

Noble Romance Publishing
Sweetheart Line



www.nobleromance.com

The Beauty's Beast

ISBN 978-1-60592-153-2

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Book Blurb

Lady Kathryn's father has sent her to court to find a husband, but being penniless and disinterested doesn't bode well for her success. Bored by the petty intrigues of court, she finds her loneliness is eased when the king charges her with the care of his newest acquisition: an uncanny black wolf. What the king doesn't realize is his remarkable pet was once Gabriel, his favorite knight, cursed into wolf form by an unfaithful wife.

The beast's too-knowing eyes and the way he seems to understand her every utterance convinces Kathryn the wolf is more than what he seems. Resolving to restore him, she doesn't count on the greatest obstacle being Gabriel himself. The longer he stays in wolf form as a captive of the court, the harder it becomes for him to remember his humanity. And to fight his wolfish urges to maim and kill.

As Gabriel and Kathryn grow to care for one another despite his horrific curse, rumors of an uncanny wolf reach the ears of Gabriel's former wife and her unscrupulous new husband, Reynard. Together, they plan to dispose of the king's pet, knowing if Gabriel ever regains his human form he could strip them of everything they have schemed so hard to gain.

Only Kathryn's affection and determination stand between Gabriel the wolf and Gabriel the man. But when Reynard returns to court, will Kathryn's love be enough to keep Gabriel from exacting a brutish revenge that will condemn the wolf to death?

"I don't want to forget Bisclavret;
... the Normans call it Garwaf [the Werewolf]
In the old days, people used to say –
And it often actually happened –
That some men turned into werewolves
And lived in the woods.
A werewolf is a savage beast;
While his fury is on him
He eats men, does much harm,
Goes deep in the forest to live.
But that's enough of this for now:
I want to tell you about the Bisclavret "

From "Bisclavret" by Marie de France
(As translated by Robert Hanning and Joan Ferrante)

Prologue

Once upon a time . . . Is that how all the stories used to start? After all this time, all this solitude I'm not sure what I remember anymore What is real?

Well, once upon a time I was a man. I remember that much at least. Not just a man, but a knight.

Remember that, wretched creature. Hold to that. A knight I was, cherished by the king himself. Respected. Renowned. The most beloved knight in all the land. A hero. And now Now I am a beast, trapped forever as a wolf, with only the boundaries of this forest as a buffer from the human world that has cast me off.

All that was good, all that was noble in me is gone now.

No, not all.

A knight is more than his armor. Pennants flying. The banquets. The fine clothes. Honor is not just to be found in the outward signs of it. I have to believe that.

He'd had fine clothes once. A fine home. Accolades. Honor. Respect. He'd had a life. A life and a wife and a place in the world.

But now I am a beast. What honor I possessed has disappeared along with my fine clothes and gold-etched armor. Along with my titles and honors and lands . . . Along with her . . .

His upper lip curled back over fangs dripping saliva.

All lost, all gone, and now . . .

A low rumble escaped his throat. Were it still a human throat, the growl might have passed for a rueful chuckle. But from the throat of a wolf, the sound was little better than a deep snarl.

And now?

And now what?

He bounded out of the cool shade of his den, his paws sinking into the wet, spongy ground beneath him as he ran through the forest, fighting to outpace his thoughts. Normally he hid himself from the light of the day. The sunshine brought back too many memories of what he'd been and hammered home all too forcefully what he was *now*.

But today he found no rest wherever he went. All this soul-searching only stirred up a restless, painful energy inside him. When you are a beast, what good is there in trying to think like a man?

Echoing growls from his ribcage reminded him of what his human ruminations had distracted him from for too long: wolf, man, or otherwise, he was hungry.

Chapter One

Lady Kathryn de Réméré understood where her duty lay. She did — truly. The hitch, though, the tricky part, the really twisty trouble was . . . Well, she was actually having a difficult time convincing herself that her duty was to do her duty.

The royal court had not taken part in a hunt since the marriage of the Princess Aliénor to their king a month previous. Kathryn had only been one of the queen's ladies since Aliénor's marriage, but in one short month Kathryn had grown very fond of her queen. She would do almost anything for her, but . . . did it have to be hunting?

Riding had never been one of Kathryn's favorite pastimes either, and when her father had gambled away the funds necessary to keep their horses, the loss of her late mother's bay mare had caused Kathryn only a small touch of regret.

Kathryn certainly liked horses, and riding could be pleasant, but *this* — this neck-or-nothing tear through the woods, the bouncing and jostling and branches hitting her in the face, and all the while the great brute below her ignoring all her most urgent instructions.

The horse recognized who was master, and it certainly was *not* the featherweight astride his back pulling ineffectually, and rather irritatingly, at his reins. He had his head now and would not have slowed for a rider twice as skillful as Kathryn.

Her horse broke from the group of hunters and went careening wildly off into the brush. A bare moment later, Kathryn heaved forward off her horse's neck, the ground rising up to meet her. She lay stunned in the damp leaves, the musty smell of the dirt thick in her nostrils, while the careless beast gleefully galloped his way back to his home stable for some oats and a good brushing down.

The chase was on, though, and Kathryn would not be missed by her companions for some time yet.

Only slightly dazed, when her wits recovered sufficiently and the world stopped spinning, she stood with the aid of an obliging tree trunk to take in her surroundings. The lush forest possessed a heavy covering of brush on the ground, clustering around the roots of the tall trees. Kathryn put a hand to her chest, trying to calm her still-hammering heart. "*Help*. Anyone? Hello?" The forest swallowed her cries, and the only sounds around her now were the gentle rustlings of the trees. She swallowed sudden fear, stifling it, and started walking, hoping someone had noticed her difficulties and come looking.

She would be having a long day if they had not.

Kathryn gulped in a deep breath, then tilted her head to listen as a strange noise caught her attention. She froze and held her breath.

Barking, horses and — the high-pitched howl of a wolf?

I thought we hunted the hart this day. This thought was swiftly chased away by another and rather more alarming one: *They're coming this way.* The crashing of hooves through the underbrush filled her ears, along with the bloodthirsty cries of the hunting dogs and the triumphant shouts of the men.

She stood at the edge of a small clearing. A hoyden in her youth, Kathryn had little difficulty maneuvering even with her hampering skirts. Quickly, she swung herself up onto the first branch of the nearest tree. Just in time too. The king and his entourage, having trapped their quarry at last, came thundering into the clearing, trampling over the place where she had been standing.

The wolf smelled the dogs before he heard the sounds of the hunt echoing in his forest. The hounds scented him before they gave chase, howling and baying while they tracked his progress through the woods. The werewolf's scent would drive the dogs mad, as the stench of magic always did the trick on poor beasts.

Ah, well. The wolf believed himself to be rather smarter than even the wildest hunting dog and had tricks enough to bring himself safely home. He stretched his muscles and broke into a run, shoulders flexing, muscles singing at the exercise.

He caught a hint of smell then — the merest breath to fill his nostrils. But this was enough. A spasm of grief choked him, and a whine broke from his throat. The wolf stopped. He could not have moved if he'd wanted to — and he did not want to.

My king, he thought, just before the hounds caught up to him. He ran then, cursing himself as he darted between the trees and slogged through the tangles of underbrush. *Idiot. You let one smell on the air distract you long enough for the bloody dogs to get your smell. And now what's to do?*

Befuddled and at war with himself, he fumbled through his escape, stumbling and taking wrong turns. His baser instincts pulled with every fiber of muscle for him to slip away and lose himself in the forest, foiling this hunt as he had so many others. His human heart and what parts of his head it still had sway over urged him in the other direction — back to the humans. Back to the king.

The wolf's hesitation, his dreadful indecision, gave the hunting dogs the edge, and the wolf wore himself out running from them and from himself. As he tried to speed ahead of the hunting pack, his mind was betraying him, thinking of his king when he should be strategizing a way out for his wolf's body. If he didn't focus – and soon – the dogs would get him.

The werewolf found he didn't care much.

* * * * *

The swift greyhounds chased him for hours, wearing the wolf down, tiring him out so he would be too weak to give more than a token fight at the end.

He remembered this tactic well from when *he* had been the hunter on the horse. He winced in memory now at the number of poor beasts his prized hounds had chased down for him, of the terrified, fatigued creatures he had put to death, then ceremoniously carved up and fed to his hunting dogs.

At least I know what happens next.

The largest of the greyhounds finally caught up with the werewolf, pacing along beside him, the hound's rasping breaths loud in the wolf's ears. They were of similar height, though the wolf's body had more weight to it, larger muscles. The greyhound, a whipcord of wiry strength with jaws of iron, pounced on the wolf. The werewolf dodged expertly, and the deathblow meant for his neck fell instead to his shoulder. The greyhound thrashed and bit down with bruising strength. With true remorse as the wolf remembered how fond he had been of his own sport hounds, he savagely locked on to the hound's neck. With a bone-shattering crunch, the wolf snapped the dog's neck and ripped its throat open. Gurgling, eyes rolling back, the dog fell dead to the soft turf of the forest.

Even as the wolf mourned the hound, he reveled in the metallic stench of the dog's blood and swallowed with savor the hot broth. He did not linger long over his kill, though. He could not afford to, as the other dogs caught up to the leader, with their

masters not far behind. He could still taste the hound's blood in his mouth, however, mingling with some of his own. The wolf's stomach still rumbled from hunger; his body ached from fatigue. *So tired . . .*

His wounded shoulder betrayed him, and he stumbled. His body rolled across the spongy earth, kicking up the wet scent of mud and the sharp tang of broken greenery.

Wet and sticky with blood, the wolf rolled to his feet with a snarl of pain and fury. He blinked bleary eyes to focus on his surroundings. The hounds had pressed his back to a tight knot of trees, and he faced a pack of snarling hounds with their masters within shouting distance. He tried to stagger out of the clearing, to shelter, to safety, but a hound snapped at him and, growling low, forced the wolf back.

Ground vibrating from the force of so many horses, the hunt thundered into the clearing. The riders circled the wolf around on all sides, cornering him as the hounds closed in. Slowly the dogs slunk nearer to tear him limb from limb for the delectation of their keepers.

Let them come. I can no longer lay claim to any of the honor I once possessed, and I am not a knight, but I can still fight.

This I will do to the end.

To the death.

Through his haze of fatigue, he wondered idly why the dogs had not finished him yet, and his human memory cheerfully supplied the answer to the wolf's addled wits. In a hunt like this, the actual kill was saved for the highest-ranking member.

The king.

The king was going to kill him; then the nobles and other worthies would hack him to bits. Very ceremoniously and reverently, of course, but all the same there would not be much left of the wolf. Then, of course, in reward for a job well done, the dogs might get to eat some of his mangled carcass.

As far as an ugly death went, it was hard to top that.

But oh, his body ached and his heart hurt, and if he got to see his king again . . .

God, that might almost be worth it.

* * * * *

The hunters' prey was a wolf. The largest wolf Kathryn had ever seen or heard tell of. As large as a man, with something unnerving about the beast. The wolf suddenly turned to face its attackers and sat on its haunches. The beast growled at the group, almost as if he realized what was coming. Kathryn pressed a hand to her throat, shocked at the beast's remarkable display of . . . defiance?

Kathryn had never seen a wolf so closely before, and she studied it in fascination from her vantage point. The beast had a rather luxurious black pelt and a long snout, almost regal in repose, even as the wolf hunched in the center of the clearing, panting. Ugly wounds spotted the beast's black coat, and a deep bite mark on its shoulder glistened with blood.

The wolf raised its head and hurled the defiant snarl of the damned at its tormentors.

Kathryn's breath caught in her throat. Those eyes. No wolf's eyes ever looked like that. She had seen wolves from a distance at night near her home. True, all wolves had uncanny eyes. Kathryn had always half believed they could see to your soul and back again. Their eyes held knowing, but not like this . . .

The wolf's eyes, they — they were *human*. The dark blue, round-pupiled eyes of a human.

Kathryn gasped, and the rider below her tree glanced up. She found herself staring down into the amused face of the king. *Oh dear.*

"What have we here?" The king laughed. His voice reminded her of the wind whispering through the pines at night. "A tree dryad? A nymph, mayhap?" His mouth turned up in mild amusement. "Lady Kathryn, is it not?" he murmured so others would not hear.

Kathryn had never before spoken to the king in her time at court — she had barely seen him — and so she studied her ruler for a long moment in mute fascination. Broad-shouldered and vigorous despite being in his mid-forties, the king had a quiet dignity, an inborn strength. His face was lined with the years and troubles of his life, but his visage had a rugged appeal, the fascination of a face well lived in. His features had a certain leonine cast to them, but with the same graceful appeal and refinement of line as a cat's. The king's eyes were kind, though dimmed from within by some terrible sadness. His smile never lit his eyes and yet was still charming and easy, pleasing.

She realized she'd been staring and hastily executed the most graceful bow she could manage while clinging to her tree. "The wolf, my lord — "

"Yes, a magnificent beast. Too large and certainly too wily to be anything but magical. His pelt will be a fine prize."

"No." The syllable tore itself from her throat before she could think the better of speaking.

At the blaze of anger in the king's eyes, she lowered her own, and embarrassed heat fanned her face as the rest of the hunting party craned to look at her and realized she was in the tree.

"No."

A voice broke through the weariness pounding at him. He looked into the canopy of trees above. He could see only a pale oval hanging in the dark cover of branches. A sweet face, and sympathetic, with rosy cheeks and light, kind green eyes. The first human face he had really looked at in two years.

Well, if I am to die today in this accursed form, at least I have seen the face of human compassion one last time.

The green eyes lowered, and his own eyes followed them. His gaze fell on a face as well known to him as his own human face had once been. The king's face.

A sight more beloved than any other.

He looked into the face of the king, his lord and his master, and his heart clenched with pain.

Not quite knowing what he did, the werewolf gathered what remained of his strength. With a grunt of pain at the tearing hurt from his shoulder, the wolf leapt over the ring of dogs separating him from his liege lord.

He landed by the hooves of the king's horse, and, before the animal could shy away from him, the wolf had caught the stirrup of the saddle. As best he could manage to with his lupine snout, the wolf humbled himself before his lord and licked the great man's boot.

The king stared down at this marvel for a full minute and might have still longer but for Kathryn's intervention as she screamed, "My lord, *the dogs*."

The king looked up and finally noticed that not only the dogs but their keepers advanced on the wolf with deadly intent.

"My lords." The king raised one leather-gloved hand. All action in the clearing halted at this slight gesture. The dogs were brought to heel, and the men waited, holding their collective breath. The ragged rasping of the injured wolf became the loudest noise. Even the accustomed rustlings and murmurs of the wild things in the woods seemed to have stilled themselves to hear the king's announcement.

"Behold this marvel," said the king as he signaled regally to the wolf on the ground. "A humble beast begs for his king's mercy. Truly" — he paused and looked more closely at the wolf — "I think he has the mind of a man. Take my dogs away."

And because he was their liege, the meadow soon emptied of all save the king, his most trusted retainers, the queen, Kathryn — still in the tree — and the beast.

"Do you require assistance to descend, my lady?" the king asked Kathryn, a grin twitching at the corner of his mouth.

Kathryn composed her face and shook her head. She leapt down from her sanctuary, light as a squirrel, landing but a few feet from the wolf. She gazed at the

disheveled creature, the labored heaving of its sides, the bloody patches on its hide, and pity stabbed at her heart. "What will you do with the beast, my lord?"

The king alighted from his great horse, offering her his arm, and as she stepped forward, he briefly covered her hand where it rested on his elbow. A quick wink came and went so fast she could not be sure she'd seen the movement at all. After this, the king addressed himself to his courtiers. "As I am king, hear me and obey. I do here and now extend the hand of mercy to this creature. He is rational. He has a mind. No one is to harm him. *Ever.*" The king sighed then with great weariness. "And now I shall hunt no more today. Let us return."

One of the knights surrendered his mount to Kathryn and led the great stallion by the reins as she rode. The knight smiled over his shoulder at her as he led the horse, but Kathryn only gave him a wan smile in return. She closed her eyes, the swaying gait of the animal soothing her as she drooped with fatigue in the saddle.

"My lady."

She blinked her eyes open and looked to her escort.

"The king requests that you attend him."

Kathryn stifled a sigh and nodded, taking the reins from the knight's outstretched hand. She trotted the horse to the front of the column to ride beside the king as requested. On the king's other side, the queen frowned at Kathryn. Kathryn wet her lips, uneasiness itching at her nerves. *Why does the queen frown so? What have I done?*

"Well, Lady Kathryn, what think you of this?" The king motioned to the ground on his right side.

Kathryn had believed the wolf all but dead back in the clearing. Truly she thought they had left him there. A misapprehension apparently, as the wolf limped wearily but quite determinedly behind the king's horse.

"While you were being helped to a mount, a few of my men tried to dissuade him from this course of action. They were, shall we say, disabused of the notion he would be parted from me." The king scratched the line of his bearded jaw with one thumb and grinned.

Kathryn grimaced. She hated to think they had been wrong about a noble, knowledgeable beast after all.

"Oh, nothing serious," the king explained, perhaps noticing her discomfort. "Just some light scratches and bruising," he said cheerfully.

Kathryn laughed to find the king so nonplussed at the potential threat of some of his best men being mauled by a mystical mammal.

"What shall I do with the creature, do you think?" the king asked her.

The queen opened her mouth but quickly pinched it closed, swallowing whatever she'd been about to say. She creased her brows, glaring at Kathryn.

Kathryn blinked in surprise, at the king's question and the queen's anger. She could find nothing to say to either ruler and stared hard at the back of her horse's neck. *Please don't let them banish me.*

Worried, she darted a sideways glance at the king. A corner of his mouth tipped up. "Perhaps inspiration will strike me when we reach my castle." He grinned, and Kathryn found herself smiling back, but quickly stopped herself at the unhappy look on her queen's face.

My king. The werewolf trotted — well, limped eagerly — along at the heels of Samson, the king's warhorse. The werewolf, despite his still-blighted life, basked in the glow of not only his king's mercy but also his generosity in taking along an injured wolf. *What good have I done in the world to deserve so great a boon from heaven? Not only to behold the face of my lord, but to be with him, ride with him again. Beast or no beast, what does my form matter if I am to have a chance to serve my lord again?*

He smiled to himself, happily padding along in step with the king's horse. His happiness wavered, though, as the maiden from the tree craned around in her saddle to look at him. Her hair was disheveled, and mud had splashed the front of her gown and spotted the line of her jaw. She seemed very vulnerable to him, innocent even, but the wolf had learned his lesson about women.

The green-eyed girl might have saved his life back in the clearing when the dogs would have killed him. But past events had, and with good reason, led him to mistrust the feminine sex.

He pushed aside his gloomy thought and stared again at the king.

No, the wolf would allow nothing to tarnish his joy at this reunion.

I have my king again, and nothing – and no one – else matters.

Chapter Two

The wolf caused much comment among the court when he was presented to the ladies. A few shrieked and sank into the arms of the nearest man. The queen merely stood with her fists clenched and glared. The king knelt before the beast, gently rubbing its ears, and the wolf's tongued lolled out from happiness.

"My queen," the king said. "I think the beast has walked far enough this day. You and your ladies may ride. The beast has more need of your coach, I think."

Oh no. Kathryn grimaced, then wiped her face blank, dropping her eyes.

The queen clenched her hands to fists and hissed a breath through her teeth. Then, fairly shaking with outrage, she said, "As my lord wishes."

"And someone will have to ride with the beast, see that he takes no hurt before we reach the castle." The king stood, dusting his hands, and looked expectantly at the master of the hounds.

The master of the dogs spat and crossed his arms. "I'll ne'er touch the filthy beast, an' you can do your worst, Highness, but that won't change me mind."

The king, perhaps recalling with sympathy the death of the kennel keeper's favorite hound, shook his head. "I understand." Pacing beside the carriage, the king rubbed thoughtfully at his lips. "Now what's to do for the animal? None of my men will touch him."

Kathryn, still within earshot of the king, shot a nervous look at the queen. Queen Aliénor avoided Kathryn's gaze and sauntered over to chat with two of her other ladies.

Chewing her lip in indecision, Kathryn looked again to the wounded beast, which had collapsed inside the queen's ornate carriage. The wolf's breathing came in ragged gasps, and blood spilled down his shoulder to his leg.

Whomever her actions might anger, she had to help him. She stepped forward and gently touched the king's arm to claim his attention. The king looked down at her, his face inquiring.

"My lord," she said, "I kept dogs at home. They would get into mischief all the time. I have never had to deal with anything as severe as this, but" She let the offer linger in the air for a moment before continuing. "And I did learn a little leech craft from my uncle before his death. I might be able to do something for the beast—if there truly is no one else."

The king smiled at Kathryn and patted her hand. Still clasping her fingers, he addressed the rest of his entourage. "*Is there anyone else?*"

The crowd visibly recoiled at the request, drawing themselves farther from the king, clumping together into tight groups of three or four.

The king snorted, his lip curling. "Not surprising." He looked to Kathryn, smiling again. "Well, what say you, my lady? Will you stay with the wolf, help him, and care for him in his sickness?"

Kathryn stifled her uneasiness and nodded. "I will heal him as best as I can, and when he is well, I shall do whatever else is required of me to aid him."

"And you, my fine beast," said the king to his newest vassal.

The wolf gazed up at the king with a look of such naked fidelity and fondness Kathryn almost turned away. So raw and wild were the emotions to be seen in the wolf's eyes, the idea that an outsider should behold them seemed indecent.

The king said, "How will you repay your debt of honor to the lady for this generous service? Wilt thou attend the Lady Kathryn, guard her, and care for her? Be her champion should she ever have need of one?"

The wolf sniffed at the carriage floor, obviously stalling for time, before he looked back up at the king and inclined his head ever so slightly.

The king beamed at this further display of his new protégé's intelligence.
"Remarkable. Truly a remarkable creature."

"He is at that." Kathryn bent to caress the wolf's head, but the animal ducked away from her touch, dropping his head to his paws again and shutting his eyes. Kathryn curled her hand back, stung by the rejection. Prickling with nervousness, Kathryn allowed the king to help her into the carriage with the wolf. As the door swung tight, shutting her up in the gloom with the wounded wolf, she worried that she had made a grievous mistake in agreeing to help the beast.

* * * * *

Kathryn and the beast had been among the first to arrive at the castle keep, but upon the wolf stepping down from the carriage, he froze at once and stood stationary before the great doors of the stronghold. She watched the rest of the court pour by her. Fine ladies, gentle knights, grooms, servants, and dogs all went into the king's stronghold. Still the wolf remained immobile before the doors. Something like fear or grief—possibly both—shone out of his peculiar blue eyes.

She studied the wolf and waited. She had time—all the time in the world, in fact, since the king had expressly said her first duties now lay in tending the wolf. A tire-woman who had been called to assist Kathryn arrived and gazed with misgiving at the wolf. The servant worriedly shifted from foot to foot, chafing her hands as she watched the animal.

Kathryn, however, did not mind awaiting the wolf's pleasure. Some significant struggle occurred now within the beast. His body had tensed, and he stared up at the castle, taking in the high walls, the square battlements, his dark eyes flicking all over the place as he panted and shook. Kathryn did not coax him. Better to let him fight it out on his own rather than force him forward when he was not ready.

While they lingered on the threshold, the castle steward found them.

"The king has instructed me to secure you the necessary implements for tending the" — he huffed and glanced with disfavor at the still immobile animal — "beast."

Ignoring his tone, Kathryn bespoke the necessary tools to tend the wolf's various injuries, most especially the gaping bite wound on his shoulder.

"And further," the steward said, making a note of all the items she had listed. "I am to show you to Master Llewellyn's workshop —"

"Who?"

"The king's wise man and miracle worker," the steward said with thinly veiled annoyance. "The king has granted you use of his workshop to house the beast and care for him this night."

Kathryn dipped her head in acknowledgment, and the steward bowed as if she owed him something. The man left to fetch the necessary tools and helpers. The scrawny maidservant would not be enough, and Kathryn supposed the woman was only there as chaperone to herself.

After a few steps, the steward turned back. "Oh yes, and is there anyone particularly suited to sitting the night out with the wolf?"

"Yes," Kathryn said. "I shall, of course."

This snapped the wolf out of his reverie, and he growled at her, more warning than menace, though.

Startled, Kathryn frowned; then she smiled, guessing the problem. She dropped her voice low and knelt so only the wolf would hear her. "I'm sure staying in the quarters of a gentleman wolf is not exactly proper. But I think you are too fragile to watch the night out alone. And we cannot have you worsen. Not if you are to be a member of the court, at any rate."

A member of the court, the werewolf thought, much struck. So I am. The lowliest member to be sure, but here I am More than I ever again hoped for in this life.

What other miracles might not occur now this first is past?

Night's chills invaded the place now that the sentries of the sun had shifted off to rest. The girl gazed at him expectantly, still patient, though she now shivered as the evening air blew through the king's courtyard with the setting of the sun. The wolf looked to the trembling girl, and a quite human spasm of guilt shuddered through him, entirely alien to his wolfish body.

Human emotion was ill fitting in a mind configured only to hunt and kill. The duality of his state seemed harder to master now in this place. While inhabiting a wolf's body in a wolf's world, he'd found his life had been easier. But here and now, the hunger rushing in veins that had once pumped human blood almost overwhelmed *all* aspects of him. To enter this castle, this hallowed place, to experience even a reflected shadow of the old chivalry by which he had lived his life He almost couldn't bear the aching of his heart. A large part of him wanted to turn tail and run back to his isolated forest as fast as his lupine legs could carry him. His human heart, though, and his rational mind decided nothing — save the devil himself — would drag him from his home again.

Finally, hesitantly, painfully, the wolf put one paw through the castle doors.

The girl watched him, then said, "You might not have heard, but the steward has given me use of Master Llewellyn's workshop to treat you. In the garden, I believe."

The wolf cut through the main corridor of the castle, then exited out the back, turning toward a small shed snuggled up cozily against the stone walls of the castle. He led the girl without hesitation to the right building, and when he glanced back, the girl was smiling to herself.

He pushed the workshop door open with one paw and waited for her to precede him. The maiden did, and keeping her face averted and her voice bland, she said, "Have you have been to the castle before, my Lord Wolf?"

He looked up at her sharply, then huffed in a fair approximation of a human sigh. He had not meant to reveal he knew the castle, but in his present state of pain and abstraction, he had stumbled in keeping his secrets to himself. Shaking his head

ruefully, he walked in to the old workshop with as much dignity as he could muster while limping on his stiff legs.

The steward had fulfilled all of Kathryn's wishes with absolute precision and haste. The proper implements were there and waiting, as well as three strapping young lads from the stables who were used to violent animals and dirty work.

The wolf eyed these helpers with disfavor as he wriggled his way up onto the worktable.

"Do I need them to make you behave yourself, d'you think?" Kathryn whispered.

The wolf gave her a sharp look, then, ever so slightly, shook his head. *No*.

Smiling to herself with satisfaction, Kathryn turned to the stable hands. "Just one of you, for now, to hold him steady for the first part, and the other two can step in if necessary" — she gave him a look from under her lashes — "which I sincerely hope will not be necessary."

The men exchanged uneasy glances amongst themselves but did not speak.

Kathryn breathed deeply to steel herself, then examined the wolf's injuries. She had seen a few dogfights in the kennels at home, and these wounds were rather typical of a death fight. There were large, deep lacerations on his shoulder where the greyhound had grabbed him, and smaller cuts on the wolf's face where the hound had scratched at him before the wolf killed it. Mud and blood — some of which even belonged to the wolf — matted the wolf's coat.

"I'll have to use the iron, I'm afraid, my lord," she said absently to the wolf. Rolling up her sleeves, she patted his side gently. "I'm going to have one of my helpers here wash your wounds with wine while I get the bellows going and heat the iron."

One of the lads stepped forward. "I can do that, m'lady. I've practice enough with the iron from tending the dogs and horses."

Kathryn nodded. "All right. Make sure to use charcoal, not coal. And do not let the iron get so hot flame leaps from it."

Her helper went to heat the hot iron.

As she made everything ready, the other two helpers skirted wide around the wolf, apparently loath to touch him. Kathryn sent one to get honey and brandy from the kitchen and the other to heat water on one of the workshop's impressively efficient little burners. She herself set about cleaning the wolf's filthy coat, rinsing the dirt and detritus from the scratches on his face and body.

He settled in comfortably to her handling. When she dabbed at the scratches with the wine, he did not flinch, snap, or otherwise make any overtures of violence toward her, even though her ministrations must have hurt him. Kathryn smiled in satisfaction. "You are indeed a truly mild-mannered wolf."

The wolf winced as she touched some tender spot.

Had he only been a brutish animal, he might have whined from the pain in his shoulder. He certainly would have snapped at her, but instead he remained passive and patient. As she continued their one-sided discourse, chattering amicably about random odds and ends, the wolf looked at her rather sardonically, his eyes narrowed. The back of her neck tingled with awareness. *He understands me. Every word.* This wolf was obviously more than he seemed.

But how much more?

The girl's restful stream of idle prattle flowed over the wolf in a warm haze, and he closed his eyes, leaning his head down against a soft cushion. Memories prickled on the edge of his senses, unwelcome and painful.

"My sweet lord." His wife, Alisoun's, fair face softened, and unshed tears rimmed the corners of her pale brown eyes. "My love, please, I beg you, tell me where you go. Where do you stay when you leave me at the end of every month?" Alisoun gulped. "You are so good a knight, so honorable, so forthright and true and yet . . . I fear you have a lover. Tell me the truth at once. Else I shall die in not knowing." She collapsed into hysterical sobs, and he gathered her in his arms, comforting her and kissing her tears away. Assurances that she was his only love fell on deaf ears. Alisoun would not be comforted.

"Have mercy, my love," he murmured, his lips feathering over the soft gold of her hair.
"If I tell you my secret, I shall lose your love. I shall lose all I have, even my very self"

In the end, because he loved her, he kept nothing from her. Truth be told, she gave him little peace, and when the day of his accustomed departure neared, she threatened to follow him if he would not tell where he went.

So he told her.

He did so and lost everything because of his trust in her.

He started, returning to the present as one of the grooms yelled that the iron was heated. As carefully and quickly as he could without harming himself, he eased away from the maiden's lap where he had been half-dozing.

The girl slid off the table, smoothing the front of her dress down and brushing away the black hairs he'd shed on her. His face heated, and for once he was grateful to have fur to hide his embarrassment.

The other grooms had returned from their previous errands, and all was ready — except the girl's nerves, it seemed. The wolf watched her straighten her shoulders and take a deep breath, obviously bracing herself. The blood had drained from her face, and her hands shook.

I suppose I should be glad she's not enjoying this, but I wish she looked more confident just now.

Her voice remained steady, though, as she leaned close to him. "I am sorry. It is undignified, but even humans are restrained when the iron is applied"

Even *humans*. The wolf thought with distaste, but he nodded.

"I will see they do not hurt you." She stroked his muzzle so quickly he did not have time to flinch away.

Years had passed since a human had touched him, and he shivered at the light contact, suddenly craving more. All in one day he felt more human than he had in two years. And all because of this girl.

He looked up at her, studying her as she made her preparations. A young woman certainly, her face unlined, her body strong and supple, no more than nineteen

perhaps. Her head came to the shoulders of the burly stablemen, medium height for a woman. Slim hips and a dainty bust gave her a trim figure, pleasing enough, but not so fine as to make a man's eyes follow the swish of her skirts as she walked past. Rather browner than the fashion, she coupled that defect with, of all the most unfortunate afflictions, freckles on her nose. But the animation of her countenance, the lively joy behind her features, made a person forget she was not – strictly speaking – beautiful. Pale green, lushly lashed, and lovely beyond compare, her eyes were unarguably her best feature.

The girl's hair shone becomingly, but her thick braid showed to be of that troublesome shade between brown and blonde, a golden sheen that caught the light charmingly, but still lacking something of the dash true blonde hair has.

Once an expert judge of these matters, he decided the girl was pretty, pert, and certainly intriguing in her own way, but she definitely was not the Beauty his wife had been.

Another face flashed across his mind's eye, another woman, blonde with brown eyes, and more beautiful than any mortal maid had a right to be. He shivered at the memory of his wife's delicate fingers running through his hair.

The girl dropped another careless caress on his head, and he ducked away from her. *This is too much.* He averted his gaze so he would not have to see the hurt on the girl's face.

Grabbing a clean-looking rag, the girl gently bound his muzzle, tying the knot tight enough so he could not open his mouth. She scratched at his ears. "So you don't bite your tongue off. And" She sighed. "We're going to tie your feet as well."

He gazed at the low ceiling but did not struggle or flinch as she tied his feet to the table.

One of the burly grooms came forward to hold his shoulder still so he could not move and cause the hot brand to slip and burn more than was needed. The other stable hand moved to hold his legs steady where the rope was tied. The tire-woman, who had kept herself apart from the proceedings until now, came forward with the mixture of

brandy and honey that had been prepared, at the ready to slather on the burn afterward. The third stable hand pulled the iron from the brazier and addressed himself to the girl. "Here, my lady, please let me do this. S'not proper for you."

The green-eyed girl gently lifted the hot iron from the stable hand's grip, a wisp of hair falling over her forehead as she shook her head. "I have experience in this, I promise you." She glanced down at the wolf, gently stroking his head, her voice soft, soothing. "Ready, Sir Wolf?"

The wolf caught Kathryn's eye and blinked. She understood that to be a yes, and so, hand steady even as her nerves frayed to the breaking point, she applied the iron to his skin, all the while remembering her uncle's words as he had showed her how to do this many years ago on one of their injured horses.

"*Nipotina, sei attento.*" She could hear Uncle Flavio's evenly measured tones as clearly as if he were in the room with her. Even when he spoke to her in her mind he always did so in Italian. She allowed the memory of him to wash over her, guiding her actions. "*Little niece, be careful. You want to make sure when you apply the iron, like this*" – he'd demonstrated, his hand as firm while he held a sizzling iron against quivering flesh as when he held his cup at dinner – "*you leave the iron on long enough to create a small red spot, just so.*" He had indicated the livid red mark on the horse's creamy yellow flank. "*And not just merely singe the animal's fur, which will do nothing. Take care, though*" – this as he'd handed the iron off to one of his helpers – "*that you do not leave the iron on too long and do not puncture the skin. Va bene?*"

"*Mio dio,*" Kathryn swore as she finished her operation and hurriedly pulled the iron away, passing the long rod off to someone else; she saw not who. She wiped sweat from her brow with her sleeve, then held her hand out at once for the honey salve. The wolf, who had behaved like a prince throughout the whole agonizing operation, lay back and closed his eyes, clenching them tightly in pain, panting through the gag around his mouth.

Kathryn dosed his burn liberally with the honey and brandy salve, then left the wound open to the air. The tension in his body eased, and the wolf at last opened his uncanny blue eyes to stare at the ceiling again. Kathryn smiled, giving a breathless, giddy laugh. There would be swelling and bruising, and the poor beast would be rather sore and miserable for days, but now, at least, he would probably recover completely. She swiftly untied his muzzle, then stroked the fur there back into place. Still groggy with pain, the wolf did not avoid her hands this time.

"If that is all, m'lady, you can leave him to us for the night and return to the queen," one of her helpers piped up.

"No, no." Kathryn waved the offer away. She had been given leave to take as long as she needed, and she did not leave a job only half-done. She would see the night through with her patient, and if he did well, then in the morning, and only then, would she surrender him to other hands. "You can return to your duties, kind sirs. My maid and I will stay here tonight and tend the wolf."

And perhaps my absence will cool the queen's anger somewhat, she thought wryly.

With obvious reluctance, the grooms acquiesced to her dictate, and after carrying the wolf to the bed as Kathryn ordered, they filed out the door. Kathryn and the maidservant were left alone together.

"The beast gets the bed, madam?" The tire-woman's voice held a note of disapproval.

Kathryn sagged. Not one for explaining her actions at the best of times, and now, tired and drained as she was, she merely stammered out, "I do not wish to face the king tomorrow if the beast dies."

Still looking dubious, the maid nodded. "I shall go fetch some extra bedding."

Kathryn escorted the maid to the door, then blinked in surprise to find a guard outside the workshop's entrance.

"Are you here for me or the wolf?" she asked him.

"For your honor and safety, my lady," the guard said, voice flat.

Too exhausted to argue, Kathryn went back inside, only to discover the wolf awake and stubbornly trying to pull himself off of the bed.

Chapter Three

During the daytime in the woods when the wolf slept, he would dream human dreams of torment. Nightmares, he supposed they were. The look in his wife's eyes, eyes which he had loved so well, often filled his mind. She had only looked so for a moment. One flickering spark of . . . what? Revulsion? Fear? Anger? All those emotions at once, and so much more besides? And then his wife had glanced away and spoken the same loving words of old, so he had forgotten the flicker of disgust he'd seen. He'd pushed his doubts away and pretended he still had her love. Pretended he could still trust her.

He had left his hall and rode alone to his favorite haunt that fateful day. When the wolf took over, he liked to be far from people and surrounded by the earth and the sky. He loved the beautiful King's Forest because if he rode to the depths of the woods no man would disturb him, and every farmer's chickens would be safe from his insatiable wolfish appetite. The nearby chapel also possessed a hollow rock he found convenient for storing his clothes.

Fool that he was he had even told Alisoun about the rock.

"*Idiota*," the girl scolded him.

He blinked and focused on the maiden as she shooed him back toward the bed. Not "*the girl*." *Lady Kathryn*. She had saved his life. Learning her name was surely the least he could do.

"Back to bed. What are you doing?"

Startled, he searched her face. *Does she really think I understand her? Or is she only jesting with herself?* As he had no wish to be revealed as a werewolf, her behavior worried him. He looked at her, pain fogging his vision, and shook his head.

"Yes, and don't play the dumb mutt with me either, my lord," she said. "You're smart enough to beg the king for mercy, you're smart enough to know what I mean when I say get your fluffy tail back in bed." She pointed, her delicate face set in a comically stern expression.

He did not move.

Lady Kathryn pouted, an expression oddly unsuited to the practical good sense she'd demonstrated thus far. "You will not oblige me by getting on the bed?"

The wolf gave her a stern look. *I take the bed while you, what? Sleep on the floor? Unthinkable.*

"All right, my Lord the Stubborn," Lady Kathryn said. "Will you share the bed with me?"

He considered this. His wound now stung and throbbed something fierce, and his limbs dragged with fatigue when he moved them, but though he was a wolf, some part of him had been and still was a man—sort of. He would no sooner jump in an honorable maiden's bed out of wedlock than he would piss on the king's leg. The bench seemed an acceptable compromise. He jerked his snout toward the hard, flat board.

Lady Kathryn rolled her eyes and shrugged. "You win, m'lord. I, bed. You, bench."

Satisfied, the wolf rose with difficulty, then at last managed to pull himself up, settling his limbs as comfortably as he could on the hard wood.

The tire-woman came back, smiling her approval when she found Kathryn snug in the bed, sans wolf. The maid deposited her own cot for the night—a hard pallet and thin blanket—on the floor next to the bed. "I sent word to the queen you would be spending the night here."

"Thank you." Kathryn pillowed her head on her arms. It had truly been a very long day.

The tire-woman bedded down and, if not yet asleep, was making rather a determined bid for slumber.

Kathryn rolled over. "Shall I tell you a story, my lord?" she asked the room at large, expecting no answer and needing none. "I am said to be well versed and not entirely without skill in the telling." She looked into the wolf's eyes for the answer. He blinked owlishly, which she guessed to be his way of saying yes.

She settled back on the comfy pillows of the healer's humble cot and told the wolf tales of the clever fox, Reinecke, and his exploits with other members of a fictional animal court. The lordly lion king, Coward the Rabbit, the poor bear, Friar Bruin, and many others besides in a myriad of intricate and hilarious encounters.

Kathryn left out the bawdier tales, though, and the sex-crazed she-wolf, in deference to her audience. Those tales were fine among the highborn ladies, but men and menials had funny ideas about how women should speak about certain things. Gradually, her audience's attention slackened, and the maid began to softly snore. The wolf, too, seemed to have drifted off somewhere between the tale of the lion-king's court and the beating of Bruin the Bear.

The poor wolf had many scars. There were various old nicks and cuts taken out of his hide, and the bite on his shoulder would leave another lasting mark on the landscape of his body. A long, deep line cut over the side of his face, crossing just shy of his right eye. She did not think an average wolf could come by such a scar in the normal way of things. A scar from his old life, mayhap?

Was he a werewolf as she suspected? Had he perhaps been a soldier as a human? A knight even? That would explain his familiarity with the castle and the intense fealty he displayed toward the king.

Kathryn did her best to settle comfortably in her dress, but it was badly soiled and sticky with sweat. She rose and poked around in the healer's possessions, hoping, whoever this Llewellyn was, he would not begrudge her the loan of a comfortable and clean set of robes for the night.

Awakened by her movement, the wolf stirred, then jerked up. If wolves could sweat, the animal would have been drenched. As it was, his tongue lolled out while his ears flicked back over and over as he whined in obvious disapproval. When Kathryn ignored him and began to disrobe against his objections, the wolf averted his eyes and covered them with his good paw.

Kathryn bit her lip to hold back a laugh and settled the heavy monk's robe into place. "I am clothed now, Sir Wolf. And may I say your discretion becomes you."

