

Victoria Landazuri

To The Wolves

In my dream I'm running.

A scent on the summer wind. Warm, flavorful, and moving fast. Knows I'm coming. Can't fall behind. I follow.

Wait. Stop. It's changed directions. Getting closer now. Maybe it doesn't know. A rustling in the trees, a twig snaps. It's coming.

It comes stumbling through the branches. A female. Lost, alone, panicked. Delicious. I wait. She hasn't seen me yet. Drool drips off my tongue. Turns in circles, stops facing away from me. Doesn't move. *Now*, I say.

It's over before she can even turn her head.

The hot, salty blood dribbles from my mouth with that first, sweet bite. I haven't tasted anything like it for days. And it's mine. All mine.

As I fade the night has never felt more alive. It is my eternal hunting ground, mine to command as I see fit. Yet I am utterly alone in it. My pack is gone. Where have they gone? Onward. Without me. I throw my head back and howl into the dark blue night, up towards the silvery moon. I already know there will be no response.

My eyes snap open.

I'm in my bed again, the sheets and my nightgown in a tangle around my bare legs. It takes me a moment to realize how warm it is; the sheets are sticky with sweat as I peel them away and sit up. Why is it so warm?

“My lady?” A meek voice says from the doorway. I look to see Mother’s handmaiden looking in apprehensively.

“Jane.” I say back. I slide my legs over the side of the bed, putting on worn slippers. “Did someone leave the furnace burning last night? It’s ghastly in here.”

“No, my lady.” Jane crosses over to the window. “It wasn’t burning at all, as far as I know.” She throws the curtains open. The room is flooded with the pale light of dawn, the sun just barely begun to rise over the hill facing my room. Jane peers over at me with watery blue eyes. “Are you feeling ill, my lady? You look flushed.”

“Ah—no, I’m fine.” I brush a stray lock of hair from my face. “Did you want something?”

“Your lady mother requests your presence downstairs. She says it’s important.”

Somewhere outside a rooster crows.

~

“I believe it is time for you to marry.”

Those are the first words out of Mother’s mouth after the usual morning greetings. I look up from my picked-at food. It isn’t like Mother to be so straightforward. She is usually the perfect picture of insincerity, particularly when we have guests. She watches me evenly from across the table, waiting for me to reply. When I don’t, she continues. “You are of the proper age, you’ve had your blood, and I have a suitor in mind. I am trying to negotiate a meeting for you.” *Another extravagant ball, you mean. I thought the vaults had run dry, Mother. We have naught but our name left now.*

“May I ask who this suitor is?”

“Lord Connington’s eldest son. I don’t believe you’ve ever met Robert.” *Connington*. I try to remember what I can about them. Lord Connington died of gout some years ago, but left a substantial inheritance to his three sons. Robert...Robert must be at least in his thirties by now. There are many things I would like to say, but I hold my tongue; Mother is utterly humorless when it comes to marriage and money.

“I will meet with this Sir Robert, if it pleases you, Mother.” I say finally. She sits back, that dry smile back on her face.

“It would, love. Very much so.”

~

I lie awake in my bed, staring out the window next to me. The summer moon hangs fat and full beyond the horizon outside. I almost wish I could reach out and touch it. I've spent the whole day thinking of what Mother had said. Robert...Robert and Johanna. We already sound like a boring couple. But I want to meet him; he could still be handsome at his age, witty, kind, adventurous. Perhaps it would be better that he is older; the few boys of fifteen I know are either insufferably arrogant or terribly dull, dreaming of knighthoods and women and...whatever else they dreamed of. I wonder if he would see me as such, as little more than a child. But I would prove him wrong. If he were deserving of it, I would teach myself to be a good wife. I would have to.

"She wasn't always like this, you know." My grandmother snaps me back to attention. I'd almost forgotten she is there, sitting quietly by my bedside. She came to my bedroom unannounced. It's an odd talent of hers, knowing when she's needed. She had insisted on getting a fire going, to warm her old bones. I am still as uncomfortably warm as I had been that morning.

"Who?" I blink, confused.

"Margaret." Grandmother is the only person allowed to call Mother by her first name. It's almost an unspoken rule. "She was much like you once, actually. She adjusted well to married life, more so than anyone thought she would." I shift in my bed.

"Was it Father who made her change?" I ask. I always like hearing about him; it's the closest I can get to knowing him. Grandmother smiles solemnly.

"In a way. Your father was a good man, and she loved him dearly. She took his death very hard, I fear. She is a different woman now, and is like to stay that way. But you mustn't hold that against her. She is only looking out for your best interest."

