

Chapter 2 -- The Days Go By

Val

I was awake and starting my day before the sun broke the horizon, gently silencing an old crank-alarm and slipping out onto the floor. The world was still quiet, and would be for another hour or so until the sun rose, but early mornings were an old habit that I'd picked up from my parents and reinforced in my years of service.

I made the bed crisp and new, always the first task of the day, and walked out into the living room followed by Edda, one of my two tan-and-black wolfhounds. Her brother, Rowan, was still sleeping, exhausted from a late night hunt the previous evening.

It was cold in the house, the late autumn air chilling the open room far more than I'd have liked, so the second task of the day was to get a fire going in the furnace and heat the cabin. I was nearly out of kindling and wood, which I noted on my list of work for the day, but I had enough in reserve to get the heat roaring and bring a little life back into the house.

Next in the routine was breakfast -- a grizzled elk bone and some trimmings from the pantry for Edda and Rowan, and boar jerky with mushrooms and berries for me. We would cook when I had more firewood.

Rowan was awake for a moment as I walked back through the living room, but only to move to his favorite spot in front of the fireplace. I chuckled and patted him on the back as I went past, before returning to my bedroom to get dressed.

It was a simple space, but I was okay with simple. A huge, homebuilt bed made up the centerpiece of the room, with a small bookshelf and nightstand on either side. There were windows on either end, which were just starting to show the first sunbeams of morning, and to my left a large wooden dresser. I dressed quickly in autumn clothing -- boots, some thick cloth pants, a long sleeved shirt and thick leather jacket -- and went away from the kitchen towards the front porch.

The sun was just starting to rise to my left, slowly brightening the sea of reds, oranges, and browns beneath me. It wouldn't be long before the leaves were falling in droves and all that would be left were wiry trunks and the evergreens, but for now the world was delicately held somewhere between the seasons.

The quiet padding of paws told me that Edda was done with her bone, sidling up along next to me. I didn't have to reach down to pet her, running a hand along the wolfhound's back and taking a moment to scratch her behind the ears.

Life could be a lot worse.

With a whistle I headed down the side stairs of the porch, and then down along the hillside to the barn, cranking the door up and laughing as Edda disappeared inside. She'd always been fascinated by Nora, my five year old horse, basically treating the mixed breed like an enormous, lanky-legged dog. By the time I had the door high enough to enter Edda was under the gate and into the enclosure, standing between the horse's legs proudly. Nora, true to form, was unimpressed.

I tossed some feed in Nora's trough and went back out the front door, walking a different path

down the front of the hill to the cellar. A few of the boards were rotting out and would have to be changed, but that wouldn't be too hard. Looked like today would be a lot of woodcutting.

I lit a torch and walked into the cold cellar, doing a quick inventory. I was good on meat this year, with well more than enough to make it through the winter even if I couldn't hunt, and I'd gotten some good yields from my vegetable garden.

I opened up one of the coolers and pulled out some well-wrapped slabs of meat, filling up my backpack and then two more. At the rate I usually got in town I'd have more than enough credit to pick up a few luxuries, depending on what was being sold at the general store. Ingredients for beer or moonshine, maybe a couple more books, some spices if I wanted to eat fancy. And if I was lucky, they might have received a new shipment of bizarre home implements and gadgets, which I was a sucker for.

Edda was jumping along in the leaves a couple dozen yards down the hill when I finally came back out of the cellar, ears perking up as she heard the door open. She sprinted back up to meet me at the barn as I made my way over, sniffing eagerly at the meat in all three of my bags. "Not for you girl," I said, but tossed her a new piece of gristle anyway. She caught it easily and stopped begging.

Norah was done eating by the time that I got back, and it was a quick process to get her saddled up and ready to ride. I brought two extra bags for any groceries I'd pick up, as well as the small coin purse I kept with my current savings, and with that we were off.

The ride down took about half an hour, no more or less than it usually did, and with a smooth dismount I dropped next to Norah. Minns, as the town was called, was just starting to come to life, the first puffs of smoke coming out from the bakery and a few shopkeepers dusting off their front porches. There wasn't much to the town outside of the main strip and a few little offshoots, but for the people living around here that was just fine. Small, out of sight and out of mind, and of no consequence to the outside world.

I had one target in particular, the cozy little general store about halfway down the strip run by Aurie and Goff, a husband and wife that had been here for ages. As we got closer, Edda picked up and raced towards the door, plopping down on the porch with tail wagging happily. I caught up with her soon enough, leaving Norah tied to the post outside and scaling the stairs just in time for Aurie to greet me.

"Well if it ain't Edda and company?" Aurie said, smiling as she hunched over and scratched the wolfhound under the chin. She had a lot of life to her for a woman of her age, gray hair still growing strong in a long ponytail, a clever smile, and eyes as fierce as they would have been thirty years ago.

"I got a treat for you my beautiful girl, just wait here," she said, talking seriously to Edda. The dog obediently sat down, eliciting a laugh from Aurie. She gave me a wink as she stood up, before heading back inside.

I looked down to Edda, who had her teeth bared happily in a crocodile smile.

She likes me more than you, she seemed to say. I scratched her behind the head.

"Yeah, you're prettier than I am though," I murmured.

Soon enough Aurie was back with a chunk of gristle that Edda happily devoured before nestling alongside the shopkeeper.

“She’ll get fat if you keep spoiling her like that,” I said as Aurie petted the wolfhound.

“Not with how rarely I see you nowadays Val,” Aurie responded. “Seems like it’s been weeks since I’ve seen you.”

“Haven’t caught myself needing anything,” I answered. “Things are going well up on the mountain so I don’t find myself needing to shop as much.”

