

Haendiges/HOUSE OF THE RISING SUN

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Poor Boy's Ruin

by Brian Haendiges

Nick - 1

I stood, facing the greyhound, looking off slightly to one side, not directly into his eyes. Not yet.

He snapped and snarled a few times, and gave an angry growl, but didn't attempt to bite me. I wasn't frightened. I'd done this a hundred times.

Angry isn't really the right word. Like every angry dog I've met, and most people, his snarl was a cover for fear.

It was the same thing Jed had done, before he left us. Started to snap at Gran and me in the kitchen or working in the yard.

"Hand me that wrench, and don't drop it! Give me the damn frypan!"

Snarling, to cover fear.

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That was before he'd devolved into sullen and quiet, non-responsive. I'd have thought him comatose if he hadn't been up and walking around, fixing engines or mufflers.

The thought of the car in someone else's garage had eaten at him until he was a shell on the outside. There may have been lots of thoughts inside, but we never got to see them.

The greyhound looked like something had been eating at him too. He'd been abused, and it wasn't pretty, though less than some I'd seen come in to the shelter. He was bone thin, every rib sticking through, and favoring his left rear leg. It dangled behind him like a sausage in the butcher's shop window, even as he twisted his bony head back and forth in his fear, masked as rage.

By the looks of several scars on his flank and behind his ears, what he was fearing was another beating. People can be cruel.

The key to calming an angry dog is patience. He, or she, will come around eventually. I waited out a mother of young pups six hours once, but she eventually realized I was no harm to her puppies, and we became good friends. I placed every one of those pups, except one. Biscuit was by my side now, watching.

I held myself calm, non-threatening. We started to talk a little, the greyhound and I. You need a low, relaxed tone. Dogs can sense fear. They can also sense calm.

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People think of calm as the absence of anxiety, an emptiness. I think of calm as a positive force. It's not something neutral. You can project it onto a dog, or a person, or yourself. It heals.

It's hard though. Patience isn't easy. But the more you try it, the better you get at it.

When I first played chess, I won a lot, with aggressive attacks. Older players feared the kid. Then my progress plateaued. I gave it up for a while, out of a combination of disinterest and the demands of the yard. When we moved north and I came back to it, my technique was rusty, but I jumped a couple of levels by having learned to wait before attacking.

The grey and I faced each other for a while, chatted, calmed, ignored the world around us.

That's me anyway. I mostly do things on my own. Gran taught us independence, and maybe I took it to an extreme. I can't stand getting help from anyone else.

Of course, Jed and I used to help each other, before he became angry (or fearful) and quiet. But not any longer, not with him gone.

I shifted my eyes to the grey's.

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"I'll call you Champ." I kept my voice low, friendly, reassuring. "You look like a champion of something."

I waited some more.

Finally, the dog approached me, took a proffered treat from my hand, and wagged its tail. We were friends.

I put it down to the help I got coming in over the shelter's speakers, Eric Burdon's voice, all resonant and dark despite its youth, backed by the haunting arpeggios on the Vox Intercontinental organ.

Nick - 2

There is a house in New Orleans

They call the Rising Sun

I always find the song relaxing, and so do the dogs.

It comes in many versions. There are poor boys and poor girls. There are different reasons for a warning. But they all grab me. This one, that everyone knows, was arranged for the *Animals* in the 60s. But there are versions by Pete Seeger, Bob Dylan, Joan Baez, even the White Stripes.

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It's a simple elegant story of someone who is raised hard, falls into sin, and returns to a prison, or a whorehouse, or a gambling parlor, or who knows what.

I knew the words to that version too, and it's a good one, but it's a little different from the one I learned. A lot of people think it's the right version, and it is, sort of. The melody is very close. But you only understand the smallest part of its meaning from the lyrics. To really comprehend, you'd have to have spent six months with my dying great grandmother, feeding her alternating sips of water and bourbon (never watered down - that would make it "less than it truly was," she would have said) on an antique silver spoon, and watching her scarred hands tremble as I listened to her stories of deceit, indifference, condescension, betrayal, and murder. And you'd have to know the real words. The exact real words.

Each history lesson from Gigi (that's Gee Gee, not Zhee Zhee, even though our heritage is French) remains vivid and deeply engrained, yet I don't often envision her as she was at the very last, physically crumpled and dying, despite a fiery incandescence boring into me from her eyes. Instead, I picture her lively and awake, propped up by pillows under a bright yellow comforter in the old four-poster in the North bedroom,

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gazing out the window at the stars as the moonlight streams in, or maybe just deep in thought.

Or, after hearing her history, I instead see all four feet and ten inches of her wiry frame standing defiant atop the hood of a burnt orange '69 Charger, facing down a gang of Dragons.

Her stand atop the Charger (not *shar-zhur*) exemplifies the nature of stewardship. She was ready to give up her life for others, but in her own way. We're each individuals, fiercely independent. We're also each a part of the whole, a dichotomous variegated unity.

That's the nature of our house. We don't write things down. We remember them. We put them in songs and stories and retell them for generations, each of us with our own individual part, but one tale altogether.

Now the stewardship obligation has passed by tradition to the next in line, his or her life at risk, to protect the lives of others, maybe even of you and your family.

But that's for later. First, a little about me. I'm a lot like the song lyrics. On the surface, I fix things. I find connections. I figure things out. But I'm also a caregiver, a guardian, a musician, a memorialist, a keeper of the flame, a speaker of the truth.

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I also have a downside. As I said, I take it on myself. I don't ask for help. I've been a lone wolf with a pack that needs each other.

My people are a lot like the lyrics as well. We're complex. We defy the stereotype. They expect us to be ultra strong, to worship the darkness, to kill for no reason, to fear the light. That's so far off. We bring the light.

But isn't that partly our own fault? We perpetuate the parts of the myth that serve our needs. Much like the song perpetuates an impression of seemingly benign warning. When really it's the very light that guides our every action.

Of course I didn't know about the depth of significance until Gigi started to die, and really not until afterwards. We don't usually pass that on at such a young age, and like all of our learning, I had to peel it away a layer at a time. What you hear, you forget. What you do, you remember. What you create with your hands, you remember always.

I finally perceive a glimpse of my obligation now. Not just the depth of meaning of song lyrics, but of my own heritage, and that of my people.

The search for that meaning sent me on a twisting journey in later years of geography, history, and the tortuous spirals of my own family and identity. It taught me phrases in French, old

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English, German, Romany, a local Carpathian dialect, and even a little Cajun.

It sent me to New Orleans, to a nightclub in Cluj, to central France, to the Alsace, halfway across Europe, and finally to Western New England. But much of that travel is for another story. This part is about the beginning, or at least my beginning.

Don't get me wrong. Travel is important. Our people travel, or migrate anyway. Gigi started me on my journey. I didn't hear it at first. Or I heard but I didn't listen. Fevered, between sips of bourbon, she blurted out in French something about "poor boys" and "ensemble."

Layers again. When I looked up as much of it as I could remember, there was a French phrase about maintaining body and soul together. That was a start, the body as a whole, and the soul as the individual. Then I started asking questions when I investigated my brother's death, and found it was about "poor boys" sticking together.

Most people would think it was just her fevered misremembering. At the time, I undervalued its importance. It was only a hint (a sip), but she said it with a clear French accent that didn't sound exactly like her native Cajun. I asked her what she meant, and she waved her hand at me and said to go find out. I knew how

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it worked. Do the work yourself, and then maybe I'll help a little.

She was always like that. If I wanted to know the meaning of a word for a crossword puzzle, she made me look it up.

"A little bit from you to get a little bit about us. Even if it's nothing more than your own hard work and first attempt."

When I asked what a "poor boy" was, she laughed, and feebly sang the following lyric, and cackled knowing it would send me on a chase.

Nick - 3

And it's been the ruin of many a poor boy

And God, I know, I'm one.

An exhaustive search uncovered a few threads to pull on. Like everything, it took conversation and exploration to tease out the rest. The threads were many, and when I brought them to her, she smiled and let me know her part of the story.

First off, a "poor boy" is not just a boy who is poor. It's not someone who's poor at being a boy. It's not even a sandwich from The Big Easy. Well, it is that, but that's not the original.

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It's simply a name, not from New Orleans, Louisiana, but from old Orleans, France. It's one of those names that define you based on what you do, like Baker, or Cooper, or Fletcher.

I pored through book after book, tome after tome, old and new and ancient crumbling pages. I speak little French, and understand more, but not much. I tried a lot of French phrases before I put *deux* and *deux* together, trying to find some that made any sense.

I tried "poil bois," but that just means "wood coat" or "hair wood." Nope. Struck out with "poele a bois, poule bois, and poire bois," since "wood stove, chicken wood, and pear wood" don't make much sense either.

"I can't find it in any book GiGi. Not in any of my sources."

"You're looking in the wrong ones. Keep trying."

I did, wondering if I'd light on the right translation before she died.

I struck on the answer not in any library or bookstore, but down under the bridge in Springvale. I'd been asking questions everywhere of people that had known my brother, or listened to him play, or bought from him.

Biscuit by my side, I'd approached a handful of what looked like vagabonds cavorting around a bonfire, old and young alike.

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Others waited in the shadows, hard to discern. We were far from the neon glow of the casino here.

I saw kayaks and canoes pulled up onto the bank, and a lot of hiking boots on the feet of the revelers. Not exactly dancing shoes. A couple of raggedy tents indicated that some of the troupe might have been camping there for weeks.

I approached one who stood a little apart from the crowd, but still in the light, and started asking questions about my brother like I had a hundred times in a hundred places. This time I got a different answer than the usual stare or simple "No" that I'd gotten all of the other times I'd asked.

"We might be able to tell you something. First we need a little something from you."

I started to reach for my wallet.

A pretty young dark haired girl laughed.

My heart nearly stopped. She was the most beautiful creature I'd ever seen. Flannel shirt over old blue jeans, no make-up, black hair back in a pony tail (I didn't find out until much later how long and wavy it was). But eyes that smoldered, and burnt even brighter when she scowled.

There was no subterfuge to her. No deceit. Whatever she was thinking showed on her face. I think.

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Her face was showing anger, or maybe resentment right now.

"That won't help you here, Outie," she said, nodding to the wallet. "You've got to find the right currency."

My puzzled look triggered nothing in her, but an old geezer in the shadows under the pylons stepped out and said "He kind of looks like him."

"Maybe," said the girl. "Let's see if he's got a tune for us."

Ok, I figured. One thing I knew was how to sing.

"Make it an old one," she said.

I wracked my brain for which song was right, feeling out the audience like Gran had taught me, and cataloguing all the songs she'd passed on, painstakingly, word by word.

Ballads, lullabies, marches, campfire tunes, bluesy complaints.

I caught a scatter of faded smoke-stained graffiti poking out from the underside of a bridge abutment and licked by a few tongues of firelight. Something about a fort.

Well, the Star Spangled Banner is old, and about a fort, but that just didn't fit.

The Ballad of Davy Crockett? No, still off.

Ballad. Forts. There was the Ballad of Orleans. That felt closer, but still not quite right.

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The Orleans part was on the money, but maybe I didn't need a song about a fort after all.

Then it clicked, and I started in, low, and built.

"There is . . . a house"

All of the laughing and speaking stopped. Every face turned toward me and I sensed a feeling in the air, a kind of curiosity, tinged with respect.