"And our estate." I mutter. Grandmother makes a face.

"Be glad she didn't hear you say that." We both go quiet for a moment, listening to the gentle crackling of the fireplace. But I'm not ready to fall asleep just yet.

"Grandmother," I say, "can you tell me a story?" I feel silly for even asking. Grandmother's eyebrows disappear into her fluffy white hair.

"Why, child, you haven't asked me for a story in years."

"I know," I smile, "but I'd like one now."

"Well alright. What would you like to hear about?" I don't have to think. The answer almost leaps to my tongue, though I don't know where it came from.

“Do you know any stories about...wolves?”

“Wolves?”

“Wolves.”

Grandmother looks up to the left for a moment. “I believe I know one. An old tale about this town, actually.” I nod a little too eagerly than I mean to. “Well, like most towns it was once just a little farming village, not even a speck on any map. For the most part, the people lived peacefully, with very little to worry about in their day-to-day lives.

“But one night, towards the end of summer, the village was attacked by a ravenous pack of wolves. There was no warning, no signs of their presence in the nearby forest. They appeared as if from thin air. Their numbers were too great for the hunters to handle, so on that first terrible night the villagers could do little but watch as their livestock were dragged screaming into the night.

“This continued for many nights afterward. Each time they would appear, take what they could, and disappear without a trace. They were clever beasts, but each night the hunters would lay traps for them. It was in this way, slowly but surely, that their numbers dwindled, until only one wolf remained. This one was clearly the head of the pack, more massive than any the villagers had ever seen, and with pitch-black fur like a moonless night. He was also the hardest to kill. Try as they might, the villagers could neither shoot him nor catch him in any of their traps. He evaded every single attempt made on his life. Yet still he came, as ferociously as ever. He even attacked the villagers, were they foolish enough to be outdoors at night. Some thought he meant to avenge his brothers and sisters. We will never know.

“One morning during the attacks, a girl called Rose woke to find her bare feet covered in dirt, though she had not left her house in days. This happened for days after; each night she would scrub her feet clean, and each morning they would be dirty again. This did not go unnoticed by her family. One night her brother watched her while she slept to see what she would do. Sure enough, in the dead of the night, she rose from her bed, silent as can be, and crept out of the house. As her brother watched, she walked towards the edge of town, towards the forest. Her brother called out to her, but she did not seem to hear him. When he finally ran to stop her, she awoke from her trance with a scream, and fell to the ground sobbing when she realized where she was.

“Frightened by the danger she was in, her family locked her in her room each night, so she could not go out and be at the mercy of the wolf. In the night she would awake and claw at her door, screeching to be let out, yet in the morning she remembered none of it. This seemed to work, but it had an unexpected effect. As her family failed to realize, every night that Rose

disappeared into the forest, the wolf did not come. On nights when she was locked in her room, however, he did a very strange thing. The wolf would stop at the edge of the village, throw back his head and howl mournfully. It was the saddest, most painful noise any of the villagers had ever heard. But they'd rather he did that than attack, so they did nothing. And unbeknownst to all but Rose's family, there was no price to pay for it.

"But the damage done to the village had taken its toll. Livestock was all but nonexistent, and a draught seemed imminent. Theft and crime ran rampant in a once peaceful place, and the villagers grew bitter and mistrustful towards each other. Until one day, a massive fight broke out. No one knows exactly how it started, but in minutes the village was thrown into chaos. It eventually died down, but in the confusion Rose had vanished. For weeks after her family searched for her, but in vain. The girl was never seen again, and the wolf never again attacked the village. But to this day, the townspeople swear, if you look up on that hillside under the light of the harvest moon, you may catch a glimpse of not one, but two wolves. One is the fabled black wolf, and the other, a female, with fur as red as a bloody sunset."

Grandmother sits back, slightly winded from all the talking.

"Was this true?" I asked. "Were there really wolves here?"

"Perhaps. The best stories have a kernel of truth in them."

"But they were no ordinary wolves."

"Perhaps, perhaps not. The leader may have been nothing but an exceptionally strong, intelligent wolf that behaved very oddly, and lost interest in the village when he found a mate."

"But then what happened to Rose?" Grandmother shrugs.

"She ran away. She died. No one knows. That's the question, isn't it?" She stands and kisses me on the forehead. "And you should sleep. You will be meeting your suitor in a few days."

"I'm not tired." I say automatically, though I feel my eyelids beginning to droop. So much for not behaving like a child. Grandmother gives me a quick smile before leaving.

"Good night, dearest."

~

I'm in the woods again. Though I am not alone.

