

Fear Makes The Wolf Look Bigger

By

Martin Gill

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“Alas for those girls who've refused the truth:

The sweetest tongue has the sharpest tooth.”

Jack Zipes

Little Red Riding Hood and Other Classic French Fairy Tales

The lass looked as sorry as can be.

Drenched. Nothing but a pale linen underdress to ward her from the drizzle, wet through, clinging to her skin. Straw blonde hair plastered lank to her face, all unbraided and tangled. She was shivering, looking desperate to hug herself warm, but the shackles on her wrists held her hands high above her head so she almost had to stand on tiptoes. Bare feet splattered with mud.

Kai trudged up the hill towards her.

She stopped a few paces short and stared for a while. Shook her head and hawked a glob of spit into the wet grass. She muttered old words in a tongue few cared to speak anymore before stepping between the low, weatherworn stones ringing the crown of the hill. She knew better than to risk upsetting the forgotten gods of the old places, no matter how weakened with neglect they may be nowerdays. A little respect goes a long way, or so the Druid taught her long ago.

“This is stupid.”

“Leave me alone.” The lass’s voice was reedy. You could hear the cold in her, the chatter of her teeth. But her eyes were defiant. She glared at Kai.

“No. You are coming with me.” Kai pulled a dirk from her belt. Steel glinted in the setting sun.

Down in the valley a wolf howled.

Kai froze.

“See,” said the lass. “Wolves are coming. You should run.”

Kai ignored the advice. She cocked her head on one side and listened, her mouth half open, eyes unfocused. The wolf howled again, mournful, dulled by the thick green pines lining the riverbank below. Something in the howl didn’t sound right.

“That ain’t no wolf.” Kai looked back at the girl, staring above her head to the shackles and to the heavy iron chain binding them to the stout wooden post. She looked down at the dirk in her hand and huffed. She slid the slim blade back into its sheath. “Couldn’t have used a rope, could they? They done you up good and proper.”

“That’s the point.” The lass glowered scornfully down at Kai.

“Don’t you want me to cut you free?”

“No. Just piss off and leave me to the wolf.”

Kai thrust her hands on her hips and gawped. Lost for words, but not for long. “You actually want to be sacrificed?”

“Yes. And you’re ruining it.”

“But...”

“But nothing. I’ll go to the Good Mother pure and cleansed and will be reborn blessed.”

“You don’t really? Do you? Really think that?” All Kai got in return was a glare. She went on undaunted. She’d faced worse. “You’re half naked, freezing cold, I can see everything the Good Mother gave you through what’s left of your dress and you’re as like to die from frostbite as from the wolf devouring you. Besides, there’s naught but gristle on you. I doubt he’d want you.”

Kai turned away and gazed back down the hill. Mist smeared the horizon, curling round the tips of the tall redwoods lining the burn. The faint rush of the river where it plunged over Carrac Falls. It was a long way back down the hill, and longer still if Kai returned without the lass.

The wolf howled again.

Kai sighed.

“It’s coming.” The lass sounded petulant. Triumphant at being right.

“It’s not a wolf.” Kai didn’t look back. Her gaze never left the treeline far below. There, she saw it.

No, not it.

Them.

Three of them broke cover, moving in a low, loping run. Shaggy mannish figures with an awkward gait. Arms too long. Hard to make out much detail at this distance. They headed for the trail, switchbacking their way up the steep hill.

“Not wolves.”

Lost from sight, hidden by a jagged escarpment of rocks, jutting slabs thrust from purple-brushed heather stubble.

Kai turned back to the lass and shrugged the satchel off her back. Nimble fingers worked rawhide thongs. Unrolling a sheepskin, laying it out on the damp grass. Steel glinted within. Kai grabbed the hatchet, a short, wicked tool with a worn ash handle and a stubby blade.

“Hold still.” She reached up and grabbed the lass’s wrist with one hand, hammering the blunt face of the axe against the black iron hasp holding the shackles firm to the post. Sparks. The lass yelped in shock.

