

Wolves at the Door

By Jacquelynn Lyon

A tale of the Hinterlands . . .

In a tidy well-built home on the outskirts of a village on the outskirts of the world lives a doe. MaryAnne lives in her ancestral home with antlers nailed to the mantel. She's aged enough to be an old maid but not old enough to be charming when a howling comes for her.

Oh, the Beast Folk of the north know better than to live alone. Lighting candles in the darkest months. Hanging Evil Eye charms in their windows to ward off wickedness. MaryAnne, all the same, cuts her own firewood and pickles her own vegetables. She survives the winter.

That is until a howling comes. Wolves are at her door.

Claws scraping against wood. Snuffling at her windowsill. Voices croon, as they always do, with a plaintive tone. In those long months, the villagers and MaryAnne bury their faces in their arms and stuff their ears with wax. Cluster together if they can. That is how you made it through a winter in the hinterlands.

Yet, a howling comes.

That year, MaryAnne forgets to restock her wax. Too late to venture out, she curls into a ball on the hard floor. She buries her face in her arms and refuses to look up. A voice floats through the cracks.

"Little doe." A growl below her window. "Why do you hide inside your nest?"

Mustn't answer. Shadows darken her window. Backlit by a yellow moon, three wolves prowl. One calls for her with a voice for turning wine to honey. MaryAnne squeezes her eyes shut tighter.

"You'll turn to dust within these walls. Nothing left but bones." The three laugh, guttural and wind-rough. Heavy footfalls crunch in the snow. "The breeze is fresh. The snow is young. A night for running."

Mustn't answer to the night. To the teeth. Everything in MaryAnne tells her to flee.

Another wolf speaks, young and feminine, scratching at her door. "They have marked your door with juniper. Tell me, what makes you so unlucky?"

A whine escapes MaryAnne. There is no escaping rumors, it seems—even among wolves.

A face flashes in her mind's eye. He is smiling there, gentle, with a tightness around his eyes and mouth. The memory frays at the edges like crumpling paper in the fire. He is forever frozen in that eternal melancholy look. Like he knew what was coming.

MaryAnne lets out a hiccup of sound.

"*There you are,*" a wolf barks and the voices laugh long and harrowed. Her door rattles at the hinges. "Why don't you come out?"

"Leave me alone!" she cries and can hear the panic in her own voice. "Leave before I, before I . . . *Leave!*"

Oh no. She has answered them, what a silly girl she is. The beasts outside her window throw their heads back and howl. And howl still.



Days pass in which MaryAnne doesn't hear the howling. She sweeps and mends and stokes her fire. Sometimes, the doe wakes in the predawn hours, half-frozen and shivering. She feeds the dead embers and looks out. Faded stars and quilted black look back at her and the night is quiet then, peeled to its barest layers and forgiving.

But those aren't most days. A howling comes at her door. MaryAnne's ears begin to ring with it. She dreams of fangs and rust-colored waters. In the light of day, MaryAnne rubs her eyes until she sees spots that leave a white-toothed grin behind. *I won't survive the winter*, she thinks. *My time has come*.

MaryAnne goes to the village wisewoman.

She trudges through the knee-deep snow, ducking behind trees when strangers pass on the road. The wisewoman, Mother Grace, lives near the outskirts of town like her. Though unlike MaryAnne, footprints ring her squat home—deep grooves like fossilized sediment. MaryAnne follows the grooves to a door thick as slabs of good brown bread. She creeps forward like she might fade into her own shadow if she is slow enough.

The house is dark evergreen and billows plumes of smoke. Charms for luck and the Evil Eye hang in the window. MaryAnne averts her gaze. Some of them look like pawed feet, yellow eyes, or pressed juniper. She hunches over, tugs at her sleeves, and lifts a hand to the door. It swings open at a single touch.

"Hello?" she calls. A gloom curtains the foyer. "I am MaryAnne. Daughter of . . ." She doesn't finish the thought. If there's one thing she knows about Mother Grace, it's that she hates tedious things. "Mother Grace, I have come to ask you of the world. I've come to ask you what wolves fear."

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