They are all around me, wary but welcoming. I am not yet one of them; my smell is different from theirs. But they are curious about me.

In the center are the red and the black, the wife and the husband. The rest are...the children? The brothers and sisters? In the end it doesn't much matter. They are all one.

They circle around me, tossing my scent back and forth as if it were a ball. Their eyes never leave me. They envelop me, flowing in, out and around me like water. The only one with no trace of doubt in their eyes is the husband. He knows me. He accepts me. And soon the others will as well. He does not speak, but his words echo in my ears.

You need not be alone anymore. Welcome home.

~

The days pass in apprehension. There isn't much to do but watch Mother make the preparations. Lots of cooks and decorators running in and out. I wonder if Robert will even like it; his family is from a city originally, maybe they don't even like the countryside, maybe he won't even *like* me, maybe, maybe, maybe...lots of maybe-s.

The dreams have stopped, but my nights are just as taxing. I can't get Grandmother's story out of my head. I feel as if I've heard it before, heard it a million times over the course of centuries, yet it's utterly new and foreign to me.

I had never seen Rose before, didn't know if she even existed, yet her face is as clear in my mind as my own. Tall for her age, willowy, athletic. Not small and waifish like me. Her eyes are a bright gold, where mine are two chips of dirty snow. She is not pretty, not exactly; she freckles easily in the sun where I burn, and she has a long, sharp nose, unlike my annoyingly small one—Grandmother calls it a "pixie nose." It's her smile that makes her face come alive. And her hair is the color of fire, of summer, of a bloody sunset. She keeps it long so it can catch the light, so it can dance like flames. My blonde curls only glow dully.

Who was she? Was she aware, for one moment, of what she was, what she would do? And the wolf, did he love her or kill her? Was he once human? Did he change like her, envelop her, tear and twist her until there was no shred of the human Rose left in her? Or did she choose her own fate? Maybe she loved him. Maybe she seduced him in exchange for her village's safety. Maybe she had tasted blood and never wanted to go back.

Either way, I am getting no sleep.

The day comes. The day I meet my potential husband, and I am positively dead. Everyone Mother has invited is here. Friends of the family, family of the family, friends I'd never

met, all mingling in the main room. I wait to make my entrance, because Mother told me to. She fusses over me as I try not to suffocate beneath the heinously tight bodice of my dress.

“There now, just let me fix this curl, remember to lift your skirts a bit when you walk, we wouldn’t want you tripping over your own feet, for goodness’ sake, don’t *slouch* like that...” I am on the verge of telling her to marry him herself when she finally finishes. “Alright, love, just through the door now. Remember to smile. Good luck.”

Someone pushes the door open for me, and I step into the brightly lit room.

I don’t know where to look first; no one seems to notice that I’ve arrived, they just continue their bustling, rustling by in waves of fabric, talking amicably with whoever is nearby. I wander for a bit. None of the faces look familiar, and I don’t even know what Robert *looks* like. You’d think Mother would have at least pointed him out to me, but I turn and she is nowhere to be found. *So...what do I do now? Take a glass of wine? Chat with everyone until I figure out who Robert is? Do a little dance for everyone?* I’m lost.

“Welcome, lords and ladies, to my humble abode.” Mother’s voice rings high and sweet over the chattering. The room falls quiet as every eye turns to her, a vision in emerald green at the top of the grand staircase. “I hope that you all have enjoyed your stay thus far.” She has spared no expense on her outfit, everyone can see that; the pearls at her throat and in her hair are alight with a soft glow, her gold ringlets carefully arranged around her heart-shaped face. I wonder if anyone here thinks *she’s* the one getting married. But I know it’s an act; she’s spent the last of our money on this ball, on my pretty dress, on a desperate attempt to marry me into more money. I’m surprised she is not sweating enough to fill a bucket up there.

“Please, friends, let us rejoice in each other’s company, and enjoy the life and music and laughter that has brought us together today. Seeing as this my daughter Johanna’s first introduction into society,” she pauses, her eyes finding me quicker than lightning, “I humbly request that she be given the first dance.”

Mother steps down daintily, and the band picks up with a lively tune. As if given some silent command, the crowd seems to fall away, leaving me alone in the center of the room. Except...he’s there, across from me, just a bit apart from the throng. He is tall, broad-chested, a little grey around the beard and temples, but not hard to look at. I’m pleased so far. I try my best to glide as effortlessly across the floor as Mother does, remembering to lift my skirts just a bit as I walk. The dress is a nice peach color. *Don’t look at it, look at him. I hope...does he like the color? I think he does. I think it goes well with my skin tone. But—oh, what if it makes me look pale, in this light especially I—ugh, stop it.* We meet in the middle. I sink into a delicate curtsy, heart fluttering like a caged bird. He bows stiffly. I look up to give him the brightest smile

I can manage. He does not smile back, only gives a slight inclination of the head. I ignore it—he's probably just nervous.

