

Nemesis

When winter killed the last flies around the farmhouse, the first frosts did much the same to the grass on the higher reaches. The sheep drifted down to where there was still some life in the grazing, chewing away stolidly and contentedly as always.

The lean grey shape that materialised at the furthest limit of their vision had very little difficulty in slinking close enough to take an isolated lamb, strangling a death-bleat in her throat, so that it might have been the cry of a bird, dragging her convulsing corpse into a stand of bracken before starting to feed.

When Jennings found the shreds of bloodied wool and followed the drag-marks into the undergrowth, the predator was long gone. The pitiful remains of the lamb were testimony to the hunger that had driven the creature to seek prey this close to a homestead. He hefted the axe, squinting against the pain that now plagued him daily, and scanned the hillside above to the lowering mass of cloud that concealed the summit. Trying to track anything up there would be a fool's errand. He was too old, a farmer, not a hunter - he didn't even own a gun. Leaving the kill as it was, he retraced his steps and went about his business, bitter, but resigned to the loss of the lamb.

Two nights later, Jennings woke in the small hours, head throbbing. He went from dead asleep to instant wakefulness without knowing what had roused him. Beside him, his wife slumbered on. A three-quarter moon penetrated the curtains to illuminate the room, familiar objects casting islands of shadow.

The dogs slept inside at night - since the time they'd surprised a skunk ferreting about in the refuse pit. And now they were silent, probably stretched out in repose on the kitchen flagstones. Jennings started to settle himself again, and then sat upright, ears straining.

Carefully drawing aside the sheet and quilt, he padded to the window, shivering in the cold. The window afforded him a view of the oak grove, ancient trees that had decided his father before him on a setting for the house. All but leafless now that winter was upon them, their lichened trunks and major limbs a comforting presence, evidence that humans were not alone in this life. That Nature was all around and would be, long after Man's pitiful efforts had ceased to have any influence.

Jennings scanned the moonlit vista and would have returned to his bed but for the slightest movement from a rock that was not a rock but sat in the shadow cast by an oak many times its girth and height. As he watched, the wolf rose and shook itself like any domestic dog and then settled itself again to resume its watch on the house. Jennings' house. His headache pounded at the affront of it.

The animal was fifty feet from the porch. The porch where he had sat for an after supper pipe before the cold drove him indoors. A shadow crept over the oak-grove as a random cloud drifted across the face of the moon. When it had passed, the wolf

was gone. A chill that had nothing to do with the night air came down over Jennings and he crept thankfully back under the covers. It was a long time before he slept.

The next day and for some days after, he went nowhere without the axe, always at hand while he repaired fences, greased the windmill and did odd chores. To his mind, splitting wood with it seemed more difficult, and he took it to the stone in the shed, treading the ancient thing and bearing down on the blade more heavily than usual, watching the sparks fly away into the darkness. A half hour later, he had ground it down to a terrifying edge, far beyond the sharpness required to enter and cleave a dry log with one or two strokes on the great stump that served this purpose.

Jennings was a man of habit, of routine and orderly application to his work. He followed an unwritten schedule that he ticked off in his head. By his sixty-fifth year, it was like a heartbeat or breathing and it had enabled him to keep the little farm running single-handed. Jennings, his draught horse and the old implements that painfully cultivated, sowed and reaped the few acres of river land that supplemented an income from the modest flock of sheep.

The spring above the house ran year round, supplied their needs and drained away to the stream below, but Jennings checked it every second day, tramping up the clay path to where it welled out of the earth to find its way to the stream course. Checked that it ran freely and was not perhaps polluted – like the time he had found a fox, drowned by the weight of the trap and chain it had dragged heaven knew how far in a hopeless attempt at escape.

This day, he knelt and removed a glove to scoop a handful of water to his mouth, savouring the sweet, clear mountain tang of it. So cold it made his teeth and head ache and he closed his eyes for a moment. When he re-opened them, it was a second before he recognised the wolf for what it was.

It lay, a little way away, head on paws, slanted yellow eyes fixed on him as though patiently waiting for him to finish. As he knelt there, water dribbling audibly from his upraised hand, the animal raised its head and held his gaze, unafraid and unthreatening. Its eyes were mesmerising, glowing and intense, pupils pinpricks in amethyst orbs.

They remained like that for what seemed minutes and as Jennings' calves began to cramp, the wolf rose to its feet, stretched, and with a last glance, trotted away into the scrub. Jennings realised that he was shaking and saw with a shock that he had laid the axe down out of reach. It was some time before he retrieved it and made his way back to the house.

Two days later, the first dog disappeared, and while Jennings found its collar, his calling and whistling drew no response. Its litter-mate slunk about, close to him and obviously reluctant to leave his side, as though it had witnessed some awful thing and now relinquished any claim to dominance of the farm. They were both heavily built crosses that had had their share of run-ins with prowlers with plenty of scars to

attest to their courage. This was not their way. It unnerved Jennings badly and he confined his activities to the immediate surrounds of the house for some time, saying nothing of this to his wife.

When next Jennings ventured away from his homestead, it was of necessity. The trickle of water from the pipe to the spring had slowed considerably, taking hours to fill the barrel outside the kitchen door. Cautiously cresting the slope, he saw what had affected the supply. Bloated and floating now, the missing dog bobbed against the outlet channel, legs stiffly skywards.

Jennings tried to drag it out with a branch, then his nerve broke and he fled back to the house, images of the torn throat pursuing his hurrying feet. Ashen, he leaned against the locked kitchen door, regaining his breath. By the time his wife saw him, he had gained some composure and when he insisted on boiling all potable water, she shrugged, tied up her thick grey hair and fetched more wood for the stove.

That night, before retiring, Jennings let the surviving dog out to relieve itself. It hesitated visibly before gingerly padding off into the darkness. It was the last time Jennings saw it. His hissed and muted calls went unanswered, and terrified anew, he closed and bolted the door with shaking hands. When he eventually went to bed, it was to lie, staring sightlessly at the darkened ceiling. Eventually, he drifted off, although it was to terrible and troubled dreams, the last with the sensation that they were not alone in the room. Slipping out of bed, he groped for the axe that he had long taken to standing beside the headboard.

In the darkness, a shapeless, blanketed form turned and settled itself more comfortably and he watched to his horror how the dark grey brush of a shaggy tail spilled out across the pillow as his wife subsided again in rest. So it had come to this. Lamb, dogs and now the ultimate prey.

His head was bursting and he could hardly see, the towering rage beating a steady, unbearable rhythm inside his skull. He aimed a hand's breadth above the tail, where the spine connected to the hips and a slicing downward blow with all his strength would completely paralyse the beast. Time slowed as Jennings swept the axe in a great parabola through the darkness, upwards and downwards in a great gleaming arc.

And in the bedroom doorway where it lay waiting, head on paws. like any household dog, the wolf's eyes glowed emerald in the darkness.

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