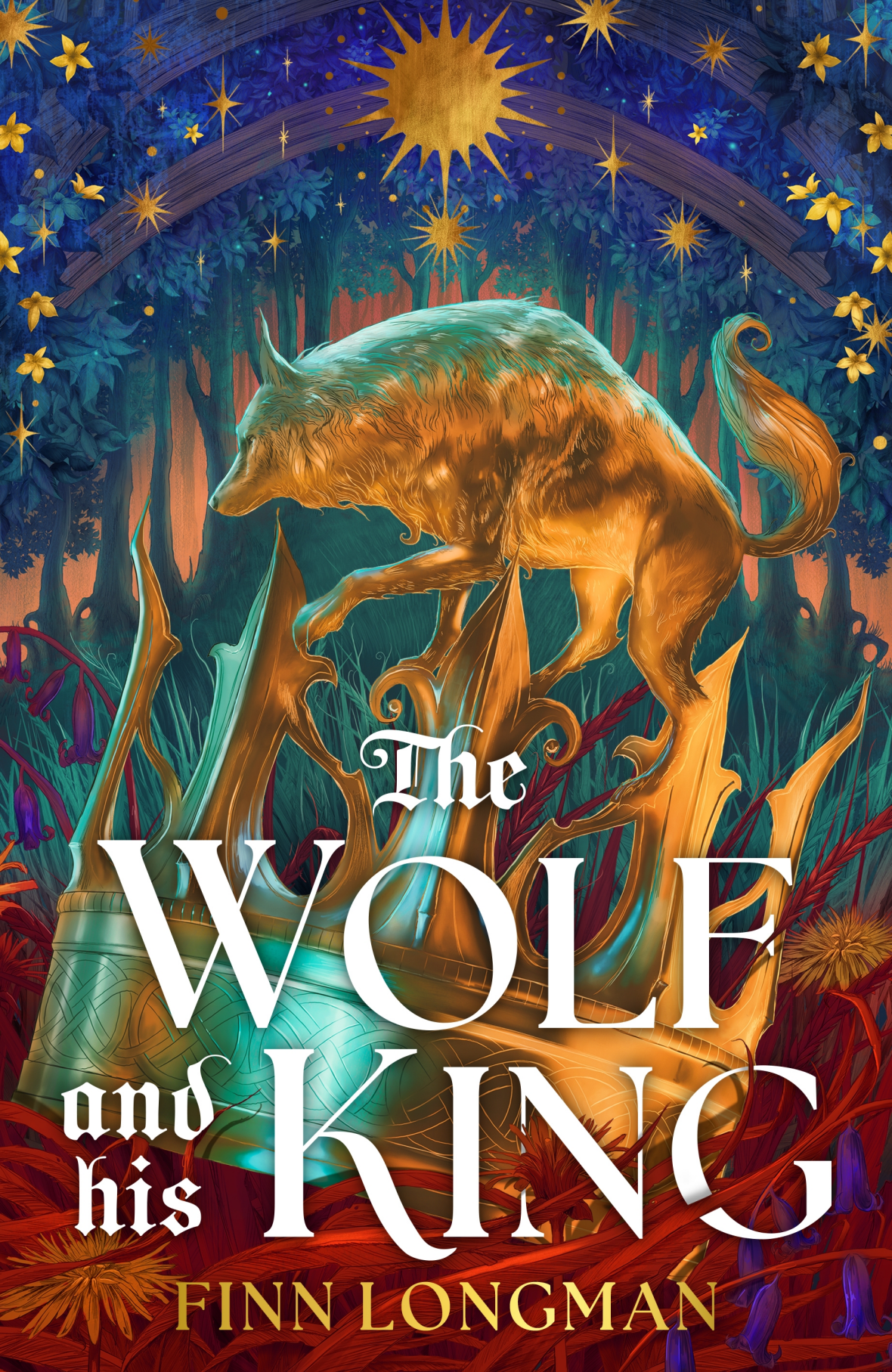




The
WOLF
and
his KING
FINN LONGMAN

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A retelling of 'Bisclavret', from the *Lais* of Marie de France



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Historical Note

This novel aims to evoke the world of medieval literature more than it strictly conforms to the facts of medieval history. My source material is, after all, deeply unhistoric in its approach: Marie de France's *Bisclavret* seems to be set in Brittany, amidst a chivalric culture that resembles her own twelfth-century context, and yet features a king, though Brittany was a duchy in this period. (The presence of a werewolf, I find, doesn't trouble historians in the same way.) Marie is pinning Anglo-Norman tails on a fantastical and vaguely 'Celtic' donkey, as is often the case with the so-called Matter of Britain, and her setting must best be understood as 'a place that is familiar to us, but also strange enough that these stories may exist'. For modern readers, this setting is less familiar, with its barons and knights, but it remains a world of story more than history, ideals rather than realities. As such, the novel you are about to read cannot easily be pinned to a particular year, its geography mapped with any great specificity, or its politics compared against records of real wars and dynastic struggles.

Still, if you wanted to place this story in a historical context, you would likely find the second half of the twelfth century to be the best fit; if you seek geography, we are in Brittany, in this universe an independent kingdom. The royal court is most likely

to be found in the east of the kingdom and the all-important forest is, perhaps, an echo of Paimpont Forest, the Brocéliande of so many Arthurian tales. I have tried to ensure the material and intellectual culture suits this setting, and to draw as much as I can on contemporary sources when seeking metaphors and imagery. But if I have occasionally indulged in anachronisms (or flights of imagination) for the sake of plot or aesthetics, I have done so safe in the knowledge that medieval authors would never have hesitated to do the same.

*Jadis le poeit hum oïr
E sovent suleït avenir,
Hume plusur garval devindrent
E es boscages meisun tindrent.
Garvalf, ceo est beste salvage
Tant cum il est en cele rage,
Hummes devure, grant mal fait,
Es granz forez converse e vait.
Cest afere les ore ester:
Del Bisclavret vus voil cunter.*

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 now:
I want to tell you about the Bisclavret.

- Marie de France, 'Bisclavret'
(trans. Hanning & Ferrante)

*hominis tibi membra sequestro,
generosa et fragmina credo.*

*Body of a man I bring thee,
Noble even in its ruin.*

—Prudentius, ‘Hymnus X: Ad Exequias Defuncti’
trans. Helen Waddell

I

Him



He isn't a knight.

