

## "The Royal"

I arrived to my mountain top retreat an hour ago and it is now 4:37 pm. I had just finished making dinner for my two dogs and the mountain top gang (neighborhood dogs) when I glanced out the front door to see if the snow was sticking. It had started snowing when I was unloading the Jeep, and I wasn't sure if it was going to be a big snow storm or a mere dusting. To my pleasure I saw a few Elk cows (females) feeding in the pasture nearby. They have been coming out lately, but with the onset of rut (mating season) I wasn't sure how much more I would see them. The cows will graze in clearings but the bull is not as daring, and usually remains hidden farther up into the tree line. I have yet to see a bull from my house.

Since I had not been able to film them before, I dashed upstairs with camera case in hand, hurriedly set it up, and ran to the balcony. I had opened the balcony door a few minutes earlier and turned up the stereo while I was unloading from my trip. Lo and behold there were nine cows all lined up and facing this house. They were all listening to the fabulous violin music that drifted across the pasture and echoed up into the trees. The awesome music of the violinist Vanessa Mae.

"A squad of Elk," I thought, as I frantically snapped the battery into the video camera to film the perfect row of Elk cows. While filming I kept thinking, "Is it called a herd?" It was my military thinking that kept calling them a squad. I laughed at my private silliness.

Suddenly, and to my utter surprise, a big bull Elk sauntered out into the open, and grazed nonchalantly while enjoying the elusive violin as it strung its way over the meadow and into the yellowing aspen leaves and pine needles. The cows were eating hungrily, obviously spent from their rutting frenzy, and preparing to survive the cold, white winter for the next four or more months. Survival for them is much greater now for they must think of the unborn they carry through the winter. The Bull's only worry is staying out of the scope sights of the high power rifles that stalk and pursue them through the winter. No wonder he wants to enjoy the haunting violin melodies.

I think he knows that I'm filming him, and he watches me as I bring out the spotting scope and focus on him. It is the same scope that hunters use and he recognizes it, but in a strange sort of way he feels safe with me. What is it that's happening between us? I wonder. I am in awe as he so graciously poses for me as I count the spikes of his antlers. One, two, three . . . six, seven! I literally gasp aloud because I am staring at one of the rarest sights of the Rockies. A "Royal."

It is one thing to see movies of Elk, and another to witness them in person, but yet another to ever get a chance to see a bull as large as the Royal gazing back at me. A Royal, what an awesome name. It is one who is sovereign, magnificent, splendid, majestic, stately, noble, regal, unusually large, yes, Webster's says it all. Most hunters would sell their soul just to see what's unfolding right before my eyes.

It is a blessed time of rest and repose as he scrutinizes the meadow surrounding his fine harem. He is ever watchful to ensure their safety from predators and hunters. He does not want to lose any of his females because they will bring forth his majestic seed that will perpetuate his species. His offspring will survive as he has proven that he is the fittest. He has survived many dangerous battles with other males, not to mention surviving the ever stalking hunters who want him only for the huge rack of antlers—his Crown.

Solemnly, he stares back at me. I am convinced that he definitely knows I'm watching him. I feel a strange connection to him and can hear his heart ask for the music to be louder. I obey his imponderable request, and he nods at me from across the meadow, like a king nodding to his loyal subject.

We both savor the nearly unimaginable solitude as we're serenaded by the most incredible violin music either of us have ever heard. What a wondrous life; to be serenaded in the heart of the forest by strings that so closely imitate his glorious bugling dialogs with his herd, with nature, as well as with his adversaries and challengers.

The music drifts into an upbeat tune and carries me into another time, another place. My heart is pounding like ancient drums of the past. My ears hear only the movements ahead of me. I am wildly chasing him up the steep slopes, scaling rocks that my hands and feet glide over like a speeding deer. We have been tracking the Royal for weeks and have set up a relay to tire him. I am the last one in the relay because my aim is perfect, my speed is unequalled, and my courage unmatched. I have been chosen to be the Royal's rival. I have been chosen to transform him from majesty to food for our people. I run harder, faster, refusing to give up the battle of two legs chasing four strong, swift legs. Our relay has worked and the mighty Bull is tiring and I am still able to run at this strenuous pace for several more hours. My training has paid off, I am keeping up with him.

The big bull's massive rack, his crown, cracks against and breaks tree limbs and branches, alerting me of the change in his direction. I pursue. My moccasins are hardly heard by the Bull as his massive lungs pump the oxygen in and out in great powerful billows. The hours of chasing him, running him down are taking their toll on him as his stamina begins to quickly drain away.

The chase stops almost unexpectedly in a clearing where I find myself suddenly staring at a ball of mist blown from the Bulls flared nostrils as he puffs his anger at me, his pursuer. The mist hangs in the air, followed by another, then another big puff of depleted oxygen. I am alone except for the monster in front of me. I fight to control my breathing and calm my pounding heart so when I release the hatchet my aim will be swift and true. At this elevation, the Aspens have started changing colour and we are surrounded by sunlit golds filtering through the dark green pines and glistening upon his monstrously large, wet back. He is three times larger than my horse. He is larger than any Elk I have ever seen.

I must make my move before he can recover a shred of strength. In slow motion my right hand raises my hatchet above my head, the grip tightening as I go. My left hand, my free hand, is the guide and I slowly take aim square in the middle of his forehead. My left hand fingers level down on him, my arm is straight as an arrow and points directly at the Elks massive head. The heavy stone hatchet is over my head now as I prepare for the last bit of strength I can summon. He turns his head slowly and faces me squarely. Our eyes meet. His nostrils flare with rage and my heart throbs with fear. It is a challenge given and a challenge accepted.

