

VOL. 1  
**SHORT STORY**



# **Southern Nights**

A Collection of Short Stories

By: Jay Miutz

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### A note:

*He often stared into the broken mirror that hung on the tree a yard or so from his cot and often times he failed to recognize the figure staring back at him. Each day he seemed to be growing less present, and in his reflection he could see a mind that was slowly slipping away.*

*He seemed undeniably aware of it, and yet brutally unfocused on it – a delicate balance of chaos and organization. How can a mind, let alone a young one, survive like this? The answer was simple – it could not.*

*Unless of course, it is within a very specific, very certain environment, on which also balances organization and chaos. Perhaps there it could maintain itself for quit a long time.*

*- but for how long, he was uncertain.*

*And to be perfectly frank he didn't have time to really think about it – which was ironic.*

*Because time was all that he had.*

# The Mud Patrol

The old flatbed kicked up a lot more dust than it did commotion when it slowly rolled through camp. It was beat to hell with solid rubber tires speckled with flat spots and a chase that was more rust than chrome. For seven days it sat like a tombstone in the overgrown lot beside the Admin. Building - it didn't seem to be in anybody's way, especially Arlo's but it seemed very out of place, which was never a good thing at Camp J.S Mosby.

It wasn't that trucks were anything new to the folks at camp - they came down the main road at least twice a week delivering supplies, food and occasionally hauling away old equipment. But it was always the same guys behind the wheel - Chic from Woodfin Food & Ice, Millard from Templeton Goods & Service and Hefty Jim from Saal's Salvage.

It was all-routine.

And it always had been - delivery trucks were more or less the only contact most of the campers, and especially the staffers, had with the outside. Camp Mosby sat in the rural part of rural on a massive plot that spanned through a dense patch of woods, a network of streams, a river fed lake and was surrounded by acres of farmland and a single dusty dirt road.

The closest town was Goochland, and even its main street was at least 20 or so miles away. Mosby was an isolated little plot of repentance in the heart of the Deep South - easy to get into, hard to get out.

That's what they used to all say.

Camp J.S Mosby had depended on the same three trucks to run the supply lines for as long as Arlo had been around and he imagined that they had probably been there from the beginning - but Mosby had been around for decades, since the turn of the God damn century - so maybe not.

Arlo thought, perhaps, Mosby - like any other encampment named after a daring and loyal confederate general - started with good

intentions. As society was expanding and folks were abandoning nature and duty in place of leisure and sloth, Camp Mosby was carved out of the woods as a place to send troubled young men who needed to reconnect with nature and reevaluate themselves. For generations that's how it had remained, troublesome young men cast out of their homes and into the care of the camp staff and its leaders to be straightened out.

They were sent to reconnect with the woods, to learn skills and trades and be returned to their loving families better off than when they had left. It was a place for little boys to outgrow and shake off their troublesome, rebellious and youthful phases and be shown the true path to virtue and responsibility.

Or at least that's what it was supposed to be. In reality it had long become a dumping ground for devious bastards. Sure, most of the kids who came through were scared so shitless by the idea of dying in the woods that they got their act together and left camp after a hard month or two - but some got stuck. Not that the parents cared - if there were any, these kids were hell hounds, bad eggs, rotten apples but worst of all of it was that the folks put in charge of them were even worse.

Sometime in the 1920s the current financiers of J.S Mosby decided perhaps they could expand the enrollment qualifications of the camp and secure some government funding by making it less of a nature day camp and more of a labor camp in lieu of hard time. Some of the folks that stumbled their way through the gates or got dropped off by the state buses came straight from courthouses - committing all sorts of offense and carrying various "terms" for their stay at camp. Those who found themselves on the long end of a gavel sentence seemed to settle into the camp but oddly enough - like scum on a pond - the nastiest stuff rises to the top. J.S Mosby was a prison run by prisoners with the top staff being those who couldn't seem to escape the compound. Some had been given long terms to begin with but others couldn't seem to break the cycle - they'd accrue more and more time while at Mosby for insubordination, lack of cooperation, and damaging property.

It was a vicious cycle - but some had come to play the game well.

And the aforementioned truck drivers knew this all too well. They had established a certain rapport with staffers seeing it as beneficial to both

groups. As the only link to the outside the trucks were a valuable resource for supplementing the few possessions folks were able to get at camp – and drivers often were able to make a hefty profit providing those materials.

But not a monetary prophet – per say because staffers weren't exactly walking around with stuffed pockets or coins to spare. It was quite the opposite since no one at camp had any money – which meant the whole system was based on trust, value and bartering.

Chic, Millard and Hefty Steve knew just what the boys wanted when their rigs came around – and the staff did their best to reciprocate, which often meant getting fairly creative.

Arlo and the rest of his bunkmates was no stranger to it though.

They had lots in the shop that could tune up the old rigs or fix a few gadgets for you – all for a low price of course. Then there was the scrap game – walking around you could generally rustle up a few steel cans, iron pipes, or old bumpers and trade'em out for half value. If you were looking for high value stuff you could always make something with the materials kicking around or dig something out of one of the old barracks if you could brave the tick nests.

Those were all good and well and on occasion they'd pay off and you might be able to weasel yourself a pack of real rolling papers, a bottle of pop or just something that reminded you of home but Arlo and his buddies had been running a real gambit for a few years now and it had been paying off quite handsomely.

But on a hot Sunday afternoon, as the weeds crept over the wheel wells of the old flatbed it seemed to be more at risk than they realized.

## **Staff Meeting**

Sunday's were reserved for three things at Camp Mosby – staff meeting, tallying of the ledger and the Lord.

Bill Givler, the old bull dog that owned and ran the camp, was a man of God – there was no denying that. He agreed with every single spot of ink in the bible he kept with him, with the single exception of the Sabbath.

That's not saying old man Givler defied the order himself – oh no, but he felt the idea of a day without work was a privilege not a commandment and so he, just like the savior himself, held judgment over whom it applied to.

This Sunday was no exception as Arlo, and the rest of the staff, took their seats in the mess hall for the meeting. Thirty some odd boys like sardines packed into the tinderbox. The air was thick with stagnant heat and must. There was no movement to it, it just sat on top of them. Every single boy in the room sat perfectly still, afraid to break the air, to make any movement that might cause their body to raise its own temperature – so the hold group sat like statues in the silence waiting for Givler to give the marching order.

Arlo watched a bead of sweat roll down the back of the neck in front of him – appearing from beneath the boy's hair and disappearing under the collar. Every inch of his body felt hot, like you could fry an egg on his forearm or cook a steak on his thigh. It was a heat that covered him like a sheet and watching the sweat fall on the kid in front of him oddly kept his mind from focusing on the similar beads currently collecting on his own neck. They had remained in place however until a faint wave of hot breath swept in from behind him.