He's not even a man, these days – not always, not in the ways that matter. The wolf comes often enough to rob him of a future, but not so often as to rob him of his name. Yet. It tugs at the frayed edges of his mind, pulling loose the threads, and one day, he's sure, the gnawing insanity of his animal skin will win. He'll lose himself, become fully beast: this he knows the way he knows the ache of change when it settles into his bones.

Part of him fears it. Part of him welcomes it. It would hurt less, he thinks sometimes, to lose everything than to bloody his fingers trying to hold onto something already shattering.

For now, he knows himself. Knows when the fragile wonders that are his fingers warp into claws. Knows when his spine shatters, his neck breaks, and his body remakes itself into something unholy. He's grown to recognise the signs – the swelling soreness of his joints, the bite of his teeth against his lips, the taste of his own blood like salt in his mouth – but he still slips out of his skin suddenly enough to be caught off guard and slowly enough to hurt.

It has always been this way.

Bisclavret is used to it.

He lives his life in exile. Quarantine, almost, keeping the

wolf-sickness away from the markets and the towns and most of all the court, where once his father performed great deeds as baron and knight of the king. So his mother told him, anyway, when he was a child and there was still hope of a cure. Not forever, she promised, would they live here on her meagre estate in the shadow of the hills and on the edge of the woods, as far from the salt of the sea as any could be in a land shaken and pummelled by waves. One day, he would receive his father's sword and the gift of his lands, and all would be restored: he to knighthood, she to joy, the wolf to memory and nightmares and half-forgotten tears.

But now she is dead, and the sickness has not left him, the possession not yet undone.

Once, when he was young, there was a priest who saw the damnation that thrust itself into his skin, but did not flee. Nor did he try to exorcise him with rituals and candles, scourge and invective and pain. Instead, he took the bruised, childish hands of the boy in his own and prayed, earnest and terrified. And after a few weeks in his own body, the boy thought, perhaps, that it had worked.

But the wolf came back. It always comes back.

The same priest warned him not to speak of it, as though he needed warning. 'If they know what you are,' he said – clutching his prayer beads, white-knuckled, his mercy only just outweighing his fear – 'they will never let you be anything else.'

He is not sure, in truth, whether he *is* anything else.

Just a wolf-sick boy, exiled and unwanted.

Bisclavret cannot remember a time before the plunging agony of transformation, but as a child it came infrequently, once a month at most. He'd have weeks to forget how it feels to wake with blood under his nails and fogged memories of how the night was spent and a growing fear: *don't let me have hurt*

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anyone. Now, though, now he loses himself a day each week, sometimes more; he's afraid to keep too close a count of it, for fear he'll find himself calculating how many more years he'll have with a voice before he's robbed of it entirely.

So, no, he's not a man. Just enough-man, enough-human, to know what he's missing. Enough to remember his mother's tales of adventure and feel a hollow grief for something that never was. Enough to know that the secrets written into his skeleton have shaped him into something that can never see the light.

Enough to long for knighthood: a glittering, unattainable dream.

Once, as a child, he saw the knights passing by, the king in their midst and his son at his side and laughter in the air. They hardly seemed like men themselves – they were some new creature, shimmering silver skin like fish scales, as Other as himself, but entirely unlike him. Their eyes were bright; their joy, their brotherhood, was an ache to witness.

Childhood is a distant memory now. And the fair beardless youth amongst those knights, seeking the first thrills of chivalry, is long grown into a man. A man and half an exile himself – even here, Bisclavret has heard tell of the king sending his son and heir to foreign courts to learn better the violence of ruling, the art of war, fearing the quiet prince might be more naturally inclined to the monastery than the battlefield. If he has yet returned, word of it has not reached this place.

But even if the prince is ill-suited to war, he is better suited to the crown than a wolf-man to knighthood.

Bisclavret cannot fathom why the Almighty formed him in this body; he wonders, sometimes, if his nature is a test and a trial, the Adversary at work to torment his mother like Job. If so, she did not live long enough to receive her reward on earth, for she died believing him possessed and his future bleak. Perhaps

she was right. It is not for him to pretend to be something blessed. It would be presumptuous – blasphemous, even – for such a creature to shrive himself in the chapel and let them paint the cross on his forehead before raising him to sword and horse and brotherhood.

And even if it were not a sin and a lie, the risk is too great. One day he may lose his mind along with his body, and then what? Would he kill, or only maul? Without human reason to restrain his actions, would he reveal himself to be the monster he's always feared, secretly, that he is?

No. Bisclavret knows his place, and he is not a knight. He will never be a knight.

But he will dream of them, all the same.



'He'll be crowned in a week, and there'll be a hunt to celebrate.'

His cousin. Resplendent in court garb, all bright colour over gleaming mail, the finest armour his lord can bestow upon him. When, as children, they played at knighthood together, it was not to a landless life of service to another lord that either aspired – but his cousin is a younger son, an inconvenience, sent here to this estate as a companion to his infirm kinsman and only later to court. By then there was no money to equip him, but he's found a lord, and a part to play, which is more than can be said of Bisclavret.

His cousin is still travel-stained from his long journey, but his eyes gleam with possibilities. Two days' hard riding to bring word: the king is dead, the prince recalled from distant courts, the kingdom altered. An accident, a terrible shock, of course, but amidst the mourning many perceive the jewel of opportunity. The young prince – now king – has been gone long

enough that none at court may yet claim his favour, and it is a rich fruit to be plucked.

'I cannot see what this has to do with me,' says Bisclavret, folding his arms. He has lost weight this summer. The wolf takes it from him, punishing him for keeping it from hunting the way it craves.

'You owe him oaths,' his cousin reminds him. 'Your mother's land is yours. You are a noble, however pitiful your estates. You will be expected at the coronation to swear your fealty.'

Bisclavret's heart sinks. He inherited his land some four years past, and ought by rights to have sworn to the old king, but the man was cantankerous and disinterested in the doings of minor gentry, so long as they held back from poaching in his forests and parks. His cousin is right, though: he will be expected at the coronation. Three days' journey, at the least, if he doesn't want to torment his horse the way his cousin has done these past two days; a night or several in the king's hall; the same journey in return.

Too much entirely for a man with a wolf in his skin.

