

The Weeks

The plains at night could chill a man to the bone, and leave a dust covered corpse by morning. Howling winds stifled the distant cries of the coyotes. The lawman had been trailing the fiend for almost three weeks now. With a few scattered scat piles along the way, he knew he was close, but it wasn't fresh enough to be less than a half day old. Had he not lost his mount, this monster would have already been put down. The creature had ambushed him and spooked his horse two days back. After being thrown from his horse and getting his bearings it was too late. The steed lay dead in the stream, its throat had been frayed to the bone. He watched the water flow into the cavity that was the horse's neck as it mixed with cardinal red blood. What has passed cannot be changed. Never name your horse; it was a rule the lawmen had abided by since the beginning.

He could see a homestead on the horizon. Smoke billowed from the stone chimney. It's amazing what a full moon will reveal to the human eye. Hopefully the inhabitants will be welcoming. He needed a place to warm his hands and the steel that hung from his hip. The leather coat he wore did a better job of covering his scars than blocking out the bitter cold. At thirty two his hair had already begun to fade to silver and lines were becoming more defined on his worn face.

As he walked closer to the cabin he could see that it was a farm that still had a few head of cattle in the stocks. Perhaps a warm meal could be possible for a coin or two. He could see a silhouette of a man in the doorway of the dwelling.

"Sleb, here boy!" the outlined figure yelled to the farmyard.

"Shut tha door if that mutt ain't ready to come in, we ain't heatin' the world, Harold!" a female voice rang from deep inside the cabin.

"Oh maw, hush it now! He's jus' finishin' up his business then he be right in."

The lawman learned of Sleeb's presence. An unseen dog let loose with a mixture of barking and howling at the stranger in the long coat. The revolvers were always at the ready, but the outsider did not want to waste a bullet on a simple dog.

"Hey now, whosare?" Harold reached for the rifle he kept next to the door. He could see a dark figure walking the path past the barn.

"Hail good sir! I'm only a tired cold traveler that is looking for warmth...not a fight," it was the most conversation the lawman had in a fort night. He had been taught keeping one's mouth shut seemed to spawn fewer questions.

"That may be friend, but I need ta see ya ha'ans if ya would," Harold may have been a farmer, but he was a smart man not to trust a new arrival on the prairie, at least not at this hour.

The traveler raised his hands, "That I can do for ya." The cold had made his joints and muscles ache. Raising his hands in the sharp wind was the second to the last thing he wanted to do, the first would be catching a slug in the abdomen.

"Harold, what is it?" The disembodied female voice chimed in again.

"Ain't nuthin to worry about, jus' get that chow ready, ya he'a?"

Finally the stranger was close enough to the door the light spilled on his battered clothing like a rising curtain at a playhouse. The glow from the farmhouse reflected off the gold badge the visitor wore on his coat.

A surprised look crossed Harold's face, "Oh Heaven's me, a lawman! Son I nearly turned you into slop for ma pigs! Come on in he'a...put ya ha'ans down... put ya ha'ans down!" Harold put his rifle back next to the door as the lawman and Sleeb came inside. Sleeb was a big lug of a bloodhound and he nearly tripped the wanderer as the both tried to fit through the narrow door. "Maggie... get another bowl down we got us a lawman vist'r!"

"We got a *what?*" a large woman came from what could only be discerned as the kitchen. "A lawman? Don't look much like a lawman to me. That's jus' a boy... so what if he looks like he's been rode hard 'n' put away wet. Prolly stole that coat off a dead man."

Harold rushed over to the woman and grabbed her arm. He tried to speak in a whisper, but trained ears hear more than an average person, "Now dammit Maggie, I gotsa good nose fer people and I say he's ok! Look Sleb seems to have a nose for 'em too," Harold chuckled as the lawman was trying to remove the dog's snout from his crotch without too much notice.

"Hell Harold, that damn dog would put his nose in the devil's leg pocket if he had the chance," Maggie gave a displeasing look as she headed back to the kitchen. "Mister...ifin you plan to kill us, you do it before I gotta do these dishes ya he'a?"

The stranger smiled, "Lovely woman."

"She's a bitch of a wife I tell ya... but I love the ol' gal. But you doan pay her no mind. Come on in an' sit by tha fire. Whatsa young fella like you doin' all the way out he'a without no horse?"

"She died two days ago."

