

Ione

A Short Story by Nevada Barr

Nevada Barr, who spoke at the banquet of the national convention of Alpha Chi in Savannah in March 2001, graciously offers this early story for Alpha Chi readers. She is the best-selling novelist of the Anna Pigeon mystery series.

When I worked on Isle Royale National Park in Lake Superior, one of our greatest delights was the two wolf packs that shared the island with us. They had come nearly twenty miles across the ice from the mainland in 1948. The wolf researchers never solved the mystery as to why the animals made such a long and arduous journey to a place offering less food and habitat than the country they had come from. This is the answer I have chosen to believe.

A cry shivered across the frozen snow, through the glass and the wood of the cabin walls and into the bones of Vic Detman's skull. So lonely, so desolate, so full of hatred was the quavering sound that the hairs on the back of his neck stirred.

She was coming. He could feel it. Uneasiness, stalking him all evening, dragged him from his chair, took him again to the window. Standing back where the light from the kerosene lamp wouldn't silhouette him, he looked out.

A gibbous moon lighted the snow. Ice crystals, dry as desert sand, blew across the crust, glittering in the moonlight. It was so cold Vic fancied he could see November's teeth biting into the black shadows at the edge of the clearing, freezing the very air, changing the quality of the light until all things living were trapped in clear, unyielding silence.

Eerie, bone-chilling, the howling resumed: sorrow carried on ice and air. "Come on," Vic whispered. "Come to Daddy."

Dropping the curtain, he turned and looked at himself in the mirror his wife had nailed up over a phonograph there'd never been electricity to run. The years had not been kind to Victor Detman. His beard was still black, but two deep creases ran down from the corners of his mouth, and his head shone bald from ear to ear. To compensate, he'd grown his remaining hair long. Grizzled locks hung past his collar.

Fleeting, he saw a younger man—eyes without bags or bitterness, where kindness warmed the blue of the irises, and hope softened the curl of the lower lip. Before he recognized it as himself, the image was gone. He turned from the glass.

The waiting, the howling, were wearing at his nerves. He sat down on the couch and opened another beer. Tonight, in her honor, he was limiting himself to two. Beside him, on a ratty orange cushion, was a cardboard box. He dragged it across his knees. Slowly, savoring the treat, he opened it. Inside was a new Palmer, special-ordered: shining metal barrel, wooden stock, a cross between a pistol and a shotgun. The Palmer, too, was in her honor.

With infinite care, Vic assembled it, loaded a cartridge, and pumped it into the chamber. Dripping a spot of oil on a flannel rag, he rubbed the smooth metal and let his mind wander, a rare luxury for a hunter.

August 1945. He'd been laying a trap line along the lake shore south of Thunder Bay, not hoping for much—fox, maybe bear, a wolf if he got lucky. Wolf pelts were going for \$18 apiece down in the Twin Cities.

The last of his traps had been set. He was sitting eating a sandwich when a sense of not being alone crept up on him, a palpable feeling of another presence. Careful not to move, he looked to the ridge, a dome of granite above the clearing where he sat.

Scarcely more than a pup, ears and tail erect, she'd been standing on the bluff, her gaze fixed over Lake Superior on the misty shores of Isle Royale. Fat from a summer of beaver and moose kills, she glowed with health and strength. Sunlight dried the fur along her back rich yellow-gold, and the breeze moved across it like wind in summer wheat. That day her eyes had been copper-colored, reflecting the coming autumn.

Suddenly she looked at Vic, into his eyes. Distance telescoped. It was as if they stood face to face, a foot—no more—between them. For a moment he thought she must speak. Light broke into prismatic colors and blessed the waxy green of birch leaves. Perfume from the lake mixed with the earthy scent of the forest, and for the first time in many years Vic had known he was alive. Then she was gone, and he was alone.

The rest of the day he'd tried to pick up her trail, but there'd been nothing, not a hair, not a broken leaf. After that, he dreamed of her. The dream never varied. He would see her across a meadow, high on the bony ridge of Eagle Mountain. He would call. Her ears would come forward and her tail sweep half circles in the air. Like a pet, she would come to him, and he would put out his hand.

Always, before he could touch her, he woke.

