The Great Black Wolf

by FemmeMalheureuse

Summary

Written to a Fairy Tale prompt at another JAFF site, this is an adaptation of The White Wolf from The Grey Fairy Book, c. 1900, by Andrew Lang (now out of copyright).

Notes

See the end of the work for notes
As so many old tales begin, once upon a time…

King Thomas ruled the kingdom of Bennet. He had three daughters, all of them very beautiful. The first were twins who resembled their mother's family in nature and appearance — Jane, the eldest by minutes, had a sweet quiet nature and golden hair like her mother, while Catherine had her mother's petite stature and generous figure combined with a reserved personality.

The third daughter was Thomas' favorite, though. Elizabeth was most like him in temperament and appearance. She was dark haired, fair skinned like him, lithe of figure and athletic in movement, blessed with a quick mind and even quicker wit. This youngest daughter also adored her father as deeply as he adored her. The king treated her more like a favored first son and heir than a daughter, in part because he and his wife could have no more children. If his throne must devolve to a relative in the absence of an heir, he wished not to be parted from this favorite child before then.

It happened that to maintain a longstanding peace, King Thomas needed to make a diplomatic tour of neighboring countries. Before he left on his mission, he asked his wife and daughters what gifts they would like from his travels. Frances, Jane, and Catherine asked for perfumed oils, jewels, and fine dresses, respectively. But Elizabeth asked only for a wreath of wild flowers representative of his travels. He could deny her nothing.

The journey was successful; each neighboring kingdom welcomed Thomas and renewed their diplomatic ties to ensure peace between them. They gifted the visiting king with fragrant perfumes for his wife, a fantastic necklace of gemstones for his eldest twin daughter, and an embroidered gown made of gold and silver tissue for the second twin daughter. Pacts were made to ensure introductions between two princes of neighboring kingdoms with Thomas' oldest daughters, with the hopes that their families would unite both kin and lands.
The weather began to deteriorate during their last visit as the seasons began to change. It was clear the retinue needed to move quickly, at risk of being trapped overlong away from their homeland if they did not complete their journey with speed. But in their haste the diplomats accompanying Thomas failed to send a courier to the last kingdom on their agenda, to advise their arrival in advance. The king nor his heir were therefore not found in residence. Thomas and his courtiers had no choice but to dash home through the countryside, heading for home through wretched storms.

The rain and wind had damaged what wild flowers there were along the fields; what were not damaged were closed tightly. The king bemoaned his broken promise to his youngest child. He had waited until the last kingdom to find her wreath so that it would be fresh on his return. He would arrive home empty-handed in her eyes. It was such a little thing she asked for, and he could not deliver it to her. What a great king I am, he thought, humbled by the weather.

As the retinue approached the border to their native lands, they came upon a dark woods. Within the dense canopy of tree branches the weather did not touch them; it was as if they had entered a twilight place after the rain. The forest was quiet and still. Only the sound of horses' hooves and the wheels of the carriages rolling over the gravel road could be heard within the span of the trees.

At once they came upon a clearing at the side of the road, through which the sun shone brightly on a small grassy glade. In the center of that glade sat a great black wolf, larger than a man, his tongue lolling out of his mouth as if he was laughing at the courtiers passing by.

The scene was quite mystical as it was, but the greatest miracle was a wreath of wild flowers the wolf wore around its neck – its brilliant yellow, pink, and white petals glowed as if made from otherworldly tissue. The wolf blinked his enormous green eyes, then cocked his head as if in query as the caravan came to a halt at the king’s command.

Thomas bade his chief coachman approach the wolf to ask for the wreath.

The wolf, though, did not want to deal with the coachman. He surprised the entirety of diplomats as he spoke to King Thomas.

"Dear neighbor lord and king, you may have the wreath. But I must have something in return for it, as it means much to me. You can imagine the work a wolf like me must manage to assemble such a collection of beauty."

"I will gladly give you treasure for it, just name your price," Thomas said, both pleased and concerned. He could keep his promise to Elizabeth, but at what price?

"I ask for no riches. I am willing to gamble on this exchange, as a king keeping his word to me has great value of its own."