I sang the version I knew, with the right words in the right places, accent marks and apostrophes and all. I drew it out, concentrating on the nuances that Gigi had taught me, and on the filigree of my own soul that I added in. A little from her, a little from me.

When I stopped, the crowd was quiet, and the old man stepped out a little closer to the firelight, one arm in front of him, and one behind his back. He wore a hood, so it was hard to see more than a pair of bottle brush eyebrows.

"I think we might have something for him after all, Dor."

He rasped when he spoke. It was barely discernible, as if something stopped him from opening his mouth all the way, or was clogged inside.

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The girl scowled again. I always loved that scowl. It was true and clear. She shrugged, almost as if admitting, or perhaps finding resolution.

"I still think he's an Outie. But I give my half."

She picked up a fiddle, and drew pure magic from it.

The old man turned a little, and the hood slipped just enough to see a little more of his face. It matched the ragged edge to his voice. Several long scars ran from chin to some unknown end under his hood, and of those parts I could see, not all were in the right place. But his eyes had no damage.

They were strong, with no backing down, dark weary coals that seemed to see everything. An uneven beard hung down over a Tulane t-shirt and knotted rope belt.

He motioned to Dor with his arm, his hand covered with more ugly scars, and she led the group in a boisterous round, dancing included, of something called "Find me this and I'll bring you that."

The old man even shuffled a little in time with the music himself, a barely perceptible shift of weight from side to side.

We got to the chorus, a little French and English mixed, and I finally learned what "poor boy" meant.

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Aimon - 1

Aimon pulled aside the hides covering the cave and stepped out into the crisp, cool night.

"Pourvois! Pourvois!"

What did Auntie want him to get for her now? Pourvois! Pourvois! Fetch me this. Fetch me that. Equip me. Provide for me. Get this for me. Take care of me.

Might as well be a quartered dragoon asking for what little food they'd had in their house before they'd escaped out to the caves.

But no, she wasn't like them. She was hard and resilient, like all the women in the clique. They had to be. But it wasn't to be mean. It was to build your strength, and to make the clique stronger.

Their family did that. Passed things from one generation to the next, from one person to the next, from one place to the next. Joy shared is joy doubled. Sorrow shared is sorrow halved.

Still, he could do more than run errands. He could find his way through the woods. He could wield a long stick, even against the better adults. And he could talk his way out of just about anything. But not this.

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His Aunt Orva stood there with a covered basket. He smelled the scent of fresh tourtes drifting out from underneath the covers, and any thought of resentment toward her melted away. She made the best meat pies in the valley. More often than not, they were pies with no meat these days, if they could even find flour, but his uncle and a few friends had managed to nick a little on the last raid, (only what was needed) and brought it back to the caves.

Either way, she found a way to make them delicious.

"Rabbit tonight, Aimon, and a little squirrel. Two for you, but two only. The rest are for your uncle, and the other leaders."

Two was enough, he thought. You take what you need, and you leave what the clique needs.

"There are fresh berries and a little cheese in there too. Take your fair share, but leave your fair share."

"Thanks Tante." He leaned down to plant a kiss on her forehead.

"Maybe they'll let me in on whatever they're doing tomorrow night."

Orva's face showed a familiarity with his reaction, a combination of weariness and something else, expectation?

"Your father used to say the same thing."

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Right. His hero father. Fighter. Story teller. He'd had songs written about him.

"You'll get to do your part some day," she continued.

"I just want that day to be now, Tante."

"I know you do."

She smiled up at him. He kissed her again, shouldered his rucksack, and walked off into the forest in the opposite direction of the rising moon.

Reule sniffed the air a moment, enjoying the scent of the meat pies, rose and shook out his black and grey coat, and trotted along beside Aimon. The boy was continually amazed by the size of the animal. As a puppy, he'd been no bigger than a wine jug. Now, Reule stood chest high, and could snap an arm bone in two more quickly than Aimon could break kindling for the fire. It was no wonder that those from outside so often thought he was a wolf. They couldn't tell that he'd just as soon hunt one as run with them.

He was like the rest of the family though. Part of a pack, yes, but every one of them an individual, independent, with his or her own peculiarities and interests.

Aimon recalled many a conversation with a quivering dragoon, worried about whether Reule might bite a hand or foot.

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The dragoons were supposed to be soldiers, to be honorable men, but he'd yet to meet one. He supposed it wasn't their fault that Louis had forced them to provide room and board until every last bread crumb was gone, every leftover bone made into soup, and every Huguenot thinner by half and ready to turn over his land and leave France.

But many of those stationed in their village had been as vicious and condescending as the Sun King himself.

Aimon remembered the first day that he'd met the dragoons. He'd been liltng down the street, whistling an old family tune about going home to Orleans. Reule, still a puppy with darker fur than what he'd develop later, bounced at his side, chasing snowflakes and sniffing the air.

"You always smell things first. What did you find?"

Aimon stopped and stood, nose in the air. The chimney smoke was not difficult. It was omnipresent. But eventually he also found the aroma of fresh bread.

"Let's go, Chiot."

He couldn't wait to turn the corner and see the house, get inside out of the cold, and play with Reule in front of the fire as he chewed on fresh bread and apple marmalade.

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When he did step past the last shop on the market street and turn into their alley, the sight was not anything like what he'd expected. The front door stood open, and two large soldiers stood outside it. Loud shouting came from inside, his mom and another deep voice he didn't recognize.

She'd always been too, like Orva, even before his father had been killed, but she was in full furious voice right now.

"I don't care if you did come from the king himself. You can't just march in here and take over. We work hard for our bread. Why should I feed those smelly brutes on top of my own son, who is all I have left after your king killed my husband?"

Aimon tried to get inside, but the two guards at the door easily held him back. He tried rushing in again, the dog yapping behind him, but to no avail. Even at the age of fifteen, starting to hint at his full size, he was no match for two trained soldiers.

"Hold on there little one. That's no way to treat your new houseguests."

"What?"

"That's right. Our glorious Sun King has declared that in order to help protect the state, you will feed and house his elite troops, the dragoons. I guess we'll be your big brothers now."

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Pah. The Sun King! Dances and music and plays and light. The king with a retinue that watched him rise, and put him to bed. The king that required exact deference to his every whim, from pruning his gardens exactly the way he wanted them to bow before the royal chamber pot when it was carried outside to be emptied. Could it really be true? That now these men would be garrisoned with Mother and him, reminding them every day of how Father had been killed. No!

He got ready to rush them again, but just then his mother let out one last yelp and came flying out the door into the snow. He ran to her.

"Mother, are you OK?" She ignored him, stood and cursed at the men, brushing snow from her apron. Reule growled.

Aimon stared at the door. The two soldiers that guarded it were both large, but they paled in comparison to the giant that stooped as he stepped outside. Great, muscled, the stubble on his face emphasizing rather than hiding a long scar that ran from the corner of one eye to his mouth.

Reule snarled and raced across the gap between him and the three brutes.

Aimon 2

The giant just stood his ground, and the two soldiers started clubbing the dog with their muskets. He never let out a whimper, until one of them lifted a boot, and kicked the puppy halfway across the street, where it lay there, still.

Aimon bent down and picked him up. There was still warmth and a heartbeat. He shed no tears, but they weren't far away. He turned and glowered at the men.

Aimon's mother still yelled in the background, and the giant rounded on her. It looked like he was ready to strike her, when a voice pierced the air from next door.

"Don't you hurt Rayonne." Madame Stelle was shrill, but clear.

The giant, for the first time, looked taken aback and not in complete control. He thought for a minute, and then turned to Aimon's mother, who was still screaming and cursing.

In contrast to her wild remonstrations, his voice was calm, low, as if dealing with a minor annoyance.

"Are you going to house us as instructed, or do we need to teach you another lesson?" He nodded slightly at Aimon and Reule. "It would not be hard to snap a neck." He smiled. "Or two."

Aimon got ready to charge them, but his mother, who had moved protectively to his side, just held his arm gently.

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She fumed, silently, looking back and forth between the soldier and Aimon. He could see a fresh bruise on her cheek, already turning purple, and finally he saw a change come over her face. He'd seen it before, when his Uncle had brought news of his father.

He could tell that she had not accepted the decision, but she was going to live with it. They wouldn't get away with it. She would hold the grudge against them, and wait, as long as it took.

"Live and plan," she said softly to Aimon, brushing herself off once again, and walked to the door. He nodded, and relaxed.

"We will house you. We will do as the king requires. But you will not hit my son, me, or his dog again."

To Aimon's amazement, the soldier also nodded, and followed her in.

Aimon could hear one last comment from his mother from inside the threshold.

"We'll find a way to feed you. You'll take enough, but not too much. We need to eat as well."

Aimon thought at the time that it was perhaps this defiance and firmness that had helped them fare better than their neighbors. The dragonnades had been worse for them.

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Jacques Lillard had been killed on the first day of the housing, when the soldiers in his house had attacked his wife and daughter Danielle. He'd done what he could to defend them, but the soldiers were too powerful, and they continued with their attack as the father lay dying in the kitchen.

The Stelle family had also had it bad. They'd complained about not having any food left, and the soldiers had slaughtered their prize cart horse, and forced their bawling twin sons to carve it up into steaks as the family watched.

The Chastains had taken it more like his mother. They resisted gently, suffering beatings and verbal taunts, but no rapes or killings. Back then, that was. After the fall feast night, there was one hideously scarred dragoon still searching endlessly for them in the surrounding woods, in any time he could steal away.

The dragoons quartered with Mother and him were better. They had reached some type of informal accommodation. They ate the provisions that she put in front of them. They complained little. They did taunt the boy on occasion, but since it was his full days of labor that brought the food in, combined with his mother's sewing, they largely relented. Their belching and snoring was obnoxious, but tolerable. Aimon did as his mother had asked. Live and plan.

Nick - 4

I learned a lot under the bridge that night, and it put me on the path to solve the mystery of what happened to my brother.

Of course, it didn't unravel itself easily and lay itself out in a straight line. I had to pull at threads, sometimes individually, sometimes two or three at a time, and it was hard to grab hold of the ends, get the knots out and yank, but I did.

It started with the dogs.

I love dogs. Ever since I remember, we've had a quick and special relationship.

I was probably eight or nine years old when GiGi brought home Sugar and Fire from one of her night time adventures.

Sugar was a jumbo sized white and brown and yellow mix of two or three breeds. I can remember him lolloping toward a customer in the junk shop, tail thumping, drool flying, huge doggie grin on his face, looking for nothing more than a pat on the head or scratch behind the ears. He was gentle and loving, as long as you didn't cross the family.

Fire was a different story. She had a fearsome bark, and you pictured a ferocious hell-hound until she came out from behind the counter, all five pounds quivering in outrage at the trespass into her territory.

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Both would terrify customers, especially when they worked in tandem, though I thought only the ones that deserved it. Dogs can read people. They know.

You'd hear Fire's fierce yelp, and see a furry freight train barreling toward you in Sugar, and it buckled the knees. More than once, customers would cower in fear by the old Coke machine, or head out the door, deciding to look somewhere else for a rebuilt carburetor or a new fan belt.

Of course, I was family, so they never scared me, but even so, I could often calm them (or maybe it was the customers I was calming), enough so that everyone got along.

