

On the Road to the East

by Steve White

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Just west of Perry, Ohio

March 22, CY21/2019 A.D.

Jeffrey Miller stood, stretching his back as he did so, and lifted the empty bucket next to him. That bucket was an old plastic water pail that had recently been filled with potato seed cubes. He carried this to the nearby wagon and hoisted it to his youngest son, Elijah, who carefully emptied new cubes from a burlap sack into it, scooping them with his small hands until the bucket was about three-fourths full. Miller took the moment to tip the straw hat from his head, wipe his face and graying beard with a cloth and looked around the field they were working. Three other sons, all older than Elijah, all in hats, linen shirts and woolen pants, used small spades to plant the cubes into rows of freshly-turned brown-black earth. Twine had been strung on sticks to guide them as they moved down the rows on knees and hands, digging and emptying their buckets, advancing the buckets alongside them as they dug, and every so often they would repeat the actions of their father, bringing their buckets to the wagon for Elijah to refill from the sacks. The five of them had started when the sun was barely above the horizon, a light frost melting away early from the earth that had been tilled the previous week, and now nearly at the noon hour they had emptied several dozen sacks of seed cubes. They had roughly half the field of five acres to go in their planting, and the boys worked diligently, as well they might with their father ready to bark out a sharp word at any sign of un-Godly slackness of effort. The March day was cool but the sun warmed their backs; the trees at the edge of the field, sugar maples, beech and oak, had just begun to bud in the past several days. The boys worked with little wasted motion and as the morning had progressed had worked with fewer and fewer words.

Miller motioned to Elijah and received a dipping cup of tepid water from a bucket at the head of the wagon. That was good enough to clear his throat. He stretched again and handed the cup back up to Elijah, then spoke to him.

“You ready to dig a little?”

“Yes, Pa.” The ten year old was serious. The boy had had his break and one of his brothers would soon step up to the wagon to hand down the seed cubes.

The field they worked sat beside the old Highway 20, a culvert dividing the road from the field, kept clear by farmers who understood the need to keep their fields properly drained. The road itself was cracked and rough, thistle and dandelion poking through the asphalt, more thistle and dandelion mixed with bracken and hay-scented ferns to either side of the roadbed. Oaks and sugar maples lined the far side with mountain laurel and witch hazel, the former green and the latter presently leafless, between them, forming a hedge to the field beyond. That field had held corn the past fall, when the entire Miller clan had worked in a line to pull each ear off the stalks by hand, removing the husks and tossing the shucked ears into horse-drawn wagons that were pulled alongside them. The corn set drying over the winter in cribs back home in their village to the east and would soon be shelled in another clan gathering. The remaining standing yellowed stalks stood above the ones trampled during the harvest, forlorn in the spring sun, suggesting that a final snow might be coming.

Which won't happen, Miller thought. The breeze off Lake Erie just a few miles to the north didn't have the icy tang that foretold flurries. But it was all the more reason to get the potatoes in so as to start tilling the other fields they worked to make ready for grain crops, beans and hay. The corn field would grow soybeans this year, he had decided over the winter, that would help rebuild the soil –

“Pa? Pa! I see something to the west!” Elijah stood at the back of the wagon and pointed down Highway 20.

Miller looked that way, squinting and silently bemoaning his now-lengthening vision, then moved to the wagon and pulled out a pair of black field glasses from a leather case on the foot-board. He fumbled with them for several moments, finally dialed in the correct focus, and, still squinting, found the puff of dust on the road. *Dear Father, this could be a problem.*

“Stephen!” The next youngest of the boys looked at him. All the boys had stopped digging when Elijah had called out, each looking at the same puff of dust in the distance.

“ Stephen!” he repeated. “Git back to the farm! Raise a warning. We have mounted men and wagons coming down the road. Find Mr. Yoder and tell him to get the men-folk together!”

Stephen was already moving towards the edge of the field and the dirt pathway cut in from the highway where Venus, a great cream draft horse, stood tied to a beech tree. She flared her ears and stamped but settled as Stephen clucked at her.

“You think it’s trouble, Pa?” Stephen called back to his father.

“I don’t know, boy. I do know you’d better git like I told you,” Miller barked. He turned to his youngest son, still standing on the wagon, and spoke more quietly. “Elijah, get home with your brother. The rest of us will stay here.”

Elijah needed no further encouragement and Stephen knew better to say anything more. The latter kissed at the horse, spoke quietly, and untied the rope. He looped that to the horse’s withers, quickly got a bridle onto the horse, and then clambered onto the back. Kissing again, he turned the horse and pulled his younger brother up behind him. They pointed Venus down the pathway and loped the horse towards home.

Miller reached back to the floor-board on the wagon and pulled out a pike. That was modestly longer than he was tall, gray-brown oak wood thick and round in his hands, and tipped with a flat, tapered steel head. The remaining two older boys had reached the wagon at that point and also pulled out weapons, the younger boy picking up a cross-bow and a cloth quiver filled with bolts, the older pulling out a pike that was a twin to his father’s.

Miller looked through the field glasses again. The caravan – that’s what it looked to him, a trading caravan – moved with purpose on the highway past the maples and beeches. There were four, no five, wagons, loaded but not overly so, pulled along by good-sized draft horses, six to a wagon, with spare draft horses and remounts, quarter-horses, following behind the last wagon on lead-lines. The front guard was a half-dozen stout men, rear guard the same, other men walking

either on or alongside their horses on either side of the wagons. He scanned right, then left, and found what he expected to see, mounted scouts on either side as well as up ahead of the main party. *We should have seen those earlier.* Good rigs, those wagons, metal frames with wood sides and canvas tops, good rubber tires, and proper suspensions. The horses looked healthy; the drafts pulling the wagons had weight to them and didn't appear to be straining. The men themselves looked toughened and some weather-worn, felt or cloth hats, chain-mail or leather-covered armor on their chests, and looked to ride quietly. Business-like. Miller did a quick count and got to about forty. That was a big enough group to defend themselves on the road but not big enough to attack a proper settlement. No, this wasn't a war party, not unless provoked, and Miller had no intention of provoking anyone.

He put down the field glasses and looked over at his remaining two sons. "Remember boys, the Good Lord does not want us to fight, though He will understand if we are compelled to stand our ground and be true to our faith. Give no offense to the strangers coming down the road, for it could be the Lord Himself traveling with them."

The boys nodded; they knew how to behave when strangers approached. Their Mennonite faith had prepared them for a life of farming and peace. The Change had brought anything but peace. That didn't change their obligation to the Good Lord one bit.

* * *

Ingolf Vogeler rode at the front of the main party, half-asleep in the saddle atop Boy, the big gelding that he'd ridden all the way from Iowa, warmed by the morning sun, aware of what was around him but pulled deep inside himself, not consciously thinking, taking in the smells, the yellow light, and the slow passing of the landscape. Vogeler put a hand up and scrunched his leather hat down on his head a touch, adjusting the brim to block the sun from his eyes, and looked about to either side to see the scouts ahead and around the party. He then hitched his long

leather duster a bit so that he could turn about and look at the first wagon behind him some ten yards with the big draft horses plodding along the two lane asphalt country road.

