

WIVES AND WOLVES

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Tales often began with names, written down in a formal mind or settled notion. It was common knowledge to know the labelings of towns and their folk, and of dogs and their cities. It was the natural inclination of man that drove them to title the simplicities of everyday living in supple words that excited one's tongue. What was a man without his name? Could anything truly be of importance if it did not hold place within words?

Yet for the *groom*, for whom this tale resides, who still wandered amongst a house that smelt of supple wheat and chastising winds. He still, ever wondered about the narrative of such supposed understanding.

The elegance of his title was a facade, for the groom was as he was, a mere creature of strangest proportions. One that coiled the space he passed through with hideous abundance. By sight he was arching, and yet silent as the beasts of woods when they hunted. His body stretched towards the sun like a yearning branch, for the aspects of men could not be destroyed entirely, but the remnants of humble shoulders and limbs were all that remained of a gentle image. The groom bared the head of a wolf, gnarled with a maw gaping with fangs, and dark as the blackest soot. His hands kept claws sharp enough to rip the finest silks, and his eyes sought flesh and bone in the briefest darkness.

The groom *supposed* he had once been a man, though he was surely not one any longer.

He supposed the countryside that sheltered him had a name as well, but he had long since forgotten it. His name had already drifted with the rural winds, a revering title lost to the fogs of careless choices, and had left him with nothing. Nothing per say, beyond wife.

He called her such, if in the brief moments when they neared one another in comforted motion. Wife. Though it was not her name, and the groom did not know it. Nor did he have the

inclination to ask, for he'd attempted plenty before of course, but it never brought more than the curl of tentative lips and glossy eyes. He only recalled awakening, to see the veil of her dress one night, as well as the clutch of her hands. But the memories felt too recent to reminisce. She had dressed him in bigger tunic and sharper cloth, and had not fled at drawing presence wherever he followed her. He had not known why she allowed it, why he desired to follow her guidance into the warmth of a distant cabin with utter comfort.

The groom had only *known*. Peering into glistening eyes, and sweetened face. The groom had only known he loved her, and *my*-was there comfort in knowing.

And so they lived. Groom and bride, wife and wolf. The groom could taste the time of their abode crumble by miniscule minutes in the hidden sanctuary they had inhabited. For Wife did not tell him much, she only showed, and she had shown him a home, one built in ivory wood in the solace of the fields and the chatter of the birds. She treated him gently, and when her hands dared to dance atop his glistening claws, the groom ushered back, fearful to tear the delicate skin she wore. It occurred too often, fervently with how his feet chased the movements of her bare soles across wooden floors. Her presence felt too rightly placed, and the removal of it broke his passivity and wrenched him from whatever armchair he had settled in.

He didn't leave her be, he couldn't. There was wrongness in being separated, in daring to part from the warmth of their shared existence. But annoyance never surfaced in his oddly timed attachments, she was consistent in greeting him with a low chur of a voice that breathed into his soul. Wife never wore a wedding dress, the imagery of the flowing veil seemed to merely pass in his memory, for the paleness of the dress was not akin to what she wore then. Colorful patterns of red and yellow, greens that marked the furtive grass by the porch. It was all just as beautiful, but it did not tempt him enough to grasp at the fragile fingertips she offered.

She laughed at him for this. Softly, as if he were foolish for his worry.

When night came and silence draped itself atop the moors, *that* was when the groom saw her most pensive. It was a rare they

occasion when she failed to drag him to bed, and he was timely-watching the gleam of the glass atop a clicking clock, and padding with immediacy to the bedchambers when night reached its peak. His feet resounded heavily when he walked, but the sight was always the same. Wife with thoughtful look, the drape of a nightdress upon her limbs, and open arms. It was a collision of ridiculous embraces, of a warmth that drew him to grasp the lean of her back to his chest, the blankets cupping his hands-it was the only time he knew they could not harm. She was quiet only then, breathing the fur of his shape, and saying nothing of the astoundingly clinging ritual.

