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WOLF-SICK

Bisclavret to the Bretons, Garwaf to the Normans, this is the story of a man born of wolf and woman. It used to happen then, as it does sometimes now, that women would shed their skin and become wolves in the wood. A curse befell some of these women: their beasts seemed male. A curse befell some of these women: they wanted it that way. Bisclavret was one such werewolf.

There lived a baron in Brittany, noble, handsome, and kind. His king's closest advisor, he was well loved and respected by all of his neighbors. Newly married, his wife, too, was equal in virtue, modest and fair. The baron's wife had but one flaw in his eyes. Taking her into his arms, he began: "I feel you vanish in the night. I hear your quick breath and the rustling of your mantle. For whom do you leave me? What do you do those three days each week, neither seen nor heard by anyone?" "My lord," the baroness replied, "There is nothing I fear more than your anger. Were I to tell you where I go, I would lose your love forever and destroy myself. I beg you, do not ask me these things." The lord tightened his grip around his lady's wrists, his knuckles straining white. The lord and lady

struggled, and the baron did not let his wife loose until she relented and told him all of her secrets. Tears welled in her eyes as she revealed herself.

“I go deep into the wood and become a werewolf, living off of the things I catch there.” The lord interrupted: “Undressed or clothed?” “Lord,” she said, “I go as in Eden. I shed not only my clothes, but my sex, too. I go as Adam, not as Eve.” The baron, though repulsed at this revelation, could not stop his questioning, as he was too curious to learn about this strange condition of his wife’s. “And what of your chemise?” The baroness’ flushed face drained of color. “I must hide it. I will not tell you where- you must forgive me- if I were to lose it, I would remain a werewolf all of my days. That is why I wish to tell no one.” The baron was not satisfied with her answer.

“You must despise your nature so strongly; why not tell me of it so I could help you?” His lady covered her face with the hem of her sleeve. “I love you, my lord, and our home here, so I do not wish to be in that form forever, but I enjoy that life I lead in the wood.” The baron grimaced at her admittance. “You must tell me where your chemise goes. I deserve to know the sickness that dwells within you, the burden I have shackled myself to and its details.” The lady, afraid, told him of her chemise’s hiding place. On the path to the wood stood a chapel with a bush growing along its side. There, under the bush, she hid her chemise inside a large hollow rock. Satiated with her obedience, the lord loosed his grip and spoke, low and quiet. “I cannot sleep with you tonight, knowing what lay inside you. I will go to our king’s castle, seek counsel, and return on the

morrow.” With this the lord left, his lady choking out cries of shame on the bedroom floor.

But the baron did not go to his king’s castle as he said he would. Many times before he had met a neighboring noblewoman in secret, and it was again to her residency he rode. This night would be different; the two of them would finally be rid of the baron’s burden. The lord arrived at the noblewoman’s garden and called for her: “Rejoice, my lady! No longer will there be obstacle to our love.” He told her of his wife’s secrets: her changing form, her shifting sex, and her chemise’s hiding place. The next morning they rode to the chapel near the wood and retrieved the baroness’ clothes. Thus was Bisclavret betrayed by her husband.

The people looked high and low for Bisclavret. They found no footprints, hair, cloth, or blood. Knowing of her weekly disappearances, this time, they thought, she must have run off for good. The baron feigned compliance and concern until the search was given up, upon which he swiftly carried his new bride into his half-empty manor.

Bisclavret’s first months in the wood were spent lingering near human settlements. He longed to return to the safety and comfort of his old life, a life in which he was accepted and loved. Bisclavret’s next months in the wood were spent hunting, drinking, and sleeping. He accepted the reality of what he was and what had happened to him. At the tail end of his first year in the wood, Bisclavret howled for the first time. He could no longer imagine life as a baroness.

The king, hunting on horseback with his party, heard Bisclavret's trumpeting. He sent forth his hounds and pursued the werewolf through the wood until he came upon Bisclavret in a clearing. Bisclavret, reminded of his previous life upon seeing his king, stood still in shock.

Just as the king's hounds were about to tear the werewolf to pieces, Bisclavret ran forward to the king and took hold of his stirrup, kissing his calf and boot in deference. The king called off his hounds and stared at the werewolf in wonder, guilt filling his heart. He called forth his knights: "See this gentle and intelligent beast! He humbles himself before me for mercy, as man would. No one is to lay a finger on him; he is most welcome in my home, and is now under my protection." Bisclavret, overjoyed, ran astride the king's horse as the party rode back to the castle.

The knights were all infatuated with the werewolf, daily fighting for the privilege of playing fetch with him. They scratched him behind his ears, took him with them on hunts, and let him sleep in their barracks. The knights' affection paled in comparison, however, to that of the king. He and Bisclavret were inseparable, and their love was clear to see. Bisclavret followed close behind the king everywhere that he went, never wishing to be apart from him. The king looked after Bisclavret very closely, making sure he was given only the best treatment. He pet Bisclavret's stomach, favored him over all others, and invited him to sleep in his own bed.