Badgers voice crept into his ear, "Ol'man Givler ain't going to get us this week – I'm sure of it. Ain't done nothing wrong all week."

Arlo let out a faint smile, "Not gonna matter," he whispered under our breath, "that lump of mush has got it out for us – you know he'll whip up some tail that that tipped latrine in Ocacroke was us..."

Badger leaned in closer, "But that was us..."

“He don’t know that, and he ain’t got no way to prove it but it doesn’t matter – he’ll pin us, just like always. 50 to 1 odds says we get handed a shovel at the end of all this.”

Hosea, who was sitting beside Arlo muffled a laugh, “I’ll give you 20 to 1 we get pegged.” The bench creaked as he leaned back and rubbed the palm of his hands with his thumb.

Badger chimed back in, “I’ll take that action.”

Arlo rolled his eyes, these boys would bet on who could [blank] the most [blank] if it wouldn’t kill them – but it never seemed to stop them from trying.

“20 to 1 odds...I’ll put two smokes down that we don’t get labor this week – two fresh smokes.” Badger had both his hands on the boys’ shoulders now taunting out his offer.

Hosea balked, “Normally I’d say that’s easy money but I know damn well you don’t have a single stick to your name, let alone two.”

“I sure as shit do,” Badger whispered tapping on his shirt pocket, “rolled them this morning – nice and fresh. Ten to one odds come on José.”

Hankins, who had been sitting stoically a row ahead, seemed to take the bait, “Why don’t you chumps play with some big boy odds?”

“And what might those be, good sir?” Badger said with a meddling smile as sweat dripped from his nose and onto the floor.

“I’ll put a whole pack down that Big Bill Givler gives us labor.” Hankins bet had caught them all of guard, a whole pack was a big bet.

“Finance?” Badger asked nervously.

“I suppose.” Hankins said with a confident nod.

“Hot damn!” Badger gave his knee a hard slap as the screen door at the front of the room creaked open and slammed shut with a sudden force.

“Quiet down Flannigan, or you’ll be raking gravel for the next month.” Bill Givler had unmistakably entered the room and undeniably begun the meeting. William Givler was a large man who seemed to wear the

part of his gut that hung over his belt like a badge of honor. He had a rat like face – and Arlo didn’t just believe that because he despised the man but rather because he genuinely did look like one. Two dark eyes sat on either side of a sharp almost pointed nose, and thin lips barely concealed a mouth full of teeth that had been yellowed by tobacco. He was always immaculately clean-shaven but wore his greasy black and grey hair combed over the top. He looked like a pale mountain of mashed potatoes with a few blotches of sunburn and a perpetual sweat on his forehead. He was harsh, he was direct, he was no non-sense and always confident that he was correct. He had made Arlo, and many of the other boy’s lives a living hell – but this far from home, his word was the law.

And he knew it.

“...O’Malley you owe ten credits for a broken faucet in the second wash house, Crosby 8 credits for the shovel you broke filling in the stump hole near Powhatan and DeVry owes four credits for failing to report to taps on time. Tighten it up boys, these credits will be added to your current totals – I suggest you work to resolve them now rather than near the end of your stay with us.”

Givler ran his free hand up and down his suspenders, while the other held his clipboard of crumpled papers. “On to more pertinent matters,” He rambled on for some time, stopping occasionally to spit on the ground while Arlo watched the damp stains beneath his arms and collar expand. His boisterous and yet monotone voice seemed to stick in the thick air – barely making its way through any of the audiences’ ears. He carried on about this and that, the arrival of new campers, the rearranging of bunks and the importance of scripture. At one point he lunged into a sermon of sorts on the plight of evil and the need for us all to find salvation. Arlo found the whole ideal droll, knowing full well the only powerful beings in the room were Bill Givler ego and the god damn heat.

“And I will end, as always, with these words which I hope you all will take into consideration with each step you take on your path...and the Lord commandeth, blessed be the good, and damned be the wicked.”

He thumbed cluelessly through the mess of papers clamped onto his clipboard, adorning a grubby pair of tiny reading glass that only made his rotund head appear even more bloated. “Right, right – in regards to the latrine that was tipped near Ocacroke, the investigation remains

open and although I have in mind – several – suspects,” He stared directly at Arlo’s row with a menacing glare, “I am unable to definitely say who is at fault, so that being said labor this week will fall to...hmm,” he flipped a few more pages,

“Moynehain, Gloucester, La Croix, Teddly, Talbot and Smythe - Bobcat Patrol - LABOR.”

A small group let out a hearty groan from the side of the room, but was mostly drown out by the heavy sighs of relief from those who had not been called, and an especially ecstatic chirp from Badger as he gave a loud clap.

“Hey, HEY! Simmer, simmer, none of that.”

Givler tucked the clipboard under his sweaty arm and took control of the room again, “Bobcat Patrol, you’ll be reporting to The Major down near admin Wednesday morning at 6am sharp – special detail this week.” More groans from the side of the room, “I have decided to clear some land – we’ll be setting up another encampment and continuing to expand our operations here. You boys will be helping fell trees and clear the plot – stump to dirt.”

“Which plot?” A weary voice asked from the back.

“DeChamps, near the Old Camp by Head Creek – time we did something with it.”

As soon as Givler had let the words ooze out of his mouth Hankins had snapped up straighter than Arlo had ever seen him sit before. He seemed startled, stunned and concerned and as Givler let the screen door once again slam behind him, and the rest of the staff rose to take on the day – Hankins remained stuck at his bench.

As the room emptied out Hankins remained seated, Badger doubled back from the door and gave him a hard smack on the back, “Oh, don’t be blue little buddy – tell you what, I’ve already got these two right here for this morning so why don’t we just say you get me that pack you were so keen on by close of business today? How’s that sound – I’m a compassionate victor I suppose.”

Hankins ran his hand through his dusty blonde hair, letting it fall to his sun burned neck, anxiously rubbing it before snapping up to his feet and grabbing Badger’s collar.

His feet seemed to be lifting off the ground while he latched onto Hankins’ forearms, “Geez, okay, okay – bets off.”

Hankins didn’t release him, “Don’t you idiots get it?”

Everyone seemed puzzled, cigs were great but Arlo didn’t think they were that tough to come by.

Hankins dropped his hands from Badger and spit on the ground, “DeChamps – he’s clearing out DeChamps.”

“So what?” Arlo asked, struggling to keep up with what was going on.