The wolf uncovered his eyes and seemed relieved to see she intended to sleep in an oversized habit of Llewellyn's. The garment dragged on the floor, and the sleeves billowed around her arms, but it was still an undeniably comfortable outfit.

She hunkered down under her covers, watching him where he sat on his hard board. "Even though you are male, no one could accuse you of any impropriety with me in your current shape. You might as well enjoy the comforts of this bed while you can. You don't know where the king will house you when you are well."

The wolf hesitated, then decisively lay down again on his bench.

She sighed. Well, she didn't *need* to share a bed with an injured wolf twice her size, after all. The narrow bed barely held *her* weight comfortably, and when she stretched to her full height, her toes dangled off the end. No, if the wolf's sensibilities were offended, she certainly would not urge him to join her again. Turning her shoulder to give him her back, she whispered, "Suit yourself, beast."

* * * * *

He went back home when he found the clothes missing. Well, no, he went back after he tore the chapel's grounds apart to see if they had been moved anywhere nearby. His lupine nose became a boon as he tried to scent them, and yet after a week of frenzied searching, there was never a trace to be found.

Finally, defeated and heartily afraid, he went back to his manor to see if Alisoun had for some reason taken them. Maybe she had thought he would like them laundered before returning to his human state.

He arrived at his manor just as Sir Reynard de Troumper rode through his gate. Reynard was another knight in service to the king. Red haired, broad-chested, fiery tempered, and wicked, Reynard always greeted him with thinly veiled loathing.

In his wolf form, he paused, not wishing the fellow knight to suspect aught amiss about him. He circled back, hiding in the line of trees to watch and learn why Sir Reynard visited his home while the lord of the castle was away.

A servant came to meet Sir Reynard and led the big knight's horse away. Another servant escorted Reynard around the back of the castle to the ornamental garden the werewolf had planted for Alisoun as a wedding gift.

Alisoun sat there waiting for Reynard. Her lovely golden hair unbound hung down to her waist, and in the soft light of many torches, she seemed blessed with an angelic halo. The servant dismissed, Reynard and Alisoun were left alone.

She did not rise from her stone bench, only looked up at Sir Reynard with flushed cheeks and the glow of anticipation about her eyes. "Well?"

"I found the clothes. They are safe hid where the monster shall not unearth them." Reynard licked his lips and stepped toward her. His gaze roamed hungrily over her figure in a tightly laced, cream-colored gown. *"Your husband will plague you no more with his . . . malignancy. And now, I have done as you told me. Your oath."*

Alisoun smiled then. A smile that had once been for her husband alone – or so he had believed. She rose from the bench and enfolded Sir Reynard in her arms. Her sensuous smile seemed full of promise as she stared into Reynard's eyes. "I promised you my body and my love. You shall have both tonight. And when the quest for my husband has cooled, you shall have my hand." She stroked Reynard's dirty, travel-stained cheek with one exquisitely shaped hand and purred into his face. "And all the werewolf's lands into the bargain."

Sir Reynard's urgency seemed such that he waited for no more words to be spoken and stopped her mouth with a lusty kiss. He hauled her into his arms, pawing at her clothes, obviously anxious to consummate their affair before Alisoun could refuse or turn him away.

The wolf ran away, back to the woods. De Troumper had hounded Alisoun for months, but the wolf had tolerated Reynard's lechery because Alisoun had treated the knight with such thinly veiled contempt. Until now.

Until her husband had told her of his . . . condition. His malignancy.

He did not rest until he was safely back in the center of his forest. He did not leave the woods again until his king reclaimed him, taking him, however unwittingly, back into the world he had been born to.

** * * * **

A beam of moonlight fell on his eyes. He had been dreaming but could not remember of what. He scratched his nose idly with one large paw then sneezed. In his foggy drowsiness he forgot where he was, what he was. His bed was a hard wooden bench, and his limbs moved stiffly as he unfolded his body from a curled position. Someone stirred beside him, and moonlight limned the soft lines of a woman in the bed. Without thinking, he jumped from his hard bench and crossed to climb into bed next to her. When he snuggled his body into the warmth at the small of her back, she mumbled something in her sleep, then settled in, snoring softly.

She snores like a mouse. He smiled to himself, sleep once again overtaking him.

* * * * *

When he woke up some hours later alone in the bed, he stared at the rumpled bedding, appalled. *I slept the better part of the night in bed with the gentle maiden – with her . . . all night . . . in the bed – all night . . .*

He jumped down at once and sniffed about for the gi – for Lady Kathryn.

The tire-woman from yesterday inhaled sharply when he glanced at her. He looked away just as quickly, fearful any prolonged studying of the servant would provoke a shrieking outburst his tired bones would not relish.

Lady Kathryn opened the door a moment later, fully dressed in a clean gown and apparently having been awake for hours. Rosy cheeked and fresh faced, she seemed well rested, the trials of the day before showing only in the deep shadows under her kind, green eyes.

She had a tray of breakfast for him, and instead of setting the food on the floor, as most people would have done, she set his meal on the small worktable. He would have more difficulty in eating that way, but this girl seemed unwilling to let him pretend to be a simple beast. So to oblige her, he stretched up and stood on his hind legs to eat breakfast.

Kathryn watched the wolf for a moment before she spoke. "You pushed me out of bed with your great hulking body last night, you know."

If the wolf blushed, Kathryn could not see the reddening through all that black fur, but he did pause in his eating and seemed almost to grimace.

"We see the king as soon as you have supped," she told him.

The wolf swallowed what he had been eating and dropped to all fours at once. *I'm ready*, was writ plainly across his furry face.

"The king will wait. He is not impatient."

But the wolf refused to return to his breakfast, so Kathryn gave in and let him have his way. "I'm checking the wound first." She motioned toward the bed.

The wolf hesitated; then, apparently realizing it would be more expedient to yield to the tyrant in this case, he jumped onto the bed. She checked his burn and applied more of the soothing honey salve. As she slicked her finger over his wound, he met her gaze. Kathryn stared back, transfixed. His eyes were even stranger seen close up, deep cobalt irises with the palest of blues fanning out in slivers and waves from his pupil, piercing through the darker shade of blue.

She had never heard of a wolf with dark blue eyes before. Intelligence stared back at her, uncanny intelligence compared to a normal wolf. Then he looked away from her, denying their connection, which he very obviously did not want.

Her examination done, their need of the workshop at an end, Kathryn shooed the wolf out and shut the building up. She and the wolf, escorted primly by the weary tire-woman, marched to see the king and his knights in their part of the castle.

At the training field, the king sparred with a young squire soon to take his vigil and, if he passed that test, to be dubbed. The young man flailed a bit against the king's greater expertise as they fought.

The wolf watched the sword match with obvious interest, and Kathryn waited patiently. Eventually the king, though slower in his movements, proved to be the more skillful. He knocked the young man down with a well-placed blow from the hilt of his

sword, but to soften the defeat, the king extended a hand to help the lad up from the dirt.

The wolf barked his approval, and his tail snaked in a temperate wag across the ground. The king wiped the sweat from his wrinkled brow with the back of one hand and, with an engaging grin, took leave of his opponent to receive his newest guests.

The king kissed Kathryn's hand. "I thank you, my lady. Thank you for tending his hurts and keeping him for me while I arranged a place for him here among my knights. Is he well?"

Kathryn smiled down at the wolf, then back at the king. "He is, Highness. I would watch his shoulder and make sure he does not exert himself. Though there's no reason for him to remain coddled and sheltered since he made the fact apparent last night he does not relish such treatment."

The king swatted playfully at the beast's ears. "You have offended the lady, my wolf?"

Kathryn bowed. "No, Sire, he is the most well-mannered wolf I have ever met. It was my pleasure to tend him."

"Truly a remarkable wolf, in point of fact." The sound of a stranger's voice made Kathryn turn to look.

The newcomer dwarfed them all, towering a head above even the king as the ruler stepped forward to slap the stranger on the shoulder. The stranger's skin had tanned to a nut brown, but his hair had bleached so fair as to be almost white. His face remained lightly lined, though, so he could not be more than midway through his thirties. His eyes were the color of two chips of ice but could warm in friendly amusement quicker than the sun could warm the flowers of the court in summer. He wore the simple black hooded robes of an occultist who needed neither fancy jewelry nor arcane symbols to do his work or to mark him as one of the Gifted. The man carried his talents about him like a suit of clothing well worn and accustomed.

The king stepped back from the magician and presented him to Kathryn. "Lady Kathryn, this is a wise man and court magician. Brother Llewellyn."

Kathryn dipped in a small curtsy. "Brother."

Llewellyn bowed at the waist. "My lady."

"Good harvest?" The king laughed.

The wise man bowed and patted a sturdy leather satchel at his side. He turned to Kathryn and gave a small smile. "Every few months our king grants me leave to wander in the mountains and gather medicine for my potions and such."

Now that he mentioned it, the heavy, brisk tang of herbs and spices clung to the conjurer, wafting over to tickle in the back of Kathryn's throat.

"I have heard tell of your newest acquisition, my lord, and came at once to see the beast for myself." Llewellyn's voice vibrated with excitement, and at the king's sign, the wise man dropped to one knee before the wolf.

The wolf, while the humans talked, had settled onto his stomach, dropping his chin between his front paws. He appeared to have been very much bored by the proceedings, had even closed his eyes as if napping. The animal breathed too quickly for sleep, though, and his hooded eyes seemed tense.

Kathryn pursed her lips, worried and confused. *Why is he avoiding Brother Llewellyn?*

Standing, Llewellyn bowed his head to Kathryn. "I wonder, lady, if you would give me a few moments' conference on your observations of the wolf while my liege helps him to settle in."

"Gladly, kind sir." Kathryn turned to take her leave of the king. The king gently nudged the wolf with his foot, and the beast stood, patiently looking up at Kathryn. She knelt and met the wolf's strange eyes with her own.

Thank you, maiden, for all you did for me, the wolf seemed to say. The beast licked her hand gently before moving to join his king. The magician's glance sharpened at this, and a speculative look fell over his features. When he noticed Kathryn watching him, though, he was quick to turn his expression to one of casual indifference. He gestured for her to follow him and strolled back toward the gardens.

Kathryn could not have said why, but for all the world, the wolf's parting gesture had reminded her of nothing so much as the courtly kiss a knight bestowed on a lady's hand. She covered her kissed hand with the other and held both tight to her stomach. "You are the noblest knight of this land, are you not, Sir Wolf?" She smiled to herself, then followed Llewellyn away from the weapons field.

Chapter Four

Llewellyn led Kathryn to his small workshop off the herb garden and escorted her inside the hut's cozy interior. The tire-woman, who still trailed after Kathryn, opted to sit on a stool in the sun and enjoy the smell of plant life wafting from the flowerbeds while the magician conversed with Kathryn inside his hut.

The daylight illuminated the hut's interior, so Kathryn could make out details of the place she had not been able to see last night. Batches of simple herbs hung from the ceiling, and shelves lined the walls, filled with small ceramic jars labeled meticulously and arranged there no less so.

Llewellyn motioned to a snug bench against one wall and waited for Kathryn to arrange her skirts before seating himself on a sturdy wooden seat across from her.

Pouring them each a tall cup from the bottle of wine she had used to clean the wolf's scratches, Llewellyn looked at her expectantly. "Well, my lady, what do you know of our wolf?" The court magician absently picked up mortar and pestle to keep his hands busy while they talked. When Kathryn did not speak up at once, he smiled. "Forgive me; I misspoke. I meant to say *werewolf*."

Kathryn gaped, setting her wine down so she would not spill it on herself. "You know what he is?"

"You are not the only one who has seen a bit of the world before, my dear," he chided, though he grinned to take any hint of rebuke from his words.

Kathryn hesitated. What to tell the magician, and what might be better kept to herself? She wasn't even entirely sure how much she actually *knew* about the wolf and how much was just conjecture.

But the magician was still talking. "I'm sure you recognized what the creature is."

Kathryn swallowed. "Did the king?"

The magician paused the gentle turning motions of his stone implements. His face became ponderous for a long moment, then he shrugged. "The king might . . . suspect. But no, I'm not sure he entirely understands what he has in his care. I believe

he thinks he has just acquired a rather remarkably sharp animal, perhaps with some magical augmentation, but no, I'd wager the thought of the garwaf has not entered his head. Yet."

"Garwaf?"

"Ah, an old word we use in the mountains. It is the same as 'werewolf.'"

"Are you going to tell the king about the garwaf?" If the king was suddenly enlightened to the fact he had invited a werewolf into his innermost circle, things might come out the worst for the beast.

Llewellyn shook his head. "I can see no purpose in going to the king with my *suspensions* until I have a firmer grasp of the truth." And then, in a quiet whisper, he said, "Many have a prejudice against the garwaf. I thought perhaps our fur-covered friend should be given a chance to show his quality before the king and the rest were enlightened as to his true nature."

That was good of him and showed a certain depth of benevolent understanding. Many of the prejudices against werewolves were not sound. They might take on the shapes of wolves, but at the beginning of the day they were human.

Kathryn fisted her hands in her lap with sudden apprehension, bunching up the fabric of her skirt. "Will someone else discover the truth? Someone less discreet?" She gazed at the wise man with no small amount of fear blooming in her heart. She was loath to see any harm fall on the wolf.

Llewellyn clucked and put aside his activity to lay a reassuring hand on her shoulder, then to take a fortifying and appreciative sip of his own wine. "Any with enough wit to spot the clues will also have the wisdom to keep such thoughts to himself until an opportune moment. I do not think we need fret for long, at any rate." He went to take his crushed mixture to a burner and poured the syrupy liquid into a pot waiting there. "The wolf has already impressed the king greatly. One so noble as I believe the wolf to be will quickly work his way back to a place of honor beside the king."

Kathryn looked up, narrowing her eyes at the wise man. *Back to?*

Llewellyn chose just that moment to present his back to her, busy stirring his mixture as it came to a boil. "Once the wolf is secure in the king's esteem, no slander nor slur — nor uncomfortable but ultimately harmless truth — will displace him. Once the king gets to know someone, he will not let the prejudice of others, nor even those he once held himself, to sway his judgment. He is as fair-minded and levelheaded a man as ever I have met. So fear not, maid — your wolf is safe for the time being." He tossed a quick grin over his shoulder.

"You know who he is," she said. Llewellyn spoke as if he knew the wolf, his personality, his heart. Perhaps even the circumstances of his transformation.

Llewellyn smiled fondly at her, and approvingly too. He shook his head. "I have only feelings and guesses to go on, and those will avail us nothing without the means to turn him back to his proper form. The worst kind of shame would be to give him back his true name when he would only be trapped forever as wolf. Better to let his lupine form remain nameless and his human half to keep his honorable name unsullied by the taint of present circumstances."

"Will you tell me?" she whispered. "I should very much like to know." Kathryn did not realize until that moment how the wolf's gentle ways and unassuming manners — *manners* in a *wolf* — had affected her. She had a fondness for the beast already, and she wished no harm to fall on his head. A wish blossomed within her to help him back to his former life if she could, knowing something of repression herself. His persecution, at least, might be curable. Hers, as a woman, certainly was not.

Llewellyn turned to her, empty hands open before him in a shrug. "I cannot risk slandering a noble knight of this realm. He may only have removed his estates to another land, as the whispers say, and not fallen on such unfortunate circumstances as our wolf has." Llewellyn came away from his burner and sat on the bench beside her. Taking her hands in his, he gave them a small squeeze. "As I treat with the king, so must I treat with you. Until I know more, I will not unfold all my mind to either of you." He gave her hands a parting pat, then rose briskly from the bench to return to his work, their interview at an end apparently.

Kathryn jumped to her feet, indignant. "But how am I to help the wolf if you will not tell me who he is?"

Llewellyn stirred his bubbling mixture and did not glance up from the brew's surface. "Watch over him; keep him from harm in the court as best you may. He needs your friendship. Keep safe the physical half, and I will strive to free the mind and the spirit." And then he did look up, his face flushed from the steam and shining a little. He must have been nearing forty, but in that moment the wise man's face glowed as eagerly as any young lad of ten, ripe for an adventure.

Kathryn bit back a sharp retort and, accepting her obvious dismissal, bowed her head to the king's wise man as she left his workshop. Her foot poised on the threshold, she stopped as a new thought struck her.

He had given her a hint, after all, a clue to the wolf's identity: "*I cannot risk slandering a noble knight of this realm . . .*" Llewellyn had said to her. So the wolf was a knight? One who had disappeared not long ago, perhaps? And with no logical explanation forthcoming? Not many knights could have vanished so in recent history.

If Llewellyn had given her a clue, then he clearly did not disapprove of her seeking the answer herself. He only hesitated to give her too much, and perhaps he even wanted her to seek and find if she came to the same conclusions he had.

A new spring came into her step as she walked through the garden and back to the castle, the tire-woman doggedly trailing her steps. She turned into the hedge maze. She had no orders from the queen today, so the morning belonged to Kathryn to do with as she pleased — until someone decided to look for her.

She did not go too far from Llewellyn's hut, merely sat by one of the ornamental fountains in the court. Her chaperone, the tire-woman, tried to persuade her to return to the lady's apartments, making a none-too-subtle comment about Kathryn's already overly sun-kissed complexion. Kathryn ignored her and stared at the rippling surface of a fountain, trying to figure out how best to unravel the enigma of the garwaf.

* * * * *

The first day back in the castle passed pleasantly for the wolf. He stayed in constant company with the king and his men, men who had been his comrades and friends not so long ago. Unsurprisingly, his days among the king's court did not seem so far gone when he found himself back among the men and places he had once known so well.

Had the king not shown such marked favor toward him, he might have had a harder time dealing with the knights. However, because the king had so obviously found a new favorite in him, the other knights treated him with respect and, eventually, kindness. By the end of the first day, they had even begun to like him on his own account. He ran counter to every preconceived notion the knights and men-at-arms had of what a wolf should be. He behaved so well the knights were hard pressed *not* to be fond of him.

He kept the king company, and during sparring practice for the knights, he went to roughhouse with some of the young pages. He made sure to keep both his claws and his fangs in line, while the children, in turn, made sure to mind his wounded shoulder.

After a rather pleasant row, the young lads were ushered away by one of the trainers. Gratefully, the man gave him a head pat and a smile in thanks. In his earlier days on the training field, when the wolf had been a knight, keeping the young pages in line could weary him near to the bone. Although, as a younger knight, he had always managed to dodge his more onerous duties, always been able to find someone else whom he could charm or bribe into taking them on for him. He regretted that now. Corralling the restless pages, wrestling with them, playing with them, had been quite fun, though his body ached horribly now.

What else did I miss while I was busy being an arrogant young lordling?

A lull began as the men went off to clean and change for the evening meal. The wolf looked up at the sky, which had begun to blush with the violent purple hues of sunset.

He had always loved children.

I used to dream about having my own children. Imagine my strong sons, my clever daughters. They had been shallow, half-formed dreams, but still their memory stung. He would have no children now. He let out a low wolf huff – the closest he could manage to a human sigh.

I have new dreams now. Simpler, humbler certainly, but just because part of me is lost forever, that does not mean I should give in and be all wolf. Even a half-life is still a life. I will not waste a moment more of this one.

The baritone of his king called him from the edge of the tourney field, startling him. His new vow held firmly in his mind, he loped happily off to find his lord.

* * * * *

No one thought to look for Kathryn until midday, and the messenger did not catch up with her for another hour after that. She was not surprised to find herself finally summoned to the queen's quarters, and went with haste if not alacrity.

Setting aside the problem of solving the knight's identity, Kathryn steeled herself for the scene to come in the queen's apartments. One of the other ladies, Beatrice de Troumper, an earl's daughter drying on the vine at the ripe age of twenty-five, had held a grudge against Kathryn since her arrival at the court. Beatrice had no doubt used Kathryn's misadventure in the forest and her absence last night to make Kathryn look bad before the queen.

Queen Aliénor also worried Kathryn. She had not seemed pleased by yesterday's events. Kathryn did not wish to anger a patroness who could make her life miserable merely by lifting her littlest finger. Yet she also would not, *could not*, leave a creature in need when she might be able to help. *And there is more to that wolf than anyone yet knows.* Until the wolf's shoulder healed and the mystery around him unraveled, Kathryn had no wish to leave court. She would not have much choice, though, if the queen sent her away.

Kathryn had no doubt as she entered the queen's solar that a storm long in the gathering was about to be unleashed on her. She squared her shoulders as she entered the lavishly furnished solar the queen and her ladies occupied.

The ladies of the court sat all in a circle, picking out bright patterns of embroidery on various pieces of fabric. Kathryn sewed well enough, her stitches small, her needle fast, but she had always preferred tending the animals with her uncle to stitchery work with her maid.

Queen Aliénor reclined by the window, glancing up as Kathryn entered. A few years older than Kathryn, Aliénor still looked barely sixteen. She had an oval-shaped face that could have been carved from the purest of white marble. Her features were as idyllic as the statues of old – and could be as hard and unyielding as those stone edifices. Her almond-shaped eyes were pale lashed but large and a rather charming dark brown, which belied the hard pursing of her lips at that moment. She was a lovely girl with luxurious titian curls, which gave more than a slight hint as to her temperament.

Kathryn modestly lowered her eyes and bowed before the queen. The queen turned her indifferent gaze back to her pattern, but another set of eyes close at hand still shot daggers at Kathryn in their indignation. Kathryn turned to Beatrice, Mistress of the Robes, senior Maid of Honor to the new queen, who was at that moment furiously glaring at her.

"So you have decided to grace us with your presence today, milady?" Beatrice narrowed her hazel eyes at Kathryn.

Ignoring Beatrice, Kathryn went to one of the cabinets and pulled out her own sewing kitbag. She selected a project and claimed the empty stool in the circle. She let her hands mindlessly accomplish their work while her mind turned over the puzzle of the knight's identity.

"Well?" Beatrice demanded of her again. "Have you nothing to say?"

Kathryn did not look up as she said in her most sickly sweet voice, "As you have oft remarked to me, lady, silence is of all virtues the most becoming in a maiden. I am merely trying to take your good advice to heart."

Beatrice snorted in a manner most unbecoming to the chief of all the queen's ladies. "Impertinent hussy," Beatrice said barely under her breath.

The queen looked up, an amused flicker in her brown eyes. Aliénor darted a searching glance at Kathryn. Kathryn met her questing eyes squarely, keeping her posture open, inviting, and wondered what mysteries the queen searched for so fiercely in her face. Then the queen sighed and looked away, going more slowly than usual. Ill at ease, Kathryn turned back to her sewing.

Acute pity for the queen stabbed through her. Aliénor's king was at least twenty years her senior. He was dutiful and respectful in all his attentions towards her, but their union hardly appeared to be a love match. It seemed such a lonely life for a young woman. Kathryn understood how a solitary girl far from home could long for a friend. Any friend. *Although some friends are better than others.* She darted a glance at Beatrice under her brows.

Full figured, with a deep bosom and a narrow waist falling to wide hips, Beatrice dwarfed the rest of the ladies. She had, Kathryn reflected ruefully, just the sort of figure men dreamed about. Beatrice's hair shone a dark, rich brown to fall in perfect ringlets and frame her charming, heart-shaped face. She was strikingly pretty, with a large, sensual mouth and dark hazel eyes.

Beatrice glanced up and caught Kathryn staring. She cocked one perfectly shaped eyebrow and eyed Kathryn with disfavor. "Well, Lady Kathryn?"

Kathryn tilted her head and smiled. "Just admiring your beauty, Lady Beatrice. So hard to believe one as lovely and charming as yourself has been questing for a husband for — how long now? Ten years? Twelve?" Kathryn arranged her face into the picture of innocent curiosity.

Beatrice's jaw clenched, then she yelped and dug her needle out of her palm. Blotting the blood away with a kerchief, she said, "I was affianced to a worthy baron

from Escarcelle as a young child, but he died on Crusade when I was sixteen." Beatrice sniffed and dabbed at the corner of her eye with the kerchief, but when she saw no one was paying attention, she folded the cloth and smoothed her skirts. "My father passed away that same year, and my brother, Reynard, was quite taken up with managing his own affairs for some time before he could make suitable provision for me. I am, however, in daily anticipation of my brother arranging an advantageous alliance."

"Hmm." Kathryn turned back to her sewing.

"And you, Lady Kathryn?" Beatrice said, her voice also cloyingly saccharine. "You are nineteen, are you not? More than ready for the marriage bed, I should say."

Kathryn pursed her lips but kept her voice light. "Like your brother, Lady Beatrice, my dear father has been taken up with his own affairs and so sent me to court." Not entirely true, but Kathryn wasn't about to relate her whole sad history. The queen was familiar with some of Kathryn's past, but only Kathryn knew all the reasons she had not, and probably never would, be married. *Too clever. Too plain. And much, much too poor.*

"Kathryn," the queen said, snapping Kathryn out of her ruminations. "Would you please fetch my green cloak out of the chest in my chamber? This room is drafty."

"Of course." Kathryn rose and set aside her sewing.

After nearly a month, Kathryn finally understood her place in the hierarchy at court. As the lowest ranked of all the ladies, she had to know her place—or the rest of them would cheerfully remind her. Lady Beatrice, as Mistress of the Robes, would hand the queen her chemises when they were dressing her. Lady Avise dressed the queen's hair. The other two, Apolline and Agathe, chose the queen's slippers and stockings. If luck favored Kathryn, she might be allowed to choose one of the ribbons for the queen's hair. To be allowed to fetch something was an uncommon honor for Kathryn. She suspected, though, the queen was annoyed with her about yesterday and used this errand as an excuse to get her out of the room. This would give Beatrice and the queen a few moments to gossip about Kathryn unhindered.

Or maybe I am being paranoid.

She slipped through the door joining the queen's solar to her private apartments. The chest sat under a portrait to the right of the bed. A little digging amongst lush velvets and sturdy woolen things produced the desired forest-green wool cloak, to be tied at the neck. Kathryn folded the garment carefully over her arm and straightened.

She found herself staring into the face of a handsome young man. The lifelike portrait hung nearly eye level over the chest of clothing. The subject had been about Kathryn's age, maybe a year or two older, at the time of the portrait. With a strong, square jaw, black hair, large, deep-set blue eyes, high cheekbones, and the same long aquiline nose as the king, the young man was *very* handsome. He reminded Kathryn of someone, but the image was elusive.

Then she looked again at his eyes.

She frowned. *No. Surely not.* Impossible for her to have found her werewolf hanging in the queen's bedroom. She shook her head and realized she had been too long about her errand. She hurried back.

As she helped the queen into her cloak, she said with careful indifference, "My lady, who is the man in that portrait in your bedroom? The one that hangs over your clothing chest."

Aliénor frowned. "The king's nephew. Gabriel fitz Michael. The Duke de Dorré."

"I thought the king had disinherited the duke," Beatrice said.

The queen hesitated, then said, "He did, but he, well, he could not bring himself to destroy the portrait. The portrait is all he has left of his nephew now the man has disappeared. My husband does not like to look at his nephew's likeness, though."

"Why did he hang the portrait in your bedchamber, then, my lady?" Apolline asked, her voice blank enough the venomous comment might have been simple ignorance, but there again, Apolline *was* Beatrice's bosom companion.

Kathryn's hand froze in tying the queen's cloak, but then she hurried on as if she'd heard nothing amiss in the remark.

Aliénor blushed and dropped her gaze. "I never met the duke, but I have heard he was a very embodiment of virtues. So handsome, so brave, so noble and good.

Gabriel became the king's heir once my husband's first wife died in childbirth. The boy was quite my lord's favorite knight as well. My lord's heart broke when Gabriel disappeared. As I understand the case, Gabriel left lands, title, wife, and all without so much as a word."

"Did he take the Cross or some other such noble thing?" Kathryn asked, a knot of tension clotting beneath her sternum.

The queen thought for a moment. "He often left his home without telling anyone, not even his lady, where he went to. So when he disappeared, his acquaintance generally assumed he had decided to leave permanently. My lord valued Gabriel, however, and searched for him, made inquiries – but no information was forthcoming. The duke is presumed to be lost forever to our court. A man's business is his own, I suppose. My king allowed Gabriel's wife to remarry shortly thereafter."

"My brother Reynard, Earl of Troumper, married the good Lady Alisoun after her husband abandoned her." Beatrice's massive bosom swelled with pride. "And Gabriel's old lands and duties at Dorré are overseen by Reynard now, by order of the king."

The queen nodded, her hand going to her throat, absently fingering the bow Kathryn had tied. "I think my husband is very angry Gabriel left without sending word to him somehow, and one cannot help but feel the injustice to Lady Alisoun. The king made what decisions he thought right after Gabriel left."

How strange. But then Kathryn supposed a man who seemingly abandoned his honor and his oaths would not be much missed, whatever his former prominence had been. She couldn't pinpoint what about the story made her so sure the duke was the werewolf, but the facts certainly fit. Especially that the duke had disappeared periodically, even before his final absence. A werewolf would probably absent himself in such a way, if he wished to prevent his loved ones from discovering his secret.

She decided she wouldn't discuss with anyone but Llewellyn what she suspected. The magician was right that to reveal the wolf's identity while he still remained a beast would be monstrously unfair.

Beatrice glanced out the window, then set down her sewing. "Time to dress for dinner, Your Highness." She stepped toward the queen.

Their liege lady looked to Kathryn instead. "Would you help me dress tonight?"

A hastily stifled gasp went round the room of ladies. Beatrice's will had not been flouted in recent memory.

Kathryn opened her mouth to accept the honor when Beatrice cut her off. "Her services" — Beatrice gave the word the worst kind of implications — "are requested for the king's new pet. Llewellyn is busy, so she's to see to the beast's shoulder again, so I was commanded to tell her. He's being brought to our chambers as I speak." Beatrice grimaced, apparently not relishing the thought of a wild beast in her apartments.

Kathryn formed the intention at once of using Beatrice's bed as an examination table.

Aliénor wilted a little but patted Kathryn's hand. "My husband's requests are law. Go with all haste, Lady Kathryn, but sit by me at dinner if you will. Lady Avice" — the queen turned at once to another of her ladies — "you will help me to dress."

With that second outright snub of Beatrice, the queen earned her title, regally sweeping from the room with her train. Beatrice brought up the rear, glaring daggers at Kathryn as she slammed the queen's bedroom door.

Kathryn was free. For now. She hurried to her room, anxious to see the wolf.

He perched on his hind legs, resting his front paw on the windowsill, looking down at the courtyard and stables below, watching the comings and goings of the grooms with apparent contentment. She bobbed him a curtsy. "Evening, Sir Wolf." *Or should I say, Monsieur Duke?*

He looked up at her and docilely climbed onto the bed she indicated — Beatrice and Apolline's bed, as it happened. Kathryn grinned as she went to him, glad to see the servant had made all ready in the form of bandages and healing poultices. "I heard you went to the training field with the king this morning. I hope you did not overdo your training, my lord."

The wolf snorted, then let out an involuntary growl as she touched a sore spot when prodding his wounds.

"Sorry."

He briefly pressed his wet nose to the back of her hand, and she guessed he understood she did her best not to hurt him.

Unconsciously, Kathryn reached up and stroked the side of his face in a friendly caress, tracing the line of his scar. There had been no such scar on the portrait. She wished she'd remembered to ask the others if the duke had borne a scar.

No, she wished she'd *dared* to ask.

She paused and studied the wolf when she realized he was not shying away from her touch as he had yesterday. He blinked up at her, his eyes soft, and warmth stole into her heart as she smiled down at him.

She's lovely, the wolf thought. He had not quite appreciated how pretty those large, green eyes of hers were, nor given enough notice to the soft, golden brown of her hair where her thick braid lay across the shoulder of her gown. She was not a beauty and never would be. Something in the animation of her features, though, and the compassion of her face, made her looks more appealing than mere beauty – and would certainly stand the test of time and trial better.

Did Alisoun ever have kindness in her eyes? Love, yes. But compassion? Empathy? Did I ever see true benevolence in her?

He huffed with self-disgust.

Did I ever bother to look? To see past Alisoun's beautiful face and fair hair? The fine manners and graces of her lithe figure? I knew Alisoun as a woman and wife, but did I ever bother to find out what kind of person she might be? The answer was plain. No. Sharp regret slashed at his gut, painful and profound.

He had looked forward to this all day, to maybe seeing Kathryn again. Llewellyn often kept busy mixing his medicines and tending his garden and would not spare time to tend an animal with only trivial hurts. Guilt prickled in his shoulders that he had

held himself so aloof from the girl, when she had done so much to help him. He made every effort not to hurt her feelings again tonight, but when she touched his face, he should have pulled away. Such contact was not proper.

He was a wolf, but he was still a *man*.

Her caress seemed too tender, too intimate, and she did not know it was a man she touched like that, for all that he was naught but an animal to her. She was so kind, even a poor wounded animal, infamous for savagery, had her compassion.

Why didn't I meet you before Alisoun? He caught himself wondering, and his grief swelled, submerging him, much too profound to be contained by the simple functioning of a wolf's humble heart.

He wrenched away and averted his eyes, refusing to let Kathryn touch anything more than his shoulder for the rest of their session.

As soon as she had checked his wounds were healing well, he hopped down and left the ladies' apartments to seek out his king. There he stood on firmer ground; there the wolf understood his place and his duty.

The maiden is too precarious.

Every moment spent in Kathryn's presence, he slid nearer to a great void, and if he let himself fall in, he would lose the little bit of his humanity that he retained. Despair of that kind was not the sort from which he could ever recover the shattered pieces of his consciousness.

For what, he realized, could be worse than finding the true lady of your heart and knowing, as you are, you may never possess her? What could hurt more than finding her, loving her, and knowing in your cursed canine bones she deserves so much more than the beast you have become?

Better to feel nothing at all.

Chapter Five

The garwaf sat by the king at one end of the table, and Kathryn sat by the queen and Llewellyn at the other end. Kathryn amused the queen with tall tales while trying valiantly to push the wolf's snub from her mind. But as the queen spoke to another courtier, Kathryn turned to Llewellyn, her restlessness bubbling over. "Her ladyship just told me today an interesting tale of one of the knights of the court who used to serve the king. His nephew, Gabriel. The Duke of Dorré. The mystery of his disappearance is an interesting one, I thought."

Llewellyn quirked up an eyebrow and gave her the barest of smiles paired with the tiniest of nods.

She tried not to let the triumph show in her face. She had solved the mystery, then. One piece of the puzzle at least, and she darted a quick glance at the dark-furred duke. The wolf sat in a place of honor by the king, eating the roasted swan set in front of him with becoming refinement.

There were scraggly, brown-haired dogs scrounging for table scraps at the feet of everyone's chairs, and she found the fact amusing that no one, but no one, thought to recommend to the king the wolf should join the dogs on the floor. Indeed, she realized with a little wry amusement, the well-mannered wolf would be more out of place among the dogs than at the human table.

The king stood and raised his goblet. "The celebration of St. Aaron's Day is upon us at the end of this month, and the custom of this court is to give a great feast. The feast day is also traditionally a time for all my liegemen and the nobles who hold fiefdoms under me to come to the court. Let no man omit this opportunity to serve me as handsomely as he may. The feast is to be a great and solemn occasion." The king raised his goblet, causing everyone in the hall to do likewise. The king tossed back his drink, and the rest of his court followed suit, though they perhaps did so with a little more moderation.

At the king's announcement, Llewellyn frowned mightily into his lentils, the smile falling from his face.

"My lord magician," Kathryn said, a troubled smile frozen on her own face. "You are ponderous."

Llewellyn glanced up, looking anxious. "The wolf troubles me, my lady."

Kathryn darted an anxious glance at the top of their high table.

The wolf blinked over and over, licking his jaws convulsively, and seemed to be swaying in his chair, his eyes fogged over and distant. Distressed, Kathryn looked to Llewellyn for guidance. He stared at his plate a moment longer, then sighed.

Llewellyn drew his shoulders back and rose to his feet. He walked to the head of the table to address himself to his king. "My king." Llewellyn bowed and spoke to his lord in a quiet undertone, which everyone in the court, whether they showed interest or not, strained to hear – Kathryn included. "I fear your newest courtier is feeling a bit worse for the wear." He gestured to the wolf, who seemed now to be adrift in a mental fog and aware not at all of what transpired around him.

The king, having been engaged in an amusing, light flirtation with Lady Avice on his left hand, looked at once to the wolf, all concern.

Llewellyn quickly, but without seeming haste, inspected the wolf. The beast's eyes were cloudy, and he panted heavily, staring thickly at Llewellyn as though from a great distance. Llewellyn clucked his tongue.

"Use my chambers," the king murmured, a crease forming on his noble brow.

"The herb garden is closer, my lord."

"Of course." The king slapped Llewellyn's shoulders affectionately, though the concerned look still haunted his eyes. "Sir Godric," said the king, turning to another of his men. "Carry the wolf to Llewellyn's workshop, if you will?" The king helped to adjust the weight of the wolf in the knight's arms as he picked the panting animal up.

Llewellyn trailed behind, his black cloak billowing. He cast one look back at the high table and locked eyes with Kathryn for the barest of moments before turning away.

His was not a look of reassurance or grief but plainly a call to arms for Kathryn. His meaning seemed clear enough: come to the workshop.

Kathryn jumped as the queen addressed her in a whisper, "I have a black cloak. Velvet. Very discreet. I realize I have forgotten the cloak in your clothing chest. Tomorrow you will return it to me, please." The queen leaned forward, her brow knit anxiously. "Tell me what you can tomorrow?" The queen called her maid over and whispered a judicious word in her ear. The woman slipped away, swift but unobtrusive.

Kathryn found resolve enough to meet the queen's eyes. "I thank you." She clasped the queen's bejeweled hand in her own and squeezed gently. "And I will."

Kathryn could hardly contain her impatience, barely a beat behind the lord of the castle when he rose from the table to retire. She took leave of the queen, who was still enjoying her repast, and hurried back to the women's apartments.

As she entered the bedroom she shared with the other ladies, the barest click betrayed that the door connecting to the ladies' solar had just been closed. Without another glance, Kathryn dashed to her clothing chest and flipped up the lid.

The black cloak lay folded neatly in amongst her other clothing.

Kathryn snatched the garment up and hastily drew the dark fabric around herself. While halfway out the door, a rising hesitation stilled her hand. The hour was by no means late enough for the castle's halls to be empty. Any lady caught trying to sneak into the gardens at night in a concealing cloak would be very much the worse for such an act. Not only because of the harm an indiscretion would do her name and reputation, not to mention the queen who was responsible for her. In addition, any men who caught a woman on an illicit errand would believe her of low virtue and therefore fair game for any and all liberties they should decide to take with her.

What should I do?

The moon shone, pouring silver light over the landscape to illuminate the castle grounds and buildings almost as brightly as day. Kathryn stared down, her gaze arrested at once by a trellis attached to the wall beneath the window. Prickly vines crept up the wall's sides, and the trellis did not seem overly sturdy. If Kathryn managed the first few feet, though, then she could make her way to the stable roof and climb down

from there, following the walls and the shadows to the workshop. *I had far more daring escapades at home, climbing the apple trees to steal the fruit.*

With that encouraging – if somewhat unrealistic – thought, she swung out the window.

Kathryn breathed deeply and fleetingly hoped the queen would not mind a little wear and tear on the borrowed garment when she returned the cloak. Then she pushed that and all other thoughts aside, swung over the edge of her window, and began negotiating the barbed trellis down to her destination. In her haste to get to the workshop, she hardly regarded the various scrapes and scratches the prickly vines inflicted on her.

* * * * *

Llewellyn had taken the wolf to his workshop and deftly tied the beast to his worktable before the animal aspect took over completely. The garwaf had been conscious for this and wearily submitted to the indignity, but Llewellyn would hardly blame the beast if, in his current mental and spiritual fugue, he had forgotten all that. Llewellyn was currently trying to make sure the wolf's bonds would hold through the night *and* ensuring the wolf did himself no injury in his madness *and* glancing every few seconds at the door waiting for Kathryn *and*, meanwhile, trying to make sure he himself was not scratched, kicked, beaten, or otherwise mauled by the werewolf.

He had tried talking to the wolf at first to soothe him, but Llewellyn's voice had only redoubled the paroxysms of rage gripping the beast. So the magician had desisted with that remedy for the moment. Llewellyn wiped sweat from his brow before the moisture dripped into his eyes and sighed. "I should have listened to my mother and become a hermit."

The door of his workshop pushed ever so slightly ajar, and a shadow insinuated itself into the room only to be brought up sharp with a gasp on beholding the wild creature upon the table.

Llewellyn, after nearly an hour and a half of dealing with a crazed, dangerous werewolf, had reached the limit of his usually benevolent patience. "Idiot girl," he snapped out. "Take the damn cloak off so he can see you." The raging wolf lay between Kathryn and himself. Llewellyn wasn't sure sheer fury wouldn't win the wolf his freedom at last if the magician made a move toward wolf or girl now. Llewellyn's bones ached, his head throbbed, and he had to admit that more than a little terror gripped him as he stared at the big animal growling murderous desires to the room at large.