'It's not possible,' he tells his cousin. 'I will have to send my apologies. Meet him when next he takes a circuit. Tell him I am infirm, or injured, or—'

'But this is your chance,' his cousin interjects. 'Did your mother not always plan to present you at court and reclaim your inheritance? The new king will be seeking loyal barons. No doubt he will be more than ready to restore your land, in exchange for your gratitude and good favour ...'

'A nice idea,' says Bisclavret drily. 'You have forgotten the wolf.'

'I have forgotten nothing,' says his cousin. He was all of twelve summers old when he learned the true nature of Bisclavret's infirmity and has kept faith with him in the years since, when

most would have turned their back. 'But you can't mean to spend the rest of your life here. Your father was a knight. A baron. His place should have been yours.'

And if his father had waited just a month or two longer to die in the old king's service, it would have been. As it was, he died without sons, Bisclavret still in his mother's womb, and his land reverted to the crown.

'Then perhaps the king will grant me lands on his next circuit, but I cannot travel that long. The wolf—'

'Surely you can manage a week,' says his cousin, but he must read the answer in Bisclavret's expression, because concern crosses his face for the first time. 'Does it truly come so often, now?'

Bisclavret looks away. He has done his best to create the impression of the wolf as an infrequent visitor – an occasional lapse, not a constant haunting. All men, after all, have moments of weakness. But weekly ... weekly starts to look like a habit.

'Sometimes,' he says. 'Especially in the winter. I think the cold ...'

His cousin doesn't care for technicalities. 'You can transform on the road. There will be no one to see you. Once at court, if you slip away, I can make some excuse for you, and they'll be none the wiser. No one will be surprised by a little eccentricity, in any case, after so long in exile.'

Nobody expects you to be more than a rustic fool, he means; it's funny how he intends this as encouragement. As though the people of the court will overlook Bisclavret's appearance, too: the way the wolf leaves him lean and hungry, burns a sharpness into his bones that no amount of hearty food can fill out; his hair, always overlong; his skin, disfigured by small scars, souvenirs of another life. Now and again, he runs his fingers over the marks and tries to remember how they got there, but

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a wolf's memories map uneasily onto a man's body. How can he remember hurting his hand, when hours ago he didn't have hands at all?

And his clothes – he only needs to glance at his cousin to know that his own clothes are hopelessly old-fashioned, the cheap blue and brown dyes faded with age. Fine clothes would be quickly ruined by being shrugged from a changing body and abandoned somewhere out among the trees, but he cannot appear before the king looking like he works his own fields.

'You assume I choose the time and place of my changing,' he tells his cousin. 'I do not. The wolf comes when it wills, and this is too great a risk. You will take my apologies to the court.' And he will never regain his inheritance, and he will never be a knight, and he will pretend to forget the youthful games he played, sparring with his cousin as though he could ever be anything other than this: a monster poorly disguised in human skin.

'Bisclavret,' says his cousin sharply. 'Do you intend to do nothing but waste away here? How long will you hide yourself from the world?'

How *long*? He has never been granted the reprieve of an end-date for his condition. It is a fact of him, more certain than the shape of his teeth or the rhythm of his heart, they that are as changeable as all his mutable flesh. There will never come a time when it is safe for him to step out of his seclusion.

His cousin again reads the answer in his face, and for a moment his frustration is tinged with grief, as though Bisclavret's concerns are tragic rather than rational. 'Your mother would have wanted you to seek your birthright,' he says. 'Your inheritance is yours to claim.'

'My mother kept me here and died in exile rather than risk

the danger you are suggesting,' Bisclavret points out. 'I cannot be my father. I wouldn't know how to begin.'

'I would help you,' says his cousin, and now he is almost begging. 'I would be your man, if you would will it.'

So he thinks to exchange his lord for Bisclavret. That explains his pleading; to serve his own family would be an easier yoke than service to another man in exchange for his arms. But he is asking for the impossible.

'I cannot make this journey. I cannot sleep in the king's hall. Imagine if the change—'

'I would help you,' says his cousin again. 'Find you a place to sleep – the stables, if you insist, somewhere secluded. And you will swear your oaths to the king and speak to him of your father and he will restore you, and then you will have your own land, enough of it to roam in your wolfing, in place of this patch of fields. Wouldn't that be a fair exchange?'

He makes it sound tempting. Tempting, and dangerous, and just enough like their childish dreams of glory to burrow deep into his heart and tug on the buried, secret desires he hid away once he grew too old to play at knighthood and too wolf-sick to pretend humanity. But his father's lands – the lands that were promised to him, a home where he could live safely rather than in exile ...

Wouldn't that be worth it? A few days of struggle, for the years of safety that might follow? Perhaps, if he is careful, the wolf might be kept at bay long enough to make it possible.

'I cannot stay for the hunt,' he warns his cousin. 'I'll have to leave after the coronation. The risk increases with every day I spend at the castle.'

A smile casts its light on his cousin's face. 'So you will come.'

'I will come,' he says, heavily. 'And swear my oaths, and see

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what results of it. But if the king grants me nothing then let that be the end. I will not beg him.'

'You think it so likely that you'll fail to impress him?'

Bisclavret remembers the king as a boy, scarcely more than a child, fair-haired and wondering as he rode out amongst his father's knights. He can't imagine that head bearing a crown, that mouth speaking oaths. He can't imagine how it will feel to kneel before him, to swear fealty, to kiss him.

'A king with good judgment would see the truth of me,' he says finally. 'And will know what to do with that truth.'

His cousin reaches out and tucks a strand of Bisclavret's hair behind his ear. 'He will see you as your father's son,' he says, and it is the kindest thing anybody has said to him in longer than he cares to acknowledge. 'But first we must find you some better clothes, or he will see you as a peasant. Come. There's no time to be wasted.'

2

You



The feast has hardly begun and already you are weary of it. It has been a long day of oaths and promises, the new weight of your father's crown heavy on your brow. You suppose you'll grow accustomed to it, just as you'll grow used to being at the centre of festivities, the object of everybody's eye. For now it remains strange, unfamiliar after three years as an unwanted prince at another's table, and the castle feels less like the home of your childhood and more like a gaol of cold stone closing around you.

A month ago it was summer, and your father was alive. Then a fall from his horse, a festered wound, and he was gone; the messenger sent to fetch you said little more than that, and didn't need to. You thought you had longer. But now the trees have dropped their leaves and the winter is fast approaching, the many hearths of the castle unable to chase the chill from the air or beat back the encroaching blackness.

And you are king, and this feast is in your honour. If only you wanted it.

