and cinnamon, adding hot water from his thermal flask.

The gap into the valley was wide, almost two miles, if he had to guess. The 'valley' was a flat spot lying between ranges of tall, cedar covered hills, leading up to the mountains beyond. Empty - nothing but thick grass as far as he could see at first look. Mr. Lewis had insisted the place was a ranch, abandoned years before Rockfall. "Oh, well - plenty of time to look around later." Finding a flat spot near a good source of water was the first and most important task at hand.

The spring bubbled out of the hillside; following a wandering path until disappearing underground in a mass of reeds. The flat area had to be part of an old road, as it extended into the distance, finally cut off by a rocky spur. Camp was established by night fall. Tomorrow would be busy, gathering firewood to store under the wagon, cutting a set of supports for his cooking area tarp, and improving the spring so he could drop his buckets into a pool of water were just a fraction of growing list of things to do. Laughing out loud, he remembered when one of the station operators had asked him on a shared shift "How do you keep from being bored out there?"

As the sun was just hitting the mountains, he put up the long whip antenna. Attaching and setting the radials took just a few more minutes. Sighing, he realized that putting up the large offset dipole would have to be done before anything else

in the morning. Carrying dinner inside, he sat the food on the table next to his station box. The box held his logbook, scratch paper, several pencils with the lid holding up an old 'Rolex' chronometer. It kept time accurately, but the aura attached to the watch by his Father was something he just couldn't see.

Lighting up the radio set took little time, having practiced the task for hours, even in the dark. Listening closely, he sent "NNA NNA de NNPS NNPS K" in a traffic gap. That was answered immediately with NNPS de NNA QSY QSY 10.010 khz K" His answer was a simple "NNPS QSY 10.010 khz AR" Why they wanted him to change frequency was unknown, but you didn't argue with net control. If NNA wanted him at a spot, it was their call. It took a minute to retune onto his assigned frequency, than he sent "NNA NNA de NNPS NNPS K" and waited. Nothing. So he sent the string another time. Still nothing. Shrugging, he sent "NNPS NNPS V V V V V V V V K" If they couldn't tune to that, he would go back up on the main net frequency to see if he had miss-read the instruction.

The phones about popped off his head, the carrier wave was massive - "NNPS NNPS de NNA NNA ZRC ZRC " then a long tone followed. Lyle carefully tuned his rig to zero beat with the NNA transmitter, then decoupled the receiver from the transmitter and off set that by 800 Hz or so. The tone stopped, then - "NNPS de NNA QRU?K"

"QRU K" He was checking in to see if they had anything, now what?

"QTX 2000 local K"

"NNPS QTX 2000 local K"

"CUL de NNA AR" Then the carrier dropped off. "Okay," he thought, "I'll sit and listen until eight o'clock." Sitting the cans on the back of the tabletop, he rolled up the volume a bit and finished eating his dinner. Not exactly as the Major had outlined, but close enough. He noted the date and times in his logbook - if nothing else, to get paid for his work. At exactly eight PM he heard station NNA once more.

"NNPS de NNA QAP this frq 0500 local K"

"NNA de NNPS will QAP hr 0500 local thx AR." Setting his alarm for 4:30 AM wasn't a problem. Closing the drawers and putting his log box away - that was just smart. If he was interrupted, or a visitor showed up, he wanted nothing to be obviously showing. It would seem that any or all of the patrol stations would be on ten megahertz - either at sundown or sunup.

The buckets of water were still hot, so washing his dishes was fast. The 'top' of his travel crate, plus four short pipe sections served as an outdoor table and cook station. The plate and utensils went on top to air dry, the fry pan, he hung from the side, once the tarp was rigged, he could hang the towels there to dry. Pouring the wash water into the French drain he'd hastily put together he looked up, the stars blazed in the cloudless sky. "Going to be cold in the morning..." he said aloud. A second blanket made for a warm and toasty night.

In the morning, he lit a small fire inside the woodstove. It burned long enough to take the chill out of his living space. Hot water from his thermal flask made the oatmeal wet enough to eat. He would make some fry bread or pan bread for breakfast while cooking tonight. It took just a minute or three to have the radio up and running, he was a bit early - nobody would find his work ethic lacking.

As expected, the instruction were the same - only this time NNA didn't feel the need to have him zero beat to their transmitter. Mr. Scott may have been a bit of a

curmudgeon, but his equipment was obviously first rate. NNA released him with the instruction to call back at 1930. So he bent to his task list. The more he got done in the morning, the more time he had to cook this evening. He dumped out some dry food for Rex and Roxie, they ate in the morning - sometimes he would give them a bit of his dinner - if the hunting was good.