Blood-red curtains of rage clouded his gaze as he growled and thrashed about, not understanding what bound him in this inferno of pain. Images kept flashing through his head. A woman's face. Then the red chasm of the hunting dog's neck he had ripped out. He salivated, snapping his maw futilely at whatever creature manhandled him. The words the creature spoke were an irritating buzz to his ears. He longed to spring up and create a similar slash of gore on this infuriating creature's neck, if only so it would shut up. As whatever restraints on the wolf's extremities held, the beast tilted his head back and howled his fury to the moon, the stars, and the chill night air – the only sovereigns he recognized now. The craving to hunt, to kill, swelled strong in him, and only one vision of the myriad display swimming in his head came close to being in focus. The treacherous female with the pale blonde hair and the frowning brown eyes. The fragmented pieces of his understanding could not supply a reason for his unmitigated hatred. He needed the hot rush of her blood spilling down his throat, and soon, or he would wither and die from longing. A new bouquet mingled with the scent of the herbs and the sweating stench of his oppressor. By her scent, this one was feminine, and frightened too. She wore a concealing cloak. An image swirled through his afflicted mind of the one he loathed, the one he longed to mangle wearing just such a cloak. The female moved close enough only for him to smell her fear and the sweetness of her. Her fragrance alone sent bloodlust pounding in his veins. He reared up and snarled, baring his fangs. Let her come near him, let her lay one of those traitorous hands on him, and she would not live the night through with her creamy white hide intact.

Kathryn wavered for a moment. She thought of running back into the night, back into a world with nothing more dangerous or mysterious than a tricky piece of embroidery. More than ever, she longed for the dull routine of the queen's chambers. Even the oppression of Beatrice was better than this snarling beast.

The wolf reared toward her, and corded muscles of iron strained against ropes that suddenly seemed a trifle too flimsy to Kathryn.

She swallowed, then, drawing herself up, she stepped away from the door and into the workshop, throwing back the hood of the cloak as she did so. Her disordered coil of golden brown hair fell around the shoulders of her blue gown. There were stinging scratches from the trellis vines on her hands and her face. More than a little ruffled, she caught her reflection in Llewellyn's small looking glass; her eyes seemed dull, with heavy blue shadows beneath them. The skin around her lips had turned a pasty white, and her battered hands clutched convulsively at the folds her skirt.

The wolf growled again, feral eyes rolling in a body almost boneless now as he thrashed to free himself.

"He's not—" Kathryn's breath caught on a sob.

"Mad?" Llewellyn's voice sounded ragged, a throaty gasp of fatigue. "No." He managed a small shake of his head. "This is an affliction of the spirit and the mind, no mere physical malady. I marked him well at dinner." Llewellyn rubbed his forehead. "The king's announcement of the Feast of St. Aaron at dinner did this, although the full moon tonight probably isn't helping much."

"Why did you—?"

The wolf lunged for her again, and the bonds held him back by only the barest of inches. She stumbled away until her back banged against the workshop door. Kathryn shivered but drew herself up again after a moment. She swallowed the fear choking her and looked to Llewellyn. "What can I do?"

Llewellyn laughed shakily and quite without mirth. "He hasn't let me touch him since he slipped into this state with the rise of the moon. He won't let me near him except to rip my limbs from my body." Llewellyn's tone was dry, but Kathryn sensed

the sobbing, shaking panic that lay behind his cool façade. The panic she herself kept in check only with a supreme effort of will.

Llewellyn continued, "If he does not quiet for you" The magician glanced meaningfully at the hatchet hanging on the wall by his head.

Kathryn's stomach dropped. *But I know who he is now.* He had a name, a human identity. Whatever madness gripped him now as a wolf, he *was* human.

He is human.

The knot of fear in her belly hardened into adamant resolve. "Then he will know me," she declared with more confidence in her voice than she actually possessed, and then she murmured on a sigh, more prayer than pledge, "He has to." She went to the wolf, as near as she dared, and knelt to put her gaze on a level with his.

Human eyes no longer stared back at her, but the feral and furious eyes of a wolf who, even as she looked at him, was deciding how best to break his bonds and savage her.

Yet even as his human soul suffocated, even in this animal rage, there was more than just a wolf there.

There was hate.

Hate is human invention. Animals kill because they are afraid. They kill to defend or to eat. But the creature looking at her would also kill for his hate. Hate gleamed in his eyes now, and anything human enough to hate *might* be human enough to bring back.

She hoped.

She prayed.

She moved closer, so close . . . within an inch of the sharp snap of his jaws. She looked at him, brazenly looked at him, daring him to snap the over-inquisitive nose off her too-lovely face. Oh, and how he wanted to. And he would A few moments more, and he would be free, free to have his way and butcher her as he longed to do. Her and then her mate in the corner.

Then

Then the female said his name.

He recognized the voice, but . . . it was not the one he had expected to hear . . . not even one who was supposed to know that name.

Quickly but hesitantly she stepped toward him again. She stood close enough now for him to strike. Or close enough for her to get her arms around him.

She did not embrace him, though. Only the sweetness of her scent stretched out to engulf him, to muddle and drug him with her heady essence, dulling the tearing madness in his heart. She smelled of fertile earth, with a sharp tang of crushed leaves about her, and a caressing feminine fragrance, something that made him think of springtime and sunshine and a sweet, fresh fruit ready to be picked. His growling subsided, and he blinked, befuddled senses trying desperately to refocus. She reached out a hand to him. He wanted to snap at her fingers, to scare her back from him, but he could not.

"I will not hurt you," she said quietly, and then, almost with wonder in her voice, "and you will not hurt me."

This was not the mate who had betrayed him. This was not Alisoun . . .

He came to himself again, or as near to his human self as he could manage these days. *God, I'm exhausted.*

"Go to him, Kathryn," said a disembodied voice over the wolf's shoulder the beast did not concern himself with. His whole existence was wrapped up in the white face shining above him, a safe haven in the dark. Like salvation and redemption and hope. Hope for the future . . .

Kathryn is her name, he thought, somewhat coherently as his head lolled back. His wounded shoulder ached and ached, a steady throb timed to his heartbeat. *I'm so tired.*

The wolf whined softly. Kathryn all but fell across his body, tangling her fingers in the soft fur of his neck, hot tears falling on his face. Llewellyn lifted the hatchet from the wall carefully. He waited and watched for a long moment. Then he smiled to himself and, unseen, placed the hatchet back over his hearth. Quietly, he sidled out of his back door to give the young people a moment alone.

The wolf licked Kathryn's cheek gently.

She looked up into his face and sighed. "So, you're back, my lord." She laughed deeply, bordering on hysteria. Then, though, she wiped her eyes quickly and traced the line of his scar again. She seized the sides of his face and gave him a tiny shake. "*Dolce ragazzo*," she crooned to him in Italian, "don't do that again."

He whimpered softly and nuzzled her cheek with his snout.

She wrapped her arms around him and gently squeezed. "Do not go where I may not follow you."

Never, never, never, never again. The thought was fierce, vehement. When he contemplated what he had almost done. *If the ropes had snapped . . .* A shudder passed through him.

"*Idiota.*" Kathryn planted a kiss on his pointed ears. "Don't be a fool. You are a knight of this land, fur or no fur. You are too honorable to break your oaths. Your vows of fealty hold you still and always will, no matter what form you take. No less does the vow you swore to in the forest hold you. You are my champion, Sir Garwaf, and whether you will or no, harm will not befall me while you yet live. You will not let it." She stroked his face again, grinning at him. "Now let Llewellyn back in and behave yourself while he dresses your shoulder. I will wait, then I am for my bed and sleep—as should you be." She turned to seek where the magician had gone, and Llewellyn approached with fresh ointment and poultices.

Kathryn went to her accustomed bench against the wall and fully meant to watch the proceedings, but her head kept bowing to her chest over and over again. By the third time, Llewellyn laughed lightly and said, "Dear lady, I do not require your supervision for this activity. Stretch out and doze if you like until I am done. Your part in the evening's affair is at an end."

She shook her head and rubbed her eyes. She watched the wolf, and he stared at her—with the same look he had given the king on first beholding his liege lord in the

forest. She smiled into his eyes, then looked reluctantly back to the conjurer. "What happened? You said something about the king's announcement."

"Since we cannot learn his thoughts, the best I can do is to draw my own conclusions — "

"Yes, yes." Kathryn waved that away. "You're brilliant, Llewellyn, and your suppositions are probably correct. So?" She prompted him with her open palm, giving him an expectant look.

Llewellyn gave her a lopsided grin. "Unless I do the man a grave injustice, I very much believe the new husband of Gabriel's wife to be the one who has betrayed him. The man courted and married Lady Alisoun immediately, when her other suitors waited — out of deference to Gabriel's memory and in fear he might come back and nullify their marriage. The Earl de Troumper had no such compunction."

"Well, why bother when you already know?" Kathryn said, calling the betraying beast Reynard all sorts of vile names in her head.

"Precisely. I believe our friend" — he patted the wolf's side. The wolf butted his head against Llewellyn's hand and gave him a look of apology — "was entertaining thoughts that his wife's new husband must be attending the festivities and will be here in the castle, within his grasp. Those less than charitable thoughts, shall we say, when coupled with the new moon tonight, served to bring out the worst of his wolfish nature. His lupine impulses robbed the human half of control. The part of him that is still human drowned in such a quagmire of bitter emotions that reasonable thought could not check the violence inherent to a beast. So the wolf triumphed at last. For a time."

Kathryn rose, awake all at once, and went to her beast. She stroked his head as Llewellyn finished applying the fresh dressing to the shoulder. She continued to gently knead her fingers through the soft fur of the wolf. The wolf's eyes closed drowsily until at last Kathryn had lulled him into a peaceful slumber. She bent again and kissed his ears, then looked at Llewellyn. "How do we keep the human half in control?"

Llewellyn scratched the side of his nose and frowned. "The best medication I can recommend is more time spent with his king . . . and with you. The two of you bring out his humanity the best. He is most clearly in control of himself when with you. He knows himself then, who he's supposed to be." Llewellyn smiled gently. "Might say you make him want to be a better man."

Kathryn nodded, her eyes flicking back and forth as her brain planned. "The queen might excuse me for the mornings if I ask. She seldom rises early. The beast dearly loves the training sessions in the afternoons. You should have heard him barking for joy today. I would hate to take that time from him. I would keep him in my chamber, but he does not think that proper." She finally glanced back at Llewellyn. "Will mornings with me and afternoons and evenings spent in the company of the king and his fellow knights be enough to keep him with us?" She chewed her lower lip, her brows pinched together with concern.

He patted her cheek affectionately. "Dear girl, time spent with you is bound to have an improving effect upon anyone."

"And I shall do my part to preserve his oaths and his honor as well," said the king from the doorway.

Even as panic set in, Kathryn dropped a hasty curtsy, her cheeks hot.

She would be cast from the court. Denigrated. Dishonored. Her father would disown her. Llewellyn. Llewellyn would be compromised as a holy man and advisor to the king. He would lose his position at court. She would never see the wolf again. She —

The king stepped up and tilted her chin back. "Have no fear of your king, *cara ragazza*. You are far too high in my esteem for an innocent errand of compassion to lower you in my opinion. Your secret will not leave these walls."

Llewellyn smiled.

The king stared at the face of the wolf, then looked almost desperately to his advisor. "Is this truly Gabriel?"

"I *believe*" — the sage put gentle emphasis on the word — "this wolf *is* your nephew, my lord."

A spasm of grief and gratitude convulsed the dignity of the king's handsome face, and Kathryn averted her eyes. When she looked back, he seemed in control of his emotions once more.

The king grabbed her fingers and pressed them. "You gave me a great gift yesterday in the forest, dear child. I will not ever be able to repay you, but from now on I shall devote my life to the effort."

Kathryn shook her head. "The act itself was reward enough, my king. You owe me nothing else." She swallowed. "Except . . . would you give me leave to keep company with the wolf for the rest of the mornings until the Feast Day?"

"I shall send him to you in the garden after our morning meal." The king grinned wryly down at his nephew the wolf. "I do not think he will mind." He caught her hand and tucked it into his arm. "And now let's get you back. The wolf will be safe with Llewellyn for tonight."

Kathryn hesitated and picked up the queen's cloak to drape the fabric over the wolf. He stirred vaguely, still asleep.

Kathryn returned to the king and let him lead her from the room. Turning back and grinning at Llewellyn, the king said, "Wouldn't the crowning stroke be if he turns out to be someone other than Gabriel?"

Both men laughed at this, but the wolf stirred on his bench, so they ceased almost at once. One should, after all, let sleeping knights lie.

Chapter Six

Kathryn awoke early the next morning and ducked into the ladies' solar as soon as was seemly. Her queen's presence there startled her. Aliénor did not usually rise so early. Kathryn had hoped for some solitude. She swallowed, though, and composed her features, giving a small curtsy.

Llewellyn had sent the cloak back up to her earlier. Kathryn had carefully mended whatever tears she had made in the velvet cloak, but after the patch of bristly

vines, the fabric would never be the same. Kathryn brushed the cloak off, folded it, and solemnly handed it back to the queen.

The queen turned her cloak over in her hands, then sighed and handed the garment back. "No, my dear, you will have far more opportunity for clandestine missions than I, unless I very much mistake myself. You keep this. It would not be seemly for a queen to be traipsing about the castle at all hours."

Kathryn smiled ruefully and sank onto the stool beside the queen. "It is hardly seemly in *me*, Your Highness."

"Ah, but you have, I think, a creature very dear to you who needed you last night. Such need can excuse many indiscretions." The queen gave a dry chuckle. Kathryn hesitated, wondering what she should tell the queen of the truth, what Aliénor could handle. Not everyone could understand the complicated issues around, well, *werewolves*. Eventually Kathryn decided she would tell the queen everything. The lady had earned that much for her faith in Kathryn. She opened her mouth to say so when the queen held up a regal hand to silence her.

"I have changed my mind since last evening, Kathryn," she said, looking at her lap. "A messenger came with a letter last night from the king, and the letter said many interesting . . . things. I have only one question I wish you to answer for me."

The queen's flat tone bemused Kathryn, but she nodded, willing. "Anything."

The queen sucked in a deep breath, then looked at Kathryn with wide eyes, shadowed and restless. "Are you my husband's mistress?"

Heat flared through Kathryn, and her body stiffened with rage. She resisted the urge to slap the queen smartly across her oblivious little face. *Of all the ignorant, witless, obtuse . . .* With difficulty, Kathryn stifled her fury and reminded herself of the queen's position. Kathryn fisted her hands but sat on them to prevent herself from boxing Aliénor's ears. Instead, she met the queen's eyes and gritted out through her teeth, "I am not now, nor do I ever intend to be his mistress." And then she threw in for good measure, "Nor do I believe anyone else is either."

"Yet," the queen choked out on a sob. Her kerchief flew to her mouth, and Kathryn, her wounded pride forgotten, dropped to her knees and put her arms around the usually resolute lady as great sobs racked her slight frame.

"The king does not touch me. Does not look at me. He is all that is courteous and kind, but I want m-m-more," the queen gasped out.

Kathryn's gut churned with pity. "My lady, you have only been married a month or so."

The queen blew her nose very loudly and sniffed. "Oh, I am a fool. I should have known how our marriage would be, but I hoped, oh, how I hoped." She gripped Kathryn's arms. "We knew each other in Antioch, you see, when I went on crusade with my first husband. He was killed, and the king helped me afterward, cared for me in my grief. We were . . . close, and I believed—" Aliénor shook her head and closed her eyes, dashing her tears away. "Oh, never mind. I was foolish. I have learned better. But still I wanted—" The queen broke off and sighed.

Kathryn sat before her queen, tense and awkward, unsure what to say to her liege lady, what comfort to give.

"And I hate Beatrice," the queen whispered, clenching her hands in her lap. "She's a bossy, ambitious *cow*." Kathryn hid her grin as the queen, unaware, continued. "And I can't think why my lord would force her presence on me, but—oh, everything is in such a muddle. Then last night when you crept out, she came and told me, told me she had wanted to spare you, but now she could not keep silent any longer. She told me the king has been bedding you." The queen blushed a splotchy shade of red and angrily scrubbed her tear-stained face. Kathryn squeezed her hands tightly, held them white-fisted in her lap, but she did not speak as the queen went on. "My lord is . . . duty itself with regard to . . . well." Aliénor flushed ever brighter. "He visits me nightly, and he is . . . thorough, but he does not—I do not" She looked at Kathryn, and as if suddenly remembering she was unwed and still a virgin, Aliénor broke off. "Well, he is *thorough*, and I wondered—and then Beatrice told me he had found his sport elsewhere, but not to worry, the king would come to me when he wanted to try for his heir again."

Kathryn saw heartbreak etched in every feature of the queen's face and had to quell the urge to find the insolent Beatrice and knock her to the dirt. *How dared she spout such filth into the ears of the queen?*

Kathryn hugged Aliénor. "My lady, the king's first wife died, you know?"

"Rosamund, yes. In childbirth. They were both seventeen. He told me about her when we were in the Holy Land together. After my husband died. When he still cared for me." Her voice rose barely above a whisper. The queen's pale eyelashes had starred with tears, her brown eyes reddened and swollen from crying.

"Have you thought maybe he is scared you will die like Rosamund if he gets you with child?" Kathryn asked.

Aliénor looked up and chewed her lower lip. At last she shook her head.

"Have you tried talking to your lord?"

Another sad little head shake from Aliénor.

"My lady," Kathryn said sternly.

"Beatrice is a manipulative sneak, is she not?" Queen Aliénor hurriedly changed the subject. "She managed to bully the other maidens out and put me to bed last night. She told me, oh, even more horrible lies about you, Kathryn."

Kathryn snorted. This did not surprise her in the least. "She *would* know all about midnight revels. She sneaks out every night, and the guards turn a blind eye." The hasty words were out just as Kathryn would wish them back in, seeing the stricken look of Aliénor's face. "My queen – I didn't – it's probably – "

"Someone else's husband she beds every night?" A purse of the royal lips, a harsh quirk of her mobile eyebrows, and Kathryn froze. But then the queen thawed. "Ah, child, I'm sorry to take my spleen out on you. You're not the harlot my husband has saddled me with." The queen stared out her narrow window at the rays of sunshine valiantly fighting their way in. "For too long I have let Beatrice poison my heart and pollute my life with her presence, but no more. I swear to that." Aliénor smiled at Kathryn and squeezed her hand. "I should be more like you. Follow my heart and do what it wills me to. And damned be the consequences. I was like that. Once."

Kathryn hastily shook her head. "No, my lady, I am no fit model for a queen. I am too much a hoyden to ever make a success of being a great lady like you."

The queen laughed.

"Which reminds me" Kathryn said. "Will you give leave to me to dedicate my mornings to the wolf henceforth?" The queen's baffled look made Kathryn babble out the rest of her request as she prayed her liege lady would not refuse her. "The wolf needs my companionship, but I can still be here in the afternoons to weave stories for you and help you dress for dinner, if you like."

"Anything you like, Kathryn. Today, though, all my handmaidens shall have the morning off." The queen smoothed down the folds of her gown, her hands shaking slightly. "Go with my blessing and enjoy yourselves. Now, send my page in to me so I may send to my husband. When he arrives I shall want privacy." The steely glint was back in her eyes, and Kathryn sighed in relief that she had not had to face off against the queen after all.

As Kathryn headed out the door, the queen called after her. "And make sure the wolf shows you the rose garden this afternoon."

* * * * *

The king was not sure what he should be feeling, summoned to his wife's apartments for all the world like a naughty child. But she was his queen and his wife, and as such, it behooved him to occasionally obey her.

There were only the two guards at the beginning of the corridor. The rest of the women's apartments echoed with emptiness. They would be quite alone, he realized, and a knot of apprehension formed. He knocked on the heavy door to her bedroom, and her melodious voice bid him enter.

She sat on her bed, her titian curls soft and loose about her creamy shoulders. She wore a simple, long-sleeved dress of deep blue, cut high at the neck with a

voluminous skirt. She looked lovely, and he smiled as he entered. She did not smile back. No warmth lit her dark eyes at all.

"I asked you here so you could tell me about yourself and that harlot, Beatrice," she told him baldly.

He frowned, more than a little staggered by this statement, but he did not falter or prevaricate. He crossed to her bed and sat at its foot, looking at her with sad eyes.

"What do you want to know?"

"What will you tell me?" she countered, voice cool.

The king passed a hand over his tired face. He rubbed eyes bleary from lack of sleep and recent stress, then shrugged with a sigh. "There is not much to tell. She became my mistress for a short time after my nephew Gabriel left. After Antioch." His jaw clenched, and he looked at her quickly before glancing away again, a spasm of pain shuddering through him before the hard shield of his self-control resettled. After a moment he continued in a colorless tone, as if he spoke of someone else's impossible follies. "I was lonely, and Beatrice was plump and pretty. Pleasing enough at first. I could barely function when my nephew disappeared. I already turned to drink more than I should, and she did not discourage the habit.

"She and the boy's wife, Alisoun, fed my rancor toward Gabriel, convinced me he had left without a word only to hurt me, that he had only used our family connection to better himself and not out of any real love toward me. I think it was easier for me to believe their lies than to go on missing him. How wrong I was, how unpardonably wrong" With a mental shake, he returned from his fleeting reverie. "The bloody harpies got me to declare him dead so Alisoun could remarry. Between them, they convinced me I should strip Gabriel of his lands and gift them to some other lord." He frowned for a moment, stomach roiling with rage and despair, then continued with the bleak narrative. "Alisoun's motives are unclear to me still, and Beatrice's, well, they became all too apparent.

"Her brother, the odious Reynard, became the recipient of wife, lands, title, and all. Beatrice's consequence could do nothing but grow as a result. I eventually sobered

myself up and saw her for the manipulative creature she is. I ended things. She told me she was pregnant, so I kept her about the place but avoided her. After it became apparent she was not with child, I offered for you. She demanded a place in your retinue and a pledge from me I would help her to a husband in return for her discretion about my affair with her. She . . . realized the strength of my feelings for you, you see."

Aliénor looked up sharply, but he hurried on with the sequence of events, imagining his skin had peeled off, leaving him raw and exposed. Vulnerable. "She threatened to tell you of all our tawdry escapades together if I did not help her. The threat acted as the perfect leverage. I am not one to give in to blackmail, but I thought she meant to turn over a new leaf, and out of guilt, perhaps, I meant to let her try. But the shameful wench keeps sniffing about me." He grimaced. "She bribes your guards—which I am, incidentally, changing this very night—to let her out so she can sneak into my apartments. Such behavior is a dishonor to you and, frankly, a headache to me to keep her here longer."

Aliénor remained quiet for a long time, and her husband watched her in trepidation but could think of nothing else to say, not knowing what she wanted to hear.

"Why did you offer for me?" she said at last, meeting his eyes, her own inscrutable.

"I needed an heir, and I wanted children," he said simply. "You had refused all others, but I wished for no one else to be my queen, so I thought I would try."

"So you sent to me," said his young bride quietly.

"So I sent to you."

"I waited," she said and looked up at him, eyes blazing now with tears ready to fall. "I refused all others because I hoped *you* would come for me." She waved her hand impatiently in the air. "And not because I wanted to be queen either." She inched closer and caught his large, calloused hand in hers, pressing her smooth palm against his rougher one, her sweet scent curling all around him, soothing his soul even as his heart hammered. "I only wanted you."

"Aliénor." He reached up to cup her face, but she turned from him and jerked her hand away.

"And so I accepted you, hoping, thinking you felt as I did. And then you don't even wed me yourself. You send your pet holy man as proxy and never look at me during our wedding supper. And that night." She grimaced eloquently, and he blushed to have his lovemaking so thoroughly denigrated. "And every night since then. So thorough, so cold. You do all you need to get an heir and no more." She wept now and was obviously very angry with herself for doing so as she roughly dashed the tears away. "And when I *am* carrying your heir, I have no doubt our nocturnal sessions will stop. This was not your way when you held me in Antioch," she whispered.

The king's heart melted. "As dark a time as Antioch was for both of us, I can't but remember so many parts of the journey with fondness. But I remember Mount Calismos too, Aliénor. That I did not die with your husband was sheer luck. We fought side by side, and only fortune's favor saved me from a sword stroke like the one that killed him. He was my comrade and friend, and you were his wife. You and I were alike in our sorrow as we waited in Antioch to go home. I wondered if Antioch was only that to you: solace with no substance."

"Our time together was a solace," Aliénor said. "But a beginning to me too. I have loved you long, my husband, and Antioch was the start of that."

The urge to gather her to him became irresistible. She did not fight him as he wrapped his arms around her, pressing her head into a crook in his shoulder. He rested his stubbled cheek against the silk of her titian hair. "Long have I loved the peerless Aliénor." He tucked a wayward curl behind her well-shaped little ear. "Long have I yearned to have her as my own. And not just for one perfect evening under the Antioch moon either."

She leaned back then and thumped him on the chest. "Then why have you ignored and shunned me, revealed no warmth or affection while I have been here? Why have you not *shown* me that love?"

He spoke with difficulty, his voice gruff but soft. "You are so fine, so beauteous and fragile a creature. I am no fit mate. I knew that when I asked for your hand. You are too delicate an angel to be throwing yourself away on old meat like me. And yet I offered for you, and you accepted. I did not deserve such good fortune. I *do* not. I thought to mitigate some of my offence by not enjoying my ill-gotten gains, as it were." He smiled ruefully.

"I am yours," she said, "by my own choice and God's will, and if we do not enjoy our time together, it will be only the harder to bear should the worst happen. We have both lost, and yet we have each other. My king." She cradled his weathered face in her hands and stared into his eyes, her soul clasping and calming him as surely as her touch did. "You cannot know what tomorrow or the next day will bring. We have only this time together. Better we use this interlude and enjoy each other than ponder how long our time may last or if we even deserve such happiness. We have each other, and that is enough."

And then she kissed him deeply on the mouth.

And they did not speak again for the rest of that morning, being otherwise and rather pleasantly occupied.

Chapter Seven

Kathryn waited in the castle courtyard at the prearranged meeting place she and the king had agreed upon last night. She had just barely arrived before she heard soft feet padding to her across the stone pavement. Turning, she smiled at the wolf's loping approach. His tail wagged, and he barked a cheerful greeting to her.

Her tire-woman was with her again. Propriety demanded Kathryn have such an escort with her whenever she moved about on the castle grounds. By rights, Kathryn should also have a man-at-arms to attend her, but the wolf provided protection enough against any foes she might encounter in the king's rose garden.

"You didn't do yourself any real injury last night, then?" Kneeling as he reached her, she caressed the side of his face, smiling into his beautiful eyes.

He nuzzled her neck, whining softly.

She grinned and shook her head. "No, nor me either." She eyed the wound on his shoulder with a practiced eye. The bite had healed well despite everything, even quicker than she would have expected. The edges had closed nicely in a long, healthy-looking scab. "The queen has given me leave to dedicate my mornings to you, Sir Garwaf, from here on out. If you don't object, of course."

He yipped happily and bounced on his front feet. He did not object, apparently.

"Well, then, the queen has ordered you to show me the gardens."

The wolf paused, cocking his head in a startled motion, but then his mouth parted in a wolfish grin, and his eyes beamed at her.

"Particularly the rose gardens."

Apparently happy to oblige, the wolf set off at a brisk trot through the groves and orchards of the king's stronghold with Kathryn by his side. She, in payment for his services as guide, told him entertaining stories. The tire-woman, acting as the reluctant chaperone, tailed doggedly along behind, although the occasional muffled giggle told Kathryn the woman enjoyed the far-fetched stories despite herself.

Garwaf, as she had christened the wolf in her head, showed Kathryn all the loveliest ornamental gardens and guided her through the king's lush orchards, waiting patiently while she selected two ripe apples from a tree and happily began to munch on one, giving the second apple to her dutiful tire-woman. The wolf led Kathryn past fountains and statues and seemed particularly proud to show her an ancient marble edifice of a she-wolf sitting regally on the surface of the water, a modest stream trickling from her mouth into the tranquil pool at her paws.

Kathryn laughed and tweaked the wolf's ears as he continued his tour. He showed her through the hedge maze without faltering, and as the early morning began to turn toward afternoon, he brought her at last to the rose garden.

The rose garden was a long, charming walk with graceful wooden archways, each bearing a different sort of rose. The roses were arranged in sections, and the wolf led her on their walk so they encountered first a blinding fall of red followed by a tender caress of peach shot through with crimson, then a delicate flush of tiny pink buds against one trellis, leading them into the blinding white of a thousand folded dove whites nesting in the wooden frame of the next arch, and so on. The sight made Kathryn's breath catch. The wolf, probably because he had grown up with the gardens of the castle, seemed bored at first, but Kathryn noticed as her delight increased with each new sight, the wolf's gait become jauntier, his mouth happily parted.

Every type of rose in the world seemed to bloom in the garden, and each with its own archway, but just when she thought the footpath would go on forever, the walk ceased abruptly as they rounded a bend. She found herself emerging into an alcove made entirely of roses. The last archway formed a set of twin, rose-covered gates that let out into the tiny haven of roses that lay before her.

She looked to the wolf, who nodded, and then she stepped into her own little rose-filled Garden of Eden. A naked statue of a young maid posed on a dais, heavily draped in vines of many-colored roses so her modesty remained intact, whether she willed it or no.

At the statue's feet, dozens and dozens of different rose bushes twined together in a great multihued mass. Kathryn walked around the circular platform and discovered a marble bench carved with designs of rose bushes blooming all around the feet. The carvings were so skillfully wrought she was almost scared to sit, lest her hind part receive a nasty surprise in the shape of a very serviceable thorn.

The wolf moved before her, though, and leapt with ease onto the long bench, comfortably settling himself down. Kathryn smiled and sat next to him, knitting her hands in her lap, drinking in, like a fine draught, the wonderful scent in the air of all the roses blossoming just for her.

The poor tire-woman, having done more walking in one afternoon than she was wont to do in a week, collapsed on a humbler wooden bench at the entrance to the alcove, then promptly fell into a doze.

Kathryn grinned mischievously at the wolf upon realizing they had a bit of privacy now the watchdog napped. "This is probably a popular trysting place for young couples." She had the grace to blush but could not quite keep her mouth from betraying her with a smile.

The wolf huffed and settled his chin on his paws, staring at her with irrepressible mirth in his dark eyes. He did not confirm or deny her guess.

They sat together for a few minutes in companionable silence before Kathryn said, "Shall I tell you a story, my lord?"

* * * * *

Thus began their pleasant tradition of long rambling walks in the garden. These walks were usually followed by a quiet retirement to the rose alcove for Kathryn to tell the beast some of her engaging epics. Their walks were a chance to sit together in companionable nearness while the gentle snoring of the tire-woman supplied the background noise to their courting.

* * * * *

That evening, when Kathryn returned to the women's chambers after supper, she found a livid Beatrice cramming all her worldly possessions into a large trunk. The other ladies of the queen had clumped together and stared at the furious dame with barely concealed horror.

Kathryn looked to the younger girls and, shadowed still in the doorway, mouthed, "What happened?"

Beatrice was distracted with a furious tirade at the poor laundress for apparently packing one of her gowns improperly. Lady Avice crept out and closed the door silently after herself, pulling Kathryn farther down the hallway. Avice's gaze fairly gleamed with mischievous satisfaction as she imparted her tale. "You missed the commotion on your walk, Kathryn. We came back late as her majesty requested, and when we did, the queen asked the three of us — Apolline, Agathe, and me — to wait in our bedchamber while she talked to Beatrice in the solar. We snuck out and listened at the door, of course."

Of course. Kathryn motioned with her hands for the younger girl to continue.

"The queen sounded very quiet and composed, so we couldn't hear what she said. But then Beatrice started yelling after a minute or so, 'What do you mean I'm to be banished from court? Does the king know of this?' and then you could tell the queen lost her temper, because we could finally hear her, and she snapped back, 'It was *my husband's* idea.' And then they got into a bit of a screaming match, and the queen told Beatrice she knew of the midnight excursions out and about. 'I have no use' — this was what the queen said — well, she said, 'I have no use for a lady in waiting who is disloyal to me and courts dishonor at every turn. Your brother has been written to. He will decide what is best to be done, and in the meantime, I want you out of my sight and away from this place. My husband has arranged you should stay with the Abbess Marie.' And then you could just hear Beatrice drawing breath. She near screamed down the rafters." Here the young girl pitched her voice low and whispered breathily as if she

were shouting. "'What, you'd send me to the bastard nun?' Kathryn, what does 'bastard' mean?"

"Never you mind." Kathryn ruffled Avice's auburn hair. "So, dear Beatrice is being shipped off to a convent?"

"That's the way of it." Avice rocked back on her heels happily. "Just as well. There'll be less competition for the good men now with her gone. Her being such a shameless flirt, it was impossible to compete."

The sound of smashing brought their conversation abruptly to a halt. Kathryn rushed back to the room with Avice reluctantly trailing behind.

Beatrice had apparently thrown a hand mirror at her maid's head. Apolline and Agathe clutched each other in one corner of the room while Beatrice vented her fury on them.

Kathryn thought she would be a more welcome target, and one more able to withstand the barrage, so she said quite cheerfully, "Good e'en, Milady Beatrice. Is aught amiss?"

Beatrice whirled, her eyes fairly popping out of her head from fury. "You. *You filthy strumpet*. You did this."

"Why, Milady Beatrice, did what?" Kathryn blinked innocently, and Avice hid a giggle behind her hand.

"*Ruined my name in court*." Beatrice's face contorted in a paroxysm of rage, turning the usually comely countenance into a wild, animalistic mask. "*Sullied me before the queen. Spoiled all my chances*."

"No, Beatrice," Kathryn said softly, her enjoyment of this scene evaporating. "You did that to yourself."

Beatrice leapt for her, but the other ladies had anticipated the attack and latched on to the woman's arms. Even their trembling laundress had her arm around one of Beatrice's flying fists.

Beatrice swung wildly to shake them off, to no avail, and when she found her will flouted, she unleashed a stream of ear-burning invective at Kathryn. "*Salope*. I'll get

you for this, you whore, you bitch. *Garce!*" A vile string of base filth poured from her mouth, all of her vitriol directed at Kathryn.

Without missing a beat, Avice skipped from the room and called down the hallway to their guards. "Would you mind helping with the Lady Beatrice's luggage? The boxes are a bit heavy for our maid."

Beatrice glared but quieted at once, straightening her hair and the neck of her gown. By the time the guards arrived, she was ringed in smiles, dabbing at eyes suddenly juicy with tears. "I shall miss you all so very much," she said and engulfed a petrified Apolline in a bone-crushing embrace. "But when one has a holy vocation, as I have, what can one do but follow God's light?" This as she squeezed Agathe. Kathryn noticed the tiny girl winced with pain and rub her arms afterwards.

When Beatrice went to hug Avice, the puckish girl beat her to it, squeezing Beatrice so hard around the midsection the older woman blanched and hurriedly pushed her away. Avice smiled beatifically and refused to let go. "Whatever shall we do without you, dear, dear Lady Beatrice? Oh. But no, you are to be *Sister* Beatrice now."

"Oh, that will not be for a time yet," Beatrice gritted out. "I have still my novitiate to fulfill. One can only hope I will be worthy." For the barest of moments, she looked quite miserable, and Kathryn pitied her. But then Beatrice stood before Kathryn and pulled her against her generous bosom, growling in her ear. "I will get you back for this. Never doubt it, *ma petite pute*."

And then Beatrice was gone, the guards lugging her heavy cases after her, and Kathryn couldn't help but heave a sigh of relief as Avice hurried across the room, slammed the door in triumph, then turned and grinned at them all. Kathryn smiled back, and all the remaining ladies of the queen hugged each other. Happy in their reprieve from the loudmouthed tyrant Beatrice.

Chapter Eight

For the rest of the month before the Feast day of St. Aaron, Kathryn and the wolf met every day in the gardens. They walked their mornings away in each other's company. Sometimes they "talked," with Kathryn studiously interpreting the wolf's sighs and body language. Sometimes they shared a comfortable silence together until they both reluctantly went inside for their midday meal, and the tire-woman, their perpetual chaperone, went in with gratitude to ease her aching feet.

Kathryn and Garwaf each enjoyed their lives apart from their rambling walks as well. The wolf's optimism improved enormously after a very short time living among humans again, among comrades and friends, and not alone in some dank hovel in the woods.

The wolf trained with the men and the king in the afternoons. He would stare with longing at the sword and archery practices, which earned him some odd glances from the others. He was always spry and fit for sparring, though, so the men forgot his odd abstraction during weapons training. Mornings were for jousting, and truth be told, the knights did not miss him overmuch now he was always with Kathryn. The wolf's presence used to frighten the horses, and training for the warhorses, at least, went much better sans Garwaf.

Meanwhile, in Beatrice's absence, life in the queen's chamber became a joy and a pleasure, as if a storm cloud had blown away to reveal a bright spring day. Not just the queen, but the other handmaidens as well bloomed in the absence of the stranglehold Beatrice had had over them all. Talk became much more animated and friendly in the queen's quarters. Kathryn was called on for her stories less and less and invited more and more to talk about the wolf's progress and herself, how she was adjusting to court, how her father was at home, and other such niceties of conversation that had not been addressed to her before. Kathryn was pleased and delighted to discover she had many more friends in court these days. She still loved spending time with the wolf more than anything else, but when he went with the king, she was glad to have some other, not too tedious way to occupy her time.

The king also had changed his routine. He slept most of his nights away in his lady wife's arms, his eyes impossibly bright – if a trifle sleepy looking – when he left the queen's rooms in the morning.

Aliénor too glowed with happiness, and the sadness shadowing her bright, shining face seemed entirely banished now she and her lord had come to an understanding. She looked more beautiful than ever, and the charm that had been dampened and drained returned, engulfing everyone who came into contact with her. The court had at first held back from their brooding, sometime dour queen, but now she had revived, they embraced her full force and welcomed her into their hearts. Meals were better, beds were softer, clothes were cleaner, and all moved along well in the castle.

With one week until the festival, most of the talk in the ladies' solar dealt with the preparation and anticipation of the important day. When talk turned to what finery the ladies would wear and the queen discovered Kathryn's best dress, the blue one, not only needed mending but was also stained and dirty – and Kathryn would wear that one on the feast day – this was deemed to be insupportable.

All the women, including the queen herself, raided their clothing for Kathryn and quickly equipped her with a beautiful dress, soft leather slippers dyed to match, and the queen, in a gift fit of royalty, at least to Kathryn's mind, gave her a matching golden ring and necklace in the shape of a delicately molded rose with soft petals unfolding. The jewelry was so cunningly wrought – so full and bright was the trinket's bloom – Kathryn almost expected the rose to wilt as she held the ring. She tried to refuse the gift. "This is too much, Your Highness."

The queen would not have it, and then, at Kathryn's insistence, she said quietly, "All right, then. Keep one and give the other to your dear one. Unless I mistake the matter, he has no festival finery either."

Not for the first time, Kathryn wondered just how much the king had told his lady about Garwaf. Kathryn and the queen had never discussed the wolf. The queen did not ask, and Kathryn did not tell.

To see the king and queen finally happy together pleased Kathryn greatly. Once, in the middle of the month, she and the wolf had been turned from their accustomed place in the rose garden by the unmistakable sounds of the queen's delighted giggling and the king's dignified rumble of a chuckle, followed by the sound of rustling foliage and a low sigh of contentment.

Discreetly, Kathryn and her beast friend had crept away from the place and back the way they had come. When safely out of hearing, Kathryn gave the wolf a triumphant grin. "Told you so. An ideal place for trysting."

Garwaf had, with much dignity, refrained from rising to her bait.

* * * * *

Garwaf and Kathryn were safely ensconced in that same alcove now, having found the space empty of any other clandestine lovers.

"Shall I tell you a story, my lord?"

She always asked him this when they sat together in the garden after they had wearied of walking. This time with Kathryn was his favorite time of the day, and he could listen to her talk for weeks. He loved the sound of her voice, loved the charisma of her personality, loved

Her.

He worried sometimes she must get bored with only him for company, but when she did lapse into silence and they just walked along with each other, he was always struck by how companionable they were together, even in silence. Things were never awkward with Kathryn, silences never strained. She was intelligent, funny, warm hearted, and for whatever reason, she seemed quite taken with him as well. She enjoyed running after him, playing tag in the gardens, and sitting under an apple tree, dozing. They liked to walk together to look at flowers.

And if he could not contribute to the conversation, per se, she did ask him questions often that he could answer with a bark or a nod. They found ways to understand each other.

He perked his ears up and tipped his head yes when she asked him now if he'd like a story. Kathryn had told him tales many times before. She had a gift for storytelling and quite a vast repertoire of tales. Today, though, he had something else in mind.

"Something of the crusades?"

He shook his head.

"All right. Something from the Greeks? Do you know of the great general Odysseus?"

Garwaf did, of course, but Kathryn would tell the hero's tale well enough for him to feel the salt spray of the sea on his face, the clash of swords on one another, enjoy the loving embrace of a wife long missed, and the favor of a benevolent goddess. In the garden of the roses, though, he once more declined her suggestion. *No, I do not want tales of heroes and villains, magic and monsters and gods today.*

"Well, then," Kathryn said with a touch of impatience, "what story shall I tell you?"

He hesitated, then he tiptoed forward on his paws and placed his head on her lap, staring up at her soulfully. He nudged her hand with his nose.

Kathryn had to laugh. "You want to hear stories about me?"