"You have me at an advantage, sir wolf. Only in giving my word can I keep a promise to another. Name your price."

"Promise me only the very first thing to greet you as you enter your kingdom, your grace. I will come for it three days after you have entered your city’s gates."

Thomas felt for certain that he would only meet with a bird, or a shepherd's flock. A wolf would be pleased with a tasty fresh meal, wouldn't it not?

"I accept your terms. In exchange for the wreath I will forfeit the first thing that greets me upon entering my kingdom." Thomas took the wolf's paw and shook it before bowing, as if sealing a negotiation with a fellow man. The wolf shrugged off the wreath, which Thomas picked up and
took with him, waving to the wolf as his stepped up and into his carriage. The great black wolf nodded its head as it watched the caravan slowly pull away.

The rest of the journey was preternaturally calm as the retinue continued through the dark forest toward their homeland. As they approached the end of the woods, the light increased as did the sounds of birds and insects. The caravan emerged only a mile from the border of their own country, beneath a clear blue sky and the brightest sunshine.

Knights on horseback rode up to border, opening the gate's broad doors. Beneath the arch of the gate, behind the opened doors stood Elizabeth, smiling in welcome as her father came home. She was giddy with happiness at his safe return, and overjoyed at the beautiful wreath he had obtained for her.

Once alone with his queen in the solitude of their royal bedchamber that night, Thomas recounted the details of the trip to Frances. King and queen alike fretted when Thomas told her of the promise he made to the great black wolf. How could he have foreseen his daughter's zeal to meet him on return, especially when there was no set time of arrival at the gates? It mattered not; the king's word was bond, and the price would be paid.

The next morning Princess Elizabeth asked why both her father and mother looked so downhearted. "It's as if you have been crying, and I cannot see any reason for tears given the success of your trip, father."

"I have bad news, Elizabeth. I have offered too dear a price for the wreath I brought you. The cost is too dear."

Thomas told her of the circumstances in which the wreath was discovered, and the bargain made with the great black wolf; at the end of three days after the king had returned, the wolf would come to claim her as his own. Elizabeth was stunned at what her request would cost; she had been happy just to have her father returned. The wreath was nothing; she would have lived happily without it.

Queen Frances, though, was unwilling to part with her daughter. She had tentative plans for her marriage to another prince in another kingdom. She thought for a while about a solution; an idea came to her that might satisfy the wolf while allowing Elizabeth to remain with her parents.

A scullery maid of the same age, height, and coloring as Elizabeth had been found. Her name was Angela, befitting a heavenly intervention on behalf of the king and queen. She was asked if she would be willing to take the princess's place if her parents were offered enough gold to keep them fed and sheltered for the rest of their lives. Angela agreed to the plan. She worked as her parents' sole support due to their age and infirmities; this was an opportunity to escape the drudgery of her life, take care of her parents, and embark on a great adventure.

The queen and her daughters spent the next day preparing Angela, dressing her in a princess's robes, packing a trousseau of similar attire for her future life.

The weather changed dramatically on the day the great black wolf arrived; dark clouds amassed as the wind increased in intensity. His fur appeared even more brilliant under blue-grey skies as the wolf padded along the stonework stairs before entering the palace throneroom.

"I am come to claim my due as you promised, your grace," growled the wolf as he bowed his head before King Thomas and his queen.

They led Angela-Elizabeth to the wolf. "You must climb upon my back as if I was your steed," he said as he waited for footmen to assist Angela-Elizabeth. Once seated upon his back, he bade her
hold onto his fur tightly before he bounded out palace doors, down the long stonework steps, along the cobblestone sweep, and through the kingdom's gates.

The wolf cantered easily in great long strides, the wind whistling through his whiskers and across Angela-Elizabeth's back. Before long they came to the place where King Thomas had first seen the great black wolf.

"Let us rest for a while here, before we go any further," the wolf said as he sank his rear haunches on the grass of the glade. It was silent and calm, the sun shining like a lamp down into the narrow glen in the dark forest.

