

The Wolf With the Red Cap

The young man was a lick of flame dancing on the forest path as he hurried along in his crimson cloak, hood pulled over the eyes. His feet pounding the ground were the only noise among the trees save for distant birds calling each other. Sunlight poured through the immobile foliage overhead in glittering beams of gold that had insects spinning round and round, drunk with summer. It was so hot, the air felt thick and heavy even under the green canopy. Served him well, the young man thought, for hitting the road in the early afternoon, but he'd finished his chores early and wouldn't wait a moment longer. It was that day of the year for him, the day nothing could keep him in the village.

That thought gave him pause, and he slowed down, looking around nervously. Once the forest had been his best friend, but now it always seemed threatening to him, ever since the one time in his childhood. The one time he'd disobeyed his mother. He was close to the same place actually, where the trail climbed the shoulder of a hill, bending around a rock twice as tall as he was.

He never saw the wolf waiting for him until they were face to face, a snarling monster with yellow eyes straight out of forgotten nightmares.

"All alone in the forest, Red Cap?" asked the wolf. "Staying on the road is no defense, you know. That's where the wolves know to lie in ambush."

The animal's voice was the hoarse growl of a creature that by rights shouldn't have been able to speak. Through the haze of fear that drowned his mind, the young man slowly realized it was a female... and famished.

"A couple of small rabbits was all I could catch in a week," she continued. "Humans have been overhunting again. Do you know anything about it?"

"Ah... Our crops have been bad this spring. Please!" he blurted out in a panic.

That just seemed to make her angrier. "You destroyed our best hunting grounds and it's still not enough for you? Wasteful creatures. Maybe I should just eat your well-fed belly."

His own voice gained a hysterical edge. "You know what happened to the last wolf who tried that!"

"He was my father!" snapped the beast, and the young man barely had the time to lift his arm before her fangs sunk into his flesh. He yelled in pain and confusion as they fell on top of each other, and swung weakly at the wolf's head with his free arm. She let go only to tear at his flesh again, and he kicked the air, trying in vain to get away, to reach his pocket knife, anything. He was all bloodied now, those fangs ever closer to his throat, and he curled into a ball, smelling the wolf's foul breath...

Then he shoved with both legs on pure instinct, and the animal tumbled down the hill. There was a metallic snap... a howl of pain... silence.

It was a while before the young man could get up on his knees and elbows. He looked down the slope with apprehension; it wasn't so steep, but the stones and bushes covering it made for a treacherous descent. Down below lay the she-wolf, unmoving, and he entertained the notion of returning home with a trophy.

His injuries were starting to hurt by the time he reached the bottom, but that was nothing compared to the state in which he found the animal. She was still alive, half-closed eyes unable to focus, cuts and bruises all over her body. Worse, one of her hind legs was caught in a bear trap, while the other was tangled in the chain. Neither looked good.

Killing a defenseless creature was not in his power.

The she-wolf moaned and stirred as the young man examined the trap. He tensed, ready to run, but nothing else happened while he worked the steel jaws with a branch. He cast the cruel device aside and wiped his brow, leaving a red smear across it. Now what? She was too heavy for him to carry very far, and she would have tried to kill him again the moment she woke up. But if he left her there... No. It was her problem now. He'd done all he could already.

The young man ran away through the forest, chased by a cold wind that rolled dark clouds across the sky.

The sky was black by the time he made it to grandmother's house – he still thought of it as grandma's, after all those years. He fetched water from the nearby stream and set to tending his wounds, as best he could with one hand at a time. It had been a good idea to bring his bag along. At one point he went into the house to find a bowl. When he returned outside, he almost dropped it: the she-wolf was there, on the edge of the clearing, her breath a low, labored whine. "Help me... I'm so sorry..."

He just stood there, frozen. She had crawled the entire way, that much was clear, leaving a trail of blood, but her teeth were no less sharp than an hour before. "How can I trust you?"

"I wasn't thinking earlier. I need you." She rolled over, exposing her throat, and at last he came forward. The she-wolf twitched a few times while he cleaned and bound her wounded leg then applied a poultice to the other, but otherwise endured stoically. At one point, she even laughed softly.

"What's so funny?"

"You're doing a woman's work," she said.

"Well, yes. My mother didn't have any daughters. She had to pass on the trade to someone, and I was the runt of the litter."

The she-wolf snorted. "So was I."

Heavy raindrops were falling by the time he finished, and the drums of thunder were right overhead, deafening them. He didn't think twice about helping her inside.

They shared a meal of smoked meat, boiled with herbs to soften it a little, while the rain threatened to bring the roof down on their heads. It leaked in places, and no matter how they moved around, it seemed they always ended up close together. At long last it was time to sleep, and to the young man's amusement, the she-wolf snuck into bed with him. He welcomed the company; the storm outside could strike fear into any man's heart.

He woke up much later, in blessed silence, the small room bathed in moonlight. He stretched, guiding himself by the slow breath of his bedfellow. His fingers stroked not fur but soft, smooth skin. It was a young woman now in bed with him, wearing a wolf's skin for a cloak and little else.

"Wolves and humans are more alike than you think, Red Cap." Her sleepy whisper was music to his ears. "You'd know that if you didn't huddle in your village like frightened cubs."

He wanted to say something, but she turned and kissed him on the lips. "We have a law against killing people, you know. My father was insane. His packmates would have killed him anyway if your hunter hadn't."

"Would they accept me?" he asked.

She sighed. "Probably not. They hardly accept me anymore. Too weak. And your neighbors?"

"I don't know. They're set in their ways. But they don't have to know, do they?"

"Not until the children come, anyway," she grinned, and they hugged.