But I could do that with any dog. When GiGi would have one of her pow-wows at the yard, and everyone would come around to visit, with their instruments and their dogs, I'd have a dozen canines swarming around me after just a few minutes. I don't know how to explain it. We just understood each other.

That was how I got the job at the shelter. Sugar and Fire had both run off, and I'd looked all over town to find them. The shelter was a last resort, the equivalent of a church for the homeless, or a hospital, or a morgue. I didn't want to go, and Gigi said they'd probably both run off to die, like dogs do when they get old, but I wasn't giving up.

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I walked through the door into a clean but tiny space in need of some repairs, housing twice as many animals as it had room for. A gruff, oversized but older man was pinned against the wall by a snarling oversize pit bull.

"I don't want to put him down, but that's the rule! Thirty days, or aggression, and he has both!"

"It will be ok," I said.

"It's like he knows!"

I spoke with the dog. Some people say *to* the dog, but it's really *with* the dog. I mean, I'm not reading brainwaves or anything, but if you think of yourself as on the same side, they listen better.

The dog calmed, and came over to me for an ear scratch.

That's how I first met Bernard, and observed one of the eeriest coincidences I'd ever seen.

He was big. He was hairy. He was friendly looking. And he was kind. And ran a dog shelter.

The neighborhood took immediately to calling him St. Bernard.

The only characteristics that he didn't share with his canine counterpart were that he didn't have a tail to wag, and didn't carry a cask of whiskey around his neck (which, come to think of it, is a myth, but that's a different story).

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"Say, you're pretty good with these fellas."

Thus began his recruiting campaign. Back then it was small, to hook me in. I picked up a little, fed and played the dogs, taught them a few basics, like sit and stay.

I had one special job, just for me. Any time a new dog came in, I calmed him or her down.

That's what I did with the pit, and a whole bunch of others too.

One day, Bernard walked in on me working with six dogs at once. Each one would stay in place while I worked with the others on something - fetch, rolling over, walking on two legs, even a back flip with our Australian Shepherd.

He just looked at me and said "It's time."

He smiled. "You want to do more of that? I need you to do some work for me, and it will be hard."

He hired me, and came up with the hardest jobs he thought he could find. Of course, after working for Gran, it was a piece of cake, even if Bernard wanted this refuge of last resort to be cleaner than a hospital. I know it was a lot cleaner than kitchens I've worked in.

Scrubbing down floors was easy compared with degreasing a rusted old Lincoln.

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Well, I did that, every other job Bernard could come up with, and I got every one of those animals placed, and hundreds more since. That's something I seem to have a knack for too, bringing dogs and people together.

Every animal except one, I should say. The pit, now named Daisy, became Bernard's personal bodyguard. Bernard would go out shopping, and the Daisy was waiting patiently outside Al's Market and Feed Store when he came out. We'd open the shelter on Halloween, and Daisy would nuzzle little hands as they grabbed for candy. The adults were always nervous. The kids had no problem. I guess they knew the dog was good as much as the dog knew they were.

Every time a new "client" came in, the atmosphere was the opposite of the first time I'd walked in on Daisy pinning Bernard against the wall. Instead, he'd barely stir as the person that found some troubled dog explained where he or she had found them, and how he or she didn't have the resources to take care of them.

Three years had passed like that. The scrubbing got easier as the dogs got comfortable with the environment more quickly and messed less. Bernard let me do more and more with the dogs as he got comfortable with me. We kept the cage doors open and the

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dogs responded well. Instead of getting into trouble, they were calmer.

We upgraded the space a little bit at a time as we could afford it or got a donation from an adoptive "parent." So, one windy, rainy late fall morning as Biscuit and I approached the shelter, it was four times its previous size.

Biscuit's whimpering at the door surprised me. I knew he wasn't hurt. He never complained, even when he had stepped on a nail when we went on a rescue to an abandoned lot. It had to be something else.

We ducked inside, Biscuit not even bothering to shake off, and St. Bernard is in a heap on the new tile floor. Daisy is lying down, not sitting, guarding the body. Several dogs gather around in a reverent halo.

I've been running the shelter ever since, in addition to engine rebuilds and body work, and some volunteering.

Nick - 5

It was my work at the shelter that first led me to start searching for my brother after he'd disappeared.

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My brother, whom I'd always admired as a paragon of excellence in everything he tried. Shooting, fixing cars, playing the blues harp, attracting women, making friends.

My brother, whom I'd always looked up to, learned from, tried to emulate, trusted.

My brother, who'd abandoned us to hang with dirtbags and druggies. I didn't know if he was an addict, but I found out he spent his time with them.

He hadn't always been bad, but there had been signs of his love for things that shone.

On one of our rare trips into the city, when I was maybe eight or nine and we went window to window searching for what to spend our hard-earned tip money on from the junkyard, Jed found something in every shop that one day he planned to own.

I'd gone into a penny candy store and returned with a little white bag full of mint julep taffy and gumballs. Jed had taken his allowance and come out of a clothing store with a new suit. When Gran had ordered him back in to return it, and the cashier had told him all sales final, he wasn't disappointed.

Gran was though. The two of them went back in, Gran had a few words with the manager, and Jed came out the door with his

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money, followed by the shopkeeper slamming the door and turning his sign to CLOSED.

Jed wasn't allowed to spend his money the rest of the trip.

We passed a jeweler on the way back to the Bronco, and a watch in jeweler's display caught Jed's attention one last time. He looked pleadingly at Gran, whose face remained resolute.

Our attention shifted when we heard the roar of an engine approach, and a couple, a white-haired man in bright plaid, a thin young thing in a tight dress, screeched to a halt in front of the store and went inside.

We stood for what seemed like hours staring at the red and black Plymouth Road Runner that they'd left double parked.

"I'll have a car like that some day."

Then, seeming to make up his mind, he turned and the three of us headed home.

He loved shiny things.

By contrast, if a person's character is determined by the dirt that rubs off on him from the people he hangs out with, then my brother was covered head to toe in mud.

The first time I went looking for him was right after GiGi had died. I had two visitors to the shelter the same day, both in search of Jed.

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The first was filthy, literally.

He shambled in through the door and up to the counter, and I could barely see his face through the streaks of grime on it.

The dogs barked as usual, more in greeting than fear, and Biscuit went over to him, sniffed, and sat down by him.

From that, I knew he was OK, despite his appearance.

"You JD's brothah, yeh?"

"If JD is Jed, then that's me. What do you need with him?"

"He tehks care of me. Mehks sure I git m'fix ever' day."

Maybe I'd misjudged him. I mean he seemed nice enough, if nervous and shaking. I hadn't thought about it as addiction though. Just skittishness, like with a dog in a new place.

I looked him over. Army surplus jacket, but with the name "Smith" on it. I doubted it was his.

Worn jeans. Some kind of footwear that might have once been boots.

Experience of some sort pooling in wrinkles near his nervous eyes.

A faded tattoo on one forearm, hard to read.

"I'm sorry friend. Jed's gone."

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He looked crestfallen. Glanced back and forth as if someone were watching him, and started to sob.

"Whew'm I s'posed to steh? How'm I s'posed to et?"

I didn't know how to answer, how to make him feel better. So I just tried to calm him by taking the conversation into familiar territory.

"Sorry," I said again. "Look, I'm Nick." Can I help you with something?"

No name back for me. Just a few whimpers, and then he mumbled low, maybe to me, or maybe just to himself.

"Mebbe the chechch tonight." He glanced around again. "Don't know what I'm gonna do."

One more time back and forth.

"Say, ken I tehk summa this dog food?"

I figured he might be trying to sell it for his habit.

"Here, take a few of these cans, and some biscuits."

Biscuit's ears perked up at his name, but then went right back down.

"How'd you know I was Jed's brother?"

He looked at me, puzzled.

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"We all know. The dog man. The dog man. Jed told us." His face crumpled.

You can tell a lot about someone from their friends, I thought.

"You need a place to stay buddy?"

"Sometimes."

"You need a place to stay *tonight*?"

"I could."

That was as close to clear agreement as we ever got. I'd have Mr. Smith around as a kind of helper with the dogs, who loved him, and every once in a while I'd make him a stew or piece of chicken, and he'd stay the night. I'd find him in the morning, sleeping on the floor, surrounded by half a dozen furry friends. Not that night. He turned as if to shamble out the way he'd come in, a stale trace of dumpster hovering over him, but never made it out the door.

Nick - 6

My second visitor that day was clean, buttoned down (or should I say buttoned up?), crisp, and sporting a bright red porkpie hat. Debonair.

And totally frightening.

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He didn't shamble through the door. Instead, he burst in, as if he'd owned it, and bumped Mr. Smith to the floor in a heap, who stumbled to his feet as the dogs went crazy.

Biscuit raced to my side, growling fiercely, held by the invisible leash of us being together for so long, anxiously waiting for my release so he could attack the intruder.

A group of the other dogs snarled in a loose circle. I motioned to them to hold in place. They calmed, but it took a little longer than usual. I could sense them seething.

"Strange company you're keeping here sir. Never thought I'd see one of these old church druggies like Smitty in a place like this."

His accent was thick, redolent of New Orleans, and as out of place in New England as a Red Sox fan's would have been in Louisiana. I heard "keepin" and "suh" and "Nevah."

"You know him?"

He didn't answer. Just plowed ahead.

"You Jed's brother?," only it came out "brothah."

Again, someone who knew me through Jed.

I didn't feel like I wanted to be as forthcoming with this guy as with Mr. Smith, apparently "Smitty." Thought whatever I passed on might lead to something bad for me, or for somebody.

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And to be honest, I was a little embarrassed that my brother was hanging out with guys like Smitty. It was my first hint that he was either dealing drugs, or addicted himself.

"Who's asking?"

Mr. Button-Down flashed a devilish grin, and then a quick badge at me, all part of one continuous practiced motion. I thought I saw "Det," but he didn't leave it open long enough to get his name, or to see if it were real. Couldn't get any names that day.

"Lookah here. Your brothah was involved with some pretty bad guys. I need to know where he's been."

This felt a little like a negotiation. Not a hard one though, as I really didn't know anything to trade.

"Join the club."

"You expect me to believe that?"

"You will or you won't."

He stared at me then, long, like he was waiting for me to crack.

I just stared back. I recalled a time when I stared at a bull mastiff like that for ten minutes before he backed down, and finally sat. We got along well after that.

This joker didn't back down, but he did finally stop staring, laughed, and flashed the grin again.

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"Well, I guess maybe you don't know, but I'll be back."

"I'll be here."

He grinned again, the full force of it shining across the room and almost knocking me over. Then from nowhere, "Game of skill, or game of chance?"

Aimon - 3

Aimon made his way out from under the fringe of the forest, and picked his way through town, ducking in and out of alleys. His eyes were exceptional in the dark.

Reule, despite his size, was able to move quietly as well.

He was perhaps the biggest dog that Aimon had ever seen, though he'd raised him from a pup.

"Direct descendant of the fighting dogs that Caesar used when he invaded France," Tante had said. I'm not sure how she'd known that, but it felt right.

They had made the long trip from the caves at almost a run, but the animal never showed a sign even of breathing hard, never mind tiring.

Eventually, he made his way to the great arch, a replica of those in Tours, which he'd seen many times, and in Orleans which

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he'd seen once, and in Rochelle, which he'd only herd about.
They always seemed to meet under archways.

He waited patiently in the shadows.