Setting up the dipole was a bit tricky. The mast went up easily enough, and the legs of the antenna rolled out, the ends held by some kind of nylon line, these staked into the ground with no problem. The third 'leg' of the antenna, another long nylon line was a mess. The tangle took more than a half hour to sort out, then the spot to drive the stake turned out to be a rocky shelf. Using two rocks, rolled over to the right place allowed him to deadman the line. Not perfect, but a workable solution.

Taking the spade out of the long tool box, he set it aside. The solar panels he just hung from the side of the long toolbox. Designed for that, also he knew that he would have to prop the panels up a bit to get the most sunlight, but for now...

Riding bareback, spade on his lap, he and the collies were soon out next to the herd. Sheep prefer to drink from open water, he had to sort out someplace to throw up a mud dam until he could cut the wood needed for making a proper watering area. A lot of work, but it would serve to keep the herd close by - at least for now. Finding a good spot where the water was nearly on top of the ground took a bit of looking, but he was soon digging. The trench would allow the water to surface for now, he would later dig a cross trench and emplace a small wooden underground dam. This would ensure a good source of surface water.

The digging was not too bad, the roots of the reeds and grass held onto the soil, so it was simple enough setting it one side and letting the water flow up. Standing to take a break, he heard the noise off in the distance - a buzzing. Holding his hand to shield his eyes, he could make out a small dot in the distance, followed by a small cloud of dust. Someone was coming up to the valley!

The ride back to camp was not quite in a panic, but as fast as he could go and not fall off the horse. He had the time to wash off the mud from his legs and put on boots, stuffing his pistol in the back pocket of his overalls before the machine came around the spur blocking anyone from seeing his camp. A single person on a motorcycle. The machine stopped abruptly - Lyle had to assume when the rider spotted the camp. The rider came on slowly, stopping about 200 yards away. Setting the kickstand, the man, he could see that now, made a show of removing a weapon slung across his back - setting it next to the motorcycle.

The man put both hands out to his sides to show empty hands. Didn't mean he was unarmed, but... Lyle waved him ahead, then turned, and waved to the hill behind him - as if to tell someone there not to come in. That caused the man to pause a bit, then resume walking. When the man got close enough for his comfort, Lyle said "Hola! Que pas wey?"

His answer of basically "Nothing much" tipped Lyle that this was not a Basco, his accent was wrong and the pronoun placement was off as well. Spanglish. Border slang - not good. The local herders, of Basque origin, spoke a version Castellan Spanish - altogether different.

So, he switched to English. "Long way off the road for sightseeing, friend."

"Es true, saw the tracks, wonder what made them."

"Me. This is Diamond A land, running some sheep this season. Nothing to see here."

"Nobody out here last year"

Lyle took a second, then avoided the obvious question and instead offered, "This was my grandfather's place - before Rockfall." Jerking a thumb over his shoulder, he went on "Uncle and I came out to run sheep again, can't keep title to the land if it's not in use. Now it's in use."

The stranger hadn't offered his name, so Lyle held his peace. The man looked over the younger man's shoulder, as if seeking the location of his fictional uncle. "I don't see your Uncle."

Lyle offered up a laugh. "Doubt you can. Given that he has a ten power scope, I suspect he has no problem with seeing you. Don't want to be rude friend, but I've got work to do yet today - and you're trespassing. No fault of yours, we haven't reposted everything as yet."

The man took the hint, turned and started walking back to the motorcycle. With a wave, he re-slung his weapon, started the bike and took off. Lyle returned the wave, he could have seen simply curious, or not. As the rider left, Lyle walked out away from camp to keep the man in sight. Sure enough, at the pavement, he turned right - heading back toward Hawthorne. "What the hell was that all about? Motor fuel could be had, not cheaply, but getting it was easy enough - why had this hombre wasted the fuel to drive all the way out here, let alone come up the valley to see what it held?"

Before he left camp again to gather firewood, he took out his rifle, put the scope on it and dropped a few extra rounds into his pocket. Never hurt to be ready. The afternoon passed quickly, he was careful to go some distance to start gathering the wood - down braches, and the like. Hating the work to cut down anything, he was content to bundle the wrist to arm thick pieces, breaking them with his boot if they were too long. Before the afternoon was gone, the area under the wagon was stacked with what he guessed to be a least a weeks worth of firewood.

