

THE WOLF

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Bunnies had been scarce that year, as well as pheasants and upland game birds. I hadn't even seen many field mice around. The shortage of game was probably because of the late hard winter and the kids from the city the year before who just shot up everything living for what they called "sport". It's easy to understand why over in Europe the land Barons control all the hunting.

One Saturday I decided to find a rabbit for dinner the next day. Fried rabbit has always been a treat; makes me remember the kind generosity of Good Mother Earth.

It had been snowing off and on for weeks. The snow was three feet deep on the flats, four-foot drifts by the larger bushes, and a foot thick in the trees. "Might as well be in Alaska!"

I thought.

My skis let me slide over the snow without too much trouble. No deer tracks and only an occasional faint bunny track. If there were any, they were only coming out when the sun shined. The rest of the time they'd stay deep under the snow in the tangled bushes. "Check out the trees" I thought. I skied into the edge of the trees. "Quiet in here, no tracks of any kind. Back out into the clearing, and no sunshine yet.

"Well, If I don't get a rabbit, it's sure been a nice day anyway!"

Suddenly there he was, not fifty feet from me, standing at the edge of the trees. A beautiful huge beast, tense muscles, his breath puffing thick clouds of vapor mist into the cold air. Those intense, hypnotic dark predator eyes looking straight into mine made my hair stand on end. I stopped with my skis at an angle to him in a balanced aiming position. My rifle was up and the sights aligned perfectly for a shot into his eye. With no damage to the pelt, I could sell it for an easy hundred dollars, maybe two, for this big guy.

Smooth pull on the trigger. I never miss what I aim at.

I always aim with both eyes open, to keep my peripheral vision from being restricted. The trigger was one thin hair from dropping the hammer on the firing pin. The Wolf was still looking at me.

"What's the matter with you, Wolf, don't you know I'm going to shoot you?"

The big beast relaxed his muscles. His head drooped and he coughed hoarsely, a sort of weary canine cough.

"Lord, I'm so tired!" he seemed to be saying. He licked his lips, stood back up straight and looked at me again.

"What the devil are you doing, Wolf? You guys never just stand still and look at a human hunter, you've known for centuries that we're predators. What gives?"

I relaxed my trigger finger, felt the hammer slide back down to its resting position and lowered the rifle. Wolf closed his panting

mouth, pointed his big ears forward and looked at me again, whining this time.

"A wolf whining at a hunter?" I couldn't believe my ears.

Wolf turned and walked a few feet, looked back at me and whined again.

"Follow me?" he seemed to be asking.

I slid a few steps on my skis and wolf started loping away in the forest snow. His big paws broke through the crust and he stumbled wearily, got back up and went again. I stopped when he disappeared into the trees. He came back, looked at me again. "Okay, Wolf, I'll follow you, just go a little slower!" I called to him.

I soon began to wonder why I hadn't shot him back there when I had a good chance. I couldn't think of a reasonable answer and became apprehensive.

"**M**aybe he's leading me into a trap with the rest of the pack. Maybe I'll be Sunday lunch for the Wolf Pack." I thought.

"No matter, my rifle might be only a twenty-two caliber, but there are twelve long-rifle

cartridges in the tube and I know there aren't twelve wolves in these woods. I never miss." I finally remember this is the first wolf I've seen in these woods for years. The hair on the back of my neck stands up just a bit.

"Next time I get a chance, I'm taking that wolf for his pelt, I'm not going to be Sunday dinner for no Wolf Pack!"

On we go, deeper into the woods, Wolf looks back at me every few hundred feet. He slows down when I get too far behind, goes faster when I catch up. We've been going now for half an hour. I still see him every couple hundred feet through the trees, but he's staying pretty well out of good shooting range. My mind starts to wander again. I start remembering some old werewolf stories from childhood and my skin crawls. I'm Lucky I know my way around these woods, or he might be able to get me lost out here. I'm following his tracks, the only tracks in the snow. Sure isn't much game around here this year.

"Wonder what he's been living on, I haven't even seen any deer or bunny tracks yet?" **S**

uddenly there he was, not fifteen feet in front of me, looking straight at me with his ears laid back, fangs bared, muscles tensed for the leap. I slid to a stop, nearly falling over, just six feet from him. I raised my rifle to my waist; no time to aim proper but I'll get him anyway while he's in the air.

