

Episode Thirty-seven ♦ *The Meeting*

“I think, if people make an effort to meet and talk with the new couple during the midday break, we can address most of these concerns,” said a middle-aged man. He stood on the other side of the hall from where George, Anita, Bethan, and Meg sat.

The meeting’s chair asked, “Will that be acceptable?” Heads nodded, some answered affirmatively. “And to the new couple?”

George nodded as Anita stood to speak. “We’d like that very much.”

“Then we’ll continue after lunch.” There were no gavel claps when the Red Cloud town meeting started or recessed. People stood, making their way to the doors. It took time for the four hundred residents to leave the simple, unadorned meetinghouse in the town square. George hoped it would be cooler outside and prayed for a breeze. Only the volunteer-powered fan system – large woven mats hung from the ceiling, swaying to and fro – made the heat tolerable.

Looking to Meg and Bethan, Anita asked, “So what does it mean?”

“We make decisions by consent,” Bethan said. “Not everyone has to agree, but we all must support the decision. We don’t have consent yet.”

Anita sat back down. “I don’t get it. Consent, agree, support – it’s all the same to me.”

Bethan nodded gently. “I may not agree that something is right – in this case, I don’t want anyone to live in that soddy – but I have to decide if I can accept it.”

“Or at least not be opposed,” George said. “You can live with it. Right?”

“That’s the idea,” said Meg. “You two should get some food and continue meeting people.”

“Together?” asked George. “Not sure I can remember who we met before the meeting.”

“Anyway,” Bethan said standing, “you’ll figure it out. We’ve got something we need to do.” Meg joined her in leaving.

George looked to Anita. She shrugged and said, “If we want to do more than say hello, maybe splitting up would help. Let’s grab some food and decide.” He retrieved a basket from under the bench.

It was easy to find food after leaving the hall. Dispersed around the square were tables filled with dishes residents brought from home: salads, cold meats, cheeses, bread, fruit pies. George marveled at all the food. Families opened blankets in the shade of trees.

From the basket he took a tin plate, cup, and flatware wrapped in a linen napkin and handed the basket to Anita before dishing up salad and a piece of chicken.

“So, how about I go clockwise around the outside of the square and you go the other way closer in?” Anita asked, spooning up bean salad then sweet potatoes, herbs, and green onions.

“Someone might want to meet both of us,” he said, dropping a scoopful of mixed fruit on his plate.

“Good point. So let’s go clockwise and keep in eye contact.”

A man approached. “Hello. Fred Wanamaker. Nice to meet you. Would you like to join us for a while?”

They chatted with the Wanamakers for few minutes. George excused himself, grabbed a piece of cherry pie, and headed closer to the meeting house.

“Hello Mister...” a pre-teen said, her voice high-pitched with uncertainty.

“Winston, but please call me George,” he said smiling and nodding to the family lounging in the dry grass.

The girl said, “I’m Kate and these are my parents. We have some tea. It’s kinda warm, but would you like some?”

“Thank you.” George offered the tin cup, spent time with Kate and her parents before continuing through the crowd, saying hello and answering questions. To break the ice he said, “Forgive me if we’ve already met. There are so many new faces today.”

Around the building the crowd thinned. George walked up to a group of teenagers relaxing and talking in the shade.

An older, auburn-haired boy said, “I just wish we could do something different this year.”

“What do you mean? There’s only one harvest pageant,” a girl with dark skin and long brown hair said.

“That’s my point. Every year it’s the same. Let’s try something new, be original.”

“Like what?” another boy, fair and freckled, asked.

“I’m with Ike,” a girl in a checked dress said. “Pageant’s boring.”

“Excuse me,” George said before introducing himself. “New in town. Brought some books with me. One is by a writer who grew up in Red Cloud centuries ago.”

The teens looked at him as if he had just emigrated from Saturn.

Ike said, “Nice to meet you, sir, but what’s a book?”

George thought for a moment. The last library was in Hannibal and he had not seen books other than his own since leaving Clearie’s. “A story. Printed on paper. Bound together. Do you call them something else?”

The group looked at each other, shaking heads and frowning brows.

“We *tell* stories here. We *listen* to the storytellers,” the girl in the checked dress said. She pointed to a girl with chestnut hair in tight curls. “Suz is an apprentice storyteller.”

George thought through her words. The Informateur had replaced printed media in the Confederation; without it, he assumed they still had books in the wilderness even if uncommon. “This’ll sound silly. Forgive me. Do you write things down?”

“We use slates in school, but mostly for numbers,” said the boy standing next to Ike.

“And letters?” asked George.

“Sure, we know the alphabet, learn to write our names, but everything else is... What do you call it?”

“Oral?” George and Suz said together.