“Leave me.” The lass’s voice was shrill. Kai ignored her. Struck again. A sharp metal clang echoed. Howls from below in reply. Kai kept hitting until the hasp sheared. She snorted in satisfaction and grabbed the chain linking the shackles, hauling it free of the broken loop. The lass staggered forwards, bare feet skidding on slick grass. Kai held onto the chain, tugging at it so the lass didn’t fall.

“What do they call you?”

The lass thought about it for a heartbeat, looking as if she wanted to lie, or that her name was somehow precious, not to be given out to strangers lightly. “Ethnie.”

“Well Ethnie, can you fight?”

Ethnie’s eyes were black orbs. Her glance flicked to the hatchet in Kai’s hand.

“No.”

“Well learn.” Kai flipped the axe, catching it right below the head. She thrust it towards Ethnie, who shook her head. Held up her hands and rattled the chain bound tight to her willowy wrists. She made no motion to take the axe.

“Stay there,” said Kai, pointing to the post. “Don’t get killed.”

The howls were closer now. Hungry. Urgent.

Kai thrust the axe into her belt. She reached up and drew a thong from round her neck, pulling her matted braids together, tying them tight. Hand on the hilt of her sword. Her mother’s sword. It hissed into the air, a snake sound. Adder, it was named. Fast and deadly. Afternoon sun trapped in the whorled pattern-welds. Fine steel.

A deep breath.

No matter how many times she did this, her heart always hammered. She tried to remember what Anthon used to say, before he turned black-hearted traitor. Footwork and agility. Speed and poise. And what her Da used to tell her, though mostly he told her not to be such a damn fool and not to get into fights in the first place. But there was one lesson she clove to, one which always lived in her, an ember of hope when she faced such fell things.

Fear makes the wolf look bigger.

And so they came.

Over the crest of the hill, spreading wide. Black and shaggy and howling. Panting from the run.

Ethnie screamed.

Kai grinned.

Closer and closer. Then Ethnie's voice, indignant.

"They're not animals."

She was right. They weren't.

"Oh they are," said Kai. "Just not the kind you were expecting."

Men. Three of them wrapped in wolf's clothing. Flea-bitten furs lashed to their arms and legs. Crude masks of hessian and hide. Ears and teeth rent from real beasts to make mummer's costumes. Blades in their hands and murder in their eyes.

They howled.

"Reavers." Kai spat. Her heart pounded. Blood coursing with nervous energy. She itched to attack, leap into the fray, but they had her at a disadvantage. Scorn was her ally here. She folded her arms and forced a smirk, like how Lady Gloria would look at them. Worthless turds beneath her contempt.

They slowed and halted, for few men, even those dressed as wolves, ever wants to be the first into a fight. They stood beyond the fey ring, not quite daring to cross the stones. Short and pale, black-haired and hungry, they looked like Cruinthie, superstitious mountain-folk with long memories. Memories of a time when the Dreugar who made this circle still murdered folks to their stag-god here.

The middle one looked Kai up and down like she was horseflesh to be bought.

"Look at her. Wee slip of a lass."

"Little don't mean helpless." Kai squared up to him, arms folded across her chest, sword hidden behind her.

"We came for the girl."

"She was expecting wolves."

"We are wolves, lassie."

"No. You're dead. Now walk away and we're done."

Ha spat a raspy laugh.

"Then we'll take youse both."

Kai started moving before he'd even finished. Closed half the distance to him before he'd even realised what was happening. Lashed out with adder, a glittering arc, almost hacking his head clean off. He was fast though. Ducked, slipped, fell flat on his arse as she slashed air.

She had the hatchet in her hand before either of the other two woke up to what was happening. Hurlled it hard at the one on the left, pivoting from the hip to put her whole body into it. She followed right through, letting momentum take her round. Not even looking if the axe hit. A wet scream told her all she needed to know.

The one of the right was running at her now, rusted shortsword held high above his head.

She ducked and rolled.

He went straight over her, legs whipped from under him as she barrelled into him and rolled to a halt. He crashed face-first into the heather.

She was up and on guard as the leader came back at her, howling his wolf-call as he closed, brutal looking axe in his hand. Notched shaft, fire-blackened blade honed to silvery keenness at the edge.

“Bitch,” he grunted.

She sidestepped his clumsy swing. Glanced round, knowing the other would be on her in seconds.