Then Wolf lays the rest of the way down.

"He's not leaping at me, he's laying down!"

Wolf looks at my feet, my eyes then back to my feet; he's submissive.

"What's the matter, Wolf, what are you trying to tell me?" I ease off the trigger, point my rifle in the air.

Wolf crawls on his belly to a bush a couple of feet to the side of him. He digs at the fresh snow. The crusted drift falls away, revealing a cave behind the bush. Wolf backs away from the cave, shaking the snow from his eyes and snout. He's looking at me now.

"Go on, take a look!" He seems to be telling me.

He scoots backwards farther then gets to his feet. He backs another twenty feet away then lays down and looks at me again.

It's like he's asking; "Am I far enough away now for your comfort?"

I try to look into the cave, but can't see; it's too dark. I catch the sun with the face of my watch, reflect a small beam of light into the cave. The hair raises on the back of my neck, the hairs on my arms stand up, tingling. Two skinny pups are trying to drink from the mother wolf. She's gaunt, lean and hungry. Her dull eyes are looking at me, she growls. Wolf growls deep, I jump back, whip my rifle barrel towards his position and look at him.

He's still lying down, eyes on me, his ears pointed forward. He's not growling at me, he's talking to his mate. I think he's telling her he has brought help and for her to relax. Maybe he's even telling her to not bite any people-fingers! I laugh nervously at my own suspicions and jumpiness.

I look into the cave again, my mind is questioning. "Think, man, think; that ancient hunter was forced to ask you, a member of the planet's top predators, for help. He's in trouble, his family is dying, what can you do?"

My pack, a little food is in my pack. The mother has to have food to make Wolf's milk, or the pups will die right after she does.

I open my pack. Three big thick sandwiches, four candy bars, a canteen of water. I pour water into the aluminum folding cup, half full, reach into the cave, mother wolf growls. Wolf growls louder, I don't jump this time, just look out the corner of my vision at Wolf. He's still where he was. She hears him and shuts up, licks her lips, looks again at me then drinks the water. Slow at first, then hungrily, lapping the water until it was all gone. I get one sandwich out of my pack. Thick sliced beef on thick, homemade, buttered bread. Probably not real Wolf food, but it'll have to do for now. I take my big folding knife from its belt sheath, cut the sandwich into fourths. I put one piece into the folding cup and slide it towards the mother. She gulps it; she's hungry. I talk to her softly while making her wait a couple of minutes between each fourth until she has eaten the entire first sandwich. She licks her lips, can't stop the running saliva. Her stomach starts to jump and rumble. She had been starving to death, along with the pups.

I cut the next sandwich, toss a fourth to Wolf first, he smells it, devours it in one gulp then

licks his lips. I feed the other three pieces to mother wolf one at a time in the cup. One sandwich and four candy bars left. I'm not sure if the candy bars will hurt the wolf, so put them back. I can eat them later if I get hungry. Besides, I'm only an hour from my truck, then another hour from home. I weigh nearly two hundred pounds so I sure won't starve soon.

Last sandwich. I cut four pieces, toss one to Wolf, feed the last three to Mother Wolf. Her eyes are shinier now. The pups are quiet, unmoving.

"Are they dead?" I suddenly wonder alarmed. I reach in slowly, mother wolf raises her head, watches me closely. I feel one pup's belly; he's breathing and warm. Starts to suckle.

"Good, Wolf, maybe we were not too late!" I pour some more water into the canteen, swish it around to pick up any bits of food left. I hold it towards Mother Wolf. She drinks it then licks the cup clean. She lies back down and finally seems satisfied. She closes her eyes. I back out of the cave, scrub out my cup with clean snow then fill the canteen with fresh clean snow that will melt in the water that's left and replace part of what the Mother had used.

I stand up and look at Wolf. The sun is out now, bright and warm.

"Come on, Wolf!" I call to him.

I put my skis back on, start to ski away, look back and stop. Wolf is standing up, looking at me.

"I said 'come on', there, Wolf!"

I wave him towards me, start to ski, looking back, he's finally following me now.

