



Women and Wolves

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Animals, Retold Fairy Tales

Once upon a time there were two girls named Olga and Lidia, who lived on opposite sides of a forest. The two girls were the best of friends, as they had known each other all their lives.

During the spring, summer and autumn months, Olga and Lidia would cross the forest to visit one another, and sometimes they would meet halfway and play together in the woods. However, during the winter they were not allowed to cross the forest alone. Every year since they were old enough to walk, their fathers had told them never to venture into the forest alone during winter. They had warned them of the dangers of the forest, of the wolves who were starved of food while the smaller creatures went into hibernation, and who would most certainly prey upon any human that crossed their path, especially an unthreatening lone child.

The winter months were a lonely time for Olga and Lidia, as they could not see each other as often as they did the rest of the year. Sometimes, when the snow had fallen heavily overnight and laid its thick white blanket upon the earth, Olga would beg to visit her friend. Olga's father owned a shotgun, and if she asked him nicely enough he would sometimes agree to take her across the forest to visit Lidia and her family. This was a rare occurrence during the winter, but Olga's father knew how much she missed her friend, so he would do the best he could to find time to take her across the forest.

One year, when the girls were not yet fifteen and Olga's mother was heavily pregnant with twins; Olga awoke to a fresh blanket of snow upon the land. There is a certain kind of light that shines through the window when it has snowed outside; bright and crisp, whiter than usual, and Olga recognised it immediately. She leapt from her warm bed and crossed to the window, her bare feet freezing on the cold floor. Sure enough, the garden was blanketed in white, as was the forest beyond it. Olga's heart leapt in excitement, and she dashed from her room in search of her father. To her surprise, there was no one about. She checked every room, calling out for her

parents, but the house was empty. She went to the back door and opened it a crack, shivering as the freezing air rushed in and bit at her bare skin.

“Mother? Father?” she called out, but the only answer she received was her own muffled echo bouncing against the tree trunks.

She closed the door hurriedly, her teeth chattering with cold. Her parents had left her without so much as telling her where they were going, but there was one way she could find out.

Having wrapped herself up in her warmest clothes, Olga went out to the shed in the garden. She was too worried to enjoy the sound of the snow crunching beneath her boots, or the feeling of her feet sinking into its soft, icy layers. She unlocked the shed door and peered inside, looking into the place where her father kept his shotgun. It was gone. That could only mean one thing: her parents were crossing the forest.

Olga returned to the house, where she paced up and down trying to decide what to do. If her parents had crossed the forest then they had almost certainly gone to Lidia’s house, for Lidia’s mother was a doctor and had been caring for Olga’s mother throughout her pregnancy. However, if Olga’s parents had left so early and without waking her, that meant there was something wrong. Olga had no intention of waiting to find out, and without another moment’s thought she put on her coat and stepped back outside.

The heavy grey sky was beginning to shed its skin once again, and the small icy flakes clung to Olga’s hair as she followed her parents’ fading footprints down the garden and out through the gate.

She knew the route through the forest so well that it didn’t worry her to see the path had disappeared beneath the snow. Yet, despite this reassurance she still felt a prickle of fear creep up her spine. She had never walked through the forest alone in winter before. The bare branches seemed to be reaching for her as she passed them by, the whistle of the wind following her along the hidden path. Her breathing quickened as her heart beat faster, the sound of her footsteps as loud as gunfire in her ears.

All of a sudden a shape appeared from behind a clump of snow-covered bushes. Olga leapt back in fright, expecting a wolf to jump at her and tear her to shreds, but to her relief she saw that it was not a wolf, but a man. He was clad in a thick fur coat and a wide-brimmed black hat, and there was a rifle slung over his shoulder.

“Didn’t mean to startle you,” he said, stepping onto the path before her. He pushed back the brim of his hat a little in order to see her more clearly. His eyebrows were thick and greying, his cheeks sallow and lined, and a long white scar ran across his bottom lip and down to his chin.

“You shouldn’t be out here alone,” he said, his voice low, “It’s dangerous for little girls like you in the forest this

time o' year."

"I'm not little," said Olga, "and you needn't tell me that it's dangerous. My father reminds me every year."