"Oh geez, I'm sorry. Well...I'm Harold... Harold Weeks, and that ray a sunshine ya jus' met is Maggie. Sleb over there is the reason both us are he'a."

"Brax," the drifter offered.

"Whatsat?"

"Name's Brax."

"Well... how do ya like that? Brax... odd name ain't it?"

"My mother didn't think so."

"Oh no sir, I didn't mean anythin' by it... we jus' don't get no new people types out he'a," Harold grabbed a pack of snuff from the mantle. "You want some Mr. Brax?"

"No, thank you. Why are you both here for the dog?"

"Oh no...not *fer* the dog...because of 'em ya see? He saved my life an' I met Maggie all inna same day," he put the tobacco back on the shelf. "Yeah it was about...oh... eight ye'as go. I was workin' the mine down in Colt City. Well one evenin' I seen a spot where they jus' had to be a nugget tha size of ya fist. I worked all 'round it and kept the other boys away from it. Anythin' we found down there went to Mr. Benson; the *he* paid us a livin' wage. Well it was a livin' wage only in name, and it wuddn't cuttin' it. I knew I had ta get me some flash when weren't nobody there. So next mornin' I got up two hours early. Well to cut this shorter, I got tha flash. It was about half tha size of what I thought it was gone be, but it was big enough. I was too excited or too dumb an' I started runnin' back to town... well I... I tripped at tha mouth of tha mine. Broke my damn leg I did," Harold motioned for Sleb to come over to his chair. "That's where this ol' man comes in. 'Cept he wasn't so old then. Well there I was, broke leg and I didn't know what ta do. If Mr. Benson caught me stealin' from his mine, he woulda made it my grave."

"What did you do?"

"He whistled like a sick bird," Maggie had brought in a warm rag. "Mr. Lawman if you gonna sup with us, you gonna take of that hat, here... both of ya clean ya ha'ans," she threw the rag at her husband.

"Fine fine, lemme tell my story woman!" he waited until she left the room to continue.

"Anyways... I whistled like she was sayin'. Ol' Sleb he'a heard me and came a runnin'. He planted a wet smacker right on my nose. Now I doan know if you believe in soul mates but this he'a hound and me... that's what we are. I no more than told him I needed help an' he took off a runnin'. About forty minutes later he came back an' he brought my lil' Mag-pie. She got me back ta her parents place, her mom was a nurse an' got me fixed up. No one from the mine ever came lookin'; fer me an' I never went lookin' fer them. We fell in love an' that lil' rock I found got us outta there an' all this land."

"And whatta we got to show fer it?" Maggie brought out a tray with three steaming bowls, "Alls we have is a bunch of weeds, two cows, and a hanfulla pigs."

"An' that's more than most gots around he'a an' next ye'a the crops gonna come in. You'll see."

"Sure twill Harold, I'm sure." She set the tray down and looked at Brax, "Hat law boy, you wanna eat... lose the hat. Doan they teach ya any mannas at tha academy?"

"Yes ma'am they did. No disrespect meant to your household."

"Guns too."

"Sorry ma'am. Along with manners they also teach us to never leave our friends... and Maggie... these are my friends," Brax offered a smile.

She sized him up as she handed Harold his bowl of soup. Perhaps he was a lawman, but it would take more convincing for her, "Alright, you jus' keep ya ha'ans above the table."

"Fair enough."

"So Mina Mrax – "

"Harold... no one can unnastan' ya with that food in ya mouth!"

"Oh please doan lecture me woman. Anyway... Mr. Brax, is tha story of tha lawmen true? Ya know... do ya hunt... them... things?"

"Aye."

"Wow wee, ya he'a that Mag-pie? I told ya they was true!"

Maggie chuckled, "A strange boy with a strange name tells ya he's a lawman an' he hunts wer-wolves, and you say true. Ifin he is a lawman, wouldn't him jus' bein' he'a put us in danger?"

Brax put his spoon down, "Yes ma'am... normally, but this one has passed and I'm at least a half day behind him."

Harold gave a 'see there' look to his wife.

"Well two things mister law boy that I don't believe in...one is ya bein' a lawman...the otha is wer-wolves."

"You don't have to believe in me, and I hope that you never have to believe in the other," Brax noticed that Sleb was uneasy and had begun to whine.

"What is it boy? Hungry?" Harold tore half of his roll and threw it to his hound. Sleb sniffed at the roll, but continues to whine, "If ya don't want it then jus' lay down an' hush up!" He looked back at the lawman, "Well Mr. Brax ya can stay he'a with me, Maggie and Sleb tonight ifin ya like."