And the dance begins. We begin slowly, turning and circling each other, eye contact never breaking. I try to watch his feet without looking at them; his steps are quick, agile, if a bit heavy for his size. He moves like one strong, decisive, athletic. He spends much time outdoors, maybe.

"Sir Robert Connington." I say sweetly, still moving to the music. "Charmed to meet you, my lord."

"You as well." He says it without feeling, a formality. He breaks eye contact to look off to the left. He still has not smiled.

"Do you hunt, my lord? You move like a skilled hunter, if I dare say." The other dancers are slowly trickling back onto the floor. I do my best to ignore them without bumping into any. My attention is on him right now.

"I've been known to indulge."

"I've never been hunting before."

"Is that right?"

"But I've always wanted to. Perhaps one day you could show me."

"Perhaps. Though it is really no place for a lady." He cracks a very faint smile, the first I've seen from him. "The woods are a dangerous place. I wouldn't want such a delicate thing like you coming to harm." I bite my tongue, feeling myself blush. Should I be flattered?

"As you say, my lord. I spend more of my time reading, to be honest. I love the written word, how it comes alive on the page, colors the air around you."

"Words are words. I know a few, when the situation calls for it. I try not to fill my head with words from stories and fairy tales. I don't find them particularly practical, to be honest."

"Perhaps you haven't found the right teacher, then. I should like to teach you new ones every day. Ones in English, French, Latin and Italian. Beautiful words." I am actually not particularly good at Latin or Italian, but he does not need to know that. He looks at me as if he hadn't really noticed me before. I am honestly not sure what to call the expression on his face.

"Perhaps."

The morning after came and went. I'm not sure how to feel when Mother reports, with barely concealed glee, that Robert has agreed to see me again. He even sent over one of his maids to attend to me. His idea of a gift, perhaps. That or he wants her to report back to him all the silly things I say.

In the evening the girl tends to me after I've had my bath. She is a nervous little thing, younger than me, quiet and mousy as she combs out my wet hair. I should make her feel welcome.

"My name is Johanna, by the way. You can call me that, if you like."

"Yes, my lady." She misses the hint.

"What's your name?"

"Marie."

"Well, Marie, tell me about Sir Robert. What does he like to do?"

"He...he likes to hunt, my lady. He is very good at it. Sometimes he brings in three, four kills at a time."

"What else? Does he sing, play cards, have grand parties?"

"Not that I know of, my lady." I resist the urge to frown. No one is telling me anything here.

"You know, I hear you can tell a lot about a person by their hands. Whether they're soft or hard, the fingertips smooth or callused. Tell me, does Sir Robert have soft hands? I imagine they're strong, yet gentle." I'm just babbling now, talking more to myself than to Marie. But she stops combing for a moment, eyes dropping to the ground. There is a long silence before she speaks.

"No, my lady. His hands are strong, but not gentle. They are...hard. Very hard." Her voice is dead as she says this. Absently, she reaches up to rub the back of her neck. I catch a glimpse of a bruise under her collar, purple and angry. A fresh one. My breath catches in my throat. Seeing that I've noticed, she hastily drops her hand and gets back to combing. Somehow I don't feel right asking her about it.

~

Robert has come for supper. He and his company will take up half of the grand table in the dining hall. I have to admit, it is a nice change from eating alone save for Mother. Not that I

don't love her dearly; I do, but I cannot help craving a different sort of company from time to time.

Robert has been seated next to me, of course. With the bustle of the servants' running back and forth with various courses, and the lively conversation going on around us, we can speak without fear of being overheard. Anyone looking over would simply think we were getting to know each other. Which I plan on doing anyway.

"It's a little strange having so many people here." I admit to him, smiling demurely. "Even with all the feasts Mother had thrown over the years I'm afraid I'm still not used to having so much going on all at once."

"You will learn." Robert says between bites, "I've never been one for small talk myself. Playing at it is an acquired skill."

"A skill I would very much like to learn. When we are married I plan to—"

"*When* we are married?" He gives me a sidelong glance. "You're awfully presumptuous, aren't you?" I feel an unpleasant heat creep up my neck. Why did I say that?