The wolf blinked. *Yes, that's the way of it.*

Kathryn pursed her lips in mock displeasure, then sighed dramatically. "Ah well, if you command it, Sir Garwaf, who am I to refuse? Do you command it?"

The wolf barked once. *Yes, I most certainly do. You have saved my life and my soul. I know your mind, your heart, and yet I know far too little about your past. Today is the day to remedy that.*

A corner of her mouth tipped up in a smile she tried to hide. She pushed a few stray hairs from her face, then leaned down and curled up around him, resting her head

on the soft fur of his side like a pillow, and he closed his eyes in contentment, leaning against her thigh.

"Well," began Kathryn. "Every tale of a life must begin *before* that life begins with the makers of the life. With the parents. That's the way I see it, anyway; I'm sure some scholars would disagree, but they are not here. For my tale we will certainly begin there." And then she fell into her "bard voice," as Garwaf called it in his mind. This voice could be any and every character Kathryn chose. Her voice had zest and nuance and could stretch from a florid, gluttonous lord with the deep drum of a thundercloud, rumbling in displeasure, to the high squeak of a mouse doing a good deed for a lion that will probably eat him anyway.

Usually the bard voice had very little of the real Kathryn. Today, though, her voice was *all* Kathryn, warm and melodious, a soothing alto. "I cannot tell you my mother was the sweetest and kindest creature on earth as most mothers seem to be. She had a sharp tongue in her head."

The wolf gave Kathryn a droll look, and Kathryn grinned. "Yes, like me. And she used her wits instead of burying them at the bottom of her sewing basket. There were not many men would have her, despite her incredible good looks and the fact she was best friend to the Princess Rosamund. Now, my father, Sir Stephen, was a lowly knight in faithful service when our beloved king was but newly crowned.

"Together they conquered much of the land that had belonged to the enemy. In gratitude, the king created the Barony of Réméré as a gift to my father, who before was merely the poor second son of a chevalier. The king's only caveat was that Stephen should find himself a wife, for he would need one when he had his property. Stephen met my mother at the Christmas court, and he loved Lady Isabella from the first. He wed her within a year of being named as Baron of Réméré. They had me the next year. Not an overly attentive father, *Lord* Stephen stopped by our apartments to take a look at me every now and again, but mostly my father devoted himself to my mother and left my raising up to her. They were very happy years.

"My father first started showing me around to eligible men when I was ten years old." Now a shadow did fall across her countenance. "Mother died when I was twelve, trying to deliver my father of an heir, and he understandably forgot all else, forgot me entirely in his sorrow." Kathryn choked and could not continue, blinking rapidly. Her usual brightness of personality crumbled. She was not always so optimistic and impervious to regret as she led the world to believe. Pain had touched her and still could. Garwaf sat up and tucked his head under her chin, leaning in with the best approximation of a hug he could give with the arrangement of limbs at his disposal. More than anything, he wished for his humanity so he could comfort his lady properly.

A sweet smile lit Kathryn's face, and she wrapped her arms around him. When she let go at last, he stared at her. Tears swam in the cloudy green depths of her eyes, but they did not break the barriers of her lids.

You don't have to continue. He spoke with his gaze. *If this is painful to you.*

Kathryn caressed the puckered scar along his face. "You would let me end things there, but a good bard does not leave a story half told." She sucked in a calming breath and seemed pleased when the air did not snag on her heartache. "Besides, to tell of the pain helps ease some of it. So *mio zio*, that is, my Uncle Flavio, had lived with us, and he took over my education and rearing after Mother died. He became more of a father to me than Lord Stephen. Uncle never understood why women shouldn't be educated, free to say what they liked and do what they liked, as men do."

She leaned toward him confidingly, and he tilted forward in response, yearning for her warmth, her nearness.

She continued. "I had rather an unorthodox upbringing, I'm afraid, and so became the saucy wench I am now."

He playfully nipped at her fingers, and she giggled.

Kathryn's rare dimple peeked out at him. "A sense of what is suitable and not in a young maiden did not hold out long against my reason and my crippling restlessness. I wandered in ever-widening circles from my home and taught myself to climb trees. I

realize now my luck in managing not to be eaten by wolves at the time." She winked at him. "Or worse."

He shuddered as he thought of some of the things that could be encompassed in that "or worse" — none of them pleasant for an innocent maiden.

"Our gamekeeper caught on to my mischief before any real harm — besides some scraped knees and torn dresses — befell me. Flavio gave me a sound scold when he found out, and a beating. After, he kept a stricter watch on me, and I ended up spending many of my days reading. I had always been a great reader, which is how I learned all my stories, but he added still more books to my library. Then, since I had already received far more education than was seemly for any girl, he decided to instruct me in other languages and in the analysis of texts. Teaching me such knowledge was highly improper, but he could not see the harm." She fanned her fingers over Garwaf's fur, smoothing it back and forth, snuggling closer to him.

"A few years ago, Flavio fell ill and began to weaken. After three years of pain, he finally passed last year, which meant Father suddenly had to deal with me. Poor Lord Stephen came to discover all the qualities he loved so in my mother, he deplored in me. A respectable intellect is of very little use in a daughter, since most men have no use for a wife with one. Unfortunately for him, as his only child, a wife is what I am to be. Otherwise, Réméré passes to some second cousins of ours whose wives produced sons. From the first, my fate was to be Marriage, and Father's abstraction over Mother only caused him to forget for a few years. Eventually he remembered his quest and returned to its pursuit full bore.

"Father found marrying me off rather difficult, though. Perhaps I'd have been suitable material for a mistress, but having a loud-mouthed shrew like me for a bride? Unthinkable." Kathryn laughed brightly, no shadow of ill use showing in a face Garwaf found comelier by the hour. "None of the neighboring lords in the area thought me worth a glance, especially as I lacked two qualities that would have made me rather more suitable or at least made my shortcomings rather more forgivable. I had no dowry and no beauty."

Garwaf growled a vehement protest.

Kathryn dimpled at him and patted his head. "Dear creature, you may think I'm tolerable now, but I'm mortified to admit at the time I was a gangly, awkward creature with freckles and teeth too big for my head.

"So Stephen wrote to his old friend the king and begged him to take me on and put some polish on me, maybe even see if any of the men of the court would be agreeable toward me. And so here am I now." She hesitated before barreling on. "And grateful, too, to find myself here. With you. That day in the forest, I thought I would die of my loneliness, but then you came. So I thank you, kind sir, for your friendship and your loyalty. Thank you for everything." She bent and delivered a chaste kiss on the top of his head.

He turned and looked up at her with longing.

I want to tell you of myself as well, his heart said. I want you to know of my father, the benevolent and noble Lord Michael, and his kind and good lady, Lady Phillippa. I want to tell you of my uncle, the king, and how he raised me from a child when they died.

I want to explain my marriage to Alisoun to you. How I was young and foolish, how I thought a comely and courteous wife all one could want from a woman.

I want to tell you how I became what I am. When my transformations started, how they happened. Why I am trapped now.

I want to tell you all of myself, show you the nicks and dents and scars of my life, and have you love me even though I be grievously flawed. I want to weave a tapestry of my life to show you, so you may see and mend the tears time and betrayal and pain have wrought on my soul.

I have done nothing to earn this regard of yours . . . but I want to.

I want you to know me. Really know me. Not as I now am. Not in this freak form I now possess, but as my own true self. I want to prove myself to be the knight I was, that I still am, somewhere underneath all this fur.

I want you to care for me as me, because I am who I am, and not out of pity for what I have become. I want to be a man for you. I already am a better man in this wolf's body than I ever was in a human one.

And you did that.

He wanted to tell her all this, but he could only stare soulfully into her eyes and sigh.

Kathryn leaned against him and he placed his head in her lap once more. They curled around each other as comfortably as if they were two parts of one whole, connected again at last.

Chapter Nine

The past week of mornings had been some of the best of her life, and it saddened Kathryn that preparations for the Feast would keep her from getting her usual walk in the gardens with the wolf that day.

The day before the Feast had dawned, and there was simply too much to do for her to get a moment away for herself. Garwaf had amicably agreed to accompany her on her various errands in the morning. He lacked hands, after all, and so was not much good in helping with the preparations of the knights.

Courtiers had begun to arrive the night before and had been housed comfortably in the castle. A brace of dignitaries were also expected to come this morning, and a little snarl of dread formed in Kathryn's stomach. Her father would be one of them.

She wore a dark gray dress, serviceable and plain, and the rose necklace sat tucked into the pocket of her gown, a talisman against ill luck. The bauble formed a hard knot against her side, and she waited for a quiet moment to make her gift to the wolf, hoping he would like the jewel, hoping he would understand the gift for what it was meant to be.

Not that she even understood anymore what her gift was meant to be.

She passed through the courtyard on her way to Llewellyn's workshop, where the wolf had gone to keep the wise man company.

A knight on a large brute of a charger rode in through the gates like he owned the castle. A big man, deep-chested and tall in the saddle, the knight wore a very rich tunic of striped silk with the red emblem of a curled dog emblazoned across his chest. His breeches and boots were of the finest cut and quality.

Here is a rich and important man if ever I have seen one. His eyes were hard and dark, though, a sneer disfiguring his too-handsome face as he dismounted. The taut displeasure on the stranger's face unnerved Kathryn, and she shuffled a few steps farther from the man, dropping her head to avoid any chance he might look at her.

The king, Llewellyn, and the wolf crossed the courtyard from the garden to meet Kathryn as the new arrival dismounted. The wolf looked up and saw the man. Garwaf stopped midstride, his eyes widening in shock. Kathryn's stomach dropped with sudden, nameless fear.

"Reynard." Llewellyn grimaced as he saw the big knight. "That bastard."

The attack happened so quickly no one, least of all the newly arrived knight, knew precisely what had transpired until after the wolf had pounced. Garwaf ran toward Reynard, fast as a fiend, and sank his teeth into the man's arm, trying to drag him down to the ground with brutal force.

The king reacted first, and just in time too, before the wolf had a chance to do greater harm to the man.

"*Sir Garwaf*," the king bellowed. "You forget yourself."

The wolf snarled and ignored the king. Ears back, hackles raised, the wolf tensed for another, fatal, spring.

The king had just come back from a brisk morning ride, and so he still had his crop in hand. "Sir Garwaf," he bellowed again, and at last the wolf turned his murderous gaze from the fallen knight and looked to his king. The king raised his riding crop threateningly, but his eyes were tense at the edges, pleading. "You will not

harm this guest of my house, wolf, or so help me, I shall be forced to beat you from the place."

The wolf looked back to the fallen knight. He growled once more before he backed off and sat, glaring, but a threat no longer. Kathryn raced from her hidden vantage point and went to the wolf at once, her heart in her throat, strangling her. She did not kneel but placed her hand on his head. He glanced up, and signs of discomfiture began to show. He did not seem sorry for the *act*, but perhaps for the brutality of his attack, perhaps because she had witnessed his barbarism?

The man, Reynard, jumped to his feet indignantly and would have advanced on the wolf had the hand of the king on his arm not stopped him.

"As he has honored my truce, so shall you, Lord Reynard." A threat hung heavy in the king's words.

Kathryn looked to the wolf, but he watched the king and the wounded knight, whose own blood had stained his fine tunic.

Reynard fumed, and with his face dirtied and his tunic rumpled, nostrils flaring in quivering indignity, he was not at all handsome. "Is it now the custom of the court to keep wild beasts?"

"The practice has only come into fashion of late, my lord," said Llewellyn in evenly measured tones. He bowed his head deferentially, his voice so bland as to be absolutely colorless.

Kathryn detected the wise man liked this knight no more than she, or perhaps even the wolf, did.

"And if you will come to my workshop, I will tend that arm for you," Llewellyn said with quiet if somewhat dubious grace.

"It would be wise," said the king to Reynard.

Reynard, dignity bruised but unable to cry off, nodded and mustered reserves of poise to aid him as he stalked from the court. The wolf's gaze followed him from the court, and Kathryn would have given much to know what went on behind the gleaming blue depths of her wolf's eyes.

When Lord Reynard had passed from the court, the king offered his arm to Kathryn, which she accepted silently while the wolf fell into step with them. The king seemed to be addressing his remarks to Kathryn, but he actually spoke to the wolf. "Was that well done of you, my boy? It most certainly was not wise. All will be made right in time, but patience and prudence are required to accomplish that."

The king had walked them out the back and into the garden, where the wolf had just returned from. "I think" – and this, the king said to Kathryn – "our friend could use some fresh air right now. I will speak to my lady wife and see that your duties for the next hour are assigned to some other handmaid."

After the king left, Kathryn turned a scathing look on the wolf, and he had the grace to look abashed. He curled his tail between his legs and followed meekly when she led him to their favorite and accustomed spot in the rose garden.

She sat on the bench, the wolf opposite her, looking as shameful as he could manage with his limited selection of facial expressions.

"The king is right," she said at last. "That was *not* well done of you."

The wolf hung his shaggy head.

Kathryn sighed heavily. "But such anger is entirely understandable. Considering the circumstances."

The wolf glanced up. His sharp blue eyes studied her for a long moment before he slunk toward her, whining softly. Pursing her lips to hold her emotions back, she held her hand out, palm up in invitation. He rested his chin on her knee, and she smoothed his fur back with shaking hands. "I had hoped for a better opportunity than this, but I doubt one will come." She fished in her dress pocket, then held her hand in front of the wolf's face. The gold lay glittering in the palm of her hand, winking at them with sunlight.

The wolf sniffed the necklace, then looked at her face, curious.

"This is for you if you would like." Heat blossomed across her cheeks. "I have a ring that matches. See." She held up her hand to show him the golden rose ring where it encircled her left ring finger. "I thought" She trailed off and creased her brows,

suddenly shy, awkward. Before she could grow more flustered, the wolf butted her hand with his nose, nodding. She laughed and clasped the necklace around his throat. The necklace looked very distinguished and lent him a regal air not to be found in any common wolf.

She glanced up at the sound of someone approaching, and Llewellyn hovered outside their alcove, wiping his hands with a rag.

"Hello, Llewellyn."

At Kathryn's greeting, he entered Little Eden.

Llewellyn knelt first before the wolf. "May I check your shoulder, my lord?"

Kathryn, to whom the possibility of a worsening of the wound had not occurred, gasped and hovered over Llewellyn the whole time he inspected the wound, which had *not* reopened and still seemed to be healing nicely.

The examination over, the magician rocked on his heels and spoke to the wolf. "The king thinks it best you omit your presence from dinner tonight."

Kathryn gasped with dismay. This announcement hardly surprised her, but it most definitely disappointed her.

Llewellyn's wind-weathered face cracked into a grin. "His lordship does not, however, ban you from attending tomorrow's festivities. He only wants to give you a day to cool down and collect your wits about you. All right?"

The wolf huffed thoughtfully, then looked back to Llewellyn and inclined his head in the affirmative.

"'Tis well, then, and nothing's to stop you two, now Reynard's cleared out of there, from taking some refreshment at the hut."

* * * * *

The three of them passed a pleasant noon meal together in Llewellyn's workshop. He pulled out a fine batch of apricot brandy and passed the bottle round. Garwaf drank sparingly, not knowing his wolfish threshold for the brew. Kathryn

drank rather more than she should have, but that only made her more cheerful and rather more inclined to laugh. Llewellyn was a deep personality and also a hearty drinker. He imbibed more than both of his guests put together and showed never a sign of intoxication except for a more pronounced glitter behind his pale eyes.

"Oh, do some magic for me, Llewellyn," Kathryn asked after her fourth mug. Everyone called him "magician" and "conjurer," but she had yet to see him display any of these talents he was reputed to have.

"Real magic. True magic, Kathryn, my dear, is subtle and invisible. True enchantment is magic from here." Llewellyn tapped his head. "And here." He placed a palm over his heart. "My magic is in the earth and the tilling of fields. I help the plants to grow high and tall. I give them resolve to last the winter. I pour laughter and love in when I brew them into wine. I mix in fortitude and hope when they are made into medicines."

Kathryn let all her confusion show in her face, and she heard the wolf muffle a small snort. Probably of amusement.

Llewellyn sighed and relented. "All right, then. Just a little." He closed his eyes and breathed deeply. When he opened his eyes, they seemed to Kathryn to glow faintly around the pupils. He pointed a finger at the grate by the fire, and a small shower of sparks fell from his fingers to the logs, causing a chipper flame to leap up in the fireplace. Garwaf barked and jumped away from the hearth with a glare at Llewellyn.

"Cazzo." Kathryn said in a rather unladylike manner.

Llewellyn's face had flushed, going white around the lips, and he drank deeply of his wine. "Yes, yes, quite impressive, and quite useless in the end. Selfish magic. Silly magic. Why use the supernatural for household chores? Why waste time and energy summoning up an inner flame when some good dry logs and a little friction could do the same?"

Kathryn looked up from the magic fire, which looked like any other fire to her untrained eyes. Llewellyn's skin had paled now and seemed to have hollowed out beneath his cheekbones. She went to him and helped move him to the bench. "Why

didn't you tell me magic took this much out of you?" Her voice slurred only around the edges.

Llewellyn laughed. "Truth be told, I was curious myself if I could still do that kind of thing. I haven't done such a spell in years."

Kathryn *tsked*. The wolf growled a short reproach.

Llewellyn grinned his accustomed irrepressible smile. "I devoted my life to the shallow magics. It was not until the magic did not come when I called that I discovered a better way – a deeper and ultimately more rewarding way – of putting my talents to use. Instead of using them to build my own fame and glory, I use them to heal and mend, comfort and cure." His tone then became decidedly didactic. "Whatever magic men of my sort do, the power is visited back on them in some way three times as potent. For every shower of tiny sparks I do, I pay the price somewhere else. In my old age the price comes out in physical strength. In my youth I believe it came out of my brain." He sighed ruefully. "I never did know a more thick-skulled fool than myself as a young man. Now, on the reverse side, every time I use my magic to help a wound knit cleaner, or an old man's bones ache less, or a babe to grow straight and healthy, the goodness comes back to me threefold in good deeds and kindness." He smiled beatifically and suddenly looked ten years younger. "Which way would you say is ultimately the stronger?"

Kathryn smiled and clucked her tongue. "Ah, my lord magician, you really are just a soft-hearted pup deep down, are you not?"

Llewellyn blushed and made a maudlin face of false modesty, so Kathryn laughed. The wolf jumped on him and playfully batted the magician's head with his paws. Llewellyn chuckled as well and unsuccessfully tried to shoo both the youngsters away from him.

The rest of the afternoon they passed together, with Llewellyn lecturing them both a little more on magic. When the magician and the maiden had to depart for dinner, Llewellyn fixed the wolf a meal to tide him over for the night, since he would

miss the feasting in the hall. Garwaf settled with seeming placidity in front of the fire to eat his supper.

Kathryn had a nasty feeling, however, the wolf only bided his time. Before she left the healer's hut, she bent down and kissed the wolf's velvet soft head. "Do not do anything unworthy of who you are."

The wolf gave her a poignant look. Kathryn frowned and left the hut reluctantly but quickly so she would not be late.

Garwaf sniffed and sighed. *I am a wolf, my lovely maiden. As I am there is no ignoble act unworthy of me. I am not a knight anymore. No matter how much I pretend to be. No matter how I wish I still was. No matter how I wish you and I could . . .* The werewolf growled, and a new thought sprang to the fore of his suddenly more animal consciousness. *I am what I am now.*

And Reynard is to blame for it.

Chapter Ten

Kathryn fought with futility against the gloomy mood that settled over her. Garwaf banished, and now she also found herself seated far away from all of her usual companions at dinner. Llewellyn waved to her from the high table, but she could barely make her fingers crook to wave back. When the wise man looked away, she sank her chin into her hand and stared without relish at her food. With so many of the king's highest-ranking courtiers coming to the castle, Kathryn, as the unwed daughter of a minor baron, could not hope to get even a glance of the king or queen tonight.

Another unwelcome surprise came halfway through dinner. Kathryn sat near the doors, but with her back to them. Many of the king's vassals were late arriving, stomping through the Great Hall to take their place at table. So when yet another pair of heavy feet came plodding into the grand room, Kathryn thought nothing of it and did not even look back.

One of the men sitting across from her, a distant neighbor of her father's, suddenly jumped to his feet and waved merrily. "Ho, there, Lord Stephen!"

Kathryn slopped wine down the front of her dress in surprise.

Maybe it's not Father. Maybe there's another Lord Steph –

Her father's low bass boomed out across the hall. "Had a beast of a time getting here. Roads are nigh impassable this time of year."

Her father, Lord Stephen the Baron de Réméré, had been wiry and spry in his youth, a mass of tight-corded muscle with a hand that could wield a mace like the arm of Doom against his foes. He had done good service for his king and had been rewarded for his loyalty. He had married a beautiful woman he had loved dearly, and had been on such a good road until his beloved wife died. Now Kathryn's father indulged himself in wine and good food. He rarely left his estate – he rarely left his own chambers. The iron sinews of his youth had melted to corpulence in his age. He had wielded a sword as a master but walked with a cane now, a stout stick of dark wood.

Kathryn had not expected him tonight. Truly she had half hoped her father would send his apologies and not come at all – as he had done every other year. She swallowed with difficulty, her stomach sinking into the heels of her soft-toed slippers. Rising from her bench, she shakily turned to make a curtsy to her father as he approached. "Good evening, sir."

* * * * *

Kathryn spent the rest of the dinner in strained silence. She did not believe she could avoid a prolonged discourse with her father. She would probably not even be able to put their conversation off until the morrow. So she sat and stared at the food she had lost all interest in. She waited with resignation for her father to bolt his meal down so the dreaded tête-à-tête could begin.

Her father cleaned his plate soon enough with little appreciation for the excellent food the king served to his guests. Softly, her father bid her join him in the garden, and

Kathryn went without comment. She held her mouth firmly shut until he led her to a wooden bench in the apple groves.

Lord Stephen sat his daughter down and eagerly stood before her, feet spread and arms akimbo, tapping one leg idly with his cane. "Well, girl, how have you done for yourself? If that fancy bauble is any sign, then none too badly." He gestured at the ring, giving her a broad wink and a grin.

Kathryn rubbed temples suddenly aching with tension. "The queen gave me the ring." She braced herself for his temper.

The anticipated explosion did not disappoint her. "*The queen?*" Her father yelled. "Fool child, I didn't spend a fortune to rig you out for this damned place to have you here making up to a married *woman*." Lord Stephen calmed himself with a long breath, but this did little to ease the angry flush spreading from the neck of his doublet. "Have you had no offers? No one come to pay court to you? No admirers of any kind?"

What did he expect? Kathryn glared back at him, teeth gritting together tight enough to hurt her jaw. "None whatsoever, sir. I am too poor, too plain, and too shrewish to attract the men of the court." She flared her nostrils in anger. "Things which you knew when you sent me here." The only offers or interest she'd had from men of the court were of the indecent kind, which had abruptly ceased altogether when she became the wolf's companion.

Her father deflated and tapped his stick against his boot. "True enough. All of it." His shoulders sagged, and he sniffed with annoyance. "Well, God knows I'm not rich enough to pay a man to take you on. I should have realized my humble barony would fail to tempt these great men here." He narrowed his eyes at Kathryn. "Well, might as well take you home with me tomorrow, then, after the feast. No point in keeping you here any longer."

Kathryn's mouth fell open and stayed that way for a time. *But the queen*. The queen and all the ladies were her friends now. She would miss them terribly if she left. *And Llewellyn*. Llewellyn said he would be happy to augment her already respectable knowledge of leech-craft with lessons in his herb-lore.

And the wolf . . .

"Father," she said in her most carefully measured and reasonable tone of voice, "the queen has taken a liking to me. Let me linger a few weeks more until the court removes to the summer palace. See if I cannot by then firmly cement myself in her good graces." Her stomach churned at having to say these self-serving lies, but her father did not know her well enough to recognize her falsehoods. "Having the favor and friendship of royalty is no bad thing, after all. She might even agree to keep me here permanently by then. Which would rid you of responsibility for me for good." Kathryn paused. "Besides, she would be very angry with me were I to leave so abruptly."

Her father turned this over in his slow-moving mind, then nodded at last. "You have a point." He scratched his patchy gray beard. "A month more, then, before I send for you? That is when the court will remove to the summer palace." He wagged a fleshy finger in Kathryn's face. "But no more new gowns, girl. You wear what you have or you go about as God made you, so tend well what you have."

Her father clasped his cloak tightly around him with fleshy arms and hustled back into the castle. Kathryn fell submissively in behind him, all the while her head spinning. She had a month, then. A month to order her life and think of something. A month before her father carried her away from the first home she had enjoyed since her uncle's death. She *would* think of something — she had to.

* * * * *

The Feast Day of St. Aaron dawned cheerful and crisply cool. Garwaf sniffed the air, letting the sweet smells fill his body with cheerfulness. A play was planned on the life of the saint, and a market had come to the castle's court, to be followed in the evening by a great banquet.

Kathryn arrived late for their planned rendezvous, perhaps because she had spent extra time arranging her hair *just so* in a graceful braid falling over the shoulder of her new gown. The red dress had a low, square neck, a tightly laced waist, and a

graceful train at the back she handled very well, only tripping once as she approached him. The rose ring gleamed in the early sunlight on her graceful hand as she reached down to caress his head. He, for his part, sat and stared at her in avid admiration.

She's so lovely. That dress couldn't have been hers originally, but the garment might as well have been made for her. The color brings out the creamy whiteness of her skin, and the red makes her eyes look like new leaves just unfolding to the gentle kiss of the sun. What a lovely creature my little guardian is. He grinned to himself. *She's flushed with the pleasure of the day to come, and her eyes are shining. She can't stop smiling. Ah . . . if only . . .* He shook himself out of his doleful daze upon Llewellyn addressing a remark to him about the pleasures to come from the faire. Garwaf yipped noncommittally, tried to shake the cobwebs out of his head and turn his thoughts away from the too-wonderful Kathryn.

The day began merrily enough in the great court with the three of them wandering the market.

Llewellyn made a courtly bow. "We will wander where you will, my lady." He looked to Garwaf for affirmation.

Garwaf wagged his fluffy black tail and let his tongue loll out happily. Kathryn grinned in response, all the reward he needed.

Llewellyn halted them all, though, and, his face very serious, drew out a small pouch and dropped it into Kathryn's hands. "By order of the king, I present this to you."

Kathryn tugged the pouch open and stared down at a cluster silver coins. "I can't—"

The wise man held his hand up. "It is also by order of the king that you are denied the right to refuse this gift." Llewellyn smirked.

Kathryn snorted in amusement, but since by royal decree the money was hers, she immediately turned her mind to deciding how best to spend it, debating the merits of boots versus a new girdle.

Garwaf noticed her hungrily eyeing a monk's cart laden with books, and he tugged Llewellyn's sleeve. The magician turned and followed Garwaf's gaze. Llewellyn winked, then guided Kathryn by gentle degrees to the book stall.

"Pick any one you like," he ordered peremptorily when they arrived. Kathryn dug in heartily, and Llewellyn did likewise. He turned up an interesting volume on demons and spirits and knelt to look the manuscript over with Garwaf, who scanned the pages with interest. Kathryn narrowed her selections at last down to two volumes.

Kathryn studied each book carefully. Both were beautifully illustrated by the same supple hand. The illustrations made her feel almost as if she could see the sights herself and hear the thrum of the noises vibrating in her ears, smell the flowers and the brimstone. She had selected a slim volume of the lives of many of the more obscure saints, and a larger, thicker volume of fairy stories and folktales. The fairy stories were beautiful. Some of them she had never read before, but the volume would cost far too much of the king's gift, and there were still the boots to buy.

Heart heavy, she set the book down and paid the monk what he asked for the saints. She watched Llewellyn take up the fairy book and turn the heavy manuscript in his hands. He smiled and piled the fairy book in with two other volumes on herb lore and a history of the popes. As they walked away, the books purchased, Kathryn caressed the wolf's ears and smiled happily at Llewellyn. "Will you let me borrow the fairy book sometime?"

"Of a certainty," Llewellyn said with his usual grandeur, then carelessly handed her the thick tome. "Especially since I bought the book for you."

The wolf barked mischievously.

"But the silver . . . " She held up the purse, too stunned to finish her thought.

"Was from the king," Llewellyn said. "I like to give more specific presents."

"But — "

"All right, my Lady Stubborn, you may have the book on condition, then." He paused. "And that is . . . you read to me whenever I ask." The magician winked.

Kathryn chuckled and scooped the book from his outstretched hand. "We have an accord." She stood on tiptoe and kissed Llewellyn's cheek. A faint flush crept up from his collar to tint his face, and he quickly moved ahead of her to the tanner's stall.

The wolf looked at her reproachfully, and Kathryn giggled. "Great silly beast." She then delivered a sweet kiss on his nose.

She hurried away, and the wolf skipped along behind her. At the tanner, they met Queen Aliénor and several of the visiting noblewomen. The queen was ordering a new belt with the heraldic imagery of her lord's house, and a buckle in the shape of a wolf.

Kathryn chatted amiably with the other ladies, and the wolf bore their simpering regard with becoming patience. Llewellyn, obviously less stolid in the face of feminine attention, darted an appraising glance at the wolf, then made his excuses. He bowed out of the stall, and Kathryn watched the wise man walk off toward another stall.

Very soon the queen had completed giving the specifications for her belt. She stepped aside so Kathryn could be measured for her new boots.

The tanner was quick and efficient. He was also very shrewd and had apparently noticed on what easy terms the young lady purchasing the boots was with Her Majesty. In consequence, Kathryn got rather a better deal on her footwear than she would have had she come to the tanner's stall when the queen was not by. The tanner, for his part, also admired the wolf, or more particularly, the wolf's pelt.

As the tanner and Kathryn concluded their business, he said quickly, "I'll give you the boots for free, throw in a pair of gloves and a new belt as well if you'll trade me for that animal."

The wolf snorted, his lip curling back, and Kathryn hid her smile behind her hand. She managed to compose herself quickly, then said, "I'm sorry, sir, but the wolf is not mine to barter away so easily. He is the king's man."

The tanner deflated in disappointment. "King's pet, then, is it?"

"Why no, sir." Kathryn widened her eyes. "*He* is the loyalist of the king's personal retinue of knights." Kathryn swept from the stall with the wolf on her heels. She looked down at Garwaf. "And don't you start to forget that either."

The beast blinked for a moment with affection in his eyes. He broke into a wolfish grin and playfully nipped her fingers.

"Behave yourself, or when I get my boots tomorrow, I really will trade you to the tanner. I could use a new belt."

Llewellyn had lost himself somewhere in the tangle of stalls. "I don't think it's worth looking for him in this mob, do you?"

The wolf growled a cheerful negative. The stalls were a massive morass in the middle of the court, but the faire was not overly large as these things went. They were bound to run into each other again sometime, so neither Kathryn nor the wolf fretted overmuch about the wise man's absence.

As it happened, Llewellyn was trying to find them, but an old, unwelcome acquaintance hindered his attempts. The wise man had been corralled into conversation by one of the visiting nobles. Llewellyn disliked the man, being bored to tears by his endless tales of hunting, but the man was an earl of the highest consequence – even if he was a muttonhead. It would not do for Llewellyn to offend him.

Yet. For if Llewellyn sensed any trouble brewing, he would certainly relish knocking the man to ground on a large horse pie if he had to, to get where he might be needed. Unfortunately, no such dire event had come to Llewellyn's rescue.

Yet.

* * * * *

The wolf is not the Duke of Dorré. Reynard had to believe that, because if the wolf *was* the duke, then he, Reynard, was about to find himself inhabiting a world full of woe.

Reynard's wife had been the strategist in their marriage from the first, but she remained at home. His sister, Beatrice, would have made a nice alternative, but the damned fool woman had gotten herself sent to a nunnery in disgrace and was of no use to him now. So Reynard had decided – and not just because he liked his flesh intact – to

avoid the wolf, then to leave as soon as possible after the king's convocation of his liegemen.

The convocation would take place on the morrow, and Reynard intended to make all ready to leave this bloody castle and ride as far away from the wolf as he could, as soon as he could. Word of the wolf's attack had already spread, and the cortege from the castle, who knew the wolf, were beginning to whisper to the ones who did not. Reynard fancied he could hear them now, chattering away behind his back as he passed.

"Yes, attacked."

"Right in front of the gates, I heard."

"I saw the fight. The wolf knocked him into the dust."

"Would have torn him to pieces if the king hadn't called him to heel."

"Yes, but my dear, he's never showed a bit of violence to anyone else before this."

"Makes me wonder what old Reynard did to the poor wolf to make him attack. Seems to me, the beast must have a pretty good reason."

"I wouldn't put anything past Reynard."

"The lecher"

Reynard's hands were beginning to cramp from being clenched into fists all morning. He wished he could just retire to bed for the day with a good bottle of wine and a kitchen maid, but his wife always hammered home to him the importance of appearances.

Not the cleverest of weasels, Reynard still recognized the antagonism against him would increase tenfold if he suddenly went missing for the day. So, like a marionette with his strings being plucked, he wandered idly along through the market stalls. He picked up a pair of scented, embroidered silk gloves for his wife, smiling grimly to himself as he tucked them into his pouch and paid the booth keeper.

His wife.

Reynard could not think of Lady Alisoun these days without a twist of distaste coiling in his gut. *My wife. And what a fine wife she is.*

* * * * *

The press of bodies in the faire had begun to overwhelm Garwaf. Three people had tripped over him so far, and even Kathryn's soothing presence could not calm his raw nerves.

She seemed to sense his agitation and reached down to stroke a gentle caress across his back. "Perhaps, Sir Garwaf, you would accompany me to the play in the Great Hall?"

Garwaf gratefully led her back into the castle. Sitting next to Kathryn, safe from the crush and stench of so many bodies, seemed a very palatable idea.

The haphazard playhouse was cool, the room shadowed with hanging drapes and not yet half full of its audience. The play had not started, but seats filled up fast. The king and queen had not yet taken theirs, but the two golden, high-backed chairs were marked out and waiting for the rulers whenever they should make their appearance.

Kathryn entered the hall, grinning as Garwaf chased his tail for her amusement. The smile abruptly fell from her face, though, and she stopped short before leaning in to tug him away. "I've changed my mind. Let's steal a quiet moment together in the rose garden, eh? Away from all this bustle?"

Wolf or no wolf, he was not a fool, and he had already scented the foul odor the moment he'd entered the room.

Reynard. A clear path lay between Garwaf and his nemesis. *One pounce, that's all.* He tensed his muscles to spring, but suddenly arms closed about him. Tiny arms. Arms that had not the strength to stop him if he followed through on his attack.

He barked angrily in Kathryn's face.

A hurt look twisted her features, and guilt stabbed through his gut, clear to his backbone, making him nauseated. He whipped his head away from her. *This is revenge. Women have no truck with vengeance. They do not understand.*

He writhed against her, trying to break free without hurting her, but she held him fast. Reynard stood so close, half turned away, and oblivious to Garwaf's presence. He turned to Kathryn, putting a fierce demand in his gaze. *I am just a pet to you, little better than a dumb animal. And this, this grudge is about honor.* He braced his muscles to break free of her hold. *I can never have Kathryn anyway. Honor is all that is left to me now.* He growled low in his throat, a warning to her. *And if you do not let go of me soon, I might have to hurt you.*

Reynard wheeled about and fell back at sight of the wolf. Garwaf twisted and thrashed in Kathryn's arms, scratching at her and snapping his jaws, snarling red-hot fury at Reynard.

Kathryn's build was slight, but the years of tailing after the servants in her manor and being put to tasks when she got in the way had given her a fair bit of wiry strength. To have such strength was very unmaidenly in her, of course, but her muscles were the only way she managed to hold a struggling wolf trying to free himself.

Reynard swore freely, though he was among ladies, and drew his sword on the wolf. "God's teeth, what madness has gripped the king he keeps such a beast about?"

"The beast amuses me," the king said from the doorway in silken, sinewy tones. "And if he does not please you, Reynard, you are welcome to take your leave. I can well understand a wolf companion may not be to *your* liking. But you will sheathe your weapon first. I ordered peace ties, did I not? I do not allow naked steel in my home."

Reynard sheathed his wicked-looking blade and glared. He began to stalk out of the hall, but the king laid a restraining hand on his shoulder and grinned like a wolf. "Tie the sword first, and then you may go."

The knight flushed angrily, found a thong of leather, and tied his blade to its scabbard so he could not draw his steel so easily again. Reynard made the most perfunctory of obeisance to the king before storming from the hall.

The king knelt, and the wolf stilled his struggles at once, but his ears were flattened back. Anger still rumbled low in his throat as his gaze followed Reynard.

The king laid a gentle hand on the wolf's shoulder. "There is a time and place, good sir, and that time is not here and now. Compose yourself, or I shall be forced to adopt certain measures that would be no less distasteful to you than they are to me." And then quietly so Kathryn, who still restrained the wolf, barely even heard him, he exhaled in a tiny whisper, "Please, Gabriel."

The wolf looked at him, and all at once his shoulders sagged, so he turned biddable, almost boneless, in Kathryn's arms. The king helped her to her feet, then sighed in dismay. The wolf's claws were sharp, and he had not been gentle in trying to free himself. As a result of the beast's struggles, Kathryn's new gown had been torn to ribbons, and she had several nasty scratches on her thighs and arms. She was also dirty and suddenly very tired. She desperately wanted to disappear before her father got wind of the whole incident and appeared on the scene.

The queen stepped forward into the breach and slid her arm through Kathryn's, leading her a little way out of the hall. When the wolf tried to follow, the king barred his way. "You did not do well by her today, my lad. Give her time and do your best to redeem yourself at dinner."

The wolf hung his head in shame. *Too civilized to be a wolf. Too foolish and fierce to be a man. Where in this world do I belong anymore?*

Queen Aliénor summoned one of the servants over. "Lady Kathryn needs a fresh gown and a bit of a wash. Draw a bath and lay out my dark green gown."

The servant withdrew. The queen gave Kathryn a rueful smile. "I wish I could go with you, but I must stay by my lord."

Kathryn agreed mutely, lending only half an ear to the queen.

Garwaf had almost *attacked* her. A moment more and he would have. The king and not she had saved the wolf's humanity this time. The wolf was already sorry, and he would not attack Reynard again after this. But other things in the world could provoke the werewolf in a like manner. How long before he would be restored to his former form? How much longer could she deal with this? Would he attack a human? Would he attack *her*? Kathryn could not control him forever if he could not exert some

control over his wolfish impulses. But had that really been an animal impulse? Or a human one?

Maybe she just cared too much. Maybe the wolf would be better left to Llewellyn to manage. Maybe she *wasn't* helping the wolf. Maybe all Kathryn did was remind him what he did not have. Maybe she should just —

"The wolf did not mean it." Aliénor squeezed Kathryn's hand. "Men lose their way sometimes in trying to do the honorable thing. But they come back to themselves in the end. And back to us." She patted Kathryn's cheek and left her to find her own way to the women's chambers.

Kathryn really hated the idea of the queen giving her one of her own gowns to wear, but she was just too weary to refuse the mercy at this moment. She would, however, as soon as she recovered some strength, see the dress properly laundered and returned to the queen.

That would be the first thing she saw to before she left the castle.

Chapter Eleven

Llewellyn was found, looking fagged to death, short about half his brain, and very much the worse for wear after his encounter with the Lord Interminable. He was also very much the worse for the furious dressing down the king gave him after the play of the saint. Llewellyn, duly chastened, took Garwaf into his charge again and kept him subtly to the side at dinner, which did not help the curious stares of the court, though the maneuver did give them a new direction.

Garwaf saw Kathryn emerge just in time for dinner, clean and in the queen's lovely dark green dress. She did not sit with Llewellyn, nor the king, nor the wolf, nor even her father, though that worthy did try throughout the meal to catch her eye. Kathryn remained stubbornly oblivious to the advances of all her usual associates and said not a word to anyone during the meal. Eventually, she removed to an isolated

corner of the room and hid herself half in the shadows so she could not be easily seen. She hardly attended to her food throughout the meal.

She looked pale and sad, and her eyes were red rimmed and deep shadowed. Garwaf hung his head and did not touch the food placed before him either. *Even if I had ripped Reynard's throat out, it would not have been worth this. Nothing is worth this.*

"You, my lad, are in rather a bit of a mess," Llewellyn said out of the side of his mouth. "Throwing you and Kathryn together the way we did was unfair." Llewellyn sighed. "But how the king and I were supposed to know the effect the girl's charms would have on you is beyond me. Gabriel had such terrible taste in woman, how could we know you would see the worthiness of Lady Kathryn?" Llewellyn plucked up a thick roll from his plate and proceeded to gently break it into pieces, stuffing small bits into his mouth as he spoke. "I must admit *I* never saw the appeal of Alisoun de Canille, but then I suppose since I'm sworn to celibacy . . . I wouldn't." He rubbed the side of his nose thoughtfully, then shrugged. "This way will be better for Kathryn." He fell silent for a moment. Garwaf looked up at him, and Llewellyn continued. "Far better she have a clean break now with the wolf — before the man has a chance to snub her."

