

In the Land of Plenty

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Mel Hippos surveyed his brothers riding up the ridge, slumped down in the saddle of his own black gelding, watching them with heavy lidded eyes. They took their time. Luke was in the lead and he didn't push his white mare to more than a lazy pace, and his brothers seemed content to follow behind. Percy's red stallion seemed to be the only one annoyed with the temperate nature of the climb, and he pranced and sidled at every opportunity. Thane watched his brother focus on controlling his mount with a small smile on his lips as he patted his pale gelding on the neck and urged him up the incline.

In their own time, they arrived at the top of the ridge and the brothers all looked over each other in tense silence. The Hippos brothers, despite being close, weren't often all four together. The wide Montana sky sparkled blue and white, clear and bright. Finally, Mel nodded.

"Luke, Percy, Thane," he said. "This a social call, or you got a reason for visiting?"

"We got reasons," Luke said and spat off to the side.

Mel nodded again. "Well?"

"You gonna make us say it?" Percy said with a sigh.

"Yup."

The men all looked at each other, tight lipped, until Thane broke the silence. "It's time to ride, Mel. I know you can read the signs just as well as we do."

"Yup, I seen 'em. But I'm not riding," said Mel.

His brothers exchanged looks of disbelief.

“But you have to ride,” said Thane. “It’s all of us or none of us.”

“Then I guess it’s none of us,” Mel said. “C’mon on down to the house. The least me and Janie can do is fix you some supper. If you want, you can stay in the bunkhouse until you decide what you want to do.” Mel turned his horse to head down the opposite side of the ridge his brothers had come up. They looked at each other and shrugged. There was nothing to do but follow.



Janie Caldwell fixed a hearty supper of roast beef and root vegetables and biscuits. She’d meant it to feed her and Mel for several days, but instead it fed her and four hungry men for one night. The Hippos brothers left not even meat juices on the plate, sopping up every drop with her fluffy biscuits. Janie didn’t mind the company, especially her man’s brothers, but in the back of her head she was figuring what she’d need to get on a town run if this brood was going to stay more than another day or two; meat other than beef out of their own herd definitely, and probably coffee and sugar. The Hippos brothers did like their sweet coffee at all hours of the day and night.

“Thank you, ma’am,” said Luke. “That was a mighty fine supper. Can we help you clear the plates?”

“I keep telling you to call me Janie, Luke,” she laughed. “We’re all but family already. Why don’t you boys go out on the porch and I’ll bring you some coffee? I can handle the dishes fine, and you boys never get time enough to talk anyway.”

The men folk all mumbled their thanks and shuffled their way out to the porch. Since Janie already had the coffee on, it wasn’t long before each man had a steaming cup in his hand and they listened to Janie sing as she did the supper dishes. Mel leaned back in his chair and propped his feet up on the porch rail, and said nothing to his brothers as he sipped his coffee. Percy leaned up against a post and lit a cigarette, staring out into the wide darkness. Luke sat forward with his elbows on his knees, swirling his coffee in his cup. Thane sat in a quiet corner and watched his older brothers, just like he usually did.

“She’s a fine woman, your Janie,” said Luke.

“Yup,” said Mel.

“Is she why you won’t ride?” asked Percy as he puffed out a smoke ring. Luke glared at him but didn’t say a word.

“That’s an awful personal question,” said Mel.

“I’m your brother, I’m supposed to ask personal questions.” Percy blew smoke out his nose.

“Just ‘cause you’re supposed to ask, doesn’t mean I have to answer.”

“Doesn’t it? We’re supposed to ride, Mel, but we can’t ride without you. Isn’t it my business if you’re keeping me from something I’m supposed to do?”

Mel said nothing and sipped his coffee.

“You selfish...” growled Percy as he started forward, his hands starting to curl into fists.

“Enough!” barked Luke. “Let it be, Percy. I think it’s time we all turned in anyhow. You said we can have the bunkhouse?” he turned to Mel.

“Yup.” Mel nodded. “Sheets and towels are in the same cupboard. If you want Janie to cook you breakfast you need to be up here about dawn. I got work to do tomorrow.”

“Can we talk later?” Luke’s voice was soft.

“I told you, I got work to do tomorrow.”

“We’re going to have to talk sometime.” Luke’s voice held a warning.

“Just because you’re the oldest, doesn’t mean you know everything. Good night now.”