"Forgive me, my lord. I only meant that—"

"I know what you meant. Still, you shouldn't speak out of turn. It isn't becoming of a lady." I meekly take a bite of the stew in front of me. Somewhere inside of me, there's a twinge of annoyance. *He's* awfully presumptuous, telling me how I should carry myself. I get enough of that from my mother. But I swallow my indignance with the next bite. "But, supposing we are married," he continues, "there are certain things you should learn as a wife. Things you should learn as *any* man's wife."

"And what would those things be, my lord?"

"To be compliant. To not speak out of turn. To have your husband take his pleasures wherever he wishes. To not meddle in his affairs." He looks at me pointedly. "And above all, do everything in your power not to displease him. You will be held responsible for the consequences if you do."

There's something wrong with the way he says that last part. Something I don't like about the way he looks at me. I wince and go back to my stew, taking care not to look at him. When the man on his other side engages him in conversation, I sneak a quick look at his hand resting on the table. I remember what Marie said. Yes, they look hard. Very hard indeed. I remember the bruise on her neck. Somewhere in the back of my mind it had bothered me. Now I can't help considering where it might have come from.

This is the man you may very well spend the rest of your life with.

~

Robert is in my dream.

We are alone in the clearing except for the fluttering in the trees. His eyes are locked with mine. And the bow...drawn back, cold and steady in his hands. Pointed at me.

The power I had is gone. I am alone once again, helpless in the face of death. I cannot run—he will catch me. I cannot fight—I will be dead before I can get close enough. I cannot even scream—no one will hear.

You brought this on yourself. Robert's mouth does not move, yet his voice rings in my ears. *You were dead the moment you laid eyes on me.* He draws closer. There is nothing left to do. I close my eyes and wait for the pain.

The pack descends on him as if from nowhere. He barely has time to even turn his head. The husband, lightning-quick, is the first to sink his teeth into Robert. His powerful jaws snap shut like a trap around his meaty arm. Robert howls like an animal, black blood cascading to the ground. The wife appears beside him, snapping at his ankles. The others are here now. Before he can run, before he can fight, before he can let out even out pitiful whimper, they are on him.

And I watch as they tear him apart.

~

The days blur together. More meetings with him, empty conversations, trying to get the horrific images of his skinless face out of my mind. Days turn to weeks, weeks turn to months. He has agreed to marry me. I should be happy to hear it. Mother certainly is. And Grandmother says she is, though I know she can see Robert for what he really is. She must.

I think I am falling ill. The dreams have returned with a vengeance. Every night I dream of *them*, the piercing howls, the carnage staining the night, and I wake flushed and weak. Mother has called doctors over a few times. They don't know what's wrong. They don't know anything. I just lay awake, praying I don't fall asleep.

"...you see, Margaret?" Hushed voices outside my door. I open my eyes. It's well after midnight. Grandmother's voice. "She is unwell. You pushed this on her far too quickly."

"And what would you have me do?" Mother's voice hisses. As silently as I can, I slip out of bed. "Lose our home? Our lineage? You'd miss those diamond slippers a lot more than you think."

“Hush, child. You forget your place.” Grandmother’s voice is harsher than I’ve ever heard it. I creep over to the slightly open door and sit down so I can hear better, drawing my knees up against my chest.

“Robert is a good man,” Mother insists, “he is stable, of substantial wealth---“

“And not a man to be trusted. There’s something not right about him, mark my words. And Johanna does not love him, that is plain to see.”

“She doesn’t need to. Love will come with the marriage. That is just how it works. She will love him. She will *learn* to love him.” There’s a pause. “That’s what I did.”

“Well, keep this up and she’s like to go mad. I don’t doubt she is already, the way she’s been behaving. She is just a pawn in your little game, and she knows it. The poor child doesn’t even know who her father was.”

“I’ve told her all I can about Henry—“

“I am not talking about Henry.”

There’s a cold, dead silence. My heart is pounding in my ears. I shouldn’t be listening to this, I should—

“I don’t know what you mean.” Mother finally says, so quietly that I almost don’t catch it.

“I think you do.”

“No. I don’t.” She speaks through clenched teeth. “And you will never speak to me of it again.” Grandmother’s quiet response blurs into the background. I can’t take any more. I rise and go back to bed as if in a trance. And I will myself to sleep.

~

My entire morning is plagued with echoes of last night. What did Grandmother mean? About Father? What she was implying...I can’t even begin to consider what it means.

I stare at Mother from across the table. She’s speaking with one of the decorators. She’s clearly irritated. On edge. I can’t imagine why she’s doing this during breakfast. Perhaps she needs a distraction from last night as much as I do.