Vogeler hated what once had been called ‘interstate highways’ with a passion: sure the pavement was good and wide, but the highways had been a magnet for brigands of every kind who thought that taking things from others was a reasonable way to make a living. Worse still, every interstate had a damned fence on either side, good stout steel chain-link anchored to metal posts hammered deep into the earth that took time to knock-down, usually time you didn’t have when trouble brewed up, as, for example, when being confronted by brigands. So their party – ‘Vogeler’s Villains’ as they had named themselves – stuck to the back roads. The one they were traveling down that morning was a very good back road indeed, ditches cleared, creepers cut back, pavement not broken too badly, up ahead some honest to goodness fields and hedges, and Vogeler was comfortably certain that before too long they’d find a settlement. That suited him.

Cleveland was behind them a good ways now, and as far as he was concerned, good rid-dance. The plunder hadn’t been nearly as good as he and the crew had hoped. Plunder was what the Villains wanted; while they weren’t marauders and didn’t steal from the living, what the dead had left behind after the Change was valued back home in Iowa, Richland and Fargo. The Vil-lains were after high-end plunder. Anyone could salvage brick and rebar, but the good stuff, well, that required expertise and nerve and a sly sense of what might be hidden and where. But Cleve-land had been a disappointment: for all the size of the city and its buildings and avenues, the mu-seums had been scorched, the schools and universities empty shells, the businesses broken and empty. The cities to the west, places once known as ‘Chicago’ and ‘Fort Wayne’ and ‘Detroit’ had been cleaned out over the years for top-end merchandise by forage crews, and it looked like someone had beaten them to this city as well. Worse still, he’d lost a man to the Eaters in the flat-land just past the main river in the downtown area, and that grieved him. Good man, Karl, didn’t deserve what had happened. Few did. The Villains had rooted around and found enough to make

the stop reasonably worthwhile, but the real riches were further east, and Vogeler meant to get there before high summer.

He returned his eyes to the front and settled again in the saddle. Boy clopped along and he rocked in time, allowing himself to drift, making up for the lack of rest that came with being up most of the night, every night. He woke instantly upon hearing his name. He looked up and to his right, and Singh, turban atop his head, smiled at him from atop his own horse. “Hey Boss, you gonna sleep in the saddle all day, or do you want a report?”

Vogeler snorted. “Talk to me.”

Singh did so in a voice that despite the flat Midwest accent had a sing-song quality. “Kaur has been up ahead.” Kaur was his sister, jet-black hair and olive skin a twin to his. “We got a settlement about five miles down this road, just over the rise in front of us. Good sized one, too. They got a palisade wall around it, big gate to cut the road, and some number of buildings. Up in front some fields and scattered buildings. Some of the fields are being worked. Just two or so miles and to the right just before the rise we got a field with a few locals standing there looking slack-jawed at us. Man, kids, typical farmer types, looks like they’ve sent the, ah, news of our arrival back to home.”

Vogeler nodded. “We don’t look like brigands, so they’ll be ready for us but not spoiling for a fight. And we aren’t spoiling for one either.” No sense in fighting civilized people, Vogeler believed, not unless you were backed into a corner. Eaters were different. Those you killed without mercy and preferably without warning. “Anyone tracking us?” he asked Singh. He doubted it, his scouts were *very* good at finding out things like that.

Singh made a rude noise. “Boss, please,” and he grinned, brilliant white teeth showing against his black beard.

Vogeler smiled back. “No offense.”

“None taken. You want Kaur and me to make contact ahead?” As the lead scouts, the two usually would sound out the locals as they traveled to see how friendly, or not, said locals might be.

Vogeler shook his head. “No, let’s do it as a group. More impressive that way.” Singh nodded and rode back to the scout group in front.

That was the cue for Kuttner to slide up to him. *Crap*. Well, no way to avoid him, Vogeler knew. Joseph Kuttner was the governor’s man, the anointed, official minion of the big Bossman himself of all of the Great Republic of Iowa. Vogeler had no problems with Bossmen as a general rule, though he didn’t particularly like the ones who had wanted him dead or in a prison work camp somewhere, and since there had been a couple of those in his life so far he was inclined to be careful in dealing with them. He wouldn’t mind being a boss man himself someday, or at least a county sheriff with a land grant, dispensing favors and taking in favors in return. But he wasn’t a boss of anything right now more than the Villains, and since the Bossman had commissioned and paid for this expedition, said Bossman had the right to send along a man to make sure the Villains did as His Enormity expected. That man was Kuttner, and Vogeler had to listen to him, or at least make a show of listening to him.

“We shouldn’t stop,” Kuttner rasped. His forehead glistened with sweat even on the cool morning. Kuttner was a short man, shorter than average and much more so compared to Vogeler, thin but not gaunt, and as usual for him was uncomfortable in his saddle; one of the several major things Vogeler didn’t like about the man – other than his being a lying fuck-weasel – was that he couldn’t ride near as well as the rest of the Villains. Decent enough with a blade in a fight, better than Vogeler had expected when Kuttner had been forced upon him back in Des Moines, but never the first up front. That was another thing Vogeler didn’t like.

“Mr. Kuttner, we’re gonna have to,” Vogeler replied. He tried to keep the edge out of his voice. “The settlement up ahead blocks the road. If we want to go around we’ll have to back-track. And we don’t have a good map for this land, so we’d be guessing. Don’t like that.” The

map he had was a single sheet of folding card-stock that showed all of ‘Ohio’, green and red lines showing roads that were barely there these days, through and around towns that hadn’t been populated since shortly after the Change. *And it doesn’t show the things I really need to know, like where all the wrecked bridges are, and where we’ll run into the worst of the Eaters.*

“We shouldn’t stop,” Kuttner repeated. “We need to get to the coast. That’s what the Bossman wants.” The coast to which Kuttner referred was New England and the Atlantic Ocean. The Bossman had been real specific on that point when he sent Vogeler off on this expedition, and Kuttner invoked the need to get there every time the Villains stopped to plunder.

“We’ll get there.” *The man is always in a hurry.* Vogeler sighed and continued. “Look, the crew is a little worn down. We didn’t get hardly any rest back there in Cleveland. We find a peaceful settlement where we can trade for a hot meal and a night’s sleep under a roof, that will help us get down the road. That’s my advice.”

“They can rest while we ride. We need to move —”

“Mr. Kuttner.” Vogeler interrupted, not as rudely as he wanted, but this was an old argument and he wasn’t in the mood for it this morning. “Remind me, who did the Bossman put in charge of this little enterprise? Hmm?”

“Of course, he put you in charge, but —”

“That’s right. He knows that I’m the man to get us there and back again, all the way to Iowa and home, so why don’t you let me worry about the day to day business? I’m sure a man like you can worry about something else.”

Kuttner didn’t reply to that but turned his horse away from him and fell back. *Nice talking with you, and thank you once again for openly challenging my authority.*

They rode on. On a good road they could average not-quite three miles in an hour, that being the best speed of horse-drawn wagons in a walk. After a while Vogeler called the scouts in tighter so as not to spook people watching from the settlement. They’d be watching alright, Vogeler knew, just as that old man and his boys were watching from the field now just up ahead.

They drew close to them, and Vogeler put a hand up to stop the wagons. The scouts stayed back from the field – no sense in making the locals feel surrounded. The man and boys had weapons but held them points down so as not to threaten them.

“Good morning, sir,” Vogeler called out. He separated himself from the rest of the front group of his team and walked Boy to the edge of the road, close to the drainage ditch and a good-sized gap between the trees lining the field.