Garwaf growled at the magician. *If you are implying my intentions toward Kathryn were ever anything other than honorable. That I ever entertained thoughts of — well Reynard won't be the only one with a scratched face, and he won't be the worst off either if you do not shut your mouth.*

The conjurer seemed to sense at least some of Garwaf's less than charitable thoughts toward himself, and a twinkle crept into his eyes. "Of course," Llewellyn said, at his most reasonable, "if *I* were still married to Lady Alisoun, I wouldn't help anyone to turn me back to a human in a hurry either. Especially since, as a man, Gabriel does still have rights to his wife if he should return."

The wolf jerked and knocked over Llewellyn's goblet. The wise man, unperturbed, righted the mug, poured himself more wine, and began drawing small runes in the spilled liquid.

I am not married to Alisoun any longer. I cannot be I . . . but Oh – God's teeth. I am still married to that harpy. The wolf huffed. And everyone believes Reynard acted on his own. No one else knows what a lying, two-face spawn of the devil she is, and if I let myself stay like this . . . no one ever will.

Llewellyn watched the wolf's thoughts flitting across his dark blue eyes. When the beast came out of his reverie and looked at the magician, eyes pleading, Llewellyn grinned. "No one will mark our absence tonight. Let us retire to my workshop. I have certain relics left over from my days as a mystic. Perhaps some of them will enable you to tell me what I need to know."

The wolf swiftly hopped down from his chair, leading Llewellyn out to the garden.

* * * * *

Reynard had rallied his allies around him at table and gathered the scraps of his dignity to his person. Yet everyone still whispered that he had injured the wolf in some way. Thankfully, no one had yet come close to the truth. Although that blasted pet wizard of the king's kept an infuriating eye on him all through dinner.

Reynard shifted in his seat, thinking not for the first time how bloody grateful he would be to escape back to his own manor. And if all went well with the plan he had set into motion, by the next convocation of lords, the damned beast would not be here. Or even alive.

He had seated at his left hand the flighty daughter of some baron. Avice her name was. She flirted with him, and when he found she was one of the queen's ladies, good friends with the wolf's companion, he turned his considerable charm on for her full force and pumped her for information. He might have pumped far more into her after the meal, but, unfortunately, duty called, and he had plots to carry out. Piecing

together what Avice let fall with things Beatrice had ranted about in her letters, de Troumper began to see an opportunity.

Lady Avice excused herself graciously from the table, casting an inviting look over her shoulder at Reynard. Reynard left his seat almost at once, but with much regret he did not follow Avice. Instead, he wandered from table to table before he "discovered" an empty seat next to Kathryn in the shadowy corner where she had secluded herself.

She did not perceive Reynard until he said, "Lady Kathryn, is it not? We met last time I was at court." He slid into the empty seat and eagerly leaned toward her. "And now you are the caretaker of the king's prized wolf?"

Kathryn looked up in surprise, then recoiled.

Reynard laid a restraining hand on hers when she made to get up. "Ah, now, let me remind you how improper it would be for you to make a scene here." He flashed her a grin. "My lady."

She frowned at him but sat back on the bench.

Reynard released her fingers and smiled into the pale green eyes, which only glared daggers back at him. "An intelligent woman." He sneered. "What a rare find in these times. So, you are the wolf's . . . ?"

"Friend," she said, denying any impropriety with the bluntness of her tone and the direct regard of her gaze.

"Ah, yes, of course." Reynard selected a large piece of pheasant from the platters. He proceeded to rend the leg, and just as much of the meat ended up in his mouth as did in his beard and clothing. "You know," he said around the meat before swallowing, "the beast is naught but a simple wolf."

Kathryn turned and smiled innocently back at him. "Did I ever say otherwise, my lord?"

Reynard grinned at her, and she looked away from him in obvious revulsion. Unperturbed, he continued. "But if the wolf were other than he seemed, say, a certain knight." He paused and picked some dirt out from one of his fingernails with his dinner

knife before he spoke again. "If he were that knight, say, who has been missing these two years from our king's court, well, then it is only natural he should try to kill me."

With relish, Kathryn feigned surprise. "But, why, good sir, unless you betrayed him in some way?" She tilted her eyebrow up with just the right combination of cool haughtiness and defiant challenge to deter a thousand forward knights. The queen would have done well to match her hauteur.

"You poor, dear girl." He caressed her wrist. "He still loves her, of course."

Rising to his bait and hating herself for her weakness, Kathryn said, "Her?"

"Why, the Lady Alisoun, of course. I married the sweet lady when her husband so callously abandoned her." Reynard smiled. "A most remarkable woman, I can tell you. Sweet. Humble. Lovely beyond man's dreaming. The knight would have to get me out of the way, of course, if he was to have any hope of reclaiming his former bride." Reynard smirked as Kathryn's hand clenched on the table. She stopped the movement at once and kept her hand perfectly still.

Reynard reached out and traced his fingertips over her hand. He looked around, then leaned into her. "If Gabriel ever returned, he would not have a moment to spare for the destitute daughter of a shabby genteel baron."

She felt Reynard inhale against her hair, and his voice turned husky, a sharp rasp as his lips brushed against the shell of her ear. She fought her instinctive flinch.

"I, on the other hand, would be able to find many uses for you." He lifted a section of her hair between his fingers and rubbed the lock between thumb and forefinger. "Many uses indeed." He titled in to wrap his arms about her, bending toward her mouth.

He was stopped short, however, by the small but still quite sharp dinner knife Kathryn clutched in her free hand. She placed it against his inner thigh, very high up. Reynard stopped as if turned to stone. *Ah, the magic powers of having a knife threatening one's manhood.*

Kathryn fought to keep her voice steady and her hand firm on the knife's handle. "No doubt you received most of your intelligence about me from the charming Lady Beatrice. She has, I am sure, informed you my family brought me up like a heathen. So, in case you wondered, yes, I will use this knife to gut you if I so choose." Kathryn shifted the knife infinitesimally, and Reynard flinched. She pursed her lips and narrowed her eyes. "Now, you are probably wondering if you would be able to get the knife away from me, but I remind you the time to test my prowess with a blade is not when it – and I – are a hairbreadth away from removing your hope of having an heir."

"You little bi – "

"Nor is this a time to be forgetting your manners, my lord," Kathryn reminded him sharply with a quick prod of the blade. "Now" At this she stood and, still brandishing the small blade, backed away from him. "I think I have been more than tolerant in allowing you to say your piece this evening, let alone to paw at me as you have done. So, in deference to the becoming patience I have displayed" She moved out of reach of his long arms, scooting around the edge of the table. If he made a grab for her now, the action would attract considerable attention. She tucked the blade up her sleeve. "You will stay away from me, and more importantly, you will stay away from the wolf." Her heart racing with fear, she whirled sharply around and rushed from the dining room.

Reynard watched the swish of her skirts as she left and smiled to himself. Well, she had not been as biddable as he would have liked. A fine filly, and it would have been very satisfying to mount her, but all in all he had not done a bad bit of work for the evening. He examined the food platter and, having selected a prime cut of meat, sank his teeth into the flesh with enjoyment.

* * * * *

Kathryn sat by the window in her room. None of the other girls were back from the feasting yet. She sighed and watched the grooms at their work in the stables without really seeing them.

She supposed she had finally figured out what about the wolf's repeated attempts to harm Reynard so upset to her. The wolf had allies now – the king himself knew his true identity at last – and with so many people acting as his aides, plans would be set in motion before long to restore the wolf to his true form. They only needed Garwaf to cooperate with them – as he had not yet been willing to do.

Maybe he only waited until he had dispatched Reynard. Maybe that was why the wolf wouldn't let Llewellyn examine him – because he needed Reynard gone and the path to his beautiful wife clear.

Reynard had probably cursed the duke to steal his wife. So the wolf would soon be human again, and all that stood between him and the old life he had lost was Reynard. If Reynard died, then the duke would be free to return to his wife without messy entanglements and scandal.

Garwaf had tried to kill Reynard this morning for love of the wife who had unwittingly married her husband's betrayer. Garwaf had attacked Reynard to save his wife and to set the stage for himself to win her back when he was human again.

With thoughts like these swirling through her head, Kathryn marveled she did not start sobbing into her lap.

She didn't know what she had hoped for. She didn't even know what she had thought would happen when the wolf was human again.

She *was* certain she had all too conveniently forgotten the duke's wife.

That was the most troubling thing of all. What *had* Kathryn hoped for? She had not thought when the Duke de Dorré was himself again, restored to his proper station and honors, he would marry *her*.

Or had she? *No*. And yet . . . *No, not the Duke de Dorré*. Kathryn laughed ruefully. *The honorable Duke de Dorré is not who I have cared for, nursed, and . . . liked very much.*

She never had been able to connect the image of the king's noble nephew with the wolf and his soulful eyes. Garwaf was not the Duke de Dorré to her. She did not know that man. Kathryn knew only Garwaf.

Garwaf – with his flashing eyes, impish moods, and quiet dignity – was the one Kathryn wanted. *Not* the great duke.

Strange as the idea sounded even to her, Kathryn *had* always thought of the wolf as a person. She saw in him the trapped mind of a man, capable of deep thought and complex emotion. She had just never been able to take the extra step and connect the rational creature trapped as a wolf with the name of the Duke de Dorré, which rightfully belonged to him.

Garwaf was her friend and companion. Her dear heart.

Gabriel was a stranger.

If they did manage to break whatever spell held him as a wolf, though, then Gabriel, and *not* her Garwaf, would be here.

And the beautiful Lady Alisoun was who he would go to. Not drab little Kathryn.

Kathryn might as well leave with her father. Garwaf only needed her while he remained a wolf, and the way events were falling out, he would not be a wolf for long. To be here when he was not a wolf would be much, much too painful. Kathryn did not relish the thought of witnessing the happy reunion with his charming and lovely wife.

Well, if he wanted his wife, then she wished him all the best, but she should get on with her own life, her own troubles. She wished him all the best, but she just didn't have a part in this drama anymore. As events had turned out, she never really had a part anyway. But really, she did She, well – she wished him all the best.

One stray tear breached her defenses and fought its watery way down her cheek. Just so the others didn't get any ideas, she viciously dashed the droplet away with the back of her hand. "Silly girl."

As soon as her eyes had dried sufficiently, Kathryn rose from the window's bench and went to find her father.

The sooner she left the castle, the better.

Chapter Twelve

Garwaf waited patiently in Llewellyn's workshop while the wise man left to get the final ingredient for whatever arcane ritual he planned. The magician had not been explicit when communicating the meat of the ritual to Garwaf, but he did not care. Whatever the magician did, whatever information he wanted, Garwaf would surrender.

Enough is enough. Time to return to being a man. Most of the time. I will always be a werewolf, but that is only three days out of every month. Kathryn will not mind three days. Kathryn will – Oh, hurry up, Llewellyn.

When all Llewellyn returned with was a large, black glass bowl full of water, Garwaf cocked his head in surprise. Llewellyn set the bowl on a small tripod made of laurel boughs, then poured just a single drop of black ink into the water.

Llewellyn waited a moment for the water to still, then stepped back, beckoning to Garwaf. "Look into the bowl for me, if you will."

Tense, Garwaf crept up to the bowl and peered into the water's still, black depths. Shapes began to swirl until a face formed on the surface.

Garwaf yipped in shock and fell backwards off the bench. His ears flattened to his skull, and he gazed in wonder at the magician.

Llewellyn muttered a few words and passed his hand over the bowl. He filled his lungs, then closed his eyes as he let the air out in a slow sigh. When he opened his eyes again, he stared down at the face in the bowl.

The visage belonged to a swarthy young man in his late twenties. His thick hair had the dark, luxurious finish of a raven's wing. A growth of black stubble shadowed his well-chiseled cheekbones and strong, square jaw. His features were generally reminiscent of the king's leonine countenance, except broader and stronger. His long aquiline nose had a crooked bridge from at least one bad break. A puckered white scar

cut through his dark eyebrow and scooted just to the side of his left eye before going all the way down to the top of his cheekbone.

The man's eyes were truly beautiful. Deep-set and almond shaped, with dark-lashes and irises of cobalt-blue. The top of the young man's broad, well-muscled shoulders showed and Llewellyn could just make out signs of small, half-healed bite marks there. The man also wore a gold rose pendant around his neck on a delicate chain.

Llewellyn had not seen this face in a very long time, but, nevertheless, he recognized the man on the instant. He touched the wolf's shoulder. "I am sorry to have startled you, my lord." He bowed his head for a moment, then grinned at the wolf. "But that's one mystery solved for certain, at least." He slapped his thigh in satisfaction and stood. "Now on to the next." Llewellyn shuffled back to the tripod and picked the bowl up. With great care he set the container in front of the wolf's paws. Llewellyn went back to his worktable and selected a small, wickedly sharp knife. He bowed his head again in respect before the wolf. "My lord, this next form of scrying requires a bit more. I could use spittle, but that doesn't work as well. I am as likely to see what you had for dinner in the bowl as I am anything of significance. Have I your leave, my lord?" He brandished the knife.

Garwaf lifted his paw readily enough and his muscles tensed as if he braced himself. Llewellyn held the wolf's limb over his scrying bowl. "Think of all you wish for me to know." Then, with precision, Llewellyn made a small slash on the wolf's forearm and let three drops of blood plop lazily into the bowl of water.

Llewellyn released the paw gently and swirled the contents of the bowl with his knife's blade. He quickly set the bowl back on the wooden tripod and let the surface of the water still. After a moment, he leaned forward to watch the play of events flit in crystal clear images across the surface of the water.

He saw the duke at once, and the Lady Alisoun swam into a focus a moment later. They were talking heatedly to each other in their bedroom. The lady appeared very upset, hanging on to her lord's arm, her face pinched and white.

The bowl could do many things. Producing sound was, unfortunately, not one of them. Llewellyn, being intuitive and quick-witted, fortunately did not labor overly much on interpreting the images he saw when he scryed. At first, the knight seemed reluctant, apprehensive even. He kept shaking his head and turning away from her. She grabbed his arm and pulled him back, tears streaming from her eyes. At last he gave in, seeing her anguish, and pulled her into his strong arms. In a whispered conference, he conveyed to her whatever secret she had been trying to pull from him.

Llewellyn watched the Lady Alisoun closely, and saw the look of horror and revulsion cross her countenance. He also saw, barely a moment later, the look of cunning as it fell like an executioner's axe across her face. She schooled her admittedly divine features into a look of love and concern as her lord turned again to look at her.

Garwaf had by this time climbed up to watch the play of events in the bowl. How well he remembered this conversation.

Alisoun addressed a question to him. Her tone had been so mild, full of such simple curiosity. "My Lord, do – do you undress for your transformation into a wolf, or . . . "

He had laughed. *Laughed*. The idiot.

Well, he had laughed, and he said, "Wife, I go stark naked," then wiggled his eyebrows and leaned in for a kiss.

She turned away and addressed another question to him. "My love, where are your clothes then while you are changed?"

He shook his head, retaining that much common sense at least. "I cannot tell you, nor anyone. If I am ever discovered, if my clothes are taken . . . I will be trapped as a wolf until they are returned to me." He'd tucked a strand of her flaxen hair behind her ear and smiled. "That is why I don't want to reveal their hiding place. Can you understand?"

Tears trembled on the edges of her eyelashes, and her lips turned up into an adorable pout which had always done him in. "I have given you all of myself. I love you

more than all the world. I am your *wife*. You must not keep secrets from me. Do you fear your wife?"

Yes. Dammit. And rightly so.

"Quiet, please, so I may think," Llewellyn murmured.

Garwaf realized he had growled as the water mirror turned to that bit of the scene. Duly chastened, he held his peace and looked back at the shining surface that was water and yet more besides.

Ah yes, another bout of pleading and begging and raging and storming. Alisoun had certainly known how to throw her tantrums. *Quite impressive ones, really.*

"You do not trust me." She threw a jar of perfume, smashing the glass vial into a thousand bits. "You hide your deepest self from me all the while, and then when you finally *do* tell me, I find there are still more lies to unravel, more secrets you keep. You claim to love me, but this does not seem like love to me." Her lower lip trembled, and a small catch formed in her voice. "What dire sin have I committed to make you mistrust me so?"

His guilt got the better of his common sense, for in those days he had believed himself to love her. Before he'd learned the truth of things, of course. *Before Kathryn.*

"Dear heart." He sighed and sat on the edge of the bed. Alisoun sat next to him and watched him with eager, hungry eyes, drinking in his every word. "Near the woods where I abide as a wolf, there is an old chapel that has often done me good service. Beneath one of the bushes of this same holy place is a hollow rock. I hide my clothes there until I am ready to return home."

He told the truth to his wife and opened his soul to her, exposing the deepest shadow that hung over his heart. Fool that he was, he had told her everything.

Garwaf could take the memories no longer and looked away again.

But Llewellyn kept watching. That was the point of this whole exercise, after all.

The interview apparently over, Gabriel reached for Alisoun, but she waved him off and, having assuaged him with a tender kiss, crossed to a small table filled with

papers. She sat at once and scribbled a hasty note on a small sheaf of parchment. Gabriel, meanwhile, sighed heavily and went to fetch a servant to clean up the mess of glass she had created in her pique. On his way out, he glanced down at the letter she was just applying a wax wafer and the seal of her husband's house to. As the scene began to dim, Llewellyn squinted fiercely and just managed to make out the name written on the letter: Reynard de Troumper.

"Ah," was all Llewellyn said as the water flowed in the bowl into a different scene. They were outside now, and the sky's blaze of daylight was swiftly fading into the dying embers of dusk. Gabriel stood in the forefront of the scene, in the middle of his castle's inner bailey, checking the cinches on his great black charger's saddle.

Llewellyn looked at the wolf. "What was that horse's name again? Bible name, wasn't it?"

Garwaf, for his part, gave him rather a dry, droll look in return. The wise man quirked up an eyebrow and grinned. "Goliath." He shook his head and turned back to the bowl. "Good horse."

Gabriel checked the gear strapped to the grand brute Goliath. The knight paused before mounting and cast about for something, his dark eyes probing every corner of his keep; then he glanced upward. The Lady Alisoun rushed headlong down the castle steps to her lord. She threw herself into his arms and kissed him with abandon, but while Gabriel had his eyes firmly closed—all the better to enjoy the sweet attentions of his beloved wife—Lady Alisoun had her brown eyes open—all the better to watch the werewolf whose kisses she suffered through one last time to allay suspicion. She pulled away, and Gabriel mounted up and rode off. He turned back at the castle gate to wave, but Alisoun had already hurried inside the main building of the castle.

Gabriel seemed disheartened, his broad shoulders wilting, and for a moment, his brows drawing together, he looked worried. He shook his head, though, and a strained smile crossed his face as he rode off into the gathering gloom of the night.

Llewellyn sighed. "Bloody idiot."

Garwaf growled back and rolled his gaze heavenward, sighing, as if to say, *I know.*

A cozy little hermitage and chapel just off the main road appeared in the bowl. Gabriel tied his horse there and went in to leave an oblation at the church. He prayed on his knees before the tiny altar of the church, and when he rose, he walked straight out of the building and down the road a ways. He stepped behind a bush to strip off all of his fine clothes and every piece of jewelry he wore, right down to the golden signet ring of his house. He made a small bundle and wrapped them around with sacking, then turned over a hollow rock and snugly tucked the package inside the stone before tipping it back down. This accomplished, he looked heavenward. Night had fallen, and clouds screened the sky.

The moon rose.

Llewellyn had never seen a werewolf transformation. He had been trying to do some research on the subject, but whenever anyone tried to secretly observe a werewolf, they inevitably ended up observing from the werewolf's innards.

Scholarship on the subject remained somewhat limited.

Llewellyn wouldn't say he was disappointed on witnessing the event—just surprised at the subtlety of the transformation. Moonbeams fell across the land. Gabriel watched them with apparent equanimity and waited silently behind his bush. As the moonbeams fell across his body the parts they touched just . . . turned wolfish. Where the light strayed across his leg, dark fur was suddenly revealed to the light, or was made by the light or . . . something. Llewellyn couldn't tell which.

Gradually the moonbeams had lovingly caressed every inch of Gabriel's body with the sensuous silver light. Where the fine and noble figure of Gabriel had stood, there now stood the same black wolf that even now sat placidly at Llewellyn's feet.

The wolf, his transformation completed, threw his head back with delight and howled his freedom. He bounded off happily into the night to create whatever mischief wolves do when left to their own devices. The bowl did not show Llewellyn these

nightly revels. He was sure they would be fascinating, but they were hardly the meat of the matter at the moment.

"Customarily three nights, yes?" Llewellyn turned to the wolf, who nodded solemnly. "But sometimes you didn't bother turning back during the day. Such a bother, after all."

The wolf looked a trifle abashed, and he shifted his paws in seeming unease. Llewellyn clucked and smiled. "Ah, my boy, I understand. Being a wolf has certain enjoyments when it's only three days out of every month. But two years of nothing but being an animal? The experience wears thin, I'm sure." Llewellyn gazed earnestly at the wolf. "You did not this last time, correct? Check your clothes, I mean. That's why you didn't notice they had gone missing until the time to change back for good?"

Garwaf nodded. Excitement bubbled up in Llewellyn, making his hands twitchy for something to *do*.

Garwaf blinked, and the pictures in the water spun again.

The wolf returned now in the predawn light of what Llewellyn inferred to be the final day of his transformation. The wolf sniffed at the rock, turning it over with a paw.

Empty. Just a hollow rock.

The wolf sniffed the area. Again and again. Round and round in circles. Down the road, up, back into the woods. All over. Dawn came and went, and still the wolf continued his fruitless search.

Llewellyn cast him a look of sympathy. "Even then?"

Yes, even then. The wolf sighed. *I didn't believe it.*

The next scene would be when he went home to look, ashamed to let Alisoun see what he had become, yet he needed her help if he was ever to be a man again. He went home, and he had found Reynard there before him.

Next came the scene in the garden where Alisoun had said — where she and Reynard had first —

Well, Garwaf had seen the moment enough in his mind's eye. He did not need to watch Alisoun's betrayal again outside his own head. He went away from the table and waited for the last scene of his silent testimony to play out.

When the magic had finished, Llewellyn sighed and leaned back, rubbing his eyes wearily. "Very illuminating." He smiled and patted his shoulder as he had when Garwaf had been a lad. Llewellyn gave him a lopsided grin, then set about making a small bed for him on the floor, since the castle was far too cramped with visiting nobles to accommodate either of them tonight. "And now, some much needed rest."

Garwaf was suddenly reminded of hunting with his uncle and the wise man in his youth, before his marriage. Grinning inwardly, Garwaf stretched out next to his friend.

Llewellyn had crossed his arms under his head and stared up at his ceiling. "And now I have seen what you had to tell me, I have an idea what is best to be done. You and I need to speak to the king tomorrow morning. See if he fancies a bit of hunting."

Garwaf yawned and placed his chin on his paws to sleep as best he might with all the worries and woes pressing in about him. He studied the sleeping wise man, hope stirring in his wolfish heart that, despite his fears, something could be done to save him. There had to be a way to unravel the interminable tangle that he and the lady he loved now found themselves caught up in.

Chapter Thirteen

The next morning brought the convocation of the king's lords and the ceremony where the king's liegemen would renew their oaths of fealty.

By general accord between the king and the wolf, with a solemn promise on Garwaf's part, they agreed he would attend the meeting, closely chaperoned by Llewellyn at all times

The king had observed firsthand some of his liegemen in their carousing of the night before. In deference to the fact that – after all that merrymaking – some of them would have heads fit for cracking, the meeting was never called before noon.

The event took place in the great hall. Only men were allowed inside.

The king spent the morning settling land disputes, hearing the grievances of one lord against another, and taking tallies of what taxes and how many fighting men could be called up from his noblemen should the need arise.

The slog through the morning's work finished rather more quickly than usual with Garwaf sitting by the king's side. The hearings and adjudications being over, the time had come for the oath to the king. As one, every man in the hall knelt to speak the oath, which renewed his fealty to the king for another year of honorable and righteous service.

Garwaf swallowed as he looked about him at all the bowed heads. He looked to the king. His king. His lord. The man who, for as long as he could remember, had acted as a father to him. Garwaf's heart stirred, swelled sweetly inside him, a fierce desire kindling inside him to swear again all the oaths of knighthood.

He bowed over his forepaws. His chin touched the cobbles of the court, and he closed his eyes.

The men of the king's retinue all knew the customary words of the oath well, and as one man, they spoke.

For Garwaf, the promises of fealty and righteousness etched themselves into his heart, the words acting as an incantation, drawing their shining light from his worthless hide to lift him higher than his stifling, corporeal form. In his heart, the words of the oath sang out in all sincerity and love for his king.

"I will to my lord, the high king, be ever true and loyal. I swear by my oath I shall love all which my king loves. I shall shun all which he shuns, according to the laws of God, the order of this world, and the laws of our land. I swear by no word or deed of mine shall I ever do anything to displease or anger my lord. I will be without fear,

upright and good as he dictates, and always I shall defend his realm and his person with my very life. This I swear on my honor as a knight and servant of this land."

To which the king replied, per tradition, "In return for this service you render unto me, I swear to hold to you all as you deserve and perform every act I have promised to by that agreement which binds you to my will and my service." The king raised a hand in acknowledgment of his vassals, then lowered it, officially ending the convocation until next year.

Garwaf almost trembled from the fervor with which he had expressed his vows. He had not yet moved nor risen from his bowed position on the floor.

Two years. Two years and now I am back again. He was not sure how he kept breathing after such joy. Almost nothing would be able to tarnish this moment for him.

Almost nothing.

Lord Stephen muscled his way through the crowd to the king's high seat. The baron fell respectfully and with some difficulty to one knee and bowed his gray head. The king motioned, so the Baron de Réméré stood once more with a little huffing and puffing.

Kathryn's father. Garwaf rose at once and padded softly to the king's chair. He settled his limbs on the floor, gave a jaw-popping yawn, then pillowed his long snout on his paws. He attempted then, very overtly, to give every evidence that, despite his display of moving fealty a bare moment before, he really *was* little more than a dumb lapdog.

Lord Stephen eyed Garwaf with misgiving, but the king waved encouragement that the baron speak. The Baron de Réméré, looking rather put upon, drew himself up and began an obviously pre-prepared speech. "My lord." He bowed again, sighing all the while. "My daughter, Kathryn, came to me last night. She is unhappy – "

"Kathryn? Unhappy?" the king said.

Garwaf fought but could not keep himself from pricking his ears up.

"I have seen no indication of her discontent," the king said. "At least not lately. For the past month, at least, I would stake my life she was happy as can be." The king tipped his head to the side.

Visibly flustered, the baron floundered on. "Well, you see, I think, um, something happened yesterday to alarm her." He leaned into the king and said in a confiding whisper, "I believe she and the queen had a bit of a spat over a gown she borrowed that, um, well, the wolf, he ruined the dress and —"

The king waved that away. "Easily mended. I am sure your daughter apologized, and I will certainly be happy to buy my wife a new gown to replace the ruined one. Is that all that makes Kathryn dissatisfied with her situation here?" The king frowned.

The baron ran a hand through his hair and wiped some sweat away. "She . . . she had other reasons, I believe, ones she did not want me to convey to Your Majesty." He darted a meaningful look at Garwaf, who peered at the man through his lashes.

Garwaf sighed, and his insides stung with guilt. *This is about yesterday.*

Lord Stephen flicked a look at him, then hurriedly glanced away, his hands clenching and unclenching with unease. "Long has Kathryn contemplated a spiritual life, sire, and she begs me to take her with me today so I can escort her to the convent at Bourlonge."

Garwaf's eyes sprung open, and he stared hard at the baron, his heart suddenly racing. *Kathryn's leaving?*

Still glancing anxiously in Garwaf's direction, Lord Stephen smoothed his hands down the front of his doublet, leaving damp stains from his sweating palms behind. "She will have, by now, conveyed her deepest regrets to your estimable lady, and so it is only left to me to express to you her sentiments. She will always remember her time at your court with fondness, and regrets she could not linger here longer." The baron let his breath out in an obviously relieved sigh.

Garwaf leapt to his feet, staring at the man in unconcealed horror.

"And now I must convey my sincere compliments to your lordship and take my leave so we can make an early start. The road to Bourlonge is a long one."

Garwaf nearly staggered down the steps. *She is leaving now? But I have not seen her since the feast. She has not even said goodbye to me. I behaved badly yesterday, but surely my actions do not warrant this.* What could have changed her feelings so quickly? As he glanced around in dazed horror, he found himself staring into the smug face of Reynard where he stood just behind the flustered baron's shoulder.

Without thinking, without pausing to draw breath, Garwaf pounced and landed on Reynard's chest, bringing the large knight crashing hard to the cobbles of the court.

The effect on the assemblage of lords was instantaneous. Some knights leapt to Reynard's defense; others drew their weapons to protect the wolf. Lord Stephen only scrambled to get out of the way. Llewellyn shoved through bodies and fought his way to the standoff in the center of the hall. Garwaf perched on a defenseless Reynard, snarling into the terrified knight's face, sharp fangs bared in menace.

You did this. You drove her from me.

Llewellyn pressed his way through the throng of onlookers. Salvation of the situation lay in the fact the wolf had only knocked Reynard down—he had not yet injured the knight.

The king moved to intervene, but the crowd was too thick, jostling and dense. There was no time to waste. Time now for Llewellyn to try his hand at taming the wolf.

Llewellyn just hoped he didn't lose his appendage in the process. He did so very much like his hand.

Reynard had gone white as a sheet and had not so much as batted an eyelid while he lay pinned beneath the wolf. Reynard had hurt the back of his head, and it now oozed blood, his eyes slightly glazed. The knight was enough in possession of his senses, though, not to give the homicidal wolf sitting on top of him any reason to strike.

That would not last forever.

Llewellyn crept up to the wolf on his hands and knees. "Gabriel," he whispered, "whatever this man has done, however he has driven a wedge between you and Kathryn, this will not help. You are *not* a wolf. Use your mind. Come back to yourself.

Gabriel." He leaned down to force the wolf to look into his eyes, and to move between the wolf and Reynard. Garwaf would have to hurt Llewellyn to get at Reynard.

"*Remember*, my lord. Do not forget the oath you have but lately spoken. You are more than what you have become. Prove it now and let this pig offal go."

The wolf looked down. Humanity flickered in his eyes, and Gabriel stared back at Llewellyn from the wolf's face.

But suddenly Garwaf's face contorted in a fierce snarl, and the wolf lunged.

Reynard flinched and cried out.

The wolf let the man shriek himself hoarse for exactly one heartbeat, then pulled back from his feint. Garwaf then wagged his tail, climbed off the prone knight, and sat back in obviously smug satisfaction. The hall erupted into relieved laughter at once. At Reynard's expense. Llewellyn pressed a palm over his mouth, but could not contain his relieved laughter.

Reynard bolted upright, rubbing the bump on his head and nursing his wounded pride.

Llewellyn sat on the floor, hands draped on his knees, laughing too hard to get up. He fought valiantly around his mirth, then finally managed to stumble to his feet between chuckles. "Would you . . . heh . . . like me to look . . . hmmhmmm . . . heh . . . at your . . . hehuh . . . Hnug." He snorted. "Head, my . . . heh heh heh . . . lord?"

Reynard glared at Llewellyn, drew his fancy cloak tightly about himself, sneered at the wolf, then stomped from the hall.

Garwaf yipped happily, scanning the crowd for the king. After a moment, though, he realized Reynard's was not the only scent absent from the hall. Lord Stephen's smell of fresh-turned earth and beef stew had gone as well.

Kathryn. Garwaf charged from the hall at once, pounding through the doors and onto the cobbles of the court just in time to see Reynard galloping off into the distance—a few horse lengths behind Kathryn and her father.

Llewellyn, not one to shirk his duty, had followed Garwaf from the hall, and he and the king stood side by side, panting for breath as one man. "My lord, Reynard may harm the Lady Kathryn if left to his own devices on the road with her." He clutched his chest and rasped for more breath. "Her father is not as young as he was."

The king nodded. "Nor as heavily armed as Reynard."

Kathryn and that hideous beast?

No. She may not want me with her anymore – and small blame to her after how I have behaved these past few days. But I care too much to risk her all alone on the road with that slimy filth. Without pausing, he bounded out of the court to follow the dust trail of the horses that had but lately left the king's castle.

Chapter Fourteen

Kathryn had made sure she was ready to depart, and taken her leave of the queen quite early. Lately, the queen had been ill, and all the other ladies were too squeamish to wait on her. A small amount of guilt tickled at Kathryn to be leaving Aliénor now, but she hoped the queen's sickness would pass before too long.

Kathryn's father had brought only one horse, and when she explained to the queen that she and her father would probably take turns in walking and riding to the convent, Aliénor offered up her own mare. When Kathryn protested, the queen clucked her tongue. "Not for you to keep, you tiresome creature. Just to borrow so you don't have to ruin those new boots of yours. Besides, if you have my pretty girl with you, I shall have a good excuse to visit you sooner than later." The queen smiled, but with sadness in her eyes, then hugged Kathryn and kissed her cheek.

The queen escorted Kathryn to the courtyard, then ordered her own dainty horse, Gaenor, saddled and loaded with Kathryn's meager luggage. "Shall I wait for your father with you?"

Kathryn chuckled and shook her head. "So seldom do you get the chance to display your queenliness to the fullest extent. How can I rob you of one moment more

of that privilege?" And then, more gently, Kathryn said, "Go back to the garden and your ladies, my queen. I will be fine."

The queen reluctantly left.

Kathryn would miss the queen and the court and the ladies and the knights and the king and Llewellyn . . . and the wolf. She would miss it all, but still she discovered within herself that she had made the best possible decision. She would only be in the way when the duke returned. If she was near, there would be awkward and painful scenes to play out. By leaving, she acted now in the best interests of everyone.

I am being a coward.

"Oh, quiet you," she snapped at herself.

Fortunately for Kathryn's inner solidarity, her father came rushing out just as the sun rounded the horizon toward late afternoon. Winded and flushed, her father's face blazed as red as a tomato. Lord Stephen wiped sweat from his broad brow, then grasped her by the arm to drag her to their horses. "Well, come on, fool girl. Best to go while the going is good."

Baffled rather than bolstered forward, Kathryn dug her heels in and would have asked questions but for the look of sheer terror her father turned on her the next moment. Silence seeming the best course for the moment, she mounted the queen's mare and set off at a brisk gallop beside her father through the castle gates.

They rode for some time. Not until the sun began a headlong rush toward its bed and board for the night did Kathryn notice the sound of a third pair of hoofbeats behind them. When she turned back and recognized Reynard, a manic glint in his eye, she was immediately too scared to notice anything else.

Eventually, though, she perceived the small dot behind Reynard farther down the road. Too small to be another horse, yet her other pursuer ran on all fours. Her throat closed with fear. She prayed this second following shadow was not who she was almost certain it was.

Unsure precisely what he planned for the wench, Reynard wanted only to hurt the bastard who had humiliated him so completely in front of all the court. Kathryn was the best and most readily available means of doing this. Her father was a trifling matter not to waste one's time on. What defense could an overweight graybeard mount against Reynard, who was cunning and in the prime of his vigor?

Reynard drew a small dagger and kicked the flanks of his horse hard to get an extra burst of speed. They neared the forest, and dusk would be the perfect time. Once into that line of trees with the concealing cloak of night to abet him, who was to know what had happened to the poor girl? Or who had done such thoroughly appalling violence to her?

Oh yes, Reynard intended to be *very* thorough.

Kathryn Oh God – oh God who art in Heaven, please, please . . . do not let me be too late Don't let him so much as touch a hair on her head Please Oh please Oh God

Garwaf's lungs were on fire, and his legs ached as if four monsters stabbed every nerve ending in his limbs. He had never run so fast or so hard in his life. Not even the day the hunting dogs were after him, the day he'd met Kathryn. Then he'd been running for *his* life. Now he ran for hers, praying the whole time that his loping, wolfish gait would be fast enough to reach her in time.

Lord Stephen still galloped his horse hard for the forest as if the devil himself bit at his ankles. Kathryn was more reticent to enter that solid enclosing mass of green with Reynard so close at their heels and night riding along at his shoulder. Any number of accidents could logically befall one in there, and any number of excuses would be ready to Reynard's hand should they befall Kathryn in a hive of such reputed villainy. She reined in her horse and called out sharply to her father, "Please, Father, the day is too far advanced. Let us return to the castle and get a fresh start in the morning."

Her father halted just shy of the tree line. He wheeled his horse around violently. "No, girl, best to be away before that damned creature gets any ideas and comes after us."

He is running from the wolf? Oh dear. Had something else happened at the assembly to make her father fear the beast so?

"Father —" she started then broke off with a small gasp. Her father was so agitated he had turned his horse too sharply. The beast bucked and threw Stephen before running into the forest. "Father." She jumped down and ran to her stricken sire where he lay dazed in the dust.

Just as she began to really worry, Stephen came to himself.

"Filthy nag." His voice sounded thick, his words slurring.

"Now will you go back to the castle?"

Reynard dismounted. "Can I be of assistance?" He tried but could not conceal from Kathryn the satisfied smirk playing about his cruel lips.

Her father rose at once, then swayed, holding his head, which bled a little on the side from a blow with a rock. The baron collected himself, though, and made an obeisance to the higher-ranking noble. "If your lordship would lend his assistance, I should be most gratified." He tried to bow without falling over but just managed to stand with Kathryn's steadying hand on his arm.

"You are destined for the convent at Bourlonge?" Sir Reynard said, a speculative gleam in his eye.

"Aye." The baron blinked his bleary, unfocused eyes. Kathryn almost toppled from supporting his weight.

"Well, then our way lies together." Reynard smiled. "For I am on my way to collect my dear sister from the convent. Your horse has run off, sir?"

"Yes," her father slurred, becoming more muddled by the moment. He sagged again, nearly knocking Kathryn down too. "In there." He pointed to the forest, then blinked as if trying to get his eyes to focus.

"Well, we shall go in together and search, then. Before the sky gets much darker." Reynard clasped Kathryn by the arm, his grip like steel bands around her flesh, and jerked her away from her father. Lord Stephen fell over in a faint almost at once without Kathryn's supporting shoulder.

Reynard sneered at her fallen father and yanked Kathryn toward the forest. "You, my little peach, will now be taught to mind *your* manners."

She struggled, and he pulled her to him impatiently, bending her arm behind her back. She swallowed a cry of pain and tried to kick him, but her skirts blunted her blows.

Reynard's smile was predatory as he looked down at her, a thin sneer pulling back over his bright teeth. "You will come to wish you had not refused my kindly attentions before. I shall have to make sure your wolf gets a good look at my handiwork when I have finished. That way he will never forget what I will do to you."

Summoning her courage, Kathryn spat in Reynard's face. "Garwaf may be a wolf, but you are the animal." Her other hand still free, she swung her fist back full force, clipping him across the jaw.

Reynard cursed and rubbed his jaw. Then, his face contorting with contemptuous anger, he hauled his arm up and backhanded her. This was no laughing matter, as he wore a heavy leather gauntlet and had a fist like an anvil.

Kathryn's head snapped back, and she sagged in his grip, though she remained conscious. Barely. She swayed but still tried to break free, tugging and shifting her weight away from him.

He easily pulled her forward. Hauling her close, he slapped her again, then once more for good measure.

The pain of the first blow fused into the second as her face erupted with stinging heat, her cheek throbbing. A cut bled on her cheek now, and her lip had split open against her teeth so that she tasted thick, coppery blood.

Her head grew fuzzy; she should be struggling, but her arms did not obey the signals of her addled brain. She was limp-limbed and half-unconscious as Reynard

drew her to him, grunting in pleasure. He pushed her roughly to the ground. She weakly wriggled beneath him while he pinned her legs with one of his. Reynard punched her across the jaw, and her head lolled back. The dirt of the ground felt coarse and cool beneath her cheek, and her nostrils filled with the scent of Reynard's sweating body as he loomed.

Grinning in savage satisfaction, Reynard bent toward her.

The wolf leapt forward and sank his teeth in. He dragged Reynard to the ground and proceeded to maul the fiend, striking, yanking, thrashing to get him off Kathryn.

She came to and managed to wobble to her feet for precisely one moment. Her eyes closed, and she tumbled bonelessly to the ground and lay there as still as death.

No. Garwaf whined. *Please, no*

He was about to go to her, but Reynard tackled him from the side and punched him about the head and ribs. Reynard hefted a large branch, but at his first attempt to bludgeon Garwaf, the branch hit with rib-cracking accuracy only for the rotten tree limb to disintegrate in a shower of sodden wood chips.

"*Merde.*" Reynard groaned, and then Garwaf landed on him, all flashing teeth and sharp claws savaging Reynard in the failing light.

Reynard shoved him off and scrambled away. Garwaf moved to stand between him and Kathryn, hackles raised, teeth bared.

"Nice doggy," Reynard crooned.

Garwaf snarled at him and moved forward a step.

Reynard backed off, stumbling to his horse.

Garwaf kept a wary eye on him for a moment, then darted a glance to Kathryn. She was still not moving.

No, was the only coherent thought spinning through Garwaf's mind. He crouched in the dirt beside his lady and keened softly, butting her bruised cheek with his snout.

She did not move.