For a year he watched and tracked and trapped and skinned and sold the wolves. The golden she-wolf never reappeared. Finally he came to believe he had imagined her. Then he'd seen the photograph: A pilot flying tourists out of Grand Portage had taken aerial shots of a pack that ran north of Thunder Bay on the Sibley Peninsula. To the pilot, she was just another wolf—a back, a tail, two ears—but Vic had known.

"I'll own you," he whispered.

"Who the hell is 'Ione'?" the pilot asked.

Ione. She was running with a big gray alpha. Vic saw him in the upper right-hand corner of the picture, unmistakable with a torn ear and half a tail.

Vic hated him. Hated his tarnished pewter so close to Ione's tawny delicate gold. And over the months the gray wolf came to hate Victor Detman. Anyway, Vic liked to think he did.

He hounded the pack till he'd sold three of their pelts to a dealer in St. Paul. More nights than he could count, he lay awake listening to them. There were times when he was camped out on the snow, no other human being for forty miles in any direction, he fancied they spoke of him. Those nights he sat up with his Winchester .30-.30 across his knees. One night the gray came for him. Vic hadn't the pleasure of shooting him: The wolf had stepped in one of the traps ringing the camp. All night the howling kept Vic in his tent. By morning the wolf had chewed nearly through his leg, but Vic got him.

Usually his hide, with the left ear bitten off and only half a tail, graced the floor in the front of Vic's fireplace. Instead of mean yellow eyes, he'd had the taxidermist put in dark brown, like a big faithful old dog's. "This is Sneak," Vic would tell anyone who came by, and he'd nudge the gray head with the toe of his boot. "Best damn dog I ever had." It pleased Victor to think he humiliated the great gray wolf.

Tonight old Sneak had been put to special use.

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Vic looked at the polished metal on his lap. Ione would come to him soon. She would have followed his tracks. Now she would be waiting in the woods, eyes cold and pale as the moon, watching with patience born of a million years of night hunting.

The Palmer was ready. He blew out the lamps, opened the small window in the pantry, and settled down amid the canned beans and flour. The moon reached its zenith, began to drop. In the cramped quarters, he shifted in his chair and wished he'd made a pot of coffee.

Several hours before dawn, as he was giving up, he heard the faintest jingle, as of distant sleigh bells—icicles, fine as glass needles, clashing against one another. He'd heard it before, when ice formed in the fur of sled dogs. Leaning as close to the window as he dared, he peered into the inky darkness of the forest. Then, so abruptly he almost gave himself away, Ione was

before him, trotting across the open space between his cabin and the garage.

She'd circled the cabin, hugging the walls so closely she was invisible from the windows. Clever. Vic felt fierce pride. Stealthily, he eased the gun from between his knees. Any second now she would see his handiwork; she would be distracted—maybe for only a moment, but it would suffice. He would have her.

The she-wolf stopped, ears forward, tail low over the snow. She'd seen them. On the side of the garage, the hides of three wolves were spread-eagled, paws nailed to the tarpaper. They looked as if they had been hurled with tremendous force against the wall. Their tails hung down in a macabre fringe. Heads, no longer supported, fell back as if the necks had been snapped by a mammoth hand. Two had the marks of the trap ripped into their skin.

On the end, near where the tin washtub hung on its peg, was the biggest pelt, shaggy gray fur ending in a ragged edge. Black lips curled back in death's permanent snarl. Brown glass eyes stared blindly down at the she-wolf.

Ione reared up on her hind legs, forepaws resting against the tarpaper, and sniffed. Then, dropping her head back as if her neck, too, had been snapped, she howled.

Vic tightened his grip on the Palmer and wondered who her mate was since the gray had died.

Weak howling answered hers. It seemed to come from nowhere, from the heart of the winter night. Suddenly silent, Ione dropped down onto all four paws, her ears swiveling to catch the sound.

Scratching, desperate and hopeful, came from within the garage, and again the weak, ululating cries, the cries Vic had known would call Ione down from the hills. Then a bark, a harsh bite of sound, and she began to dig. "I knew you'd come for your damned whelps," he whispered. Noiselessly, he pushed the barrel of the Palmer over the sill. "Time is up," he whispered and cocked the gun.

