

THE SECRET LAIR

Thelma shouldered her backpack, slung her rifle over her shoulder, and had a last glance back at the house as she set off for her long hike to the hills in the far north-west of Sutherland.

Thelma was the descendant of countless generations of Highlanders and Islanders, and her ancestors had survived times of famine and hardship, of poverty and deprivation, as well as periods of plenty, and she was proud of her heritage and the resilience and strength of the people of the Gaidhealtachd.. The wickedness of the Clearances were still strong in the memories of her people, and the cruelties visited upon the defenceless crofters in the Strath and throughout Sutherland by the evil Patrick Sellar - on the orders of the Duke- would never be forgotten.

As she went inland, Thelma passed the remains of ancient crofts - burned and destroyed by the Duke's men - and she felt not only anger, but also a deep sorrow for those innocent men, women and children who had been dragged from their homes with their few pathetic possessions thrown after them, before the houses were burned. She knew that many of the ruins were once the homes of her ancestors - ancestors related not only by blood, but also by a common heritage of suffering and persecution.

As the sun rose into the perfect blue sky above the mountains, Thelma's mood brightened. She had been planning this trip for weeks - a long walk into the most remote fastnesses of Sutherland, an overnight camp, and perhaps a rabbit or two to skin and cook, and a trout for the pot. She had a high-pressure life, with a responsible job, several voluntary public roles, and many responsibilities to her family and her many friends. And - every now and then - she wanted a day or two to herself and what better than to return to her roots. To live as her forebears had lived and to disappear into the wilderness of her homeland.

She walked for many hours, eventually reaching her destination for the night. In the shadow of a vast peak, with a burn bubbling through the rocks and a patch of freshly deer-nibbled grass for her tent. A few casts into the burn soon yielded a couple of fine trout, and her rifle quickly made sure a pheasant and a rabbit joined the larder, and Thelma smiled gently to herself at the thought that she was taking something back from those who had stolen from her ancestors. Certainly, everything would taste the better for it.

After dining, rather to excess, Thelma pitched her tent and sat at the door, watching the sun setting over the tops and descending into the sea, bathing her family's home island, sitting like a jewel in the far-off ocean, in a warm glow before sinking below the horizon. She sat for a few more minutes, at peace with herself and the world, and then lay down in the tent, pulling her quilt over her, but leaving the door open to allow the warm breeze to waft through and to caress her as she slept. And sleep she did. A woman happy and at peace.

Thelma wasn't sure what woke her. A sound perhaps or maybe just a feeling, but wake she did and she realised she was not alone. Lit only by the moon she saw a pair of eyes staring at her. As her vision cleared she was able to see that what

appeared to be a huge dog had joined her in the tent. For a moment she nearly panicked, but she was a strong woman, and slowly reached for the rifle ready to use it if she had to. And then the last cloud moved away from the moon and she saw that the animal was certainly no dog. Not only was it a large, heavy animal, but it had thick grey and silvery fur, eyes that seemed yellow in the moonlight, and an aura of wildness. With disbelief Thelma realised she was looking at a wolf. A very old wolf as she soon noticed. It's muzzle was greyed and it's eyes tired and infinitely sad. Somehow Thelma knew instinctively it was a female. And that it meant her no harm. She eased her hand away from the rifle and gently placed her hand on the wolf's muzzle and stroked it gently. And all the while she thought to herself that this was impossible - after all, the Wolfstone at Loth claimed the last wolf in Sutherland was killed in 1700, although one was allegedly sighted in 1888. And then she thought of all the stories of "big cats" and the reports of sheep being killed by mysterious animals in Sutherland, and of the sheer vastness of the barely explored interior of the area. And she wondered. And whilst she did so, she continued to gently stroke the great muzzle.

And the wolf looked at Thelma and allowed her to continue stroking her. She too was a survivor, the very last of countless generations of wolves who had lived in the wilds of the far north-west for thousands of years. Her last litter of cubs had died in the great storm and their father had died soon after. She was the very last of the line - there were no more males and no more cubs - and she knew that her time was very soon. For the last two hundred years the pack, growing ever smaller, had managed to escape detection by man - they had adapted and evolved until their skills were such that they could smell and hear people from miles away and they had a network of caves and hides which would never be found. But as each generation grew smaller the pack grew weaker and now the end was here. In her memory, passed down through the generations, she knew of the great forests that had once stood here, of the time when bears too roamed the land, she knew of the times of plenty and of hardship, and of persecution by men who meant harm - just as Thelma knew - and she sensed that somehow she was safe with this woman. It was time.

She lay down beside Thelma, and Thelma placed her arm gently around the wolf. Two females with a collective memory of the past generations of their families, once enemies, but now together at the end of days for the wolf. And the night passed and Thelma continued to hold and stroke the old she-wolf until, as the sun rose again, the breathing ceased and the wolf went peacefully, and without pain, and with a sense of love as she passed over.

And Thelma rose and sat at the tent door, still stroking the wolf's fur. And she knew what she must do. They were so similar, their ancestors so close that they were as sisters. She prepared a grave near the burn, in the shadow of the great mountain and she laid the she-wolf to rest, gently placing her in the lair, and giving her a final stroke before closing the grave and placing a few stones randomly on top to make sure she left no sign. She bowed her head and then turned and started the long journey home. And as she walked she wondered what to do. If she told her story many would laugh at her, but some might believe her and that would be worse because someone, somewhere, would want to dig up the remains. And she had made a silent promise to the wolf to protect her and to allow her to be at peace. She resolved to tell nobody, but to keep the memories of the wolf in her heart forever.

And far, far above her, in the shadow of the mountain, and next to the trickling
burn, the wolf slept her eternal sleep.

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