He could pick out the shapes of bushes and trees, rocks,
rooftops, but no signs of humanity. Yet he knew they were here,
like him, like always, waiting.

Soon he heard the wolf-like howl, eerie and piercing. Reule's
ears picked up but he did not respond. Dark figures drifted out
from every side, and met under the arch. A bat flitted across
the sliver of moon.

They were common by the caves, but seemed to follow them
occasionally wherever they went.

He noticed a familiar figure in the center, and approached him,
just as he lit a torch and put it in a wall sconce.

"Uncle," he said, and embraced him.

"It's good to see you, Aimon."

And with that began a whispered cascade of "Hello" and "How are
you?" and "How is your Tante Orva?"

Everyone seemed to be there. Spider, Sweeper, Glazier, Hopper,
Bug, Filly, Jean Pierre Aristide. They all greeted Reule, as if
he were a fellow human, and the huge animal let them stroke

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behind his ears, and run their fingers through his coat, even over the long scar on one side.

"Oh, I almost forgot," said Aimon, and produced the pie and fruit and cheese.

"Now I'm truly glad to see you, nephew. I haven't eaten anything but tree bark for three days."

Aimon looked longingly at the pie.

"You'd think you were Reule and lost a bone."

The hunger pangs were like sword thrusts to his belly after the long walk.

"But don't worry. Old Spider's working on a soup for us all. There will be enough."

Aimon's grimace turned to a smile. Spider made the best soups.

"We'll all need our strength tonight."

Indeed, Aimon could smell not just any soup this evening, but one with meat. It must be a very important night if Spider had emptied out the stores in this time of scarcity to make a fortifying soup. Aimon wondered what was afoot.

The aroma of the soup grew stronger, and Aimon remembered a time from years ago when cupboards had also been emptied for soup, again in a time of shortage.

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He hadn't enjoyed any that time.

"None of the soup with garlic," Danielle had whispered.

His uncle took the food over to a group of the leaders, and they begin to dig in.

Aimon looked around now that he could see a little. It struck him that every one of these men, and a few women, were different. What an assemblage of skills! Two or three artists known throughout the country, a master furniture craftsman, a calligrapher, a stained glass maker, a cooper, an ale brewer, and a winemaker.

He didn't sense the movement behind him, but Reule did, and he picked up on it and spun around to face a tall, thin boy, and a shorter, but still lean girl. They seemed to share the same face.

"Lonin! Daphne!"

"That's a good dog you've got there."

Reule seemed to understand, and wagged his tail.

"Please hand it back."

"Hand what back?", said Daphne

"Whatever you took."

"So you don't actually know...," said Lonin.

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"Nope. But I know you two."

"That's right. Still the best pickpocket team in the kingdom. You had no idea."

"None. Which one of you has it?"

"Not me," said brother and sister together.

Aimon reached up around his neck, and nodded.

"Look, I know you've got it. Just don't know how."

He motioned with his hand.

Lonin and Daphne pointed as one to a shaggy mound of panting fur between them.

"Seule. Move."

The dog shambled aside, and Aimon saw what he was looking for on the ground.

One of Aimon's eyebrows raised.

"Really?"

Alternating, they responded.

"Yup."

"It took a while, but she learns quick."

"Quicker than you did."

They laughed.

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Aimon scooped up the amulet and put it back around his neck.

Eight pointed ends glistened in the low moonlight. The clique's version of the "real" sun, the true sun, to mock the so-called Sun King.

He recalled how a pair of the dragoons (they always seemed to be in pairs) had once found it on him, and asked for it, since it looked like a weapon. He'd sung him a song alright, built a story on the spot about how the pendant was an homage to Louis. The idiots had let him go.

Little did they know that they'd passed up a custom piece of jewelry worth more than a few months' salary, intricately crafted by his father before he'd died.

"I'm not a jeweler, Aimon, but this is a good piece," his father had said. "Carry it always, and use it when things are hard."

"Use it?"

"You'll know."

Aimon had often wondered what his father meant, and had finally decided, in a despondent moment when he was missing his father, that he'd meant for him to stare at it and remember the light. To replace sadness with joy. And that did help.

It wasn't until much later that he found another use for it.

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Aimon pocketed the amulet, looked the twins up and down and finally said "So, what are you doing here?"

"Big doings tonight. Anybody who's fighting the king is here. Something's up. The dragoons have been scouring high and low looking for your dad, and we're going to retaliate."

Seeing the look on Aimon's face, Lonin immediately wished he could take it back.

The king was convinced that Aimon's father was still alive, guarding a cache of stolen treasure. His men were constantly searching for him everywhere. Uncle said they weren't really looking. It was an excuse to go into Huguenot homes and businesses.

Aimon shrugged it off, grabbed one each of their arms, and together they edged up to the arch, a little outside the circle of men gathered around the leaders, so as not to be kicked out.

His Uncle started, "Tonight, we teach the king a lesson."

A leathery man with a pointed beard up front said "Careful now, Stinger. You can't say that. It's treason. Say we'll teach the king's men a lesson."

"No. Our people speak the truth. We won't harm the king. But we'll harm his men. Tonight, we teach the king a lesson."

Aimon 4

It was night, and secrecy and quiet were watchwords, but tonight his Uncle spoke confidently and clearly. His timbre was rich, deep and authoritative.

"This," he said, holding up what looked like his own amulet of the sun, "is the symbol of King Louis XIV. He claims the sun in his own name."

Aimon had heard the Louis' obsessions with the sun and its symbols.

"I am the state," he had said, but he thought himself much more than that. He imagined himself a new version of Apollo, the Roman sun god. He copied Apollo's symbols, the laurel, the lyre, the tripod, a double L.

Uncle said that in the new palace he was building, at Versailles, sun symbols and Apollo's symbols were everywhere - on fountains, on cutlery, even on those chamber pots that required bowing.

So strange that this man who thought himself god on earth imitated a god of long ago. Perhaps he felt threatened less by an ancient god than a modern one. Maybe that's why he celebrated Apollo, but tore down Aimon's people.

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But then again, he tore down anyone who threatened his sense of supremacy and order, with him at the top.

His uncle had described the brutal punishments that came to the actors in "sun plays" who didn't perform the role of the sun in a fashion befitting the king. They rotted away in a dungeon, never seeing the sun again.

Aimon watched his uncle, the muscles of his face, the occasional smile mixed with anger, the way it felt like he was looking at you. He'd seen this before. He was pulling the crowd into his speech, so they'd feel part of it, as if he were speaking their thoughts. It was clear he had some announcement in mind, and was building up to it.

"Our people have our *credo*." Heads bobbed in agreement.

"Do what works," a voice shouted from the edge of the group.

Aimon was sure it was one of his father's plants, priming the pump to get it working.

They all knew the code. They'd all learned it an early age. Do what works meant rules are made to be broken. Don't live by the law or convention. Don't just do what authority tells you. If it doesn't work, don't do it. If it works, do it. Just don't get caught.

"Keep and protect the clique," came another voice.

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The clique was Aimon's family. You protected family. You might each have your own specialty, live by your own wits, but you were also a team, and you took care of the people around you.

"Live with all creatures!"

Dogs were precious, of course. Almost everyone had one. Even cats were ok, but few hung with the clique. Something just didn't fit with them.

It was okay to eat a pig or a cow if you need to. That's what they were there for.

Even the bats around the caves they lived in had their purpose. They kept away bugs and helped the plants grow.

"Ours are ours and theirs are theirs. Stronger together."

If you were in the clique, you were protected. If you were outside, you can't be trusted. But, if you were persecuted, treated unjustly, bullied, the clique invited you in.

"Pass the word, straight and true."

The clique's history was oral, not written down to be found by others. Stories and songs kept history going. Stories and songs that children learned at their parents' knees, and learned to repeat word for word, without variation.

Memory was prized, and music helped maintain memory.

"Hands and feet!"

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Hands. Everyone was good with their hands, good at something. Music, sculpture, leathercraft, cooking, pickpocketing, sleight of hand, the special dance with the snapping fingers.

Feet. Walk when you can, to maintain independence. When it's time to move on, move. Use your feet. Leave no trace behind.

"And the last?" asked his uncle, his voice raised now.

"We live at night!" said almost every voice together.

"Truer words were never spoken."

Uncle paused for effect, and to let the tension build.

"They call us names, creatures of the night, the loupe garou."

Some cheers, and some booing. He calmed them with his hands.

"Do not fight this. Embrace it."

The crowd waited, some still a little agitated, all curious.

"We will be what they say, what they fear."

A murmur, a positive murmur, went through the crowd.

"We are the Hugoen, the people of the night."

Now there were no boos mixed with the cheers.

"We worship behind closed doors and in caves, where we're able to do so without interference."

All attention was on his uncle now.

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"If Louis claims the sun, then we claim the night, and everything in it, the moon, the stars, the silence, the fear."

Hooting and hollering now.

"The peace."

He held his eight-pointed star high.

"We don't fear the light, like they say we do. His light is evil. It is not a true light, so we fight it. The night is ours, and we choose it."

"Hugoen!!"

"You see this?"

He held up a cross, this time to many boos instead of cheers.

"The king has used this to persecute us as well. Whatever he can find to justify taking what he wants. He is not a believer in the church. He thinks himself god, and uses the church to his purpose, just as Charlemagne did."

Heads nodded again.

Aimon remembered the story of Charlemagne, converting hundreds of defeated opponents to Roman Catholicism by offering them a choice - join up or be beheaded.

"We do not fear the cross."

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Again, some questioning in the crowd. There was reason to fear the cross. During the Huguenot slaughter, the rivers had been so full of bodies and blood that people wouldn't eat the fish they caught there.

"We do not fear it, but we do what works."

Back to positive again.

"We heed it. We watch it. We take it as a warning."

"Yes!"

"But we don't fear it."

"Hurrah."

"And one last thing."

Once again, the crowd waited. They were enjoying this.

"We've all lost family in this fight."

Every one of the heads around the circle, all these people with their different shapes and sizes and talents, nodded again, in solemn unison.

"I lost my own brother, because of that giant that heads the guards."

A few shouted Aimon's father's name, but Aimon barely heard. He was remembering a conversation with his uncle, around a campfire

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in the evening, when he had learned the details of his father's death.

He had leaned in close to hear.

Aimon 5

Aimon's father was a *gambolier*, a wanderer, a traveling explorer and trader. He walked every inch of the country, as far as Orleans, finding here the enemy was, learning the people and their mood, finding those who could help the clique. He was a collector of sorts.

He collected information, friends, goods for trade. He collected relationships and favors. He collected reputation. He collected stories.

His stories, as all those of the clique, but his especially, were fascinating. In almost all of them, he escaped a dire situation by a hair's breadth.

Indeed, Aimon's uncle, Stinger, had told three different stories alone of how Aimon's father, Singer, had escaped the king's dragoons. Everyone in the clique knew those stories. But he'd never heard from uncle how his father had died.

"That's why you need to travel light, Aimon. Carry only what you need, without a case, or as the Germans say, *ohne trunk*. That's

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the only time you can be satisfied that you can make a quick escape when you need to.”

“But Father, we all carry a trunk. The night we left, any of us who had time took what was most valuable, packed it and took it with us. You said it’s the only thing you need.”

“Indeed. I’ve slept on mine many a time.”