"You should listen to him," said the man, his lip curling back to reveal a set of chipped, yellowing teeth, "he's right to warn you."

"I need to go," said Olga, beginning to move around the man, intending to walk past and continue on her way, but he stepped in front of her.

"Now now," he said, grinning in a way that made Olga feel sick to her stomach, "I can't leave a little girl like you to walk off into the woods alone now can I?"

"I'll be fine," Olga retorted, "I know the way."

"Why don't I walk with you? Just to be sure now."

Olga's skin prickled in fear. She tried to move past the man again, but he caught her arm and hauled her backwards. She cried out in fear and anger, her voice echoing between the trees. As she fought against the man's grasp, she heard the faint thudding of small feet, and turned just in time to see an enormous grey wolf charging towards them. She snatched her arm away from the man just as the wolf hurled herself at his throat. In seconds he was lying face down on the ground, the snow around him splattered with bright red blood. The wolf turned to look at Olga, who froze where she stood, sure that she would be next. Her father's warnings were echoing inside her head as she stared into the eyes of the wolf before her.

"Don't be afraid."

Olga blinked. She looked around, but there was no one there. She looked back at the wolf, whose muscles seemed to have relaxed somewhat, and whose eyes were still trained upon her.

"I...I'm sorry?" Olga stammered.

"It's all right. You're safe now," said the wolf.

"I don't understand...aren't you going to kill me too?"

The wolf made a sound that could almost have been construed as a laugh and said, "Of course not! I have all the food I need right here," she nodded her head towards the dead man, "Besides, you are of no threat to us. Not like these men who walk the forest with weapons, shooting us down for our fur to keep them warm in winter. They don't even eat our meat; such wasteful creatures," her tone sounded bitter.

Olga shook her head in disbelief, "Do you mean to tell me that if I were to come across any one of you in the forest, you would do me no harm?"

The wolf seemed to be smiling, "That's right. Your mother knows this, I am surprised she never told you."

"You know my mother?"

“She walks here all year round, Olga, for she knows she is safe amongst us. Women and wolves have been allies in this forest for centuries.”

“Then why does my father tell me not to come here in winter? Why has he taught me to fear you?”

“Because he still believes we are dangerous, because he is a danger to us. Your mother has tried to convince him time and again, but he will not listen. The only way in which there can be peace between us is when neither poses a threat to the other. As you have just seen, this forest is not entirely safe. Not when men roam the land with guns and cruel intentions.”

Olga’s mind was buzzing, so amazed was she at everything she had just heard, but from beneath it all came the memory of why she had come here in the first place.

“I must go!” she said at once, “My parents crossed the forest this morning, I think there is something wrong with my mother.”

“I will walk with you,” said the wolf. She threw back her head and let out a loud howl that ricocheted between the trees. In a moment, the forest was filled with the rustling of approaching wolves. They each nodded to Olga as they passed, before surrounding the dead man’s body.

“We should go,” said the wolf.

The pair walked quickly through the frozen forest, exchanging few words now that it seemed everything had been said.

When they finally reached the cottage on the other side of the forest, the wolf stopped.

“This is where I leave you,” she said.

“Thank you.”

“I wish good health to all your family.”

Olga smiled, “And I to yours.”

As the wolf began to walk back into the forest, Olga heard a voice call out from the cottage. She turned to see her father running up the garden path towards her.

“Olga! Be careful!”

He had clearly caught sight of the wolf as she departed, but by the time he reached Olga, she had gone.

“It’s all right,” said Olga, “I was safe with her.”

Her father stared at her in confusion, and it was only then that Olga saw the tears in his eyes.

“What’s wrong?” she asked, suddenly frightened. “Father, what’s happened?”

To her surprise, her father smiled, “You have a new brother and sister,” he said, tears rolling down his cheeks.

He took her hand, squeezed it and said, "Come inside and meet them."

Olga never managed to persuade her father that the wolves were not dangerous. Instead, she and her mother raised the twins to believe it, and to respect all the creatures that roamed the forest. Now, when winter falls, Olga still crosses the forest to see her friend, because she knows that the wolves who live there will always protect her.

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