But why would what Grandmother said upset her so? Mother has never been one to give much notice to false accusations, unless they were made public or affected her reputation somehow. But Grandmother would never do that, not to her own daughter. So why then?

Unless what she implied is true. But it couldn't be...could it? I can't ask Mother directly, that's for sure. She would only deny it regardless. But I have to know. I have to find some way to know for sure. But how? *How?*

And then it hits me. Mother's journal. I know she keeps one. I remember as a little girl I would watch her write in it. She even let me practice my penmanship in it once. The only question is when she started keeping it. Before I was born? After? Does she even still have it? I don't know. But there's only one way to find out. It will have to be today; anytime after and I would lose my nerve. Not to mention I couldn't stand to wait. Mother will be fluttering around all day making plans. I can only hope she won't have reason to go to her chambers. Yes. Today. After breakfast.

"Is something the matter?" Mother's voice snaps me out of my thoughts. She's peering over at me, eyebrows raised. The decorator left I don't even know how long ago.

"N-no, Mother. I am fine."

~

My every step up the stone stairs seems to echo like thunder. By some miracle, I make it up to Mother's room without turning and bolting back to my own, terrified of what I nearly did. She is occupied, but for how long? What if she left something behind, has to come get it, has some reason to come up here? What would I say I was doing here? What if she came in while I was...doing what I'm planning on doing? No. No, I can't afford to think like that right now. I'll just go in, find what I need to, and get out.

I don't even remember the last time I set foot in this room. It feels smaller somehow. Colder. It doesn't feel as if anyone lives here. I don't feel the sense of a safe haven like I did as a little girl. Perhaps it's only because I'm not supposed to be in here.

Alright. If I were my mother, where would I keep my journal? Someplace easily accessible? I go for the bedside table first and open all the drawers. Nothing. Someplace on or in her dresser? Nothing there either. I continue to search, as slowly and as methodically as my whinging nerves will allow. But the tiny leather book is nowhere to be found. The room is rather stark, with even less furniture in it than mine. There aren't many other places it could be hidden. Unless...wait. Why would she keep it in a place easily found? Mother is nothing if not without her secrets. She would keep it someplace only she knew, especially if it contained the information I think I does. But where would that be?

My feet move, almost of their own accord. To the little rug in the center of the room. As if in a trance, I lift the faded red velvet and push on the floor beneath it. There's a loose board here.

Of course. I remember now. One night, when it was time for bed, Mother had Jane bring me back to my room. I must have been four or five. As I was leaving, holding on to Jane's skirts, I looked back for but a moment. Mother was kneeling on the floor, putting something under the rug. She must not have realized I was watching. For the life of me, I don't know why I'm remembering this just now. But it's there. I know it is. I wiggle the floorboard free and with a moan it pries open. It's there, having clearly been taken out recently. The little book, bound in leather the color of midnight. I'm almost afraid to touch it, as if the moment I do Mother will come bursting in demanding to know why I'm there. But I do. I pick it up, and carefully, as if I'm holding a tiny, delicate creature in my hands, I begin to leaf through the pages.

There's a lot here. Mother, in her miniscule, flawless handwriting, had been keeping it for years. Many of them are dated from before I was even born. Good. That's what I'm looking for. I flip through and find the entries I need. The ones written in the year before I was born. I can't let myself look at anything else. With all the things written in here, it will hold my attention for hours and I'm not sure I have that much time.

Here. Mother's engagement to him. Henry. My father. He is short, she says. With bad skin and ears like a monkey. Only a year older than her. I do a quick calculation in my head. Sixteen. Here she was sixteen and Henry was seventeen. Grandmother insisted it was a very good match. Convenient for both families. But Mother was not satisfied with that. My eyes begin to focus sharply on every single word.

...can't live like this. In constant suspense, waiting to be carted off like cattle to the monkey boy. The thought of marrying him, laying with him and carrying his child inside of me is sickening. I can't even stay in bed at night. My own room feels like a prison, the walls closing in on me as my days of girlhood grow short. I've taken to going outside at night, off grounds. I run, sing, anything I can think to do. It is my one solace in this wretched hand I've been dealt...

Scanning. Nothing interesting here. But my breath catches in my throat as I begin the next entry.

February 8th

I met someone. Last night, while I was out walking. It was strange; I've never seen anyone out at that time of night. He appeared as if blown in by the wind. He did not attack, only spoke to me. Perhaps I should have been frightened, but somehow I wasn't. Something about the way he looked at me, the way he spoke to me...I wanted to speak back. He stayed with me

for hours. I didn't even realize it was morning until the sun had halfway risen. I hope to see him again. He was unlike anyone I have ever met.