The king held a great banquet at his castle for Yuletide. Bisclavret, well loved and respected by the king and his knights, attended the feast at the side of his lord. All was well and joyous until the arrival of a particular noblewoman: the one who had married Bisclavret's husband. She could never have dreamt that Bisclavret would be accepted into the king's home. Bisclavret recognized her immediately as his neighbor: the one he had seen dancing with his husband in their manor.

Bisclavret ran toward the woman and nipped at her legs, tearing her elegant dress with his teeth: her wails echoed off the stone walls. The knights pulled Bisclavret off of the noblewoman and escorted her to another room of the castle as the king scolded the werewolf. Twice more they attempted to bring the lady back to the feast and twice more Bisclavret pounced. The knights knew better than to blame Bisclavret: they had never seen such fierce anger roused in their friend. "The lady must have wronged him in some way," the knights said. The king, inclined to believe the knights' theory, sent the noblewoman away.

When the noblewoman returned home to Bisclavret's husband, she told him all about that wretched woman now living in sin amongst men. If they knew what she was they would surely throw her out. If they could convince the king that she had wanted the baron dead, perhaps they could even get her killed. They need only wait for the right moment to reveal her nature.

Some time later, nostalgic for the day he had met Bisclavret, the king took the werewolf and his knights to lodge in that region

near the wood. The group stayed at a luxurious inn with a warm crackling fireplace and an elk's antlers mounted above the mantle. Each day they would chase game and return to the inn laden with meat and pelts, Bisclavret and the knights falling in a pile near the fire as the king looked on and smiled.

Bisclavret's husband learned of the party's stay nearby; he went to the inn to carry out his plan. When Bisclavret saw his husband, that intruder, darken the inn's doorway, no one could restrain him. He rushed at him with all his might, knocking the startled baron onto the snow outside. Bisclavret stood over his betraying husband and saw the fear turn to recognition, recognition to disgust, and disgust to a smile. Listen to the revenge Bisclavret rightly took: he lunged forward and bit the nose clean off of the baron's face.

The knights pulled Bisclavret off of his husband as he swallowed the thick skin. The commotion brought out all the guests of the inn, who shrieked in terror at the sight: bright red blood spilt on the powdery snow. The noseless baron rose, stumbling, and drew the sword from his hip. "That beast," he spat, "is not what you think it is." The knights put their hands on their pommels and waited. The baron continued. "That beast was my wife. She did not run to avoid cleaning the house or to go to the arms of another. This wretched woman, Bisclavret, revels in a changed form and sex, becoming the he-wolf you see before you." The baron emphatically pointed his blade at Bisclavret, who was now crouched in fear. "She attacked me viciously with intent to murder. I wounded her and hid the chemise that transforms her as punishment. Evidently, she has

not learned her lesson. She never wanted help for becoming this: she is sick beyond what anyone but the Lord can fix.”

The king was staggered and did not know what to do. The gathered crowd grew restless. “Catch it!” They shouted. “Kill it!” They cried. A wise man, one of the king’s knights, stepped forward and approached his king. “My lord,” he said, “No one would deny the gentle nature and intelligence of this beast. What Bisclavret might have been is of no importance: we have known him for so long and in such close quarters. We love him as one of us, and we know that he is kind. Surely this man must have provoked the attack. I myself know the irrelevance of our friend’s nature to the crime. My wet-nurse was one such werewolf. Try Bisclavret as you would try any other man.” The king pondered this counsel and found it sound.

Upon hearing this support for Bisclavret, the baron became frenzied. He dashed forward, sword flailing, in an attempt to cut through the knights and end the werewolf’s life. The knights seized the baron’s arms and subdued him. Feeling the pressure of an impending trial he admitted his lie and insisted that he was justified: “Who among you would lay with such a creature?” No wonder Bisclavret hated him. The king, angry with the baron’s behavior, questioned him on the location of Bisclavret’s chemise. Scared, he complied. The king sent his knights to fetch the chemise from its hiding place and return the garment to its rightful owner.

The knights returned with Bisclavret’s chemise and set it before him. The werewolf made one nervous glance at the dress and returned to looking around the room. He made little notice of it. The wise knight from before advised the king yet again: “Lord, you are not acting properly. Our friend Bisclavret has lived happily

among us for so long; he clearly sees himself as one of us. Nothing would induce him to wear female trappings any longer. Try giving him privacy and one of your own shirts to dress in- that, he may prefer. I have seen people such as this before; many marvelous things happen in Brittany. Leave him in your bedroom and we shall see if he turns into a man.”

The king guided Bisclavret to the room the two were sharing at the inn. He retrieved one of his own shirts and laid it on the bed next to Bisclavret, left, and shut the door behind him. Everyone waited expectantly outside the door to the king’s lodging to see what would become of the werewolf. After some time the king opened the door to his bedroom and saw Bisclavret laying on the bed, human and asleep, wrapped in the king’s shirt. He ran up to the man and embraced him, weeping and kissing him in joy.

Bisclavret continued to live in the king’s castle. The other knights still found themselves infatuated with him, daily fighting for the privilege of sparring with him. The king’s love for Bisclavret grew. He knighted him and kissed him often, and the two still slept in the same bed. Bisclavret had never felt more at home with himself or others. He still sometimes became a werewolf, as he and the others took joy in it on occasion. I tell you truly, this story did happen, and this work was composed to preserve its legacy.