He'd dug a pit, then a vent hole leading to the base of the put going off to the side, so any wood he did use burned hot. His grill, shaped like a double X, and made out of rebar kept the pans or buckets over the fire without worry of the pit collapsing. Later, he could line the pit with clay or rock if he decided this was a good camp location.

At dinner he made up a large batch of fry bread, it was pretty good for breakfast, with a bit of jam and a cup of warm tea, and he was good for most of the day. That gave him pause for thought. Tea was one of the few things that the Tahoe Confederacy exported, actually one of the few things they had in any surplus he would guess, and it would be a good excuse to travel to Hawthorne. The next session on the radio was only different in that he sent a short message for Major Jenkins about the visitor, noting the out of area accent. Once he closed for the night, he ensured the collies were right outside. If someone came to visit at night...he wanted all the warning he could get.

The alarm woke him in time to meet NNA on schedule. No messages, and he had managed to copy to the daily weather bulletin. Chewing his breakfast, he pondered last night. To say he'd slept badly was an understatement. Forced to flee his camp at night

empty handed, that was the stuff of his nightmare. Riding out to look the sheep over, all good he noted, gave him time to consider just what he might do.

Back at camp he pulled out his largest piece of oilcloth. Last year, it had been his cooking area cover, this year he had the large canvas tarp from the 'treasure' warehouse. He spread this out over his bed. Placing one of his wool blankets, a container of char cloth and a few matches into a small pot, he added two cans of potted meat and his knit cap. Tossing in a liter bottle of water, he decided that was as good as he could do for now. Rolled up and tied with long lengths of cordages, it was ready.

Picking up the webbing he used for firewood carry, he headed uphill, rifle in hand. It didn't take long to find the ridge marking the top of that line of hills. Following the short wall of rock until he found a large enough fissure, a hole really, that would accept the bundle, he stopped. The bundle went inside, then he broke a branch off of a nearby cedar tree, using it to screen the hiding spot, and hopefully keep the rain out. "Now, Lyle, you clever dog - how to mark it so it isn't obvious to someone else?"

He found another, deeper hole, about ten meters further along the wall - this showed daylight inside, so wasn't any good for his cache - but in this one he stuck a long pole - one easily seen for some distance if at the top of the hill. Shrugging, he said, "That will just have to do..." Filling the web carrier with firewood on the way back to camp gained him something useful for his walk - besides a bit of peace of mind. "Wonder if Lewis has an extra rifle that I could put up there as well? Guess I'll ask next week," he wondered aloud.

That night he turned the leather notebook into a holster for his pistol. The rifle was perfect for much of what he would want, but it was a massive pain in the ass when he was trying to get some work done. Lacing the leather with some waxed cord he carried for repairing his canvas cover, the holster provided a secure means of carry while on his belt - he was pleased with the work. When he had time, he could soak the leather and make a better fit for his pistol - when he had time.

Sitting at the table, clean from a hot 'bath' and in clean clothes, he was nearly at the end of his radio overwatch when the phones whispered to him. A signal! Weak. "NNA NNA NNA de NNPP NNPP NNPP K."

Station NNA didn't respond, so he keyed his radio - "NNPP NNPP NNPP de NNPS NNPS NNPS QSP QSP NNA K." Cranking the RF gain all the way up gave a bit more body to the whisper. Nothing.

Then the distant station sent "NNPS de NNPP thx. ZJO Msg es..." Lyle copied nine, five letter groups, then a single six digit group of mixed letters and numbers. As he copied the groups, he then re-transmitted them, waiting for the next group.

When he got the AR group, he sent a character count of 51 and was relieved to hear "RRR thx NNPP QRT SK"

"NP OM 73 NNPS AR." No reply, well understandable. He shook his head and shoulders, the strain had been considerable. Having no idea of what the code groups meant didn't bother Lyle, he often sent commercial messages with nothing but an address and long strings of seeming gibberish. All in a day's work.

Before he could call NNA, he heard "NNPS de NNA, cpy all ZJO msg. Gud wk OM. NNA QRT SK."

"Well good for them and good for me." He added his own date-time group to his message #2 in the log - then remembered the bonus. "Even better!" That night he slept like a log.

After the Saturday morning radio overwatch, he headed for Hawthorne. He didn't have to push the bicycle all the way to the paved highway, but he did anyway. Being on the saddle all day would be bad enough, no sense it beating himself to death before he really got going. The bike, like his rifle, was a careful mix of junk and function. It had been marked as a "JC Higgins", whatever that might mean was lost to him.

