

The Wolf-Girl and the Hunter

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In those days forests covered the South of France. Gnarled oak trees fashioned a crepuscular world beneath their boughs. Conifers thrust upwards, leaving pine needle carpets between their evenly spaced trunks. In the spring, green light filtered through the newly grown leaves and in the autumn the branches were painted orange by the sunsets. The summer sun could be escaped in the cool damp air of the forest, and rabbits and deer provided sustenance for the small villages that clustered in spaces scooped out from the surrounding thickets. On this clear land, crops were grown and sheep were penned after days of foraging in the pastures. In winter, the long nights held the fear of wolves. Deep in the darkness of the trees, packs of wolves thrived, unseen by humans. When food was scarce, they emerged to prey on livestock and, sometimes, people. The cry of “Wolf!” held the promise of bloodshed and fear, of starvation and loss. Beasts of desolation, monstrous in size and appetite, wolves were hated and despised. In the local churches, the priests denounced them as devils full of the demonic fires of Beelzebub.

Great hunts were sent after these animals. The greatest of this blood-soaked band was known as the Hunter. Taller than any man, she dressed herself in male apparel. A thick leather jerkin, oiled until it was supple, was tied over her linen shirts, dyed the green of the forest. Her boots were doe skin, worn buttery smooth and lined with rabbit. They were tied with scarlet points. Wolves cannot see red, the Hunter said; only humans can see the colour of blood, only humans can take absolute pleasure in the beauty of killing another creature. She built herself a sprawling hunting lodge to house her acolytes, those who came to learn her skills. She trained her hounds by giving them wolf cubs to rip apart. She knew how to use the scent of the she-wolf to draw out her prey. She was as quiet as snowfall. Across her back she wore the skin of the largest beast she had ever caught – a male wolf, who it was said, ate six hundred sheep and ripped the throat from forty people, twenty of whom were children, in one year. Her thick hair hung like a pelt down her back and was entwined with the skin of the wolf. When she hunted, she pulled up the head of the animal so that its snout hung just above her eyes. Dressed like a Bersicker, the Hunter rode harder and wilder than any other. The wind screamed through her hair like a banshee. She dreamed of killing, of tearing off the skin of

the animal before it had grown cold and watching the raw flesh steam. The Hunter was known by human and by animal. Her name was whispered by parents to their children as a prayer of protection from the wolf. Her name echoed in the forests as the wolves howled their fear of her to one another.

And the wolves were scared. They knew the Hunter wanted them dead. From the undergrowth they watched the silver of her hunting knife slice through the bodies of their friends, family, lovers, children. But the hunger inside them drove them to the flocks of sheep and the soft flesh of the peasants. They hid and they ran and they hoped that the transformations would save them. The transformations - the change of shape from wolf to human, which heralded a respite of hunting activities. Throughout history, the humans had told stories of feral children, whom they believed had been brought up by animals. There were wild children who started empires, and those who escaped back into the wild, shedding their human skin as they ran. Sometimes they were brought up by humans, pining for their non-human families and never able to inhabit the bodies in which they found themselves.

For the wolf packs threatened by the Hunters, their saviour was a young male wolf with a mate and newly-born cubs. It was this wolf who woke up one day in human form. The wolf looked at the elongated paws and hairless pale skin of this new body and slowly crawled towards a tree, an ancient oak with low-hanging branches. Knowing that humans stood on two legs, the wolf rose onto the fleshy pads of these new feet using the branches most easily in reach. The pack stood around the transformed wolf. They could smell the faint scent of their former pack member who stood shivering by the oak tree. The forest stilled, even the leaves held their breath and remained unmoving as the birds fell silent. The human-wolf shuddered again and landed on all fours. The pack moved forward and then fell back when a young male wolf stood again by the old oak tree.

Over the next few months of spring, the wolf moved from human to wolf form: learning to stand and then walk and then run with a still-lupine speed and gait as the primroses and violets painted the floor underfoot. The first blood from between transformed legs, showed the wolf that the change of skin meant becoming female. The wolf had seen the she-wolves bleed. The wolf-girl washed away the blood in a stream so as not to confuse the other wolves. When the sound of hunting horns forced the pack to run into thickets spreading fear and confusion, the wolf-girl ran towards the humans and horses and dogs so that they would catch

glimpses of the feral child and, distracted, ignore the wolves. As the hunts moved through the forest, ripping cubs from their mothers, stories of the wolf-girl spread. Rumours gathered apace: the feral child was a young girl who had been stolen by gypsies and having escaped had been raised by a wolf pack. She was the disappeared daughter of a family from a neighbouring village, who had long been thought killed by the wolves. She was the illegitimate child of a priest abandoned in the forest. The interest of the nobility was raised and scholars flocked to see the wolf-girl, each desperate to make her their own. The hunts became search parties.