“Morning to you, traveler,” the man replied, flat midwestern twang familiar to Vogeler. “Name is Miller. Who be you?”

“Vogeler. We’re a trading company, just passing through. Peaceful to all who are peaceful to us.”

“You shouldn’t have any trouble then. Lord God commands us to be at peace with all good men.” Miller used the butt end of his pike to point down the road. “That’s Millersburg up ahead. If you’re in the mood to trade, you might find folks willing to dicker with you.”

Vogeler nodded and smiled gently. “Millersburg. That’s good. Named for you?”

Miller shook his head. “Just an old name.”

Vogeler nodded again. “Anything we have to know in approaching Millersburg?” That wasn’t an idle question; he didn’t want to make the town guard nervous, and he wasn’t certain of the customs in this land. Settlements were few and far between east of the Mississippi River, and those had survived by being, at the least, suspicious of anyone who came down the road.

“Come up slow, stay to the road, keep your weapons sheathed. Our elder will greet you at the gate. Might have some questions of his own.”

“We can do that,” Vogeler responded. He waved his hand at the field. “What are you putting in there, potatoes?”

It was Miller’s turn to nod. “Yup. Good ones from last season back in town, if you’re in a mind to trade.”

“We might. Does Millersburg have a stable and an inn?”

Miller shrugged. “No inn, not like what I think you mean, at least. Good stable, with blacksmiths and leather-workers for anything you’d ever need. We don’t have any sleeping accommodations like a hotel. We don’t get many travelers coming down the road. You might be able to hire out something.”

“Thank you kindly for the help, then.” Vogeler nudged Boy back to the road, looked around, and satisfied that nothing was coming down the road at them from the town, called out to his party. Most of his men – and women – except the rear guard came up closer to him. “Okay, we rein it in, nice and slow, come up to the gate up there and expect to be greeted peaceably. Weapons down, ev’ryone got that?”

He received a thin chorus of acknowledgment from that, some sour; no one particularly liked having their weapons put away while riding up to an unknown settlement. The caravan started moving again, horses clopping along, and they rolled another couple miles past more fields and low out-buildings up to the front gate of the settlement. That was closed, and in front on the pavement stood a single man, older than Miller, lean with a gray-white beard, wearing the same sort of homespun clothing as Miller and his boys, pants held up by black suspenders, feet covered in workman’s boots. He wore a broad-brimmed black hat instead of a straw one. Some heads, each with a hat, some black, some straw, peeped above the palisade wall to either side.

Singh was riding beside Vogeler at that point, and they quietly, professionally surveyed the settlement in front of them. Stout walls. Palisade logs were trimmed nicely, a good twenty feet out of the ground and fronted with a dry ditch, that being a good ten feet wide and perhaps as much deep. The peeping heads strongly suggested an elevated walkway behind with plenty of firing positions. Singh pointed at some cabling just below the points of the palisade logs and similar cabling near the base.

Vogeler nodded. “Looks like wire, maybe old electrical wire. Something like that, anyways. Helps keep things tight if someone’s trying to smash it down with a ram. Smart.”

The logs themselves were unpainted and unadorned. The gate was a single pane, also unadorned, timber-framed, strong, with smaller logs cut the same way as the wall used to make the gate. Cross-braces ran top, bottom and middle. Vogeler was comfortably certain the other side had similar braces. *Wouldn't want to try and bust that down without proper siege equipment.* The gate swung on massive hinges and looked to be counter-balanced, judging by some wires at the top. And it ran completely across Highway 20. The settlement behind the gate and wall must be on either side, Vogeler judged and said so to Singh.

Singh agreed and spread his hands. "Had to be deliberate. They could have built their village to either side. Hill to the left," he continued, pointing towards a knoll a mile away, "well, that would have been more defensible. But they put themselves here, so they must have meant it."

Vogeler and Singh stopped a dozen steps in front of the old man. Vogeler introduced himself as he had to Miller, doffing his own hat as he did so as a mark of respect, and the old man nodded.

"I'm John Yoder. I'm the elder here. What's your business?" He didn't remove his own hat.

"Passing through. We're a trading company from Iowa, headed to the east coast." No need to embellish, the truth was strange enough, Vogeler knew, and the old man – predictably – looked skeptical.

"East coast? That's a long way from Iowa, if I remember my geography right. Long ways, especially these days."

"Yes sir," Vogeler called back. "It's our job, as it turns out. We salvage materials and bring them back home for sale. If you're willing to let us, we'd like to stop here for the day and night. We'd pay fair for food, fodder and any lodging. We might have some things you'd be interested in."

Yoder didn't move. "Day is young. You think you want to pass on through?"

“If that’s your desire, that’s what we’ll do. We’re peaceful to all who are peaceful to us.”

Vogeler tensed at the attitude. *I do not want a fight.*

But Yoder took a step back and put up his right arm. “We have no problem with you stopping here, Mr. Vok-ler,” mangling the name. “Make your way through the gate and then left, you’ll see a stable there. My cousin runs it, he’s a Yoder also, he can help you.”

Vogeler whistled softly to himself. *Well, okay then, that’s more like it.*

The gate swung outward; indeed counter-balanced, it unblocked the two lanes of asphalt, and Yoder signaled the wagon teams forward as he stepped aside. Groups of men stood beyond, one motioning them left, all armed with a variety of pikes and crossbows. Vogeler didn’t see a single re-curve nor a sword. Beyond the gate the settlement looked well-kept, large two story buildings lining either side of the highway. Vogeler could see other men beyond the first line returning to their work, and further back could hear the sounds of lumber being sawn, metal-work being done, and the clacking of looms. Behind them to either side were frame homes with rough, unpainted plank siding, one and two stories tall with windows that were mostly pre-Change and framed in, going three to four rows back, all neatly aligned. Some had trellises on their sides, vines already beginning to green. Graveled side roads separated the rows of buildings and raised plank sidewalks ran along either side. Behind and to the sides of the buildings the thin strips of earth separating them had been turned, and Vogeler guessed those were for gardens to be planted as the weather warmed. The tang of curing leather and milled wood licked at him, mixed with the smells of charcoal, cooking smells and baked bread, but with little outhouse odor. That suggested plumbing and sanitation. Tightly put together but not too tight, and Vogeler remarked on this to Singh and to Kuttner, who had ridden up on Vogeler’s right.

Kuttner surprised him in response. “These folks look like Amish or Mennonite. Notice they didn’t have any housing outside the wall. They’re completely self contained except for the fields. They laid out the town first and then built the wall. Timber is plentiful so that wouldn’t have been hard.”

Vogeler chewed on that as they rode over to cousin's stable. Made some sense if you didn't want to risk having anything outside the wall in any sort of dust-up. "But that's a mighty big wall to defend in a fight," he finally answered back.

Kuttner shrugged. "They may not need to have any big fights here. Seen any Eaters lately?" They hadn't, not since Cleveland. Kuttner continued, "Easier to defend yourself inside a wall like that if you're just dealing with scattered tribes of Eaters. Don't leave nothing for them outside."

Singh had been looking around and spoke up quietly. "I count maybe a hundred houses, Boss. Figure maybe five, six hundred?"

"Thereabouts. That would give them a hundred, hundred-and-a-half fighters. Let's not pick a fight."