“If he clears out that whole plot – there won’t be smokes for any of us.”

## **DeChamps**

Arlo broadened his steps to catch up to the group who were quickly disappearing behind a cloud of dust as they made their way hastily down the road beside the Mess Hall.

He was finally catching up to them when they hooked a hard left and disappeared into the thicket of woods that ran along the road.

Admittedly he was still slightly confused, things has escalated so quickly that he couldn't quite keep up – it was like trying to straightened out a tangled ball of wire. Following the announcement they had bolted out of the room and were now b-lining toward staff site.

The staff lived in army issued canvas tent that could comfortable fit two adolescent males but Camp Mosby stocked each one with no less than four. The site itself was almost hidden at camp, but essentially in plain sight. There was a bulkhead of woods at the top of the hill, a few hundred yards past the Mess Hall and before you got to the Quartermasters Lodge. The only ways in and out were well worn and narrow paths that weaved through the woods – most folks would miss them if they weren't keeping an eye out for them.

One by one, Hankins, José, Badger and Arlo filed down the trails at a rapidly increasing pace – by the time they reached the half-propped tent in the back corner that they called home; Hankins was in a full sprint.

Hankins came to a hard stop and the boys following behind him nearly collided like a freight train. Without hesitation Hankins threw open the tent flaps, “Fitz! You decent?”

In all the commotion, degenerate gambling and general misery of the meeting Arlo had completely missed the fact that one member of their bunk was missing – Fitz.

With each passing second since Givler's departure more and more questions had flooded into Arlo's head. Was Fitz the reason for all this commotion? Why did he miss staff meeting? Why were they running? Why was he so out of breath?

And one by one all of Arlo's questions were answered as the entered the ramshackle tent the five boys had come to call home.

Fitz seemed completely un-phased by the entrance, and to be perfectly honest Arlo knew it was nothing out of the ordinary. The young man sat on the edge of his cot in the back corner of the tent; he glanced up for a moment before returning his attention to the thread and needle and in his hand.

“Arts and crafts are over Fitz,” Hankins said rather directly “you still got that map they gave you when you pulled labor two seasons back? The one you used to scout the dam.”

Fitz raised a thread to his mouth, clenching it between his teeth and snapping the needle off, “Oh, sure sure. It's around here somewhere – maybe in the trunk? With the survey reports.”

Hankins broad stepped across the tents cluttered floor kicking aside socks, bandanas and piles of ash – he reached under a cot near the front and pulled the old trunk out. The boys had used it mostly as a table for playing cards at night but occasionally they put things of general importance inside.

Arlo watched as Hankins snapped open the lid and frantically began to rifle through the piles of faded papers, bloodstained reports and bent photos.

He was still rummaging and cursing under his breath as the boys took seats on their respective beds. “Why weren't you at meeting Fitz?” Arlo asked still keeping an eye on a growingly manic Hankins.

Before Fitz could answer Badger chimed in, “He caught a corner re-shingling the shed out near the pavilion – tore him up something fierce.”

Fitz shrugged his shoulders, “Yea, had to sit the meeting out and get it patched up – but I think I did a pretty good job considering.” He held out arm proudly, it had a nine-crooked stitches running from the edge of his elbow to the base of his forearm, a line of thread still dangling off.

He plucked the needle from between his teeth and dropped it into a small glass of clear liquid sitting on the floor beside him – it turned a rosy pink as the needle sunk swirled around the edge.

“I've had worse,” he chuckled and he wasn't kidding. In the time that

Arlo had known Fitz he had accrued more injuries, scars, scabs and broken bones than anyone else. He was an average looking kid with a mess of black hair and tattered clothing but his distinguishing characteristics seemed to all be inflicted. There was the jagged scar that he had shown up with that ran from the crease of his lips to the top of his cheeks. The various red ropes of tissue that covered his back and made him look like he'd taken a lashing; there were crooked fingers, deep black bruises and the occasional bandaged limb – so it was true a few crooked stitches were nothing new.

Arlo had always justified it as the results of having worked in the camps metal shop for so long – but Badger worked in the shop as well. In fact He had known Badger just as long as Fitz, the two were nearly inseparable, doing just about everything together – but Badger didn't have nearly as many injuries to boast as Fitz.

The kid was just prone.

Badger used a pocketknife to clip the excess string and had begun to help Fitz wrap his arm when Hankins again commanded their attention, "I got it – I got. Quick clear a spot, clear a spot. José close the flap."

The flaps closed and with it the tent grew almost entirely dark, just a sliver of light bearing between the flaps as Hankins delicately unfolded a well-worn and heavily marked map.

Arlo had seen it a million times, it wasn't really anything new but the boys weren't exactly supposed to have it – hence the heightened amount of secrecy. It wasn't that they weren't allowed to have maps – there were maps all over camp but this one in particular was special. It was a surveyor's map.

It spanned the entire camp and beyond – well past the active camp sites and active roads. It covered acres and acres of wooded lots, of harvest fields and even showed distant properties. Givler didn't allow such information to trickle down to the campers or especially the campers – sure after a few months or years here you could piece together the general lay of the land but there were acres and acres of thick woods and unidentifiable fields that could easily get the most curious explorer hopelessly lost.

In Bill Givler's mind ignorance of the actual size, scope and layout of Mosby was the best security he could have.

Whenever the map got pulled out, which honestly was rare these days as the boys had become so familiar with it – Arlo would always wonder why they didn't just pack their things and use it to wander out of camp. He could recall the first few times he had seen it he had suggested just that and they had all humored the idea but then would be reminded that attempting such a feat would most definitely end worse off than they currently were. You could get lost for days, weeks, month and end up a corpse in a pine field, or bear bait – but honestly if by some miracle you did make it to the edge of the map Givler claimed he had measures in place.

Some of the new boys tossed around rumors that it was an enormous fence, too tall to scale and it blocked off the perimeter if you walked far enough out. Arlo, as well as the others, had long laughed off that idea but what they did believe was what they heard every time someone tried for the road – as soon as you cross that line you leave behind the notion that you are anything other than a convict.

You may make it to the gravel, but then you are a wanted man with a bounty on your head and the backwards folks in Goochland County were more than happy to put a bullet between your eyes and collect a reward.

So, these days the map was only used for very specific questions about very specific locations and as Arlo watched Hankins fingers run along a red line drawn down the edge of the map it all finally clicked.

"Shit." He groaned, as the other boys leaned in staring at the map. Hankins had reached the end of the line marked with a big green X and a field of dots a good hike away from the center of camp in the heart of Old Camp.

