

Red

by Jason D. Young

Little Red Riding Hood looked for flowers in a burnt and blasted meadow, far off the path. She was on her way to her grandmother's house, of course, with wine and cakes, but had been distracted by the wolf, as usual. Last night's terrible storm left the entire forest, it seemed, little more than ash and charred stumps. Red - who was really Margaret Beth Wainwright, she realized, only now understanding that she did, in fact, have a name - continued to play her role and look for flowers to pick, wondering in a distant way why she was unable to find any.

As usual, however, she soon discovered that she had spent far too much time picking flowers (or, in this case, merely looking for flowers) and that she should heed her mother's advice and proceed straight to her grandmother's house. She did just that, and was surprised, as usual, to see the door standing open. She entered carefully and stopped at the threshold when she saw her grandmother's bed covered in gore. The curtains were torn away and the half-gnawed remains of her grandmother's body lay visible amidst the shorn covers and night clothes.

"Grandmother?" Margaret whispered. A bead of sweat trickled down her spine and the hairs stood up on the back of her neck. This was not usual.

The wolf answered by padding around the far end of the bed, his eyes fixed on her tender young body. His gaze, always merely crafty before, was now wholly malicious and predatory. Blood stained his muzzle and his tongue lolled as his eyes watched carefully every movement the young girl made. "Shall we go straight to 'All the better to eat you with, my dear?'" the wolf asked.

Margaret Beth Wainwright shrieked and ran.

The wolf sprang after her, but slipped on the blood-slicked floor. The few seconds thus gained proved to be the difference between life and death for Margaret. She sprinted to the stone trough near the house and jumped into it, her hooded cloak flapping in the still air as if it would take flight of its own accord. The end of the trough allowed her a boost from which to reach the roof and she clambered up just as the wolf snapped his gory teeth at her heels. A second leap by the wolf allowed him to catch the long cloak and pull violently on it. Margaret gagged at the pressure on her throat, but quickly pulled the string which released the garment. Cloak, hood and wolf fell into a pile on the ground.

The wolf stood and shook himself as Margaret climbed higher onto the roof. He leaped again, but his sated stomach weighed him down so that he could not reach the edge of the roof. Margaret looked around desperately, but the woods were too damaged to afford cover, even if she could reach them, and the wolf too fast to risk running for safety. There were little more than twigs and scorched moss on the roof, and it appeared to Margaret that there was no way out of her elevated prison. No way at all.

In the part of her mind that was starting to engage in a new way, one which could deal with new circumstances and different situations, Margaret wondered if the huntsman might still come by. How long would it be? Might he be close, even now? She certainly didn't know, as she'd always been inside the wolf before and it can be difficult to track the passage of time inside another creature. She decided

there was nothing to lose by screaming for help, so she did just that. A few tense minutes later, the huntsman appeared, walking rapidly out from the trees, his rifled musket over one shoulder.

"Shoot it! Shoot!" shrieked the roof-bound young woman, pointing at the wolf and bouncing up from where she had been sitting. The huntsman readied his weapon, but the wolf had detected the obvious danger and was streaking for the old man like an arrow. A single shot rang out in the dark and blackened woods, but the wolf had slipped in under the long muzzle of the weapon and attacked the huntsman's midriff with his teeth. The wolf pulled his own muzzle away with a mouthful of the huntsman's guts and the man stumbled back and sat down heavily, dropping his rifle and clutching at his wound. The wolf calmly strode forward and tore out the man's throat.

Margaret stared at the second rent body of the day, bile and terror rising in her throat. She looked to the woods again for anyone or anything that could aid her, but there was no one else in sight or - apparently, after more screaming - within earshot.

The wolf, no longer hungry, simply gnawed at the man's body for effect, then began to pace around the house. "You will tire, and I will regain my spring once your grandmother's body no longer weighs me down. I will leap to the roof and eat you. Why face such an ordeal? Why not simply surrender yourself to me now?" tempted the wolf.

"Someone will come! Someone will save me!" the girl claimed.

"I think not," replied the wolf, still pacing.

Margaret's gaze swept the roof again and noted the old, dilapidated, stone chimney. Considering, she kept one eye on the wolf and another on the roof as she crawled to the end of the house to which the chimney abutted. She found that a

number of the stones were loose and gathered a few as the wolf circled the far side of the building. As soon as he returned to view, she threw a stone at his head.

The wolf laughed and dodged easily. "You think to chase me off like a dog, with stones?" he jeered. The next stone struck him squarely on the head and he fell to the ground in a heap. Margaret slid from the roof as quickly as she could, but fell to the ground awkwardly, twisting her ankle as she landed. With a cry of pain, she nevertheless hurried for the huntsman's discarded rifle.

As she picked up the rifle and whirled unsteadily, she found the wolf, his temple bleeding freely from the impact of the masonry, standing and watching with a gleam of triumph in his eye. It isn't loaded," he said, "the man fired it." He leaped for the girl's throat.

Margaret swung the rifle with all her strength and the butt end connected in mid-flight with the wolf's skull. The wolf fell heavily to the ground. Gathering herself, Margaret struck again with the rifle, and again. When the rifle's stock split, she ran to the huntsman's torn body, retrieved his hunting knife, and returned to the barely-living body of the wolf. She stabbed at his throat with the knife and watched his blood spill out onto the muddy ground.

Margaret went to where her hood lay on the ground and picked it up, brushing mud from it as best she could. She understood that she was not at the end of her story, as she normally would be by now, but at the beginning of a new story. Sighing at the filthy garment in her hands, she let it fall back into the mud. Limping, her hands shaking from fear, pain and adrenaline, Margaret Beth Wainwright began to walk. There would be friends out there, somewhere, she reasoned, and reflected that the very act of reasoning was something new and enjoyable.

But she would enjoy little else for a long time.