

The Greatest Predator

Lena was raised on violin lessons with very little parental supervision. Her tutor had done his best to infuse her with a love and respect for the classics, but couldn't compete with an innate, if strange, capacity for musical invention. In defeat, he wished her well and concentrated on more receptive pupils.

Growing up was relatively painless, uncomplicated and so it was little surprise to her parents when she left home at eighteen for somewhere very far North and what little contact they had with her dwindled and ceased.

The fact that Lena Saskwatchee McDonald's first husband should have driven his team of Inuit huskies off a cliff, and then that Fergus McDonald, was found with his skull crushed in one of his own bear-traps were things unanswered. These were no more mysterious than her exquisite skill at fringing the hoods of parkas with fur that shed snow as efficiently for its human wearers as it had for its original owners.

Far below an overhang that exposed here and there the rocky footing of the mountain above, wind-borne sleet, pine needles and snow had formed a thick carpet on the shingled roof and would have merged the rough building with its surroundings, were it not for the yellow light spilling from its windows and a wavering plume of smoke from the generous stone chimney.

A lean-to at the rear stood empty, the door ajar, only some broken and mouldy harnesses on nails and a few pieces of shaved spruce in various lengths, suggested that it might once have housed a dog team and been used to repair a sled. On the covered porch, a set of rusted traps hung from wooden pegs coloured with the same signs of disuse that had run down the walls to stain the snow. Within the cabin, Lena Saskwatchee McDonald prepared for another of her lone, nocturnal hunts.

After a good sale of her wares and a few drinks at Largo's Lode, she would take the bow to her fiddle until the strings smoked in the lamplight. At these times, it was whispered that she was looking for a third husband and every halfway sober man in the place looked anywhere but at her flying hair and beaded moccasins, so nimble on the splintered boards, and she would laugh derisively, dance out into the icy darkness and be gone again for a week or so.

One hundred feet below the timberline they had met on that still, brittle day, with the newly fallen snow unmarked under a weak sun. The rest of the pack gathered, pacing silently between the towering trees, like dark and restless ghosts at the entrance to some great cathedral.

Far above, where the mountain disappeared into clouds the colour of old bruises, a solitary raptor pivoted on the splayed feathers of one wingtip, changing course to be closer to the impending drama silhouetted against the snow.

The challenger was no stranger, for he had shadowed the pack for a long time, slinking closer every day, until he dared to snatch a mouthful of last night's kill to appease his hunger.

This morning had been too much however. He had made overtures to one of the females in oestrus, play-bowing and gambolling foolishly about her, pretending fear at her lifted lip and lightning snaps, but working his charm and wheedling away at her obligatory indifference.

When the pack scattered before the exasperated mock charge of the pack leader, the intruder cantered away with thinly disguised contempt, but did not go far. The alpha wolf returned to his lie-up spot where he flopped down again, all without taking his slanted yellow eyes from the impudent stranger.

It was late afternoon when the master wolf put in a full-blooded charge to end it all. A keen observer would have seen that the younger wolf had speed in reserve and that he led his pursuer to where the snow was deepest. And there, he turned to make his stand. Momentarily blinded by the sting crystals thrown up by the challenger's flight, the alpha wolf almost collided with him, narrowly avoiding the lethal stroke that would have laid open the great pulsing artery beneath his grizzled ruff. As it was, one of his flattened ears was slit from orifice to tip, to release a scarlet spray across the snow.

Victor in a score of dominance struggles, the veteran's confidence was shaken. His greater weight hampered him in the deep snow when it should have carried the day, and bleeding from a half-dozen flesh wounds and favouring a deeply cut foreleg, he broke off the engagement and turned away.

His blood up, the youngster bristled after him but then the strange chivalry of the wolf manifested itself and he stopped, head low between his shoulders, watching the old one leave the field.

Only when the loser was lost from view, did the young wolf throw back his head and howl a short staccato song of triumph, and he turned back to inspect his winnings.