Cousin Yoder was waiting for them at the stable. Most of the Villains were inside the gate now with the last wagon passing through and rear-guard, handled by Vogeler's second-in-command, Jose, close behind. Cousin was a formidable man and put out a large hand to Vogeler, still mounted on Boy. "I'm John Yoder," he called up. His clothing was identical to his cousin and to that of farmer Miller. He wore heavy leather boots and held a pitchfork in his gloved left hand, which he waved. "Putting some flakes out for the horses inside today," referring to baled hay that he would pull apart to 'flakes'.

Vogeler smiled and shook the proffered hand. "Got room for some horses? I told your cousin we'd pay fair."

Yoder smiled back. "We can do that if you like. We'd put some in here and some in a paddock on the east side of our village," motioning with the pitchfork. "That's safe enough at night, we keep a couple boys on duty to watch over the livestock."

"Good enough for me. Will you take goods in trade?" He jerked a thumb back to the wagons. "We have some interesting things, tools, some stuff we've foraged out of Cleveland and points west, if'n you want to take a look."

Yoder's smile broadened. "Gold."

"Gold?" Vogeler's heart sank a little.

"Gold," Yoder said again. "You've heard of it since you're a trader from Iowa, right?"

"Oh, yes." Vogeler swung his leg over and hopped down from his horse. Dickering like this was best done eye-to-eye. He had gold, of course, one always paid attention to finding gold in salvage operations, and even if the jewelry stores were long-since empty, one could find gold in all sorts of places if one knew just where to look. He had a couple strongboxes each more than half-filled with salvaged gold, another containing various gems, and a several more flush with silver, both in coin and in service. That didn't mean he wanted to part with any of it, since all of it in the end belonged, minus expenses, to the Bossman in Des Moines. He also had a fair number of Iowa gold dollar coins and more of silver half and quarter dollars. He didn't want to part with any of those, either.

"So you're not interested in trade-goods," Vogeler said. He kept back two steps so as not to overly-threaten Cousin Yoder with his presence.

Yoder shook his head, the motion combining with his size and his beard to make him look like a sheepdog shaking off a drenching. "My friend, we make most everything we need here. I have plenty of tools. Over the years we've found or made everything we use today. We grow our food. We grow our hay. We grow flax and weave linen. We make all our clothes. We cut trees and saw the lumber we use all around here. No offense, but I don't know that you have anything I need or want that I can't make."

"Well-l-l, that being the case, we could do gold. But if you make everything you need, why do you need gold?" Vogeler was looking for an angle, and Cousin Yoder dashed it.

"I have to take something from you in trade. You don't have anything else I want. Gold I can save for a rainy day."

Vogeler surrendered, and they spent the next several minutes working out exact rates. As they dickered Yoder gave him, Singh and Kuttner a tour of the stable. The building was timber-

framed with a great Dutch roof, and they walked down a broad aisle with stalls on either side, some occupied but more empty, plenty of hay-bales stored above on the rafter boards, separate rooms halfway down the aisle holding tack that looked stout and well maintained. The timbers supporting the structure were heavy, not logs but sawn wood; those looked to be twelve-by-twelves. The roof had gables to let in light; that light was dim despite the morning and wasn't augmented by any lamps. There wasn't a spec of paint on anything. The floors were dirt but level with just a little straw here and there. Someone had mucked the stalls not long before, and at several points along the aisle large oak barrels held the manure. The horses in the stalls were mostly draft type, a few cream, others bay, chestnut or black.

At the far end of the stable aisle, framed in a large, open door and what looked to be a paddock beyond, a youngish man, dressed in homespun and with a hat on a nearby peg, worked with a rasp on a horse's hoof that he had curled up in his knees. The black draft was held in rope stays and stood placidly on his other three hooves while the man used smooth, clean strokes with the rasp, back and forth, left then right, to trim the hoof while a boy stood nearby holding a shoeing hammer and a shoe. To the side stood a wooden cart, and Vogeler could see an anvil atop and various tools hanging on either side.

Yoder pointed at the man. "That's one of my cousins. He's our farrier here. Good one, always does a nice job. You have horses that need any work?"

"We might," Vogeler replied. The Villains could do their own work but it never hurt to have a skilled man take a look. He tilted his head at the farrier cousin. "Does he take trade goods?"

Yoder smiled once again. "Gold."

"Gold," Vogeler repeated. "Is he a Yoder?"

"Oh no," Yoder replied, "he's a Miller."

* * *

Shruthi Patel had stepped outside her clinic when she first heard the commotion about visitors. Her small receiving room was empty; she'd sent out just a few minutes before a young Miller who had finally recovered from a recent asthma attack and had no patients to see after him. She would go out later that day on her rounds, mostly for the pregnant and nursing mothers, the children with recurring sniffles, and the occasional work-related injuries. She was the only doctor in the village but even so generally wasn't particularly busy. The Mennonites didn't ask for help all that often, particularly for their aged, and they certainly didn't ask for the type of pre-Change medical care that they and Patel both knew couldn't be delivered. Patel had learned over the years not to push herself onto the community, and the community in turned had learned that the kind heathen doctor would always be there to help when asked.

A young Yoder ran past her, shirt-tail hanging out, one hand on his hat to keep it in place. "Doctor Patel, we have visitors at the west gate! Traders, maybe they'll have some neat stuff!" And he dashed away leaving a laughing doctor in his wake, wondering where youth got its energy, energy she certainly didn't have in such abundance anymore.

Oh, why not, she thought, and closed the clinic door behind her before setting off towards the west gate on the crushed gravel road that was one step beyond the plank sidewalk, wrapping a linen shawl around her shoulders. It wasn't as if she couldn't be found if needed, even if she didn't wear a pager on her hip anymore. She brushed back her black hair and ambled, no need at all to hurry, smiling and waving to her neighbors in their homes, more than a few of whom had also decided like her to set out to gawk at the mysterious travelers. She stepped around the few puddles in the road, down the row to the main north-south way that bisected the settlement, and angled towards the west gate. Two teen boys moved past her quickly, scuffing the gravel in their heavy boots, doffing their hats in respect, towering over her. Almost everyone towered over her, she at just shy of five feet in height, rail thin both from her genetics and from a former life of serious running. She'd done the Chicago marathon once, that during her medical residency, fitting

in the training and the roadwork despite the every third night call on the wards, always craving the endorphin high that would come if one just ran long and hard enough. That thought brought a thin, reedy chuckle to her lips. *Like any adult runs for pleasure any more.*

Five minutes brought her to the courtyard with the west gate just beyond, now standing open, local Mennonites chatting with men who had to be the traders, quiet, respectful talk about the quality of the horses, admiring words about the wagons, a few words about where the traders had come from and what they'd seen, shaking heads in disbelief when Iowa – Iowa! – was mentioned. She lost her desire to join the gathering throng, the buzz was already too loud for her, and she decided to step back and down to the dwelling of one of the Millers, home to a young pregnant mother who just might be at risk for pre-eclampsia, checking on her and perhaps collecting a cut-up chicken for services rendered. As she turned around she dug her heels into the asphalt of the courtyard to stop, bug-eyed, mouth opening just steps from a tall, hawk-faced woman who stood equally disbelieving at her. Her mouth flailed.

That woman is a Sikh!

Kaur had stepped away from the crowd at the western gate to look for food. She had settled her horse at cousin Yoder's and then had walked back to the gate astride Highway 20, checking with Jose to ensure the wagons were tucked out of the way to the side of the courtyard. Settlements meant fresh food, bread, vegetables, meat for the rest of the Villains – she and Singh ate no meat, of course – and she was determined to find a decent bed for the night and perhaps even a bath when she rounded the corner and come to a full stop, staring open-mouthed at the miniature woman standing stock-still blocking her way and gaping back at her.