"I knew I'd seen the name before" He pointed at a neatly scrolled name under the dots – "*DeChamps*."



## ***A Plan Together***

Four hours later the boys had brought Fitz up to speed, fetched supplies and were blindly walking down hill well after sundown. Arlo could just make out the set of hunched over shoulders in front of him, and could hear the close footsteps of the two following him. Darkness was a common occurrence in his life, mentally and physically, often the nights at camp could be pitch black – almost all consuming but empty. With thick canopies of trees, hefty storm clouds and new moons the sky was more often than not entirely dark.

Arlo wasn't sure if it was true or not but he had heard many times for many years that the loss of one sense made the others stronger and in these moments he trusted it. Way in the distance he hear a rustling, and close behind him he heard the soft scuff of shoes pushing into damp soil. He felt a coolness creeping over his skin from the growing night, and dryness in his moth from the anxiety. The hairs on his neck and arms seemed to be standing, not out of nervousness entirely, but more out of precaution.

They were traveling into an abyss, almost entirely by feel – he felt like a predator – no, he felt like the prey. He was nervous, excited, overwhelmed, anxious, steady, and calm and on alert – like an animal evading capture. Every step had to be silent, every movement had to have purpose and at any second he had to be prepared.

When they had left camp earlier Arlo was fairly confident that at this point he had the route memorized – but in the pitch black it had him almost at a complete loss. Together the boys had been making this same trek for months, along the same worn out toe path – but that was usually in the late evening and getting to the edge of the map was easy.

Hankins had insisted they wait for nightfall and keep the lanterns off until they reached the spot – he said it was too much of a risk to use them. Arlo supposed someone could easily spot the flames in the pitch black and either call them into main camp or follow the lamp and stumble onto their plan – neither would be ideal.

So, they waited till dark, keep the lanterns off and worked their way almost by feel and instinct through the winding woods. They crept through the woods, Arlo kept his eyes focused on the pitch black all around him trying to remember each step as he took the next. It was because of this deep state of focus, precaution and

preparedness perhaps, that Arlo completely missed the sudden absence of footsteps in front of him.

Before his brain could begin to process the change he felt the earth disappear below his left foot, tipping him forward, end over end until he landed with a thud atop a mass of tangled adolescence limbs.

“I think I shit my pants,” Hosea groaned from somewhere in the pile, “Fitz, Badger watch o-“

Two dull thuds interrupted the statement as both boys tumbled down the side of the ravine and stacked themselves on top of the others. Slowly they untangled themselves from one another and got to their feet, rubbing sore spots and catching their breath. Arlo, who had found himself somewhat crushed in the middle of the melee couldn't help but huddle over, sucking in hot air trying to gather his footing.

The sweat leapt from his forehead as Badger clapped an open hand against his now dirt stained back, “God damnit, I knew we'd lost the path – I fucking knew –“ From the darkness his words were muddled as he stumbled backward with a loud commotion, a shuffling and then the crack of splitting wood.

His outline was just visible, another few feet down the edge of the hill, a crumpled mass swearing under his breath.

Hosea and Badger hopped to their feet and slid gracefully down the dirt to meet him, “I think we're here,” he grumbled as they helped him up. “Gimme a light.”

Badger pulled a stack of matches from his pocket and quickly swiped them across the heel of his shoe; the small flame lit a bulb of the night sky. They knelt where Fitz had landed and brushing aside the fallen leaves and splintered woods where the remains of a shattered and sun bleached sign that faintly read:

### *DECHAMPS*

Arlo and Hankins slid down the hill as well joining the group and bringing along the lantern, now that they knew just how deep they had gone it seemed safe to light the flames.

As the last match stick turned to ash the oil lamps quickly lit the old campground revealing the steep hill they had misjudged, a swath of young trees occupying the now overgrown site, and the remnants of old wooden structures and stones that had been set years and years

ago.

The old relics helped them get their bearing and as the group pushed a few yards further through the growth and brush they found what they were looking for just beyond the old camp's edge.

They had come all this way, in the middle of the night, through the hot evening, and the broken trail and mosquito swarms to be certain of where things were and now that they had arrived – everyone seemed to grow silent.

Hosea held the lantern dangerously close to his face, leaning in with a cigarette clenched in his lips – his nose nearly touching the scolding hot glass. He let the tip of the white paper sit for a moment, giving two gentle puffs before pulling his head back un-phased. He handed the lantern off to Arlo, who held it up to the young man's head as he took a long drag off the smoke.

"Now what?" He said in an eerily calm yet questioning voice as he rubbed his neck.

Ideas floated around the circle as a brainstorm devolved into bickering. Arlo watched as the boys whispered over top of one another, all while Hosea stood in silence – slowly removing a cigarette pack from his shirt pocket, tapping it several times on the butt of his hands.

Around the lantern Hosea cast the longest shadow - a tall, strong shouldered young man who wore his clothes well not hanging off of him like Hankins or tore apart like Fitz. He kept his head shaved close, as well as his face and Arlo had always found him to be the easiest to approach for help or advice. He'd been at Mosby for quite some time and was cordial with just about everyone – despite being one of the only black members of staff in a part of the states that hadn't been very kind to his family line.

It was an odd factor, one that Arlo had a hard time identifying in his character. Here, in the middle of nowhere, in the pitch black arguing against the shadows the color of José's skin seemed irrelevant. He was just another outline, another voice, another figure, but often times at camp it made more of a difference. Arlo, as well as the group, seemed almost un-phased by the racial differences and saw Hosea Jones first and foremost as a friend. He had big, kind brown eyes and a voice that always seemed calm and collected as if every word he spoke was perfectly in place.

Tonight was no exception as he gave the pack on final tap, gently lifting the lid and using the butt of his last smoke to light the newest one. He passed the pack around, letting each member of the search party help himself and once the boys had all retreated to the silence of lighting up - he finally spoke.

"We can't leave it all here. Sure, there's some fifty feet between that camp line and this plot but I don't trust those Bobcat boys with a yardstick as much as I trust Fitz here with a fucking dime. We can't move it – not five of us, and not tonight. Even with more hands it would take hours and if we did haul it all away we'd have to grease the palm of every boy we got to help and then give 'em a cut of it all. The way I see it," He wiped the sweat from his forehead with a cig still pinched between his fingers, "our best bet is convincing Givler to either abandon the plan, or more likely to pick a different site to clear."

Fitz broke the circle; grabbing the lantern and holding it out toward the edge of the woods. The beams of light were quickly swallowed by the seemingly endless wilderness.

"And how," He turned back towards the group with a grim look on his face, "Do you expect us to do that, champ?"