February 9th

I saw him again. The boy from before. Like the other night, we spoke for hours. Aidan, his name is. I didn't realize until now that he had never told me. He says he's a huntsman. I asked him why he's all alone, where his family is. He only laughed and said, "I had a family once. But they've moved on. I don't mind, though; the world is all mine now." Something bothered me about that laugh. There was something behind it, something I know all too well. He's lonely. As much as he tries to hide it, I know he is. Like me.

I skip a chunk of the entries. It's much of the same anyway.

February 28th

This is all so strange. Aidan has made everything different. My nights with him feel like the real world, and my life in the day is the dream. He exists as if apart from the rest of the world. He tells me stories of worlds I've never seen, speaks in languages I've never heard. He smells like rain, like wood and fire and autumn leaves. I feel alive when I'm with him. And I don't want it to end.

It continues like this for quite some time. Entries recounting what Aidan said that night, what he did. And then, one tiny entry, three simple words. *We kissed tonight.*

More of these entries. I skim them, an unexplainable terror mounting in my chest. I know what's coming. Yes. There it is.

March 15th

I laid with him tonight. Outside, under the moon. It was not as difficult as I thought it would be. It hurt, but it was the sweetest pain. He was so strong, yet so gentle. Perfect. He has never taken anything from me, never asked for anything I was not willing to give, and this time was no exception. I wouldn't have wanted it to be with anyone else. I think I know now why some women do not wait until marriage before they get with child. I used to look down on them, was always told it was unacceptable in any situation. True, plenty of them only act out of lust, or are unwilling, but I know why the rest do it. They are the lucky ones who know what it is to love. I'm certain of it. And I now share that knowledge.

March 17th

Aidan didn't come to our meeting place last night. I waited for hours, long after he would normally appear. But by sunrise he never did. I don't know what to think. He has never

failed to be by my side. Could something have happened to him? He didn't say anything strange, and he would not abandon me, not after...what we did. I will go back tonight. Surely he will come.

April 2nd

Gone. It's been over two weeks and Aidan is nowhere to be found. I've been an absolute wreck. I can't eat, can't sleep, I was sick this morning. Every time I close my eyes he's there, close enough to touch but always out of reach. I can't stand it. But where could he have possibly gone? He never did say he would stay. Perhaps he's moved on. Perhaps he's done this before, with other girls. He draws them in, lets them love him, and when he's done with them he leaves. No, I can't afford to think like that. I can't bear to think that's all I was to him. And on top of all that, my wedding is in three days. I have to pull myself together.

April 4th

Something is wrong. I keep getting sick, and my bleeding has regressed. I remember my lessons, the stories I've heard about married life. Before I dismissed it as stress, but now...this is too much to be mere stress. I am with child. It's impossible to even fathom, but it's true. In my bones I know it. What am I to do about it? I am to be married tomorrow. I can't possibly pass it off as Henry's child, can I? But I must. I don't see any other option. To simply get rid of it would be an abomination, a sin for which I could never forgive myself.

So it went. Mother was wed, and passed me off as Henry's child. The man whom I grew up believing to be my father. He believed it as well, that I was his little girl. And in time, Mother learned to believe it too. As she said, she learned to love him. When my real father was...who? A huntsman without a penny to his name? A vagabond who abandoned everything when it was no longer convenient for him? I don't believe it. I can't believe that my mother, ever cold and calculating, would make such a naïve mistake. But here it is, clear as crystal, written in her own hand. I am the only thing she has to remember him by. His blood runs in my veins, no matter how much she hates him for it. No matter how much I may yet hate her for it.

I feel sick. I can't go on reading this. I shove the journal back into its hiding place and stumble out of the room as fast as my weak legs will carry me.

~

The nightmares are worse than ever. They don't even make much sense anymore. Just flashes. Of the past. The present. The future. All blurring together. All ending in blood.

Robert is dead, has died a hundred times over. Yet he still comes for me, bones snapped, eyes and ears and tongue missing. One of his hands is gone too, just a bloody stump.

His hunting hand. His killing hand. But he is still terrifying. I cannot run; I am not a wolf anymore. I'm just a girl. A poor, defenseless girl. Useless.

Mother lies on the forest floor, the bodice of her gown ripped open to reveal a monstrous gash. Her stomach is gone, her female parts slashed away, guts splayed out around her like ribbons. Yet her heart is still beating. Because of him. Because of me. *Stop it.*

Another wolf, but this one is different. Grey. Powerful. Running. He is hunted. We can smell the dirt and sweat on the wind.

