


THE FIRST TALE

The Wolf Child

 At the edge of a fathomless forest, in a castle grey as cloud, a baby was born at the stroke of midnight. But, alas, all was not well. 'She's dead,' the young mother gasped, her tumbling hair plastered to her brow, her ragged voice as thin as the curls of smoke snaking their way from the fire as she staggered from her chamber.

Outside in the corridor, her husband stumbled back in shock, grief gripping his heart. He turned away from the tiny bundle, too upset to even gaze upon her.

The mother's eyes burned bright as she crept through the castle, the baby clasped in her arms. A cloak of red velvet thrown swiftly over her shoulders, her feet still bare.

Somewhere a window was open, letting in a snow-laced wind. It skittered through the corridors, carrying away the tiniest whimper, as soft as a nightingale's wing.

Three serving girls huddled together. A golden dog barked in the courtyard. The apothecary, who

had helped bring the baby into the world, stood statue still.

The mother hurried on, out into the dancing snowfall. Near the castle's entrance, a trusted huntsman stood alone, keeping watch over the drawbridge. Magnificently tall, shoulders as wide as an ancient oak, his skin the colour of ebony. He was the castle's sworn protector, and he had taken an oath to keep its secrets. All of them.

'She's dead,' repeated the young mother, pushing the little bundle into his arms.

The huntsman took hold of the bundle carefully, taken aback by the pale figure swaying before him in the wind.

A demanding little cry came from within the blankets and a perfect pink foot kicked at the huntsman's elbow.

He gave a smile of relief. 'Look, she's –'

'She will not last the night,' the mother said quickly. 'Take her to the river, bind her to a rock and throw her in. Make sure she sinks to the very bottom. This way is kinder.'

The huntsman peered down and felt his heart still. The babe was as radiant as the winter moon, her hair the silver of stardust, her eyes icy blue. Her right arm, not fully formed, ended in a neat little stump.

She was beautiful, but she had been born with the Mark of the Witch.

The huntsman swallowed his dread and said gravely, 'I will take her away.'

The mother nodded, drew up her scarlet hood and was gone.

Under the watch of the lone pearl moon and a solitary owl, the huntsman rode deep into Silverthorne Forest. Through tangled briars, over shifting rocks and rushing brooks, never pausing. And, as he rode, he sang sweetly to the child, a ballad of sorrow and hope.

For a forest can hold many secrets. Promises murmured beneath a new moon. Pathways so twisted they defy any map. Dark truths hidden in the heart of a wolf. The very air seemed to stir with myth.

The mother's cruel words circled the huntsman's heart. 'She will not last the night.'

We will see about that.

He would have taken the babe home to his own wife and child, raised them as sisters if he could. But he knew news would soon spread of his new daughter, one with stardust hair and the Mark of the Witch. Word would get back to the castle and the child would be put to death. All his family would be in grave danger.

Her only safety lies in the thick of the forest where the Silverthorne wolves reign, and all but a few brave folk fear to tread.

Finally, after riding far into the woods, the huntsman brought his horse to a halt. Tethered her to an ancient ash tree and dismounted in a glade of trembling aspen, and alder buckthorn, still rich with dark berries.

From round his neck the huntsman pulled the garland of lavender he always wore for safety and

bent it carefully into the shape of a crown, placing it upon the child's fair head.

Within the forest's folds nearby, a wolf with moonshine eyes awoke and stretched out a long, sinewy limb. Her fur was the bleak white of winter, her teeth sharp, her heart wild. She tilted her snout to the moonlit skies and breathed in the scent of a stranger in her forest. Then she set off at a run. Other wolves were drawn to the sound of her howl, and took up the chase, following their leader.

Soon the gleam of yellow eyes flashed through the dense trees surrounding the alder clearing. Snouts raised to the moon, they sang with a swift, feral yearning.

The wind stirred and the snow whirled. The wolf bleak as winter pawed the earth, glaring hard at the huntsman.

He lowered his gaze in respect and moved towards her. Carefully he laid the child on a bed of leaves at the white wolf's paws.

The huntsman crept back as the wolf put her nose down, taking in the lavender crown's familiar scent.

The baby raised her arms to the wolf, her single hand clasped in a fist. The wolf opened her jaws and tenderly licked the child's cheek, then, slowly, she lay down by the babe in the snow, guarding her from the night. The pack at once surrounding them for protection.

As the wolves' howls continued to ring through the glade a barely noticeable doorway opened and a

band of fierce men and women stepped from the dark into the moonlit clearing, drawing their daggers in readiness.

‘I have brought this child to the safety of the forest,’ said the huntsman, bowing to his friends in solidarity. ‘She is already at one with the wolves, and I humbly ask: will you also watch over her?’

The gruffest-looking man pushed his way forward, walking among the wolf pack as if they were family, and peered at the child’s luminous hair.

‘Where did she come from?’ he asked.

‘The castle,’ the huntsman replied.

The group of Forest Folk muttered among themselves, uncertain, sceptical. They wanted nothing to do with the castle, or its king and queen. But the youngest of them, a girl not much more than a child herself, was drawn to the baby. ‘Please,’ she murmured to the gruff man, and he saw just how lovely the baby was, and caught sight of her sweet little arm. Gently he took the babe from the wolf’s clasp and turned to the huntsman.

‘I swear we will protect her,’ he said with great solemnness. And the family of Forest Folk welcomed the babe into their home.

And so the huntsman rode away, back towards the Ebony House at the edge of the forest, back to his own wife and child.

And the Wolf Child?

Some say she did not outlive the winter. Others think the wolves devoured her. But there are some

who swear that, on nights when the moon is high,
they hear her singing.

A voice bright as bone, wild as a wolf. Singing a
melody of moonlight and freedom.