Shaking with grief, he collapsed into the dirt beside her body, his cold nose pressing against her wrist, his lupine head on her arm. He closed his eyes. *Let Reynard come. Let me die then if she will not move.*

Kathryn stirred. "Your nose is cold." Her voice was thick and slurred, but she spoke. *She lived.*

Garwaf leapt to his feet and nudged her with a paw. *Up, ma belle. Up. We're not back to the castle yet. Up.*

Kathryn shakily propped herself up and gazed at him in the dark, her eyes vague, dazed. She rubbed her head with her other hand, then winced as she brushed her bruise. "*Reynard,*" she said and turned at once.

Garwaf had much keener eyesight than she did, especially so near nightfall. He clearly saw the crossbow Reynard leveled at him. He growled defiance at the knight, preparing to spring. Garwaf might get an arrow bolt through his gut, but Reynard would end up with a broken neck. Garwaf's probable death would be worth it to hear *that* satisfying crack.

But Kathryn moved before the wolf. Half-conscious and mildly concussed, she still knew him better than he could lay claim to knowing himself. And damned if she'd saved him from the king's hunt just for him to get shot by Reynard the Lecher, a stone's throw away from sanctuary.

What she did was not graceful or particularly well executed. The maneuver was not so much heroic as it was an awkward, frantic sideways topple.

But it did the trick.

And it saved the wolf.

And it got Kathryn an arrow through the shoulder for her trouble.

Reynard's eyes grew wide, and he had no doubt the wolf would have ripped his throat out there and then but for the king's pet magician. Llewellyn muttered a few words and sketched a hasty symbol in the air, which left a faint sign of luminescence

where his hand had passed. Some unseen force propelled the wolf backwards so he landed in the dust twenty feet from Reynard, winded and obviously furious. The king had by then arranged himself between the wolf and Reynard. Llewellyn had gone to Kathryn.

Reynard threw his prized crossbow to the ground. His face grew warm, and his eyes were open so wide in horror they threatened to fall from his head. "I didn't—she just fell right . . . into it," he choked out and swallowed. Then he leveled an accusing finger at the wolf. "*The beast did this*," he bellowed. "Damned wolf was going to attack me again, and I only defended myself. I didn't mean to" He trailed off quietly.

Reynard had injured women before, certainly, and he killed men as a matter of course. Generally speaking, he was rather a poor specimen of humanity. He had never actually *killed* a woman before, though. He found he hated the feeling actually. Much as he had disliked the wench Kathryn, he had not wanted her *dead*. Just . . . maimed, maybe.

"Llewellyn," the king yelled and jerked his chin toward the wolf, who growled and paced on the edge of his invisible barrier.

"The spell will hold," the magician said, without looking up from Kathryn's injuries.

Sure enough, the wolf lunged forward only to be repelled backward again by some force. He skidded through the dust a few feet from whatever imperceptible barrier Llewellyn had erected to keep him from Reynard.

"Then go, Reynard," the king said, lip curling. "Go home and let me not hear a word from you. About any of this."

Almost smiling in relief, Reynard ran to his mount and flung himself into the saddle. Riding fast, he beat his horse to within an inch of its life to get him home as swiftly as possible. He needed to get to his wife and make a complete report to her. She possessed all the intellectual cunning in their relationship and would know how to mend things with the king.

"I had to let him go," the king said quietly to no one in particular. "It would be his word against a wolf's, and unfortunately some people would believe Reynard."

Once Reynard was gone from sight, the king knelt next to Llewellyn. The wise man looked up for a bare moment from the hasty field dressing he had applied to Kathryn's shoulder, lines of care and fatigue etched deeper into his face than the king had ever seen them. The conjurer waved his hand once, muttering a soft syllable in Latin.

The wolf, magical barrier removed, ran forward at once toward Kathryn.

"Well?" the king gulped out. The wolf, his quarry obviously forgotten in the face of Kathryn's distress, nestled under the king's arm, seeking comfort like a child.

"She lives," Llewellyn all but sobbed out in relief. "We need to get her to Bourlonge, though. The convent is nearer than the castle, and we may be able to save ourselves scandal if Marie will help us."

"The abbess will do all she can," the king said, still stroking the head of the stricken wolf.

Llewellyn pushed himself up with a hand on one knee, staggering only slightly before he gained his footing.

"What can I do?" the king rasped out, gazing in horror at Kathryn. She looked like a broken doll where she lay in the dirt of the road.

"My lord, press firmly on either side of the arrow," Llewellyn said, running to fetch their horses. "We must keep the edges of this wound together as best we may until I can get the damned arrow out."

A groan from Kathryn's father made them all jump.

The baron sat up and held his aching head. He shrieked when he saw the wolf; then he saw his daughter, and the look on his face made them all want to weep. "Wh-what happened?"

"Bandits," the king prevaricated smoothly. The wolf shot him a sharp, betrayed look, but the king shook his head and, smoothing the wolf's fur, said, "My boy, be

patient. Do you think Reynard will not pay? He will. Just you wait." The king nodded grimly. "And oh, how he will pay."

Apparently satisfied, the wolf looked back to Kathryn, then to Llewellyn.

"We must get her back to the convent – it's closer," Llewellyn repeated. "I have to," he rasped in a frayed breath, "get the arrow out, and the procedure would be too dangerous to do here. I have no bandages, no gauze, no herbs, nothing to clean the wound. I'll have to cauterize the opening as well –"

The king silenced him with a sharp gesture, his hand slicing through the air. "All right, Llewellyn, I will carry her before me on my horse." He lifted Kathryn in his arms, trying to be careful of the arrow and the hasty padding of bits of clothing and such that Llewellyn had scrounged to bandage over the open wound without pressing on it. The king mounted his great warhorse, kicking the beast forward at once without waiting to see if the others followed.

* * * * *

Their party rode quickly, thinking haste more important than jarring the arrow. The longer Kathryn was left to bleed, the less chance she would ever awaken. Llewellyn eventually took the wolf up before him on his horse, and the confused baron nursed his aching head and brought up the rear on Kathryn's borrowed mare, his own horse lost irredeemably in the forest for now. The king's horse first reached the sturdy wooden gates surrounding the convent. The king tugged furiously at the little bell of the wicket gate, and very quickly the portress, looking bleary-eyed and ruffled, came to open the portal for them.

"Are you and your lady benighted, my good lord, or –" and then she saw Kathryn. "Oh –"

The king brushed past the portress. Knowing the convent well, he barked orders to the sister as he hurried across the court to the closest cell, there to deposit his sad burden. "Summon your abbess at once, and anyone with herb lore or leechcraft."

The elderly nun hesitated, and the king whirled on her, becoming all at once a blood-soaked barbarian barking in her face. "Go, idiot woman, or this girl's blood will be on your head." For yelling at a holy sister, he would do penance later — *if* Kathryn lived.

By this time, Llewellyn and the wolf were within the enclave, and de Réméré was riding in as the convent's healer, and her abbess ran forward.

"Marie." The king intercepted the dignified abbess, taking her by the hands while her healer went forward to assist Llewellyn.

"Brother?" the abbess said, wiping sleep from her eyes. "What's happened?"

Marie was the king's half sister, a by-blow of their father's, but one the king had loved his whole life long as though she were his full-blooded relation. She had a lovely face, narrow and leonine like his, with the long, sharp nose of their father, which showed so strongly through the line. Her eyes were large and the same gray-blue as his. Her hair shone a dark, rich brown, though she had hacked it off on becoming a nun, and now her lovely locks were forever hidden from sight under her wimple.

Unable to ever make a good marriage because of her illegitimacy, Marie had accepted the church as her vocation and made a fine job of the pursuit too. She was prioress at Bourlonge, and a more respected and renowned abbess could not be found in all the land.

Hurriedly and very quietly, the king gave his sister an abbreviated version of events without omitting even Reynard's part in the ignominy.

Marie nodded. "All will be attended to. But first we must ensure the girl is seen to and safely on the mend."

The king clasped her hand. "Yes."

* * * * *

The baron, once he arrived at the convent, demanded to stay by his daughter's side.

In the sickroom with Llewellyn and the convent's healer, Lord Stephen was startled and scandalized when the wise man placed a hand on Kathryn's forehead and uttered heathen incantations under his breath. Then, though, a glowing aura formed around the magician's palm before sinking into Kathryn's body. For a moment, Kathryn seemed illumed from within by healing light. That passed quickly, but afterwards she seemed less pale, her breath less labored.

Lord Stephen did not hold with magic, but he would not protest anything that might give his daughter back to him.

The attendant nun pursed her lips but likewise said nothing.

The baron, though usually rather squeamish in all things having to do with healing and the gore entailed therein, nonetheless volunteered to be the one to assist Llewellyn in removing the arrow. The arrow had, thankfully, passed all the way through the shoulder already, and so only needed to be carefully broken off and pulled out. Lord Stephen almost forgot himself when Llewellyn cauterized the wound, but recovered his wits in time to leave the room before being asked to help stuff the wound with moss and apply the dressings.

Outside the sickroom door, the wolf paced back and forth. Their party had taken over one of the front rooms of the convent, as Llewellyn had no wish to waste a moment and let Kathryn bleed any longer than was necessary. The holy man had kicked out the nuns who had been sleeping in the room before taking up occupation.

The king sat quietly by a fire in one of the convent's receiving rooms, waiting for news. Lord Stephen joined him, and shortly thereafter, the wolf came to him, bowing his head respectfully as if in an act of contrition.

Lord Stephen looked down at the wolf and frowned for a long moment. A feeling of wonder stole through him as he gradually realized what he was witnessing. Lord Stephen hesitated for a brief moment; then, at the king's encouraging nod, the baron placed his hand on the wolf's head. "I am sure this misfortune was not your fault, my boy."

The wolf bowed his head, then left the king and the baron. He curled up to the side of the sickroom door.

Lord Stephen eyed the beast for a long moment, then looked to the king. "He . . . *loves* her. Doesn't he?"

The king looked at the wolf with a strange light of affection in his eyes. "Yes, he's truly learned the nature of real love now with your girl. I hope" The king trailed off and looked away, pursing his lips as his eyes shone with moisture.

Lord Stephen swallowed and let the subject drop, sensing his liege's grief and to overcome with his own in that moment to speak.

* * * * *

Hours later, Llewellyn emerged, the convent healer only a beat behind him to close the door of the sickroom.

Garwaf jumped up on Llewellyn at once and placed his paws on the sage's shoulders, staring Llewellyn solemnly in the eye as he delivered his news.

Llewellyn sighed, a frail smile trembling on his lips. "She's alive, and I think she'll survive. But this coming night will make the difference. If she takes a turn—" Llewellyn's voice broke and he shook his head and looked away.

Garwaf eased himself off Llewellyn's shoulders at once and started into the sickroom before remembering himself and looking back to Llewellyn sheepishly for permission.

"As if I could stop you." Llewellyn scoffed. "Go on."

Garwaf went into the sickroom.

Kathryn was very pale. *Too pale*. A light sheen of sweat beaded her brow. Black and blue all over, her face was puffy, bulging with bruises. One eye was swollen shut entirely. A florid bruise spread across her cheekbone around a small nick there. Where her split lip had scabbed over, Llewellyn had wiped the blood away. From the small hint about her nostrils, her nose had bled as well.

A hard knot of hatred formed in the pit of Garwaf's gut. *I'll get him for what he did to you, Kathryn. Whether you want me to or not. I will hurt him for this.*

Tucked tight with many blankets, Kathryn had been propped up against the bed's headboard with her feet elevated. Thick layers of dressings had been applied to her shoulder.

Her caretakers had let him see her before they had even taken the time to clean up all the bloody cloths or pick up the discarded arrow. The stench of Reynard was all over the arrow's shaft, and a heady reek of Kathryn's blood that made Garwaf dizzy. He kicked the arrow away under the bed so he would not have to look at its bloody point and think. Instead, he went to Kathryn.

Llewellyn had said she would probably be fine. Llewellyn was hardly ever wrong, and he would never lie. She was still unconscious, which was probably a good thing to judge by her bruised face, the large bandage, and all the blood-soaked rags about. Kathryn would be in a lot of pain when she did wake up.

If she wakes up

Don't even think that.

He nuzzled her limp hand on the sheets.

I am so sorry. He closed his eyes. If he had human eyes, real human eyes, he would weep. But he was not human, so he keened softly and whimpered into her palm.

If I could have explained things to you, I would have. I wish I could explain everything to you. I wish I could have told you once in more than just actions. In words. In exact and precise words what you mean to me, Kathryn. I want to be able to tell you all that is in this twisted, damaged heart of mine. I want to be able to tell you I love you. Out loud. Out loud and as often as I can form my lips around the words.

I was lost. More than halfway to being a wild animal all the rest of my days. I had forgotten what being human felt like.

Ah, my beauty. Ma belle. I need you to live. Even if you never speak to me or look at me again. I need you to live. I need you to be in the world. Having you in the world alone makes it an easier place to survive.

*So breathe in, breathe out. Mend and heal. Do what you have to, but stay in this world.
Just stay, Kathryn. Stay.*

He jumped in surprise as her hand stirred. Her fingers moved closer to him, and he leaned toward her. Her delicate hand shook as she cupped his dark muzzle in a tender caress. Hope flared within him as he gazed into her face. Her good eye opened a crack, and she smiled at him, careful of her lip. He gingerly leapt onto the bed so as not to jar her shoulder, then settled his chin in her lap.

Kathryn smiled again dreamily, and the fingers of her good hand moved to stroke his head. "Ah, Garwaf." Her voice was the barest whisper of breath, hoarse with pain. "Events like this should tell you the time to be a man again has come." Her hand stilled suddenly on his fur.

He looked up in alarm and fear only to be reassured that no, now she slept true sleep and not the unconscious stupor of injury. This was healing sleep and would do her good.

He stared at Kathryn a long while, frowning over the darkening bruises on her. The marks would leave no lasting scars, but for the moment, her face remained hideously marred by Reynard's handiwork.

Garwaf found he no longer craved to rip Reynard's throat out with his teeth. The thought of the man's blood in his mouth revolted every part of him. He wanted none of that poisonous stuff anywhere near his innards.

No, the werewolf craved instead, suddenly, a contest of arms. To challenge the vile beast Reynard to trial by combat, then hack him into little tiny bits with a sword, a dagger, whatever weapons he had to hand, but to make a thorough job of his revenge, regardless.

To challenge Reynard, though, he needed to be a knight. To be a knight, he would need his clothes back. To get those, he would need help.

Kathryn stirred, and he stilled. All in good time. He could wait a while longer. He needed to be with Kathryn now. *When* she lived through the night, well, then would be the time to seek restitution and, maybe . . . redemption.

Chapter Fifteen

Kathryn lived through the night.

In the morning, when Llewellyn came to check on her, Garwaf lay curled at her feet. He perked his head up, then hopped down so Llewellyn could examine her.

The magician gulped a profound sigh of relief, and Garwaf wagged his tail. He was at last persuaded to leave the sickbed and get some food into his weary body. A young novice came to sit with the invalid in their absence.

Garwaf broke his fast with Llewellyn in the little receiving room where a cheerful fire crackled. Lord Stephen was persuaded to rest in a guest room now he knew his daughter would live. The king and the abbess entered shortly thereafter, and all four of them sat to council. The abbess gazed at Garwaf, and when he looked at her to grin wolfishly, she bent to stroke his ears before allowing him to return to his meal.

"We will keep her here until she is well enough to travel," Marie said at once.

"Agreed," the king said. "And you will help us to keep this from blossoming into a scandal. Even if we put about the bandits story, people will believe Kathryn's virtue compromised, especially if Kathryn is seen like this. If even a whisper reaches the court of her condition, her reputation will be forever tainted, and she will not be welcome in the outside world."

"We will keep her here while she mends and, if that is her wish, we will send her back into the world again when she is whole and no blemish remains of the . . . incident to cause suspicion. She was coming here anyway. If her father keeps silent about the whole affair —"

"Which I'm sure I can persuade him to do," the king said.

"Then we need not worry," the abbess said. "She is supposed to be here. She *is* here. If any come seeking her, I can say she wants solitude for reflection before beginning her novitiate."

"Ah, Marie." Llewellyn patted her hand. "How we've missed your level head at the castle these years."

Marie smiled back. "I'm sure you have managed."

"Now what do we do?" the king said.

Marie snorted. "My people are well able to care for her."

Garwaf yipped and glared at his aunt.

"I think what the king is trying to say is all of us are loath to leave Kathryn's side while she is like this," Llewellyn said with careful diplomacy.

"She is *fine*," Marie said. "People will comment if you all stay away longer. You will have a hard time explaining why you left so suddenly and stayed away for the night as it is."

The king waved that away. "The wolf ran off because he sensed his friend Kathryn leaving. Llewellyn and I went to reclaim the beast. Chased him all the way here to Bourlonge, and by the time we arrived, the hour was too late to leave. So, the kind abbe" — a graceful gesture to his sister — "graciously offered us bed and board for the night. Much as I hate to admit you are right, we cannot stay here any longer without causing comment and courting scandal."

Garwaf whined stubbornly, but eventually the king convinced him of the wisdom in leaving. The last thing he wanted was to harm Kathryn's reputation by some act of his own. So, after repeated assurances on Llewellyn's part that Kathryn would be fine, Garwaf agreed to leave.

Kathryn's father, on the other hand, refused to depart from the convent until Kathryn became well enough to *order* him away. Since they had secured his promise to stay quiet and let the king deal with the "bandits" who had injured his daughter, Stephen was given countenance to stay. The king and Llewellyn did not need Lord Stephen back at the castle to make their story plausible anyway.

* * * * *

Garwaf peeked inside Kathryn's room, his ears perked forward.

She beckoned him in and smiled when he bounded happily to her side. He gingerly jumped up on the bed and rested his head in her lap.

Kathryn affectionately tweaked his ears. She didn't remember much from the previous day as yet, but she still understood what she must do. Fragile in her heart and body, she had strength enough, bravery enough now, to start the discussion she had been dreading since the feast. Her haphazard flight had been an attempt to avoid this moment, but with Garwaf at her bedside now, she *had* to speak. "Garwaf."

He looked up at once and crept closer, slipping against her side so she did not have to speak too loudly. His scent filtered up to Kathryn, and she smiled. He always smelled strangely nice. Of leather and manly works, but also meadows and roses, sharp and strong, but tender and sweet as well.

She bestirred herself. She would never get to her point if she let her thoughts continue in this vein. "I do not want you to have any sense of obligation toward me." Kathryn scratched his ears, then touched the wound on his shoulder, which had started to scar over. She looked up and traced the line of the scar on his brow. "I think you have more than discharged any debt you might believe you owe me. Go with the king, return to your real life, and forget the wolf's bookish little friend."

Her words tumbled out now in a rush. Like tearing the dressing from a wound, she hoped to get her ordeal over with quickly. "You still love your wife and —" Her throat threatened to close up with the knot that was forming, but she *would* get this out. "And I will be well settled away from the court by the time you get back, so . . . so you needn't worry I shall interfere in a reunion with your lady love in any way." Kathryn gazed earnestly at him, shaking her head. "I swear I won't. I want you to be happy." She raised her hand but stopped before she touched him. "You want to be with Lady Alisoun, and I . . . I will not hinder your reunion."

The wolf fell off the bed and rolled over on his back, belly up, wheezing and huffing. It took Kathryn a long moment before she realized the erratic wheezing noises emitting from the wolf were, in fact, his own brand of laughter.

She was a bit put out, truth to tell. Here she had concocted this heartfelt, noble speech, and he just lay there, rolling on the floor, *wheezing* at her. She sniffed and snapped her head away, uncontrollable wetness flooding from her eyes to slide in damp, clammy tracks down her cheeks.

She let loose a sob, and Garwaf jumped back onto the bed at once.

"If you want to return to your wife — " Kathryn frowned, stopping short at the disgusted look on his face. "*Do* you want to return to your wife?"

A belligerent and violent head shake. *No*.

"But Reynard said — " Realizing how stupid the rest of the sentence forming in her head really was, Kathryn cursed her own folly fluently in two tongues. Reynard, scoundrel that he was, had still seen through her and plucked just the right chords inside her soul to send her dancing to his tune.

Thank the Lord, no serious harm had been done.

Being of a very pragmatic nature, Kathryn had conveniently forgotten the arrow in her shoulder.

"Well. Then . . . that's good," she murmured at last, even as her heart clenched with hope, hard enough to make her chest ache. She gazed into Garwaf's eyes and saw the human heart shining out of them. He gazed back adoringly.

Kathryn, the more practical of the two, was the first to shake out of her reverie. "Well, you great ass, the sooner you make off with the king and Llewellyn, the sooner we can be about the business of life." She made an impatient shooing motion, "Out, you great silly beast. Get thee gone. Then the sooner you can hie hence again."

The wolf started to go, then whirled back, jumped up, and licked her face before galloping out of the sickroom in search of his king.

Kathryn laughed and wiped her wet cheek.

A shadow fell over her heart. The soulful eyes gazing out of a wolf's countenance were one thing, but she found herself wondering what she would do if she ever saw those same eyes shining out of a human face.

The prospect tantalized and terrified, all at once.

Chapter Sixteen

Alisoun had always been cunning and careful.

Naught but a poor chatelaine's youngest daughter once, through guile, good looks, and rather a bit of luck, she had managed to snag one of the best catches in the kingdom. Gabriel, the king's nephew and heir, the Duke de Dorré had chosen *her*.

Then, when her first husband, after nearly a year of marriage, had been revealed to have rather an inconvenient problem, she managed affairs to dispose of him accordingly, then replaced him with a much more malleable tool. One willing to use the power she secured for him.

Closeted away in her chambers, she reclined on her bed while her lady's maid read a romance verse aloud to her. Hooves clattered on the cobbles of the court below. Someone was arriving at Dorré.

The maid dropped her book with a resounding thud, her soft slippers shushing across the floor toward the window. "Lord Reynard has returned." The serving girl stammered as she said his name.

Alisoun laughed to herself. If Reynard had not already bedded her maidservant, then his failure wasn't for lack of trying. Alisoun had never met a hornier old goat than Reynard de Troumper in all her life.

"I suppose my husband will come to pay his respects as soon as he may," Alisoun replied, motioning for the maid to resume her reading.

Alisoun no longer attended to the ballad, though. Rumors had reached her of the king's new pet, an uncanny black wolf, unnaturally large and well trained for a beast so lately plucked from the wild.

Alisoun was curious indeed to hear Reynard's impressions of this wolf.

Not that the wolf's sudden appearance meant anything. Pure coincidence merely.

It had to be.

When Reynard arrived at her chambers with unaccustomed promptness, the first prickling of foreboding beset the clever Lady Alisoun. When her husband peremptorily dismissed her maid from the room, he gained Alisoun's full attention.

"I bought you some scented gloves, my love." Reynard sneered the endearment, mocking her as he tossed the parcel onto her bed to hit her legs. Alisoun made no move to pick up her present.

"How was the feast?" she asked him.

Reynard scratched at his beard, a sharp rasp of skin on stubble in the quiet of her chambers. "Alisoun, we have a problem." He then proceeded to pour out to her all the disastrous occurrences of the past week, up to the preceding night's happenings with the injured girl.

When Reynard had finished, Alisoun smoothed her skirts, hissed in a deep breath, and proceeded with her icy tone to chill his blood. These days, when Alisoun became infuriated, as she very much was at that moment, her teeth gritted, and her voice became absolutely scathing. The experience was rather like having acid poured down his spine.

"The wolf attacked you, and you let it live? You bloody *fool*. What better excuse did you need for the dispatching of a beast? And if the wolf is *him*, all the better. That loose end has long haunted me. It would be a comfort to know he has been dealt with."

Reynard snorted. "Quite the loving wife, aren't you, my darling?"

Alisoun snatched at the package he had given her and threw the parcel at his head. She missed, and Reynard curled his fists in, trying to control his own temper. He had old scars from Alisoun's other fits of pique. She had a habit of throwing breakables and smashing furniture when someone flouted her will.

In no mood to deal with one of her tantrums now, Reynard held his tongue. He might kill her in defending himself, and he needed the maneuverability of her mind to see him through this crisis.

Once the wolf was gone, though, things might change.

Alisoun reflected on what a shame it was that Beatrice had been away from court for the feast. A singularly stupid girl, Reynard's sister yet had her uses in keeping her brother from costly blunders.

Ah well, the damage is done. Now, how to repair matters?

"I will unravel this knot you have tied," Alisoun snapped. "Never fear, dear heart. Now leave."

Reynard left with haste, boot heels ringing and slamming her door on his way out.

Alisoun reflected with bitter amusement that her husband was not overly fond of her society these days.

Well, the feeling was mutual.

* * * * *

The king arrived in his castle in time to sit down with his knights for the noonday meal and catch them up with a fictionalized account of the past night's adventures. Garwaf came in for some lighthearted scolding and passed the deception off well enough.

The queen, being that Kathryn was her dear friend, would be put in possession of the true facts. The king did not relish the task but went at once after his meal to break the news to his lady. The king made plans to meet Llewellyn in his workshop as soon as may be to discuss their next steps.

Garwaf, listless and unequal to enduring the rowdy knights, went to the alcove of roses. He sat there for some time, turning things over in his mind. As he sat there, surrounded by the scent of roses, awash in memories of his happy days with Kathryn, he reached a decision. Sliding off the rose bench, he ran off in search of the king.

Garwaf found the king closeted in Llewellyn's workshop, a plan of a siege tower spread out between them. He gazed at the plans with mild interest before puffing out an unimpressed snort.

The king laughed. "Yes, we found them highly impractical as well." He patted the wolf's shoulder and proceeded to roll up the plans. He turned away, and Garwaf looked at Llewellyn.

The sage frowned and touched the king's shoulder. The king followed Llewellyn's arrested gaze and they both looked to Garwaf.

He scratched with his paw in the dirt just outside Llewellyn's hut. Gabriel had learned his letters as a boy, and though not a great reader, he had been able to con a letter or two if the need presented itself. No one had yet, however, seen him display any such talents in wolf form. Indeed, he labored hard at his task, blinking, his tongue lolling out. At last, his effort completed, he stepped back from his great work so the other two could read his message.

HELP ME was all Garwaf had spelled out, but the two words had the desired effect.

The king and Llewellyn traded looks and nodded. The king stepped forward, kneeling to bring himself eye to eye with Garwaf. "I thought we both might enjoy a little game hunting," the king said at last, grinning. "Near Dorré."

* * * * *

The king set out from his castle the next morning with the wolf, Llewellyn, and a significant number of men-at-arms by his side. He said he fancied a spot of hunting after all the trials of the feast. If some of his courtiers wondered what he was about going with so many soldiers, well, as king he could be excused his odd little indulgences.

* * * * *

Word of the king's movements came to Lady Alisoun a bare week after her husband's return from court. These tidings were as unwelcome as they were surprising. Alisoun's estimable wits had been thrown into a complete disorder. She was flustered. *She*, the triumphant Duchess de Dorré and Countess de Troumper, was *panicking*.

She could not think of a suitable strategy. Her cool intellect had deserted her, and her steady calmness had abandoned her as well.

Finally she realized there was nothing for her to do but go to Sûr where the king quartered himself, and meet the king's wolf for herself. To so expose herself was a terrible gamble, but she didn't trust Reynard to go alone. He would undoubtedly bungle everything. *Again*.

Her maid laid out all Alisoun's very best finery. She had to be flawless tomorrow to allay any and all suspicions. She had to look perfect. The ideal of womanhood.

Perhaps she did not take such a very great risk. She would only go for a short while, just to take the measure of this wolf everyone spoke of.

Perhaps, that being done, she might settle on an appropriate course of action.

And then she would be able to calm some of the dread that consumed her every moment.

* * * * *

Robert de Sûr was a simple creature, a good landlord, and a kind man. On the king's arrival to stay as his guest, Robert cast doubtful looks at the wolf, but the creature traveled with the king and, as such, under Lord Robert's fundamental code of conduct, the beast was to be welcomed as a guest and treated with all courtesy.

When the beast demonstrated he could be quite the prettiest behaved vassal in the lot, Robert was impressed and gave the wolf the good bedchamber adjoined to the king's.

When Garwaf glanced in concern to the slighted Llewellyn, the wise man only grinned. "Ah, lad, I don't mind being bumped down to lesser apartments." He laughed. "I'm used to it, after all. From the old days, remember? I always got the worst chambers when I traveled with you two."

Garwaf whined, unconvinced.

Llewellyn tweaked his ears, not hard enough to hurt, and still smiling broadly. "Believe me when I say that to see circumstance returning to the old status quo warms my shriveled old heart near to bursting. I so dearly missed being a second-class houseguest these past two years."

Garwaf snorted and let the subject drop, but returned to his own plush apartments free of guilt.

By the second morning of their stay with de Sûr, word had predictably spread throughout the surrounding areas that the king had come to call. All his vassals, who had by now returned from the feast, hastily made their reverences to their lord. Again.

The king sat at the opposite end of the great hall of Sûr on a raised dais in the finest chair the Baron de Sûr could offer him. Garwaf, like some mythical beast of old, sat at the king's side like a figure carved of black marble, noble and aloof, immovable and oblivious to the proceedings of lower mortals. Barons, chatelaines, and chevaliers all made homage to his king while Garwaf remained as removed from the proceedings as if the courtiers were ants scurrying for his scraps.

There was only one face he wished to see, only one person in all the throng massed about the hall that he wanted to step forward and make their obeisance.

His fur stood all on end as he smelled her. Never could he forget that spicy floral scent.

The smell was tinged now with some other scent, an odd pungency almost sickly in nature. The scent reminded him of the goats he used to hunt for meals around the forest somehow. He shook that thought off. She *was* here, and he would bide his time until she revealed herself. Then . . . Well, then matters rested in God's hands, for Garwaf could not guess what he would do when he saw Alisoun.

One lowly chevalier scooted to the side, and she was revealed.

The Lady Alisoun, Duchess de Dorré through her marriage to the duke, Gabriel. Countess de Troumper now she was Reynard's wife. A lithe, glowing vision, she stood before them, the early-morning radiance pouring in through the Baron de Sûr's leaded windows creating a coronet of sunlight on her head. Clad all in white, Alisoun wore a graceful gown of satin fixed with delicate seed pearls at the hems and the cuffs of her long sleeves. She wore elegant gloves to her elbow, embroidered with silver leaves and delicate buds of flowers over her hands.

The sight of a tight wimple modestly covering her golden hair startled Garwaf. Before she had displayed her hair with lamentable vanity whenever an opportunity had presented itself to do so.

Her second husband walked with her, and she delicately rested her hand on his strong wrist as they shuffled forward in the receiving line. She limped now. She had forever been riding like a madwoman across their lands, and Garwaf would not be surprised if, at last, Alisoun had suffered an injury for her recklessness. A long, plain white veil covered Alisoun's face. Her resemblance to an innocent maiden made rage boil over in his gut.

The sight of her was too much. Nothing could have strangled the wolf in him in that moment. There he was, humbled beyond all measure, imprisoned in a body not his own, tortured, conflicted, and in peril of his soul, and this betraying witch had the gall to play at being the devoted wife. All modesty, chastity, and humble duty to her lord.

How dare she?

No other coherent thoughts flitted through Garwaf's mind as he leapt at her. The wolf took over, and he pounced from his place by the king and knocked her to the ground. The wolf in him might have ripped her limb from limb, but Llewellyn leapt into the fray to drag him back. The sage whispered a few of his rusty magic spells to calm and hold Garwaf in his place.

Men closed in on the wolf from all around, though, and tore him from Llewellyn's protective embrace. Someone knocked Garwaf a resounding blow to the head, and he crumpled unconscious to the great hall's floor.

The nobles might have torn the beast apart right there and then. For what honest man would stand back and let a defenseless woman be savaged so, right in front of him, and not move to act?

Llewellyn staggered to his feet, throwing himself over the wolf. "Listen to me. My lords, you *will* listen to me." His voice rose up in the highest tones of command, echoing with supernatural force throughout the hall. His command froze them where they stood. "Many of you know this beast. There is not a one of you who has not watched him, marked his noble bearing and gentleness. Never before this has he shown violence to any human creature save this woman." He pointed to Alisoun, who had not moved one inch from where she lay on the floor. "And her husband." He leveled a finger at Reynard, who sheepishly stepped back from the wolf he'd been about to kick in the ribs.

Reynard immediately assumed a none-too-convincing air of outraged innocence.

Clenching his hands, Llewellyn raised them high, his voice tight with the fervor of his words. "By my troth, I swear our wolf has some cause to bear such a bitter grudge against Lady Alisoun *and* her husband, Reynard."

Reynard steadily edged his way out of the hall.

"You all knew the first Duke de Dorré, our dear Gabriel." Llewellyn placed his palm over his heart, dropping his gaze to look at the wolf. "Can any man among you tell me the truth of what became of him?"

The crowd eyed the unconscious wolf in wonder and confusion.

Llewellyn had hit his stride by then. He had the crowd in his thrall. "I say we question Lady Alisoun to see what she knows about this wolf. *And* her first husband's disappearance. Let us discover the truth of why the wolf hates her so. *Make* her tell what she knows of his curse."

At this time, Reynard made a rather pronounced bid for freedom, knocking people down as he ran for the doors. Very quickly, the crowd apprehended the knight, and some of the king's men-at-arms dragged him back.

The king went to Lady Alisoun. She still breathed, but she had not stirred on the ground. He touched her shoulder. "What have you to say, my lady?"

The duchess turned over, and a collective gasp of horror went round the crowd.

Her veil had fallen away, and blood poured from her nose, staining her gown in gore.

Worse, though, was the wreck of her face. Lesions and old, scaly sores covered her once lovely visage. Her nose had caved in on itself long ago and was all but gone, save for two ghastly slits where her nostrils had been. A chalky pallor hung over all her face, and puckered white lines from old sores, long healed, marred the once perfect creaminess of her skin.

Worse than all this, however, was the look of pure hatred in her bloodshot, unseeing eyes. "I say — *I hope the beast rots in hell.*"

Chapter Seventeen

The king detained Reynard in a sturdy cell in their host's underground stores with several of the king's best knights posted to his door.

The wolf rested in his bedchamber, and the Lady Alisoun had been removed to a private compartment in the servant's wing. Meanwhile Llewellyn and the king conferred.

The king grimaced. "Her face . . . Was it — ?" He shook himself and looked to Llewellyn. "What was it?"

Llewellyn sighed and chafed at his arms. "Without a closer inspection I can only guess, but I believe she is leprous, my lord. A well-advanced case. She is blind already, and her face — " He cleared his throat and scratched at the pale blond stubble on his chin. "I wouldn't say she was much longer for this world." Llewellyn shook his head in

disbelief. "The disease is not usually so quick moving. Leprosy should have taken *decades* to inflict such wreckage on her, but I would say she has only been infected these past few years. I saw her whole and well not more than two years ago, and I would swear on my life she was not leprous then."

"She only became leprous *after* she betrayed Gabriel?"

"It would seem so, my lord." Llewellyn spread his hands in a small, noncommittal gesture. "God's justice can manifest itself in strange ways."

"She was always such an ambitious little —" The king broke off, huffing out a breath. "Well, she always enjoyed the pleasures of court, so I had wondered why she suddenly ceased to attend. I supposed the cause was grief over Gabriel's disappearance. *Then.*"

"When I interviewed him below, Reynard said Alisoun instigated everything." Llewellyn scrubbed a hand through his hair, shaking his head. "He would never have discovered Gabriel's condition if Alisoun had not sought Reynard out to help her."

The king clenched his fists. "No wonder Gabriel attacked her as he did. I'm surprised he didn't kill her."

Llewellyn nodded. "The nobles gave Garwaf quite a crack on the head for his pains. He should have come round by now."

A look of concern crossed the king's face, but Llewellyn assuaged his fears. "Not to worry. He'll be fine. Best he's out of this now, anyway. The rest of the work is up to us. Come, let's go see the woman, sire."

* * * * *

Alisoun had been made comfortable in a small, spartan cell, and her satin dress had been changed for coarse blue robes scrounged from the rag pile. Without her cleverly concealing garments, her disease made itself plain. She was not recognizable now as the once beautiful woman who had captivated the court and held a dozen young men in the hollow of her hand.

Her hair had mostly fallen out. Where strands lingered the sight was all the more grotesque, for the hair was goldenly luxurious even while mingling with the old sores and bald patches now covering her head. Her right hand remained firm and supple, but the bones of her left had all but disappeared, forcing her appendage into a crooked claw composed of festering sores and rotting skin.

Not just her nose, but her upper lip had rotted away as well, revealing yellowing and broken teeth, and her lower lip drooped with unnatural heaviness.

Her eyes, once so bright and sharp, were now clouded and milky, bitter. She had gone blind from her disease and could no longer blink, as her lower lids were paralyzed. The sight unnerved the king, but Llewellyn had had truck with lepers in the Holy Land and was not put off. He had only pity for the poor woman now.

She turned her ravaged head toward the sound of their footfalls. "This is a judgment on me for what I did to the beast," she rasped out in a voice barely recognizable as the bright, clear tones both men remembered from her earlier, unblighted years. "I banished my first lord to inhuman exile, and God condemned me to live like this. To live and die a leper and an outcast, so I may know threefold what I have inflicted upon the filthy werewolf. But never, *never* will I help him back to his human form. If I must die accursed and contemptible, then I will not go alone into the fire." Her good hand clenched around her covers while her other arm lay limp and nerveless on the sheets.

The king and Llewellyn retired to a far corner of the room and held quiet conference. "Usually the mind remains whole and untouched until the end. One of leprosy's more bitter aspects is that the infected should remain in full possession of their faculties as they watch their flesh literally rot off their bodies. I think, though, the loss of her former beauty has touched her mind in an adverse way. She is a trifle unstable," Llewellyn said in carefully measured tones.

"Do you think, oh wise man?"

"Don't get testy," Llewellyn snapped back at the king. He rubbed his cheek with one thumb as he thought. "Torture will avail us nothing, my lord. Her nerves are so far gone, she would not feel a siege engine rolling over her body."

"Reynard, then?"

"That might be the best course, and also — " Llewellyn frowned, darting a cautious look at the king.

The king folded his arms. "And *what?*" he demanded, at his most majestic.

Llewellyn scratched his nose and gave a small shrug. "Might be a good idea to bring Garwaf round to talk to her as well."

Naught for nothing was he a king. One does not get to be ruler without considerable amounts of discretion and self-control, even if you *are* born to the position. It required all of that particular virtue the king possessed to keep quiet until he and Llewellyn had discreetly removed themselves back to the king's own quarters.

Once there, however, and safely behind closed doors, the king's voice boomed out across the Baron de Sûr's estate. "*Did you see what she looked like? She's a wreck. A horror. The sight of her face is going to haunt me for years. If you think I am going to subject him to that, then you are a bigger fool than I always thought you were. She was his wife. . . .*"

And on and on. Llewellyn bore the harangue with composure and said not a word in retort.

The king's tirade went on for some time and might have been enough to wake the dead. His yelling was certainly more than adequate to wake a sleeping werewolf.

Garwaf jumped up and turned the door handle with his paws. Groggily he trotted into the king's bedchamber adjacent to his own and encountered his liege lord still expending his eloquence on a resigned Llewellyn.

Garwaf sent Llewellyn a questioning look. Llewellyn winked, then waited for the king to draw breath for his next vocal barrage. The sage cleared his throat and indicated with his chin the king should spare a glance behind him.

The king glared at him, turned to look, met Garwaf's gaze, and deflated.

"Perhaps," Llewellyn said in a bone-dry voice. "You should ask Garwaf what *he* wants."

Garwaf looked to his uncle expectantly.

The king frowned. "My lad, do you remember what happened in the great hall just now? Did you see Alisoun?"

A shudder passed through Garwaf. He had seen.

"She refuses to tell us where your clothes are," Llewellyn put in.

"I want to bring the conspirators together, demonstrate to them the fruitlessness of holding out –"

"I don't believe that ploy will work," Llewellyn said. "I think you, my lord" – this next he directed toward Garwaf – "must earn your own humanity back from them."

The king glowered. Llewellyn groaned and threw his hands up. "But we will, of course, yield to your wishes, my king."

The king stalked to the window, his shoulders tense as he looked out.

Llewellyn came to Garwaf and clasped an arm around him. "But if that fails, what will you do, my lord?"

Garwaf looked away. *I will go to her. I think I need to. Somehow.*

As if reading his thoughts, Llewellyn creaked to his feet, crossed to the king. "Well, shall we?"

The king squared his broad shoulders, fisted his hands at his sides. "Fetch Reynard to his wife's chamber." A beat passed; the king sighed deeply. "Bring Garwaf as well." He held up an admonitory finger. "But I do not want him to see her like this if he does not absolutely have to."

"Only if there is no other way." Llewellyn nodded..

Garwaf growled. He understood what the king was doing, of course, and it infuriated him. *I am not a child, Uncle.* Garwaf also understood this was his task to do and no one else's.

How to convey this to the king and his wise man was a different matter.

Times like these truly made him miss his power of speech.

* * * * *

King, magician, and werewolf padded through the castle back to where they had left Alisoun in her solitary sickroom. The king had sent ahead, and Reynard, under heavy guard, awaited them. When they reached the door, the king tried to keep Garwaf out of the cell.

The wolf glanced up at him with defiance gleaming in his dark blue eyes, as if to say, *I have more of a right to confront these two than anyone.*

Sighing in resignation, the king opened the door to let Garwaf precede him into the sickroom — now makeshift interrogation chamber.