Your mood is at odds with the festivities, your father's knights and retainers deep in their cups, every loyal man from across the kingdom dressed in his finery and seeking joy and good company. You received their oaths today, and their kisses,

and it should warm your heart to know that they love you, but they loved your father too, and do not know you, and only owe you their swords.

The noise of the hall drowns the senses. Half-shouted conversations obscure each other, a mess of sound by the time they reach you; voices compete with the minstrels for volume. You squash the futile urge to flee. They have scarcely let you outside the castle walls since your return, and you ache with the need to walk down to the lake and see if it still reflects the stars of the clear autumn night in its inky depths, the way it did before you were sent away. To let the darkness dance your feet to somewhere you hardly know; to follow the tracks of the deer deep into the forest; to remember the land you were kept from.

Instead you sit here, on this dais, away from the mass of faces you half recall. They have left space on either side of you for the wife you don't have and the favoured ones you wouldn't know to invite to your side. A little way down the table sit your barons and advisors, deep in conversation with each other and ignoring you; at the other end sit the ladies of the household. One is the daughter of your father's most favoured knight, lately deceased; she will remain under your protection until she marries, halfway to a sister or a niece. She is accompanied by a kinswoman of hers, you think, and two maids, but while she offers you a fleeting smile when she catches your gaze, it cannot diminish the space between you and make this seat a less lonely one.

They might have thought to choose company for you, you think resentfully; they must have known you had nobody to summon to your side. You haven't so much as a squire to serve you at table. Your only true friend in the castle is the scribe you brought back with you from your exile, and he would never be permitted to sit beside you, if he were invited to a feast like this at all. Even your knights are strangers these days, though you

see among them the faces of those you knew as a youth. It will take time to earn their companionship again, whatever oaths they've sworn.

'Sire?' Someone wants your attention. You thought you'd done your duty, the rituals of the day over; you'd resent the petition, except that it interrupts your loneliness. 'Sire, I beg a moment of your time on behalf of my cousin.'

You look up. The voice belongs to a knight you recognise but don't know well, though you could hardly be said to know any of them well, now. He's a lesser knight, sworn to one of your men, arrayed in his livery; you can't remember where he hails from, but you have a vague sense that it's somewhere quaint and rustic, and that he has rather more brothers than any man hopes to have in the line of inheritance ahead of him.

He is also, to your surprise, spattered with mud, his once-bright clothes soiled by bad weather and a hard ride. It's unlike him to appear dishevelled, nor were you aware that he had any cousins with whom you might concern yourself.

'Your cousin?' you say, half-engaged despite your exhaustion.

'He would have been here this afternoon, sire, to swear to you as was proper, but the elements turned against us and our horses were lamed some thirty miles from here.'

And by the looks of him they'd been travelling some time before that happened. Most likely he's one of these very minor nobles with scarcely enough land to raise his taxes – a coastal backwater, perhaps, or something out in the hills to the west. His absence this afternoon would have been noted by your seneschal and the record-keepers, but you hadn't marked it.

'I daresay I can find it in me not to see disloyalty in his absence,' you say, dredging up a smile, and the knight returns it, nervously. 'Bring him forward, then. A feast is as good a place as any to take a man's oath.'

No doubt your seneschal would feel differently. But the knight looks relieved. He turns and gestures, and a man begins moving across the hall towards you. He has a loping stride, easy as a huntsman over rough ground and just as unsuited to a feasting-hall; he covers the distance in moments, and then he is standing before you.

He's near enough your own age, give or take a year or two – slightly younger than his cousin, you'd guess, and even more rustic in his dress. He has no armour and no surcoat: he's clad in red wool over a blue undertunic, his sleeves cropped and practical, and he wears no hood or cap, so that his damp hair falls unfashionably loose and long past his shoulders. But he has a rough-hewn beauty, unpolished, all cheekbones and sharp eyes and eyebrows like sword-slashes.

He bows his head. 'Sire,' he says, taking your hand and kissing it. 'I must humbly beg your forbearance for my absence at the oath-taking. It was not disrespect that kept me, but poor weather and a difficult road.' His voice is hoarse, low – strained, perhaps, by the ravages of his journey. The cold weather has flushed pink his cheeks and nose, and there is something unsophisticated yet lovely about it, juxtaposed as it is with the coal-black of his eyes and his dark hair.

'Indeed, it's clear you've had no easy journey,' you remark, raking your eyes over his muddied clothes; whichever servant took his cloak did a poor job of brushing the dirt from his chausses and boots before they let him into the hall. 'What is your name?'

The young man glances up and meets your eyes. 'Bisclavret,' he says.

Bisclavret.

You mouth the name to yourself, tasting it, trying to place it. You can't; you don't think you've ever heard it before. No

chance, then, that this man is a long-forgotten childhood playmate, here to rekindle an acquaintance. A relief, in truth, for after years away you have enough difficulty matching names to faces without attempting to recall the friendship of another age.

But you would know more of this man – understand him better before you take his oath. ‘Where is it you have travelled from, Bisclavret?’ you ask, taking no small thrill from the shape of the name on your tongue as you voice it.

He names a place you have never been, and adds, ‘Some way to the west, before the mountains proper, with woodland on one side.’ It is the description one gives when expecting no familiarity with an estate; it must be very small, for you never to have heard of it. ‘The land was my mother’s dower, and passed to me now four years ago.’

So his mother is dead. ‘And what befell your father?’

‘He was killed in your father’s service a little more than a quarter-century ago, a month before my birth.’ He hesitates, glancing sideways at his cousin for help, but the knight only nods encouragement. Bisclavret continues: ‘He was a baron of the old king, and when he died without issue, his lands reverted to the crown. I . . . I did not inherit. Sire,’ he adds, a little hastily.

For a wild moment, you’re struck by the absurd desire to ask him to call you by your name. Nobody has done so since you returned from your exile, as though the syllables have been forgotten in your absence and you are nothing to them now but your crown.

But you refrain. ‘You have been as much an exile as I have, then, and for far longer. Your mother didn’t think to bring you to court, and ask for the return of your inheritance?’ Your father might have granted it, if he liked the old baron enough; he was not an especially loving man, but he could be generous to those who pleased him.

of you for a dozen close companions to dine at your side, and you have only been picking at it, but it is clear he is unsure whether he is allowed to accept the offer. You take pity on his unease and push a dish towards him, so that politeness demands he take a portion. He's slender, even gaunt – not starving, for he lacks that hollow-eyed look, but still he is thin in the way of a man who burns more fuel than he can replace. And after such a journey as the one he has had, he will be in need of sustenance.

