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The Revenant

Written by Michael Punke

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September 1, 1823

They were abandoning him. The wounded man knew it when he looked at the boy, who looked down, then away, unwilling to hold his gaze.

For days, the boy had argued with the man in the wolf-skin hat. *Has it really been days?* The wounded man had battled his fever and pain, never certain whether conversations he heard were real, or merely by-products of the delirious wanderings in his mind.

He looked up at the soaring rock formation above the clearing. A lone, twisted pine had managed somehow to grow from the sheer face of the stone. He had stared at it many times, yet it had never appeared to him as it did at that moment, when its perpendicular lines seemed clearly to form a cross. He accepted for the first time that he would die there in that clearing by the spring.

The wounded man felt an odd detachment from the scene in which he played the central role. He wondered briefly what he would do in their position. If they stayed and the war party

came up the creek, all of them would die. *Would I die for them . . . if they were certain to die anyway?*

"You sure they're coming up the creek?" The boy's voice cracked as he said it. He could effect a tenor most of the time, but his tone still broke at moments he could not control.

The man in the wolf skin stooped hurriedly by the small meat rack near the fire, stuffing strips of partially dried venison into his parfleche. "You want to stay and find out?"

The wounded man tried to speak. He felt again the piercing pain in his throat. Sound came forth, but he could not shape it into the one word he sought to articulate.

The man in the wolf skin ignored the sound as he continued to gather his few belongings, but the boy turned. "He's trying to say something."

The boy dropped on one knee next to the wounded man. Unable to speak, the man raised his working arm and pointed.

"He wants his rifle," said the boy. "He wants us to set him up with his rifle."

The man in the wolf skin covered the ground between them in quick, measured steps. He kicked the boy hard, square in the back. "Move, goddamn you!"

He strode quickly from the boy to the wounded man, who lay next to the meager pile of his possessions: a possibles bag, a knife in a beaded scabbard, a hatchet, a rifle, and a powder horn. As the wounded man watched helplessly, the man in the wolf skin stooped to pick up the possibles bag. He dug inside for the flint and steel, dropping them into the pocket on the front of his leather tunic. He grabbed the powder horn and slung it over his shoulder. The hatchet he tucked under his broad leather belt.

"What're you doing?" asked the boy.

The man stooped again, picked up the knife, and tossed it to the boy.

"Take that." The boy caught it, staring in horror at the scabbard in his hand. Only the rifle remained. The man in the wolf skin picked it up, checking quickly to ensure it was charged. "Sorry, old Glass. You ain't got much more use for any of this."

The boy appeared stunned. "We can't leave him without his kit." The man in the wolf skin looked up briefly, then disappeared into the woods.

The wounded man stared up at the boy, who stood there for a long moment with the knife—his knife. Finally, the boy raised his eyes. At first it appeared that he might say something. Instead, he spun around and fled into the pines.

The wounded man stared at the gap in the trees where they had disappeared. His rage was complete, consuming him as fire envelops the needles of a pine. He wanted nothing in the world except to place his hands around their necks and choke the life from them.

Instinctively he started to yell out, forgetting again that his throat produced no words, only pain. He raised himself on his left elbow. He could bend his right arm slightly, but it would support no weight. The movement sent agonizing bolts through his neck and back. He felt the strain of his skin against the crude sutures. He looked down at his leg, where the bloody remnants of an old shirt were tightly wrapped. He could not flex his thigh to make the leg work.

Marshaling his strength, he rolled heavily to his stomach. He felt the snap of a suture breaking and the warm wetness of new blood on his back. The pain diluted to nothing against the tide of his rage.

Hugh Glass began to crawl.

ONE

August 21, 1823

"My keelboat from St. Louis is due here any day, Monsieur Ashley." The portly Frenchman explained it again in his patient but insistent tone. "I'll gladly sell the Rocky Mountain Fur Company the entire contents of the boat—but I can't sell you what I don't have."

William H. Ashley slammed his tin cup on the crude slats of the table. The carefully groomed gray of his beard did not conceal the tight clench of his jaw. For its part, the clenched jaw seemed unlikely to contain another outburst, as Ashley found himself confronting again the one thing he despised above all else—waiting.

The Frenchman, with the unlikely name of Kiowa Brazeau, watched Ashley with growing trepidation. Ashley's presence at Kiowa's remote trading post presented a rare opportunity, and Kiowa knew that the successful management of this relationship could lay a permanent foundation for his venture. Ashley was a prominent man in St. Louis business and politics, a man with both the vision to bring commerce to the West and the money to make it happen.

"Other people's money," as Ashley had called it. Skittish money. Nervous money. Money that would flee easily from one speculative venture to the next.

Kiowa squinted behind his thick spectacles, and though his vision was not sharp, he had a keen eye for reading people. "If you will indulge me, Monsieur Ashley, perhaps I can offer one consolation while we await my boat."

Ashley offered no affirmative acknowledgment, but neither did he renew his tirade.