That tiny sound, the clicking back of the hammer, cut through the pups' whining, the paws scuffling against snow and tarpaper. Ione stopped, looked up unerringly at Detman, her eyes flashing like molten silver. Though hidden in darkness deep under the eaves, Vic knew she saw him, knew him. Her silver gaze entered him like an electric shock, coursing through his spine and into his soul.

For a brief eternity, their eyes held, his and the wolf's. Then in an instant she turned, leapt for the safety of the forest. Loneliness as bitter as November gusted into Vic. "Ione!" he cried and pulled the trigger.

The she-wolf disappeared into the trees, but he knew he'd hit her. He'd never miss at this range. Never. But it would be difficult tracking her in the dark. Snow would help, but there wouldn't be much blood. Still, she couldn't get far. He had put enough nicotine alkaloid in the dart of the capture gun to tranquilize a bull moose. Pulling on his gloves, he prayed to a god he didn't believe in and often reviled that he hadn't killed her. One day she would eat out of his hand and be glad to do it. Smiling, he pictured her, gold and silver and cringing, creeping across her pen begging for a bit of meat from his hand.

He left both the Palmer capture gun and his rifle behind. The she-wolf weighed easily seventy-five pounds, and he didn't want to carry any more than necessary. At the garage he loosed the pups. Their pelts were too small to bring any money. "Find Mama," he said and laughed as they loped awkwardly across the compound.

On the way out of the garage he took down Sneak's hide. Snow was coming—he could smell it. He'd paid too much for this trophy to let it be spoiled. Tossing it back in the cabin, he grabbed a flashlight and followed its beam into the woods where the animals had broken trail. Spiny branches of winter-bare aspen stung his face. Snow plowed up his trouser legs and fell into his boots, but he never felt it: This night had been a long time coming. The track grew clearer. Ione was dragging her hindquarters, cutting a swathe a blind man could follow. The pups were nowhere in sight. Vic started to run, crashing through snow and underbrush.

Within minutes he'd broken free of the woods into a clearing, a half-acre pond in the

summertime, a field of snow in winter. Ione lay near its center. Her legs were out and her tail feathered dark on the snow as if she'd been felled as she ran. Chased by storm clouds, moonlight touched her ears, ran down by her body. Her fur was silvered, iridescent.

Vic stopped. "Daddy's come to fetch you home," he murmured.

Crossing to where she lay, he knelt. Foam, white as starlight, blended into the snow around her muzzle. Her eyes were dull, open, staring. "Please don't be dead," he pleaded, and tears, as alien to him as palm trees, stung his eyes. Never, even in dreams, had he touched her, never felt the thick fur of her neck, stroked the softness of her perfect golden ears. He reached for her. "Ione . . ."

A growl, so low and deadly he sensed rather than heard it, emanated from the dead black forest at the edge of the snow-covered pond. Instinctively, he felt for his rifle, but it stood in a corner by the stove back at the cabin. Slowly, he moved his hand toward the hunting knife at his belt. The growl came again, louder, building to a wild pitch. A shadow of a shadow, black as the bottom of a well, so black it sucked the light from the sky, so black Detman half thought to see a star field within it, separated from the trees and rose into the air.

Terror paralyzed him. A scream ripped from his throat. The reverberation of his own voice freed him. As he sprang to his feet, knife in hand, the black wolf struck. Teeth honed to an edge slashed across his cheek as man and wolf tumbled to the ground. Hot blood melted the ice in his beard. The stink of the wolf's breath burned in his nostrils. Blindly he struck out. Jaws clamped on his arm like a steel trap. The knife fell from his fingers.

On elbows and knees, he struggled for the edge of the clearing, for the trees. The midnight-black wolf cut at his legs and feet, his teeth gouging through heavy leather boots. Pain tore upward through blood vessels to burst like red fire in Vic's skull.

Then he was on his feet. Running, stumbling, he no longer heard wolf, but every shadow on the snow, every darkness behind log or stone was a black wolf to his fevered brain. As he flailed through the woods, numberless black wolves sprang from rock promontories, slashed with razor teeth, only to turn into a crouching stump or the whipping branches of a willow.

Finally he staggered from the forest and found, by instinct or blind luck, the compound where he'd built his cabin. Muttering prayers and curses, he pulled himself inside.