That the axles and crankset had roller bearings wasn't lost on him. With some help, he'd managed to lace a three speed rear axel set onto the clincher rim, no mean feat. The paint scheme was two tone, one color for most of the frame set, and the rims and tires another. Rusted fenders added to the overall effect - the saddle was soft leather, something he could stand for the long trip ahead. The rear rack and saddlebags were a treat to see - if not functional as well. The front brake had required some welding for the brackets, he just painted over the slag spatter - if it worked, it didn't have to be pretty.

Hawthorne, Old Nevada

The ride into town would be easy - most of the way to the junction would be downhill and a long grind back. Hawthorne itself was equal parts burned and rebuilt buildings. Rather than wonder about the history, he headed deeper into to the town, following what seemed to be the main drag. The road here was in good repair, no real holes or cracks in the roadway. Arriving at the mercantile just an hour after opening, he found it empty of life.

Using the chain and lock from his travel crate to secure the bike, he walked inside - pistol slid around to the small of his back. The air was close, still and a bit musty. Maybe they open the windows later," he thought. The counter at the back was unoccupied. Calling out a "Hello" netted no response. As Lyle pondered another shout, a man walked in, tall and broad - and instantly recognizable from his photo.

"What do you want - stranger?"

Lyle was careful, Jenkins had been insistent that at his first meeting with Stubby he say "I want a lot of things. Question is, do you have what I want?" That earned a narrowing of the man's eyes. He took a deep breath, "Looking for some tea. Green if you have any."

"Nope. I got what they sell for tea out of Tahoe - that'll have to do. How you going to pay?"

"I have silver. Hard coin."

That got a greasy smile, "Fine, show me."

"Not so fast, friend. Might want to look at what you have, ask about the price first." Lyle was no fool, if he showed his hand - that would be the full price, and no dickering. No, two could play a game. He might be young, but he wasn't stupid.

"Sherry!" the man bellowed, "bring me up the number six can of tea." Glaring at Lyle, he said, "I sell by the ounce."

"Fair enough," Lyle dropped two of the pistol rounds on the counter, "this here is just under one ounce, let's see if your scale agrees."

"What you trying to say, kid?" The low voice was a threat.

"Not a thing, mister. Your place, you get to set the price. What you don't get to set is weight, gravity's got that covered. You want my silver; I get see your scale work..." Before he could finish, Stubby broke out in gales of laughter.

"I gotta give it you, kid, you got a set of balls, all right."

Lyle gave him back a small grin, then tapped the counter next to the bullets - "Not all I have, let's see the scale." The man sobered, finally getting Lyle's meaning.

As Stubby was lifting the cover from his scale, a young woman walked in. Lyle was dumbstruck – it was the woman from the train!

Dropping the tin on the wooden countertop, she gave Lyle a cold look. "Never see a woman before?"

"Oh, I have lady. A lot. You get a sunburn on those fine..." Now it was her turn for a startled look.

A knife flashed out of nowhere into her hand. "Who the hell are you with? Pinkerton?"

Now Lyle was happy to drop his ace. "Nope. US Union Army. Least, that's who paying me to do some work for 'em. Lewis told me to watch out for you, he was right. Where the hell did that knife come from?"

The blade disappeared, with a curt, "None of your damn business. What are you looking for here anyway?"

Pointing to Stubby, his simple, "I took a long ride to buy some tea. Still aim to, if I can get a price."

That got another round of laughter. "For you, kid, quarter an ounce, if you want to trade some of that ammo, you could get a lot more."

"Thanks, but no. I can always get more silver; old school factory ammo is damn hard to come by." Dropping his quarters on the counter, he said, "I'd say about that much will do." Looking around the store, to ensure it was still empty. he stared at the woman. "Not my business, ordinarily Miz Dorow, but I have to ask - no answer needed, just my curiosity."

Her eyes narrowed, so Lyle added - "Not that the bull didn't deserve something. Pushing someone off in the middle of the desert is damn...unfriendly." He took a deep breath, "Killing him seemed a tad, I don't know, excessive?"

Sherry hissed "You don't know shit, *boy*. You think a woman enjoys getting raped? You think sex is a trade good?"

Lyle struggled to keep his voice even, "No, I don't. That's why I kept my peace when I got to town. Railroads got a bad yard bull, their look out when he turns up...you know." He shrugged. "Just wondering was all."