Mel retreated into the main house and left his brothers to find their way down the hill to the bunkhouse. None of the Hippos brothers slept well that night.



The next morning after breakfast, Janie got ready to head into town for supplies. Mel kissed her good-bye at the truck. He laid his forehead against hers with his eyes shut. “Please, be careful.” His voice was soft and gruff.

“I’m always careful, silly.” Janie brushed his lips with hers.

“I just worry,” he said. “Things are getting worse out in the world, you know.”

“I’ll be extra careful,” she said, and pecked him on the cheek and headed into town.

Mel turned to face his brothers where they all stood watching on the porch, with coffee cups in their hands.

“If you’re going to eat my food, you may as well make yourselves useful,” he said. “I’ve got to mend some fences out in the north pastures and I could use a hand.” His brothers nodded and went to fetch their work gloves and saddle up the horses.

They worked for hours on the fence, nearly silent. Over the years they’d worked together enough to not really need to talk. The afternoon sun was hot on their shoulders, and the brothers were glad for their hats. Percy tossed down the post hole digger, wiping the sweat from his eyes with his red bandana. Thane swung his arms in wide circles to loosen his shoulders and Luke looked up from the roll of barb wire in his hands.

“You have to ride, Mel,” Percy said.

Mel spat off to the side. “Who said?”

“Nobody had to say, you moron, it’s just what we do.”

“I’m not talking about this anymore,” said Mel and he turned to pick up another fence rail.

Percy ripped off his work gloves and threw them to the ground. “Don’t you walk away when I’m talking to you!”

“I said, I’m done talking.” Mel did not turn to face his brother.

Percy balled up his fists and began to stride over to Mel, but Luke grabbed his arm and swung him around.

“I told you to leave it, Percy. I told you this might take some time,” Luke’s voice came from between clenched teeth.

“We don’t have time.”

“I said I’d handle this.” Luke’s knuckles were white against Percy’s tanned bicep.

“You don’t seem to be doing a very good job, Luke,” Percy said.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Luke narrowed his eyes to slits.

“It means that he’s still not riding and you’re messing this up and I’ve got to fix this.”

“You couldn’t fix anything that didn’t involve a gun or a sword,” growled Luke and he shoved Percy back several steps.

Percy let loose a roar of inarticulate rage and put his shoulder into his brother’s stomach, tackling him to the ground. Luke flipped his brother over and landed a vicious gut punch. The two oldest Hippos brothers rolled in the dirt, punching, kicking, and cursing. Mel and Thane stood off to the side and watched them go. They knew one or the other would come out on top,

it didn't really matter which. This time Luke came out on top. He pinned Percy face down into the dirt, with his arms twisted painfully behind his back. Blood flowed unchecked from Luke's nose, and one eye was already beginning to swell.

"I said, I'd handle this." He ground his brother's bloody face into the dirt. "You get me?"

"I got you," mumbled Percy. Luke held him for just a moment longer, then got up off his back. They got up and started to beat the dirt off their clothes, eyeing each other warily.

"Why don't you all go back down to the bunkhouse and clean up," said Mel. "Me and Thane can finish up here. Sides, I don't want you all bleeding on my tools."

Luke and Percy didn't say anything, they just grunted and mounted up. Both of them looked pained, but neither would admit he was hurt. Mel and Thane watched them ride off and turned back to the work of mending the fence. They worked in silence for a long time, digging holes, placing posts, nailing fence rail, winding barb wire.

"So, how come you won't ride?" Thane finally asked as the sun was dipping toward the horizon.

Mel groaned. "Not you too."

"I'm not trying to convince you of anything – yet. I just want to know why you don't want to ride."

Mel wiped his brow and looked his little brother up and down. "You just want to know, huh?"

"That's all," said Thane. "I just want to hear your reason."

"Fair enough." Mel shrugged. He scanned the horizon and leaned on the post hole digger. "You see what's around you?"

Thane looked around at the wide pastures and mountains in the far distance. "It's a nice ranch, Mel. You've made a good life for yourself here. But you've done that before, and you've walked away before. I don't understand why you aren't walking now."

Mel sighed. "Keep looking, boy."

Thane took his time. He examined the horizon inch by inch, considered each tree and blade of grass. When he was done, he shrugged. "I still don't get it."