Hosea let the cigarette in his fingers fall to the ground in front of him – stomping it out as he walked toward Fitz.

"I have no idea."

He blew out both lantern flames and suddenly the boys were once again covered in total darkness. "Sleep on it boys, we've got 36 hours till it all goes to shit. Let's move"

One by one the boys followed one another out of the clearing and slowly made their way through the night and back to camp.

## **Early Morning**

The next day Arlo found himself aimlessly floating through his morning routine while the night's events sat stagnant in the back of his mind. He'd barely slept, considering every possible angle of the plan – trying to spark an idea. He'd left his the discomfort of his cot for the cold water of the shower house, wandering down the path running through scenarios, repeating outcomes to the faucet and eliminating choices as he got dressed.

The monotony of his entire existence at camp had seemed to numb him to the passing of time but also made him a relative expert when it came to multitasking – but on this morning it seemed fruitless. At the morning role call and color guard the group was mostly displaced, having to tend to various responsibilities across camp or simply lost in the sea of ill-behaved campers.

It wasn't until breakfast that Arlo finally found himself back in their company. They took over a table in the far corner of the dining hall. After grace was said and everyone was seated the boys ate their food in silence – it was until mid way through the meal that Hosea finally emerged from the kitchen and conversation began.

He gently unwrapped the extra apple he'd smuggled out of the stockroom and began to polish it against his shirt, "Anybody have any bright ideas since last night?" He spoke freely, the sound of metal forks scraping against plastic trays drowning out his voice to the crowd.

"We've already got it handled." Fitz said in a rather haughty tone as he gave a hard nudge to Badger who had previously been nose to nose with a pile of grits. He snapped up, gave a quick look around and then lifted his shirt just below his chest.

His sides, stomach and part of his back were covered with enormous red sores and between those sores were a small army of jet-black creatures attached to his skin and hanging off his torso.

"Jesus." Arlo said throwing his spoon aside and pushing his portion of the bench back with a loud scrape. "Are those, are those – leeches?" Fitz was wearing a broad smile now, "And how –Badger and I got up early this morning and picked'em out of the water front. I arranged

them myself, wanted them to look natural."

Arlo still hadn't rejoined the table, the other boys had moved away as well, "Why? Why would you do that?"

Badger let his shirt fall back over the insects, but Arlo could not help but notice the small lumps now hiding under the fabric, "We figured, you know, if Givler thought there were leeches back there by the Sheepshead creek he wouldn't want to build there, and hell maybe he wouldn't want to build anywhere – pretty good, huh? We was going to show him after breakfast..."

Arlo felt slowly moved closer to the table, "After breakfast? Why did you get up early then?"

"Well we didn't want to miss the grits – they're my favorite." Badger pointed to his now empty tray, displaying what he thought was a brilliant defense.

Although Arlo had been unable to contain his surprise, or more likely his disgust Hankins and Hosea seemed rather un-phased but equally un-impressed. Hankins pitched the bridged of his nose with two fingers, "Did you boys think this through at all? Because Givler isn't building anything new dipshits – he's just tearing it down. He could give a monkey's uncle what's back there! On top of that – how the hell were you gonna explain this?"

"Whaddya mean?" Fitz scoffed back through a full mouth of white mush, flecks of unknown food flying across the table.

"Well, "Hankins was still rubbing his forehead, visibly impatient, "if you walk over there to the head table and tell Old Givler that you got leeches out by DeChamps he's gonna ask you one question." Fitz and Badger had no response... "Why the hell were you out at DeChamps?"

The two boys sank into their bench, looking discouraged as the lumps wriggled under Badger's shirt.

"That makes sense."

All the meanwhile the mess hall had grown quieter as the campers reached the end of their meals. Hosea tossed the core of his apple onto one of the empty trays stacked on the table. He glanced for a

moment, across the mess hall, staring almost blankly at the long table that occupied the front from beneath the stone mantle. At its center Bill Givler sat eating a neat stack of pancakes that didn't match any of the food the other boys had been served – his eyes seemed to narrow in,

“I never thought I'd say this boys, but I wish that fat stack of burlap had given us labor.”

“That's it!” Hankins seemed to almost choke on his words they came to him so suddenly. “Maybe we've been going about this all wrong boys. We all know Givler's never going to be convinced not to clear that plot – so maybe we have to convince him not to let Bobcat do it.”

“And how in the Sam hill are we supposed to do that, Sherlock?” Fitz asked rather smugly.

The whole group was silent for a moment as they thought the question over. Arlo wracked his brain for the answer, how on earth could they get the Bobcat Patrol off of labor. They could trade them? No. Trick them? No. Bribe them? No.

Then it clicked,

“We convince Givler we tipped that latrine...”

The group seemed lost, “But we did?” Fitz asked with a confused tone.

Arlo pulled his bench back to the table and dropped his voice to a whisper, “He don't know that.”

## ***The Tipping Point***

They'd left breakfast in a rush and although things had a reputation for moving slow in the south the last thirty-six hours had seemed like a mad dash. They had until 6am tomorrow to convince one of the most stubborn men on God's green earth to change his mind.

Others would have said it was impossible – especially with Givler's track record, but Arlo had concluded that it took a group of equally stubborn fools to change the mind of one.

So they'd gone about their business after the meal – back to the shop, the kitchen, the back lodge, the waterfront and waited for the next open window.

The plan was simple – convince Givler they'd tipped the first latrine over at Ocacroke by tipping another.

But this time they'd get caught red handed.

Hankins had assured them if they pulled it off the old bastard would blow a gasket – call an emergency meeting and lay the hammer on all five of them. Sure months of labor were at stake but it was well worth it – they'd have full control over DeChamps.

Choosing the target was easy – most of the latrines were hidden throughout can between wooded lot but one was out in the open right on the outskirts of the drill field where everyone could see and where Givler gave lecture every day at 2pm. They had until then to drop the latrine so he could see.

Arlo had mixed feelings toward the potential success of the plan and they didn't get any better as the group reassembled – late as usual. At 1:15 it felt like an oven as he made his way to the Drill Field, his whole body was soaked in sweat standing in the sun waiting for the others.

Hankins and Hosea had slipped out from their positions bring along a thick coil of rope from the boathouse and an old section of pipe from god know where. Fitz and Badger had shown up with a dull a hatchet, a trenching shovel and a mostly optimistic attitude.

The tools seemed rather impractical for the job but in a rare

occurrence everyone seemed focused and engrossed in the idea. Or at least until they reached the tank itself – it had been average size from the edge of the field but when they finally got up close it was obvious that the latrine was twice the size of the others. A bigger stall meant the legs underneath were most definitely deeper and possibly stronger.