She looked at Stubby, "Damn, Stubby, you were right, this kid has a set as big as cannonballs or," she looked right at him - no, through him, "he's so damn *stupid* that even angels can't protect him." Now it was her turn to shrug, "Seeing as how Lewis sent you. That bull was passing train schedules to the Mexicans. Sonofabitch was getting people killed. I just got to him first."

"Thank you. I can pass that on, if it's important."

The pair of them looked at him like he was a monkey. "Ain't no mail out of here or from Tahoe. And it's a long ride back to the fort."

"It is." Once more, he took a look around. "I have a radio set. Connect to the fort twice a day."

Stubby surprised him, "You look hungry..."

"Lyle."

"You look hungry, Lyle, come around back, I'll fry up a couple of eggs, call it an extra for paying with hard coin."

"*Do I trust these people?*" he thought. "*Not until I have a long talk with Lewis, too much is at risk,*" he decided. "Thank you, but no. It's going to be a long ride back. I'll be happy to take my tea and pass along anything else you might have." Taking his packet, he walked out. Waiting till the junction was behind him; he stopped, got a drink of water and looked at the packet. Full of tea leaves - likely a lot more than he paid for, the inside of the packet was covered with writing. Not uncommon, good paper was often reused, several times. He secured the tea packet and peddled on.

He stopped short of the turnoff to Grass Valley, eating some jerky and the last of his water. Slowly, he worked his way back his camp - pistol ready to hand. He briefly considered finding a good place to cache the bike near the road - it would leave both his hands free, but in the end, he just couldn't find a suitable location until he was nearly at the camp. Everything was as he had left it - and no new tracks were seen on the way in. "*I hope the bonus is worth it,*" he thought, "*I'm exhausted.*" He settled for cold rice and fry bread for dinner.

He had NNA 'read back' each of the string of numbers he sent. The paper had been full of five digit strings, one after another. His request for NNA to QRS was a surprise, tired and nervous, he pressed on. Once completed, he informed NNA that he would be off the air for at least the next two sessions. The master station merely acknowledged and bade him goodnight.

Rex and Roxy barking woke him the next morning. Pistol in hand he looked out the windows - nothing. Poking his head out the door showed he was alone - the dogs were hungry, and he was late in feeding them. Once fed, they ran back toward the herd, he spilled more food on the ground.

An hour later, he was on his horse and heading up valley. The saddle was well worn and comfortable - a lot more comfortable than his bicycle seat, that he certain about. The bedroll hanging behind him held everything he could roll into it for a two day trip. He hadn't been up-valley and needed to scout it out for water, white top or any remains of the old ranch Lewis claimed existed. Following the old roadbed allowed him to think, rather than pay much attention to where the horse headed.

Three hours into his trip, he saw it, a set of ruins. Sitting in a shallow spot, not quite a bowl, the buildings were all but invisible to anyone not up on the road, itself set up and into the hillside. He was careful in his approach; there could be all manner of junk hiding the grass. Saddle cinch loose, he hobbled the horse, letting the animal graze. The rifle was left dangling off of the saddle horn, instead he held one of his tire irons - good enough to dig with, weighed less than his spade.

The 'house' - a large single story building had been stripped. The roof was bare, so he assumed it had, at one time, been covered with corrugated roofing. Windows weren't broken, they'd been removed. Oddly, curtains still hung from one of the openings. He went inside; moving with caution, getting hurt out here could be fatal. The living spaces were empty; one room had carpet, now utterly ruined by the weather. The kitchen held a refrigerator, door askew. He went through each of the cabinets, one held a solidified container of salt - that went into his bag, another presented a set of spice bottles, those he ignored. In a bottom shelving unit, a full box of matches sat to the back of the shelf. He struck one, it flared. Those went into the bag. Nothing else but dirt was present.

As he walked back outside, he was struck by one wall - it seemed to have bulged slightly. The barn, what was left of it - had been stripped, windows, hardware and even some roof timbers, or so it seemed. Leaning oddly, he gave it a kick on one corner in jest. The structure collapsed in earnest, with beams and timbers sticking out of the wreckage. "Angels indeed," he said aloud.

The shed was an anomaly, whole and roofed still, it sported a padlock on the door. He shrugged, whatever it held could wait. Over at some standing corrals, he found a hydrant. Twisting the valve, water gushed out - with gusto. Looking all around he said, "Must be an Artisan well! That's good to know." The water flowed into a set of troughs, all of which held water. That was enough for Lyle - he'd found his new camp location.