"I'm in the land of plenty here, Thane. I have more food, and space, and peace than I've ever had before. Janie loves me more than any woman ever has. The land of plenty, Thane."

"But you know it can't last, it's not supposed to."

“The hell it can’t last. I don’t ride, it doesn’t end. So, I don’t ride.”

“Mel...” Thane’s voice was soft and low. “The signs are all there. The world is in pain. We have to ride.”

“No, Thane,” Mel said as he gazed out on the horizon. “We don’t.”

“You’d condemn all the rest of the world to endless pain, just so you can stay here? Mel, you’ve never been selfish before.”

“I won’t ride, Thane. Janie loves me... I’m not starving for the first time in my life. For once, I feel full. I can’t leave her, not her. She’s not like the rest. I don’t expect you to understand.”

Thane pretended not to hear the tears in his brother’s voice.



The Hippos brothers mostly avoided each other for a few days. Mel continued his work on the ranch while Thane followed along, not saying much of anything, just helping and watching Mel with his serious, dark eyes. Thane ate his meals with Mel and Janie. He was polite and always thanked Janie and responded to her questions, but for the most part he was silent, watching Janie and Mel with his serious, dark eyes. Luke and Percy stayed in the bunkhouse, nursing their wounds both physical and not, and subsisting on the coffee and cans of beans Janie kept the cupboards stocked with, just in case.

Friday night came around, and after supper Mel went to offer an olive branch to his brothers. All three of them were on the porch of the bunkhouse, sipping coffee and Percy was smoking.

“Evening,” Mel said, and nodded as he strolled up. He stopped at the other end of the porch from where his brothers were gathered and hooked his thumbs into his belt loops, looking off to the horizon following Luke and Percy’s gazes. There was nothing to see, not that he expected there to be anything. Thane looked at his brothers and sighed and shrugged his shoulders.

“You wanted something, Mel?” he asked.

“Janie and me are going into town to the honky tonk. Going to do a little dancing, a little drinking, you know, kick up our feet a little. Wanted to know if you boys wanted to join us,” Mel said.

Percy blew a stream of smoke out of his nose. "Is this a celebration?"

"What do you mean?" asked Mel.

"Is it a good bye party?" Luke held his brother's eyes.

"No," Mel said carefully. "It's just what Janie and I do on Friday nights."

Percy spat over the railing. "Count me out," he said and walked back into the bunkhouse.

"You don't get it, do you?" Luke shook his head and followed Percy.

"Get what?" Mel asked Thane.

"They're mad at you," said Thane.

"I get that just fine, that's why I'm trying to make peace."

"The only peace they're going to accept is you saddling up and riding like you're supposed to," Thane said as he shook his head.

Mel spat over the railing. "Well, they're going to be waiting an awful damn long time."

"I know," said Thane as he started toward the bunkhouse door.

"You're not going either?" asked Mel.

"I already decided a long time ago that I was going to ride." Thane shut the door softly behind him.



Mel did his best to shake off the anger and frustration he felt with his brothers. Janie didn't deserve him being growly, especially not on her only night out all week. The honky tonk neon was bright and garish, and its parking lot was full. Janie's smile was wide as Mel found a spot off in the corner that he could nestle the truck into. As they walked the gravel and dirt parking lot to the door, Janie grabbed his hand and swung it back and forth, laughing like a little girl.

Inside, Mel got them both bottles of beer and they started to make their rounds. Mel talked to the other ranchers and independent hands. They mostly talked about their herds and who could help who when, which hired help could help with which drive. But it wasn't the true intense conversation of real negotiations; they were just feeling each other out, like they did every Friday night. Janie circulated among the ladies of the men Mel was talking to. Mel had no idea what the ladies talked about, if it was recipes or canning secrets or what to do when your man stained his shirt really bad. He never asked her, and he never would.

But across the room, Mel felt eyes on him while he was in the middle of talking about which heifers to breed. All the ladies in Janie's little hen party were staring at him. Janie was tapping the end of the beer bottle on her lower lip, and smiling that secret little smile she only smiled just before bed, usually on the nights Mel could bet on not getting any sleep. Mel blushed from the tops of his ears on down past his collar. Janie and the ladies all burst into giggles and put their heads down together.

"Women," chuckled Mel's companion. "Who really understands them?"

"Not me, that's for sure," laughed Mel, and they clinked their bottles together.