That woman is a Hindu!

Patel recovered her voice first and raised her right hand. "Child, what brings you here?" She surveyed the younger woman, dressed in loose trousers, a linsey-woolsey shirt, leather tunic and chain-mail, dagger in her tooled belt, long shete at her hip and buckler tucked behind her, her

head unadorned, and rugged, high boots on her feet. *This lioness would fight her way out of a tornado.*

Kaur in turn looked the tiny woman over, taking in the homespun shawl, shirt and skirt and the thin leather moccasins on her feet. *That woman would blow away in a stiff breeze.* She settled herself, bowed slightly in respect to the shorter woman, placed her palms together with fingers upraised, and responded with formality, “I come from the west with my friends. What brings you here, Auntie-ji?”

Patel smiled, her eyes bright and wide-open. “I bounced around after the Change, and the gods put me here amongst the heathens. Perhaps as a punishment.”

Kaur smiled in return and stepped to the small woman’s left. “It is a reward for me to see you here.”

Patel stopped smiling and shook her head. “The honor is mine, child. You should rest a while, you look as if the wind has blown you across the land.”

Kaur stepped closer, then offered her hands pressed together, which Patel took between hers, gentle in grip. Kaur spoke again quietly. “Is there a place where I could find fresh food around here, Auntie-ji? I’d pay, of course.”

Patel released Kaur’s hands and gestured toward the plank sidewalk across from them. “I’m not with the Foders Agency” – the reference drew a blank from Kaur – “but there’s a communal kitchen just a few doors down where you and your friends can eat, so long as you like country fixins’. As if you’d find anything else around here.”

Kaur warmed to this wisp of a woman. “Please join me, Auntie-ji?”

To which Patel replied, “Of course, Child, you are my guest.”

* * *

By mid-afternoon the Villains were settled in. Horses were groomed by the Villains themselves, and their care and obvious expertise earned the respect of the Millers and Yoders throughout the settlement. Contrary to the statement of Farmer Miller earlier that day, there was indeed a guest-house of sorts, and – for more gold, of course – half the crew was settled in there. The rest would sleep at the stables with the horses. They'd done better in the past. They'd more frequently done a whole lot worse.

Vogeler and Singh worked alongside their crew until they'd finished their work. They'd left Kuttner back at the stable, and once the horses were settled various townsfolk had pointed them to a communal kitchen. As they walked in through the double-door, held open by wooden wedges, they saw many of their crew already inside, sitting around plank tables, some chatting amiably with the few Mennonites who were there, more just eating. The eating area was spacious and plain, floored with smoothed planks with large windows to either side. Shutter doors were hinged to either side of each window with a heavy wooden shutter-bar hung from a nearby hook for each. An open ceiling exposed the beams above, and an honest-to-goodness ceiling fan, suspended from the main beam by a pipe, turned slowly in the middle. Vogeler would bet the lunch he now craved that a small windmill sat outside atop the roof to turn the fan. He came in further and the food smells struck home, narrowing his vision to the far end of the eating area where wooden counters held large serving pieces filled with steaming, cooked vegetables, mashed potatoes, gravy, and cut-up fried chicken. Baskets with fresh loaves of bread stood nearby along with small clay crocks of butter. More baskets held dried fruit, but Vogeler didn't see any pastry. *Rats*. Plastic pitchers of various colors and sizes held something, and as Vogeler and Singh walked up they could see milk and apple juice within.

A young Mennonite woman, medium height and thin with brown hair spilling out of a white veil on her head, stood behind the counter to the side closest to them, wide opening to the kitchen behind her, and spoke up. "More travelers. I must say this is a special day!"

Vogeler and Singh both chuckled broadly and Vogeler responded, "I take it you folks don't get a lot of company in these parts."

The woman's smile faded and her eyes looked down a moment. "Not often, at least not ones who don't want us for dinner."

"You have lots of problems with that?" Vogeler had learned over the years that one gleaned useful intelligence from almost any conversation one had with strangers. Especially a handsome stranger as this one. Brown eyes, nice figure, maybe, oh, twenty or so. And very likely untouchable, though perhaps amenable to what he considered to be his considerable charm.

"We do. Sometimes. We have to be careful. I'm surprised my grandfather let you in so easily this morning," she replied.

Grandfather. Well, the things you learn. Vogeler responded with respect. "We're grateful he did, we've been on the road a while." His stomach tried to remind him that there was food for the taking just down the counter, but another part of Vogeler told it to mind for a while and talk to the pretty lady. "It's always good for us to find shelter, good people, and good food. "You folks put out quite a spread. This special or is this ev'ryday?"

"Our people contribute to the kitchen so the mid-day meal is generally for them. But once we heard we had visitors we decided to lay on some extras."

"Glad you did. You work here in the kitchen then?" Vogeler pointed around and then returned his attention to the woman. *Very nice figure.* "Good sized place. Name's Vogeler, by the way, Ingolf." He extended a hand across the counter.

She took it, her own palm warm and moist lingering over his a moment, then pulled her hand back. "I'm Beth Yoder, and I'm here everyday." She paused. "I don't get to travel around, nothing like you folks. You came from Iowa?"

"Yes ma'am." Vogeler noticed that Singh had given up on him and was now fixing a plate of food. "My associate there, he and I, all of us, came out of Iowa over the winter."

“Winter?” Amazement came into her voice. “Why travel in the winter? Conditions must be terrible!”

“Oh, not as bad as you’d think. Lake effect snow gets tiresome but it’s no colder here than Iowa.” Which was plenty cold, he didn’t say. “But we needed to get on the road if we were going to get to the east coast by summer.”

“To the ocean? Why would men do that? It has to be dangerous.” She looked dubious. “What does the coast have that you don’t have in Iowa? We have everything we need here.”

That’s a darned good question, Vogeler realized, especially since it was that damned Kuttner who kept riding him to move, move, move. “Well there’s goods there that we don’t have as it turns out. And, I guess, no one’s been there for a long while, least no one civilized. We figured we’d take a look.”

“That’s mighty brave.”

She shifted, a little uncomfortable, and Vogeler couldn’t tell whether that was from thinking about the coast, his bravery, or from his mentally undressing her. *Down, boy*. “So that’s the story, anyway,” he continued, and forced himself to stop staring at her. “Dunno if we’re brave or just stupid.”

“Oh, it’s brave,” she responded, eyes bright looking at him, and then took a step back, extending her left hand to point at the food on the counter. “You’ll need to get your lunch now before everything gets cold.”

“Speaking of which, what do we owe you here?”

“Oh, you’re running a bill for all your people. ”

“Alright, then, you let me know personally when it’s time to settle up and I’ll pay you. We have all sorts of trade-goods and such.” Vogeler tried his standard opening line for barter but he suspected that he already knew the answer, and he wasn’t disappointed.

“My grandfather instructed me that we’re to take gold.”

Deflated, Vogeler said, “ah yes, well, I’ve been hearing that.” Singh snickered quietly down the counter from him. *You’ve been made, boss* was his clear meaning.

“And there you go.” She stepped back from the counter and turned to walk into the kitchen behind her.