Aimon recalled the rumors circulating among the dragoons. They were like all other rumors about the clique. First, they had some basis in fact. Second, the clique inflamed them whenever they could so the dragoons thought their powers were even greater than in real life.

They were outnumbered by the goons. They didn’t have the same weapons, or training. They were peaceful artisans, until they were pushed against the wall and had no choice but to fight, from the shadows.

The one weapon they did have was imagination. So when rumors circulated about almost anything, small or large, the clique distorted and enlarged them to their advantage.

No they didn’t talk with dogs or bats or other animals, but they could communicate and had a close relationship with the dogs, and were often found in the company of bats because they lived in the caves.

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Then there was the thing with the soup.

And when Celeste the vintner took earth and Bordeaux vines with her in her trunk to keep the lines going, crying out "I'll just die without this trunk," she and her friends let the dragoons believe that she needed the earth to survive, and slept in the trunk at night.

Trunks were useful.

"Then why travel without one Father?"

"Most people need trunks, but not a gambolier. Traveling with too much weighs us down son. Things are heavy. Loving what you have is heavy."

So, Father had traveled light, and Aimon tried to do the same. Father often told stories that led to a lesson, and Aimon would take it to heart.

He would never forget his father's story of how he met the king, and the lesson from it.

It was through the strangest of circumstances. Father met another gambolier on the road, one who'd found and purchased a diamond in the heat and dust of the East that was "the size of our prize chicken's largest egg."

The traveler, in what had to be the biggest risk of his life, had approached the court of the Sun King, and let him know that

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he might be able to obtain the largest diamond that the world had ever seen. He would not ever think of asking the king for money to purchase it, since anything of this world was by right the king's anyway.

How to present it to the king, keep his head, and make some money?

He was lucky to start with. He approached the king on a day when many of his advisors and most of his soldiers were away.

Then, he sang a song, as Father was wont to say. That is, he hatched a plan, and he told a story.

The gem, he said, was literally "a piece of the sun," and befitting a god on earth. No ordinary man could touch it without burning alive in a monstrous ball of flame, and many had done so in the attempt to obtain it. It had been dangerous to locate, and even more dangerous to move.

How had he done so then, being a mere mortal?

The traveler had found another king, almost like to his majesty, but of course lesser, far off in the east, who had his holy men build special gloves for it, like the gloves of a blacksmith, but of a rare material.

Why would such a foreign king help a stranger, and why would he allow him to keep this piece of the sun?

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The traveler had saved the foreign kingdom from a deadly scourge, with bright glowing eyes like those from a long burning fire, and clothed in great stripes. In repayment, the king invited the traveler to ask for anything in his kingdom.

The traveler, in a fit of pretentiousness which he now regretted, asked for the fabled jewel of which he had often heard whispered in taverns and inns.

The king, despite his promise, had been on the verge of killing the traveler for his cheek. His bodyguard of muscled brutes, each one the height of a man and then half again, prepared their curved swords.

"Give me a reason to spare your life," the king had said through his translators. The traveler, as his last thread of hope, thought of the most powerful force on the planet, and shouted out the name of the Sun King.

"It is a present for his majesty, Louis XIV."

With that, the foreign king stayed his bodyguards with a wave of his hand.

"Even here, where pale men like you seldom travel, we have heard of the great Sun King. You have mentioned the one and only personage who can save your life. Tell me more of him."

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The traveler went on to tell of the glory of the king, and the grand new palace that he was now building.

This proved a perfectly reasonable explanation to the haughty King Louis, who deigned to accept the traveler's gift, and asked to be shown the jewel.

"Well, of course, your highness," the traveler replied, "but the gloves and container are almost destroyed because the gem has so much power."

The king was shocked, and disappointed, and concerned he would lose this treasure.

"I have a solution, lord, but it is a challenge. It would take resources that mere mortals could not provide."

At this, the king's few advisors in attendance had grown skeptical, but the king merely waved a dismissive hand.

"Resources I have. Tell me what you need. I will have this gem."

The traveler explained that the king himself could certainly touch the gem without burning alive, but anyone else would incinerate in a ball of flame.

This was brilliance by the traveler, explained Aimon's father. Though the king exclaimed loudly to his court and guests and public that he was godly, he would not have vanity true enough to believe himself immune from fire that would consume mortals.

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"Again, tell me what you need."

The traveler provided a long list, gold, and smaller gems, and coins of the realm. The head of the king's counting house must have been away, for the king agreed, and provided (not paid) the gambolier a kingly sum, in a wooden chest bound with gold straps, and emblazoned with a picture of the sun.

The traveler, for his part, wanted to provide the king something in return so that the king would not seek him afterwards.

He created a special chain and setting for the gem, with instructions that no one touch the gem itself other than the king, but that one might hold the necklace. He knew of course that the king would not touch it himself for fear of burning.

He created a special platform, inlaid with gold, on which the king could display his new possession. This particular piece was quite beautiful, with the diamond radiating in all directions against the gold leaf. The king eventually christened it the "House of the Rising Sun."

Finally, he provided a special cloth for cleaning, and for transferring the jewel back and forth between the platform and the necklace, again with instructions that the cleaner be careful not to touch the gem.

The traveler had not skimmed on the necklace, or the display plate, or the jewel itself. He provided the real thing.

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The only false piece of work was the gloves that the traveler and his father had used to deliver the jewel. They were merely a pair of blacksmith gloves, coated in paint. Father had added a special touch so that the gloves disappeared in flame right after the delivery of the jewel.

"Do what works."

The traveler couldn't sell the jewel to anyone else, and he had a chest full of treasure, and his life, in exchange for it.

Uncle said the jewel still sat in a special room in the half-finished palace at Versailles, and occasionally appeared around the king's neck.

So that's how Aimon's father had met the king, but Aimon wanted to know how his father had gotten into trouble with the king, and how he had died. It was time to listen to his Uncle.

Aimon wasn't the only one listening to Uncle's story. The crowd was eerily quiet, and every head was turned toward him.

"You all know the story of the three fights."

Nods all around.

"The fistfight," yelled a voice from the crowd.

"That's right," said Uncle. That was the first, and he launched into the story.

Nick 7

Not sure where this was going, and thinking even something as light-hearted as a "game" with this villain might be dangerous, I ventured "If I choose 'skill,' do I get to pick the game?"

"OK. This is our first date. You pick the category, but I decide who goes first."

I thought for a while. I was a decent shot, but that seemed too dangerous. We didn't have cooking equipment. I didn't want this guy tying me up.

"Riddles," I almost shouted, thinking Gran had prepped me well.

"How very Baggins-like of you."

Jed and Gran had often told me that I had a penchant for bad puns (which Jed described as redundant). I barely refrained at the moment from saying how games of riddles were "hobbit forming," and just nodded instead.

Without preamble, he asked "I have an eye, but cannot see. I'm faster than any man alive, but I have no legs."

I remembered a lot of riddles from Gran, but not this particular one. Most classic riddles with eyes were about potatoes or shoes. But then I remembered Mr. Clean was from New Orleans, and free-associated as he stared me down.

"A hurricane," I said, trying not to betray my excitement.

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I thought I'd start easy, but not too easy, to see what he knew.

"What gets larger the more you take away from it?"

He didn't even blink before answering, "A hole," and jumped right into the next riddle for me.

"Hurt without moving. Poison without touching. Bear both truth and lies. Judge us not by our size."

This one was closer to home. I'd always been a fan of language, despite my propensity for bad puns. I knew this from when Gran and I sparred.

I held back for a minute though, so he'd think he had me stumped, and so I could come up with my next one for him.

"Words."

I expected him to show frustration, but instead he smiled more broadly. He was enjoying this.

"OK. What do you have for me Dog-Boy?"

I wracked my brain. If he was really experienced, I needed something that would test him. I reached into memory and transformed an old brain teaser to my own purpose.

"The king's daughter has two suitors. He doesn't want her to marry either. He sets up a horse race and says whoever's horse crosses the finish line last will win the princess's hand,

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thinking there's no winner to the backward race. Yet the suitors find a way to compete. How?"

This one held him a little longer than the first. I guess home-grown was the way to go. Finally his contemplation wormed around back to a smile.

"They rode each other's horse!"

"Right."

"My turn," and he laid out a tough one.

"The hand sows. The eyes reap."

I hadn't heard this one before, and I'd heard a lot.

I looked for a connection to New Orleans, and found none.

Then I remembered the prior riddle. Something with this guy and words.

"Writing, and reading."

"Well done. Now yours."

Home grown had worked the first time.

"Same king. Different daughter. One suitor."

"OK."

"The king offered a game of chance."

That took him aback a little.

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"He picked up two stones from the path in front of the castle, and put them in a velvet bag."

"Keep going."

"He told the suitor that there was one white stone and one black stone in the bag. If he still wanted to try for his daughter, he was to draw one stone from the bag. If it was white, he'd win the daughter's hand and be heir to the kingdom. If it was black, he'd be executed."

"So the king offered a game of chance."

"No. Secretly, he'd snuck two black stones into the bag."

Mr. Clean nodded. "So whichever stone he picks, he gets executed."

He seemed to smile in admiration of the dilemma the monarch had posed. "Smart king."

"Smarter suitor," I said. He found a way to escape the king's trap and win the princess. What did he do?"

This was clearly one he hadn't heard before. He stood a long while puzzling.

I watched him grow from calm, to fascinated, to edgy. It was time to move things along.

"Is there a time limit to this game?"

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"Usually yes, and I'd be about over it right now."

The wicked grimace came back.

"But I figured it out."

I might have slumped just a little, at least on the inside.

"The suitor took one of the stones out of the bag but held it in his hand so no one could see, and then dropped it on the path. He said he wasn't sure which one he'd dropped, but they could figure it out by seeing which one was left in the bag!"

I nodded. He'd gotten it.

"I'm getting tired of this," he said. "I've got one last one for you, and yours reminded me of it."

It looked like he might have played this game before, and used this riddle before to end it.

He got very serious, pulled out a gun, and pointed it at me.

"If you lie, I'll shoot you in the head. If you tell the truth, I'll shoot you in the heart. Choose."

His smile was completely gone. So was mine.

None of the times I'd riddled with Gran had the stakes been this high. We played for who would wash the dishes, or whether I'd split one cord of wood that night or two. This was a little tougher.

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Even our audience of dogs was nervous.

It wasn't unfamiliar though. Just hard to concentrate staring at that gun. I stood still as stone, and couldn't help but notice the details of it.

Something old-fashioned, from a Wild West movie. Lots of silver filigree. Some writing. And a great big cross across the top by the sight.

This man who knew my brother, and broken-down drug rats like Smitty, who dressed smartly and knew riddles and could clearly think on his feet, smirked at me.

I did the same thing to myself that I did with the dogs. I looked for calm. I detached my feelings and imagined myself on the other side of the room watching the scene in slow motion.

I tried not to sweat, or to shake.

I wracked my brain. There were lots of riddles on South Seas islands, or with prisoners, or with prisoners on South Seas islands, and they only told the truth, or only lies.

"I like your idea of a time limit," he pressured, indicating his watch without taking the gun off me. "Choose."

Liars. Truth-tellers. Liars.

"I won't count down from ten," he said. "Too predictable. Too gauche. I'll just shoot."

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You could see him getting ready. He clicked back the hammer on his ancient revolver.

Calmly, without blurting, I said "You're going to shoot me in the head."