The wagon he kept on the road until well past the old homestead site. The solid ground of the roadbed hid any trace of his travel. He ran across what looked to be a newer road, or at least a strip of gravel, coming in from the north toward the old homestead. He could only hope that his tracks, if not invisible, would be damn hard to see.

Parking his wagon behind the ruins, within the small bowl, effectively hid it from any approaching party. Riding the horse out some distance confirmed this to be the case. Now he could sleep in peace, or at least with less worry. He cached his bicycle in the trees above his old camp when retrieving his hide out bundle. If he rode out again, he could hobble the horse, there would be ample water and grazing when he was away.

Checking in with NNA, he left one of the headphones off, the windows in the front and the door were open, a testament to the mild evening. As he had done in the past, his two buckets were sitting over the fire pit, he would bathe and wash the dishes tonight - the barn would provide enough wood for two seasons. Sitting back on the bench seat, wondering just what all the letter groups from Stubby might have meant, he heard the sound from the other day - a motorcycle, maybe more than one.

After informing NNA that he had uninvited guests, he walked outside, rifle in hand. Looking through the scope, he could see at least three lights bobbing around in the darkness, wandering around his old campsite. Watching for some time, the lights retreated back toward the highway. Lyle took the time to climb up and stand on the box seat at the front of the wagon, the best he could do for height - outside of the roof of the homestead. Bracing his leg on the front bow, the scope showed two distinct red lights heading away - one short of the three headlights he'd counted before.

Now what? The moon would be up in another hour, the last motorcyclist might see his rig from the road, might. The sheep could take of themselves, the Turkish

mountain dogs that Lewis used to provide protection would kill anything that tried to go after the herd. The Collies could come with him, they were quiet enough. What about him?

He settled for stowing the radios, and then throwing a blanket and some food into a tarp, that going with him on the horse. Leaving the saddle, he pressed off, away from the camp and out toward the hills about two miles away. He would go as far as he could before moon rise, keeping the camp between himself and the moon. Dropping the gear and sitting, watching for movement to or near the camp would be the best he could do for now. The grass was tall enough to provide visual cover, but the AK-47 he'd seen earlier on the motorcyclist demanded more than stands of grass to stop any bullets.

With his hat in place and a bandana over much of his face, he could keep watch without looking like a pale spot on the dark grass waving in the warm breeze. The wind shifted, bringing the rumble of a motor running just above an idle. Sitting almost straight upright, much of his head cleared the grasses, and he knew not to use the rifle scope, too much chance of light from the low hanging moon reflecting back. With the dogs at his side, he scanned back and forth, trying to catch sight of the 'visitor' on the edge of his vision.

There! The moonlight silhouetted a rider, some distance away. Lyle knew from talking with his father that devices capable of seeing in the dark, or highlighting the differences in heat were out there - just what this guy had remained to be seen. Just in case - he slowly lowered his head down below the level of the grass.

What to do? He was loath to shoot the man, even if he was the one warned off earlier. So many had died in the last few years, he didn't want to add to the total. "Why were these people out here at the camp anyway? Had Stubby or Sherry accidentally let slip about his radio set - or worse, sold him out?" he thought.

The answer came in a rattle of gunfire! ""Damn! What the hell..." Lyle was careful when he popped his head above the grass - the bastard was shooting at his outfit. The second burst confirmed it; no mistaking the intent was to kill him! It took Lyle two shots to put the brigand down. The ten minutes he waited seemed an eternity, but his 'instructor' at the range had plenty, maybe too much, combat time...

"Son, you shoot somebody, you shoot 'em twice, then wait to make certain they are good and dead." Spitting the side, he finished with, "Then when you get close, bust 'em again. Seen too many of my buddies get killed by someone they thought was a dead man." The rest was an incoherent mumble, and at the time, Lyle had been happy to miss it. Now, he wondered what else he should have picked up when he had the chance.

The crawl back to the edge of his camp took long enough that by the time he popped his head back up, the moon had risen far above the distant mountains. The body lay there motionless. Lyle split the difference of wasting a round on a dead man and getting killed by approaching the body with cocked pistol in hand.

Sitting in a puddle of blood, the man was indeed, very dead. Lyle took the AK-47 and stripped off the magazine, then cleared the chambered round, setting it off to the side. One of his rounds had hit the man in the leg, the other just below the shoulder. The exit wound left no doubt that it had been the killshot. But why?

