Gabriela Woltman

Little Fire

My den had been disturbed. The little stone building had been abandoned many winters ago. Now, dilapidated and reclaimed by moss and fungi, its walls protected me from the harsh winds and human hunters. But the smell was different—the stench of blood and sweat and dirt. The stench of *humans*. The wind whistled through the empty doorway, and I was surprised to find no signs of hunters inside. Only a trail of small human tracks left on the thin layer of snow betrayed the intruder. I followed those footsteps further inside.

The human could not see me. The snow silenced my steps, and the human's weak little eyes were useless in the dark. But it felt me approach; it shuffled closer to one of the stone walls, pressing its back against it for protection. A quiet whimper escaped it, followed by a hand slapped against its mouth. It could not see me, but—as if it could hear me—the human turned to face me. I doubted it comprehended what it stood before. Now, I could see it well—a human child, a girl, was shivering in a tattered rag, her legs on the verge of giving in under her weight. Her puny little hands hugged her torso, but the look on her face was ferocious, savage. I allowed my paws to make a sound.

"Back!" the child screamed. Her hands curled into pathetic fists, she pressed herself even more into the wall, as if she wanted to melt into the stone. Her wild hair floated around her head, unaffected by gravity. "Back!"

The child was not afraid of me. She was hungry, cold, and injured, but she was not scared. That fire, that fierce look in her eyes, convinced me that she would not run. When I was close enough to feel her breath coming in short puffs against my fur, she straightened herself to her full height. Even that attempt at intimidation was pathetic; she did not even reach the level of my shoulders. I lowered my head. She held her breath but did not turn her face away. Brave little creature. Hesitantly, she raised one chubby hand, frail enough for me to snap with my teeth if I wished so. The child's palm rested on my snout, soft and cold. The tension slowly left the girl's tiny body. As if she began melting into a puddle, her legs gave way beneath her. I offered my head for support, and she gratefully buried her little fingers into my fur, tugging a little and testing out the texture of it.

Having regained her footing, she introduced herself with a short word. Her human name meant nothing to me. I worried she would begin babbling away in her language, as so many humans do, but the girl kept quiet. She slid her hands back and forth through my coat, a motion more soothing to her than me. This child was different from other humans I have seen.

In that moment, a sound outside the building alerted me. Another wolf wanted to challenge me for my territory. They always think that wintertime would make me weaker. I snarled at their stupidity. Then I realized my mistake—the little girl would be

terrified now. I turned back to her, but she stood still, listening. *Maybe*, I thought, *she could be taught something useful.*

I turned back towards the exit and offered the girl my tail to hold on to. She did not hesitate, but her touch was gentle. I led her outside, back into the snow. She raised one arm to cover her face as the wind blew ice into our eyes. There I saw him—a wolf that had contested me once before came to see if I had finally perished in the cold. He circled my stone building and came to stand before me. Then, he looked at the girl as if he considered her for his next meal. This annoyed me. I found the girl first, and I would do whatever I wanted with her. She was not his to take. He looked ready to pounce, growling, hackles raised. I made myself appear bigger; I was much older than he, much stronger. A youth like him did not know who he had challenged. I let out a growl, baring all my teeth in warning. I felt the girl clutch harder onto my tail. Despite her fear, she gave a snarl of her own, her small, blunt teeth not much of a threat. Her instant loyalty to me was endearing.

Suddenly, the sound of human voices reached us from the depths of the forest. The hunters were becoming more audacious with each day, daring to encroach on known wolf territories whenever they liked, and their blades of metal were deadly. My challenger quickly disappeared between the trees; the situation suited his cowardice. But the hunters were a bigger problem than he. The girl was swaying on her feet with exhaustion. I pushed her toward the building with my snout. Now, she was mine to keep. I found a place where the snow didn't reach through the building's gaping windows and lay down. The girl hesitated. I closed my eyes; the choice was hers to make. Soon, I heard little feet shuffling closer. I opened one eye to see the girl settle next to me, snuggling tightly into my side to share heat. *Sleep now, Little Fire*, I thought. *I have much to teach you*. The girl relaxed with a sigh like she understood.