“What you supposed to be?” She danced back as he swung again, the bulk of his furry armour slowing him. “Werewolf?”

He growled in answer.

She let him swing again, let the weight of the axe take him ever so slightly off balance before stepping in close, raking Adder up across his chest. The furs took the worst of it, but he grunted in pain. She stepped past him, spun and hacked her blade across the back of his leg as he staggered forwards.

Then the other one crashed into her.

Lifted her right off her feet. Drove her back a few paces before his grip slide away and they both crashed down hard. An unseen rock hammered Kai's ribs. He was on her, hands grabbing her sword arm. She lashed out, trying to hook a leg round him as he squirmed his way up her. Kicked his wolf mask off. He snarled. His hands holding her arm to the floor. Shaking her hand like a madman until Adder slid from her grip.

Shooting pain in her head.

Stars blossoming.

Hot spray of blood.

His forehead came away bloody where he'd battered his head into hers.

“Ow.”

She saw two of him. She lashed out and kicked one of him, boot in the face. He grunted and rolled off. Her sword was gone, slithering somewhere in the heather. She needed a weapon. Hand closed around the rock she'd fallen on. Smooth and round, like a river rock. What was a river rock doing at the top of a hill? No mind. Firm and heavy.

She slammed the river rock into the side of his head.

He stopped moving.

Kai spat blood. Staggered to her feet. Looked around. Ethnie was pale and gasping, hiding behind the post, shaking hands clutching it as if it might save her. The three wolfmen lay bleeding. She walked over to the one with her axe in him, unsteady on her feet still. Bent down and wrenched the axe out of his shoulder.

He howled, though no wolf-howl this time.

She kicked him hard in the face and he shut up.

She glared at Ethnie for a moment before walking back to the leader. He was crawling away from her, making for the edge of the fey ring, a hapless attempt to flee back to the pinewoods. Blood smearing the heather, a gory slug trail.

She ground her boot into his calf.

He howled as well.

She rolled him over. His face was wan, his eyes wide with fear.

“What do they call you?” She let the hatchet dangle at her side, a gentle threat.

“Runulf.”

“Well Runulf, this is your lucky day. Tell me who sent you and I won't kill you.”

“What do you mean who sent him?” Kai looked over her shoulder. Ethnie had dared slip from the sanctuary of the post. She approached Kai with hesitant steps. “The Laird chained me here to be sacrificed to the beast.”

“This ain’t the beast.” Kai glared down at Runulf where he squirmed in the dirt. She levelled Adder’s keen blade at his throat. “Well? Who sent you?”

“Was Duglad’s idea.” Runulf’s eyes stared at the bright blade. “There’s stories of the Wulver taking folks. Eating them. When Duglad heard he thought up a plan.”

“A plan to dress as wolves?”

“Aye. Scare the life out of folks. And it works.”

“So you are what? Reavers?”

Runulf hesitated, seemingly afraid the truth might earn him more pain. “Aye. Though piss-poor ones until we made these masks.”

“So you’re saying the Wulver ain’t real?”

“It’s real alright,” said Ethnie. Kai turned to face her. Ethnie held her gaze for a moment, as if defying Kai to contradict her, before looking down.

“What aren’t you telling me?”

“Nothing.” Ethnie’s eyes remained lowered.

Kai frowned.

“Real or not, these three idiots have been taking advantage of folks with their costumes, and you sacrificing your skinny arse to it or to them won’t do none of us no good.”

“But I was chosen.”

“Well I’m un-choosing you. Not having no one sacrificed while I can do something about it. Now let’s get you somewhere warm before you freeze.”

Thunder rumbled. It crashed and echoed from the mountains, startling grouse to flight. Kai gazed through the downpour, struggling to find a landmark she recognised.

“This is stupid.” She kicked at a fallen branch. Rain dripped down her neck in chill rivulets. She smeared her sodden hair out of her eyes.

“You said you knew the way.”

“I did. But it’s dark and the storm’s got me turned around.”

“Some rescue this has turned out to be.”

Kais frayed temper snapped. “You want me to drag you back up the hill and lash you to that post again? Let the Wulver take you?”

