Not All Enchantments Have a Happy Ending

By Jennifer Lynn Krohn

Though it was forbidden, my father would bring home a doe or a stag. With the first slice of his knife their skins pull back, revealing the smooth grains of pink muscle and whitish curdles of fat. We gladly took that meat, the skin, even the bones; we were too poor to waste anything.

One day my father brought back a doe, his arrow had pierced it's heart. Mother would later claim that it was the most beautiful animal that she had ever seen, with golden fur and green eyes. I remember thinking that it looked rather thin and dirty, covered in burrs. My father sharpened his knife and sliced. He recoiled, poked at the edges of the hide and made a sign to ward off evil spirits.

"Eva, go fetch Old Mother Gothel," he ordered me. I ran. It had to be bad to fetch that old woman, the priest called her a witch and said that she should be burned. No one dared to, she could deliver babies when the mid-wife failed, exorcise demons that paid no mind to the priest's Latin. We were all scared of her, but we were all scared of being without her. Her house was not out in the woods, but in the center of town surrounded by a large wall. She was not a bent old woman, but one who stood up straight and thin, gray hair pulled back into a respectable bun.

When I pounded on her red door, she answered already in her brown cloak. "No need to make such a racket child, I'm coming." Her strides were so long that I had to jog to
keep up. Mother Gothel setting off in her brown cloak meant that something was amiss. Mothers would shoo children back home; the barber, smithy, and tanner would close their shops, often falling in step behind her lest she need help.

We came to my house on the edge of the woods, where my father was pacing in front of the doe. Mother Gothel walked around the animal, poking her finger into the wound that had killed it, and into the first cut my father made.

"Finish skinning it," Mother Gothel ordered, "burn the skin and bury the body at the crossroads."

My father nodded and took his knife. He gently cut along the hide, and peeled it back, revealing a young woman. She was pale and blond, her naked skin covered in a red mucus like a baby's caul. The men from the village made the sign of the cross. It would be one thing if she had been in the body of a wolf, werewolves happened all the time. Last year, walking through the forest Elsie cut off the paw of a hungry wolf only to find it was a woman's hand with a ruby ring. Everyone knew Carl, the tailor's boy, was locked up in the basement once a month. You couldn't trust a wolf, one look into those yellow eyes and you could not help but recognize something of yourself.

Looking at the woman's limp arms, I realized that this was a different story. One that was suppose to end differently. Some prince or young king, lost in the forest or just separated from his hunting party, was meant to glimpse the maiden by moonlight in a glade. By dawn, the curse of her wild shape would drive them apart, but the aristocrat would be an able-bodied young man and would no doubt set out on the quest to save and marry her. It may have ended happy with a marriage and children or ended tragic with the
death of the two lovers. It wasn't suppose to end with some obscure poacher trying to provide a meal for his family.

My father burnt the empty skin until there was nothing but ash, and everyone helped dig the girl's grave. That winter the King came to hunt in his forest. In the morning he would set out, and in the evening he'd return, his face turned down despite the bodies of slain boars and stags. We hear the trumpets and the barking hounds everyday, as we huddle over our dishes of rabbit stew.

Jennifer Lynn Krohn was born and raised in Albuquerque, New Mexico where she currently lives with her husband. She earned her MFA from the University of New Mexico, and she currently teaches English at Central New Mexico Community College and Santa Fe University of Art and Design. Jennifer has published work in The Saranac Review, Adobe Walls, The Mas Tequila Review, Prick of the Spindle and In the Garden of the Crow.