



Robin's Tale

By Sean Jackson

MY HEAD WAS THROBBING when I awoke amid the twisted metal wreckage of a passenger train, deep in the Dark Forest. I opened my eyes slowly, almost afraid to look. First I saw blood on my right arm, then I saw my aunt, head tilted toward me, eyes vacant.

“Robin,” she had whined an hour before, “stop squirming or I’ll tell your mother when we get home!”

“But there’s nothing to do,” I replied.

“You know what happens when you disobey?”

“Bad things happen. You’ve said that four times.”

“Because you didn’t listen the first time.”

And now something bad had happened. I guess I was supposed to feel some remorse, but I felt a chill in my neck instead. Being the well-prepared girl that I was, I sifted through my aunt’s purse until I found the phone. To my dismay there was only a black screen which read, in dull white letters, “No service 00/00/0000.”

I crawled over my aunt into the aisle and looked around. Every single person seemed lost in another world; they didn’t speak or move or even breathe. I decided they must be dead, but oddly wasn’t bothered. I didn’t love my aunt and the rest were strangers, but my conscience said I ought to cry. Instead I scavenged the car for a snack.

I was emptying an old man’s briefcase onto a vacant seat when a low black growl from beyond cut through the walls. I dropped the briefcase and ran to the nearest window.

It was very dark, and mist blanketed the ground. The trees, ancient and sad, scratched against the glass with their branches. The moon was full and bright. I couldn’t see very far into the woods, but I saw the beast. His silver eyes glistened through the dark, and his red tongue hung through his teeth. I thought I could see hair.

I didn’t scream. I ducked beneath the window, pressed my back to the wall, and listened to the soft padding feet coming closer and closer to the train. The wretch’s growling grew hungry and eager. At last I heard a sound like a metal sheet being torn apart shred by shred. The maddening noise shook the train again and again. I huddled as close to the wall as I could, making sure I was safe within the shadow. The clawed feet now scraped against the floor and drew nearer to my hiding place. The door opened.

I covered my eyes. I don’t know why. I wasn’t safer, but I felt safe. At least I wouldn’t have to watch myself die. Just as I was praying for forgiveness for squirming, the beast passed me. It must not have been able to see me in the shadows. I hardly breathed as I waited for it to wander a safe distance from my hiding place. Then, when I felt the time was right, I peeked around the chair.

To my horror it was looking at me. I could see it clearly now: it was a wolf. It must have been a king of the wolves, for it was very large. Its black hair gleamed in the flickering train-light. Its eyes were pale and grey. It was

smiling, if wolves can be said to smile.

I instantly stood up and ran for the door. It opened into the gap between the cars. In my haste to escape I bashed my bleeding arm on the doorpost and scraped my knee on the coupler. I landed on the forest floor with the grace of a rag doll. The wolf was not far behind me. I scrambled to my feet and ran.

People speak of the exhilaration of the hunter. I felt that excitement as I ran through the darkness. I was the prey, but I thirsted for the kill. It was a mixed-up thing to feel, but then I was always a mixed-up girl.

Around the time I thought I had lost the wolf, I found a circular clearing. A dark green tent had been pitched next to the smoldering embers of a dying fire. The tent had no light within. My curiosity seduced me into approaching the tent and lifting the flap.

It was empty. Someone had left a sleeping bag wadded in the corner, grass and fresh mud clinging to the fabric. Several beer bottles cluttered the ground, all but one broken. An open journal lay next to the severed neck of a bottle. I knew it was wrong to read other people's journals, but I was still under the spell of my curiosity so I knelt down and read the new entry. A glass shard cut my knee and I winced. The journal read as follows:

Saturday, February 15, 2031

I am back in the Dark Forest. I hate civilization with its show lights and sugary futility and two-faced morality. This is my home: the Forest of mystery and beauty and primal wonder.

It is this primitiveness in particular that draws me back in. There is no lawman or priest to shackle my impulse, only the old trees, which have outlived forty thousand priests.

Civilization is elaborate, yes, but not beautiful. It spins rules and conventions and etiquette like cobwebs and catches the blind flies in its ways, but can't appreciate the bare simplicity of the primitive. So I am driven here.