Mel was watching Janie, like he often did, when he saw the fight break out in the corner. Two hired hands who had had enough beer, and enough of each other, not unusual in this bar in this town on a Friday night. Normally it wouldn't have concerned Mel, but the fight was just a little too close to Janie, and he was just a little too far from her for his liking.

Mel started to move through the crowd toward Janie, who hadn't noticed the fight herself in all the din of the honky tonk. He moved politely at first, but as he saw the pushing and shoving move closer to Janie he began to lose his manners. He stopped saying "excuse me" and "thank you" as he moved faster through the crowd. By this time, Janie had noticed the fight and she'd backed herself up against the wall, trying to make herself as small and non-threatening as possible. The fight moved closer and Mel could see the fear in Janie's eyes. Mel barreled through the crowd, shouting out Janie's name as he went.

The hired hands were swinging more than just fists. Honky tonk neon glittered on sharp green glass edges as they swung broken bottles at each other's faces. The bar's bouncers muscled their way out of the crowd and grabbed both men from behind. When one of the bouncers grabbed the hired hand closest to Janie, the chunk of broken bottle went flying. It shimmered and gleamed as it traced a graceful arc through the air, an arc that ended on Janie's sweet, pale neck. Red suddenly bloomed and Janie crumpled elegantly against the wall, trying to stop the flow with delicate fingers. Mel reached her too late. He gathered her in his arms and felt the life ebb out of her while his tears mixed with the blood pouring out of her throat.

"Oh my god," said the other bouncer. "Poor Janie. That was a one in a billion shot. Why is it always the good ones?"

Mel held her close for just a minute more, rocking and smelling her hair, eyes shut tight. Then he laid Janie down with gentle hands among the peanut shells and caressed her cheek one

last time. Tears rolled down his chin as he left the bar at a full sprint. His truck kicked up rooster tails of gravel and dirt as he tore out of the parking lot.

“Thane,” growled Mel as he drove into the inky night.



Luke, Percy, and Thane were playing poker in the bunkhouse when Mel slammed the door open. He raced across the room, grabbed Thane by the collar, and jacked him up against the wall.

“You son of a bitch, you son of a bitch,” he howled as he locked his hands around Thane’s throat. “You took her!”

Thane’s heels hammered on the bunkhouse wall, toes stretching in vain for the floor. He tried to pry up Mel’s fingers with his own, but Mel’s grip was strong. Luke and Percy jumped up from the table and tried to pull Mel off of Thane. Thane gurgled as Mel tightened his grip. His face started to turn red, and he changed his tactics. Thane’s body relaxed slightly and he changed his grip. The skin on Mel’s hands under Thane’s began to wither and die. It aged and wrinkled and turned black. Mel hung on just a little longer, then he dropped Thane with a curse.

Thane sat on the bunkhouse floor massaging his throat, breath wheezing in and out. Mel was still on his feet, but he was hunched forward with his hands between his knees, jaw clenched in pain.

“What the hell, Mel?” shouted Luke. “What the hell is wrong with you?”

“He took her,” gasped Mel. “The bastard took her.”

“Who took who?” asked Percy.

“Thane!” shouted Mel. “Thane took Janie! Janie’s dead.” The last words came out in a sob and Mel crumpled to his knees.

The other Hippos brothers looked at each other with shock on their faces.

“Mel,” Luke said softly. “Thane’s been here all night. He hasn’t gone anywhere.”

“Liar!” shouted Mel. “You just want to force me to ride.”

“I do want you to ride, Mel, but I’d never take Janie before her time.” Thane’s voice was still raw, but full of gentleness.

“Don’t you say her name! You have no right to say her name!” Mel began to weep. His brothers watched him with concerned eyes, but let him take his time. When his sobs had slowed, Thane spoke again.

“I’m not the only one with the power to take life, Mel. And I’m not the only one with an interest in seeing this Apocalypse move forward.” Thane didn’t raise his voice above a whisper.

Mel rolled up to his knees, and sat up on the floor. “You truly didn’t take her?” he asked.

“No, brother,” said Thane. “I didn’t take her. I wouldn’t do that to you.

Mel nodded and sighed. “This land doesn’t hold anything for me anymore.”

“It never really did,” said Luke.

“Shut up,” growled Mel. “Let’s ride.”

