

Excerpt from **Red Riding Hood ~ Wolf-Slayer**

(my upcoming horror/fantasy novel)

Logline: Red Riding Hood survives an attack by the Big Bad Wolf as a child, but she grows up to be a werewolf hunter so that she can track down the Big Bad Wolf and finally avenge her grandmother.

Scarlett strolls along a desolate road at the edge of the city. It is the dead of night, a crescent moon providing its meager glow. Scarlett is adorned in a hooded cloak. The cloak has been dyed a deep, lush crimson – like a crushed pomegranate or the cascade released by a slit throat. The garment was sewn from a sturdy satin, which shimmers even when engulfed in shadow. A gentle breeze sends ripples along her cloak and a chill up her spine.

Scarlett illuminates her path with a candlelit lantern resembling a wrought-iron cage. The iron lattice of the lantern carves the candlelight into squares that radiate all around her. These flickering squares dance across a wall that runs along her left side; a tall barrier made of mortar and roughly-hewn river rocks, each stone about the size of a human skull.

Up ahead, Scarlett notices a beggar sitting upon the ground with his back resting against the wall. He wears a coarse linen shroud, clutching it closed at his chest so that it forms a hood with a frayed rim. His bare feet display toenails that are yellow and jagged. He holds forth a wooden tankard, waiting for coins to be dropped within.

As she comes near, a raspy voice exudes from the black pit of his face, “Please m’lady, show pity upon this poor wretched soul. The shack I called home was washed away in a torrent of mud during the recent rains. I seek only a few copper coins so that I may fill my hungry belly with a bit of stew.”

Scarlett pauses her stride and sniffs the air.

“Please forgive my musk,” the beggar says. “I have not known the comfort of a warm bath for at least two moons.”

Scarlett pokes her thumb and forefinger into the velvet coin purse which hangs from her belt, plucking from it a pair of copper coins. “Here are the copper coins you seek, my good fellow. It pains me to see you in such a downtrodden

state." She drops the coins into his tankard, a couple of gentle clinks are heard as her coins join the others which reside at the bottom of the wooden mug.

"Thank you, for your kindness, m'lady. May the angels watch over you with a favorable gaze."

"If you choose to use those coppers to fill your tankard with ale rather than your belly with stew, I would not begrudge you that temporary solace from your sorrows."

"Kind *and* understanding. You humble me, miss."

"It would be a falsehood to say that it is the least I can do. In fact..." Scarlett reaches back into her coin purse, produces another coin. This one is larger and shines more brightly. "Take this silver schilling. It should be enough for a visit to a local bathhouse. Let a proper cleansing help you reclaim some of your dignity."

"Uh, yes. Most generous of you, m'lady. Most generous, indeed."

Scarlett crouches down and places her lantern upon the ground. She extends her now freed hand to the beggar. "Here, lend me your hand so that I may grant you this modest boon with proper decorum," she says while holding up the silver schilling with her other hand.

"In the cup will do just fine," he says, holding up the tankard by the handle. "I would feel ashamed if I were to sully your pristine skin."

"Nonsense, I insist."

Scarlett roughly grabs the beggar's free hand and presses the silver coin into his palm. The skin on his palm begins to sizzle and smoke, like raw egg hitting a hot skillet. He yelps in pain and furrows his brow. Scarlett lets go of his hand and he tosses the coin aside with a flick of his wrist. She stands up and takes a step back as he glares at her and scrunches up his sullen face.

"Damn it, you foul wench," he says. "I said in the cup would be fine."

"You are unclean, and I do not mean the soiled rags you wear. You have been bitten by the beast."

The beggar stands up slowly, hunched forward and still tightly clutching his shroud. "What gave me away, you trollop?"

"The stench of a filthy wolf. I know it all too well."

"You have a keen nose. I shall enjoy biting it from your face."

"Come then, there is no one around. Show me what you truly are."

"If you wish to see the visage of death, then I shall grant your final request."

The beggar's hands fall limply at his sides, dropping the tankard to the ground. Copper coins spill out, one rolls along the dirt floor like a wheel that has broken free from its wagon. It rolls past Scarlett's lantern, which remains on the floor between them.

The beggar's body begins to tremble. The sound of stretching skin can be heard as his limbs elongate and he grows taller in stature. The hair on the backs of his hands grows wildly, enveloping his hands entirely within an instant. The same bloom of fur occurs to his feet. His fingernails and toenails extend, becoming as sharp and curved as sickles. The cracking of bones rattles the air as his ribcage bulges and his knees invert, forming new joints that protrude forward. From beneath his ragged cowl, the snout of a wolf emerges, with bristling whiskers and a glistening nose. He snarls, curling his lips to brandish his tarnished fangs.

"The beggar was a lie," Scarlett says. "This is your truth."

"A truth you shall take to your grave," growls the transformed beggar. He lunges forth, attempting to clutch her shoulders.

Scarlett ducks ever so slightly, and then leaps back a few feet, causing the creature's claws to grasp at the empty space she had just been occupying.

"I'm no lady of the night that can be had so easily," Scarlett says with a smirk. Her eyes of jade twinkle from beneath her hood.

A deep growl vibrates forth from the beggar's scruffy throat. He reaches up onto his back and tears off his shroud, casting it aside, allowing her to fully witness his fearsome form. A grotesque amalgamation of man and wolf. His bristling fur is the blackish brown of burnt wood. His tunic and breeches are split and ripped, yet they still cling to his distorted figure. Feral eyes that ache with hunger. His pointed ears are perked up, listening for her next move.

"Werewolf," Scarlett whispers. "That is your true name."

"You do not cower or flee as a woman should," the werewolf says. "You know things that you should not know. Who are you?"

"I am no stranger to your ill-begotten breed," she replies.

She takes a step backwards, never averting her eyes from the werewolf that is poised to strike. She feels her back collide with a soft yet scratchy surface. She places her hand against it, feeling the prickle of hay fibers upon her palm. She has backed into a pair of stacked hay bales. *I must be behind the stables*, she thinks. The smell of horse hair in the air confirms it.

Scarlett calmly leans back against the tightly-packed bundles of hay and places one of her bootheels atop the edge of the bottom bale, causing her bare knee to jut forth from her cloak. This provocative peak at Scarlett's inner thigh catches the wolf's eye. Scarlett reaches up to her chest to play with the end of her French braid, which snakes out from behind her neck and rests upon her bosom. Her dark hair has the luster of obsidian as it catches the moonlight.

With a smoldering gaze, Scarlett says, "How about a wager? If you manage to lay even one of your unholy paws upon my body, then I'll tell you my name."

The werewolf becomes incensed, claws flexing in anticipation, a fire igniting in his eyes as though they were furnaces that had just been fed heaping shovels of coal.