

CHAPTER IV: DONE BY MASON OF THE WOODS

EXT. NATCHEZ TRACE - DAY

CLOSE ON a human skull placed in the fork of a tree. It is the remains of Big Harpe's head, but we do not know that yet.

CLOSE ON the face of JOHN L. SWANEY, a mail carrier who sits on his horse staring at the skull. The sunken road of the Natchez Trace winds along both sides of where he has stopped.

SAMUEL MASON (O.S.)

Do you know who that is?

Swaney is startled by this and he turns to see where the voice came from. SAMUEL MASON, a known outlaw has ridden up behind him without making a sound.

The outlaw is dressed in a leather shirt and leggings, more Native American than Revolutionary War fighter. Both men sit in silence for a moment. Swaney is tense: he knows who this is.

SAMUEL MASON

That is the remains of a villainous outlaw... Some called him Big Harpe.

Swaney is in awe of this news, enough so that he forgets for a moment that he is in the presence of an equally famous outlaw.

SAMUEL MASON

His skull was placed there two years ago as a warning to other outlaws.

(beat)

Like myself.

Swaney awaits what he is sure must come: to be robbed or killed.

SAMUEL MASON

You know who I am?

JOHN L. SWANEY

Yes sir.

(gulps)

You are Captain Samuel Mason.

(CONTINUED)

SAMUEL MASON
Captain...

JOHN L. SWANEY
You fought for our independence.

Mason smiles, wily, revealing a distinct tooth that sticks out more than the others.

SAMUEL MASON
Not many have remembered so.

Swaney waits, on edge, not sure what Mason will do next as the smile fades from his face.

SAMUEL MASON
And you are one John Swaney, in charge of carrying mail from Natchez to Nashville. A dangerous journey for a man to make every two weeks.

Mason is familiar with his traveling habits. Swaney knows this is not the first time he's been watched from a close distance.

JOHN L. SWANEY
Yes, sir.

SAMUEL MASON
Big Harpe was no outlaw though... no, not him, he was a savage and a brute.

Swaney glances again at the skull.

SAMUEL MASON
No regard for the life of man, woman, or child. He slaughtered any that crossed his path. He was more savage than the Savages.

JOHN L. SWANEY
As many times as I have traveled these woods, I have never taken notice of it. I slept under this very tree not long ago. To have found rest under the remains of such a man...

The knowledge of the deeds of the owner of the skull are well known to the mail carrier and as his words trail off. Mason studies Swaney, who still awaits his fate at the hands of this land pirate.

(CONTINUED)

SAMUEL MASON
No harm will come to you.

It is as if Mason could read his mind.

SAMUEL MASON
I only want to know what you hear
about me on your travels.

Swaney relaxes some but he knows not if this is a trick of
some kind.

SAMUEL MASON
Go on. Don't be modest. Tell me
what you they've told you.

JOHN L. SWANEY
Well Captain... they say you are a
gentleman robber.

SAMUEL MASON
(chuckles)
Well that I am, a gentleman and a
robber.

Mason's tone turns more serious.

SAMUEL MASON
...but you can do better than that
Mr. Swaney. It's news I'm after.

JOHN L. SWANEY
(still hesitant)
I'm not sure any news I may have
would be of any value to you.

SAMUEL MASON
All word is of value to someone...
or where would that leave you?

Mason glances down at the mail carrier's saddle bag with
interest. Swaney shifts around a moment in his saddle.

SAMUEL MASON
I'm bettin' you are privy to more
helpful information than you know.
I've heard tales that some
associate me with the likes of him
(Mason points to the skull in
the tree)
What are they saying about that?

(CONTINUED)

JOHN L. SWANEY

Well, sir... there has been some talk.

SAMUEL MASON

Go on.

JOHN L. SWANEY

Sir, tale is... there was this traveler, passing through Natchez. An old woman there said she had stitched six hundred dollars into the very clothes he was wearing. He was found robbed and killed a few days later.

SAMUEL MASON

What does that have to do with me?

JOHN L. SWANEY

The new talk is... your men are the ones that did it. Some say they saw your men in the area when it happened. Some say... your gang is picking up the traditions of the Harpes. Killing that is... not slaughtering like them.

Mason quickly becomes visibly disturbed. He explodes, physically drawing near the mail carrier who immediately regrets his words.

SAMUEL MASON

A damned lie! A Goddamned lie! I don't kill for the sake of killing like those... despicable...

(he turns and shouts at the skull)

Sons-of-Tories!

Mason shifts about in his saddle, mumbling to himself as he brings his horse around to pull up beside Swaney once again. When he speaks, it is controlled, a drastic difference than the recent outburst.

SAMUEL MASON

I don't kill anyone. But I can't account for the actions of each and every one of my men. Rarely and under the direst of circumstances my men may not have been given the choice.

(under his breath, almost self-damning)

(CONTINUED)

But to be compared to the brutality
of a filthy Harpe...

JOHN L. SWANEY

Nobody who met you says such a
thing. Nobody sir.

(beat)

If I can speak true, I think it's
rumors, just to try to get the
people turnin' against you.

Mason settles again, satisfied with Swaney's response. The
two men sit for another moment in silence.

SAMUEL MASON

Swaney, I asked and you told me.
That's fair. I will call on you
again from time to time. For now
carry on your route, tell no one we
spoke, and sleep sound knowing you
have nothing to fear from me or my
men. That, I will guarantee.

Mason extends his hand, the men shake and Mason turns about
and heads away. Swaney points his horse North to continue
his route when he turns back to Mason.

JOHN L. SWANEY

Captain? The rivers up North are
swollen. Won't take em long to make
it this way, maybe a week. I'd keep
to higher ground if you plan on
sticking around here for that long.

Mason raises his hand to acknowledge the information as he
continues out of sight. The mail carrier looks over at the
skull in the tree a final time before heading out towards
Nashville to complete his run.

EXT. CAMPSITE - NIGHT

Swaney sits near a small fire, gun in hand, staring into the
dark.

EXT. KENTUCKY FLATBOATMEN CAMP - GUM SPRINGS - EARLY MORNING

The campsite of travelers heading north on the Trace is
abandoned, with fires still burning, and in disarray.

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