Fuck it, Arlo thought – they had everything to lose it was beginning to feel like.

Fitz seemed to have the same idea and without warning he raised the shovel over his head and fiercely drove it toward the latrines side. The great beast, protecting it's nest of feces, was un-phased but the force recoiled back through Fitz's arms.

He dropped the shovel, clenching his forearms before being pushed aside by Badger and his hatchet. He took a different approach, and swung his hatchet one handed above his head revealing a maze of bloodstains on his shirt where the leeches had been.

He swung downward, hoping to crack the supports but instead the axe flailed wildly out of his hand flying off to the side.

He chased after it as again and again the boys took turns swatting various sides of the latrine supports with the shovel, the pipe, the shovel, the pipe, both, then the other – all to no avail.

Each time a shockwave shot back through the handle and a loud thud rang out. But from the edge of the field, it was barely a dull thump by the time it reached the ears of those all around. Even a hundreds off, the boys making their way to the lecture box early seemed un-phased.

Hankins swung the pipe, leaving what might have been a soft dent in the side or what might have just been a scrape, "How the hell did we get the last one over?"

"We dropped a tree on it," Arlo could still remember the commotion as the old pine came toppling down, bashing the side of the stall and snapping two of the legs. By the time they'd rolled the tree off, cleared it out and hauled it away the tank had crumpled beneath its weight falling backward and hiding the remaining evidence.

He doubted they could get that lucky again, but as he caught a

glimpse of the other four boys staring toward the tree line he knew they were going to try.

The other latrines were in wooded lots, in fact the last tank had happened completely on accident while they were getting lumber for the docks. Grant it they were supposed to be pulling from that spot, and they knew the tank was close there was still no need to point the finger only at them. But now – they had picked the only latrine that wasn't totally surrounded by trees and it was making the plan a little bit harder.

The closest tree was a thin pine about a 20 feet away, maybe 25 but definitely not thirty Arlo thought. The tree itself seemed fairly healthy and strong; it was about 30 feet tall, maybe 25, but definitely no less than 20. The boys attacked it like vultures to a carcass – madly chipping away at it. The shovels hacked off the bark at the base, the dull axe reluctantly duck in and began splitting the trunk and the pipe – the pipe did nothing but Hosea had still chosen to join the group.

With a final hard swing Fitz had the tree leaning and one hard push was all it took to move it in the direction they needed, cracking off its base and crashing down.

About three feet shy of the tank.

"You've got to be kidding me." Hosea launched the pipe across the field, it land with a cloud of dust as a small group of camper looked over at the boys, "Thought I saw a spider." He said with a shrug making a rude gesture as the boys turned back toward the lecture block where preparations were underway.

They were running out of time and options – it was a mad dash for a new idea. They'd tried to knock it over, break it down, crush it – before Arlo could even reason his next option it slipped out of his mouth, "We could try to push it over."

The boys got to their feet and began to square their shoulders, Arlo was staring right at the middle of the back wall – he was frustrated, angry, and mad – he needed all of that before they attacked.

He waited for a countdown but instead of three two one he heard of low rumbling from in front of him, somewhere blocked by the structure. It was getting louder, and beginning to creak and pop – like the

backfire from an old engine. The boys peeked their heads around the edges of the latrine and saw the face of an old decrepit flat bed coming their way. It moved at a snail's pace, jostling over every bump and coughing out black smoke. As it got closer, Givler could be seen in its shadow making his way up to the lecture block.

It was 2pm – they had to tip the son of a bitch now. But before they could even get a running start the truck found its final resting place directly in front of the outhouse, blocking it from Givler or any of the audiences view.

Arlo dropped down to his knees, the motivation flooding out of his body.

The others soon joined him, squatting over the burned out grass in the shrinking shadow of the flatbed.

It had given a loud hiss before it had come to rest but now with the engine off it lay silent and waiting for its cue. Generally, Givler's afternoon lecture carried a theme, and although it tended to be his ego – the boys assumed his hubris had taken a back seat to the ideas of growth, or strength or some other bullshit that Givler was trying to emblemize, through the use of the truck.

Hankins, Fitz, Arlo and Badger all sat in exhausted stance letting the clouds of dried grass and red dust stick to their bodies from the sweat – but Hosea seemed in less defeated mood, laying on his back with his eyes closed toward the sun he mimic Givler on the podium,

“Young men, I – your fearless and rotund leader, have washed you of your burden and instead brought you great opportunity!” He let his hands fly in wild gestures, “Jesus, blessed be his name was a carpenter, and carpenters need wood – do they not? And I shall bring you all the wood by the grace of God!” His voice was impassioned now, “and that grace comes in the form of a four cylinder, diesel engine, flat bed with dual exhaust and chromium steel! Blessed be the day – it is a mover of men!”

The boys attempted to muster a laugh but it was more of a low grumble – truth be told the impression was spot on but the reality of the situation was still discouraging.

“I said...it's the mover of men!” Hosea was attempting to muster a bit of spirit but it seemed out of character for him, giving the whole bit an

odd presence.

Badger hung his head between his knees, “If only it was the mover of outhouses – then we'd be set.”

There was a moment of silence before Hankins and Fitz snapped to their feet immediately recognizing their shared epiphany. They grabbed the thick coil of rope that had been left with the pile of abandoned tools and tossed overhead, dropping it over the support beam and letting it fall back toward the ground. They made another loop overhead and then crept carefully toward the back of the flat bed securing the rope to the rear axle and all the while staying out of site of the driver.

Arlo and the others had also scrambled to their feet, peering around the side of the latrine to see if the lecture was ending.

“He's on the psalms.” Badger whispered rather loudly and almost on cue the truck seemed to fire up. A faint round of applause could be heard from across the field – clearly whatever biblical connection Givler had drawn between himself, the truck and the Bible had been well received.

The boys slinked back from the edge, still crouching, invisible behind the tank. The truck was running now, moaning as smoke belched out of its tailpipe. As the wheels rotated forward they made a loud creaking noise, as if they hadn't moved in an eternity – then another creak, another, a pop as the engine back fired and the boys saw the line get tight.

They hopped the heap was in such bad shape the driver wouldn't notice the extra weight of the rope – he'd think the old bastard had stalled and would give it the gas. More importantly, however, they hoped Givler was still in the Drill Field.

The rope was getting tight, Arlo knew there was a good chance it may snap but the legs of the latrine weren't very thick, so maybe they'd get lucky. But the truck wasn't moving; the weight of the structure had anchored it.