“What if I said yes?”

“Then I’d knock you senseless and carry you somewhere dry myself. What is wrong with you? Do you want to die?”

“No.” Ethnie shook her head. “But I don’t want anyone else to die if I can do something about it. I was chosen to be given to the Wulver. So if that stops it from murdering others, then that’s a price I’ll pay.”

“This makes no sense. The Lore tells it that the Wulvers are peaceable things. They like folks. Protect them, even.”

“Well something’s been killing folks. Eating sheep. All up and down the Rath Burn. Folks are terrified.”

“I know. I’ve heard the tales. That’s why I came. I just don’t understand why.”

Ethnie shrugged, subject dealt with. “So which way do we go?”

“Downhill.” Kai pointed. “Dungrask is on the river, and we’re still up in the hills, so we have to go down. Come on.”

They set off down the hill, weaving their way between the firs, the wet forest floor sprung with a spongy brown bed of decaying pine needles. Gnarly fingers of dead branches sprouted from the ground to clutch at them, tagging at Ethnie’s dirty dress. The path was long gone. The forest canopy held back the worst of the rain, but the gloom was thick. Colours were fading. Night was close.

Kai fumbled her way over a fallen log, stumbling as Adder’s scabbard snarled on a rotting branch. She cursed, slipping sideways to land in an ungraceful heap. Ethnie clambered over the log and held out her hand to Kai. The chains still rattled at her wrists. Kai reached for the outstretched hand, then stopped.

Ethnie’s eyes were black pools in the dark. Her head was cocked on one side, like she was listening for something. Lost in some waking dream. Then she looked back at Kai.

“We need to run.”

“What?”

Ethnie reached down and grabbed Kai’s hand. Hauled her to her feet.

“Just run.”

Ethnic bolted.

Kai snapped her head round, scanning the forest. What had spooked the girl? Her heart beat faster. Tight tension across her shoulders. The itch, the feeling she got, she always got when...

A wolf howl.

A high, discordant note full of sadness. Of melancholy. Of hunger.

No man, this wolf.

Kai darted after Ethnic. Branches slashed her face, snagged her braids, lashed her as she ran. She careened off a tree trunk, shoulder slamming hard. She staggered sideways, somehow keeping her footing. Kept running.

Another howl tore the forest air behind her.

Closer.

The ground dropped away. Kai fell, tumbling headlong into the gloom. She screamed, landed hard and rolled. All sense of up and down lost. The world spun. She hammered into something. It broke under her impact. A sapling or a rotting tree, yielding, yet painful. The crack of wood and the thump like a punch in the ribs. Her head slammed into the ground. A lurching feeling in her stomach like she needed to puke.

Then she stopped.

Pain. Burning hot pain lanced her leg.

She'd taken a beating or two in her time. Been stabbed more than once. Knew what it felt like. It was never good, not the kind of thing you got used to.

That's how this felt.

She eased herself up from the ground and looked down at her leg. Her eyes confirmed what the pain already told her. The jagged spar of a cracked branch jutted from her calf. Slick with blood, black and steaming in the gathering night. She ground her teeth, biting down a scream as she gripped her leg. No time to waste. Whatever was following was hard on her. She wrenched her leg upwards, yanking it off the jutting branch.

Pain wracked her body.

Eyes watering, she staggered to her feet. Managed two steps before her leg gave way. She crashed down hard, elbows and knees driving into the dirt. Behind her tree branches snapped and cracked as something

big muscled its way through the forest. She risked a glance over her shoulder. A shape loomed, bulky and bearish, black against the shadowy woods.

It snarled.

The scent of her blood must be ripe in the air.

Kai scabbled forwards, hands clawing through wet mulched pine needles and broken branches, the detritus of the forest floor, rich with a loamy scent of rot and animals. Desperate for somewhere to hide. Expecting fangs in her back at any moment.

Then she saw it.

Gnarled roots jutting from the earth. A vast, upended tree, torn down by some savage winter storm. A massive, broken thing with a trunk as wide as her arm span. She scabbled towards it like a wounded dog, hand and knees, her lame leg a deadweight dragging her down. She rolled over, squeezing beneath the felled trunk, squirming her way down into the dirt, into the dank void beneath. She dragged her leg in after her and froze.