***

I taught the girl how to be a wolf. Her puny hands and short legs were no good – she was not strong enough, not fast enough. But she was desperate for knowledge. And, more than anything, hungry. There was a determination in her that quickly turned her into an efficient hunter. I taught her how to pick game, how to sneak up on it, how to snap its neck. She became quick and quiet, merciless with her kills. She brought me rabbits, weasels, birds she killed with rocks and her bare hands, which were no longer soft and delicate. She always shared her prey with me, letting me eat my fill first. Then, we began hunting together. Her hands were useful for climbing. I could chase our dinner right to her, and she would always be ready. She kept our den clean and carpeted the floor with dried animal skins. At night, she sang with me to the moon.

She did not speak much. All of her human ways, she had learned from observing hunters and children playing in a nearby creek. In human language she called me "mother." It was the only word I tolerated—she always spoke it with pride and power. Not all her human skills were useless; she saw the weapons the hunters carried, and her skilled fingers replicated them with ease, carving both wood and stone into a

collection of knives, each one sharp like a claw. She taught herself how to weave ropes, baskets, and casks, how to work the leather from our kills into better clothing to cover herself with. Her inventions made our hunting easier. She learned how to make fire to warm us both at night, and how to carry it with her so she could see better.

Little Fire never revealed herself to other humans. She only watched them from the treetops, deadly, ready to attack or run if need be. This worried me. Her kind was dangerous, but she was no wolf. Yet she never complained, just returned to our den and spoke quietly of what she had seen. If she had encountered something that moved her in some inexplicable way, the hunt the next day was bountiful—everything she came across, she slaughtered.

***

Our hunt was interrupted by arrows raining from the sky. As I ran, I could see Little Fire weaving through the trees, yet she was much slower than I. I kept her pace. An arrow lodged itself in my back, but I did not slow down. Little Fire turned sharply away from me, making the hunters chase her instead. I limped back to our den and waited.

She came back not much later, her face littered with scratches from running through the dense undergrowth.

“Mother,” she sighed with relief. She kneeled next to me and started working on the arrow sticking out of my back. “They are gone. They will not find us.”

She began cleaning the wound meticulously, taking care of it the way she had seen humans do. She covered it with leaves and made a fire. Her silence was unsettling. I had never before seen her so distressed—she was pacing back and forth, disturbing the animal skins she so carefully arranged on the stone floor. I wanted to go to her. I wanted to lend her my strength. But I could not move. “I will return soon.” Little Fire took her knives and ropes and put them into her pack. She stopped in the doorway to cast a long look at me. Then she squared her shoulders and disappeared into the treeline.

Long after darkness had swallowed the world, she returned. I worried she were dead, or that the hunters had found her and captured her. Yet, it seemed, it was she who found the hunters. She carried one of their long, gleaming blades at her belt, now covered in blood. She wore a thick coat of sheepskin and shiny leather boots. Her clothes were drenched in red, yet she appeared uninjured. I tried to go to her, but she stopped me with a raised hand. From the pack on her shoulder, she took out more game than she had even hunted before. She left it close to me, checked my wound, and curled up close to me to sleep.

“They are gone,” she whispered as she closed her eyes. “They will not find us, mother.”

For twelve more nights, Little Fire disappeared to hunt alone and brought me more food than I could eat. She barely ate any herself. She hummed when she took care of my back and kept silent otherwise.

When my wound had finally healed, I left our den before she awakened. I crept up to the creek nearby. Two young humans met there frequently, Little Fire had said. The boy had an instrument she was utterly enamored with. She had tried carving it herself but said it did not sound the same. As she had observed, that careless boy always left his pack hidden in a great oak, and took it out only to play for his companion. Little Fire did not dare to steal the instrument. I had no such reservations.