We make it to the edge of the forest. He stands thirty feet off to the side. We look at the meadow. Three bunnies, fifty yards out, playing on top of three feet of fresh snow. Six more bunnies over to the North, three more over to the West, a dozen down to the South.

"No wonder you can't get them, Wolf, they can eat under the snow then play out there on the flats and see you coming for a hundred miles!"

Wolf looks at me, ears up. He moves closer to me. He looks from me to the rabbits and back again. His saliva starts to run and he licks his lips. He seems to know what I said, and I can tell what he's thinking.

"Okay, Wolf, relax now, don't jump!" I tell him. He looks at me, I swear he smiles, then lies down, lays his snout between his paws.

I pick the closest rabbit, pop him and the other two freeze. I pop the second one, then get the third one just as he makes it back to the rabbit hole. Wolf is still lying where he was, all his big muscles quivering, ears back, fangs bare, nostrils flared. I can imagine how the close rifle shots frayed his whole nervous system, but he's staying still like I had told him to.

"Go get your dinner, Wolf!" He looks at me and I wave him towards the plump figures on the snow.

Wolf is off like a shot, floundering through the snow, sinking in to his knees with every step. He grabs the first rabbit, holds it with his big paws and tears it open. He eats ravenously.

"You're eating like a starving wolf, Wolf!" I laugh at him.

He looks up then goes back to his feast. I swear he's eating bones, skin and all. I get myself a candy bar, sit back and watch him.

He finishes his meal then rolls over and over, tossing the snow into the air with his

nose. He gets up and shakes off the snow. He picks up the other two rabbits in his huge jaws and heads back to where I'm watching.

"Darn, I sure do wish I had my camera!"

Wolf stops ten feet from me, drops his prizes and looks at me. He raises his nose to the sky and lets out the longest wolf-howl I ever heard. Made my skin crawl.

He looked at me after his howl, I swear he smiled a question; "You like that one, mister, then how about this one?"

He howled again, longer and louder than the first one. "Man, oh man, how I wish I had my camera and my recorder!"

Wolf carefully picked up his rabbits again, looked at me one more time as if to say; "Wish I could stay and play, but I've got a family to feed!" He bounded off, disappeared into the forest and left me to my thoughts in the quiet stillness of the day.

I didn't take any bunnies for myself that day. I figured I might be taking one the wolf could get later to feed his family.

I went back the next Saturday, and the next, and the next. Saw Wolf twice more. Each time he stopped, looked my way and raised his

voice in a fine howl; kind of a greeting I suppose between old friends. He'd look my way again after his howl, I'd wave at him then he'd toss his head back and forth and lope off real busy like. I also saw where he had been getting some rabbits and mice for his family, as the snow melted and the hunting got easier for him.

I camped overnight in the springtime and heard four wolf voices singing just before I went to sleep. Two of the voices were small, high-pitched. I smiled, knowing the voices came from what had been starving little bodies just a few weeks ago. Another voice was deeper, the Mother Wolf who had almost starved to death in the snow cave. The deepest voice would have made me pack up and head back to town if I hadn't known it belonged to my old friend. That great primordial hunter, with a thousand generations of great hunters watching nervously through the mists of time as he struggled to raise his family.

I wonder if he knew my ancestors used to shoot his ancestors for no good reason except mindless fear and misunderstanding?

Whatever he knew, I'm glad he had the bravery and intelligence to ask a modern hunter for help when it was needed to save his little family.

Was he just one of the first of many who will be asking the humans for help to save their whole race, and will all their...and our...ancestors be watching?

The End

Background of "The Wolf"

One day I was listening to the controversy between opposite sides of the question "should wolves be re-introduced into the Yellowstone Park area?" and it brought to mind an event in my life from many years ago that I had nearly forgotten. My short story "The Wolf" was the result of this memory. There are definitely opposing sides to the subject of reintroduction of wild predators into lands impacted by human population expansion and land use, so I won't take any one side at the expense of the other. Some people have even suggested in this subject a deeper meaning of Genesis Ch. 1, v-25, but I don't know you'll have to decide.

The Author

The Wolf is one in a selection of the author's short stories published with "The Recovery, An Adventure Novel". Available from

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