"I need to requisition more provisions from St. Louis," said Kiowa. "I'll send a courier downstream tomorrow by canoe. He can carry a dispatch from you to your syndicate. You can reassure them before rumors about Colonel Leavenworth's debacle take root."

Ashley sighed deeply and took a long sip of the sour ale, resigned, through lack of alternative, to endure this latest delay. Like it or not, the Frenchman's advice was sound. He needed to reassure his investors before news of the battle ran unchecked through the streets of St. Louis.

Kiowa sensed his opening and moved quickly to keep Ashley on a productive course. The Frenchman produced a quill, ink, and parchment, arranging them in front of Ashley and refilling the tin cup with ale. "I'll leave you to your work, monsieur," he said, happy for the opportunity to retreat.

By the dim light of a tallow candle, Ashley wrote deep into the night:

Fort Brazeau,
On the Missouri
August 21, 1823

James D. Pickens, Esquire
Pickens and Sons
St. Louis

Dear Mr. Pickens,

It is my unfortunate responsibility to inform you of the events of the past two weeks. By their nature these events must alter—though not deter—our venture on the Upper Missouri.

As you probably know by now, the men of the Rocky Mountain Fur Company were attacked by the Arikara after trading in good faith for sixty horses. The Arikara attacked without provocation, killing 16 of our men, wounding a dozen, & stealing back the horses they had feigned to sell to us the day before.

In face of this attack, I was forced to retreat downstream, while at the same time requesting the aid of Colonel Leavenworth & the US Army in responding to this clear affront to the sovereign right of US citizens to traverse the Missouri unimpeded. I also requested the support of our own men, who joined me (led by Capt. Andrew Henry) at great peril, from their position at Fort Union.

By August 9th, we confronted the Arikara with a combined force of 700 men, including 200 of Leavenworth's regulars (with two howitzers) and forty men of the RMF Co. We also found allies (albeit temporary) in 400 Sioux warriors, whose enmity for the Arikara stems from historical grudge, the origin of which I do not know.

Suffice it to say that our assembled forces were more than ample to carry the field, punish the Arikara for their treachery, & reopen the Missouri for our venture. That such results did not occur we owe to the unsteady timber of Colonel Leavenworth.

The details of the inglorious encounter can await my return to St. Louis, but suffice it to say that the Colonel's repeated reluctance to engage in an inferior foe allowed the entire Arikara tribe to slip our grasp, the result being the effective closure of the Missouri between Fort Brazeau & the Mandan villages. Somewhere between here and there are 900 Arikara warriors, newly entrenched, no doubt, & with new motive to foil all attempts up the Missouri.

Colonel Leavenworth has returned to garrison at Fort Atkinson, where he no doubt will pass the winter in front of a warm hearth, carefully mulling his options. I do not intend to wait for him. Our venture, as you know, can ill-afford the loss of eight months.

Ashley stopped to read his text, unhappy with its dour tone. The letter reflected his anger, but did not convey his predominant emotion—a bedrock optimism, an unwavering faith in his own ability to succeed. God had placed him in a garden of infinite bounty, a Land of Goshen in which any man could prosper if only he had the courage and the fortitude to try. Ashley's weaknesses, which he confessed forthrightly, were simply barriers to be overcome by some creative combination of his strengths. Ashley expected setbacks, but he would not tolerate failure.

We must turn this misfortune to our benefit, press on while our competitors take pause. With the Missouri effectively closed, I have decided to send two groups West by alternate route. Captain Henry I have already dispatched up the Grand River. He will ascend the Grand as far as possible and make his way back to Fort Union. Jedidiah Smith will lead a second troop up the Platte, his target the waters of the Great Basin.

You no doubt share my intense frustration at our delay. We must now move boldly to recapture lost time. I have instructed Henry and Smith that they shall not *return to St. Louis with their harvest in the Spring. Rather,* we *shall go to* them*—rendezvous in the field to exchange their furs for fresh supplies. We can save four months this way, & repay at least some portion of our debt to the clock. Meanwhile, I propose a new fur troop be raised in St. Louis & dispatched in the Spring, led by me personally.*

The remnants of the candle sputtered and spit foul black smoke. Ashley looked up, suddenly aware of the hour, of his deep fatigue. He dipped the quill and returned to his correspondence, writing firmly and quickly now as he drew his report to its conclusion:

I urge you to communicate to our syndicate—in strongest possible terms—my complete confidence in the inevitable success of our endeavor. A great bounty has been laid by Providence before us, & we must not fail to summon the courage to claim our rightful share.

Your Very Humble Servant,
William H. Ashley

Two days later, August 16, 1823, Kiowa Brazeau's keelboat arrived from St. Louis. William Ashley provisioned his men and sent them west on the same day. The first rendezvous was set for the summer of 1824, the location to be communicated through couriers.

Without understanding fully the significance of his decisions, William H. Ashley had invented the system that would define the era.