Brax took out a rough gold coin from his gunny sack, "Thank you both. May this find ya well."

"Oh...nope, no sir, we can't take ya money."

"Harold! Hush up!" Maggie turned to smile at the outsider, "Thank ya Mr. Brax, now that's somethin' I can believe in."

"Maggie **NO**... this man needs our help. Ya do good ta others an' good comes your way. It even says it in tha good book!"

"Har -"

"No Maggie," it was easy to tell that Harold did not stand up to his wife all too often.

"Fine Harold, but ya can't buy flour and milk with 'good doin's'."

"Hush it woman," Harold was standing. Something had gotten his attention, "Somethin's got the cows all riled up."

Brax's hands slipped below the table, "Your dog smells something, Mr. Weeks."

For the first time in his short visit Maggie seemed worried, "Harold, ya come back way from that door. That thing out there lawman? Mayhap it's just a storm comin' an' got the animals spooked."

Brax then realized the cabin was his flash of gold nugget. He was only worried about finding refuse from the elements, he hadn't been thinking clearly. The cabin was a trap. It was the only shelter for miles, of course Marrock would have known he would stop here. They could hear the cattle trample the ground outside, sounds of scraping and lumber breaking, one final moan from the cows and the

night fell quiet again. Sleb clawed at the door. "Douse the lamps and stay away from the door, I'm going to check it out." The lawman secured his hat and slipped out front.

The yard was cold and damp. Perhaps a storm was coming. He could see two heaps of cow flesh behind the fence. Brax took down the path toward the barn.

"Harold, can ya see 'em?" Maggie was reaching for a broom.

"No, can't see anythin' yet."

Glass shattered behind Harold, he turned quickly to see a lumbering wolf perched on his wife. It seemed to smile at him as it pinned her head to the side. Maggie was screaming and trying to move under the beast. Sleb acted quicker than his master did as he charged to save the woman. He leaped toward the wolf bearing his teeth. With lightening speed, the creature batted the dog to the wall, and Sleb's back snapped with a muffled crack. The hound let out a blood-curdling howl.

The wer-wulf's claws raked Maggie's face exposing bone and muscle. Her eyes escaped their nesting place in her fractured skull. She opened her lips to cry out, but she only managed a gurgle noise. The weight of the monster caved in her ribcage as she let out her last bubbling breath.

"Maggie!" Harold yelled and raised his rifle. He got in a single shot before he was pinned to the floor. It felt as if pitchforks had dug into his shoulders.

Brax heard the shot, and turned around for the house.

The animal was looking down at Harold, "As you die here on the floor old man, think about how you didn't save them."

Harold began to weep; he wasn't sure if it was because of the whole experience of a conversation with a wolf, or the fact the words it spoke rang true. For a split second the pain in his shoulders was gone, only to be replaced by searing throbbing in his stomach as he heard a wet sound hit the floor. Harold's brain screamed... then his mouth followed.

The wolf spoke again, "you can't say you didn't have guts old man." The claws delicately pulled his intestine up to Harold's face, "Maybe you should have listened to your dog sooner, we know things." Marrock turned back to the window to leave; one of his giant back paws stepped on Sleb's twitching head. As the intruder leapt for freedom the hound's skull flattened and became a smear on the floor.

"**SLEB!**" Harold cried. "Oh God boy, I'm so sorry."

Brax threw open the door, "Oh shit..."

"Mr. Brax... he... it... talked."

The lawman kneeled down next to the disemboweled man, "Yes Harold... they talk, they speak lies as well. I pushed fate on you and yours and for that I am sorry."

"Now listen he's a lawman," Harold took shallow breaths. "It seems it was a fence in... ya didn't chose us... he did... but... he didn't need ta kill ma dog." His short breaths became raspy and liquid filled, "Mr. Brax... please... please before ya go...turn out ma lights... but do me another fav... favor."

"What is it friend?"

"Please get that bastard that killed my Ma... my Mag-pie and my Sleb," Harold began to cough violently.

"You have my word, good sir."

"I thank ya...now... ple... please will you turn out ma lights?"

"Good journey, Harold."

Marrock stopped as he heard a single gunshot echo the plains. He smiled knowing the long coat was still playing the game.

Maggie never had to do the dishes again.