In her hunting lodge, the Hunter waited, frustrated that she was unable to hunt wolves for fear of scaring the wolf-girl. She knew she would be called on to hunt the girl herself. Time passed; the wolf-girl drew the hunts from the wolves and, as wolf, watched its cubs grow. The scholars grew tired of theorising late into the night and called on the nobility to help them. The lord who lived closest to the Hunter came forward. He visited the Hunter, offering vast rewards for the capture of the wolf-girl. Smiling at his eager face, she agreed. One morning, as the sun rose with the promise of summer, the Hunter took her finest huntsmen and bravest horses to find the wolf-girl. Knowing that the wolf-girl appeared when the hunts threatened the wolves, the Hunter drove her men towards the wolf den with her wolf skin pulled low on her brow and the hunting horn between her lips.

The wolf, asleep with cubs and mate, heard the horn and felt the first judders of transformation. The change complete, the wolf-girl ran towards the hunting horn stopping on the edge of a small clearing in which the Hunter waited with her huntsmen. At the sight of another half-wolf, half-human creature, for so the Hunter in the wolf-skin appeared, the wolf-girl paused. At first it was not clear if the Hunter was male or female, wolf or human. The wolf skin was from a strong, healthy wolf and was beautiful under the morning sky. The Hunter smelt of clean, fresh sweat. The wolf-girl was filled with both desire and an urge to growl at this intruder and was not sure from which part of herself, wolf or girl, each emotion emanated. The Hunter dismounted and, taking a cloak of soft crimson velvet, she approached the young, naked woman. Transfixed, the wolf-girl did not move as the downy material enveloped her. Nor did she resist as she was placed on the Hunter's horse, which whinnied and shied at carrying this lycanthropic creature. Instead, the wolf-girl breathed in the scent of this dangerous human and let herself be carried out of the forest, the warmth of the Hunter at her back.

The wolf-girl did not run away. She knew the Hunter and the danger the Hunter posed to her pack, her mate, her cubs. To run might lead the Hunter to her pack but to stay meant that the wolf-girl was not able to distract the other hunters. She was frozen. At the hunting lodge she allowed the hands of serving maids to pass over her. Washing away the dirt of the forest, brushing away the leaves of the ancient oak tree where she first stood as a human, clipping the nails that she had used to rip into the small animals her pack had brought her when she could not hunt herself. She let herself be dressed in a long silk gown and doe-skin slippers which were tied with the same scarlet points as the Hunter's. And perhaps she only noticed a little how gentle were the hands that dressed her and how smooth the silk felt against her skin and how when she moved her gown susurrated like the leaves of the forest. Once prepared she was taken to the great hall of the hunting lodge where she sat by the Hunter on a raised dais. Their chairs were made of oak polished until it shown like tiger's eye. At the tables before them the Hunter's men sat gazing at the wolf-girl. They brought a mirror for the wolf-girl to look into. She had never seen herself transformed. In the mirror she saw a young woman with green eyes, brown as a berry, whose hair was thick and faceted, made up of the colours of a wolf pelt. But the first night at the hunting lodge, the wolf-girl paced the edge of the Hunter's bedroom, panting and whining until she could stand no more. Then she crawled to the door, clawing at the wood. After she had fallen asleep her head pressed into the crack between door and wall, the Hunter picked her up and took her to bed. The wolf-girl woke with the Hunter's arms around her and her face pressed into the crook of the Hunter's neck. After the next full moon, she stopped trying the door.

Hearing that the Hunter had captured the wolf-girl, the local lord arrived to claim ownership of the beautiful foundling. He beseeched the Hunter and then grew angry at her refusals; the Hunter laughed and reminded him that she had been paid to capture the wolf-girl but not to give her away. She belonged to the Hunter. To this end, the Hunter paid for a collar to be made for the wolf-girl. It was beautiful: fine thongs of leather interwoven with pure gold links designed to fit perfectly on her neck. On the front of the collar was a small gold plate engraved with the address of the Hunter and the name given to the wolf-girl, Arduinna. The chain that came with the collar was never used by the Hunter but hung on a hook in her bedroom where it could be seen by the wolf-girl as she shared the Hunter's bed.

Once the noblemen left, the scholars arrived. They flocked to examine the wolf-girl. They watched her walk marvelling at her lupine movements. They made her run after small animals like dogs hare-coursing in order to measure her speed. They checked her for self-inflicted bites and scratches. They gave her food on plates coaxing her to use a knife and fork. For each trick she learned, they praised her. If she ignored orders she was hit with a cane, not hard, but so that she learnt to respect her betters. Finally they taught her to speak. They started with her name. Lamenting the complex appellation the Hunter had given her. Arduinna, Arduinna, Arduinna, Arduinna, Arduinna. Good girl. The first things she learnt to say properly were lies. Her human name. Her human history. Yes, she was left in the forest. Yes, the wolves brought her up. No, she could not remember her family. Yes, she was grateful to be rescued. The wolf-girl knew if the scholars knew the truth then their next experiments would involve knives and pain and blood, which she now knew was as red as the velvet cloak she wore when the nights were cold. She learnt their language, parroting their phrases. They were impressed. They wrote lengthy tracts about her existence. She was a marvel, a miracle. She learnt to forget the wolf. She forgot the warm smell of her den. She learnt the smell of clean linen and scented oils. She forgot how to run with ease instead slipping in her fine slippers. She learnt to accept praise with a smile and a nod of her head. She learnt that raw meat was too close to the animal it had been. She learnt that fire burnt despite its hypnotic effect. She learnt to be patient when the Hunter went out on her horse. The Hunter was proud of her Arduinna, a child of the wilderness made tame.