Reynard flinched and retreated upon beholding the wolf. Alisoun stirred restively beneath her covers, but she did not speak. She certainly knew the king and Llewellyn had returned, but had she also recognized the light padding footfall of the wolf?

Reynard thought not. He stood, silent and fuming, by his wife's sick bed, unable to keep the contempt and disgust from showing on his face when he looked at the ruin his lady had become. "The betrayal was all her idea," Reynard growled when they began to question him. "Long had I admired Lady Alisoun. Often did I offer her my . . . services. Always before she refused my attentions and sent me on my way. I was never more shocked in my life than when I received a letter from her bidding me to aid her should I be willing. She named a time and place. Faithfully did I keep the tryst with her. There she told me of the werewolf and how to trap him so she should be free of him."

The king cast a black look at the duchess. "If you desired your freedom, you could have come to me." He glared at her, though Reynard knew her sightless eyes could not see the expression.

"Gladly would I have parted you from my nephew." The king's voice held a note of disgust.

Reynard gave a coarse laugh. "And give over being the Duchess de Dorré? My king, we all know Alisoun better than that. And you were so mad when Gabriel disappeared, getting you to sign over all his lands to me was an easy task. I'm not sure you even realized how malleable you were. But Alisoun did."

The lady in question said nothing all the while. She remained immobile and blank-faced throughout, betraying her interest in the discussion only by the restless stirring of her good hand on the sheets.

Reynard continued his account of his part in events. His sudden burst of loquaciousness had actually come about after a few not-so-subtle hints from Llewellyn, regarding sharp objects and certain soft parts of Reynard's anatomy. After his colloquy with the king's magician, Reynard had wisely decided a full confession would be best. After all, persecuting a werewolf, even if in the daylight hours he was the king's nephew, would hardly be regarded as a crime by the general populace. Reynard had no desire to be tortured into divulging his part in the werewolf's betrayal when, on closer inspection, it seemed his willing confession could hurt him not a bit.

The king and his two pets here in the room could actually do very little to Reynard. He had fallen out of favor, he might lose his lands, and banishment was an option. There were, however, other lands, after all, and other kings more susceptible to manipulation and flattery.

"So," Reynard continued. "She told me where the werewolf went and by what road. I stole the clothes from the rock and, having faithfully discharged my errand, returned to her to receive my reward." He wiggled his eyebrows in a smug manner at the wolf. The beast curled back his lip to show sharp teeth but did not growl. Reynard ceased his gloat and continued his tale. "I gave the clothes to her grace and forgot them. I have not seen them since." Reynard shrugged.

"You have no idea what she did with them?" Llewellyn said.

Reynard relished every word as he said, "None whatsoever."

"Send him back to his cell." The king dismissed Reynard with a casual flick of his wrist.

The guards began to jostle him out of the room, but before Reynard left, he leaned down to glare into the wolf's face. "I got everything I wanted. Your lands, your title, *your wife*, and I left you worse than dead. Dishonored. Broken. An animal living in the woods. What a delicious day that was when your wife propositioned me." Reynard snorted, his face puckered in disgust. "But you've had your revenge full measure now, haven't you? I and not you have ended up cursed. Cursed with a leper to wife. Oh yes, what a grand deal clever Reynard made that day. You've already had your revenge, my lord, on the pair of us, and now you know it."

The wolf curled back his lip.

Reynard leaned in and said, so only the wolf could hear. "Even if I did have your clothes, I would not help you back to them."

The wolf snapped in his face. The guards were summoned and Reynard carried out between them, smiling smugly to himself all the while. *That beast will never find his clothes.*

Llewellyn, for the past few minutes, had closely watched Alisoun, and he observed a new animation seeping into the rotting husk of her body. *Ah, so she did not know her first husband was here. Not until this moment, when her second husband addressed himself to her first.*

Still she said nothing, though.

"Well?" the king snarled at the lady. "Ungrateful wretch that you are, you might still redeem yourself, gain a modicum of forgiveness in this world and the next, if you will tell us where those clothes are."

Alisoun moved for the first time in this interview, but only to laugh at the king. "You do not scare me, my king. What threat could you possibly hold over a leper?" Her voice rasped, faltering to form words difficult to shape with a disfigured face.

The king glowered.

Llewellyn laid a hand on his shoulder. "By your leave, my lord?"

The king, face tense, went to lean against the door.

Llewellyn knelt by the cripple on the bed and clasped her good hand in his. From the corner of his eye, he noticed the king recoil, but Llewellyn had no fear of contagion. "Lady Alisoun, when did you find out your husband was a werewolf?"

She frowned, stretching the lines of her face into even more grotesque lines. "He always left me at the end of every month with no explanation." Her enfeebled body stirred to new life under this blazing indignation. "I was his lady wife. I had a right to know where he went." Her maimed hand convulsively patted the sheets at her side while her still functioning appendage plucked at her gown. "If he was being unfaithful, I wanted the truth."

"Did you love Gabriel?" the magician asked.

The question seemed to surprise her; then, oddly, the gruesome lines of her face softened. She was not lovely, but she became less painful to look at in that moment. "I thought him everything a knight should be. Everything honorable and good. He was so kind, so gentle. And the way he looked at me. So proud. As if I was the greatest prize in the land, and he had won. I thought I had the best husband God could make."

Garwaf sighed. She *had* been a prize to him, an honor, an ornament, the final trophy with which to decorate his fine castle. The fact she had seen herself as such did not excuse his misconduct. He had regarded her as chattel and treated her accordingly. He had enjoyed admiring her, contemplating his great triumph in winning Alisoun for a bride. He had never actually talked to her, though. Not at their courtship, which, he remembered, had been all too brief.

I think the night she confronted me about my absences was the first time I saw she had thoughts and feelings of her own. And I wanted then, so much, to share all of myself with her. To let just one person in this world really know me.

My thirst for acceptance outweighed my discretion. I saw Alisoun only as my wife. I was naïve. I trusted without understanding her.

"I badgered him," Alisoun continued in a lower voice, sinking back into her bed now the first blaze of her anger had burned itself out. "I would let him have no peace, and finally he told me." The stricken lines of her face hardened. "He told me and turned my life into a *nightmare*. My husband was a monster, I was a fool, and all the consequence that I had worked so hard to achieve hung on a knife's point. If he should ever have been discovered, I would have lost everything. The shame was not to be thought of. Not to be endured. And the thought that I had let this creature touch me. That I had been longing to bear his brats." She shuddered. "He had to pay for so defiling me. For so *humiliating* me."

I should have told her from the first. Garwaf hung his head.

"So I cuckolded him with Reynard," she said, "and I stole his vile clothes so the world would forever be able to see what he *really* was."

"Lady, why did you not confront your lord with this when he told you his secret?" Llewellyn asked.

Alisoun scoffed. "Unfold my mind to an *animal*? Bad enough I had lain with the creature, been deceived for so long. To what purpose should I have continued the charade and indulged the beast in believing he was human?"

"*He is not a beast.*" The king's face blanched with fury, a vein on his temple throbbing. "Even in the form you have trapped him in, he retains a dignity and understanding you could never aspire to have or even conceive of comprehending. He has a compassionate soul, which your curse has done nothing to tarnish. It is *your* wickedness that is to be condemned. *Your* betrayal. *Your* lies. Mayhap he should have told you from the first of his affliction, but *you*" — his lips curled back in repugnance — "you judged and condemned him at once, and in that same moment when he had most trusted you. You, *my lady*, took a man's life away from him with never a thought of the blight you inflicted on his soul. With never a thought to spare for his humanity — humanity, which, I assure you, remains intact, no matter what his shape."

Alisoun looked sullen. "What can a werewolf know of humanity?"

The room fell into a silence positively thrumming with tension. The king spoke again. "What do *you* know of it, Alisoun?"

Llewellyn rubbed his forehead, his brows knotted in a frown.

"If I have done wrong . . . see how I am repaid." Alisoun lifted her maimed hand and turned the grotesque mask that her face had become to the king and Garwaf. A tremble passed through them both. Obviously sensing their revulsion, Alisoun laughed in triumph, a mad light in her dull eyes. "Almost at once my iniquity was rewarded with the contagion that reduced me to this. Within a week of stealing the clothes, I stabbed myself with a needle. The point went clean through my finger, and I didn't notice until the blood stained the cloth.

"By the end of the first year I had sores all over my body. I saw the flesh liquefy from my bones, my bones dissolve and fall like dead leaves." She twitched the covers aside to reveal a disfigured foot, bereft of all but the two largest toes. "My foot first, then my hand, my face, my hair — all putrefied. My eyes went last, so I was privileged to behold every deformity and relish the sight of my beauty laid to waste." A delighted rictus of a smile crossed her face. "I bedded Reynard for months after I first noticed my symptoms. He threw up for a whole day when he finally realized the truth."

Sick at heart, Garwaf trotted over to the king. He gazed into his lord's eyes and gave a small keening whine, willing the king to understand him.

The king sighed. "Llewellyn," he called softly. The wise man looked up. "Let us leave them alone for a moment."

Alisoun sat up. "What? You'll leave me to the wolf?"

"No wolf, madam," the king gritted out. "Only your husband."

And then the king and the wise man left.

Garwaf sat there for a full minute, willing himself to move, while Alisoun leaned back and stared fearfully around with her sightless eyes. Garwaf padded as slowly and as loudly forward as he could, so as not to startle her.

He watched her eyes the whole time, ignoring the ruin her face had become. Her eyes were sightless now, but some of the lovely brown tint remained. He focused on that, on the familiarity in her eyes.

His anger toward her had abated. He had lived a horrible life these past two years, cut off from family, friends, and all the world he had known. He had been cold, hungry, miserable, but he would recover. Mend.

Alisoun never would, which made him sorrier than he could say.

He leapt up onto the bed.

She recoiled, drawing back and lifting her hands to shield her face. "Don't. Don't."

He whined and crept toward her, at last resting his chin on her good hand.

She remained stiff and unyielding for a long moment, then her face softened. He rubbed his chin on her hand, wondering if she could even feel his fur. She hesitated, then blindly reached toward him. He tilted his head into her palm, and she caressed his ears. "Oh, Gabriel, it *is* you in there."

I did not do right by you, Alisoun. I should have told you. I should have told you from the first. I am sorry.

Alisoun sighed and leaned back, letting her hand fall. "What have I done to you, Gabriel? What have I — ?" For a long moment, she did not speak, and Garwaf let his solid presence comfort her. He could say nothing to ease her guilt, but he could show her she was forgiven.

She reached out to him again, and he met her questing hand, ducking his head into her fingers. She touched his jaw, and her sightless eyes somehow found his and gazed into them, unseeing. "What Reynard stole from you — what *I* stole from you You will find it amongst my things at Dorré. In my clothing chest, the one you had carved for me at our wedding. Your things are underneath my old bride clothes."

Garwaf nodded.

"I tried to burn them once," she spoke dreamily, almost conversationally, her thoughts wandering. "They wouldn't burn. And I meant to drop them in the river or

bury them, but whenever I went to rid myself of them . . . I would pause, and I could not finish the deed."

No, Garwaf thought, you would not have been able to. No one could destroy them for good but me.

The light in Alisoun's eyes faded. Garwaf sat on the bed for a long while with the body before he went to the door where the king and Llewellyn waited.

Llewellyn went to Alisoun first and checked her. The wise man shook his head and sighed. "Reynard is a widower now."

"And you." The king addressed this to Garwaf.

Garwaf shook his head. *No, our marriage ended the day she sent for Reynard. Alisoun and I might have lain and lived together, but we never had a true union. We said the words in church, we went through all the motions of love, but our union was never what a marriage should have been. What love is supposed to be, what it is ordained to be.*

I will do better next time. I must do better. Ma belle deserves that – if she'll have me.
The werewolf bestirred himself and looked up at the king.

"She told you where we may find your clothes?"

Dorré was but a half day's ride from here. Garwaf blinked in wonder.

Llewellyn hazarded a guess and directed himself to the wolf. "Somewhere at your home, my lord?"

Garwaf nodded.

The king slapped his thigh, stomping with deliberation from the room. "Then to Dorré we ride."

Chapter Eighteen

The ride to the Dorré estates was not a long one but still seemed to last an eternity to Garwaf. He could not ride alone, obviously, and it was uncomfortable to go on horse, so the king and Llewellyn rode with him in a carriage. As the day darkened, they clattered up to the Dorré estates – there to tear the house down about their ears if

such an action would help them find the lost clothes. Clothes that, through some magical property unbeknownst to even the king's wise magician, would, in theory, somehow restore to Garwaf his human form.

Garwaf was apprehensive and restive, shifting perpetually in his seat, absently whining. The past few days, from the feast onward, had passed in a dizzying whirl. Everything moved so fast, and *now*, if all went well, he could be a man again by the end of the night.

A shudder passed through him. He thought his heart might explode for the happiness swelling inside his chest.

They had brought Reynard with them, thoroughly tied and gagged. The king was challenged at the gates of Dorré, but once he identified himself, their party passed through unmolested, led off to the inner bailey of the castle with due deference.

When they arrived in the castle's inner sanctum, Garwaf longed to bound up to Alisoun's room at once. He was wise enough to realize, though, that a strange wolf galloping unescorted through the castle would be a wolf with a very short life expectancy indeed. So Garwaf stifled his anxiety and waited for the king to sort matters out with the castle steward. Eventually, the king was given free rein of the castle and leave to search the grounds to the smallest jar of seasoning for what they sought.

The king waved this generous offer away. "That will not be necessary. I believe we have a fair idea where to seek what we desire." He leaned in to pat Garwaf's side. "Don't we, lad?"

Garwaf shuffled forward and whined. He wanted to *go*.

"All right, all right." The king smiled indulgently, but the expression wavered on his face, and he trembled. "Let us go."

Garwaf charged into the castle keep, navigating with ease through the many corridors and rooms. Scents came back to him — the musty smell of smoke, the cool chill of the stones, the dusty dank of the tapestries . . . *Home*.

On the threshold to Alisoun's bedchamber, Llewellyn and the rest of their party hesitated. Garwaf, a lifetime ago, of course, had been there many times before, and did

not so much as pause. Not much of the décor had altered, and Alisoun had not moved the wedding chest from the wall that had ever been its accustomed place. Regret abraded Garwaf's senses for the ruin Alisoun had become, and he paused for a moment to grieve. With a sigh, he scratched his dead wife's trunk. Llewellyn picked up on his hints and lifted the intricately carved lid.

Llewellyn shuffled back the fine gowns to find a package of dirty wool wrapped and carefully folded, tucked securely at the very bottom of the chest. He pulled the parcel out, presenting it to Garwaf for his inspection.

Garwaf's nostrils flared; he barked and jumped. His gut churned; he could barely breathe from the anticipation.

"My king." Llewellyn glanced up, grinning from ear to ear at his liege lord. "I believe we have the items." Llewellyn laid the clothes in front of Garwaf and waited expectantly for him to make some move toward them.

Garwaf only sat there, giving them all an impatient look, growling low. Llewellyn understood first. He pulled the king aside and dropped a discreet word in his ear.

The king, likewise, looked abashed at his own obtuseness. "Of course." He shook his head and winked at Garwaf. "So sorry, lad. We weren't thinking."

Llewellyn chivvied the other nobles trailing them off to some other part of the castle. The king acted as Garwaf's servant and carried the package of clothes to the old room Gabriel had used when the castle of Dorré had been his. Reynard, miraculously, had not taken the suite over when he became master of the fortress, and the room had been left almost untouched since the rightful duke was last in residence. The king laid the clothes on the end of the bed, patted Garwaf's shaggy, fur-covered head once, and left to give him privacy.

* * * * *

Garwaf stared at the parcel for an hour without moving. The thoughts in his head were eddies of turmoil, barely coherent. He just kept thinking, remembering, pondering, wondering, worrying, and the thoughts in his head would not still long enough or make themselves rational enough to allow action.

After an hour of perching in silent indecision and fretful inaction, he finally bestirred himself. With difficulty and regret, he pawed at his neck until the golden rose necklace slipped off, then he padded to the bed and tore away the wrappings of his bundle.

To someone who did not know their secret, the clothes were innocuous enough: a plain pair of dark leather breeches with worn patches at the knees, a stout linen shirt, a green woolen cloak with a heavy hood, and hardy riding boots. A leather pouch lay among the clothes too. Garwaf grabbed the bag in his teeth and tilted out its contents. An ornate cross etched in gold on a delicate chain, a length of three braided ribbons, and . . . nothing else.

The wolf growled. The smell of Reynard was all over the pouch.

* * * * *

The king looked surprised and understandably dismayed when Garwaf burst forth from the chamber still, well, a *wolf*. Garwaf ignored him and all others, though, as he galloped through the chambers of the castle – all thoughts of caution thrown to the wind. He bounded out of the keep and into the courtyard to where Reynard leaned against the gate with his guards.

Reynard let out a muffled cry and threw up his hands to ward the wolf off. The guards, no fools, threw themselves out of the path of the furious animal. Reynard was not worth dying for.

Garwaf knocked Reynard to the ground, bouncing Reynard's head on the cobbles, so the knight lay momentarily stunned.

The king's retinue recoiled in horror, and the archers on the walls drew their bows. Llewellyn and the king ran into the courtyard together, winded and pale with fear.

"Hold," the king bellowed to the archers, his voice cracking from fear. "Hold!"

Garwaf continued to ignore them all and sniffed furiously all about the knight's hands and torso.

Garwaf suddenly let out a snarl of rage and triumph, striking toward Reynard's neck. The watching crowd gasped.

Garwaf sensed their fear, but he had no intentions of ripping Reynard's throat out. Instead he delicately drew a leather cord between his teeth from the man's neck and bit the string in two. Carrying the leather thong and the gold ring dangling from it in his jaws, Garwaf cheerfully trotted away from the prone Reynard and back into the castle.

* * * * *

Shut up in solitude back in his old bedroom, Garwaf laid his ring out on the bedclothes. The heavy signet was bright gold with a flat lapis lazuli set into it, a *wolf passant* chiseled into the stone. He had not seen the ring in more than two years. The signet had been his father's, crafted in the Holy Land and brought back to wear in all honor as the Duke de Dorré. The ring had passed to Gabriel at his father's death.

The delicate cross had been his mother's, brought home from the first crusade by her father. The Lady Phillippa had then gifted the cross to her son at his christening. There was a heavy cross in the middle and four smaller crosses bordering it to symbolize the four paths by which the word of Christ traveled from the Holy Land.

The grimy braided ribbon had been a favor bestowed on Gabriel by Alisoun. She had braided it in her hair, then given the ribbon to Gabriel as a sign of her favor. The ribbon had frayed at the end, dirty and discolored now. The colors of the three strands

had once been red-orange, dark purple, and yellow, though the third ribbon, which had been bright yellow, had faded now to a dingy mustard hue.

Garwaf gazed at the cross, the ring, and the braided ribbons. They had been the most precious of all his belongings. These treasures, and not his clothes, defined his humanity. Without these three items, he would be stuck forever as a wolf.

He jumped onto his bed, and with some frustration about his lack of opposable thumbs, he managed to get the signet onto the toe of one paw and twist the chain of the cross around his leg. He went to get the ribbons and found he was loath to touch them. Before they had been a reminder and a comfort to him. *Now* they served only to remind him of his inestimable folly. First in marrying and then in trusting poor Alisoun.

He nudged the ribbons off the bed with his nose, letting them fall to the floor. Better to continue a wolf forever than to remain indentured to the memory of Alisoun and their disastrous marriage.

A glint of gold caught his eye. The rose necklace lay in a glittering pile on his clothing chest where he had reverently placed it. He had taken the necklace off to create the clean slate required to transform, but he realized he needed that bauble more than all the rest, after all.

He smiled to himself. Not the past but the present, his *future*, his hopes, were what he needed now. Even if he had been able to bring himself to take up the ribbons, he doubted very much whether they would have worked for him any longer. That life was over and his new one just beginning.

Breath shallow, muscles tense, he shrugged his head into the gold chain with surprising ease. And waited . . .

And then the world changed.

* * * * *

Two hours later, the king could bear the tension no longer. Garwaf had been alone quite long enough. If anything was going to happen, it would have happened.

The king went to the room, knocked and, when no answer came, pushed the door open a crack to peek inside.

His nephew sprawled on the bed, bathed in the fond caressing beams of moonlight, sleeping soundly, snoring loudly, with an odd assortment of items draped over various limbs and the old clothes tangled all about him.

He was still a wolf.

The king clenched his jaw and shut the door with precision to stop himself from slamming it. Then, to avoid having to contemplate the repercussions of this failed experiment, the king staggered off to get quietly and thoroughly drunk.

* * * * *

The dawn arrived next morn as vibrant and brightly pink as a maiden flushing with delight at a pleasant surprise.

Llewellyn managed to rouse the king with difficulty by noon. The magician had spent most of the morning already looking for the silly bugger. When Llewellyn *did* find his king, the ruler sat hunched in a corner of the great hall with a bottle snuggled under his arm like a nubile lover. Llewellyn was by then *very* impatient and *beyond* fed up. In consequence, he was not gentle in rousing his liege lord.

A few industrious dunks in the ice-cold water of the horse trough did the trick.

The king, sober now but not entirely awake, aimed a blow at the wise man's head, which he ducked. Llewellyn grabbed the king by his shoulders and gave him a hard shake. "My lord. We must check on Gabriel. See how he does."

The king's face fell. "I have." He collapsed into Llewellyn's arms, nearly knocking the wise man down, and sobbed as only the extremely hung-over can do. "The clothes did not work, my friend. He remains a wolf. We have lost Gabriel forever. I will never see the damned boy again. He's doomed to spend the rest of his days as a house pet. And *Kathryn*. Poor sweet girl." The king moaned and held his head, sniffing.

Llewellyn shook the king again, gripping the other man's shoulders tightly. "Did you check on Gabriel this morning?"

The king blinked, eyes red from sorrow and drink. "No. Last night."

Llewellyn forbore from rolling his eyes. "Am I the *only* one who noticed the full moon last night?"

Befuddlement, comprehension, then a piercing hope flitted over the king's face. Llewellyn barely had time to absorb any of these emotions before the king broke from him and bounded away, up the stairs to Gabriel's room.

In his joy, the king was not entirely considerate, and threw open the bedroom door so hard the heavy wood collided with a bang against the wall.

A long lad lay stretched out on the bed. Sometime during the hours of darkness, the clothes, which had lain discarded on the bed, had been donned. The young man lay coiled under thick blankets with one supple, strong hand curled under his tanned cheek like a child, the glint of the signet ring on his finger catching dawn's early rays.

The king stood in the doorway and simply stared.

The man in the bed stirred and looked up, long lashes fluttering against tawny cheeks. Dark blue eyes opened at last and stared up at the king. The sleeper frowned and raised one strong, well-muscled arm to run his fingers through unkempt black hair. He passed a hand over his handsome *human* face and scratched with the backs of his knuckles at the long white scar along his cheek, black-shadowed now with a dark beard. The apparition opened his eyes wide, grinned impishly, and said in a voice a trifle raspy from lack of use, "Good morning, Uncle." He nodded brightly to Llewellyn. "Llewellyn."

That the king did not break the lad's ribs was a wonder as he ran forward and embraced his nephew. The king kissed Gabriel's forehead and hugged him, sobbing with joy and *not* the inebriated melancholy of the night before. "My boy, my son. Oh, Gabriel, my dear, dear lad."

Gabriel cradled his uncle's face in his hands and laughed and laughed, tears shining in his eyes. He hugged him close when they both finally began to weep in earnest.

Llewellyn hung back, quietly shutting the door to let the affecting scene play out in privacy. He smiled drunkenly to himself, besotted by the joy of this morning.

"Welcome home, my lord."

Chapter Nineteen

Llewellyn allowed uncle and nephew as much time as he could to bask in the glow of reunion before he discreetly ducked his head back in and coughed.

"My good friend." Gabriel strode forward to clasp Llewellyn by the arms.

Llewellyn grinned and made a formal bow. "My lord." He smiled and playfully batted Gabriel's bearded cheek. "Good to see your face again, m'lad."

Gabriel laughed. "I must agree with you."

The king said nothing, just stared at his nephew, his gladness written plainly in his glowing expression.

Llewellyn hated to be the one to break the mood, but . . . "Perhaps it is time we strategize."

The king let himself take one last look at Gabriel, as if he were memorizing the lad's features in case he should never see him again. Then, with a visible wrench, he looked at Llewellyn. "Strategize?"

"How we are going to reintroduce Gabriel." Llewellyn grimaced and scratched at his nose. "Account for his absence."

The king required a moment longer than usual to comprehend Llewellyn's meaning. When he did, his look of joy was shuttered at once as an immense frown of worry creased his brow. He paced and chewed his thumbnail. "You're right. We must find someone trustworthy to groom Gabriel, find him suitable clothes, bustle Reynard out, bustle a double for the black wolf in . . . "

Llewellyn nodded at these plans and made mental notes of his own, already delegating tasks, planning how best to dig up a large black canine on such short notice.

"No, no, no and no," Gabriel said. "*Not* like that. Never again. Besides, most of the court has already figured my secret out. The ones who would be fooled by such a charade are not the ones worth fooling."

"But —"

Gabriel shook his head and clasped his uncle's shoulder. "Uncle, I lived half a lifetime like that. Now I have a second chance, a second life. I will *not* begin my second chance with a lie. Let them know me for what I am and judge me as they see fit. I will stand trial as a werewolf if I have to, but whatever happens, I will not be banished to the dark again to hide my head in shame." He drew himself up proudly, a son of kings. "I am what I am. And I can live with it now."

The king opened his mouth as if to protest then snapped it shut. He darted a glance at Llewellyn, who only shrugged. Who was he to meddle in the affairs of kings?

Well, the king's advisor, yes But really, that was definitely beside the point.

"Lot of help you are, my old sage." The king snorted, then he sighed and looked back to his nephew. "All right, then."

Gabriel clapped his uncle on the shoulder, then headed for the door.

The king caught him gently by the arm, hauling him back into the room and kicking the door closed. "Lad, at least let us clean you up a bit first, eh?"

* * * * *

Most of the king's vassals who had come to pay homage at Sûr had by now followed their liege lord to Dorré. Strange happenings had transpired. *And obviously these old fools mean not to miss the finale.* Reynard studied them with disgust. The crowd gathered in the courtyard of the duke's hereditary seat, wiping sweat from their brows, the braver among them darting glances at Reynard where he stood chained and gagged

between two of the king's knights. He bared his teeth at one of them, being disinclined to civility in that moment.

No one seemed surprised to see Reynard in chains; most likely they merely wondered which of his many infamies had finally got him caught.

Reynard glared at the puffed-up idiots and waited with resigned curiosity. He had spent the night in his own oubliette and been pulled out early that morning to sit on chill stones in his own courtyard. He too was ready for this farce of a drama to be over.

A commotion at the gate set the crowd humming, and the castle's lanky steward strode out with his usual bustling gait, issuing stentorian orders to every servant within his sight.

The spokesmen of the assembled lords went to the steward and stopped him, speaking loud enough for all to hear. "Pray, Steward, what transpires?"

The steward bowed respectfully to him and said in a didactic tone of condescension, which only the highest ranked of servants can master, "The king bid me summon every servant of this house down to the lowliest drudge and bring them to this courtyard, my lord."

"Why?"

"I am not in the king's confidence, my lord," the steward said with a crushing blandness of tone before sweeping away to discharge the rest of his orders.

Very quickly, the courtyard of the castle became a sad crush. All the nobles and servants crowded around, pressed tightly together, kitchen drudges rubbing elbows with earls. His guards pulled Reynard roughly to his feet to avoid him being trampled by the crowd.

The king appeared with Llewellyn at his back and addressed the now very restive audience. Their ruler held up his hands and received quiet at once. "My lords and the inhabitants of this castle, the Lord of Dorré wishes to address himself to you. I pray you hear him out in all courtesy and compassion." With that concise introduction,

the king stepped aside, only the anxious flickering of his gaze betraying his nervousness.

Some heads turned toward Reynard, who blandly returned their stares, but others looked toward the castle's entrance where the king had appeared. Obviously, they remembered Reynard had not always been the Lord of Dorré.

No doubt they remembered the king's pet wolf as well.

Reynard swallowed, the first prickling of unease clawing up his spine.

Gabriel came to stand framed in the doorway, and the clouds crowding in around the castle parted briefly to bathe him in an approving beam before moving on to shine elsewhere. Gabriel's hair had been cut and brushed back, the wild tangle tamed into waves that framed his face. He realized his countenance was more lined now than two years ago, and his large, dark eyes were sadder than they had been, but his fellow nobles apparently recognized him instantly nonetheless.

A whisper passed through the crowd, swifter than the birds of the court could have flown to carry it. "The duke . . . Lord Gabriel – why, that's really Gabriel! The man himself" And so on.

Gabriel let them chatter amongst themselves for a moment; then forced his deep voice to boom out across the court to silence them, except Reynard.

"You *bas* – " The displaced Reynard was soon muffled again by his guards, and his indignant cries went unheard.

Gabriel planted his feet and squared his shoulders, projecting a confidence he was far from feeling. "A long time has passed since my face was last seen in this land. I have been remiss in my duties to my people and my title. For too long I have been absent. I acknowledge that, and I am sorry for this neglect.

"Some of you met the wolf the king has kept with him of late; some of you encountered him for the first time here when the king rode in yesterday. I tell you now, wondrous as it may be" He trailed off and frowned, swallowing convulsively and nerving himself up. *Oh, God, please guide me to do the right thing.* "I was that wolf."

The cries of shock, horror, and confusion that erupted from his servants and his peers did not disappoint. They were deafening.

"Many of you know me," he said with measured calm, breaking through the clamor to fight for, and get, the silence he needed to finish his speech. "And have known me since I was a young lad. I have been informed by my steward many of the old servants who answered to me are still here. I tried ever to be a fair master and a good one. I hope serving me was not an onerous duty."

He sighed and ran a hand through his hair. "But I *am* a werewolf. There are those who will swear this makes me unfit to walk the earth. I can only say in my defense that I do retain my mind if not my shape. I am the same creature as a wolf that I am as a man. I swear it." *I'm just shorter . . . and furry.*

Gabriel drew a steadying breath. "Many of you fear the garwaf and have heard dreadful tales of him from your mothers and grandmothers, on back to the beginning of time. I do not want any who serve me to fear their lord or to fear retribution should they decide to leave my service. Search your hearts and your minds. Decide what you can live with, and then leave or stay as you see fit.

"And to my loyal friends." He embraced the circled lords with a toothy grin. "My *dear* friends will be pleased to learn the king has gifted back to me all my old lands." He grinned smugly at de Troumper. "And many of Reynard's as well. So you need not concern yourselves over Dorré's welfare any longer. I will see to her safety and keeping as well as I ever have done before. And woe shall fall on the head of any man who tries to take her from me again." He flashed them another predatory smile before continuing his oration.

"I have hidden my secret as long as I can remember, even from my kind uncle. No one knew but my wife. I was betrayed. Accursed. I never thought to be human again. And now I am, I do not wish to return to you cloaked in lies. If my people serve me, if my friends stand by me, let it be because they know the worst of me and still judge me as fit and able. Good and honorable. That is why I have told all here assembled of my secret. I leave you now to make your choices. No blame shall follow

anyone should you choose to seek service elsewhere. If you believe I did you wrong as a wolf, go to the courts and seek justice there. I will answer for myself and take responsibility for what harm, if any, I have done. But if it pleases you to let my prolonged banishment serve as punishment enough, I am happy to resume my duties and take up my old life again. If the world will let me." He nodded once, satisfied, then quickly ducked back into his castle, hoping he would not be pulled hence and torn apart by the crowd for an oddity of his nature he could not help.

Llewellyn stood quietly, wreathed in the shadows, listening to every nuance of the crowd's reaction to Gabriel's speech. The king had set a contingency plan in place should Gabriel's gamble fail. The king and Llewellyn had no intention of seeing the duke ripped apart by an angry mob. At the first sign of trouble, Llewellyn was to give the signal for the guards to whisk Gabriel out of the castle to safety. And exile.

Please, let the lad's foolishness work. Please, don't let it come to that. Llewellyn swallowed and drew closer to a knot of people, eavesdropping as they whispered together.

The nobles fell into a buzz of conversation at Gabriel's exit, discussing what the most politic way would be to duck out of Dorré now they had been seen. No harm there. Llewellyn moved on to the more humble folk of the crowd. The servants, for their part, weighed the pros and cons of having a werewolf for a master.

"Well, I'm not sure," said the grizzled old groundskeeper. "I've heard some strange tell of werewolves."

The housekeeper, a solid, roundly built woman, folded fleshy arms across her bountiful bosom and huffed. "Well, I'll say this for ol' Gabriel. I'd rather be locking up my chickens than my daughters, and that's a fact. Say this for the werewolf — he was never one to tumble the maids as was unwilling."

"No," piped up the head groom, "never did catch him with any willin' ones either, 'ceptin' his late lady, of course." They bowed their heads and crossed themselves. Word of the duchess's death had reached them before even the king had.

"Well," snorted the housekeeper again, "must say I think, werewolf or not, he ain't any better nor worse than the rest of the nobles when you come right down to it. In fact, we could do *much* worse for a master."

"We already did," some brave soul muttered just audibly.

Everyone darted a look at the glowering Reynard and edged a few steps farther away from him.

"I s'pose I'll stay on," the housekeeper declared. "Despite all this to-do. I don't reckon the duke will make a habit of these grand dustups when the dear lad never did before." With that charitable pronouncement, she wiped her hands on her spotty apron and wandered back into the manor house to return to terrorizing the kitchen drudges.

The rest of the servants came to pretty much the same decision and shrugged amongst themselves as they went back to the work they had been summoned from.

"Well," the head groom muttered as he walked off arm in arm with a friend. "What was all that fuss for anyway? Lad should have known we'd welcome him back with open arms. 'specially after living with *Reynard*."

Llewellyn smiled as he strolled back into the castle.

* * * * *

"And what, may I ask, are we going to do with Reynard?" Llewellyn popped a grape in his mouth and glanced expectantly first at Gabriel, then the king.

"Banishment," the king said at once.

Llewellyn looked to Gabriel, who said nothing. A crease appeared between the duke's brows, though he did not look up from his steward's inventory report.

"Well, my lord duke?"

Gabriel sighed and sat back in his chair. "Reynard is not walking out of this land alive if I have anything to say on the matter." His voice was hard, flat. His eyes shadowed.

The king looked sternly at his nephew. "Gabriel — "

"No, Uncle. You stopped me from ripping his throat out as a wolf, but by God, you shall not keep me from challenging him to fair combat as a knight. He beat Kathryn. He *shot* Kathryn. I will take the payment he owes for that out of his hide."

"Gabriel, this is not" The king trailed off as Llewellyn shot him a look full of meaning and shook his head.

Llewellyn stood, crossing to Gabriel and gently touching his shoulder. "Gabriel, why would Reynard consent to fight you? He is already bereft of his lands and his honor. He is not so desolate I think he would let you kill him, so *why* would he fight you? What does he have to gain?"

Gabriel's mouth tilted up in a wolfish grin. "I shall strike a deal with the former Earl de Troumper." He stalked from the room, new boots resounding on the stone floor. The king anxiously hurried after him.

Llewellyn rubbed a tired hand over his eyes. "God's teeth. We finally get the boy back his body, and nothing will suit him better than to get himself killed." He followed the others at a run, hiking his robes up above his knees, his pale legs flashing as he ran to catch his liege lords.

Gabriel beat king and magician both to the courtyard. The pack of nobles still milled about in indecision, discussing the morning's marvels and revelations. They eyed him warily as he bypassed them, walking up to Reynard. Reynard's back was against the wall with his knees propped up and his eyes closed. Chained wrists rested on his filthy knees, and but for the manacles, he might have been taking a refreshing nap in the early-morning sun.

"Remove his gag," Gabriel ordered.

Reynard worked his mouth a bit in an obvious bid to return feeling to his lips and tongue. That being done, he curled his lips back into a smile and gave a mocking nod. "Sir Mutt."

"Well said by one who well knows my bite." Gabriel smirked.

Reynard cocked an eyebrow and laughed. "What do you wish of me, *m'sir le duc*?"

Llewellyn and the king had caught up by this time. Gabriel spared them a glance, hastily thrown over his shoulder, before turning back to Reynard. He leaned in to the other knight, lowering his voice. "I wish to have an opportunity to pay you back in full for what you did to Lady Kathryn."

Reynard's shrewd eyes narrowed. "You wish to fight me."

Gabriel smiled with pleasant malice. "I do."

Reynard sniffed. He tipped down to rest on his elbow and arranged himself languidly as he could on the castle's hard stones. "And *why* would I do something so stupid?" He picked dirt from beneath his nails with his teeth and seemed content to lounge on the dirty cobbles of the court for the rest of his life.

Gabriel hesitated. He looked over his shoulder at his two mentors again; then, squaring his shoulders, he risked all on one throw. "If you agree to fight me fairly in single combat—and if you win—I will cede all my lands, all my titles, everything . . . irrevocably back to you."

"No." This was a horrified gasp torn from the king's throat.

Llewellyn merely sagged to the nearest wall and sank his head down to his chest in obvious despair. Gabriel could easily guess his mentor's thoughts. Reynard was older, more experienced, *stronger*, and he hadn't been out of practice with the play of weapons—not to mention the practice of managing human limbs—for more than two years. No doubt the magician thought this duel suicidal.

But it has to be done, and damned if I'll let anyone else do it. Gabriel watched Reynard's face, waiting for his answer.

A smile of triumph twisted the haughty lips of Reynard de Troumper. He jumped to his feet at once and clasped Gabriel's hands. "We have an accord," he declared for the whole of the court to hear. "Witnessed by king, court, and all. Let it be so." Reynard twisted Gabriel's hand in a bone-crushing grip, but Gabriel by dint of will kept himself from flinching in pain. "Now to the battlefield," Reynard cried.

"No," the king said again, his voice harsh, his eyes haunted. He stepped forward and pushed between the two men, leaving one hand firmly pressed against Reynard's burly chest to hold him back. "If we are to do this, then we do it fairly. You will eat and rest, and so shall the duke. We will wait until late afternoon. Then you and the duke can hack each other to bits for all I care."

Gabriel winced. *Uncle really is quite furious with me if he's calling me the duke. But this duel has to happen. Reynard's bloody and bruised carcass is not worth one drop of Kathryn's blood . . . but it's a start.* He looked at Reynard's smug face. *The deed is done, and now the only trouble is which part to cut off first.*

* * * * *

Gabriel ate his midday meal in stony silence with Llewellyn as his only companion in his chamber. Eating cooked food with utensils again was odd, but extremely gratifying nonetheless. He had so missed having *thumbs*.

The king had gone off to make preparations for the duel. He returned just when Gabriel was finishing the last of his roast boar. The king walked straight to the room's largest window and stood there, staring out without saying one word to either of them.

At last Gabriel could take his silent condemnation no more. "Uncle."

Llewellyn laid a restraining hand on Gabriel's arm, but he shrugged the older man off and went to the king.

"Uncle," he said again, more gently. "It has to be done. If I don't defeat him, he will follow me forever. And Kathryn. Fighting him will end it."

"What will this bloodbath end?" the king said softly but without looking at Gabriel. "What satisfaction do you hope for?"

"I want to know full well the filthy brute won't be coming after me, won't be sniffing around Kathryn. That Reynard the Lecher won't be haunting me all the rest of my life." He clenched his fists in frustration. He had to make his uncle understand.

"Disgrace Reynard. Banish him. Beat him from the land with stones, and he will still

return. Reynard has to *die* – not just for what he has done to Kathryn but for what harm he can do in the future if we let him escape. His infamies end now, and I am the one to end them."

The king stared at Gabriel for a moment, his expression searching. "You are a young fool. I only pray you will be a *live* fool at the end of this day." He stomped from the room, slamming the door behind him with a crash.

Gabriel turned to Llewellyn, who had lingered behind. "What do you have to say, oh wise man?"

Llewellyn gazed at the ceiling and let his breath out through his teeth. "My lad, I don't know whether to strangle you for this foolish escapade or weep in despair." He shook his head, scrubbing his fingers through his white blond hair. "I haven't yet decided on which one appeals more at the moment. I might do both."

"I'm right to do this. You *know* that."

"Perhaps." Llewellyn gave a small nod; then the wise man swept out of the room too.

Gabriel was left to prepare himself as best he might for the coming ordeal. Alone. "God's teeth." He let his breath out on a gusty sigh. "Things were easier as a wolf."

Chapter Twenty

The expectant blush of the morning had flared to a bright yellow at noon but waxed to the fatigued red of someone florid from overexertion as the two combatants faced each other across the open fields before the great castle of Dorré.

The men-at-arms ringed the two opponents round with their shields. Gabriel and Reynard each wore leather jerkins over their light cotton tunics and breeches. The jerkins were sturdy enough to deflect a half-hearted stroke or a dagger graze, but certainly not enough to ward off a killing blow. Each fighter carried a sword, serviceable and as light as could be managed. The knights might be at this all afternoon,

so any extra weight that could be left off the weapons and their bodies had been. Each man also bore a matching dagger tucked into his belt, good for slashing and stabbing.