Until one night, when the groom could not find her-and the loss of the daily embrace sent him to hurried concern.

He'd bounded through the household insistently that night. Nosing his way into doorways and chambers, huffing and whining when emptiness greeted him. He keened in anxiousness, clumsily tossed his maw to the air in some desperate attempt to find the glimpse of her golden presence. Yet it was only in his panicked findings that his eyes flashed in the breeze of an open window, and found the weight of her feet drenched in the height of the glory flowers. His pause had come stricken, but he dashed to the outdoors without hesitation, and her ears caught the hurry of his pace before he ever neared her.

"I just wished to see the stars," she told him-when his beastly hands hovered over her, and the ghost of a chastise filtered between fangs. "I miss the dances with the moon.. don't you?"

Dances. The notion of it had stilled the groom from herding her back into the air of the abode, *dances*. The stars were enveloping, dotted lights that hung themselves so daintily across the expanse of the dark sky. The groom's heart wrung at the sight, twisted so oddly that it pained him to drift over the notion of some hidden desire, his feet burned in an itching shame-but the furrow of his sight rested on only the woman before him. She gazed permissibly at him, but the groom spied the flare of a desired to

within them, though it drowned in such a *wanting* that it seemed to shake her frame. It pained her, and the knowledge of it drew a curdling sound from his grated tongue. He did not wish for it, this odd sensation that had emerged-his body shifted in a mere instinct, reached out to ease her, and drew back just as well in reminder of his cursed touch.

But above all, he sat still. Glinted paw extended to her whims, his shoulders bent in softened wait, his eyes crinkling at her features. He offered, his body and mind fired to the knowledge that *this* was right, though he little recalled why. She had mentioned dances, the groom recalled dances, had they not danced before? Her confusion laced her eyes as she watched, drifted to his extended palm with sifted breath, an air that dared to choke her, and took her time to move.

She took his palm. Claws and all, and danced.

They danced with the moon as their witness, with the stars glinting in match with their shapes and the curl of her lips in a whispering laugh. So that when it ended, and the delight of their actions faded in comforted silence, the groom watched the length of her fingers tap to her thighs as they walked in returning intention. The dance followed their rhythm in lingering pace, and the groom swore it did not leave him for days.

She spoke words to him.

No meager parting of her lips was worth missing, not with the kindness of each conversation drawing him to contentment-even if he could little answer in accuracy. His throat was horrendously garbled these days, scratchy as the mountain winds, his voice *howled* however with whatever he attempted to speak, and daring to attempt better chatter drew sounds too beastly to be repeated. It startled him, when he had first offered a mumble to her presence, but she spoke enough for the both of them-ringing throat unyielding to the a flaw of his speech.

She told him she loved him. Loved him more than the most gorgeous blooms of springs and the temptations of warm she spoke

noons, she cooed the words at him constantly-and though he did not answer, his teeth clacked heartily whenever she spoke it. His bones could little handle the excitement in his frame when she spoke of him, whatever word was worthy of joy if it came from her, she bathed them all in worthy brilliance. Every breath was never wasted on her tongue, and he only wished he could speak the softness of their meaning just as well. Yet the weight of her speech faltered with him, she could never fail to mutter another word in her whispers, and the word always paled her when she spoke it. She called him that word, often. The groom couldn't decipher it, he could not recall its significance in their patterns, she called him many things in truth. Darling was on a consistent occasion, precious on others, and there were plenty more that existed with their affections. But the word she spoke floated only briefly in his mind. He tried prying, staring inquisitively when she spoke it just as fondly as any other address, but the moment her realization clutched onto the matter of her speaking it-her cheeks thinned and she turned from him, so forcibly it seemed to make her ill.

So he did not ask, and only pondered.