O-o-okay, so maybe we’re not so lucky tonight, Vogeler thought, and Singh snickered a little more as Vogeler picked up a tray. *It only hurts because he really can read my mind.*

Both men slid their trays down wooden dowels attached to their side of the counters. Most of the cutlery and dishes were of mixed vintage. The vegetables on the counter were cooked together country-style with chunks of bacon, and the potatoes and gravy were heaven sent to Vogeler. He loaded up on chicken parts, golden-brown and spicy, which Singh had passed by, poured himself a large glass of apple juice, and picked up a loaf of bread. With their plates and glasses full the two men looked around and found a table near the middle of the eating area with next to their own crew and walked over. Along the way Vogeler looked around and saw Kaur at a corner table talking quietly and intensely with – *hey, wait a minute, that’s no Mennonite!* As they settled at the table with their crew, Vogeler exchanged greetings and then asked around in a near-whisper, “So, who’s the old lady with Kaur?”

The crew-man closest to him, one of the rear-guard men, answered just as quietly. “Dunno boss, but they have a similar, ah, complexion.” He looked at Singh. “No offense.”

“None taken,” Singh responded and smiled. “She’s obviously a woman of some importance.”

“How do you know that?” the crew-man asked.

“Well, she *is* a member of the master race,” Singh responded, and grinned broadly. That brought good-natured raspberries, and men and women at other tables, crew and Mennonite alike, looked over to see what the conversation was. Vogeler spoke again in as low a tone as he could. “Ah boys, let’s not be too jocular here, we don’t want to pick a fight today.”

That quieted them down, and the crew-man who'd spoke a moment before spoke again, just as softly as before. "They were here when we came in and they've been chattering non-stop the whole time. Beats me what's it about. Maybe just girl-talk." That brought a few chuckles but nothing loud: everyone at the table had gotten the message.

Singh glanced over to where the two women continued to talk, oblivious to events around them. "I'll find out later, boss," he said to Vogeler.

"Fair enough," Vogeler replied. "Let's eat."

* * *

Evening rolled in. The Ohio sky turned to deep blue and then indigo as stars began to appear. The sunset hadn't been special at all given the lack of cloud cover, just reds and pinks and purples high in the sky, and as it receded most of the Villains sat at a bonfire just outside the west gate of the settlement where they'd passed through earlier in the day. Lunch was past, dinner was past, work was done, and all that was left was to spend the remaining moments of twilight around a fire before retiring. Kuttner sat to one side by himself as was typical for him; none of the rest of the Villains particularly wanted anything to do with him, and he had long-ago recognized the discomfort in forcing himself on the group. So he sat with his sword, short in the *gladius* style, and a sharpening stone, occasionally holding the blade out towards the fire, examining it in the yellow light, before starting again with the stone. Several other Villains did the same. Another member of the crew, one of the several women in the party, had pulled out a mandolin from her personal kit, and she picked quietly while another woman sang with her:

This is the sound of voices two

The sound of me singing with you

Helping each other to make it through

This is the sound of voices two

Vogeler had kept himself busy all day. From quartering crew at the guest-house – that had turned out to be an older church building which apparently had become too small for the flock, and was now used for various other purposes – to keeping a discrete eye on the crew, many of whom had been somewhat less discreetly keeping their eyes on the Mennonite women, to arranging with a Yoder or a Miller for trade, for dinner, for farrier work, right down to firewood for the bonfire in front of which he now sat, he'd worn himself down as surely as he would have in the saddle. He was entitled to his rest now and he damned well was going to take it.

Singh and Kaur had appeared at the bonfire just as the sun had touched the horizon. They'd been off together most of the afternoon. They'd ridden a ways to the east of the settlement, looking at Highway 20 and the side roads so as to plan their departure the next day. They had returned from that just as dinner had been served in the communal kitchen. The Villains were the only ones there for that meal; the Mennonites ate with their families at home, and one could smell the woodsmoke, the last wafts of food and the cooking-grease from various points around the village. Small children played in the main courtyards in front of the gates at either end of the village while older children attended to their evening chores. Candles burned in most of the homes. Vogeler had made himself fairly popular by buying a case of those in return for silver. He'd make a few other purchases as well, nothing too splashy or rich, but he'd bought preserved food, some new tack for their draft horses, and had made arrangements with grandmother Yoder, the wife of Elder Yoder at the gate, for bread to be delivered the next morning. He'd also talked with Cousin Yoder about buying a horse or two, since one couldn't have too many remounts in the wild-lands, but in the end the price – in gold, of course – was too high.

Singh now separated himself from his sister. She in turn stepped away from the fire and began to work her evening ritual of exercise, first stretching, then martial forms with bare hands and then more forms, one- and two-handed, with sword. She gave away, at a minimum, thirty

pounds to any man who might attack her, and the only way for her to stay alive in a fight was to be quicker and more limber. A few other crew walked to another point in the field away from the fire and started to do the same.

Singh sat down beside Vogeler. He held a small plastic cup in his hand and offered it to Vogeler. Vogeler tilted the cup towards the light and peered into it, then his eyes bugged at the contents. *Raisins!* He took a small handful, eyed them a moment, then popped them into his mouth, and sat for a few seconds enjoying the taste.

“My word, that’s good,” he finally said, wiping his lips with his sleeve. “Where did they get these?”

“They grow grapes here. They have arbors out on the east side of the settlement. Something they call ‘table grapes’, apparently no good for making wine, so they dry them and make raisins.”

“I wouldn’t expect wine here,” Vogeler said. “They don’t seem the type.”

“You’d almost be wrong. Kaur has been filling me in. These folk are a little different. You ever encounter any of the Amish in Iowa?”

“Yup, couple times, some settlements north o’ Cedar Falls.” Vogeler was now curious. “Those folk live a *very* simple life, even compared to ev’ryone else.”

“Yup, I been there too, and these folks are different. The Amish have a different religion than the Mennonites, for starters, and they’re something called ‘Old Order’, apparently, so they’re different from the Mennonites, who apparently have their own Old Order, even though their Old Order is different from that of the Amish. Simple, right?”

Vogeler grinned in the firelight. “You’re hurting me.”

Singh grinned back at him and went on. “They take their religion seriously but they don’t have a problem with weapons, for example.”

“I wondered about that when we first saw that farmer and his boys.”

“That’s why they’ve survived out here, they’re not afraid to defend themselves. They do some drill a few nights a week, but tonight is Saturday and they don’t drill tonight. They also have an archery range just outside their east gate, and I’ve seen some crossbows.”

“So they’ll stand up for themselves.”

“Apparently so,” Singh said, “and well enough that they’re here today. They also take pretty seriously the need for non-violence when they can. One of the reasons they allowed us to stay here was so that they and we wouldn’t fight.”

That surprised Vogeler. “I wasn’t looking for a fight.”

“Yup, and neither were they. Apparently the only ones they’ll fight are the Eaters, and only then if they’re backed into a corner.”

“What else did you learn?” Vogeler was more interested in the people now.

“How about, for instance, that not everyone here is named Yoder and Miller?”

They both laughed. “Could have fooled me,” Vogeler chuckled. Then he shifted gears. “So, what’s with your sister and that old lady? She related to you two?”

Singh shook his head. “No, course not. She’s an Indian, as in Indian-Indian and not Sioux.” He smiled. Vogeler’s face was blank at that comment, and Singh was pretty sure that his boss didn’t understand the difference between a Hindu and a Sikh. “Interesting story. I got the gist of it from Kaur but I declined the girly details.”