In the Forest is blissful freedom. In the Forest man is animal and animal is man. In the Forest the hunter is God. In the Forest blood is beautiful.

The moon is rising.

My heart raced faster than it had when I had cowered in the train. The truth of the words thrilled and frightened me. Was the Forest, filled with strange ghosts and shades and demons, so powerful that it could make a kid think the thoughts of a monster, become a monster? I shut the journal, took it out of the tent, and threw it in the fire. Then I ran.

I saw the light of a house. That night, as I was hunted by my inhuman enemy, anything human, no matter how dim, would have made me glad. The light of this house, a mere cottage, was bright and welcoming. I slowed down to save my strength, plodding down the sticky mud path to the door.

A red truck was parked at the end of the path, encrusted with a fine layer of grime. On the porch a rocking chair stirred in the wind. I wondered if there were a ghost on that chair. The more I thought about ghosts, the more I realized how strange it was that anyone would want to live in the Dark Forest, and the more I questioned the safety of this isolated cottage.

The Dark Forest is a place no one likes to visit. They've built a railroad through it, of course, but that was carefully supervised and even so there were many mysterious deaths during the construction. Several kings and queens after the Restoration proposed grand measures to combat the evil of the Forest. They sent all their best exorcists and knights and armies to cut down trees and slay demons, but the trees grew again and the demons returned in greater numbers. So the Dark Forest is left to its own devices. As long as our trains can pass safely, we don't care.

I walked up to the door and knocked. The door creaked open about an inch. I knew better than to trespass, but I was shivering with cold and couldn't be troubled with such irksome rules, so I pushed the door open and tiptoed

in. I closed the door behind myself and bolted it shut.

The source of the light was a weak yellow bulb hanging from red and blue wires in the ceiling. It revealed a simply furnished room. There was a bookshelf with scores of books on witchcraft, and a red rose in a glass on the top shelf. The water seemed tainted red like the rose. An old television stood across from a heavily stained grey sofa. Lying on the sofa were two children, a boy and a girl, dressed in school clothes and holding rosaries. They were albinos and looked to be twins. Their uncanny character made me reluctant to disturb them.

The cottage was filled with a burnt smell. I followed it through a door to the right, into a kitchen blazing with red light. A huge brick oven was spewing out smoke and ashes. I held my breath as best I could, gasping once in a while out of necessity. The counter was covered in green herbs and poisonous roots. Knives on a rack glistened above the sink. Small dead animals, cats and hares and mice, hung from the ceiling on ropes tied around their ankles.

An ax was propped up against the wall next to a windowed door into the woods. I crossed the kitchen and took it, smiling at this new empowerment that I had so desperately needed half an hour before. It was a little heavy and I was ridiculously clumsy, but I found I could at least drag it along the floor by the handle.

I happened to look through the window and saw a man. I was so alarmed I choked on the smoke.

He was dressed in a black trench coat and wore a wide-brimmed hat tilted over his eyes. His hair was long and black. His mouth hung open so that I could see his unnaturally sharp teeth.

My hands were shaking. "You're the Wolf, aren't you?" I asked.

"Of course. I'm impressed, really. You're rather quick to accept the extraordinary." He growled. "Tell me, little girl, who are you?"

"They called me Robin."

"Then you should be an easy dinner." He began fumbling with the doorknob.

I screamed at him. I didn't expect it to work, but in an instant he was gone. Just as I began to feel safe again I heard the twins stirring in the living room.

"What was that?" the girl asked. "Is she back?"

"Shh."

I turned toward the door and saw the eerie reddish eyes of the twins peering at me. They were holding up their rosaries to ward off whatever evil I might carry. They were afraid of me. And who would blame them? I was wild-eyed, dirty, desperate, and armed with an ax. I felt ashamed of my earlier fear. They were not scary, only strange.

"It's okay," I said.

"You're not the witch, are you?" the girl asked.

"Of course I'm not a witch!" I tried to sound reassuring.

"Prove it," the boy said.