The hearth is warm, and you see the tension in his body begin to ease as that warmth reaches him, tempering the chill of his damp clothes.

'Tell me,' you say, when you deem that he has settled enough to answer, 'are you here to beg me for your father's lands? Do you come seeking your fortune and advancement?'

There is a moment's pause while he chews and swallows his mouthful of food, and then he says, in a steady tone, 'I am here to swear fealty to you, sire. The capacity in which I do so is for you to decide.'

A smile tugs at your lips. 'You mean if I were to make you a knight and lord of your father's lands, you would swear to me as such and forget that you had come here with only your mother's estate to your name.'

He inclines his head in acknowledgment of the remark, both the possibility and the humour in it. 'I would not forget my exile, for it is all I have known. I think perhaps you are a man who knows what it is like to become yourself away from the lands that should have been your home.'

Is that what you have been doing, these last few years: becoming yourself? Perhaps. You have practised the arts of the chase and the kill enough to satisfy even your father, and if you have also gained an education in the discourses of the scholars and clerics while you were about it, well, he is too dead to know

of it. Mostly, you've been learning what it's like to be alone in the world, away at a court that bears little love for your kingdom and its stubborn refusal to be annexed into a greater empire.

'Forgive me,' he says, worried by your silence. 'I spoke out of turn.'

'No,' you say. 'Perhaps you are right. Perhaps I have learned myself in my exile, and I will not readily forget it.' You regard him for a long moment – so long that he flushes scarlet, as intriguing as it is becoming. He has the sinewy physique of a man not built for inactivity, and you would sooner see him amidst the woodlands of his home than here in this hall, hazy with smoke and drowning in voices and the strumming of minstrels.

You imagine it is beautiful there, this lonely estate of his in the shadow of the hills and the trees. You have long been enchanted by woodlands as more than a home for game and a place of hunting: by the way the spring blossoms and the pale green of new leaves defy the lingering remnants of the winter chill; by the bluebells gathering along the borders to herald the coming of summer; by the rich colours of the autumn, all bronze and brass and candlelight. Bisclavret would look well there.

Impulse stirs your tongue to action. 'Ride out with us tomorrow,' you say, before you can think better of it. 'The hunt.'

He blushes so easily, this interesting young man. 'I could not,' he says. 'I am not ... prepared.'

Of course – his horse is lame, his clothes filthy from travel, and he will have no hounds or weapons to contribute. But no matter. 'I will have you outfitted,' you say. 'I have many a fine courser for you to ride, and no shortage of equipment.'

'That is ... very kind, sire, but—'

You want him on that hunt. You want to know what he is capable of; you want an excuse to ride with him; you have the sense that if you do not press him now, he will slip between your

fingers and disappear, back to his home, for another quarter-century of quiet absence, and you will never see him again.

‘Your father must have ridden out with mine,’ you say, carefully calculating. ‘It would have been a way for him to prove his skill. His fitness for war, should it be needed.’

Do you want your father’s lands? you might have said to him. *This is how you prove yourself to me. This is how you earn them.*

Bisclavret hears it, and you see his desire warring with something you can’t identify – some fear, some inner conflict. Perhaps a lingering remnant of his exile, a shyness amidst the unfamiliar court.

‘Ride out with us,’ you say again, leaning towards him. ‘Let me see what manner of man you are.’

He bites his lip, and your gaze is caught by it. You cannot look away from his mouth. If he had a courtier’s manners, he would not feel able to refuse you. He would do whatever his king asked of him.

You asked him, in part, because he doesn’t.

‘If you wish, sire,’ he says at last, and some forgotten part of your heart howls in triumph.



3

Other



the forest is rain on moss and rotting leaves,
bright fresh scents away from the smoke
and the heady human smell of wine and rich food
that nags at memory – *where was I?* – a snare
the shape of borrowed clothes on lost skin
and music in a mind that has no word for song.

discordant with itself, lost in a castle –
the king – the song twists – *when I was me*
when I was whole I was at the castle
and the king – becomes forest-sharp,
becomes a hunger like being unmade,
pulling apart a body newly created.
it begs to run from a place unknowable,
and the hunger is a gnawing thing,
a beast in itself, guiltless and bloodied.

small deaths, sheep deaths, swift and simple
as the scent of iron. tomorrow the debt,
tonight the loss and the hunger and the blood.
walking a wolf's track leaves a wolf's prints,
sure as winter – *this is not me this is not*

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what I am meant to be – sure as hunger,
no way around it but to run and running
is a kind of death with all that falls behind.

but sometimes there's nothing, no choice
but movement, no whisper but teeth,
and every heartbeat murmurs run
and run
and run
will I ever stop?

4

You



Ride out with us.

You've hardly slept, remembering his hesitation, that fear and desire tangled up in each other. What is it that Bisclavret is afraid of – and what is it that he wants?

You rise early, before the huntsmen have set off. Dawn is uneasy and grey, but there's a fresh scent in the air: the rain has passed, and if your luck holds, the sun will shine later.

Impatience hums beneath your skin as a servant stitches tight your sleeves, such that eventually, with the uncertainty of one still adjusting to your edict to *speak to me, in the name of God, I cannot abide this silence*, he asks, 'Are you excited for the hunt, my lord?'

That's a sound enough excuse for your twitching, you suppose. Though excitement doesn't come close to touching this tangle of feelings: the relief at leaving the castle and breathing fresher air; the thrill and the fear of a boar hunt with all its dangers; the ever-present awareness that this is a test. Your people no longer know you, and they wish to. Today will demonstrate your strength and skill in arms and your father's canniness in sending you away to learn, or it will mark you the unmanly failure of a son he thought you were when last you saw each other. It's a heavy burden to place on a spear and a dagger.

‘Yes,’ you say absently, when you realise that the servant is waiting for an answer. ‘Yes, it will be welcome to hunt here again. I have been gone too long.’

When you are dressed – and oh, how welcome these more practical clothes, free of the trailing sleeves of your coronationbliaut; you are already tired of being decorative – you descend to the hall, where your lords are waking, their eagerness for the hunt tempered by the heavy remnants of last night’s festivities weighing down their heads. You scan their ranks for Bisclavret, but there is no sign of him.