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Back inside the wooden meetinghouse after lunch, a man stood and addressed the room. “I had the chance to visit with Anita. Will you and your husband please stand?”

George and Anita stood. She raised her hand in a tentative wave.

The man continued speaking. “I hope you’ve met one or both of them by now. I suggest we provisionally accept them into Red Cloud and let them use the old Tomcyck place until they have been here for a year. Next summer we can discuss building a new residence if they plan to stay.”

Some people said, “Hear, hear.” The chair called a new vote. “Green badge for consent.”

George looked at the sea of green items held in upright hands. Ike held up a green board.

“Red badge if you refuse consent.” No one held up anything red. “And yellow badge if you stand aside.” There were a few yellows. “Then let’s welcome Anita and George Winston to Red Cloud with a round of applause.”

The attention embarrassed George. They sat and the clapping tapered off.

Anita squeezed his arm and said, “We did something right during the break.” Her face was a big smile. He thought about the hovel carved out of the earth, far from town, and wished he could share her enthusiasm.

“And next we have a report on fire prevention,” the chair said.

Part way through the discussion of building inspections and firebreak clearing, Anita slowly drew to her feet. She raised her palms to her ears as her chin dropped to her chest. George heard air entering and leaving through Anita’s nostrils.

Meg stood, took Anita’s arm, and asked, “Are you okay?”

Anita remained rigid. Only her head moved, her chin rising from its contact with her sternum until her nose pointed at the ceiling. Looking forward, a sonorous, almost masculine voice boomed from Anita’s mouth. “Heed my tidings!”

George’s first thought was Anita would never say anything like heed my tidings. It sounded like something out of a Regency Era novel about Imperial Rome or ancient Egypt.

Heed my tidings that ye may know.

From the mountain in middle, chaos sends forth vengeance and retribution.

Ten for one. Ten for one.

The fair day, hunted, burning, burning.

The morning sun. Fire devouring all.

Morning sun burning the red cloud.

*Mind the break. Ten people. Fingertip to fingertip.
The void surrounds, protects.*

Anita collapsed onto the bench.

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After a short break to make sure Anita was okay, lots of tongue wagging, and more than a little head shaking, the chair regained the town's attention.

"What's it mean?" a woman asked. George fanned Anita with his soiled plate. He bit his lip, fearing Red Cloud's reaction, certain to be driven from the community. Voices mumbled, words not understood.

A young man stood. George remembered him from the ride into Red Cloud, Egor's younger brother Tyler, he said, "Our name, Dagfrid. It means beautiful, or fair, day. Also peace. A couple weeks ago we caught two Black Miners sneaking around our village. One said they came looking for a wife. Some of us felt they planned to steal. My grandfather sent them away. A small band followed them."

George stood. Inside him two forces battled: fear and truth. He coughed, trembled. "My wife, Anita, was washing up at the river. This dirty person came to me and said, 'So hungry. Gimme food.' Thought it was a woman. Alone. Walked to our cart. Got her some hardtack. Someone came from behind. Hit me across the back." George looked down, the day's shame weakening his knees. Struggling with anger and fear he said, "Too stunned to fight. Shotgun by the fire. He hit me until I knelt. My hands behind my head."

Rising, Anita said, "I saw them as I returned from the river, one rummaging through our things, the other strangling George." Her voice was normal. "I got the gun and fired a warning shot. Then the Dagfrids arrived. Without their help – it's nothing I like to think about." She shook her head.

A woman asked, "Who were they?"

Anita hunched her shoulders and shook her head.

An elderly man stood. He cleared his throat. "Black Miners or Middenites." Nodding heads and whispers swept the room. "We don't trade with them. Don't trust them."

"Why?" Anita said, an innocent.

"Legend says the Middenites came from a place called Kansas City. After the great and terrible war when the three powers – the Confederation, League, and Union – accepted a truce, Confederation leaders decided there wasn't enough population for the prairies. It was returned to nature."

"The wilderness park." George said.

"Yes. People relocated to the more productive lands in the east. What could be used to rebuild the bombed out cities on the coasts was taken. The rest was put into great pits, pits that grew into large hills. The one closest to us we call Midden Mountain. That waste was poison.

“Most people moved to the coast. The true believers and the ancient ones hid – in the mountains and deserts. But there were people who didn’t trust the Confederation. They fought and made their final stand at Independence Bridge. The Confederation left them what remained of a great city on the river. Kansas City. But they fought among themselves.

“A small group left and started mining Midden Mountain. The Middenites. Their work poisons and deforms them. They steal when they can’t get what they want in trade.”

Tyler stood again. “My family killed the two who attacked you.”

The old man shook his head. “If they were not alone, and knowing the Middenites others lurked in the shadows, they will seek revenge. It is their way. It is of them we speak when we tell the young ones not to wander at night.”



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