They both laughed again and Singh continued. “Apparently she’s a doctor and lived in Cleveland. Remember that big, big hospital we plundered near the downtown and the bend in the river? Right before we ran into those Eaters?”

Vogeler nodded. They’d found a couple of microscopes and some other medical instruments in the wreckage, now packed away in wooden crates, per a specific request of the Bossman. Those had been a prize. That was also where they’d lost Karl when the Eaters had attacked.

Singh went on. “That was her place to work. She was a nee-fro-lo-gist, something about your kidneys, from what I gather.”

“How in the world did she end up here? Or anywhere for that matter?”

“Apparently she’s tougher than she looks. She somehow managed to survive Change-Day and ended up working in some refugee camps south of the city. Typical story, never ends well. When those fell apart she went into the country with some people. They died, she lived, and she stumbled into the Mennonite community.”

“Here?” Vogeler asked.

“No, not here. South of here, down near the Ohio River. Managed to survive in the hill country, from what she said, and made herself useful. Apparently some years back the Mennonites down there decided to start a colony up here.”

“Ah, same thing the Marshfield Bossman did along Lake Michigan right after the Sioux wars.”

“Right you are, boss. Mennonites decided to get something going near the lake. Idea is just like Marshfield, you get some decent settlements going in a few places and then fill in between when you can, and they like the land in these parts. So, the good doctor went with them.”

Vogeler thought about that a bit. “What I want to know is, any more of these settlements?”

Singh jerked a thumb to the distance. “Yes, a couple, but those are south of here so they’re out of our way. Like I said, they spread out a little and then fill in. They do have one settlement east down the very road we’ve been traveling on, about sixty miles or so, near a place called ‘Erie’. Some sort of moderate sized city before the Change, and it has a harbor that they use for fishing as well as the usual farming and such.”

“We’d be welcome there? Hell, sixty miles isn’t but a three day ride if we push.” Vogeler began to hope that the Villains might move from settlement to settlement along the lake for a good while. That was a *lot* better than moving in the open wild lands, if for no other reason than to sleep inside a guarded wall at night.

“The doctor will give us a letter. Apparently she has a friend there. And she’s talking with Elder Yoder tonight to get a letter from him.”

“Nice work,” Vogeler replied, and he meant it. There were scouts and then there were scouts, and Kaur and Singh between them had helped to protect the entire crew.

“Thanks boss. I’m hitting the hay, it’s been a long day.” He would hit the hay literally; he was one of the crew sleeping in the stable.

“Right. Keep someone on watch there. I’ll keep someone on watch at the guest-house.”

“We’ll do that.” He ambled off, and Vogeler stared at the fire a good while. He thought about lighting up his pipe, but he had little enough tobacco left in the pouch he carried. Tobacco was scarce in Iowa, scarce everywhere really, and he didn’t really need to think a lot right then, so in the end he left the pipe where it was and instead looked up at the stars that were popping out in the darkening sky, naming the ones he could, tracing out constellations, feeling the chill of the evening come over him.

There were just a few crew left about the fire which now had burned down to glowing embers, sky to the east black and to the west deepest indigo, when two young Mennonite men, pikes in hand, approached. Kuttner had finished with his blades and had remained meditating at the fire nearby. The young men came to Vogeler, and Kuttner slid over to listen.

“Sir?” The taller of the young men called to Vogeler. “I’ve been asked to let you know, we’re going to close the village up for the night real soon now. You’ll want to get all your people in.”

“That’s fine, I’m ready to turn in myself,” Vogeler responded. That brought nods and yewbetchas from the remaining crew as they pulled themselves off the ground and worked to put out the fire. When that was done they set off behind the young men to the west gate.

Kuttner moved beside Vogeler as they walked in. *Oh great, I start and end the day with Mr. Personality*, Vogeler thought.

“Evening, Mr. Kuttner. What’s on your mind?” *As if I can’t guess.*

Kuttner didn't return the greeting but instead grunted. "We'll need to move out early in the morning."

Bingo, right again. "Sure, we'll be doing that. No reason to stay, and we want to get down the road."

"Let's do that," Kuttner rasped.

* * *

Ingolf Vogeler had settled in the bed quickly enough, a real, honest-to-goodness mattress as long as he was tall and wider than a blanket roll, sitting in a plain room large enough for the bed and a night-stand. A second mattress – no, something different, something with springs, was underneath, and both were supported by a simple, stout wooden frame. The bedding had to be pre-Change even if the frame wasn't, and Vogeler had sighed when he had first seen it. *Old-timers really knew how to make stuff*, he had thought then, and he confirmed it now, stretching and rolling a bit, feeling the bed give beneath him. He'd changed to a clean shirt to sleep and was glad he had done so. It wouldn't do to dirty a bed like this.

He drifted along, thinking about little other than fast-approaching glorious sleep, when the door creaked. His hand went quickly to the short blade he had on the nightstand, and the rattle of that elicited a giggle from just inside the door.

"Well, if you don't want company, you can just say so." The voice giggled again. Then she slipped into the bed next to him, pulled herself over to half-lean, half-perch on his chest, and smiled.

Well, what do you know. "Ah, Miss Beth, I must confess that I'm some surprised." And he was, too, though pleasantly and increasingly so. *Thought I'd struck out swinging at lunch.* He slipped an arm around the small of her back and found himself caressing bare skin. Whatever she'd been wearing she had doffed easily enough at the door.

“Surprised? I’m surprised myself, the way you ogled me at lunch. I guess the men in Iowa haven’t learned manners.”

Vogeler snickered softly. “No, guess we haven’t. You did make quite an impression with that white bonnet.” That brought another giggle from her.

“It’s my favorite color. Actually it’s the only color around here.”

“Really? They don’t go for passion pink?”

More giggles, deep within her, shaking her breasts which now were just above him. “It’s a religious thing. You wouldn’t understand.” She paused. “I don’t understand myself.” Another giggle.

“You won’t be missed anywhere?”

Beth wriggled closer. “I’m a grown woman, I’m unmarried, and I’ll do as I please.” She paused. “And I did slip out the back door at home.”

Vogeler now laughed and she joined him, softly, for a few moments, then she arched over him. “Like I said, I’ll do as I please.” She started then, and she did.

* * *

Kate Wilson put her mandolin into a leather case and slipped down to her mattress on the floor of the old church. The common sleeping area was the nave, plank floored with windows to either side and an arched ceiling of wood beams and white plaster. All the railings to the sanctuary as well as the altar had long since removed, and smaller rooms to the rear, on either side of the entry doors, had been converted to separate sleeping areas and bath facilities. Mattresses and cots of various sizes and construction had been laid out on the floor of the nave, and Kate had pushed her bed, a folding cot of heavy linen, nearer to that of one of the rear guard fellows. There wasn’t any privacy in the nave, of course, and Kate didn’t expect – or desire – anything

physical with Elrod that night. But each lay on their separate cots as they waited for others to settle and for candles to be doused, chatting quietly about the strangest things they'd seen that day.

To the corner of the nave farthest from them and the door, Kuttner was settling to sleep. He had foregone a mattress and instead had pulled out a blanket roll, and now wrapped himself, using a pack for a pillow, to settle snugly in the corner.

Elrod made a sour face and indicated Kuttner with a jerk of his head. "Wonder if he'll have another nightmare?"