I returned to our den just as Little Fire was waking up. She stretched lazily, her delicate human joints creaking and popping into place, when she noticed the thin piece of wood I carried in my jaws. She suddenly jumped up with joy, and I dropped it at her feet, just how she always did when she brought me her kills. To my surprise, she bypassed the instrument and went straight to me, circling my neck with her arms. I could feel her strength and gratitude pulse through her as she burrowed her face into my fur. Then, she gave herself a small shake and picked up the instrument, wiping it carefully. She put it to her mouth and blew into it; the shrill whistling sound it made was terrible, but she laughed joyfully just as she did when she was young.

As with everything else, Little Fire was naturally skilled at playing the instrument. She quickly learned how to make it sound pleasant. She played quietly, and the sounds she chose did not hurt my ears. She laughed to herself every time the instrument squeaked when she did not want it to. When I came out at night to sing to the moon, she took it with her and played in tune with my howling. Our songs became even more beautiful.

***

“Mother,” Little Fire called, sitting up in alarm. “Someone is coming.”

I opened one eye to look at her. I doubted someone would sneak past both of us unnoticed. The sun was warming up the meadow near our den, and I was feeling lazy. Whoever was approaching did not feel like a threat.

But Little Fire became restless. She crept closer to the walls of our den and took out one of her knives. A sudden intake of breath from her alerted me. On the other side of the meadow was a human boy leading an old donkey. He seemed to be lost or looking for something; it did not mean anything to Little Fire—she bared her teeth in a quiet snarl, more wolf than girl, and stalked towards our den, ready to attack. I kept close, prepared to support her in whatever she decides. When the boy peeked into one of the shed’s windows, Little Fire grabbed him by his auburn mop of hair and tilted his head back, baring his throat to her knife.

“You are not welcome here, intruder,” she growled into his ear dangerously. The boy immediately raised his hands in surrender, letting go of his donkey’s lead. The donkey seemed unbothered by my presence, so I let it be. The boy started babbling something in response, clumsily stumbling over his words. His voice wavered with fear. Little Fire did not lower her knife; her responses were harsh and clipped—it was her first time speaking to another human since who knows when. I was very proud to see how fearless she became.

The boy explained that he was traveling to a town on the other side of the forest and was looking for a place to rest for the night and water his donkey. Little Fire was cautious, hackles raised, as she looked at me questioningly. The boy was too terrified to be a real threat to either of us, I decided. I turned back to go into our den and left her to tell the boy he may follow.

As soon as he entered, the boy curled up in a corner opposite me. Little Fire started working on a fire; the winter was creeping in, and the nights were cold. The humans did not speak to each other; the boy looked at Little Fire with curiosity but looked away as soon as she tried to meet his eyes. When the fire died down, I listened to the quiet. Little Fire was breathing rhythmically next to me, and I could hear the donkey walking around outside, but the boy was entirely silent. He had probably perished from the cold. I hoped that Little Fire would not mind.

But come morning, the boy surprised me by starting a fire before I woke up. He met my eyes and scurried out to attend to his donkey. When Little Fire awoke, he thanked her for the hospitality, still jumpy like a rabbit. I could feel the disappointment radiating from her. I may have become her kin, but I was not her kind. I taught her everything I could. But there were things I could not teach her. I felt that the boy would be a great teacher. So, I followed him and his donkey.

Soon after, Little Fire joined me, looking at me with question. I indicated the boy. *He can teach you*, I thought. *He can show you things I cannot*. She did not seem convinced at first but reluctantly caught up to the boy. They started a stilted conversation, which gradually became more natural as they walked. Little Fire gave a wolf's snort at something the boy said. After a brief surprise, the boy began laughing along with her. I was proud as I trailed after them, my Little Fire setting the world alight.



Oliwia Dawidowska