Arlo held his breath – watched the wheels roll back, then creak forward – once, then twice, once more and a loud crack erupted from one of the two structures.

The back left leg bent leaned forward, the truck did too, then more then more and more as both legs lost their footing in the dark and the whole outhouse was gently leaning forward.

An inch at a time it felt like.

Then slowly, like a ship sinking at sea, the latrine began to lean further and further – its front legs taking on more and more weight. They could hear the splintering of wood, just over the roar of the truck's aged engine. The driver seemed completely unaware, thinking he was simply stuck in a rut; he must have rammed the pedal as the flatbed made one last desperate attempt at escape. The latrine was leaning at a solid angle, fighting to stay up until finally the rope reached its limit and with a sharp twang - snapped at its center. The boys' ends went limp, dangling from the latrine's beam; the other was slowly dragged behind the truck as it slowly made its way across the field.

The latrine sat in place – leaning oddly to one side.

Without hesitation the boys lunged forward. Arlo felt a shooting pain as his shoulder slammed into the thin wood walls of the outhouse. He felt his heels lift off the ground and his toes curled in his shoes as he began to clench his teeth in effort.

He could feel a burning behind his eyes, like they were being squeezed out of their sockets. He didn't know where any of his strength was coming from, but it seemed impossible to stop.

He felt another body beside him, the heat between them was growing as they grunted into the wood.

Then, he felt his left foot slide backward on the arid grass – he regained his footing, and again he slid out but this time accompanied by a low creaking.

“On the count of three, we end this “ Hankins yelled rather breathlessly.

“One...two...three”

The latrine gave way, slowly at first – and then rather suddenly. It careened forward and then plopped down lazily – a cloud of dust swallowing both it and the group.

Arlo felt back to the ground yet again, and realized he had taken a

breath since they first hit the latrine. He gasped – his heart felt like it would beat out of his chest, the air was so dry and dusty it felt like it was tearing at his throat. He felt beads of sweat beginning to roll down his head and chest – having finally caught up to his level of exhaustion. He leaned on both his knees, gasping for air, stopping only for a moment to glance up at the stubborn beast that now lay conquered on its side, a pair of broken legs hanging in the air and two neatly dug holes under where it had stood.

As he looked over the latrine he couldn't believe they'd been able to tip it over. Sure, he was beyond exhausted, but they'd done it – they tipped the Drill Field latrine.

That's when he noticed it...

The Drill Field

It was empty, almost entirely – no Givler in sight.

“God damnit.” Arlo kicked the ground, a sharp pain shooting up his leg. “Where the hell did Givler go?”

He was irate now, but he had no energy left to show it, instead he leaned in a rather defeated manner against his knees and kicked his foot gently into the ground. Fitz had collapsed a pace or so away in a similar state, lying on his back in exhaust, “He must have left before the truck.” He said between heavy breaths.

Arlo knew it was the truth but didn't want to accept it, he closed his eyes trying to get his heart to stop racing.

“So now what?”

The others had all gotten to their feet, and were all visibly red faced with fatigue.

Hosea brushed the red dust from his pants and shirt, “Let's get the hell out of here before anybody realizes we did this.”

“Yea,” Badger agreed, “it smells like shit over here.”

## ***An Encore***

Arlo watched Badger sit unflinching as Fitz not so gently went about cleaning the wounds the leeches from the morning had left behind. It was rather impressive, as if he was receiving a tap on the shoulder – he seemed all together un-phased.

But at the same time it was very frightening.

Arlo couldn't help but stare at the young man open wounds – it was no exaggeration either, that's exactly what they were – open wounds. Deep red pockets that had been torn from his body by the leeches, the slowly dripped blood covering the dried and cracking edges that had attempted to heal throughout the day.

But each time Badger had attempted to move, or remove a layer – once again they had been opened up.

That's what this place had done to all of them. Arlo felt it every day – between the heat, the authority and the heavy hanging guilt- it left you with open wounds. Wounds that felt constantly open and unable to heal.

Arlo's eyes followed Fitz's hands as they patted down the area with rubbing alcohol – filling the tent with a scent that stung his nose. The air in the tent was hot, and stiff with silence – broken only by the occasional creak from a wooden cot.

Nothing came in from the outside – the sun had set hours ago, drenching the staff site in darkness. It seemed to slowly creep into the tent, even with the flaps closed and the lanterns on the entire room seemed to be growing dim.

Arlo fished through his front pocket for whatever he had left – a set of cigarettes that had seen much better days. They seemed lonely without their comrades, bent, bruised and slightly crushed. Arlo decided to put them out of their misery – pushing the tent flaps aside and wiping a patch of brush away he took a seat against the stump outside the tent. The darkness and Hosea followed suit, sitting beside him – both men leaning against the stump in the pitch black.

The only flicker of light came from the matches Arlo had lit against his heel and once both cigarettes had been lit it was quickly swallowed up

by the night. Arlo passed one off to Hosea, it's end faintly burning red between his fingers.

For a while the silence seemed to have followed them out of the tent as well. In the distance Arlo could hear the scattering of dried leaves as some nocturnal creature crawled through the brush. The trees didn't make a sound, like giant black pillars in an equally dark sky, the outline of the canopy blocking out the glow of the moon.

For anyone else the setting would be serene – an absolute escape from everything. Peace, silence, and solitude – they all seemed so idealistic in Arlo's mind. What he wouldn't give for the glow of a streetlamp hanging overhead, or the rumble of an engine rolling late down a road or even the sound of commotion coming from a neighbor.

But the night was completely void of it all.

A plot of woods, full of exhausted bodies and minds, restless and yet completely motionless in the night.

Arlo couldn't find peace here, he had tried numerous times, but now as he took a drag from what could be his last cigarette he knew he could never find piece in a place this dark.

He pulled his knees to his chest, resting his arms on top of them, "I'm starting to forget my own mother's face."

Silence followed the statement as Hosea took a puff from his cigarette, letting it hang between his teeth for several second before letting a small cloud of smoke flow from his nose.

"She remembers yours," The thought seemed so sincere but the tone he had said it in seemed hollow. There was nothing behind it, as if the words had been uttered out of sheer muscle memory.

"Don't let it keep you up at night Arlo, it'll drive you mad – absolutely mad." He took another puff, "There's no room in this camp for madness – gloom, heartache, humility, hostility and greed...sure, but madness has no place this far from civilization." He flicked butt of his cigarette off into the dirt with an arch of orange sparks slowly rising to his feet. "Hold on to those memories Arlo, but don't let them swallow you up. They're just like photographs, if you take them out and look at them too often they start to wear out –they start to fade, get tattered, torn or even bent. Hide'em away kid - far away. Don't let this place even know you have them."