A rumble in the distant provided an answer - a truck, at least one set of headlights, was coming up the valley - right toward him! Had the sheep proven to be too much

temptation? It would seem so, but still, Lyle wouldn't decide until he had more information to deal with - right now he needed help - and that was some time away.

The inside of the wagon was a mess, the bullets had torn through the wood like a saw. Flipping out the drawers, he found the receiver a shattered mess. The transmitter was whole, so with no other choice, he fired it up, hoping to luck.

"NNA NNA NNA de NNPS NNPS NNPS TTT TTT TTT. Attacked, rig damaged need help." He thought for a moment longer - then sent "Will hide in AO. Can monitor 27065 khz. Send help fast." Transmitting the 'send help fast' twice more, he stood and quickly grabbed what he could, mostly a bandolier of rifle ammo and his little haul-ass kit. It would have to do.

Sitting in the hills he watched in the moonlight as the truck pulled up the valley and hit the remains of the road. While better than crossing the grassland, it was still a slow going for what turned out to be a massive semi-truck. It became obvious to Lyle that the brigands were after the sheep or any many as they could stuff into the trailer. That meant they would shoot the Mountain dogs living with the herd. As strangers, it was the only way to load the sheep. And there wasn't a damn thing he could do about it. Anger grew when he realized that he could have disabled the motorcycle, but even something that simple had escaped him in his panic to flee.

The night unfolded slowly - it became increasingly obvious to Lyle that while the brigands might be good at killing sleeping people, they didn't know Shineola about herding sheep. Without a good set of dogs, they spent most of the night running back and forth, sometimes with the motorcycles, to load the truck. The sun was tinting the sky pink when the thugs finally put up the ramp and headed back down valley - they never bothered to check on their now-dead companion, another lesson for Lyle.

Several times he had been tempted to take a long shot at the bastards, but settled for observing and keeping the pair of collies quiet. The scope allowed him to see that the motorcycles left ahead of the truck as if even they were in a hurry to leave the scene of their crime. With nothing better to do for now, he propped the little ATS-505 up on a rock, extended the antenna, tuned it on, and set 27.065 on the display. With no squelch, it sat and hissed.

The little fire soon had his pot boiling, he enjoyed a hot breakfast of tea, potted meat and what was left of his hardtack. He gave the other can of potted meat to the dogs. It was mid-day before he ventured out of the low hills. Taking the time to scan the entire valley showed no activity, but that didn't mean he was safe either. As he whistled at his horse to get her under control, walking damn near back to camp in the process, he had to decide what came first.

Rounding up the scattered sheep had been almost easy. The collies earned their meat today- no doubt. The horse shied away from the two dead dogs, so he looped a rope over each of the carcasses, then pulled them far out into the grassland, almost to the edge of the hills. With each step that he took, his anger multiplied. Each step back to his horse showed him the futility of the rule of law - it *was* only good for those that chose to follow it.

The horse had no problem with the dead brigand. Lyle saddled up and ran a long line from the corpse to the saddle-horn and began another trip - this time far away from his camp. The blood was already drawing flies. Building a bonfire over the puddle would hopefully be the end of that problem.

At the end of the gravel road leading from the camp, there he turned toward the hills and dumped the body into some sagebrush. He wasn't going to bother burying the bastard; he thought Lyle was sleeping when he fired up the wagon. The contents of his pockets gave up little, a couple of silver coins, some kind of flat wallet, which he left closed and a strange looking knife. These went into his bag, at some point he'd give them to Jenkins or Lewis.

He was not looking forward to sorting out the damage to his wagon. By arrangement, Lewis was supposed to be by with more food and such this next week. If he ran low, he could always slaughter one of the bigger lambs and smoke the meat. He would look carefully at the old homestead, there should have been a garden, maybe some bits of that still existed. As these thoughts ran through his mind, a shadow swept across him.

Looking up, he spotted a bird, a damn big bird. A bird that got bigger each minute! "Damn - an airplane of some kind..." he thought. Running the horse off to one side of the gravel road, he watched in wonder as the aircraft swooped and finally slid down the gravel road, stopping in a small swirl of dust - all in dead silence.

The pilot turned out to be none other than Mr. Lewis. Lyle hobbled his horse and forced himself to walk, rather than run, up the aircraft. Rifle over his shoulder, he took as long as seemed reasonable to get close enough to shout - "Good to see you."