"Ugh. It would be his way to spoil what we have here. We finally get to sleep indoors, and no doubt he'll go bat-shit crazy." Kate shook her head and looked away, then spoke quietly. "Does he really have to make it to the coast with the rest of us?"

"Careful," Elrod whispered back. "He's a jerk but he's damned good with a blade. I seen it in Cleveland." Elrod made a sound to mime a sword tearing the air. "You cross him, you better be certain."

Kate snorted quietly. "Fine, I won't skewer him. Just find a damned cork for his mouth if he goes off tonight."

But Elrod remained serious. "I don't know about him, that's for sure, but he's no good for us. Not for any of us."

* * *

Vogeler awoke when the birds started chirping outside the window of the room. Thin gray light filtered through the shutters. He rolled in bed; Beth had gone, leaving only her body fragrance on the thin pillow and the sheets, and Vogeler rolled back to where he'd made the bed warm. *Damn, that was nice. I'd do that more often if I could do it with her.* Which he wouldn't, he knew; it was time to get moving.

He dressed quickly and stepped into the hall. The communal bathroom was empty and he took care of his business, filling the tank of the commode with water from one of the buckets sitting beside it as previously instructed, splashed a little water on his face at the sink, and walked down the hallway to the larger common sleeping area in the nave. Several Villains were up already while the others were just beginning to roust themselves, turning over on their mattresses and wondering if the extra minute would be worth the abuse from their pals.

Kate Wilson had been stuffing her bedding into a bag when she saw Ingolf enter. She slung the bag over her shoulder, picked up her mandolin case and walked over to him, dressed in her travel gear, mail shirt clanking quietly as she moved. "Sleep well, boss?" she chirped, and arched her eyes.

No secrets 'round here. Especially once Beth got so, ah, vocal about it. Vogeler kept his face even and his voice neutral. "Yup, sure did, slept fine. You?"

"Oh, okay I guess. Not as good as some." She was going to give him the cheese all day, Vogeler knew, and he was just going to have to take it.

"Great. So, let's get ev'ryone moving, okay?"

"Yup, people are beginning to move, Boss. Guys in the barn are rolling out now. You ought to get to the kitchen and get some chow. I'm guessing you have an appetite this morning." She arched her eyes a little more.

Oh, man. "Excellent. I'll do just that."

Vogeler left the old church and ambled along the gravel path to the kitchen. Some Villains were there, waiting in line or eating at tables, and several called out to him. He waved back, answered their calls, went to the end of the line and waited patiently for his turn. As he got to the front of the line, Beth walked out of the kitchen loaded with more food for the counter. She saw him, wrinkled her nose at him briefly, and then went about her business as if she'd never met him before and didn't care to now.

Well, that's that.

Breakfast was eggs scrambled with milk and butter, bread with butter, fresh milk, rashers of bacon fried up crisply, and more dried fruit in bowls. Vogeler loaded his tray, sat alone and ate quickly. He looked up towards the kitchen; Beth was gone and another young Mennonite woman worked at the counter. Vogeler walked over and settled their bill, pulling Iowa gold-dollar coins from his hip purse, waiting while the woman weighed them on a scale. He then left a small roll of Iowa silver quarter-dollar coins on the counter. "For all the kitchen help," he explained, and the woman nodded brightly. "Well bless your heart! I'll make sure we share these fairly."

Vogeler waved and walked out. The sun was peeking over the horizon, the air clean and still cold, frost on the gravel crunching as he headed down the street towards the west gate and courtyard. Mennonite men and boys were readying horse-carts and tools for the daily labor in the fields. Most of the Villains were now outside, a few more trailing out of the kitchen with bread in their pockets for the road just behind him, and he saw both Singh and Kaur mounted up already. The remaining scout team were with them, and Singh motioned Vogeler over.

"Hey boss, morning." Vogeler responded and Singh continued. "Been out a little with the Mennonite patrol."

"They get out bright and early every morning, I'm going to guess?" Vogeler asked.

"Yup, they do a circuit, so we went with them. Clear in all directions. They don't let their farmers out to the fields until they know it's okay."

"East looks good then," he called up to Singh.

Singh grinned. "Boss, please. Bet on it."

Vogeler grinned back. The routine was old. "Okay, let's round 'em up and head 'em out."

Other Villains nearby heard that and motioned to others, who in turn spread the word. Horses were tacked up, draft horses hitched to wagons, and Villains began to mount up. A young lad brought Boy from the stable, and Vogeler spent the next couple of minutes tacking him up before mounting.

Crew-members then said their farewells to the villagers, and within minutes the scouts were walking towards the east gate down Highway 20. Vogeler looked left, and there was Elder Yoder and Cousin Yoder walking towards him. Each was dressed identically, in gray coarse-woven overalls, off-white linen shirts and brown leather boots, heads covered in black felt hats.

“Morning, gentlemen,” Vogeler called.

Elder Yoder answered back. “Morning, Mr. Vogeler.” He either didn’t know about his grand-daughter’s sleeping arrangements the night before or chose not to say anything. The men chatted, Vogeler handed over more gold coins, and Elder Yoder looked satisfied. Cousin Yoder then had his turn and pocketed his coins as well. Elder Yoder then pulled a packet of paper from his overalls.

“If you wouldn’t mind, Mr. Vogeler, I have some mail for the New Hebron settlement.”

“That’s the one around Erie, right? We can deliver the mail if you want.”

“I would and I thank you for it. A letter in there is addressed to a Mr. Miller. He’s the Elder there, and that letter will introduce you and your people to him.”

Another Miller. “I thank you, Mr. Yoder. That’s very kind.”

“Not at all. We appreciate seeing honest travelers. Maybe one day the world will be a little better, and we’ll see more honest travelers.”

Not for a good long while. “Well sir, that’s a good thought to have. I’ll wish that for us both as well.”

Yoder stepped back from Vogeler, and Vogeler waved to the two men. “Thank you.” The Yoders waved in reply.

Vogeler turned in his saddle to the crew. “Ready?” he called back.

A chorus of hoots answered. Vogeler smiled at them all. “Well then, let’s roll.”

The wagons creaked, the tack creaked, the horses moved forward and the Villains started to roll along Highway 20 through the village towards the east gate.

Shruthi Patel stood on the sidewalk just inside the east gate. Kaur saw her, smiled, and took off her helmet in respect. “Good bye Auntie-ji, I ask your leave to go,” she called.

“Good bye, child,” Patel called back. “You may go but you must return some day.”

“I will, Auntie-ji, I will.”

Author's notes

I wrote this as a 'slice-of-life' story about Ingolf Vogeler and his Villains on their trip to the east coast as described in *The Sunrise Lands*. While Mr. Stirling focused on the two ends of that journey – Cape Cod and Illinois – I thought there might be a simple story somewhere in the middle. I hope that I've been true to the characters and have remained 'in canon', though of course all errors in that regard are mine.

I borrowed the name, 'Shruthi Patel', from a colleague of mine, though the woman I describe in this story is nothing like her.

I would like to believe that despite the devastation of eastern North America in the years after the Change, some few civilized places will remain, mostly tucked away in Appalachia and the deep rural areas. The Mennonite people, with their faith, their understanding of the simple ways, and their farming background would be as good a bet as any to survive, and very importantly, remain a civilized people. Not everyone is a fluffy bunny.

I'd appreciate comments.