

The Predator's Past

By Danny Cove

All was silent in the cabin, aside from the wolf that moved within it. The great creature walked slowly, steadily, its paws moving softly across the carpet, the silence ultimately broken by the click of claws as the carpet ended in wooden planks across which the beast proceeded. It was dark inside as well, the only light drifting in from the moon and through the open front window, the white light turning crimson as it passed through the barrier between the cold, outer wind and the colder, inner silence of the cabin. The wolf moved slowly, carefully, sniffing for anything which shouldn't be.

It was of gargantuan size, with grey fur trailing along a hunched back. Long ears stood like tombstones at the top of a hairy hill, moving slowly as if something were trying to crawl its way out from beneath them. The darkness of the cabin meant nothing to the wolf, its yellow eyes piercing the shadows like a flashlight, gazing into the secrets held by the blackest of corners. A howl echoed from outside and the creature stopped, cocking its head to the side, twisting its hulking form around toward the front door. The howling echoed again, louder, causing the shutters to tap lightly as the screaming wind caught them. A person would barely even register the sound of the shutters, but to the wolf, it was deafening. Just the wind, nothing more.

It stopped in the kitchen, sniffing around. Nothing remained of what had once been. Carefully, the wolf shifted its weight to its back legs and stood upright. The claws of its front feet grew longer, as if they were bony fingers ready to tear at anything which needed rending. It sniffed the air, its snout now rising closer to the ceiling, one clawed limb now resting on the island table in the middle of the kitchen. Lips curled back and the breathing became deeper, longer.

There was something else, something moving, taking breath, *existing* where only shadow should be. Something dropped to the floor, the sound of a single drop, a salty tear hitting the boards. The wolf leapt from the kitchen and bounded up the stairs, its back legs driving into the boards of the stairs with a deafening *whump* as the front limbs drew long gashes along the wall beside the steps. Wallpaper ripped and the wood behind it splintered, but was incapable of slowing down the beast. It reached the landing, moved into a more silent approach, then stopped at a door. The handle was immobile, the door locked from within. The wolf threw its weight against the door, kicking at it and tearing gashes in the wood. Splinters fell away and the frame began to weaken. Finally, it tore from the wall and the beast disappeared into the room. There was only a single wail and then silence, the cold, cold emptiness where once a life had been.

The wolf was finished in minutes; the thing which had been in the room was now one with it. But the beast lingered in the room, sniffing the bed, the dresser, the closet, the chair. On the windowsill there was a picture, framed, of a young boy in his father's arms. The wolf reared again upon its hind limbs and approached the picture. Long claws wrapped around the gold frame as yellow eyes peered at its treasure. The paw began to shake and finally smashed the frame picture-side-down onto the wood. Glass shattered and the wolf shoved it away, rasping. It wandered back out of the room and into the hallway, then down the stairs, far from the room which held the terrible thoughts of what once had been.

The wolf hadn't always been alone. There was a time before time when there was nothing solitary about it at all, a time when it had had a mate and a litter of young ones. It had a den in which they stayed, but that was before the pale man came. He'd just stepped in without a knock, walked over to him when his family was gone. The pale man had skin as glinting and colorless as the moon, and he'd seemed wreathed in shadow, as if a single glance in another direction and

he'd be gone. The pale man with the piercing, red eyes had made him such promises, played on his anxieties and ultimately won his allegiance with the single assertion that, when all was done, there would be no threat to his family save him alone. He'd consented and received the pale man's gift, a leather belt with patches of fur sewn into it. And as he'd clasped that belt around his waist, he'd felt his flat face elongate, his nails grow long and sharpen into claws. His back hunched and as he felt that furry fleece growing over every spare inch of his now lupine form, he'd let out the great howl at the moon that shone its light through the open door that had once held the pale man. It had been the first of many howls, a lifetime of howls, all echoing from the past into eternity and collapsing all of existence into a single moment. When his family had come home, their sire was no more; only the wolf remained.

The wolf shook his head as his eyes wandered throughout the cabin. There were no sounds in that cold, chilly air, nothing save the wind shrieking and howling beyond the windows and the doors. The trees themselves seemed to move as if they were animated, reaching out with their clawed and gnarled limbs toward the house where all had become one within the wolf.

Colors moved outside the house, hues of red and blue that the wolf could no longer see. But he could smell the thing that carried the light, moving silently in the night, no warning, just investigating strange sounds. There was a knock at the door, the knob jiggling slightly as one of the creatures outside tested it. Retracting its claws, the wolf padded softly across the tiled floor in the kitchen, used a human-like hand to open the back door and disappeared out across the grass, through the small field and into the forest. A single howl carried on the wind toward the creatures who stood upon the front porch, but inside the house, all lay silent and empty, a cryptic absence where once the dead had lived.