He gently let the hammer back down, but didn't put the gun away.

"Well-played."

He walked calmly over to the pegboard where the leashes hung, took one, and said "I'll take by dog back now."

I stood wondering what he meant.

He looped the leash around Daisy's neck, motioning for her to follow. At first she resisted, but when he snarled at her, she went.

"You'll see me again, whether you find me or I find you."

Impossibly, the squint tightened further, and grew even stonier.

"Be ready."

And he turned and left.

I guess you can tell a lot about people from their enemies too.

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Aimon 6

Stinger and Singer sit in the inn's tavern, taking another drink to drown their anger as a half dozen dragoons chastise the owner Fat Bart and his wife.

It's not outright brazen harassment yet, but it will be after a few more tankards.

Right now it's just small unreasonable requests, brisque demands for more food, or for things not on the menu, so there'll be an excuse to yell later. Soon it will grow into making fun of the tavern owner's big round belly, or his wife's bosom, or the dirt on the kids' faces who are running back and forth with service.

Then voices will rise, and the soldiers will yell, maybe slap Bart and Daphne around a little, maybe pressure her to make up with more personal services, in exchange for their inability to provide exactly what was wanted, though that was probably what they wanted all along.

"They do it every time. Start out small and build up."

"And always with a group. Get one of those hounds off by themselves, and they'd fold like a wet travel cloak."

This was their conversation far too many evenings lately. The harassment was constant, which was the point. Louis had placed the goons in their homes to make them uncomfortable. Maybe he

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didn't know how far they went, or maybe he didn't care. He was the king, divinely appointed. If his men made an error, then so did he, so unless he himself had an issue with what they did, he wasn't going to stop them. It would be an admission of fallibility.

His chief of the dragoons, on the other hand, might intrude. He didn't care about the families housing the goons, but he wanted discipline. You were only allowed to respond if the citizens lashed out, so they harassed and imposed, and hoped for a reaction.

The two sit and chew on stale bread. They have an agreement with Bart that they'll eat the stale foodstuffs so that he can feed the goons, though they sneak a little out the side when needed. If they're ever caught, it will be their heads for stealing from the king.

Right now, having stale bread in their mouths is what keeps them from jumping up, because one of the soldiers, a swarthy lout with a tooth or two crowning the mouth that hides deep in his beard, is hassling Mae, the eldest daughter.

Singer turns to Stinger, with a nod, and breaks out in a drunken tirade.

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"Now see here, you skinny oaf. You may insult my manhood, and you may insult my wife, and even my dear mother, but you will not call my daughter's honor into question."

The whole inn, except for the dragoons, knows what Singer and Stinger are doing, as Singer has no daughter.

"I do call it into question. I called into question twice last night."

With that, Singer takes an apparent swing at Stinger, and the two begin to throw looping punches at each other, breaking a few tables and chairs in the process. They land light blows, but both remain standing.

A few of the soldiers come over to break up the fight, and escort the scuffling men outside.

Once out the door, the epithets escalate, and so does the random swinging. Singer takes a massive, slow swipe at Stinger's head, and misses. But he doesn't miss the goon behind him. He hits him squarely in the jaw, and knocks him out. His partner follows him to the ground seconds later.

Within a few more minutes, the rest of the party has drifted outside, and one by one all but the nearly toothless pursuer of Mae has also landed in the dirt.

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He stands there, crumbs of Bart's best bread in his beard, staring at the bodies on the ground.

"Say there. Whash going on? Stop that fighting."

Singer and Stinger stop.

He takes several seconds fumbling with what looks like a combination of an axe and a hammer, finally wrenches it free, then staggers toward them.

Without the sound of shouting and fighting, it's easy to hear the clop of a horse's hooves approaching, though no horse can yet be seen through the mist.

"You knocked out all of my men?"

"Naw," said Stinger. "They just sort of ran into my fist."

"Well, I'll show you."

He keeps staggering toward them, and takes a wild swing. Stinger steps deftly aside, with none of the earlier signs of drunkenness.

Toothless swings again, and again Stinger ducks.

The dragoon raises his axe-hammer, ready to strike. Stinger doesn't seem the least bit tense.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you, Sergeant. He's liable to take your head off."

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All three men turn, and the largest dragoon Stinger has ever seen rides up on an equally huge black steed. Both are in full battle regalia, and the dragoon, clearly a man of rank, carries an extra weapon he hasn't seen the others carry. What looks like a huge walking stick hangs from his side next to his sabre.

Stinger has seen it used as a training weapon, both by dragoons and by the clique's fighters, but he hasn't seen a dragoon carry one with him.

The sergeant drops his own axe-hammer weapon to his side, and grows meek.

"Capitaine."

"Brutus." A small nod. "It looks like you've got a problem here."

"Yesshir, and I was jusht about to deal with it."

"You may want to think twice, sergeant. It looks like the problem is that your men were dispatched by two unarmed civilians, and you were about to attack them yourself."

"Well, they were fighting."

"They attacked your men?"

The mounted captain is almost perfectly still, as is the horse, but there is a clear energy there, and danger. His eyes remain steadfastly on his junior.

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"Uh, no shir. They attacked each other."

"And how did your men end up unconscious on the ground?"

"Er, I don't know shir. I wuzh inshide."

"Think carefully about this next question, sergeant. Take your time in your current state. Do you think these two civilians, with no weapons, and without provocation, dispatched five of your men?"

The sergeant seems to contemplate at length. Perhaps he doesn't know what 'provocation' or 'dispatched' means. But he does clearly know not to cross his captain.

"They are Hugoen, sir," he stammered, trying to take the slur out of his voice.

"That is not a crime, sergeant."

"But the king,..."

"The king has invested me with the task of creating a fighting force to protect his vast empire. I, in turn, have decided that we need discipline in our ranks. We don't attack unarmed civilians, no matter how dirty or common they are."

Stinger mouths to Singer, "Dirty?"

"So, sergeant, it's time to answer. How did your men end up on the ground?"

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The dragoon ponders at length, then glares at the Hugoes, and turns back to his superior.

"It must have been an accident, Capitaine. I believe they tripped."

"Indeed. Clean it up."

The giant turns and rides off.

The sergeant glares again at Stinger and his brother, packs his hammer-axe back in his belt, wakes his grumbling men, and shuffles down the street.

Stinger and Singer walk back inside, and each hands Fat Bart a soldier's money pouch to cover the damages.

"This should be enough."

Aimon 7

The crowd had all known the fistfight story, but this was the first time most of them had heard Stinger tell it, and there were a few details that were new even to Aimon.

Aimon flashed back to the first time he'd heard it, and how proud it had made him feel.

It wasn't just defeating the goons. It was outsmarting them.

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But maybe, in the end, it wasn't worth it. The dragoons just looked for different ways to badger his people. And his people bided their time looking for ways to get back.

Aimon stared into the bonfire as his uncle worked the crowd, and thought of Danielle.

She had approached him on the night of the fall harvest.

"There are two soups, Aimon."

That had brightened his spirits.

"Don't get excited. You're only having one."

"Oh?"

She elbowed him in the ribs. He was the only one she'd do that with, after the soldiers had attacked her. It might have been the only playful thing she had left, but the look on her face was serious.

"This is important. Listen."

"I am."

"There's a plain stew that Spider made."

That wouldn't be so bad. Aimon knew Spider's stew. It was the same stew they were having that night. It's hearty, and keeps you going for miles.

"Yes?"

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"There's another soup, the best one Spider has ever made, with onions, and leeks, and tons of garlic."

That sounded even better.

"If you smell the garlic, don't eat the soup."

Garlic? Garlic was delicious. It might make it hard to capture a kiss, but its taste was glorious.

Lille Chastain approached.

"You told him? I've told most of the others. I still have to find Jacques, and the twins."

"I've told him, and he'd best listen."

She turned to him again.

"Do not eat the garlic soup," Danielle repeated, in slow cadence as if instructing a four-year old.

And then, in her normal voice, maybe even a little hurried, she added "Pass the word to any others you can find."

The two had run off then, presumably to continue spreading the message. Aimon had tried to do so himself, though everyone else had already known by the time he found them.

Many of those saved were standing around the fire tonight, listening to Stinger.

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Their stirring brought Aimon back to the present. They were yearning for more.

"The swordfight," yelled another voice.

"Tell us about the second fight, Stinger."

"But you all know it already," winked Stinger. He was doing what he did best, but better than Aimon had ever seen it done. He was getting the crowd ready for something. Aimon was dying to learn what it was.

He bantered with the crowd a while longer, and got ready to increase the fire even further.

Nick - 8

Just as they had in the shelter, the dogs added atmosphere one night under the bridge as well, just like the old days in Louisiana. Almost everybody had a dog, and they came to me and Biscuit, immediately.

Strangely enough, that warmth, that protection, that feeling of family, is one of the things that got Dor upset. She used to snap a lot at me in the beginning.

Her Labrador, Mr. Blue Jeans, trotted over to me and we had one of those good conversations.

"Hey. Get over here!"

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Mr. Blue Jeans just stayed, wagged his tail, and licked my face.

Finally, Dor walked over, her scowl still there but mixed with a trace of a smile. She ran her fingers through Blue's coat, and he turned round three times, chuffed happily, and sat down.

"I guess you're an Innie after all."

"Come again?"

"You know the right words to the song. And the dogs come to you. And old Pepper likes you."

"That's his nickname, Pepper?"

"No, that's his real name, and there's another sign that you're an Innie. You care about names, getting them right."

"OK"

As for hers, Dor turned out to be Doreen, and she indeed did provide her half, her part of the story.

Everyone has a piece of it, the story, the tapestry.

She started with an explanation of "poor boy." Not far from purveyor I guess, but she said all of our people (not *her people* but *our people*) came from a line of providers. Not shopkeepers or hotel-owners or families that ran the taverns, but people that got things done.

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She told stories of a talented group in France, actors and musicians and artists and actors, who all worked with their hands, and that masqueraded as servants to get close to the king and get back at his people.

She told me about all of their characteristics, our characteristics, and that took me back to Gran again.

Nick 9

First and foremost, we're self-sufficient. You use what you can find.

I can remember Gran staring down Jed and me at the kitchen table, a gallon jar sitting between us. It had once contained pickles, but now was only about a third full of remnants, a green liquid spotted with dill seeds.

One of us (I say Jed, he says me) had complained about eating canned peas that Gran had conjured up that evening and that we'd turned into pancakes. I've since grown to love them. Not that night.

Well Gran didn't take to complaining, so there we were, and we weren't leaving the table until the pickle juice was gone. It was, after a while, and neither of us ever complained about dinner again.

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In fact, I grew to love mashed pea pancakes, though I still prefer them made with fresh peas. With enough seasoning and a crispy fry, they're quite good.

But pickle juice, bleh! I can't stand it to this day.

Another rule of Gran's was that if you find something somewhere, you take what you need, and only that.

I flashed back on one of GiGi's night-time disappearances. She'd come in at six in the morning with turkey, and yams, and pie. She'd often do that, show up in the morning with food. Never too much. Always enough.

"Where'd you get it Gran?" My eyes were saucers.

She just gave me a close-lipped smile.

"A little of this, a little of that."

Had she been hunting? No, not this time. We'd had our share of possum and coon and deer, and she was a crack shot, but this turkey was dressed, and you don't put a .22 round through a yam. Scrounging, or stealing, or trading? Maybe, and her definition of the three often blurred. She was a shrewd negotiator. Take this time, for example.