A swish. A flash. The hunter's arrow strikes him clear in the neck, a terrible yelp ripping through his throat. He is dead before he hits the ground. And his dear, sweet Margaret is left all alone. Suddenly, without being told, the name comes to me.

Aidan. The wolf. The huntsman. My father. Father? I have no father. Only the pack.

Among it all, they are there. Watching. They are not responsible for my pain. Tried to stop it, even. They regret leaving him behind, but he chose his own fate. And now they are coming back for me.

~

The day of my wedding. Both Mother and Grandmother are there, helping me with my dress. It is truly beautiful: white trimmed with gold, delicate lace, the perfect silhouette.

"You look divine, love." Mother murmurs in my ear. I don't want her to speak to me. I don't want to hear her voice. Never again.

I look at my face in the mirror. I don't feel beautiful. I feel sick. Weak. The blood is gone from my face like that of a corpse. Robert gets to marry a corpse. Lucky man.

The trip to the chapel passes uneventfully. I almost have to will myself to breathe. What is *wrong* with me?

Outside the door. They are all waiting for me. One of my uncles is walking me down the aisle.

"You look pale, Johanna," he says, linking arms with me, "don't worry, anyone would be nervous in your place."

The faint music inside sounds almost somber. As if this were my funeral. I swallow dryly and the door opens.

Every eye turns to me. There's no helping it now. I force my legs to move. They creak in protest as I make my way down the aisle. I see him at the end. Robert. My soon-to-be husband. Like everyone else, he's looking at me. But it's a different sort of look. It is not the look of a doting husband or even that of an adoring spectator. It is a look of triumph. Possessiveness. Hunger. The aisle seems to stretch for miles under my trembling feet. Finally I make it to the end.

I don't hear the reverend's words. They seem to slow down, becoming incomprehensible. I can't even look over at Robert. I stare straight ahead, trying to keep the room from spinning. But it's no good; my face starts burning again, that fire that I wake up with every morning. My vision blurs. It's starting again. It's—

A howl sounds from somewhere outside. The spinning stops. I wait with bated breath, trying to shut out the voice of the reverend. A second passes, then—there it is again, louder this time, closer. As I listen, a second howl joins with the first. Then another, and another. I look around at everyone in the room. *Why can't you hear it?! I want to scream.*

The fire is rising from my chest, into my throat, through every muscle, every vein and cell in my body. The howling continues, growing to a near fever pitch. *They're here. They've come back for me. You stupid people, open your eyes! Look! Listen! Don't you see, don't you SEE?*

I can't hold out anymore. The fire rips up and out of my throat, and I answer. My own howl sounds strange to my ears, yet it feels so familiar.

Silence. Every human there is staring at me. But I don't care. I turn to look at Robert, his face somewhere between shock and disgust. Disgust. He's disgusted with me. I find that funny. So funny that I have to laugh. My laughter rings through the chapel, drowning out the shocked whispers. *What is wrong with that child...she's gone mad...embarrassing her mother like that...*

When I'm done laughing, my mouth splits open in a smile just for Robert. "Forgive me, Sir Connington," I say, my voice high and manic and beautiful, "but I'm not ready for this just yet." With that, I rip off my pretty veil, and in a whirl of fabric bolt for the door. The room erupts into chaos, but I hardly hear them. I bash the doors open and the cool air hits me full blast. It's wonderful.

The moon is out, full and bloody orange, sharing the dusky sky with the sun that's just beginning to set. How odd. Am I imagining that? I don't know. I look up towards the horizon, towards the hillside. I don't have to look far. There they are, the black and the red, the husband and the wife, at the head of the family. My family now.

"*There!*" I say, talking to no one in particular. People have begun to trickle outside nervously. I point out towards the hill. "There!" I say again, "Don't you see them?"

"Johanna, love," Mother says, her voice somewhere between calming and barely concealed fury, "there's nothing there."

"But they are!" I screech, "Aidan died a long time ago, Mother, but *they've* come back! For me! And they're here to take me away!"

Mother's face blanches at the name. No one has anything to say to that. Perhaps it's just as well. I have no further use for words.

"Perhaps it's time you began believing in fairy tales, Robert." I say. With that I kick off my shoes and run faster than I've ever run before, towards the endless horizon. The fire erupts in me again. But this time it consumes me, twists and shifts until there is no trace of Johanna left. I am no girl anymore. No lone wolf anymore. I've found them. I've come home.

Perhaps it is madness. Perhaps it is my blood awakening. Perhaps. I don't know. But it is all I know now. I run, my very body changing before my eyes.

And I let the beast take hold of me.