"I . . . I'm just not a witch, all right? Prove you're not a werewolf."

The girl turned to the boy and whispered, "I think we can trust her. There's no way the witch could've lived."

"Wait, you killed a witch?"

"What do you think is burning in the oven?"

I felt sick. In the kitchen I had been breathing in all that smoke.

"Why are you looking at us like that?" the girl asked. "What would you have done?"

"It's all wrong!" I moaned. "Why are we all savages here?"

"It's ok," she said. "We didn't eat her. She was going to eat us."

"Whatever. Let's just think of a way out. Is there a telephone?"

"There's one in the bedroom. But it's worse in there than in the kitchen. I'm not going back."

"Then I'll go," I said.

Suddenly the house shook. I heard the wolf tearing the kitchen wall to splinters. I turned around. The beast

had found me.

This time he was a wolf again. His saliva trailed along the floor as he stalked toward the living room, fixing his grim glare on me. I wondered if I could escape if I ran. I had an ax, but it was useless in my weak hands. The twins would be in danger without me, but they were not my friends, so it wouldn't matter. And if I stayed we would all die. I was never one to be held back by people I didn't love.

As long as I could remember I'd been told I was bad. I always forgot to clean my room, to shake hands with adults, to keep quiet around adults unless they spoke to me. While my friends would play tag and hide-and-seek, I would climb to the top of the slide and think about life as I watched the other kids play. Of course, some boy would always push me down the slide, and then I'd fight him and get in trouble. I even had a nickname. "Bad Little Wolf," they'd say, even the adults.

But something seemed different about this. While I had a nasty habit of breaking rules, of fighting, of speaking out of turn, of thinking too much, of generally being bad, I couldn't be wicked. I gripped the ax tightly and let savage wrath overwhelm my senses. I screamed and, with strength far beyond my stature, I raised the ax, charged, and brought it down mercilessly.

I remember hearing shattered bone. I also remember agonizing pain in my neck. My eyesight blurred; I could only see a room colored red. A boy, or perhaps a girl, asked me what was happening to my eyes. I tried to say I didn't know, but I could only scream. Then I collapsed on the red floor.

I cannot guess how many hours or days elapsed before I opened my eyes. My arm was sore. I was in a white room, and there were blurred figures like people. I thought one of them looked like my mother. There were two a little like the twins. There was one man in white that I did not recognize.

"Will she ever be normal again?" my mother asked.

"Normal?" the strange man answered. "I'm afraid not. But people with her condition can adjust to human society. You only hear the horror stories, but there are plenty who turn out just fine. Has she ever been a problem?"

"Well . . ." my mother hesitated. "She isn't what you'd call well-behaved. But she saved their lives." I think she gestured toward the twins. "I can't deny she's rough around the edges, but she's a good girl."

"Well, just keep an eye on her and she'll be fine. And for God's sake, make sure to do everything I've already told you. No matter how 'good' she is, if she gets out of control she could put herself in danger as well as everyone around her."

"I will." She turned to me. "I think she's awake! Robin, how are you feeling?"

"I'm hungry."

"How does a nice big steak sound? I can go down the block to Starlight Grill and order takeout."

"That sounds great." It sounded beyond great. I craved it more than anything.

It's been about five years since my transformation. I love my life more now than I ever did before. My classmates hold me in fearful awe. I get my own red ID card. When I show it to the waiters at restaurants, I get a discount on steak. People ask if I ever get tired of eating only meat, but they don't understand the craving.

But there are some frustrations. Though everyone's afraid to bully me, there are kids who aren't allowed to hang out with me because their parents think I'll eat them. I've had to overlook countless unintentionally rude remarks people make when they notice my silver-grey eyes. Worst of all, I have to take special classes for special people where the teachers keep telling me how special I am. It's awful.

But, all things considered, that was one of the best nights of my life. I made two new friends, I heard my mother call me a "good girl," and I will never again be told to eat my vegetables. Most importantly I learned that wolves don't have to be monsters. So next time you see a werewolf and start to feel pity or fear or hatred, just remember to look twice. Chances are she's far more than just a grey-eyed creep.