The king clenched his hands at his sides. There had to be a way to stop this. How could he let his dear nephew, a boy as good as a son to him, square up against the beast, Reynard? *I've only just gotten Gabriel back, and to lose him now . . . How can I stop this?*

The king's mind raged, but he was taking too long. He needed to move, or one of the fighters would strike without his leave. The king remained certain that once started, neither combatant would pause for their ruler's displeasure either.

If the king did not start the contest soon, the looks on both of the fighters' faces promised they would.

With an almost physical wrench and an oath that flew up to choke his mouth with its bile, the king gestured for the duel to begin. Then he jerked his head away. He did not condone this duel, he could not stop it, but he would not watch.

The fight began.

Reynard advanced several paces. Gabriel did not give back a step. He hefted his broadsword and waited with supernatural patience to see what his opponent intended.

"You've scratched your last flea, Sir Mutt." Reynard swiped at Gabriel with his sword.

Gabriel parried the blow and thrust for Reynard's midsection.

Reynard turned Gabriel's sword aside with a deft twist. "I'm surprised you remember how to hold a sword." He stepped in and seized the wrist of Gabriel's sword hand. Taking advantage of Gabriel's position, Reynard held Gabriel's wrist tightly, trapping their blades together in a crossed arrangement. Reynard laughed in Gabriel's face as they strained, pushing against each other. "Hard to get used to having thumbs again, m'boy?"

Gabriel shifted his stance and drove his knee into Reynard's midsection. Reynard doubled over. Slicing savagely with his blade, Gabriel broke the cross of their swords and left a sizeable gash across Reynard's back.

A few of the men-at-arms cried out in jubilation as Gabriel drew first blood. From the corner of his eye, Gabriel caught sight of Llewellyn triumphantly pumping his fist in the air and cupping his hands around his mouth, calling out to Reynard, "I hope that will serve to remind you, de Troumper, not to waste your breath so idly on foul words."

"I'll see you skewered on a pike, old man." Reynard snarled back to the magician.

Gabriel kept his gaze focused on Reynard, waiting, unwilling to rise to Reynard's petty taunts. Gabriel had no breath to spare either.

Reynard glared at the king's magician. Then the large knight straightened, working his back muscles with a grimace. In a sudden burst, he raised his sword and ran at Gabriel.

Gabriel met him, and they traded blows at a furious rate. Gabriel's face flamed hot from exertion, and he grew sticky with sweat after only a few minutes of fighting. His hair clung to his neck and his temples in wet clumps. Overheated and hampered by his light jerkin and flimsy shirt, he struggled for control. His boots made him unsteady. He would feel so much better with the skin of his feet connecting with the ground. *I have to get used to wearing clothes again.*

He hoped he would have the opportunity to do so.

Gabriel was ashamed to admit to himself that Reynard's earlier taunts had not been far off the mark. His swordsmanship was rusty, unequal to Reynard's in this most pressing of moments. He felt ungainly, awkward, a great lumbering hulk. His old speed in sword play, his greatest advantage against a larger opponent, had withered, like a sickly limb. Even managing the disposal of his human limbs gave Gabriel difficulty.

As a wolf, Gabriel had still always been a man, but if he let himself hurt Reynard in the way he wanted to, then he risked losing all he had recently fought so hard to regain. He risked losing all he yet hoped to have.

But he didn't know how much longer he could hold out against Reynard's swordsmanship. He didn't know how much longer he could fight these animal urges — or how much longer he *wanted* to.

Gabriel knew enough about blood magic, though, and his own curse, to know if he killed a human being with his teeth, if he swallowed human blood, no matter what his shape, man or wolf, he would be a monster forever.

He *had* to control himself. He was a knight. He had to prove he could be a man. Winning wasn't winning if he killed Reynard as a wolf would kill.

Blinking sweat from his eyes, Gabriel swiped wildly at Reynard's head. Reynard retreated, and Gabriel staggered as he lunged again in pursuit. He shakily thrust for Reynard's gut, and the bigger knight knocked Gabriel's blade away. Reynard stepped swiftly in, seizing his throat. Gabriel clawed at the fingers cutting off his air, feeling Reynard's skin open beneath his nails in long, deep gashes. Reynard growled and shoved him away.

Gabriel gulped in great breaths of air, gratefully filling his lungs. Reynard pressed his advantage and viciously slashed Gabriel's stomach while his guard was down.

"No." the king leapt to his feet.

Reynard brandished his bloodstained sword before the solemn faces of the crowd.

Gabriel dropped heavily to the ground, a hand held to his bleeding gut. Rasping in great gulps of air, he struggled to remain conscious. Waves of anguish stung his body, and sticky blood coated his trembling fingers in a steady ooze. Stepping up to him, Reynard kicked Gabriel in the belly so hard he howled his pain and rolled away, shaking.

Reynard advanced. "Up, cur. Come, you flea-bitten bastard. I've not had my fill of fun yet." The large knight seized Gabriel's sweat-dampened hair, nearly tugging a chunk out by the roots. Gabriel's legs wobbled to a standing position, and Reynard thrust him away. Gabriel staggered, doubling over and retching, bile sour in his mouth.

Reynard turned to the king, his smile big and bright. "Care to name a new champion now, milord? I'll let the whelp live if you do."

The king pressed a fist to his mouth, avoiding Reynard's gaze.

Gabriel ran forward, arcing his sword down to behead Reynard. Reynard parried the blow, and Gabriel, dizzy and off balance, plummeted headlong into the other knight. Too close to use his sword effectively, Gabriel laid into Reynard freely with his knee and the hilt of his sword. Reynard shoved him off.

Gabriel righted himself with an effort. Blearily trying to focus, he swung his sword at Reynard's neck once more. At the last moment, Reynard's free hand shot out, and fast as lightning, he seized Gabriel by the wrist and, twisting ruthlessly, brought him crashing to the ground. Reynard pinned Gabriel's sword hand roughly with his foot and kicked Gabriel's weapon away as his nerveless fingers released the hilt.

"Now what's to do, Sir Mutt?" Reynard laughed mean and low. "You might have bested me with your teeth and claws, you know. Better as a wolf than a man, eh?"

Gabriel drew his dagger and stabbed Reynard in the calf.

Roaring in rage, Reynard stumbled off and groped with his free hand to draw the blade out. Gabriel kicked Reynard's legs out from under him, and as his opponent fell, he leapt upon Reynard. They rolled over and over in the grass, furiously trading blows with their fists and legs.

Gabriel tried to push Reynard's face into the smothering ground when Reynard turned suddenly and latched his mouth on to Gabriel's fingers, his teeth squeezing Gabriel's flesh and breaking the skin. With a low growl, Gabriel savagely bashed his skull against Reynard's, the force of which left the both of them stunned.

Reynard recovered first, bucking his knees up to hit Gabriel in his wounded stomach. Sucking in a breath and biting his lip so hard he bled, Gabriel fell sideways off him.

Reynard rolled over with a sharp bark of pain, pulling Gabriel's knife from his own calf. He threw himself on top of Gabriel and pinned him, jarring the air out of Gabriel's lungs.

Gabriel's hand shot out just in time to block the knife stabbing down toward him. He wrapped his fingers round Reynard's wrist, mercilessly pinching his nerves, trying to

deaden the hand and make him drop his blade. Reynard's benumbed fingers released the dagger.

Gabriel shoved the big knight off, then scrambled to pin Reynard's arms to the ground with his knees. He punched Reynard several times across the face, and the crunch of bone against bone was brutally satisfying. Gabriel wanted more. He kicked Reynard and backhanded him, punching the other man over and over and over, reveling in the feel of flesh turning to pulp under his fists, skin splitting open, blood staining his nails and hands as he rent Reynard to pieces. Gabriel growled with pleasure. This was just how he should kill Reynard. Slowly. In pieces.

As Gabriel delivered punch after punch, something glinted just under the edge of his vision, stinging his eyes, distracting him. He paused and rocked back to sit on his knees. Reynard groaned but did not move.

Gently, Gabriel cupped the shining thing around his own neck in his palm, glancing down at the little golden rose.

The jewel . . .

Kathryn's bauble . . .

Kathryn.

Good God, what will she think if you beat Reynard to death? I wanted this, but she wouldn't.

You knew that when you challenged him. Don't fool yourself you're doing this for her sake. It's just the wolf in you. Reynard's just another rival who needs to be taken down, another hunting dog whose throat needs to be ripped out.

Good lord, Gabriel, your first day as a man, and this is how you behave? Might as well have stayed a wolf. You don't seem to be doing much worthwhile as a man.

You didn't have a choice who you were as a wolf. Now you do, and look what you've chosen. You're a worse beast than Reynard.

No.

Gabriel recoiled from the ruin of Reynard's face. He stared down at his cut and bloodied hands, flipping them over, staring at them in surprise. Rasping for breath,

sweat, blood, and dirt mingling freely on his face, Gabriel looked into Reynard's hard, dark irises as the flesh around them bled and swelled.

"Kill me, then," Reynard choked out through his broken face. "Your precious bitch might be in heat by now. Wouldn't want to miss that."

Gabriel narrowed his eyes and clenched his fists. Something inside him wound tight, ready to snap. His arm shook with tension as he drew back for another blow. Reynard's battered lips tipped up in a gruesome grimace of a smile. There was satisfaction in his face.

Gabriel stared at Reynard for a long moment, then slowly let his arm fall back to his side. Gabriel stiffly stood, clutching at his bleeding gut. "*Tch*. Such a filthy mouth, Reynard. May you learn better manners in exile." Gabriel wiped blood from his mouth with the back of his dirty sleeve. He fetched up Reynard's discarded dagger and jauntily stuck the blade into the belt of his torn, bloodied jerkin.

"What are you doing?" Reynard tried to sit up, then grunted in pain and collapsed backwards.

"I'm done with revenge, Reynard. It's over. Enjoy your banishment."

Gabriel staggered away to receive the congratulations of his king and the spectators.

Reynard roared and threw himself on Gabriel's legs. Gabriel lost his footing and crashed to the ground, the air pushed from his lungs, his gut on fire from his wound. Reynard, his battered face a grisly pulp, his dark eyes flaming now with hatred, clawed for the dagger in Gabriel's belt.

Gabriel, tired muscles screaming within him, grabbed Reynard's wrists and grunted and strained against this last frantic attack. Gabriel's stomach broiled with pain, warm blood soaking the shirt to his skin. Gritting his teeth, Gabriel brought up his legs to kick Reynard away, then drew the dagger from his own belt.

Reynard crawled back, foam flecking his mouth, his teeth bared in a wordless snarl. Gabriel wrestled against the knight's bulky arms. Breathing hard, heart

hammering, Gabriel arced the dagger up and brought it down, burying its blade deeply into Reynard's throat.

Reynard gurgled and gagged, pawing futilely at his throat. Nauseated, hot blood dripping onto his face from Reynard's neck, Gabriel released the dagger's handle with a little push, which sent the dying Reynard falling back. His body landed with a gruesome *thump* on the torn-up, bloodstained grass.

For a long moment, Gabriel lay on his back in the trampled turf, too weak and wounded to move. His skin crawled; his insides squirmed with disgust at the nastiness of the fight. Stinking of Reynard's blood and his own, feeling soul-soiled and dirty, Gabriel pinched his eyes closed. Tears leaked out between his eyelids, sliding down his filthy cheeks to drip into his ears.

"Gabriel." The voice seemed very far away. "*Gabriel.*"

The stricken note in his uncle's voice at last penetrated Gabriel's awareness, so he opened his eyes. Gingerly and by very gentle degrees, groaning all the while, Gabriel creaked to his feet. Hugging an arm to his slashed stomach, he limped slowly over to his uncle, then dipped achingly to one knee, trying not to tumble forward in a faint. Gabriel cleared his throat, then spoke. "I trust, my king, I have proven my claim to the Dorré estates."

The king made his pronouncements with convincing solemnity, even as his eyes shone with wetness. "Your lands are yours again, Gabriel fitz Michael, irrevocably and irrefutably."

Gabriel raised his head and gave his uncle a wan smile.

The king pulled Gabriel to his feet and raised their joined hands aloft in triumph. "I present your lord, the Duke de Dorré, now and forever."

A cheer went up among the men-at-arms. They clanked their swords against their shields in salute. As the jubilations began, Gabriel looked about him in wonder and gratitude.

I am the Duke de Dorré. I'm me again

Time to retrieve my duchess. He took one step, then blinked, black spotting the edges of his vision. Gabriel wavered gracefully on the spot, like a leaf trembling on the end of its twig. This lasted for a long moment; then the valiant and victorious, honorable and glorious, brave and noble Gabriel fitz Michael, son of kings, heir to the throne, the Duke de Dorré . . . fainted.

Chapter Twenty-One

Beatrice really was quite close to tearing her hair out. She had been at the damned convent of Bourlonge far longer than she cared to remember. Sitting and waiting and furiously writing to her idiot brother. The longer Beatrice remained, the less likely she would leave again. She had to get *out*.

The damned abbess kept trying to talk to her as well, preach to her about the benefits of a spiritual life. Beatrice had to admit she was tempted. An ambitious, clever woman could certainly climb her way over all the other pious, biddable little nuns to a position of great authority in the church. With her abilities, Beatrice could even make abbess someday – if she wanted.

The idea did appeal. But then, so did being a duchess.

She needed to talk to her brother and find out if she really was as irredeemable for marriage as he now believed her to be.

The other thing that made Beatrice grit her teeth was that all the precious little nuns were hiding something from her.

After about a week of enduring strange behavior from the sisters, Beatrice discovered one room they all kept taking turns in, spending hours there at a time. Another day, one of the local foresters came back leading a horse, and the event caused a great stir of elation among the sisters – as much as nuns could be said to be observably joyous.

The next day, as Beatrice lay in her chamber, debating whether to rise or not, she caught the sound of a man speaking in low tones with a woman, whose voice she immediately recognized as belonging to the abbess.

Beatrice leapt up. Cracking her door open ever so slightly, she could just barely discern what they said.

"You need not fear for her anymore," the abbess said quietly to the man. "She is awake and knows herself. She will suffer no lasting hurt from her misadventures in the forest, and now you can trust her into our care to help her mend the rest of the way."

"And is she to stay for good, or —?"

"That choice is yet before her," the abbess said gently. "When she is well enough to travel, she will certainly let you know what her intentions are."

The man had to be content with that answer. "How will I ever be able to thank you and the sisters for all you've done for my daughter?"

The abbess, of course, piously waved this away. "All was done in service to God. His blessings be on your journey, Lord Stephen."

"And God go always with you, Your Reverence." The man bowed to the abbess and went to his horse, which Beatrice, who now leaned all the way out of her door, recognized as the one the forester had brought in days ago.

Then the mysterious Lord Stephen rode off in the early morning light, and Beatrice hurried back into her room, in case the abbess should turn and see her.

Beatrice would have to discover what this whispered conference was about. The gentleman seemingly had a daughter quartered here, and *not* one of the sisters, either. Beatrice had believed herself to be the only noble guest in residence at the convent. She was wrong, apparently, and now nothing would suit her but to find out the identity of this other woman.

She snooped about the secret chamber all day, but to no avail. The nuns were very vigilant about closing the door behind them when they left the room. If Beatrice questioned them, they would say one of the sisters had fallen ill and they were taking turns in caring for her.

Later, the abbess came by and told Beatrice with the utmost delicacy that her brother, Reynard, and his wife were dead, the one having succumbed to her illness, the other killed in a duel by the newly reinstated Duke de Dorré, one Gabriel fitz Michael, nephew to the king. The abbess was respectful and gentle when breaking the news, but Beatrice could tell this was *not* ill news to the abbess.

Only the most minor of pangs touched Beatrice over the death of her brother. Alisoun mattered not at all. She was a stone-cold bitch in life, and now she was just stone cold. The news mattered little to Beatrice. Reynard had been a useful tool, though, and without his protection, Beatrice was not quite sure what to do with herself. The spiritual life was swiftly becoming Beatrice's *only* option.

* * * * *

By the end of that week, Beatrice still had no idea who or what lay in the secret bedroom. She realized the invalid's identity was probably not all that important, but at heart she remained an irredeemable gossip. It pained Beatrice that scandal and intrigue brewed around her, yet nothing she was able to do could unravel the truth. She went to bed every evening with her fists clenched on the covers and woke the next morning with the same acute burning of dissatisfaction in her gut.

After Beatrice broke her fast the next morning, the sub-prioress came to speak to her. "Lady Beatrice, a young maiden arrived last night to stay as a guest. She also is contemplating a monastic life. I thought the two of you might be good company for each other while you each sort out what is best to be done with your futures. If you would be so kind, she is helping Sister Catherine in the vegetable patch."

"Of course, sister." Beatrice nodded demurely. Rubbing her hands in expectation, she went to see this "new arrival," which, Beatrice had no doubt, was the invalid who had actually been secreted away within the convent these two weeks past.

"Her name is Kathryn," the sub-prioress called after Beatrice.

Beatrice all but ran to the dingy little vegetable patch.

Kathryn wore a plain brown gown, probably one of the gifts to the poor from a new novice entering the order. She perched on her knees next to a fresh-faced young nun, and the two of them were up to their elbows in dirt, happily digging away in the garden.

"The sub-prioress recommended me to find you, m'dear," Beatrice said sweetly. "She thought you might like a companion. Someone to show you the ropes on your first day at Bourlonge."

The little witch, Kathryn, flinched and, hands shaking, looked up at Beatrice.

Beatrice couldn't help the exclamation which burst from her. "What happened to *you*?"

Kathryn flushed. Fading bruises and healing cuts covered the girl's face, and her eye particularly showed signs of an old bruise just turning yellow at the edges. "Men are allowed to do what they will to women." She glared up at Beatrice. "Your brother believes so, anyway."

Beatrice scoffed and sat on a nearby bench. She smiled at the confused little Sister Catherine. "We are friends of old, dear sister. Will you leave us in solitude to reminisce?"

Darting a glance at Kathryn, who nodded reluctantly, the nun wiped her hands on her apron and wandered off.

Kathryn sighed and sat back on her heels. "Well, Beatrice, what do you want?"

"Retribution for what you did to me," Beatrice snarled.

"I did not do anything *to* you." Kathryn turned back to her vegetable patch. "I did not force you to whore yourself in exchange for social consequence. Nor did I make you tell wretched lies to the queen. Nor did I have anything to do with their highnesses' decision to banish you from the court. *I* did nothing to *you*."

Beatrice snorted. "I could have triumphed over that she-devil, Aliénor. The king would have been forced to help me to a good husband. But then you came and wrecked everything."

"What do you want me to do?" Kathryn barked back. "I can't cleanse your besmirched character nor make any decent man want you now. I say you had better take your vows today and cut your losses."

"Why, you little — " Beatrice advanced on her.

Kathryn held her off with a small spade. "Watch yourself, Beatrice. Lay a hand on me within the enclave, and there's nowhere on earth will take you then."

Beatrice sat back on her rump and scowled.

Kathryn's brows pinched together, her eyes soft and sad. "You've made your own fate, Beatrice. Now live with it."

Beatrice glowered at the girl and stomped off to the rectory to brood.

* * * * *

Kathryn's time at the convent had been painful and inconvenient, but she found much comfort in Abbess Marie. As soon as Kathryn had come to herself, she had poured out all of her story to the abbess' sympathetic ears. Marie listened patiently throughout, and on Kathryn's concluding the tale, merely looked attentive and compassionate. Marie did remark, though, as she left the room, the story would make quite the fairy tale.

Reflecting on this, Kathryn had to agree, but *she* would never write such a tale. Not now.

The abbess, Kathryn's jailer and nursemaid in one, allowed her to go about the convent now her shoulder was doing better and her appalling bruises were healing. Unfortunate that Kathryn's first day out and about the place she had had a scene with Beatrice forced on her, but this hardly troubled Kathryn. Beatrice, after all, could do nothing within the rectory, and Kathryn had been enjoying herself all morning despite the unpleasantness. She couldn't remember the last time the fresh air had splashed against her face, tugging with playful hands at tendrils of her hair. She could almost forget her worries and her sorrow in the joy of being out in the world again.

Almost.

The wolf had been gone two weeks, and Kathryn had received no word but what the abbess could tell her — of the disease and death of Lady Alisoun, of the wolf's return to humanity, his speech to his vassals, the duel, Reynard's death, and the duke's reputed injuries. That these wounds had been extensive enough to keep him abed for a while, Kathryn understood.

But

But Garwaf had found his clothes again. He had changed back. He was the Duke de Dorré now, Gabriel fitz Michael, heir to the throne until the queen was delivered of an heir — which, the abbess had confided to Kathryn, would be soon enough now. The midwife had confirmed the news only yesterday, and Aliénor had wanted word sent to Marie and Kathryn.

So, Garwaf, or *Lord Gabriel* rather, though he would soon only be *second* in succession to the throne, had become a very important person again. His lack of communication with Kathryn also made the fact apparent that he was someone who no longer had any time for her. Not now that he was human.

Their last meeting remained vivid in her head. She thought they had come to an understanding. She remembered the speaking look in his eyes, so full of promise.

Yet as the weeks passed without any word from him, it became easier to believe the promise his eyes had held was no more than a delusion of her pain-fevered mind.

Aliénor's latest letter said the king and his retinue were expected to return to the castle from Dorré any day, and frankly, Kathryn could not wait for that happy event. Surely they would send *some* word to her, and then she could resign herself completely to a life among the sisters of Bourlonge. Kathryn had decided that to lead a quiet life of scholarship and hermitage here in this lovely haven — while it was not quite what she had dreamed of — would not be so awful. She would never take vows, of course, but seclusion from the world seemed a desirable thing to her these days.

She would have reconciled herself to a monastic life already if not for Queen Aliénor. Aliénor, perhaps sensing Kathryn's disappointment, had written that *she*

believed Duke Gabriel was rough-riding through the country to storm into the convent, sweep Kathryn in his arms, and carry her off to be his bride.

Had this been his plan, though, such an event should have happened already. Kathryn had written back to Aliénor and had, at least, gotten the queen to reluctantly agree that if Gabriel did not return with the king, then Kathryn had royal permission to submerge herself in life at the convent. In fact, if she *truly* wished for seclusion, Kathryn had royal permission to withdraw from the world entirely.

Over the next couple days, Kathryn often found herself, irritatingly enough, picturing what the human Garwaf looked like and, in her most unguarded moments, embroidering on the vision the queen had conjured for her.

Once Kathryn realized she was doing this, however, she scolded herself soundly and recited in her mind the most gruesome tales of gore she could remember The strategy even worked sometimes. Sometimes she did manage to turn her thoughts away from the wolf she had lost forever. And the man she would never know.

* * * * *

Queen Aliénor, true to her promise, rode out in company with her ladies-in-waiting and several men-at-arms to visit the convent of Bourlonge, to reclaim her horse and see Kathryn. The queen stayed the day with Kathryn, and they laughed together like times of old. Aliénor showed great forbearance in only asking Kathryn to return with her to court once.

Kathryn bit her lip, giving a little head shake. "I *can't*, Your Highness."

Perhaps noticing Kathryn's fragile state, the queen shifted topics. "The midwife says I am nearly two and a half months along."

Kathryn touched the queen's thickening belly with a broad grin. "I'm not surprised."

The queen beamed. Kathryn smiled back, a little sad but happy for her friend.

Aliénor gently clasped Kathryn's hand, offering comfort. "The king has not even returned yet. He is the most abominable correspondent – only writing to tell me Gabriel is wounded and he cannot leave his nephew's side yet. But when Gabriel is well, the king will return. They *both* will."

Kathryn nodded but quickly changed the subject to something less painful.

The queen departed the next morning, taking with her Gaenor, the sweet mare she had lent Kathryn all those weeks ago.

Kathryn sighed as she watched Aliénor and the others ride away. An oppressive tide of loneliness swept over Kathryn from head to foot. The day after the queen's visit, she could not bear company. She hid in the vegetable garden with one of the new novices as chaperone, and rooted and weeded and got filthy trying to take her mind off things.

* * * * *

Gabriel's wounds had not been severe, but he had lost far too much blood for comfort. For nearly a week, he remained in a dreadful fever, half out of his wits most of the time. The only signs of coherence he showed were when he spoke of Kathryn.

Eventually the fever broke, and Gabriel began to mend.

"Well, my lad," Llewellyn said at the end of the second week. "Your wound is healing just fine. Your fever is gone. You've managed to sort out the most immediate needs of the estate while bedridden. You may be fit to travel – "

Gabriel tried to leap from bed at once, but Llewellyn held him down with a firm hand on his shoulder. "*Tomorrow*." Then, taking no chances, the magician dosed his recalcitrant patient with poppy juice to keep him still for the night.

Nothing would do next morning, though, but for Gabriel to mount up as soon the sky had lightened. His uncle hastily made preparations and rode off with his retinue straggling behind as he tried to keep up with Gabriel's eager pace.

The cavalcade arrived at the convent of Bourlonge on the second day of their journey. Gabriel rode in at the gate, warily casting his gaze about to see whether she was there.

She was not, and he staggered almost from a physical blow. His eyes, his arms, his heart ached for Kathryn.

The abbess stood ready to greet him, though. As soon as he had dismounted, she hugged him tight to her chest, weeping a very little.

He smiled kindly as he held her from him. "Where is she, Aunt?"

The abbess smiled in understanding, eyes still watery. "The vegetable patch. Sister Catherine will guide you."

When the king and Llewellyn started to follow him, Gabriel turned and waved them away. "May I go alone?"

Abashed, the two went to go take refreshment with the abbess and wait.

* * * * *

Kathryn knelt in the garden, covered in dirt and very hot. She wiped a hand across her sweat-dampened brow, smearing a long mark of dirt across her face. Oblivious, she sat back on her heels to think about Garwaf. She missed him so very much.

In acknowledging that she missed him, she surrendered at last and allowed herself to be lost in pleasant memories of fond moments with him. Llewellyn's workshop, shopping at the market together, the quiet of the rose garden, chasing each other and laughing in the king's garden . . .

* * * * *

Gabriel and his holy guide turned a corner, and all he saw was a young novice bent over her work. He turned to the sister who had escorted him there, his throat clogging with fear. "She's not a novice, surely. Lady Kathryn, I mean, she has not —"

Sister Catherine shook her head, an amused gleam in her eye. "That is one of our novices, Winifred. Lady Kathryn is just there." She pointed.

With lupine grace, he whipped his head around, and at last he saw that same lithe silhouette, still wearing a plain brown gown of the secular world. Reluctantly he tore his gaze from her back and looked to his monastic escort. "With your leave, I'll continue alone."

Catherine hesitated, but then, with a quick nod, she left.

Kathryn swatted a gnat off her face, no doubt leaving yet another daub of dirt on her cheek. She whistled gently under her breath, content with sunshine and fond recollections of her lost love, which she would always have to comfort her in her solitude.

"Excuse me . . . Lady Kathryn?"

She whirled, startled by the soft-spoken male voice behind her, but as Kathryn stared at the visitor, aghast, her breath strangled in her throat.

She gazed with probing, dazzled eyes at the dark young man who stood above her. Dusty from the road, he carried his traveling jerkin clutched in one hand. He was tall and well muscled, and his hair hung longer than the fashion of the times, deeply black with an enticing wave. His strong jaw and fine cheekbones were dark shadowed with a normally well-kept beard, now grizzled in places by a few patches of errant stubble. His lips were wide and shapely, and his nose would have been noble and aquiline but for the crook in the middle where it had been broken. He had a few long scratches on his cheek, and some darkening bruises, but other than that, he was most obviously a young man glowing with happiness and in the prime of his life.

The white scar on his face looked familiar but oddly out of place where it puckered over a *human* eye and cheek. The wind whipped up and pulled back his shirt

from his shoulder to show the thin white lines of an old wound but newly healed and scarred over. Kathryn pinched her eyes closed. *The dog bite*. She snapped her eyes open again, and the golden pendant caught the light in its rosy petals, dangling on the same chain as a heavy Jerusalem cross.

Kathryn steeled herself and gulped in a breath. Without even looking, without any of these outward signs, she would have known this man. With her eyes closed, blinded forever, deaf, dumb, or dead, still she would have known him. Something inside her simply could not help but thrum and sing out in his presence — wolf, man, or otherwise. But for all that, there remained one thing more. One last test she had to try before she could let her heart break.

She clenched her jaw and looked into his eyes.

Oh, those eyes.

Her own eyes prickled with tears as his dark gaze held her in its thrall, caressing her, cradling her, promising everything — even though it was impossible.

She wanted to look away, to break the contact and run from him. Instead, she found herself all but falling toward him, her arms reaching out, her feet tangling in her skirts as she rushed forward.

He lifted his hands, long hands calloused with a lifetime of work, battle, and running unshod through forests, but still shapely and gentle. He caught her arms, and she felt a shiver pass through him.

"Kathryn," he murmured, still staring into her eyes.

She swallowed, the lump in her throat all but choking her, and eased back to get another look at him. Kathryn had realized — well, thought — *well*, she had supposed she felt rather stronger for the wolf that she had wanted to believe, but now to find herself head over ears in love with a werewolf was . . . something quite different. She loved him, beast or no, werewolf that he was, and she would love him in any shape, any color, any form the world might choose to make him.

"Gabriel," she choked out and gave him a watery smile. He gave a small groan and held his arms wide to embrace her. Kathryn stepped happily into the circle of his

arms as if she had done so all her life. Her fingers came up to tangle in that same dark hair she recognized of old. But then, remembering the garden dirt on her hands, she clenched her fingers tight so as not to soil his shirt. Even as she twined her arms more tightly around his neck, she kept her hands curled into fists.

Gabriel clasped her tightly to him. He gulped in a deep breath. Then, over the protesting gasp of the novice chaperone, he touched his lips to Kathryn's.

He kissed her rather thoroughly, and for quite a long time too, making her all warm and fluttery inside, and leaving her totally insensible to the rest of the world. For her part, she gave up and threw her arms around him, pressing her body tight to her garwaf, her duke, her one true love.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Eventually Gabriel and Kathryn were persuaded to break apart by the offended novice. Only then did Kathryn take herself off to the washbasin to clean her hands, laughing delightedly all the while. When she came back, Gabriel held one hand out to her, and with wonder in her eyes, for the first time but certainly not the last, she shyly curled her fingers around his.

The young novice escorted them back to the receiving room to reunite with the king and Llewellyn, but those worthies had already stepped out to take some refreshment in the abbess's dining quarters. On Gabriel peremptorily ordering the young novice to go find them at once, the flustered girl ran out of the room to obey.

Kathryn started to scold her duke for such high-handed behavior, but on realizing they were quite alone for the moment, she subsided at once, her cheeks flushing.

The first thing they did, of course, was to kiss each other again. Kathryn found this activity quite enjoyable and thought she was rather getting the hang of kissing.

A short time later, Gabriel had his lady cradled in the crook of his good arm. He caressed her face and leaned back on the bench in the receiving room with a satisfied sigh. He looked down at Kathryn's sweet face and tucked an errant tendril of golden brown behind her ear.

She traced the line of his jaw, brushing his grizzled cheeks gently with her knuckles. She sighed softly and smiled, her gaze fluttering up to meet his. "Well, Sir Wolf, what now?"

"Now" He drew a deep breath, burying his face in her hair so he would not have to watch her face for this next bit. "You marry me."

"I am to become your lady?"

He nodded against her hair, which smelled of roses and fresh earth and the promise of tomorrow. "If you will have me." He leaned back to study her face. "I am still a werewolf and always shall be. There will be at least a few nights out of every month when you will have a wolf for a husband."

Kathryn seemed to think deeply about this for a moment; then she smirked up at him, one dimple bobbing a haughty curtsy at him from her cheek. "Well, I always have several days a month where I am not the most enjoyable person to live with too. I daresay it evens up." He laughed at her and leaned in to kiss her, but she pulled away, suddenly serious again. "But love, I'm only a poor baron's daughter. Shouldn't you . . . explore your options before you settle for me?"

Gabriel wrestled her into his lap, comfortably crushing her in his arms. "Idiot girl, I played that game once before and ended up with a lying harpy to wife." He paused. "God rest her soul." He shook his head. "Think you I want to play that game again when I have the best catch in the kingdom curled so deliciously in my lap already?"

Kathryn frowned still. Gabriel cupped her cheek and tilted her face so she would have to look at him. "Kathryn, I had a grand lady before, but now I should far prefer a true lady. And so you are. You are my one true lady. The only woman I could ever have

to be a real wife to me. And," he said, "if you won't have me, then I shall just have to join a monastery. Or maybe I could be Llewellyn's apprentice." Gabriel grinned.

"Blackguard." She paused, then quietly said in a very small voice, "I am your true lady?"

He held her tightly to the crook of his shoulder, emotion roughening his voice. "You are my miracle, my salvation and, indeed, my true lady. I should be lost without you if you ever leave me."

"Well," she said with a brusque tone as she settled herself securely into his lap and arranged his arms about her. "In that case I had better not leave." She quickly brushed his lips with her own. "After all, can't have *you* go to waste. You're such a fine morsel of manhood – "

Gabriel kissed her.

"Werewolfishness – "

Gabriel gently touched his lips against hers

"Mmm – "

Gabriel pulled Kathryn to him in a lingering embrace.

* * * * *

Meanwhile, the king, the abbess, and the wise man returned to the receiving room to break the solitude of the couple. The poor little novice had missed them at every turn, and so they were still in ignorance as to the whereabouts of the young couple.

"I thought Gabriel went out to the garden to find Kathryn and bring her back to see us," the abbess said testily as they walked along a corridor.

"Yes," the king said. "We can't exactly announce a royal engagement without the couple."

Llewellyn, however, had nothing to say and had fallen rather behind as he stood just out of sight of the entrance to the small receiving room, the sound of quiet voices murmuring in contented tones having reached his ears.

The king and his sister turned to start asking him questions, but the magician frantically motioned them to silence and cocked his head toward the room. Furtively the king and the abbess stole up beside him and joined in on the spying.

Quiet murmurs passed back and forth for a moment before the voices ceased altogether.

"Oy." Gabriel's booming tones barked out to the eavesdroppers. "Bugger off."

It seemed one didn't spend two years as a wolf without developing an impressive sense of hearing.

The king and Llewellyn burst out laughing, and after indulging in a moment of offended piety, the abbess was also unable to control herself, and Marie howled with laughter too.

Eventually the disturbed lovers were persuaded to admit the others into the antechamber. The couple was chastely arranged beside one another, forced to content themselves for the moment with merely holding each other's hands.

"Have you come to an arrangement between you, then?" the king asked, brows sternly drawn down.

Gabriel grinned wolfishly and kissed Kathryn's hand. "Meet the future Duchess de Dorré."

"Congratulations." Llewellyn stepped forward at once to kiss the bride.

A general round of hand shaking, back slapping, and much kissing of the bride-to-be commenced before everyone could settle down and remember what they were about.

"Well, so, is Kathryn to stay here until the wedding or remove back to court?" the king asked.

Kathryn bit her lip. "I am grateful for all the abbess has done for me, and my stay here has been a pleasure, but I miss the queen and my friends at court."

"And you do not wish to be parted from Gabriel while the wedding arrangements are made," Llewellyn said.

Without missing a beat, Kathryn replied quite shamelessly, "And I do not wish to be parted from Gabriel while the wedding arrangements are made."

Everyone laughed.

The king considered. "Well, there's more than enough room to have you back. The only difficulty I can think of is you need an escort back to the castle. After all the intrigue we went through to spare your reputation, we can hardly have you riding back without female escort in company with so many men."

"I will go with her," Beatrice said and stepped from behind the half-open door.

* * * * *

Oddly enough, the arrangement worked out quite well. Kathryn and Beatrice did not actually need to interact for things to be seemly, and the truce accomplished what it needed to, in that Kathryn's reputation remained as spotless as ever when she, in company with her fiancé and his uncle, rode in to the royal castle the very next day.

Beatrice had a room in the women's chambers again, but she did not share her chamber with anyone, and no one expected her to perform any of the duties of the ladies-in-waiting. This suited everyone admirably – Beatrice, apparently, most of all.

Lord Stephen returned to court when news of his daughter's extraordinary betrothal reached his ears. He stayed at the castle for some time and then, though no one was quite sure how, announced to his daughter and soon-to-be son-in-law that he, too, would soon marry. "She is an estimable lady, Kathryn, to be sure. I have asked the Lady Beatrice de Troumper to be my baroness." Lord Stephen smiled brightly at his shocked daughter.

Kathryn opened her mouth to tell him all about Beatrice, about Beatrice and the king, about Beatrice and everyone else with a codpiece in the royal court, but Gabriel stomped on her foot to quiet her.

Lord Stephen continued, oblivious. "The castle has been very lonely without you these past months. The place needs a mistress, and I am sure my dear lady is capable enough to set all to rights. She is kind and so considerate of my gout. I am quite taken with her," Stephen declared cheerfully.

Kathryn left the interview with her father with extremely addled wits, and when she finally decided to confront Beatrice, her soon-to-be stepmama, the change which had come over the former strumpet amazed her.

"Oh, dear Kathryn," Beatrice said, "your father is quite the sweetest man I have ever met. I pray you will not spoil this for both of us by carrying tales to him of my old life. I am quite reformed, I assure you, and want nothing more in this world than to be a good wife to Lord Stephen." Beatrice smiled angelically, patted Kathryn's cheek with infuriating condescension, and glided away to sew her wedding dress.

Kathryn left this interview even *more* addled, and when she told Gabriel, he held her in the crook of his shoulder and explained his thoughts on the matter. "The convent didn't appeal. She had no male relations to care for her. I suppose ol' Beatrice's options are rather limited. Better to be a poor baron's wife and have the rule of him than to be an old spinster sitting by a fire somewhere, unregarded, unwanted, and alone."

Gabriel was right. The more Kathryn thought about her father's marriage, the more she realized Beatrice might be the making of Lord Stephen, and he the making of her. Their marriage was, oddly enough, really all for the best.

* * * * *

Kathryn remained far too busy taking daily delight in Gabriel, the man who couldn't become her husband quickly enough, to care much about the affairs of court. A few of their friends thought they might be marrying too quickly, but to Kathryn and Gabriel the promised day did not approach fast enough. They were very much in love, and the beginning of the rest of their lives could not come soon enough to satisfy.

The both of them were very busy, but now that they were both back at court, the morning walks, more properly chaperoned now, of course, continued. Kathryn spent the first week of mornings drinking in with awe and gratitude every word that fell from Gabriel's lips. They talked of everything, shared everything that had, because of circumstances, been left unsaid between them. Every day was a revelation of how much more they could be in love, and every day they were proportionately grateful events had fallen out so well for them.

Kathryn and Gabriel's marriage took place a month and one week – to make sure the wedding night was not on the eve of a full moon – after their engagement. It seemed everyone in the kingdom was invited, and the great hall of the king's castle filled fairly to bursting with all the dignitaries and nobles come to see the beast marry his beauty.

Under the kind sermon of Llewellyn, Kathryn accepted Gabriel's ring, and together they exchanged vows, ignoring all the pomp and consequence of the event. The dubious sobs issuing from Kathryn's soon-to-be step-mama and the snores of her father were likewise disregarded. Aliénor's complaints about the silly, oversized frock she was forced to wear to accommodate the king's busily growing heir, and the king's whining about a split seam across his shoulder, both fell on unheeding ears. They barely noticed when Llewellyn accidentally skipped a page of sermon as the sheaves of paper stuck together. When Abbess Marie tripped on a rug in the chapel and accidentally took the lord's name in vain, Gabriel ignored her to keep his attention focused on Kathryn. Kathryn tripped on her train, but her gaze never wavered on her way down the aisle to Gabriel. Gabriel sneezed before he pronounced his vows, but the action barely registered.

To both of them, the day was about their love, about joining their lives together, and as such, that was all they concerned themselves with.

"Those whom God hath joined together let no man put asunder," Llewellyn intoned with convincing solemnity. He ruined his pretense the next moment, though, when he leaned in confidingly to the newlyweds and murmured, "Well, kiss each other, you great silly fools."

The crowd watching rose to their feet in appreciative delight. Gabriel and Kathryn broke apart after a short time and turned to beam at the wildly approving wedding guests.

Gabriel hugged Kathryn tightly to his heart as they faced the cheering crowd together. "Any regrets, love?"

"Just one," Kathryn said quietly.

Gabriel turned to her, scrutinizing her face, his brows pinched together. "What?"

Kathryn's dimple peeped at him from her cheek. "That I let Aliénor convince me to have this idiotic train on my wedding dress."

Gabriel grinned and kissed his bride again.

* * * * *

So it was that they were happy and united together at last. And, though Gabriel still turned into a wolf, he now had a warm bed to spend the night in and never again banished himself to the forest for his change — unless, of course, his uncle fancied a spot of hunting.

Kathryn and Gabriel would have their small fights and misunderstandings, hard times and good. But they would be together now, always and forever, living, for the most part, happily ever after.

That is all anyone can ask for.

And all they wanted anyway.

~The End~

About the Author

E.D. Walker is a SoCal native who came of age with her nose stuck in a book and a cat kneading his claws in her lap. These days her nose is glued to her laptop as she pounds

out her latest manuscript, and the cat, well, he just has to lie in wait until she goes to bed so he can knead his claws in her shoulder at 3:00 a.m. And drool.

At present, E.D. is finishing up her long overdue B.A. in English Literature at UC Berkeley.

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