Her breath came in ragged gasps. She forced herself to tame it, willing her hammering heartbeat to slow. Pulling the thong from her hair, she lashed it round her leg right below the knee. Anything to quell the bleed. No time for stitching and binding, that would have to wait.

The creature howled again. Close now.

Heavy, padding footsteps crunching over broken twigs. The rustle of pine fronds as it pressed its way through the trees. The shallow pant of its breath and the snort as it sniffed the air, perhaps catching her scent. Kai couldn't see much from where she'd wedged herself. She'd managed to trap Adder beneath her, and even if she'd been able to lay a hand on her hilt, Kai doubted she had enough space to even bare the blade. She pulled the short dirk from her belt instead, clutching it to her chest in both hands like a talisman.

Her head snapped round as a low, rumbling breath sounded. A snuffling snort as the creature groped for her scent. Its head must be low to the ground. She felt the plume of its breath brush her, a rank, meaty odour. She caught a glimpse of fangs and a baleful, yellow eye.

Kai yelped in shock. And wished she hadn't.

It snarled and lashed at her, a shaggy paw groping beneath the rotting trunk like a cat toying for a mouse. Curved claws tore deep gouges into the log. Kai jabbed at it, slashing it with the dirk. Failed to wound it, just enraged it. Growling in anger, its claw swiping further into Kai's fast-dwindling refuge. One barbed talon caught her, rending a gash through her leathers, scoring a hot line of pain across her shoulder.

She stabbed again. The dirk bit deeper. Drew blood.

The creature howled. It must have leapt onto the log, because the whole trunk shook, dislodging a filthy rain of dirt and splinters and crawling bugs. A worrying crunch from above and the log dropped, pressing down onto Kai. She wedged her arms above her chest, pointlessly trying to hold up the massive weight. It jumped, dislodging the log, crushing it further down into the muddy earth.

Kai slithered sideways, worming her way from under the log. Better to face the thing and be rent apart by its claws than ground into the dirt like a bug.

“Hey.”

Someone was shouting. The voice made no sense. There couldn't be anyone else here deep in the woods in the dark.

“Over here.”

A woman's voice.

Kai grabbed at the rain-slick roots, desperate to pull herself free. The weight of the log bore on her, jamming her down into the mud. Her hands slipped. No purchase, no grip. Panic stabbed at Kai, muddling her. Any moment and the beast would be on her.

“Yes, you. Come on. Come and eat me, you bastard.”

It was Ethnie's voice. What was she doing?

The creature snarled and must have sprung at Ethnie, because the weight of the log lessened. Elbows in the dirt, Kai hauled herself clear of the pit. Ethnie tumbled over the log, landing in a heap. She sprung back up and grabbed at Kai, hauling her to her feet.

“Come on.” Ethnie dragged at Kai.

“The wolf?”

“Just come on. Run.”

They leant on one another in the dark.

“Slow down. It might be dangerous.”

The ramshackle shack nestled in the lee of a low cliff, some rocky escarpment marking a clearing in the woods, cut by homesteaders long ago. No hearthfire burned. If anyone was home, they were huddled sorry and cold in the wet night, too poor or destitute to even light a fire. The turf roof sagged.

“More dangerous than what’s after us?” Ethnie glanced back over her shoulder as she spoke.

“We’ve lost it for now.” Kai pushed herself away from Ethnie, struggling to stand on her own. “Just let me go ahead and make sure.”

Kai slid Adder from her sheath. Rain beaded on the slim blade, running in a rivulet down the groove of the fuller. She smeared damp hair for her eyes and started towards the bothy. Her injured leg betrayed her, bucking beneath her weight. Ethnie grabbed her before she fell. “You’re in no state. We’ll go together.”

The door was half rotten, hanging limp on wet leather hinges. Kai pushed it open, Adder held before her, silvery in the pitch black.

The place reeked of decay.

“Ain’t no one home.” Kai hobbled to a low cot, sinking onto the dirty blankets and oily sheepskins jumbled there. She stretched out her leg, wincing with pain. She couldn’t help laughing.