Dawn was just glimmering in the east—a faint lightening of the overcast sky—but it was enough. Crying, Vic threw his hands over his face and fell in a faint before the brown, glassy eyes of old Sneak.

When he woke, he was so stiff he could scarcely move. A vicious cut marked his left cheek from below the eye to the jawline. Both arms were badly slashed, and his foot had been bitten through. Black Wolf's teeth had met in the middle, near the bone. The only wound Vic knew wouldn't heal in time were the bites to his left hand. Tendons had been torn, nerves severed. The fingers curled in like a spider subjected to a candle flame.

It hurt so much to move that he made whimpering sounds as he pushed himself to his feet, found his Winchester, and forced himself back out into the cold, his crippled hand lashed to his belt. The storm had dropped six inches of new snow while he slept, and more was falling. Still he followed the ghost of a trail to the frozen pond.

Ione was gone. The nicotine alkaloid had worn off. She'd gotten away. With Black Wolf.

For nearly a week Vic lay abed, holed up. Fever came and went, and he bathed his wounds and made his plans. Two nights he heard howling. Once he knew it was Ione, and he made his unsteady way out onto the back porch and howled back. Silence was returned, and then came a sharp yelp and a long, low cry. Black Wolf.

February passed. His strength returned. He tripled the number of traps he ran, spent his days stalking trails and ridges. Foxes, martens, weasels were caught until his garage was filled with frozen carcasses he didn't take the time to skin. Half a dozen times he'd seen the tracks of the pack Ione led with the Black and her pups. Twice he followed her as she broke away from the others. Both times her trail ended at a high place above Lake Superior. The snow was packed as

if she had paced for hours looking out over the glittering expanse toward the faint blue line on the horizon that was Isle Royale.

March came. Victor redoubled his efforts, laying traps every quarter mile along the shore and up on the ridge, where he'd seen the most sign.

One night, just before the ice began to break out in Superior, he was awakened from a dream of Ione by the sound of her voice. Howling rent the air, high and wild, as if a woman's crying and a child's scream had been rolled into one long, quavering voice. The sound was so desolate, so heavy with sorrow, that Vic laughed. He'd snared Black Wolf.

Morning was too long to wait. Arming himself with the Winchester, he ran into the night. Snow glowed under the evergreens. With the help of a flashlight and a three-quarter moon, he moved quickly along familiar trails toward the lake and the mournful wailing.

As he reached the places he'd set each trap, he slowed, grew cautious. One by one he found them empty. At length there were only two left. He'd set them scarcely fifteen yards apart on Ione's distant island.

When he was three hundred yards below the rocky point, the howling ceased. Silence rang in his ears, and though he walked softly from years of practice, every bootfall sounded like a rock slide to his ears.

Wind came off the lake, carrying with it a faint musky odor: the smell of wolves. It whispered in the trees like the brushing of furred bodies through low branches. Several times he thought he heard something following, sensed the barest movement on the path behind him. He shined his torch, but there was never anything there.

It came to him that Ione had called. That she cried knowing he'd think Black Wolf was trapped, that he would come. The thoughts brought the feel of black jaws closing on the soft flesh of his throat. Sweat broke out under his arms.

He fumed, would have run back down the trail, but it was swallowed in trees, such darkness he couldn't bring himself to plunge into it. Ahead, on the stony bluff, the moon was beckoning. He went on.

The trees thinned, and he stood at last in the light. Moonlight reflected off a hundred miles of lake ice, and it took his eyes a minute to adjust. At first the bluff appeared unmarked, the pure white of untrammelled snow. Then, slowly, as he watched, tracks began to emerge, hundreds of them crossing and recrossing the bluff, as if they'd been made with invisible ink that was just now appearing. They grew denser as they drew close to the trees, to his two remaining traps.

There, the black pooled, so dark at the center it was as if a hole had been dug to the middle of the earth. Black Wolf. Vic could just make out his outline in the snow. The wolf lay still as death, but a nightmare feeling was on Vic, and he didn't believe it. Closer, and he could see something was not right. At first he thought the black's left back leg was gone, torn off raggedly just below the joint where he had chewed at flesh, gnawed at bone, while Ione howled his pain and despair. So it was over. He had won.

Then he heard it: a faint swishing, like a woman sweeping with her hearth broom. *Swish. Swish. Swish.* Dropping the torch, he jerked his rifle to his shoulder and spun toward the noise.