Lewis waved and fiddled with something inside of the cockpit. Then he reached into the rear of the aircraft and pulled out a package. By the time Lyle stood next to the aircraft, they were several packages, both large and small. After they shook hands, Lewis started with, "Sorry to take so long, Lyle, just as I arrived, I saw the truck pulling onto the highway. Had to follow it. Anyway, you seem to be pretty much in one piece, care to tell me what happened."

"How long do you plan on staying?" The question made sense to him, if he was leaving right way, he would leave out details...

"Well, I can't leave until late this afternoon, that's so I can get on the leading edge of an incoming front. I need to fly all the way to Delta, going to meet some folks there. So, we have a lot of time. Go ahead."

As Lyle laid out the events leading up to the attack, Lewis handed him a few of the packages, taking the rest for himself. At his description of shooting the brigand, Lewis remained silent, just nodding. At the wagon, they both washed up at the hydrant, taking seats on the corral fencing.

"So what I'm left with is a shot up wagon, a dead receiver and motorcycle I have no idea on how to operate."

Okay, let's see what we have to work with. I'm going to have to keep you here a while longer, I'm afraid. Two of my long range patrols are on their way back out and the fort hasn't heard a thing." A slow head shake punctuated his next statement, "Hope like hell it's just radio propagation issue - which is where you come in."

Lyle kept his peace for the moment, he walked over and picked up the AK-47 lying in the dirt. Holding the weapon out he said, "You may have noticed someone tried to kill me last night. Damn unfriendly and his friends may be back for the rest of the sheep." The last said through clenched teeth.

"That bunch won't. We caught them just past the junction, heading toward Bishop." He gave Lyle a feral grin, "They only place they went was to hell. We were

right not to trust the drivers. Seems they have been playing both sides of the border. Thanks to Stubby, we knew where to wait."

"I don't see..." Lyle was confused.

"You were never privy to the big picture. The trucks running through Hawthorne then on up to the Tahoe line was meant to stir the pot." Lewis rubbed his face. "Stirred it too good. Before you got hit, two farms in the Lake valley got hit, hit bad. That was our trigger..."

Even this far from the highway, they couldn't miss the deep throated rumble of the trucks - a string of trucks carrying heavy loads.

"I need you to stay here and provide radio over watch until all of my Recondo groups are in and accounted for, then..." He rubbed his neck, "Then I can cut you loose. We'll pay as agreed and a bonus. You were never supposed to be in danger, but..."

"But nearly got killed. Just tell me why."

"The farm attacks give the US Union forces a reason to go after the brigands, if that happens to mean we get back our ports on the coast, well - so much the better."

"I see. I forgot to mention that Sherry killed a yard bull on the way down to Delta. She claimed he was feeding train schedules to the Neuvo Mexican raiders." That earned him a curse.

"Damn, wished I known that earlier, it could have made a difference."

"How could I tell you? I was waiting for your resupply visit, guess Stubby didn't bother to mention it either?"

"Stubby has his own world to sweat over; it was none of his worry in the first place..." He paused, "Look, I brought you a few things after your report on the first visit."

The little .22 pistol, Lyle kept, the well worn M4 he did not. Lewis promised to send a .22 rifle and ammo when he sent the replacement receiver and more food. The other items were a patrol radio set, the same as used by the LRRP teams, and a couple of books.

After they turned his aircraft around, Lewis left on an odd note. "How would you like some company? Full time, for a few weeks? At least you could take turns on watch."

"Be nice, so long as they are willing to pull their weight."

"That, they can do. Once things settle down a bit, I'll send a message for you to get ready to leave here." Minutes later, the little engine that popped out of the spine of the aircraft roared, and Lewis was gone in a cloud of dust.

Late on the appointed morning for his supplies, Lyle saw a truck slow, then pull off of the highway. He met the truck as it entered the valley, he would need to show the driver where his camp was located. To his surprise, the driver was none other than Sherry Dorow.

"Good morning, Miz Dorow. To what do I owe this visit?" He got a smile in return. And a question.

"Lewis tells me you hit a bit of trouble. Why don't you tell me about that?"

He tied the horse off with a long lead to the rear of the truck and climbed into the cab. By the time they'd reached the camp, he'd finished his tale. And asked his question, "Any reason you drove all the way out here?"

"Remember back at the shop, when I told you that you didn't know..."

"Much of anything, yes, I remember."

"Lewis sent me out here to wise you up. Now, where am I going to sleep..."

Lyle could tell this would be a summer he wasn't going to forget, no matter what.