It was truly nothing, words were nothing but sifted sounds, but that one had stuck to his ribs stubbornly. Perhaps it was because Wife had spoken it, and he did so care for her words. But it did not leave him easily, it appeared to him that the more he pondered, the louder the word grew, and he paced incoherently against lengthy halls, baring teeth at empty ghosts and that foolish sound that followed. On those occasions, he found peace by the mirror, a mere turn from the hall-with glass tall enough to meet his eyes, however dipped in darkness they were.

Beside it, he watched himself cautiously. The groom could spy it all upon him, with broad shoulders and sprawling ears, how he was a lashing sight of beast and man. To call himself a creature was wrong, but it was a worse injustice to stare longer at the reflection, it did not feel akin to right-not like the warmth of Wife or the dance with the stars. He seemed to wear a face, a false snout that creaked unnaturally.

In the reflection, there are hundreds of him-but what looks forth is a man, whose eyes are pained and whose hair is ash. It's the

the face of a man he'll never meet, but when he comes closer, the image looks back, shaking and deforming into ripples until only the wolf stares on.

It only came to pass one day, that he could take it no longer.

Wife had appeared in a blur, drawn to the collapsing crash of his destruction, and wide-eyed in the face of the fitful madness he indulged himself in. The groom had spied his reflection once more, but had only met the sight of baleful teeth and lingering fur had suddenly suffocated him in their appearance, without reason, and without knowledge, he had *loathed* it. He'd hated the image of the beast with such visceral truth that his palms had lashed, and claws had torn through the glass like snow upon the wood. Both mirror and reflection had shattered to the sudden wrath, clinging to the floor and ringing a symphony of clashing catastrophes in their fall.

The effect had held him in horror, how could it not? But it was the tumbling mess of actions in itself that had bubbled a cry too long held within him, his hands had gripped the heaviness of his snout, and only felt the ripping of flesh in his desperate clutches. Blood dribbled from him, but the taste of it was nothing in this sardonic display, his body had turned to writhing like a child, his limbs thumping as if the pain of his own claws could truly kill him. It was all wrong, and his wailing screeches clipped into the air and howled to the sky, meeting the woods and branches, and stranding him on ruined floorboards. He could not stop, he simply could not, because it all felt wrong.

The madness lasted as long as Wife stood still, and she neared him too quickly for it to linger. Her knees crushed the glitter of glass before he could protest, but it was her touch that awakened him-the frantic clutch of her fingers to cradle his maw. A fierce hold, as if she feared he would dissolve if she released him, but it stilled him wholly, in heaving mess but in subdued reassurance. Her fingertips dug into his flesh, but the groom called to her, begging her nearing against the tears of her cheeks and the strength of her coddle. She held to him steadfast, and shifted her

vibrant lips to the word of his torturing.

She spoke it once, and suddenly the groom *knew*.

“Jeremias.”

Jeremias.

She spoke it again, and the groom raised a trembling palm to her cheek. He dared to touch the softness of her skin, and recalled its rosiness when she went to search for flowers, he recalled the flush of her nose whenever she sniffed a good tea. He recalled her essence and her love, and how he had forgotten. He had *forgotten*, it was clenching pain to hold and know, for how could he have *forgotten*? His darling of the woods, with glorious making and utter perfection, his shivering frame when their wedding had come—the curse of envious brothers and his own love.

He was sobbing, hideous tears rolling upon a face not his own—clutching her like a jewel and her holding him like a glass.

“Jeremias,” she cried, and how he nodded, how his name sounded so right.

The wolf said nothing, but the man did.

“Elina.” He said, remembering, gloriously so. “*Elina.*”

Tales often began with names, and he finally recalled each one.

In Finnish folklore, werewolves are born at weddings, which occurs when a jealous relative curses either the bride, her groom, or the accompanying party members. In belief, it is said that the curse can be broken if the wolf is recognized by a loved one in their monstrous state. I, on the other hand, wondered whether the opposite could be said—if the man inside the wolf had to remember first.