One summer I was sitting on the milk can by the Coke machine, going through the words of The Song, and in glided a loud, brash, dark haired somebody or other important, dressed up in a

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seersucker suit, and steaming. He had three or four heavy gold chains hanging around his neck, what looked like bear fur poking up from under a matching watch, and stunk of those long foul cigars that they sold around the corner at the Check and Stop.

"I need hubcaps for my Caddy. Right now. Some'ody put a big 'ol pothole out there and I lost one. Whaddy say Granny?"

Now, I call her Gran, and when our singers and players came around they called her Gran, but she was a lot younger then, and he wasn't anybody we knew. She stiffened a little, not that anybody else would know. I could see the steel in her eyes, waiting.

"Well, you got any? You gonna sell me somethin'?"

She did. She sold him four slightly used but good condition hubcaps worth about \$68 (I knew the value of everything in the shop by then), for \$1200. He paid without flinching.

"You can pay Nick here," she said, and flipped on the eight-track tape player, Jim Croce crooning out "Bad, Bad Leroy Brown." Sugar and Fire heard it, a practiced cue that we had an unfriendly customer in the front to get rid of, and bounded and yipped in from the shop, sending our guest scurrying out the screen door.

After I'd put on the caps and collected the money for the till, plus a \$2 tip I'd picked up off the ground as I wiped off the

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dust from his Cadillac spinning out through the chain-link, I asked Gran how she'd done it.

"You just read 'em and you can tell. You've got that part down already. Now you just need to learn to tell 'em no until they take your price."

"But \$1200, Gran! That's a fortune, a treasure."

"It's enough. And he would have paid more."

"More than 1200 bucks? Why didn't you take him for it? He was obnoxious, and he called you Granny."

She looked at me with her serious face, the one that said

"Here's a lesson sonny. Get this one right. No changes."

"Remember this Nickie. We take enough. Never more than that. You can always find more when you need it."

She was right of course. There was always enough.

Nick - 10

Gran's lessons worked both ways.

She had a young mother with a toddler stumble into the shop about a week after the rich businessman drove off in his Caddy. The little boy had a shock of red hair that went every which

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direction, and a thumb inserted deep into a mouth in the middle of a heavily freckled face.

"My old junker finally stopped Ma'am. Can you help out?"

"Nickie, get some cold Cokes out of the box for the young lady and her little one."

When I had, she sent me down the road to fix up an old Duster.

I don't think the young miss had any idea how many broken or rusted or leaking parts I fixed, in between long trudges up and down the dust covered road. Probably worth more than the \$1200 Mr. Gold Chain Hubcaps paid me.

When she asked Gran what she owed her, Gran just asked her to sing a song.

"What?"

"I was you once, Missy, and somebody gave me a kindness. Sing me a song. It will be enough."

She had a pretty voice. Not like the campfire singers from the yard, but pretty, and sang an old hill and holler tune about a mama bear and her cubs who went to town one day.

We clapped and cheered, just like at one of Gran's fireside parties. The young lady blushed.

I pulled her little boy aside and said "Your Mama is really good." He started crying, not the reaction I was looking for.

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In fact he was blubbering so hard I didn't think he'd ever stop. He was inconsolable. Something about Daddy being bad and yelling at Mama for singing and hitting her and them getting kicked out of their house and living in a car and begging people for food and it went on and on.

Finally, I pulled a little broach from around my neck and handed it to him, and the blubbering subsided, somewhat, as he gazed at the light reflecting off it in every direction, almost mesmerized.

"What's this mister?"

At that age, I'd never been called "Mister," and started to chuckle a little. The blubbering went back up a notch.

"Here. Take it."

He wiped a grimy hand across his forehead and looked at me intensely.

"Really?"

"Yes."

Until now, this had been one of my most prized possessions, but sometimes you know that something is right.

I remembered Gran handing it to me.

"Take this, and keep good care of it. Polish it every day, and it will remind you to take care of others like you take care of

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it. Treat it well and it will remind you to treat others well. Repair it when it needs it, and it will remind you to mend your relationships with others."

I had nodded as seriously at her as this boy did with me.

"Someday, you may find someone who needs it more than you do. Pass it on, and give the same message."

"But Gran, if it's worth so much, why would I give it to someone else?"

"Because that's the only time anything has value, Nickie, when you share it."

So I did, and gave this boy the same little speech. And it felt right.

And it was like Gran said. Once I'd absorbed the symbolism, I didn't need the symbol any more. It was a relief to me to give it away, as much as it was a comfort to him.

And it saved my life one day.

Enough is enough, whether you're taking or giving. As long as you don't waste it, that is. That was another of her lessons.

That turkey? The one with the yams?

We had a crowd over and played some old songs. The turkey and yams and pie were enough for a dozen grown-ups and a few kids. Just enough.

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When they'd packed up their fiddles and drumsticks and guitars and banjos and Jews' Harps and harmonicas, she asked me to scrape leftovers off the turkey. I spent an hour at it over the old farm sink, and stood back with a meager pile of turkey shavings, grinning at my work.

"I like the effort Nickie, but let me show you what you missed."

She worked another ten minutes and tripled the size of the pile.

As I got ready to haul the carcass out back, she asked me where I was going.

"Put it in the pot on the stove. We'll boil it down."

We did, and had turkey and yam soup for the next three days.

Enough is enough.

Nick 11

I stood staring at the old freezer, wondering how I was going to move it. It had to be over 400 pounds.

I'd woken early, and was finishing wolfing down a plate of scrambled eggs and bacon in the kitchen. There was a chess tournament at the other side of the county, and I was going to play.

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"Hold on a minute," came Gran's voice from behind me. I need you to do something."

"Sure, Gran." I thought it might be moving some firewood inside, or restocking the Coke machine.

Instead, it was a 400 pound freezer.

"Gran, I was going to the chess tournament."

"You can go after you're done. Move it down to the far field. And take out the switches. They still work."

"The far field?"

"Yep. Jed could help."

I had no idea how I was going to move it a couple of hundred yards, but I wasn't going to ask for help.

"No ma'am. I'll do it."

As the sun set that evening, I trudged back to the hose outside, washed some dust off, and ducked into the kitchen.

Gran had a little smile, and maybe some surprise, as she asked "So you did it then?"

I had. I'd grabbed some old rope and chain, found a couple of axles and a two by six, and made by own winch. It had taken the day, and I'd missed the first day of the tournament, but there was some satisfaction in figuring it out.

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"Nickie, I think I made a mistake."

I'd seldom heard Gran admit that. I listened.

"I gave you what I thought was an impossible job so you'd have to ask your brother for help. You always want to do things yourself."

"What was the mistake?"

"Well, you figured it out. Now I'll never be able to give you something. You'll always think you can do it."

Her brow creased.

"I guess that's not all bad."

We laughed.

"Well, I can still go to the tournament tomorrow. I won't win, but I can play and have a good time."

"Well, there's just one more thing, Nickie."

Her smile widened a little.

She motioned to the doorway and we stood looking at a large crate at the end of the driveway.

"It's the new freezer. It's a little heavier than the old one, but as soon as you move it, you can go. Either tonight or in the morning."

I tried not to let my shoulders slump.

"You could ask Jed for help."

"I'll do it myself."

Aimon 8 (Stinger's POV)

This time, Stinger and Singer are entering town after working the dogs. Stinger has them trained up well, and is very satisfied with their progress.

The lead hound, Blaise, had cornered the fox, but not gone after it, holding position for most of the afternoon, and the other dogs responded in kind. They were listening, and maintaining discipline.

Stinger is telling Singer a joke about a count, a cardinal and a dragoon, when one of the latter walks out of Fat Bart's tavern. It is one of the six from the night of the fistfight.

He calls to his companions inside, and they come out one at a time, the toothless sergeant last. They stand in a semi-circle around the two men.

"Where are you going, Hugoen? Off to steal some bread no doubt?"

"Just training the king's dogs. They're more disciplined than his soldiers, I hear."

The sergeant growls at them, and spews angry epithets, but doesn't move.

Haendiges/HOUSE OF THE RISING SUN

"Seems the emptiest barrels do make the most noise," says Singer to Stinger, but loud enough for all to hear.

The Sergeant reaches for his axe-hammer again, but one of his men whispers something to him that neither Stinger or Singer can pick up. It must be something about only attacking if set on first, because he calms, and thinks.

"Last time we met, you surprised my men in the dark, got the drop on them with some kind of a weapon, a large club no doubt, and when I came out the door all of the others who'd attacked them with you had disappeared."

He says it as if it were true. He must have been telling himself this story for a long time.

"I suppose they took the weapons with them?" retorts Stinger.

None of the other five look up much, not believing their sergeant's story, but he has no loss of conviction himself.

"Clearly, that must be the case."

Singer has always had a penchant for getting into trouble.

Whereas Stinger's job is to train the dogs, and he's developed the habit of speaking to others only when necessary, Singer travels, and is in the habit of striking up a conversation with others quickly and saying what comes into his head.

Haendiges/HOUSE OF THE RISING SUN

He isn't stupid, but sometimes you can't tell by what comes untimely out of his mouth, and can't be unsaid.

"I suppose you want to see what the result will be in daylight?"

The sergeant grins broadly.

"What have we here? A threat? A threat against the king's soldiers? Perhaps we need to fight after all!"

That is when Stinger notices the large black stallion tied up at the dry goods shop the next building over, and the captain from the night of the fistfight, standing in shadow in the doorway. It is uncanny how two beings so large can go unseen, but he has been completely focused on the men in front of him. It appears that Singer has perhaps noticed them as well, for his words are getting smarter.

"Certainly not, fine sir."

"No, then what is possibly the meaning of your suggestion."

"Only sir, that we should perhaps engage in a sort of a contest."

Stinger has seen Singer do this before, and jumps in.

"Yes, sergeant, a contest." He eyes the captain in the doorway to be sure that what Singer has said does not qualify as a threat. If it has, they'd be dealt with sternly, and are walking the edge of a knife.

Haendiges/HOUSE OF THE RISING SUN

"What contest would you propose?"

It is Singer's turn.

"How about something you're good at?"

"Like riding horses? I know you country folk know how to ride."

"How about archery?"

"Like Robin de Bois? No, I'm sure you're choosing something you know. We should do something we know, like swordplay."

The captain chuckled, but doesn't say anything.

Singer says "We can do that. . ."

The sergeant looks surprised. The captain does not.

Singer continues ". . . if we get to choose the type of sword."

Once again the sergeant ponders. He looks like it is a real effort every time.

He smirks.

"We choose our fighter."

"And we'll choose ours."

"Done."

"Done."

His smirk broadens. "Our fighter will be Guy."

Haendiges/HOUSE OF THE RISING SUN

One of the other five, a tall young man who doesn't look he has seen hair on his chin yet, steps forward.

"I'll stand for us."

The smile grows even wider.

"Guy has bested every man in the barracks."

"I guess I'm in trouble then."

"What about weapon? Sabre? Epee? Broadsword? We can fetch whatever you need."

"No need. We'll use these."

Singer takes from his pack two tiny wooden daggers, both broken at the halfway point.

"But these are a child's toys."

"Are you backing down then?"

More pondering.

"Of course not. Let's fight."

"Shouldn't we set the stakes first?"