But there, by the door, far from the hearth, is his cousin. You cross to him. ‘Is Bisclavret here? I had thought to take him to be equipped for the hunt. I’m aware he did not travel prepared.’

His cousin blinks, and swallows. ‘He is ... that is to say, he was taken ill after the feast, and left to seek relief. I believe the air in here was too close for him, and the wine too strong.’

‘Ill?’ You choke back your dismay. It will be nothing serious. ‘Wine-sickness, I assume? He would not be alone in that.’

‘Something of the sort,’ admits the cousin, but he looks uneasy, and his fingers twist in the fabric of his surcoat. ‘He intended to sleep in the stables, I think. He cares a great deal for his horse, and after the journey ...’

A kind man to care so much for his lamed horse that he would give up his place by the fire to spend the night with her. ‘Then I will seek him there. Thank you.’

The knight looks startled by your thanks. ‘Sire,’ he begins. ‘I must ask ...’

‘Speak freely.’ You are not surprised that those who knew your father are hesitant to offer opinions or indulge their curiosity, but it’s tiresome nonetheless, when you have no intention of punishing them for it. It will be far easier to rule if you are loved and understood than if you are not.

‘How did you convince him?’ He cannot look at you as he speaks. ‘He is reclusive, shy; it took some cajoling to convince him to travel for the coronation itself, and he was determined that he could not stay, but would leave when he was pledged to you. But now he has agreed to ride out with the hunt.’

‘He is not yet pledged to me,’ you say, as if that explains it, and perhaps it does, desire and obligation keeping Bisclavret here, his father’s lands held to ransom. But still he hesitated when you asked him to stay – you saw that. You saw how he almost refused you, and it charmed you, that he considered saying no to a king.

‘Then you have promised him something more?’ asks his cousin. ‘His inheritance?’

Oh, he is clever, this landless knight, engineering this situation to bring his cousin back into the court’s favour and restore a family impoverished by the old baron’s death and the past quarter-century away from the court. Perhaps, if Bisclavret rises, he stands to gain a knight’s fee of his own, and that, for a man with too many brothers, would be heady enough temptation to risk retrieving his cousin from his exile. Especially if he alone has kept faith with him, and knows Bisclavret owes him for that loyalty.

‘I would know his capabilities,’ you say, half an answer and far from a promise. ‘Is there much hunting, on his estate?’

‘Not of boar. Largely hares, foxes. We haven’t the land for deer.’

We. Interesting. ‘Then this will be a test of his mettle, too, I suppose. Will you be riding with us?’ Properly, he should ride with his own lord, but you’re sure the man can spare him, if it will put Bisclavret at ease to have a familiar face beside him.

‘If my lord can spare me a horse,’ says the cousin. ‘My own will not be fit for hunting for some time yet.’

‘Oh, have no fear about that. I will ensure you a mount.’ Your father loved his horses, possibly more than he loved his son; his stables are the finest in the land. ‘I’m going to the stables now, to arrange one for Bisclavret. I will have them saddle one for you, too.’

‘Sire, you are too kind,’ begins the knight.

You flash him an unkingly smile. ‘I am a man alone in his own home. What have I to lose by cultivating friends? Fear not, I’ll speak to your lord and ease the sting of his loss; I’m sure he’ll not begrudge me the use of you. Be at the assembly when the huntsmen return, and I’ll find you there.’

He doesn’t blush as easily as his cousin, but his embarrassment and pleasure is plain nonetheless in the pink tips of his ears and the stammering way he thanks you for your attention. A novelty, still, to have men grateful for these scraps of friendship, when for so long you have been too unimportant and unwanted to be worth befriending by any but the other outcasts and exiles scrabbling for a place in a court they don’t belong to.

But that is melancholy speaking, and ill becomes a king.

You make your way out of the keep and into the courtyard, still sheltered by the castle walls but with a sharp bite to the air nonetheless. It’s past Michaelmas, and winter is rushing in – too fast for one newly crowned, who has had no time to ready his kingdom for the cold months. At least this wave-tossed peninsula of yours has gentler claws than the inland courts you’ve known these past years; here there will be less snow to besiege you in your castles, a lighter frost. But storms will harry the coast and keep the fishermen from their work, and an ill-prepared kingdom is a kingdom that starves.

Your own death of cold would be carelessness, but the loss of your people would be cruelty. If they do not live to see Candlemas, it will be your sin to answer for.

The stables have changed little in your time away. You even think you recognise a few of the grooms as they hasten around you, making preparations for the hunt. You enquire after Bisclavret's horse, and they gesture towards a stall at the end of the row, and you squash your inane anticipation as you walk towards it.

You see his horse first: a reliable-looking dun courser with sorrowful eyes. One of her forelegs is swollen, though the grooms have taken care of her with their poultices and bandaging. She snuffles despondently at your empty palm and consents to your touch, but your hand stills when you catch sight of Bisclavret.

He's still asleep, curled up in the straw like a servant boy. He's twig-thin and birch-pale, wearing only his undertunic and that with the sleeves loose. His chausses are torn, the left almost ripped from his leg entirely; his bare feet are obscenely white against the muddied floor. His hands and face are filthy, his hair tangled, a scratch across his cheek.

'Bisclavret,' you say, coming a little further into the stall. 'Bisclavret?'

He was taken ill, his cousin told you, but you cannot see how wine-sickness would have left him in this state. He is so still that for a moment you fear he is dead.

'Bisclavret,' you say again, more loudly, and this time he stirs. You see the moment he becomes aware of your presence: the crease of concern in his forehead, the tightening of his muscles as the discomfort of the cold air registers to his underdressed body. He looks down at his feet first, then at you, and you see his mouth curl into an oath or some utterance of despair as he realises the aspect he's presenting. 'Be easy. I won't judge you. Are you well?'

What a foolish question, when he is clearly not. But he pauses a moment and then nods. 'Yes, I'm well,' he says. 'I was ...

taken badly, last night. I am not used to the wine. I will be fit to hunt, if still you want me there.' His words are unsteady, dealt out one by one like coins or blows. 'I'm sorry, sire, that you saw me like this.'

'Rare would be the man who has never been found dishevelled after a feast,' you say, and press him no further about his disarray. 'Come. I will arrange for a bath, and clothes, while we wait for the huntsmen to return. By the time we break our fast, you will have entirely forgotten your wine-sickness.'