“What’s so funny?” Ethnie poked around the hovel, searching for kindling dry enough to start a fire as Kai fumbled at her boot.

“Just remind myself of my old Da.”

“How’s that?”

“His leg ain’t what it used to be neither. Always limping and wincing every time he sits. I wonder if that’s my fate.”

“Well let me see what I can do to help. Let me light a fire and I’ll take a look.”

Kai continued to peel off her clothes while Ethnie scraped flint to steel, knocking sparks onto straw, blowing and coaxing a flame from what wood she could salvage from round the ashen hearth. Kai rolled back her treads, prodding at the gash in her calf. Dark blood oozed, almost congealed now, but still sticky and damp. Pain flared when she prodded the wound. It needed cleaning and stitching.

Flames began to lick at damp logs. They hissed and crackled, reluctant to give up any warmth to the room. Steamy smoke curled in the hearth. Ethnie found an old iron pot beneath the forgotten detritus of the hut.

“I’ll go and get some water. Look at your leg.”

Kai frowned at her, teeth gritted at the pain. “Why are you being so reasonable all of a sudden?”

“What do you mean?”

“Well before you looked ready to murder me if I’d given you the chance. Wound up tight as a hare in a trap because I cut you down from that stake. Now, well now you want to help me?”

“You’re hurt.”

Kai glanced down at her leg. Pale flesh smeared dark and gory with blood. She nodded. “Aye, I am.”

“So I want to help.”

“Just tell me something first.”

“What do you want to know?”

“Why did you want to be sacrificed? Really?”

Ethnie shifted the weight on her feet, a shuffling, nervous looking little gesture, but one Kai didn’t miss. What was she hiding? Ethnie seemed to think about it for a moment, as if weighing up some hidden truth before she spoke. She sighed, shoulders slumping.

“You wouldn’t understand.”

“Try me.” Kai sat up straight, shuffling her way to the edge of the cot. “I’ve seen more’n you might imagine, you know?”

Ethnie set the iron pot down, her hands curling the shackles round her wrists, fidgeting as she spoke.

“It was my duty.”

“To be killed?”

“No. To protect the people of Dungrask.”

“From the Wulver? How would getting chewed on by a man-wolf save anyone?”

“The Wulver doesn’t kill. Least ways not people, not if it can help it.” Ethnie took a shuffling step towards the fire. The flickering flames lit her against the dark of the hovel. Pale as the dead. Her face was steeped in worry. “It helps folks. Brings them food when winter takes all from them. Watches against the fell things that stalk the night.”

“How do you know all this?”

“My mother taught me. And hers before her.”

Kai shivered, though not from the cold. A feeling like spiders walking across the nape of her neck. Her hand moved ever so slowly over the sheepskins, fingers curling round Adder's hilt. Just in case. Her solid, purposeful weight always a comfort in dark places.

She had to ask. She didn't think it would be true. Surely she would have realised before now. Smelt the taint on Ethnie. But...

"Are you a wicca?"

Ethnie laughed. Genuine. Not the laugh of a liar. Heartfelt amusement at Kai's question. "No. Oh no, nothing like that."

"Then what?" Kai hadn't fathomed the truth yet, of that she was sure.

Ethnie's reply was snatched from her by a splintering crash as the door burst inwards, smashed to shards as a hulking black shape barrelled into the hut. Teeth and claws and a gaping, growling maw. A bluster of wind and driven rain. The flame guttered, plunging the room into shadow. Ethnie screamed. The thing flung her through the air, slamming her with a backhanded blow. She hit the wall hard, bouncing to the dirt floor in a cascade of breaking pots and cracking wood.

Kai was on her feet, Adder snaking into the air.

Pain lanced through her leg, threatening to overwhelm her. She ground her teeth and lashed out, slashing her blade in a bright arc before her as the beast reared. She felt Adder bite flesh, the impact juddering her arm. The beast roared defiance. Meaty breath far too close for comfort.

Kai had nowhere to go.

She spun to her right, shoulder thumping into a post. She ducked behind it as the beast swung a claw at her, talons like a bear's claws gouging deep lines in the stout wooden beam. She jabbed Adder hard, a fast thrust at the thing's face. She felt the strike and again the beast snarled in pain.

