

Little Red, Grandmama, and the Wolves.

Grandmama feared wolves. This, the little girl had been taught from her very first day. Above her newborn's crib wafted conversation about Queen Lisbet -- Grandmama -- and how she had put the price of six golden pennies upon each wolf's head brought to her court. No talk of the little girl passed between her father's men, rough and stale smelling in the sweat-sodden furs they wore beneath their armour in the midst of winter. Nor did her father, in his heavy iron crown, speak at all to his newborn daughter. The only concern was as to how her father's men might profit by Grandmama's decree.

As spring came, year after year, the little girl was swaddled in fine silks and carried in her father's procession, much like one of the wolves' heads casked with dripping snow. She played upon Grandmama's knee, whilst Grandmama cast a grim eye across the banquet served to her. A fine meal, thin red straggles of blood spreading upon fine bone-white plates from the bedraggled fur of the wolves, each head presented to Grandmama with jaw parted and row upon row of teeth on display.

The little girl was favoured by her Grandmama, requesting and receiving a fine scarlet cloak, which the little girl much adored -- especially for its hood, which she often wore up to conceal herself, much to her papa's chagrin. The little girl was fair and pretty, her father argued. Why should she enjoy hiding herself beneath that red hood so very much? Her mother was far more tolerant, and indulged the little girl by allowing her to wear the cloak even as she rode upon horse for the first time.

In the Autumn-time, when as we all know the forest is at its best, displayed in gold and red with the first bite of approaching chill softened by enough warmth to encourage rot among the fallen leaves, the little girl was dispatched to her Grandmama's summer palace. Her father had found his purse empty, and thus sent his daughter alongside his men, and alongside the severed wolves' heads which swam in stinking brinewater rather than fresh clean snow.

The little girl sat counting heads with her Grandmama in the empty palace halls -- many of the courtiers having already left for the more comfortable south, and making ready with luxuries and fineries with which to greet their queen. Whilst Grandmama concentrated upon numbers, the little girl used Grandmama's knife to cut away each wolf's ear to mark it she counted them. One, two, three, and beyond this the little girl delighted her Grandmama by making up words for the numbers she did not know. Door, fire, sticks, heaven, fate, and on it went, late into the night, until at last Grandmama's men at arms retired for the evening, locking the doors and bolting shutters over each of the windows -- all strong enough to hold away the largest and most frightening of wolves.

"You are such a beautiful little girl, in your scarlet riding-cloak," Grandmama said. "What beautiful green eyes you have."

"Look closer, Grandmama," the little girl begged, wearing her hood within the hall, as she preferred. "Everyone says they are green, and it wounds me so, for my beautiful eyes have never been green."

"Have they not?" Grandmama asked, looking closely.

"Cats have green eyes, Grandmama. I am not a cat." The little girl blinked her yellow eyes prettily at Grandmama.

Grandmama Lisbet did not like this one bit. "It is only the firelight," she told the little girl. "We shall bring a mirror outside tomorrow, and you will see how beautiful your green eyes are in the sunlight, while you wear your scarlet cloak."

"But it is not a scarlet cloak, Grandmama," the little girl replied contritely, "it is rather my beautiful fur pelt."

"Ridiculous! What are you playing at? Did I not give you this very cloak," Grandmama asked, slipping back the little girl's scarlet hood, "as you asked me to--"

The little girl smiled, her mouth petite, but broad. Her nose narrow, but long. Her ears large, but thinly pointed.

Grandmama, wide-eyed, reached for her knife upon the table, but the little girl had stolen it away whilst playing at cutting wolf's ears.

"Grandmama, why do you fear wolves?" The little girl's thick tail, with its snow-frosted tip, swept about eagerly. "Foxes are ever so much more dangerous."