The Royal anticipates my move and lunges his full twelve hundred pounds at me, crown first. The antlers can disembowel me with one swift move and will toss me twenty feet away from him. At the same moment, I hurl the hatchet and listen as it sounds its warbled whistle toward its mark. The razor sharp flint discharges a resounding crack through the air as it ricochets off the charging, massive rack then disappears into the dense foliage. My God, I missed the mark.

The earth rumbles as the Bull stomps to a halt a mere ten feet from me. The table has been turned. The hunted is now the hunter and he, the assailant, prepares to hurl his antlers into the core of my being. It's a no win situation. I know it and the Bull knows it. The forest is about to claim another life, my life, but I will go with dignity. After all, I was chosen to be his equal. I muster all the strength I have ever known in my entire life and pull myself to defiant attention as I face the forest giant. I am prepared to become the slave of the Elk spirits forever.

The Royal huffs, puffs, and grunts his angry threats as he paws the golden leaves resting beneath his hooves. He magnificently drops his head for the charge, all the while holding eye contact with me. If I were to stretch my arms up and wide open I could not match even one half of the size of his magnificent rack. The Royal is about to reestablish his sovereignty.

He doesn't move. Slowly, he raises his head toward the blue sky above and screams out the blood curdling death cry of the Elk. The bugle echoes over the forested cliffs and canyons. It commands attention and the forest is suspended in alarming silence. In terror, I realize the bugle is for me and has frozen me immobile. The Bull steps back and paws the dirt again as he slashes the brush near him with his rack. He is enraged, but unlike man, he will not take a life needlessly. He bugles again, the bugle of triumph, then he snorts low into the brush, scrapping his antlers through the forest floor and scattering bits of dirt, pine needles, and golden leaves across the clearing. He is throwing dirt at me as he shakes his dangerous antlers in admonition. I am paralyzed with fear.

One last, long eye contact as the big brown eyes of forever-knowing stare deep into my soul. I will never forget the look of those large, round, brown, earthen fluid eyes, nor will I forget the stirring of a mysterious half forgotten memory stored somewhere between my spirit and God. I am prepared, but for the first time in my life I realize there is no dignity in death. Death, either through stupidity or greed does not exalt our creator.

To the sheer amazement of myself and all the creatures about to witness my death, the Royal backs off across the clearing then with one last threatening look he charges off into the forest with the speed and power of a locomotive as the earth thunders beneath his powerful hooves. Somehow, he knows I understood his castigation, with the entire forest as our witness.

The forest is silent except for the sound of my resonating heartbeat thumping through every cell of my body. Terror, fear, knowledge, respect, reverence all wrapped up into one single heartbeat that melds with the next, and the next, and the next, as each beat hammers its message deeper and deeper into my soul. The golden sunlight glistens and sparkles deep within the tears on my cheeks and reflects back into the wild.

The fleeting remembrance is haunting. My heart beats wildly at the scene as though it's the heart of the Elk and Indian both as one. The smell is damp, earthly damp, as the setting sun fights to reach its way into the dense forest. The leaves have burst into flaming oranges, golds, yellows and reds, the finale of the wonderfully warm summer. They slowly, hesitantly let lose of their summer perches and lazily drift down through the tree limbs, tapping their friends on their journey to mother earth below. They will die where they land on the forest floor, the same place from which they had their beginnings.

They lie there looking up at the blue skies flickering through the tree tops. They are not sad because next spring they will return to their elevated perches to watch the forest below, but for now it is a time for rest, for sleep. They too had heard the Elk thunder off into the distance and they trembled at the awesomeness of the forest guardian. From high up in the trees the Elk look small and peaceful, but from the ground, looking up at the might and severity of the Elk, he is massive, proud and fearless.

To me, the Royal is beyond all that. He is even a connoisseur of the finest violin music drifting through the forest, serenading all who cares to listen to it. Only the mighty Royal paused to enjoy the serenade as he lowered his massive body down to the golden prairie grass, front legs first, then dropping his rearward weight next. His front legs are nature's fulcrum to balance the huge, heavy antlers at the front, and the muscular body in the rear.

The music had not been stopped for more than two minutes when before I could turn it on again, he signaled his cows, his majestic harem, and retreated back into the safety and seclusion of the forest. His females have obediently followed his lead. All I have left now is the tangible video proof of the bull and his harem, and the intangible proof of the encounter, my thoughts, and of course, my racing heart. And I have the music upon which memories are stored. His and mine, our music, the violin that coaxed him out of the forest and into the clearing. It was an elusive coaxing as the finely tuned stringed bugle resonated its haunting sounds within his far off and distant memory. Each string played was an angelic bugle of the Elk spirit, telling him that it was time to appear for the soul and spirit of one who so desperately needed reminding of yet another facet of the power of God.

I go into the city whole and complete and return depleted of energy and saddened at man's inhumanity toward man. Nature heals my sorrowful soul and reenergizes my heartbroken spirit. This time the sublimity of the Royal has done just that.

Hours have passed since the chance encounter and I am still emotionally numb from the sheer majesty of the Royal. Numb from seeing something that few humans ever see in their entire lifetime. I was chosen for that special moment and I will forever cherish this memory. It has been indelibly printed upon the blueprint of my soul and spirit. I could not forget it even if I tried.

© September 20, 1995, All Rights Reserved, Morgan Chai