

Winter's End

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I saw the first sign of the approaching spring today. I was down in the lower field near the river looking for animal tracks in last night's snow. It was only a light dusting but I was confident I'd find some and have a successful hunt for the first time in a week; instead I found fresh shoots breaking through the crust of snow which had blanketed the land around us since October. I was never much good with plants but I think they were snowdrops. We didn't used to get them here but since my parents stopped farming the fields around here, all sorts of things had moved in.

That was well before the world fell apart, when the first spring plants appeared at the end of January; now the winters are longer and it's usually March before any dare show themselves. The winter's are harsher too and we struggle to survive, huddled together in a building with ill-fitting boards for windows and nothing but an open fire to keep us warm. In the past, we'd have snow but it would only stay for a week at a time, maybe two, before melting away. Now it lies heavily for six months or more on ground that's as hard as iron. There's no hope of ploughing it, of planting winter crops. All we can do is try to survive off the land and the meagre stores we can build up after the first frosts of autumn start to chill the air.

Mostly we eat meat: rabbits from the warren in the paddock or roe deer from the wood if I get really lucky. More often, though, it's rats and mice from the barn that once housed chickens. The kids hated eating them at first but now they're both skilled hunters. They come back with their catch tied by their tails to the stout wooden sticks they use to kill them; showing off and boasting about who's caught the most. Before all this, they'd been disgusted by the sight of whole fish on the fishmonger's slab at the supermarket but now they're experts at gutting and skinning their tiny prey before throwing the carcasses into the stew pot.

If there's been a good crop the year before, we'll still have the acorns and beach nuts Mhairi grinds into flour with an old mill stone she'd unearthed behind the abandoned cow shed the first winter we were here. She then turns it into something that loosely resembles bread and which we can dip into our stew. When the crop's poor, we run out of flour by the winter solstice and have to resort to eating lichen; it tastes awful but it gives us the vitamins we need to stay healthy and it stops our stomachs from rumbling.

Before all this happened, I'd been a touch on the heavy side. Not exactly fat but definitely carrying a few extra pounds. Now I'm all sinew and bone, my muscles wiry but hardened by the constant exertion needed to stay alive. Once I went into a neighbouring house looking for any supplies that might have been overlooked by those who'd already ransacked it and was startled to find an old man staring at me out of the gloom: hair limp and straggly, cheeks drawn and gaunt, eyes sunken and bloodshot. At first I thought he was one them, one of the rotters, and raised my axe but when the old man did the same I realised he was just my reflection in a grubby mirror that hung on the wall. I'm only forty-one but the last six years have taken their toll, and I now look closer to seventy.

Still, winter will soon be over and our life will change as it always does with the shift from one season to the next. We'll pack the few belongings we still have and leave the remote farmhouse where I grew up. As the snow melts, we'll move up into the mountains. Once there, we'll set up our battered tents in a place we hope the ground will remain frozen but where we can still find some food. Up there, there's no chance of rabbits or roe deer, and no rodents to supplement a poor hunt; instead we have to rely on catching the small song birds which hop from rock to rock. They're difficult to trap and they have little meat on them, but their occasional presence in a diet that primarily consists of lichen and scrubby mountain herbs is a real treat in the lean months of summer.

This is the contrariness of the world we find ourselves trapped in. Winters, while harsh, at least allows us to venture far enough down from the mountains to find shelter in the old farm buildings on the valley floor. There're woods where we can forage, and even a stream we can fish in if we can break through the ice. Then each spring, the thaw comes, melting the frozen ground, releasing the rotters trapped in its icy grip. Once free, they start their endless search for human flesh. Whenever I dare slip into the valley in summer in search something more nutritious than we can find in the mountains, I encounter enough to know it's not safe to remain while the ground's still soft. Once the first sign of spring was something to celebrate, but now it's a warning that once again we'll soon be banished from the lands where I grew up. Each spring we're forced up into the highest reaches of the mountains where the ground remains permanently frozen and no rotters can reach us before they freeze solid. The chill of winter, the snow, the ice – they're now our friends; the sun, and the heat it gives to the land, our enemy.

I won't tell the others about what I found, not yet. Instead, I'll give them a few more days to enjoy the luxury of being surrounded by four stone walls and all the rats they can catch. I'll let the happiness of winter, when we can move freely without having to worry about the

dead, last as long as I can but I know we'll soon be exiled to the mountains once more.