"Stakes? I was just planning that we'd run you through."

"Okay. If you win, you run me through."

He says it casually, as if losing his life were nothing. Stinger has always admired Singer's sangfroid under pressure.

Haendiges/HOUSE OF THE RISING SUN

"Good."

"But if we win, you stop troubling us every time you see us."

"Agreed."

"And you leave Fat Bart and his family alone."

"Yes, yes. Let's get going."

"Don't you want to shake on it?"

"No need. After Guy kills you, . . ."

"The sergeant will keep his word."

The voice is the captain's, who is now leaning forward ever so slightly.

The sergeant nods, and motions for Guy to take his dagger.

If there were not lives at stake, the fight would be a farce. Guy is quick, but has no idea how to perform this dance that Stinger has seen Singer perform so many times, winning one tavern bet after another, and always getting free ale, or wine, or food, or lodging, or once, a horse.

After the third time that Guy lands in a heap, and regains consciousness, he acknowledges defeat.

The sergeant, now a deep shade of puce, reaches once again for his axe-hammer.

"Whack!"

Haendiges/HOUSE OF THE RISING SUN

Guy has been quick, and Singer has been quicker, but the captain moves so quickly that it makes both look like they have been standing still. His walking stick lands on the back of the sergeant's head, and they all wait, as they did for Guy, for the sergeant to wake up.

"Sergeant, you have been challenged in fair combat and have lost. You will abide by your promise. Is that understood?"

He is silent for a moment.

"This is no time for pondering sergeant. You'll respond now, or you'll die."

The captain says this coldly, but there is no question that he will do as he said.

"Yes sir."

Once again, the sergeant gathers his men and leaves, the ones that have not been knocked out helping Guy and the sergeant. The captain remains.

"It seems we keep meeting each other, and you besting my men. It's good for them to learn, but painful."

Singer and Stinger simply nod.

"I like you, even for Hugoen. The fights have been fair, but understand. If you breach the rules, retribution will be swift, and severe."

Haendiges/HOUSE OF THE RISING SUN

He mounts his horse, as blithely as he had knocked out the sergeant, and rides off.

Stinger doesn't know then that the next time he sees the captain, his words will ring truer than he could have imagined. The retribution will be stern indeed.

Aimon 9

Stinger had the crowd warmed up now. Aimon could feel the excitement, the nervousness.

He hadn't felt that level of energy since the night of the fall harvest. He remembered that night well.

Danielle had approached him again, quietly, and let him know that Fat Bart had pulled out all the foodstuffs, and added it to last year's wine that would soon be replaced, for the biggest festival they'd had since they'd started housing the dragoons.

Aimon had no idea how they would keep something that big quiet, or deal with the questions that would come from the goons when they asked for food and got only scraps, but clearly, Danielle must have an idea.

He assured her that he planned to be there. He just had to finish up some chores for Mother.

Haendiges/HOUSE OF THE RISING SUN

But, as they say, the cat plans, and the mouse escapes. The evening hadn't gone as expected, though it started that way.

Aimon had swept out the kitchen, had chopped and brought in new firewood, and had replaced the candles in his mother's sewing room. He went off to the festival, and met Lonin and Daphne along the way.

"Big doings tonight," said Lonin.

"A feast almost," responded his sister.

"I heard Stinger took the dogs out and got a pheasant."

"And there'll be games."

"And Danielle will be there."

"Give it up Lonin."

"Never."

"The twins will be there too."

Daphne and Lonin were so similar in appearance that they looked like twins, but weren't. People called them Daphne and Lonin. But *the* twins were two identical brothers. People called them *the twins*.

"The twins? Which one do you like?"

"I don't know. I can't tell them apart. But they're both dashing."

Haendiges/HOUSE OF THE RISING SUN

"And sad."

"Not sad. Melancholy."

"Give it up Daphne."

"Better chance than you. There's two of them."

"Right you are," he agreed heartily.

That was the two of them. They could fight, but then ended up agreeing. It was hard to tell when they were even arguing.

The three of them approached Fat Bart's, and stared in puzzlement.

It seemed like everyone was there, spilling out into the street.

What was a little surprising though, was that the dragoons were among them.

What was very surprising was that no one seemed to mind.

A tall thin goon turned to the trio, and said, "Thanks for sharing your harvest dinner with us."

One of his friends said, in a drunken sing-song, "I guess you should have hidden it better if you didn't want us to join in," shoved a bit of meat pie in his mouth, and laughed, spraying some of the contents on his friend.

"Hey watch it there," his friend spluttered, but didn't seem genuinely annoyed.

Haendiges/HOUSE OF THE RISING SUN

Danielle and Lille stepped out then, announcing that they were about to tap the wine cask.

The dragoons slipped inside.

"Be sure to try the soup too."

Lille winked as she ducked inside with the goons, and Danielle came over to the three, and chatted with Aimon. Lonin looked on, a little jealous.

"How'd they find out about it?"

"It wasn't hard. We wanted them here, so we let the word spill."

"You wanted them here?"

"It's part of the plan."

"They must be eating all of our stores for the winter."

"Not all, but the fanciest ones yes. There are more packed for us. But every one of them has tried the soup."

"I thought we weren't supposed to. . ."

"You're not."

Aimon just stared quizzically. Danielle turned to Lonin and Daphne.

"You didn't tell him, did you?"

Lonin looked especially ashamed.

"I, uh, forgot."

Haendiges/HOUSE OF THE RISING SUN

"You forgot to tell him about the most important night of the year?"

Turning back to Aimon, "I don't suppose you have your trunk packed either?"

"My trunk? Where are we going?"

She threw up her hands.

"Go home and pack it. Now. We'll tell you later when we meet in the square."

Aimon had never seen her so, well bossy. Or so confident. Lonin seemed to like it. He was grinning from ear to ear.

"Now."

"But my Mum. I'll need to go and get her. She'll need to pack too."

Danielle's smile changed to a scowl.

"Your Mum's not going, and she's not in there. But you are. Get home."

She wasn't going? How could she continue to show more loyalty to the king than to her own people?

He turned and started to go, and heard Danielle ask Lonin "Is that why his goons aren't here either? Did you forget to tell him to drop the hint too?"

Haendiges/HOUSE OF THE RISING SUN

Now Aimon's walk turned into a run. Reule ran after him. If his mother wasn't here, and neither were the goons, they were the only ones in town who weren't.

"That's more like it," Danielle yelled after him.

She turned to Lonin and Daphne.

"Let's get back in there. We have work to do."

Aimon 10

Aimon raced through the streets to get home. He rounded the last turn and slid to a stop.

A soldier stood in the doorway, and it reminded him of another time he'd rounded the same corner.

He'd seen the giant there, rather than a soldier, but with a tiny older woman.

She was shaking a finger at him.

"It's unseemly for you to be living here with a married woman."

"I'm only here once every few weeks, Mother."

Was it possible a man so large could have a mother so small?

"Once a month, or every night, she's a married woman."

"She was."

"Did they ever find the body?"

Haendiges/HOUSE OF THE RISING SUN

"No, Mother."

"Then as far as you know, he's still alive."

"Yes, Mother."

"What have I always told you? Decorum in everything. I raised you to be respectful of the rules of the church, and your father to respect the rules of command. It worked. Look where you've landed, a job with the king! You are to be proper at all times. You maintain discipline, in yourself and in others."

"As always, Mother, you're right."

She turned and walked away. Aimon stayed a long while in the shadows, as the giant waited outside the doorway, until he eventually left.

This time, Aimon only paused for a heartbeat, then tumbled past the soldier unto the kitchen, where his partner was arguing with Aimon's mother. The soldier tumbled after him, and the two goons stood there smirking, but she didn't appear alarmed.

"We need to be going Madame. The capitaine is waiting for us."

"Not quite yet, soldier. I need to speak a bit with my son. You may wait outside."

How could she do that, take such a firm tone with them? It's as if she feared nothing.

Haendiges/HOUSE OF THE RISING SUN

The dragoon she had confronted was almost shuddering in frustration and annoyance, but held his tongue. With great reluctance, he and his companion turned and went out.

"Aimon, I thought you had left to be with the others."

"I did. I mean I didn't. No one told me about it but then I went anyway and found out, but I came back to see if you were all right."

"I am fine, Aimon, but I need to let you know something.

"What's that, Mother?"

"I'm leaving."

"Aren't we all? Danielle told me to pack my trunk."

She lowered her voice to a whisper.

"Yes, but we're all going different places. Some are going to the Pays Bas. They need to escape."

That made sense.

She lowered her voice even further.

"Others are going to the caves that your father and uncle found, and will live there. There's no escaping for them. There's work to be done here.""

"Oh."

Haendiges/HOUSE OF THE RISING SUN

"You're going to the caves, and you'll be with Stinger and Aunt Orva."

"And you."

Her face seemed torn, hurt by some decision she had to make, but as resolute as always.

"No, not me."

Aimon's stomach knotted a little.

"Why not?"

"I have a different job to do."

Aimon's heart fell.

"To sew uniforms for the king's men," he said.

"That's right."

"But you should be with us, not them! They killed him."

A look of even deeper sadness crossed his mother's face. At length she spoke again.

"We all have our jobs to do. We live and plan."

"But. . ."

She brightened.

"No. It's decided. You go to the caves, and I go with the men.

Aimon tried one last desperate maneuver.

Haendiges/HOUSE OF THE RISING SUN

"But my trunk's not packed. I'll have to stay."

"Your trunk is packed. I took care of it."

"Oh."

"Come give me a hug and a kiss. I'll see you anon."

He hesitated, but only for a moment, and did. They embraced a long time, until the soldier came back through the door.

"Madame."

"I'm ready."

She gave Aimon one last look, and left.

Aimon sat despondent for a while, and then decided that he might as well return to his friends.

He drifted out into the street, and smelled the smoke. Reule started to bark.

He saw a light in the distance, and realized it was coming from the direction of the tavern.

Once again, he and Reule raced off.

When he arrived at the tavern, breathless, he grabbed Lonin and demanded "What's going on?"

"She's in there."

"We were all supposed to leave, but she snuck back in."

"She wouldn't let it go," lamented Daphne.

Haendiges/HOUSE OF THE RISING SUN

"Ever since she was attacked."

"It was just supposed to be a sleeping draught"

"So they wouldn't be awake when we left."

"But she ran inside."

"And no one can get in."

"And lit the fire."

"Stop the back and forth, you two! I can't follow," snapped Aimon. "Who's inside?"

"Danielle," they said together.

As if on command, she appeared in an upper window.

Flames licked her sides and long hair, but if she was in pain, she didn't show it.

Flames licked the sides of the window, and limned her face with a pulsating beat of light and darkness. Smoke poured out, occasionally blocking the view of her face, but he could hear a haunted laughter even when he couldn't see her.

An especially large flame burst through the floor behind her, and backlit her face, so that she looked like some haughty queen of the underworld.

Haendiges/HOUSE OF THE RISING SUN

She could have been one, Aimon reasoned. He'd have been screaming in all that fire. She had not the slightest sign of pain or discomfort.

It was instead as if an entire life played out before Aimon's eyes. Her laughter had begun as the giggle of a young maid, had grown into something liberating and freeing, and then transformed to the cackle of some demon.

She was still laughing when the roof, and then the floor gave in, almost at the same time, the building collapsed, and she plunged from view.