

Wolf

The girl breathed raspy breaths in the dark. In the distance, half-hidden behind shadows of stone and metal bars an orange glow of torches echoed in her eyes. They burned in the night even as they ached from the dark nothingness. Her eyes strained themselves on lack of light. Her throat rasped from quiet cries now long bled out. The first tide of rushing, raging screaming had roared away in the quiet of the cell, the second tide of howls and begging whimpers dissipated in isolation, the final quiet tide of self-comforting tears had leaked out and left her in a pool of muted emotion. Her chains rattled, and she sighed. Her wrists ached.

A long while ago, hours and ages and lifetimes, a guard had come to give her a plate of mouldy bread and stale water. It would have been enough to get her strength back to some degree, if she had been any other girl, trapped in a cell somewhere. But wheat and water gave her indigestion, the food dropped into her gut and melted away like seafoam, insubstantial.

Even farther back, some years it seemed, a group of young guards had come to look at her. When she heard their footsteps, she felt an instinctual rush of hope, as any wounded animal will reach out in hope of survival. She bayed and rattled at the door, begging, pleading, cloudy thoughts like dense paragraphs drifted through the noise. The boys had bayed like jackals, champing their teeth in stinging words that had lost their sense to her. But she felt their bitter intentions, could smell the sulfurous gossip on their breath. Their fear excited her, made her hunger, left her jaws bleeding as she snapped at iron bars. All her pain stemmed from metal, the metallic flavor of wounds both old and new, the ever present strength of solid metal, the reddish pressure on her wrists. She fell into a rusty sleep.

Now she sat, and time sat with her. The only presence of change was the feeling of her stomach slowly pickling in its own brine. Bread alone did not fill it. The tick of this organic clock was her breath, rasping with its red-rimmed pipes, clicking the manacles on her hands with the subtle motions of her internal business, slowly rocking her body back and forth. The shadows inched along the wall, dancing a silent dance to a nonexistent music box.

She stared at the shadows. Shifting, always shifting, black forms drifted in and out of the conscious world, spinning around across walls and floors, in her hair and around each metal bar. Iron could not touch them. The only things they could not cling to were her eyes, which now glowed like twin embers, and her manacles, still shining with cold binding power. Even in the cold and murky pool of her emotions shadows lurked.

She moved herself, stretching out across the cell. She twisted like a shadow, casting every fiber of her body flat. The moonlight hit her and the sparks in her eyes and the polish of the metal shone out in the empty cell. She crept into the quiet of the corner, twisted herself around in spirals, in circles, in drifting smoke-like patterns, drifted herself into the hallway outside the door of her cell and was cast wide and stringy, like ashes thrown across the stones. Her figure burned, with scrutiny and risk and eyes hidden behind a thousand other cells. Some tongues would whisper her secrets for gold. Some would sell her life for a beating. Some would cut her form back into flesh for nothing but the asking of it. She pulled herself into a thin half-mile of corners, twists and turns, then pulled the strings like tared fishing line back into the moonlit cell.

She stood. Looking out the window, she found more cold iron bars down to the sheer wall of the fortress and the muddy courtyard beneath. She smelled, and her lungs took in the

warm heartbeats of rabbits burrowed far beneath; the distant rotting of leaves; the alertness of a herd of deer; the whispering hiding spaces of a thousand bushes and shrubs and blades of grass; a good place, layered with dew, to den up for the night; the steel tang and breathing of grown and tired men; the baited sour tongues of town watchmen; the nervous smell of unlit torches; the comfortable innocent sleep of pampered horses; and the overcast rocky icing of the moon. She backed to the edge of the door and leaped.

In air, she twisted. But it wasn't enough. As she hit the bars her bones were still melting, semi-solid, and her limp limbs rattled against the bars like a doll's. Her flesh, pale and papery from the narrow cell, was dented with black and blue and red. Her eyes slipped through, twin skipping stones sliding through the air. Her shoulders were caught in between the bars, compressing her ribcage down to its simplest parts, saving the manacles to shine in raw midnight. Something popped as she shifted and then fell down through the night. The stars ripped through her form, slowing her fall.

Her body hit the earth with the false footstep of a drum. The feeling of a mass hitting the ground from a height compelled her to keep her eyes closed for a time. Upon opening them, her breathing came back. She stood, the awkward weight of form left her clumsy, the scabbed blood, inside and out, the softness of her bones, sent a smog over her senses. She rattled through the plant growth, ripping and tearing through the perfectly manicured garden. The garden's china exterior was overturned, and the internal organs, the blood of soil and roots, more real and more beautiful than any flower's face could ever hope to be, became exposed. The courtyard was disemboweled. So the girl slunk past the garden even as its warm dead dirt held on to the end of her tattered dress.

In the courtyard, the disturbed grass awakened the small creatures burrowed there, and rabbits' little heartbeats pricked at her nose. The fear and the pain and the scent of the world, the raging pressure of moonbeams fried her brain. She sweated in the chill, and gnashed her teeth against the pressure. Rushed into the outside world, the woods were no longer just a place to escape to, but now a sanctuary of calm, an oasis in a desert.

She tripped into the bright territory of the moon. The girl slipped out from the courtyard and immediately fell in the mud. The dark substance clung to her like blood as she spun around, bright eyes searching in the night. The space between the courtyard's shady balcony and the forest's dark ceiling stood, lit with the moon's floodlight, a no-man's-land, a solid block of space between the imposing fortresses, castle and forest. She hid at the edge of the wall, feeling the rocking pulse of continued breath after her escape into the chill. The manacles around her hands rattled as much as her breathing, and she shook like a horse keeping off flies. The world shuddered in her view, shook with the warm fever of feeling than could only be cooled in the moon, under the cover of the trees. So her body shook with cold and her mind boiled in the heat.

From the distance, a deep yell pulled open the darkness, and the madein tore through the boundary space. Stones thrown too late bounced off her heels, casting dirt into the air again. Reaching the forest she flew, springing from the ground and throwing herself into the shadowy world of the woods. Dirt scraped her face and mixed with blood. The dull tug of bruised teeth fell in time with the pounding of raw rubbed wrists. She got up, wiry frame and metal clattering in the wind, legs shaking like a doe, running for the first time, slowly, stumbling. Feet found the unknown surface strange to walk on, slow and bumpy going in the dark.

The booming throaty punch of guards echoed through the woods, talented woodsmen pounded through the trees like thunder, surrounding the girl, throwing their weight around her like boulders. She fell, they stood. Reddish torches cast heat into the night. Heat that boiled the brains of the not quite sane, that made the thing that was not wolf and yet could only be described by the bloodied observers to be WOLF.

No.

No.

Let me go into the woods, she had said, but the toothy thing felt hot blood and pushed against solid bone until it cracked. It was good for it to be free, to again be teeth in flesh, to lick the marrow away from the things that had threatened it. The night air cooled the blaze down to a wolf again, and metal shards of melted manacles hardened as the thing panted in the shade from the moon. It caught a small rodent, for fun, and cracked its bones over its teeth. As the sun rose it was still a wolf, watching the town from its oak fortress, sticking its head out from between two trees. Being human had not been good, it decided. It trotted off into the woods, and its humanest pieces said a silent goodbye to the town. It regretted the lives, and the children, and even the possums and mice which made its sides more than bones lined with fur. It feel the cool of the trees and sighed, dreading the next full moon, when all the cool would melt away.