It darted at her, fast, despite its size. Stooped over, unable to stand to its full height in the hut. Sickly yellow eyes the colour of the harvest moon. It lashed at her. Raking claws caught her as she ducked, searing lines of pain across her back. The impact staggered her, sent her tumbling to the floor.

She rolled and came up fast, fast enough to thrust Adder into the thing as it pounded into her, lifting her bodily from her feet to smash her against the hovel wall. Crushing the wind from her lungs. Part of the wall came down, and the roof with it in a shower of wood and turf. The force of the beast's charge carried them both onwards, tumbling out of the hovel and into the storm.

Kai landed clear of the thing and rolled.

She grabbed for Adder but the blade was gone. She rolled to her knees, oblivious of the pain until she tried to stand. Her leg gave way. A tightness in her ribs as if the thing gripped her still, crushing her to its shaggy chest in a deathly hug. Something was broken. A jabbing pain in her side dropped her. Her left arm hung numb and useless.

The beast loomed, shaggy and black against the storm.

Massive.

“Fear makes the wolf look bigger.” Kai muttered it through pain-clenched teeth, but it didn’t help. An icy hand gripped her heart.

She was about to die.

Lightening arced across the sky. Rain lashed down in broad sheets. Spires of the forest pines silhouetted against the momentary-bright sky. She caught the silver glint of Adder’s hilt jutting from the beast’s flank. Black blood matted fur.

It roared her death.

Then Ethnie was leaping on it, high onto its back. Screaming from the depths of her lungs. Looping the chain still binding her wrists round its neck. Kai blinked blood and rain from her eyes, fighting the pain to try and stand. The thing would tear the lass apart. She had to help.

Something in Ethnie’s howling changed. No longer the shrill screams of a terrified girl. A savage, animal tone now, guttural and menacing. The beast reached behind its head, all thoughts of Kai gone. It grabbed Ethnie by the hair, hauled her over its head to hurl her down, rag-doll rough in the dirt beside Kai.

She bounced back to her feet and snarled at the beast.

Kai scabbled sideways as a change gripped Ethnie. Her face contorted. A grimace of pain, of anger. Eyes shot with yellow, burning now like pale lamps in the night. Head twitching. Spasms wracked her body.

The beast roared at her, but something in what gripped Ethnie cowed it.

Then fur began to sprout. Ethnie’s limbs twisted. Hands became paws, nails became talons. Her pale dress was torn to shreds as her thin body bulked. She stood, Ethnie no longer. She snapped the iron chain and pounced.

Kai gazed in fascination as the two beasts tore at each other. Some rational part of her brain, perhaps her Da’s voice, told her to get to the hovel. Take shelter. Hide. But she didn’t.

They fought like the wild things they were, claws and teeth, snarls and howls. Ethnie was smaller, faster, uninjured. She ducked and rolled, talons flashing, teeth bared. The beast lashed at her, ponderously slow

now in comparison. Ethnie darted beneath a wide blow, her teeth gouging the beast's flesh, tearing its shoulder to red ruin. It tried to bear its weight onto her, force her to the dirt where it might gain some advantage from its bulk, but she darted clear, twisting to rake her talons across its face.

The beast staggered, its face savaged, blood welling in one eye, raw, ragged gashes exposing yellowed teeth, its mouth gaping and lopsided. It sunk to one knee and Ethnie was on it, fangs in its neck, driving it to the ground just as it had tried with her.

It collapsed.

Ethnie howled her victory to the storm-wracked night.

Then the beast on the ground began to change. It shrunk, sinking in on itself, its fur moulting, whipped away by the wind, washed by the rain from pale, bare wrinkled flesh until there was nothing but the broken, bloody form of a man. Naked, wounded, curled foetal-tight beneath Ethnie's wolf-feet. And jutting from his side was Adder.

Kai staggered to her feet, fighting through waves of pain.