Summer came. The wolf-girl slept in the Hunter's arms. The windows were open in hopes of attracting a breath of air to alleviate the desperate heat. The Hunter had been out all day. She had returned home once sun had set, bringing with her the scent of horses and the chase. Exhausted, the Hunter slept deeply immovable in her repose. The wolf-girl fretted, too hot and distracted by the full moon which seeped under her eyelids. And then the sound of howls. Close by. The wolf-girl wakes up and goes to the window. The howls are too close and too familiar. They are young howls, calling for someone to help them. The wolf-girl feels sick fear, frantic energy rising in her. She goes to the door – no longer locked, as the Hunter trusts her not to run away – and moves into the corridor. Running now, her legs remember speed unhampered by skirts. Down the stairs, through the hall and out into the night. No other person is awake. No human disturbed by the sounds of the wolves' distress. Past the stables where the horses whinny at her approach; they remember what she was. Across the courtyard

to the outhouses. The pads of her feet, grown vulnerable from her human shoes, are torn by the sharp stones underfoot. Drops of crimson blood stain the ground. The sounds are louder here, more painful to her ears.

She reaches the first building and opens the door. She has never been in here before having been kept safely in the house or in the well-tended gardens. Inside there are knives gleaming coldly in the moonlight. They are clean and ordered in size. They bear no resemblance to the knife she uses for her food. These are for killing and rendering bodies into manageable pieces. Furs for sale, feet for decoration, viscera for the dogs, bone marrow for glue, and heads for mounting. And above her, those heads look down in serried ranks. The glass eyes flat and emotionless. The wolf-girl can smell the history of the animals: their place within the pack, their age. She smells too fresh blood and moves towards the carcass hanging on the furthest wall, blood draining from the wound on its neck. It is her mate. Next to the corpse on the floor is a cage in which she finds her pups ready for the hounds. They have gone silent. Now they cower in the corner, pissing themselves with fear. The wolf-girl reaches forward and opens the cage. She tries to coax them forward but they no longer recognise her. They will not escape until she is gone. She leaves, stumbling towards the edge of the forest.

The wolf-girl breaks. The wolf returns to her memories. She smells her dead mate and her cubs. She goes on all fours on a patch of moss and begs to transform. Her nails dig into the ground and she screams into the forest. She does not change. Her body has forgotten how. She is barely human but no longer wolf. She thinks of her wolf skin, her beautiful wolf skin. And she thinks of the wolf skin the Hunter has hanging in her bedroom by the wolf-girl's unused chain. The wolf-girl returns to the Hunter's bedroom where she finds the Hunter still asleep. The pain of the wolf-girl and the sound of her screams have not touched the Hunter. She is used to the sound of anguish. It is the sound of death. Calmly, the Hunter sleeps on. She does not stir as the wolf-girl takes the hunting knife from the Hunter's cape. It is only when her throat is slit that she wakes and looks up into the wolf-girl's face where, for a second as she hears the blood gurgling in her throat, she sees the wolf in the young woman's eyes. Once the Hunter stops breathing, the wolf-girl stands and moves towards the wolf-skin. It looks like the remains of her old identity. The wolf-girl picks it up and drapes it around herself trying to use the Hunter's blood to stick it to her skin. But it slips down, again and again. Back on all fours, the wolf-girl wraps the skin around herself and keens her pain into the dead wolf's muzzle. It is here the Hunter's servants find the wolf-girl the next day.

There is uproar. The Hunter's men use the chain hanging on the Hunter's bedroom wall to restrain the wolf-girl. No-one is sure what to do: time and money have been invested in this curiosity. The scholars and the noblemen take her to a hunting tower in the forest, leaving her in the highest room. Monks push food through a flap in the door. Some days it is food fit for a human, some days for a wolf. She can no longer distinguish between the two. For a price, the locals let people into the tower to look at her through a hole in the door. She does not know when people are there. She knows she had a mate and cubs. She had a home. On dark nights, when the moon hangs in the firmament like a pearl on a necklace she calls for her missing family. She howls until her throat is hoarse. She howls and pulls at the matted lengths of her hair. She howls as though she could shatter the moon.