Arrogant now, the new leader shouldered his way through his pack, ignoring the suddenly accessible female and trotted away across the face of the mountain. In order of precedence the others fell in behind him and the pack was on the move.

The caribou were gathering, and it was a young female in labour that paid the price for the herd that day.

Replete and at his ease, the new pack-leader stretched out and closed his eyes. A massive outcrop, cleft during the millennia by immeasurable forces, shielded his back and with his easily-won pack spread out before him there was nothing to challenge him and he dozed on. And then, so softly on the evening air that it might have been the seductive call of some rare bird, or, simply, the sound of two branches rubbing together, there came a truly remarkable sound.

At first, the wolf simply opened his eyes and did not move, but his whole being was intent on the intruding signals. Caressing and suggestive, the sounds continued and with a grunt, he rolled onto his chest and cocked first one ear and then the other.

Unmistakeable now, the sound came from further down the mountain, where, bold as he was, he did not care to venture, for that was the kingdom of Man, greatest predator of all. And yet - this enticement was irresistible.

-3-

The young wolf stood. A moment later, he set off in quest, ignoring the stirring and curious half-rises of the pack, growling each of them back into position as he passed. Non-plussed, they glanced at each other, and craned their necks to watch his plume of a tail disappear from sight.

Almost immediately, and without issuing overt challenge, the next ranked wolves began to eye each other speculatively, manes semi-erect and hind paws gathering under them.

By nightfall, independent now of his new pack, and drawn forever downward, the wolf had followed the strains that first roused him and had come at last to a strange, square structure from which the tantalizing sounds seemed to emanate.

There, at the furthest fringe of a faint circle of light, he stopped dead, and sat, tail curled around his hocks, warily surveying the distant cabin. Clearly the sound was caused by something inside. His intelligence told him this, yet his innate caution prevented him from approaching closer and he remained where he was, motionless, except for an occasional lift of his chin to test the air.

Most confusing was the strong scent of others of his kind - mingled though it was with wood-smoke and other mysterious fragrances, all overlaid with the odour of Man - or something very like it.

Twice in his vigil, there was the briefest flash of movement across a chink between tattered curtains, and fleetingly, the uncomfortable sensation that he, himself was being watched. At this alone, he would have melted away into the night, were it not for the mesmerising sounds that beckoned from the cabin.

Exploring each of his lupine senses, it piqued his curiosity while it lulled his natural suspicion more and more. At times, so soft and hesitant that even the phenomenal hearing of the wolf was tested, and suddenly so strident and wantonly frenzied in its invitation that he tensed to flee, despite his male arousal, only to sink back as it fell through several octaves to woo him back under its influence.

Secure now in her domination, Lena had sunk into a collapsing armchair, one lissom, honey-skinned thigh over an overstuffed arm-rest, cushioning the elbow of her fingering hand, the other continuing with the bowing, while she watched the open door. Over the past hour, the

blaze behind her had reduced to an occasional, sullen crackle and the interior of the cabin to flickering orange and sepia shadows.

It was in this strangely unthreatening and utterly fascinating place that the wolf finally materialised, first, only as two reflected emerald flares suspended in the blackness, but gradually and almost without perceptible movement as the head and shoulders, and finally, the whole of this creature of legend. Belly down and chin between forepaws, it was true - but there on the doorstep of Lena Saskwatchee McDonald, watching her nimble hands with unblinking attention and ears twitching back and forth at each exquisitely pleasurable resonance.

With the passage of more time, Lena had risen and commenced pacing as she played, gliding black and forth across his fading field of vision, until, except for an occasional flicker of his eye-lids the wolf had ceased to move at all.

A sudden errant flame from the hearth cast a huge silhouette of Lena as she exchanged her bow for the double-bladed axe on one wall.

A wall where it seemed that the spread-eagled, headless shadows of wolves past had been neatly nailed from floor to ceiling.

Mike Job