The Iron Rule

John sat on his porch watching the sunset, thinking about the past. He and his wife Joy had lived on the forty-acre farm for thirty years, buying it right after he separated from the military. Society collapsing hadn't affected them much as the farm was fully self-sufficient and the other homesteaders in the area were willing to trade.

Things weren't bad at first, but as supplies ran out in town, people were forced to start scavenging and eventually started raiding the surrounding homesteads. It wasn't much at first, just some vegetables missing from the garden or a chicken or two missing from the coup. But lately people have been getting more desperate, and the raids have become much more than a minor nuisance. The small community of homesteaders were getting nervous and started meeting to discuss their options.

When the sun finally fell below the horizon, he pushed thoughts of the past from his mind and started thinking of things to come. There was work to be done and time was a wasting, as his father used to say.

He returned to the homestead just after dawn, guilt at what he'd done forming a knot in his stomach. But when he looked at the burning outbuilding that held the charred remains of his wife, his guilt disappeared. Fighting back tears, he headed to the house and out of necessity more than desire, made himself some breakfast. After that, he got a cup of coffee and sat on the porch and waited, the rhythm of the chirping crickets helping to ease his jarred nerves.

A representative from each of the other eleven homesteads showed up not long after lunchtime. Looking around at the devastated homestead, several dismounted their horses and made sure the remaining fires were under control. The nominal leader of the group rode up to the porch and looked at John.

“John” he said, nodding in greeting.

“Hank” John replied.

“You OK?” Hank asked.

John shrugged his shoulders in reply.

“Joy?”

John nodded towards the still burning outbuilding.

Hank looked at the building, sorrow on his face. “Over?”

“Did unto others as they did unto me” John said quietly.

Hank looked at the large column of smoke coming from the direction of town. “The Iron Rule has been enforced” he muttered, heading over to help restore as much order as possible to the devastated homestead. He turned his head to look back at John.

One of the others nudged him. “How’s John?”

“He’s alive. Have to wait and see if he survived.”

They went back to salvaging as much of the homestead as possible. If John survived, he’d need it. If he didn’t, others would.