He started to walk back towards the tent, brushing the dirt off his pants as Arlo sank deeper against the stump, “Do you really think we’re done for?”

Hosea turned before disappearing behind the flap, “I don’t know.”

It was the first time Arlo could remember that Hosea didn’t have the answer.

## ***In Spite of Hope***

Reveille trickled over the treetops to the patch of grass where the boys were perched the next morning. They’d reluctantly left their tent for role call and couldn’t help but pause on the hilltop to watch as the Bobcat patrol made their way down the main road toward the admin building where the flatbed was parked once again.

Hankins ran an agitated hand through his hair as he watched the boys make their way toward the other end of camp, “There goes everything boys.”

He got to his feet and started his own decent down the hill – the others followed behind. Arlo couldn’t help but feel personally at fault – he should have pushed harder, he shouldn’t have argued against the leeches, he should have done more or recognized it all earlier. As he looked around at the faces of the others he could tell they felt the same way.

They marched in muffled silence, with gravel crunching beneath their feet – feeling universally sorry for themselves until Fitz finally worked up the courage to speak, “I told you we should have tried the leeches.” His brave effort was quickly halted by a sharp prod from the end of the pipe that Hankins was hoping to return undetected to the chop shop. The butt of the ineffective tool had been placed firmly against his chest, matched with an equally firm glare,

“Enough with the leeches Fitz, I’m tired of hearing about the fucking leeches.”

He swiped the pipe away as they continued their path past admin, watching the Bobcat patrol load gear off to the side, “It would have worked if we had at least tri-“

“I said enough with the leeches!” Hankins had clearly run out of patients, he knelt down and scooped up a rather large piece of gravel, “You want to know what I think of the leeches? Do you? Do you?”

He tossed the rock into the air, “Here’s what I think!”

With a loud ping he swung at the rock, knocking it out of the air and launching it off the metal and across the road. It lofted in the air for a moment before careening back down to earth and crashing directly into the front left window of the building in front of them – shattering it

to pieces.

Hankins dropped the pipe with a thud and the group stood frozen in the road. The Bobcat patrol had stopped loading gear and had instead turned all of their entire attention to the crash site – no one was moving, no one was speaking.

The door of the building swung violently open and the unmistakably large form of Bill Givler came barreling out. He took an encompassing glance around before he erupted, “Which one of you slim-witted, hedonistic hell hounds did this? WHO?” His face was beat red with fury, it was the angriest Arlo had seen him in quite sometime - and because of it Arlo felt almost frozen. He couldn’t bring himself to move, to speak or even breath.

But Hankins could, and took a single step forward toward the raging bull, “Wind must have took it sir...”

Hankins seemed to offer only a shrug.

Arlo was in disbelief – Hankins was mad, he was crazy, insane, inept, unbalanced, psychotic – no, he thought – he’s brilliant, fucking genius!

Givler began marching towards the group with the rock in hand, but Arlo already knew what was in store as he opened his enormous mouth with a roar, “Oh, Hankins, you thorn in my side – you ceaseless drip of water on my head, you dull thud of a human being -” He pointed a pudgy finger behind himself, “Bobcat patrol you are relieved! Mud Patrol -” He jabbed a single index finger into Hankins chest, “LABOR!”

The Bobcat boys in the yard seemed confused – afraid to celebrate or abandon the task at hand but as Givler continued to huff and puff and berate Hankins they slowly abandoned ship.

Givler didn’t ease up and as the seconds ticked past Arlo felt a sense of relief wash over him. They were being reprimanded, and scolded like they’d brought on the apocalypse but he didn’t care – not in the slightest.

All the worries and concerns they had had were washing away. Never in a million sunbaked days did Arlo ever think he’d be so happy to be sentenced to labor.

## ***Slow Burn***

Hankins’ line drive earned them a solid three-months of backbreaking work at J.S Mosby. It was a heavy punishment, the most some of them had ever received and it made the coming days seem daunting – but by the grace of god or whoever decided to toss some scraps their way that day – the punishment began immediately.

That meant four hours after the incident the entire group found themselves back at DeChamps but this time with a flatbed truck, a solid plan and no Bobcats around to fuck it up. It’d taken them most of the morning to hack saw and clear enough of a trail to slowly navigate the old rig into the back woods but now it was there.

They left it in the old camp’s clearing, retracing their footsteps from two nights prior - but this time without the unlit lanterns, whispered bickering, or fear of discovery.

They had smoked the last of their cigarettes the night before – but it no longer felt like a concern. They regained their bartering chip, and when Sal, or Chic or Hefty Jim smuggled in the next load they’d be open for business again. Ready to trade and keep the part of camp that Givler didn’t know about under their control - to keep what little connection they had to the idea of a real life alive.

Arlo stared at a pile of old burlap sacks, half buried under pine leaves and half covered in moss – where the key to all of those things had been well hidden since before he or many of the group had arrived.

Badger and Fitz knelt down, tossing aside the old bags and sweeping dirt out of the way with their feet. Beneath the layers of burnt ready soil and rotting leaves Arlo could just make out the gleam of a copper lid.

Hankins and Hosea joined in with shovels, gently moving the loose earth aside to reveal more and more of the structure until finally the entire mass had been pulled from its hiding place and reassembled just beyond a the clearing.

It had several large pieces, too heavy to carry far, or to full to transport at all. A length of pipe and a tar barrel were the last components, neatly stacked beside the others. Even covered in dirt and clay and black in other spots with ash - the copper tops and fittings seemed to

shine through.

Badger kicked another set of burlap sacks that were a foot or so away, “What about the stash Hankins?”

Hankins had been distracted admiring all the pieces. He stood for a moment with his hands entwined in his dusty hair – he seemed in absolute awe like a man who had just found a long rumored treasure. He brushed the dirt off the largest dome, running his fingers across its hammered top, gazing at it intensely,

“Carry what you can...we burn the rest.”

Badger reached down into the hole before him and pulled out a grime-covered bottle, filled just to the brim with a clear liquid.

He pulled the cork out, clenching it between his teeth before spitting it to the ground and raising the bottle in the air then taking a hefty swig.

The End.

He passed it off to Arlo, who could already smell the pungent odor as he raised it to toward his lips. He felt a harsh yet familiar burn run across his tongue and down his throat, he grimaced – it was a sting he could never quite get used to.

He felt warmth slowly melt down his chest and then up into his cheeks as he passed the bottle off to Hosea on his left.

He took a swig, without so much as a blink,

“Well boys – the Mud Patrol is back in business.”