“Well *start* needin’ to shop, we like your business!” Aurie joked, swatting at my shoulder. “Now come on, bring what you got to sell and let me do you one more. I got a few things to coax you into buyin’ and I ain’t takin’ no for an answer.”

“You never do,” I said with a laugh. I turned to my load and picked up the bags, bringing them inside with me.

“That Val I heard you talkin’ to Aurie?” Goff asked, calling out from somewhere in the back as we came into the cozy general store. “Cause if it is make sure he leaves with more than he came with.”

“I can hear you Goff,” I called out, as I laid the bags on the counter.

“Good! Cuts out the middle man!” Goff said, sweeping out from behind the counter. He was built like a lot of mountain men, with a thick beard and a pot belly, topped with a big cap to cover a bald head.

“Damn good to see you Val, always feels like too long,” Goff said, offering a firm handshake. His calloused hands were covered in some dust from the carpentry he was doing in the back, but if I’d minded that I wouldn’t have lived in the mountains.

“I was just tellin’ Aurie, I’ve got a great place going up there,” I said. “Finishing up the cellar, got the heating working just fine, and with the way deer were breeding last spring I’ve got food for months.”

I tapped the bags lined with meat.

“Well damn, that don’t leave you with much to do but drink, do it?” Goff asked. “What’s a young, smart man like you do up there all alone during the winters?”

“Oh, this and that,” I said. “There are always things to clean and to cook and to build, and between Edda, her brother, and Norah I’ve got three pieces of company that always need tending to.”

Aurie smacked me in the arm.

“Now you know that two dogs and an ol’ horse ain’t good company for a looker like yourself,” she said.

“Oh, I don’t know, Edda and Rowan are quite the characters. Aren’t ya girl?” I asked.

Edda barked.

“See?” I said

“Well all I’m sayin’ is that it’d be a shame to let them good genes go to waste, if you know what I’m *sayin’*,” Aurie said with a wink. “You been here what, four, five years now?”

“Little more than five,” I answered.

“And you ain’t talked to none of the girls ‘round your age, even though you got the pick of the lot?” she continued. “Now, if you ask me, it’s gettin’ on time where a young man like yourself should be startin’ a family. Now I wouldn’t say nothin’ if I saw you lookin’ around, but the way I see ya goin’ you’re just gonna live your life on that mountain ‘til one day you ain’t comin’ down

no more.”

For a second I thought about an answer to give her.

“Just hasn’t been the right time I guess,” I said, after a few moments. “Can’t really say anything else about it.”

At that point, Aurie did something I loved the people of this town for, which was throw up her hands and let it go when someone didn’t want to talk.

“Well no god in heaven can say I didn’t try,” she said, before returning to business. She looked over my haul and ran a quick tally.

“Hey Goff, grab us a scale from out back, would ya,” she said, starting to unpack the bags of wrapped steaks.

“Yes darlin’,” Goff said with a salute, heading to the back.

“So, what you got for us today?” Aurie asked.

“Well let’s see, we’ve got twenty slabs of flank, another twelve from belly, and then finally about eight cobbled together from here and there,” I answered.

“Val, you sure know how to hunt,” she said with a whistle. “Ain’t no one puttin’ up numbers like that around here.”

“I learned young,” I answered.

“Yeah, and you learned well,” she said, as Goff returned with the scale. Aurie started piling up the slabs and measuring them, but I could see that she was thinking about something. After a few, Aurie sighed and spoke again.

“Now leavin’ aside our previous discussion, there’s somethin’ I’d like to ask you Val,” she said.

“Well I can’t guarantee I’ll have an answer, but I’ll never fault you for asking,” I said. She kept working.

“Well, the thing is that there’s a niece of mine who’s got a son just about reaching a man’s age,” she said. “And I was wondering... well I was wonderin’ if you had some time to teach him how to hunt. Seeing as you got such a talent for it and all.”

For emphasis, she dropped a slab on the table.

“That would usually be the job of a boy’s father,” I said.

“Yeah, yeah you’re right...” Aurie answered, continuing to work. “Usually it would have been but... boy ain’t got no dad around. He died a year ago, black lungs.”

“Oh, I’m sorry to hear that,” I said.

Aurie kept moving.

“Yeah, it’s been a struggle for ‘em, but me, my sister and her husband, some of our friends, we all chipped in, helped the family out. These you brought in will actually be goin’ straight to them, so I thank you for that,” she said.

I nodded. Good meat made even the darkest winter days a little brighter.

“But it all happened right around when the boy would have been starting to learn his father’s craft, and, well, I figured since you-”

“I’ll take the boy out for a few hunts,” I said. Aurie stopped working.

“Really?” Aurie asked. “You’d do that?”

I nodded.

“It’ll be no real trouble to me, and I’ll bring in a few extra heads for the winter,” I said. “Besides, like Goff said, I don’t exactly have much to do up there.”

Aurie reached out and grabbed my hand with both of hers, looking me in the eyes.

“Are you sure? You ain’t pullin’ some trick on an old woman are ya?” she said.

“I wouldn’t dream of it Aurie,” I said. “I’ll teach the boy everything I can before the snows get too bad. After that, well, we’ll just have to see.”

Aurie lifted my hand up to her lips and gave it a quick kiss, before getting back to her work.

“I knew you were a good man Val,” Aurie said, as she stacked the last slab of meat. “I just knew you were.”

She took the last stack to the back, leaving me and Edda alone. I looked down at the wolfhound, scratching her behind the head.

“A good man, Edda,” I said. “You hear that?”

Edda leaned into my side, but had no other response.

I patted her flank. I hadn’t wanted one.