He is taller than you, and broader-shouldered; nothing of yours will fit him. But the servants will be able to source something – hunting clothes of your father's, maybe, stripped of ornament and destined to be remade into something new.

'I thank you, but ...' he begins, and then abandons whatever argument had leapt to his tongue, perhaps remembering that you promised him clothes even before finding him like this.

'Then it will be done. Come. Your cousin will ride with us. He tells me boar hunts are rare on your estate.'

Bisclavret pushes himself to his feet, wincing. 'This is true,' he acknowledges. 'Though I am aware of the principles. I hope I will not disappoint you.'

And you will endeavour not to disappoint the court, and the shade of your father. 'It will be a fierce chase. And boar can be dangerous, even to a hale man. I could call a physician to examine you, if you have any doubt about your fitness to hunt.'

'No,' he says quickly, and then recalls his manners. 'Thank you. I am uninjured.'

But he stumbles, and when you extend your hand to steady him, his grip betrays both his strength and his need. His feet are bruised and bloody, belying his claims to health. 'Are you quite sure?' you ask him. 'It would be no trouble.'

'I am well,' he insists.

THE WOLF AND HIS KING

If he is determined not to see a physician, you won't force him. But you look doubtfully at his bare feet, and observe, 'You have lost your boots.'

'... Yes,' he admits, reluctantly, as if for a moment he intended to claim otherwise.

'I will find you another pair. Can you walk as far as the keep or will I ask the servants to bring water for a bath here?'

'Don't put them to that effort,' he says. 'I will manage.'

It is your right to put them to that effort. You are their king. But you don't feel inclined to remind him of that, when he has finally forgotten to call you *sire* or to look at you as though it causes him pain to regard the gold of your crown.

You take him to the kitchen, on the basis that the ever-burning cook fires make it the warmest place within the castle walls and he has not stopped shivering since he woke. They're startled to see you darkening their door, but usher Bisclavret inside with promises that he will be bathed. From there, it's easy enough to ask a servant to seek out clothes sturdy enough for hunting and fine enough not to shame the man.

With those orders dispatched, there is nothing left to be done but to return to the stables and select a mount to be saddled for Bisclavret, and a second for his cousin – the steadiest hunters your father ever had trained. The horses remember you, at least, and as they press their soft noses against your neck and breathe warm breath in your face, you feel a little more like you have come home, and not exchanged one exile for another.

But still the court is changed, made new – and Bisclavret is a part of that strangeness, his presence altering everything around. Perhaps this is a natural curiosity about an untested man who might be a knight, but it feels stronger than that. Fascination has ensnared you, novelty only part of the tangle of desire. His reticence, his blush, his almost-refusal, as though he

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owes no oaths ... He is something new, this fellow exile, and you have only scratched the surface of understanding him.

You would know him for who he is, if he will allow you to see.

The hunt will test him. The hunt will test you both.

5

Him



Pathetic. He couldn't manage a single night at court without the wolf ripping itself out of his skin. He'll be lucky if he wasn't seen; he's still not sure how he stumbled back into the stables, wretched and hardly human, to sleep off the exhaustion and the pain of the change. And to be found there by the king—

Bisclavret doesn't know whether to treasure the memory of the king's hand in his, supporting him as he stumbled, or whether to bury it beneath the humiliation of having revealed himself as one so base and bestial as to be unable to sleep a night in the hall without fleeing for the stables like some overwhelmed peasant. What manner of man would behave in such a way? Not one a king would be inclined to raise to knighthood and his inheritance, that's for sure, and who could blame him, when it is so abundantly apparent that Bisclavret is unfit for it?

He's lucky the king didn't insist on calling the physicians, who would bleed him until he fainted, if they didn't summon a churchman to chase the demons from inside his head. If there were a cure, he'd have found it years ago. He purged himself often enough when he was younger, seeking out herbs deadly to wolves in the hope of killing it. Forgetting – not caring – that some of them are deadly to men, too.

At least it was never his mother who found him in these

moments of despair. It was his cousin, once, when he was fourteen and wretched and wishing for nothing so much as an end to it. His cousin who nursed him back to health. He has yet to repay that debt, and the greater one incurred by his cousin's faithfulness in keeping his secret; maybe that's why he's still here, allowing the castle servants to wash him and dress him in somebody else's clothes. He cannot reward his cousin's faith while he has nothing, but once he has secured his inheritance, all will be different.

If the king sees fit to restore it to him, after what he has seen.

It will sting, Bisclavret thinks, to return to his exile now that he knows what he is missing. Now that he has tasted his father's life. The feast – yes, it was overwhelming, all the noise and people and colours and smells. Maybe there was something of the wolf in him even then, and that's why he couldn't bear the cacophony of scents, and why the colours were too bright and every instinct screamed for him to *run*. His body ached as though the warmth of the fires caused his joints to swell and push against themselves, and he should have known then that it was coming, but he was distracted. Caught out by the soft gold of the king's hair, his kind smile, the exhausted shadows beneath his eyes.

But it was also so full of *joy*. The food, the fire, the fantasy of belonging. Sitting at the king's side while he enquired, quite sincerely, about lands and names and wants.

Are you here to beg me?

He's here to take whatever he can get, whether it's another minute or a lifetime of pretending he's human.

It's odd to be dressed by another, but the clothes the servants have brought him make it necessary, with side laces in places he can't quite reach and sleeves that need to be sewn tight to his arms. Quite the fine man he'll look, when they're finished;

he tries not to think how troublesome these fastenings will be should the wolf return again, though he hopes last night's disaster has earned him a few days of humanity.

He runs his hands over the soft wool, wondering at the feel of the cloth under his fingertips. It is always his hands he misses most, when the wolf comes. They look so fragile, now that he is himself: fingers so easily broken, nails so easily chipped. The tendons standing out below the skin may as well be ribbons, fit for nothing but adorning the braids of a woman's hair.

A woman. The thought snags a memory. There was a woman, wasn't there, at the feast last night, on the dais with the king? He saw her watching them. Wondering, perhaps, why the king was speaking with a man so poorly dressed, a man who hasn't even sworn the fealty he owes. She can't be the king's sister – it's well known that he's an only child, for his mother died when he was still a babe, and the old king never took another woman to wife. Heartbreak or disinterest, the rumours can't agree. Some other lady of the household, then, but who?