Ethnie growled as Kai approached with her one good hand held before her, palm open. The druid had shown her how to deal with wild animals. How to dominate yapping hound. How to take control. But now didn't seem the time for control. Ethnie's breath rasped over the patter of the rain. Somewhere high in the mountains, thunder rumbled, further away now than before. The storm was passing, and with it Ethnie's rage. The wolf she was seemed smaller now. Kai fancied she could see some of the lass beneath the bloody grey fur. Her eyes no longer hateful yellow orbs. Shoulders slumping, head bowed. Fur sloughed from her body, baring her thin limbs like the parchment pale branches of a winter birch.

Ethnie sunk to her knees.

Kai knelt before her, as much because she could hardly stay standing as to bring her eyes level with the exhausted looking lass. She looked down at the man who lay between them. The meagre rise and fall of his ribs the only sign of life. Deathly pale and wounded beyond measure. Kai's sword jutted from his stomach.

Kai looked back at Ethnie.

"Who are you?"

Ethnie blinked away the torpor gripping her worn body. Misty eyes focused on Kai. Her breath was deep, her voice rasping as if she'd been shouting for too long.

"I'm the Wulver."

“Aye.” Kai nodded. Hardly news now, that. “And him?”

“He’s one too.”

Kai didn’t reply. She simply looked at the shivering, dying man, his pain dwarfing Kai’s injuries. Tiny streams of rainwater cleaned twisting lines through the blood and grime. Kai thought about pulling her sword free from him, but that would surely be the death of him.

He opened his eyes.

Swathed in pain, he spoke.

“I came to take her place.” He looked up at Kai. “I didn’t expect you.”

“What do you mean, take her place?”

Ethnie replied. “There can only be one Wulver for each place. This place is mine. Has been for generations. He came to take my people. And I didn’t let him.”

“But the people were sacrificing you.”

“No they weren’t.” Ethnie’s eyes were bright now in the dark. The wounds she’d suffered in the fight were healing. Her body was recovering before Kai’s eyes. The cleansing rain washing away her spilled blood. Straw blonde hair matted to her face, like when Kai had first seen her chained to the post. “It was my idea. I convinced the Laird that someone should be sacrificed. Then I volunteered. I wanted to draw him out. To kill him.”

“The Laird knows?”

“Of course not. We live in secret. We have to. Or your kind would kill us.”

“Your kind?” Kai frowned. “What do you mean, my kind?”

“Sisters Martial. The Mother Church.”

Kai laughed, pain stabbing her cracked ribs. “Oh you have me so wrong. I’m nothing to do with them. But what about the reavers?”

“Opportunists.” Ethnie pointed at the man where he lay. “He was hunting, killing. Stirring up trouble to bring me out to fight. Stories of the Wulver were alive from the coast to Carrac Falls. All throughout my territory.”

“I know,” said Kai. “That’s why I came. And the reavers thought dressing up as wolves would help them scare the crap out of their enemies?”

Ethnie nodded.

“Nothing to do with either of you?”

Ethnie shook her head.

“Then what do we do with him?”

“Kill me.” The man’s voice was weak, raspy.

Ethnie nodded.

“No.” There had to be another way. Kai fumbled in the dark to find it, but in her heart she knew he was dying. He was hardly a wolf now. Dangerous to no one.

“You’ve already done it. Just finish me.” Pleading eyes gazed at Kai.

“No,” she said. “That’s what the church would do. I’m not like that. You can find a way to live together.”

Ethnie shook her head. She stood, a swift, sure motion. Her hand grasped Adder’s hilt, wrenched it free from the man’s side. He howled in fresh pain, then was silent as Ethnie slammed Adder’s bloody point through his throat.

“No.” Kai’s shout was dampened in the dying rain.

Ethnie pulled the blade clear and wiped it clean on the wet grass. She flipped it, holding it pommel first to Kai.

“This is yours.”

“Why?” Kai took the sword, its weight ever a comfort in her hand.

“It’s our way. It always has been. There can only be one of us in any place, and this place is mine.”

“But...”

“But nothing. I know what you do, Kai. You protect people. You hunt the things that hunt in the night. So do I. Now come on,” said Ethnie stooping, hooking one arm under Kai’s shoulder. “Lets get you cleaned up.”

Kai gazed at the crumpled corpse cooling in the night air.

And she felt as sorry as can be.

THE END