Ethereal in silver, her back to the forest, was Ione. She sat upright, her tail brushing over the snow. Like a friendly lap dog's, her ears were erect and her tongue lolled from her mouth. She was smiling at him, a doggie grin.

"Ione," he said and lowered his rifle.

In that instant a hundred and twenty pounds hit him from behind, and he was sent sprawling. His left hand crippled, the .30-.30 was flung into the darkness. Snow filled his nose, his eyes. He rolled into a ball to protect his neck and face, but no teeth slashed, nothing. When he could find the courage, he pushed himself up to his knees and looked around. The trap was sprung where Black Wolf had lain, but it was empty. The black was gone. Wolves filled the bluff—six, seven, nine of them, sitting on their haunches, watching. Ione came forward at a foot pace, and Vic looked into her eyes. There was no connection this time. The pale depths dropped away into emptiness, and he felt a terrifying sense of falling into a pit that had no bottom.

The she-wolf growled. Reflexively, Vic threw his right arm up to protect his face. Ione's jaws closed on it gently, as if she meant only to hold him or lead him.

He dared to hope. "Ione," he whispered. The pressure began. He felt her bear down, piercing the skin, cutting his muscles and veins till her teeth were like a nutcracker on his forearm. A dull snap. Pain shot into his armpit. Afraid to cry out lest it bring the pack down on him, he swallowed his anguish. Ione loosed him, backed away. His hand fell useless, fingers unresponsive.

Clutching his broken arm beneath the crippled left hand, he rocked himself. Wolves ringed close, like dogs before a fire. Again Ione growled, the same insistent murmur as before. Victor began to cry.

Jumping at him almost playfully, she barked. He fell back on his broken arm and passed out. When he came to he was laughing. Relief that the nightmare was over. But the familiar ceiling of his cabin wasn't overhead. Stars pressed down, and the unforgiving cold of melting snow bit at his back.

He raised his head. They were still there, silent as the grave. Tears squeezed from under his eyelids, hot on the frozen flesh of his cheeks. "Please," he begged. Clenching his jaw against the pain, he pushed himself to his knees. Black Wolf edged closer. Now they would kill him. He scrabbled to his feet.

Ione barked twice, and several wolves melted away. Vic began backing toward the gap they left in the circle, toward the fringe of trees.

The wolves followed, step for step. He heard each paw as it struck the snow. Keeping him in a semicircle, they herded him toward the forest. "What do you want?" he heard himself crying. "For God sake, what do you *want*?"

As the trees closed around him, Ione sprang. Screaming, he stepped back. There was a clash of sound and a burst of pain. He had backed into the second of his traps. Metal jaws chewed into the bone above his right ankle.

Agony filled his body, broke out of his mouth. Curling himself in the snow, he flapped at the biting iron with ruined hands. Still he heard the delicate sweeping. Through a haze of tears he saw the wolves wagging their tails, feathered fur whisking over crusted snow.

"What? *What*?" he wailed.

Ione growled, soft, supplicating, and suddenly Vic knew what she wanted as plainly as if she had spoken. Whimpering, he doubled over his trapped foot. "Ione," he pleaded.

Swish. Swish. Swish.

Vic bent down, began chewing at his flesh, tearing with his teeth—anything to end the pain. Once he looked up from his grisly task. The she-wolf and the black, the others behind them single file, were running across the ice toward the ghostly outline of the island on the horizon. Mindlessly, he bent again to his work . . .

Two skiers found him after daybreak. Blood was crusted around his mouth, and he was unconscious. He woke in the hospital, but for many weeks he was out of his mind. The doctors saved his leg, but he insisted on walking with crutches, believing it to be gone from the knee down. Nurses said he cried for a woman named Ione. They called his ex-wife. Her name was Martha. She wouldn't come.

When he was released, he begged to be taken to Isle Royale to meet *her*, he said. But he was crazy, and he was broke, and no boatman would take him. Soon after, he disappeared.

That was 1948. In the summer, fishermen reported that a wolf pack was making its home on Isle Royale, eighteen miles out in Lake Superior. No one believed them until the following winter, when an airplane took photos of a healthy pack led by a black alpha male with a golden mate. There were three new pups.