The servant finishes arranging Bisclavret's mantle – that, at least, is his, one small fragment of familiarity amidst the mud-died and clouded selfhood bestowed by the borrowed clothes. Impulsively, Bisclavret asks, 'The woman. At the feast. Who is she?'

The servant looks startled by the question, but doesn't need to ask which woman he means. 'The king's ward, my lord,' he says. 'Daughter to his father's favoured knight, may God rest both their souls.'

Ward. Well, that explains her presence in the castle. No doubt she's under his protection until she marries. 'Does she hunt? Will she ride out with us today?'

'On a boar hunt?' says the servant, incredulous. 'No, my lord. But she has a taste for falconry.'

Of course. No lady would join a boar hunt; he had briefly forgotten the danger the day offers, the rarer thrill of a riskier chase. It is a shame, though, that there will be no opportunity to pursue her better acquaintance, for in the glimpse he caught of her at the feast, she had the same quick smile as the king, a certain laughter in her eyes. He would have liked to know her better.

Never mind that. 'I have been promised weapons. Where will I find them?'

The servant gives him directions, and Bisclavret leaves the warmth of the kitchen and embarks on his search. He is gratified to be met with no questioning when he arrives, so the king must have sent word: they readily equip him with a crossed spear and a long dagger. His own sword, in the stables with his saddlebags, is ill-suited to hunting.

From there, there's no further reason to delay returning to the stables, to collect the fine bay courser the king has had saddled for him. She's finer than his own horse, though it feels disloyal to think so, but she's steady, too: he knows it at once from the way she ducks her head to his touch and stands perfectly still, awaiting a rider. He is at no risk of this mount startling on the chase.

It stings, a little, that he will prove himself in borrowed clothes, with borrowed weapons, on a borrowed horse – the king's fancy, unequal to those who bring their own hounds to the hunt. But at least his equipment will not put him to shame.

The assembly is embarking on breakfast when he arrives, the king deep in conversation with the returned huntsmen about their findings. He glances up, catches sight of Bisclavret, and raises a hand in both greeting and summons.

Hesitantly, Bisclavret gives the horse's reins into the care of a groom and weaves his way through the crowd to the king.

‘Good morning, sire,’ he offers, as though their earlier meeting did not occur.

The king eyes his new clothes. ‘A marked improvement, I would say, wouldn’t you?’ he comments, with a twist of a smile to ease the sting of insult towards Bisclavret’s older clothes. ‘I’d allow that you would keep them, but alas, they are not mine to dispose of. Still, we’ll have better made up for you in no time.’

He speaks as though he intends for Bisclavret to remain at court. As though it would be no remarkable thing for the king to give new clothes to this countrified noble with only a handful of acres to his name. *Yes*, whispers his heart, triumphant: *yes, let me stay*. But Reason, ever cautious, reminds his heart of the unwelcome truth: *it’s impossible*.

‘You are most generous, sire,’ he says at last, as neutrally as he can. The king himself looks well this morning, though he has traded the silk and embroidery of his coronation gown for plainer wool. The warm coppery orange of his tunic over his red chausses speaks of autumn leaves and the warmth of hearth-fires, fitting colours for an October chase; the white fur trim of his mantle will keep out the chill.

‘Sire,’ begins one of the huntsmen, and the king recalls himself.

‘Ah, yes,’ he says, but before he gives them his full attention, he adds, ‘They’ve found us a fine boar, Bisclavret, quite ready for the hunting. You should eat; you’ll need your strength for the day ahead. Look, here’s your cousin.’

And sure enough, his cousin is moving through the crowd of men and dogs towards them. He’s set aside his mail and livery for hunting clothes, and carries his own spear.

‘Now,’ the king is saying to the huntsman, ‘you say he was moving west, but—’

‘I looked for you last night,’ says Bisclavret’s cousin in a low voice, drawing him away from the king. ‘After the feast. I had

found you a place to sleep, but you were nowhere to be seen. Bisclavret, did ... was it ...'

'Nobody saw me,' says Bisclavret, which is as much an answer as *Yes, it was the wolf*. 'I was careful.'

His cousin chews his lip. 'Are you well enough for this hunt? I know the wolf can leave you weak.'

It can – it does – but today the bitter ache of his ill-fitting skin is muted beneath the thrill and excitement of the chase ahead. Whatever else Bisclavret is, he is a hunter, in a wolf's skin or a man's. He has never had the chance to test himself against a boar before, but he welcomes the opportunity. One last chance, he thinks, to taste the life of a knight, before he returns to his own lands and his own life.

'I am well,' he assures his cousin, and pretends to believe himself, but underneath his borrowed clothes he feels again his ever-shifting bones and knows there is only so far he can push himself before disaster.

'If you need to leave ...'

'I am well,' he insists, a little more firmly, though he knows his cousin is merely concerned for his comfort. He is the only one who has ever understood the pain of the change, the only one who has ever been more concerned for Bisclavret than for the sheep the wolf kills or the paths it treads in the woods.

His cousin nods, acquiescing with grace. 'Then today is your chance to prove yourself the equal of your father.'

The *equal*. A joke. His father was a knight, well-trained and experienced; Bisclavret can claim only adolescent sparring with his cousin for his sword-work, though many long and lonely hours he spent swinging around a blunted weapon until it felt like an extension of himself. His father would have thought nothing of hunting a boar – he would know the technique of it in his bones and in his blood, not merely in his head, the

product of hearsay, the way Bisclavret does. Just as he would have known his own father as a man and not a story, a body and not merely a name. Though perhaps it's for the best that his father never knew his wolf-sick son.

'Aye,' he says at last, dragging himself from his reflections. 'And when I have his land and his title, I will be safe.' Safe and secluded and rich enough to pay compensation for the animals he takes when the wolf is hungry. Safe, and nowhere near the court, or the king.

Bisclavret glances again at the golden-haired man who invited him here. He has put aside his heavy crown, exchanging it for a slim circlet. There is an earnest animation in his face as he discusses routes and habits with the huntsmen; he gestures emphatically, his hands darting like swallows.

One hunt, Bisclavret promises himself. Then he will swear his oaths, as master of whatever land is his, and that will be the end of it. He will not let the court seduce him; he will not let his dreams become too glorious.

Let me stay, howls his heart, but there is no place for desire amidst this careful balancing act of wolf and man. Better to have the loneliness of exile in his own body than the glory of the court without his proper shape.

Better to be no knight at all than to bring the wolf into the king's halls.