The wolf patted his paw on the soft grass beside him, gesturing for Angela-Elizabeth to sit beside him as he rested. His tongue lolled heavily, making her at ease; he seemed like any gentle dog in the village surrounding the palace, panting from the effort of running and carrying a burden.

He cocked his head at her as his eyes narrowed with a question. "If this was his forest, what would your father would do to it?"

Angela-Elizabeth could not help herself; she was unprepared for any questions from a wolf. There was something about his deep green eyes that begged for the absolute truth.

"My father is poor and could likely do little with these woods. If he were hale, he would fell the trees, saw their trunks into boards, trim the branches for firewood, and sell the lot at market. My family would have enough money to keep a roof over their heads, clothes on their backs, and food in their stomachs if this was my father's forest."

This was not the true princess; he nosed her up upon his back and carried her back to the palace whence she came. The sky grew darker yet as he emerged from the forest with Angela-Elizabeth on his back; she clung tightly to him, terrified by both the wolf's anger and the weather which mirrored his mood.

Thunder roared overhead as the great black wolf snarled at King Thomas and Queen Frances. "Give me my price as promised. This is not the princess you have given me. If you attempt to deceive me once again I will wreak a storm so great that your palace will collapse with you in it." Lighting exploded outside the palace at the last word left the wolf's tongue, followed by a boom the likes of which had never been heard before, rattling every pane of glass and every suit of armor within the city's walls.

The terrified king and queen could see no other way out of the situation save to offer the real Elizabeth as Thomas had promised.

Her parents summoned her before hugging and kissing her farewell. Thomas explained, "You must go as you are bid, as I have promised. I must keep my word, my beloved child." Elizabeth hugged her parents back, asking only for a moment to prepare herself for the trip. She packed a small satchel with a very few clothes and then grabbed the wreath of wild flowers for which she had been exchanged.

After donning the flowers, she allowed the wolf to nudge her onto his back before he sped off once again on his giant paws.

Once again the wolf came to the place where King Thomas had first seen the great black wolf.

As before with Angela-Elizabeth, the deep woods were silent and calm, the sun shining like a lamp down into the narrow glen in the dark forest. "Let us rest for a while here, before we go any further," the wolf said as he sank his rear haunches on the grass of the glade, gesturing again for
this princess to sit on the soft grass beside him.

Elizabeth marveled at the beauty of the clearing, reclining alongside the wolf as she closed her eyes to the sun beating down pleasantly upon her. She reached for a cluster of purple blooms within her reach, pulling a few petals to hold to her nose to enjoy the fragrance.

The dark beast smiled, a wolfy grin baring his teeth. Would she run at the site of his canine lips stretched so widely? Elizabeth peeked at the wolf but briefly; he looked like her own wolfhound, happy to see her after the hunt. She showed no fear that he could detect.

He nuzzled her neck with his great wet nose, enjoying the sweet smell of her skin combined with the scent of the wild flowers she wore. Elizabeth giggled; his nose tickled her in the funniest way. She could not help herself, reaching out to stroke his muzzle and then scratch behind his ears, wrapping her arms around his furry nape just as she would her pet.

He cocked his head once more, his eyes narrowed with a question. "If this was his forest, what would your father would do to it?"

"My father would hire nearby village men to clear away the dead wood. What was salvageable would be sawn into planks for sale. What was not salvageable would be cut into firewood for the poor. The funds from the sale of the planks would be used to pay the village men wages. If funds were left over they would be distributed to the widows and orphans. The village men would be hired to clear a trail through the forest so their children could enjoy the beauty of the forest. Village women would be allowed to teach their children how to harvest mushrooms and berries from the forest while men would be encouraged to learn how to manage this as a woodlot for the benefit of the entire village."

Ah, Elizabeth, you are the real princess – my princess, the wolf thought to himself, before nuzzling her one more time. "Mount my back once again, Princess, and I will carry you to my home." Elizabeth clambered on, slinging her satchel across her back before clutching his black fur tightly. The wolf bounded through the woods, taking great strides along the road until he came to a set of massive gates before an elegant courtyard.

"How beautiful this is," Elizabeth whispered into the wolf's ear, still clinging tightly to his back. "I wish it were not so far from my parents," she sighed.

"In a year we will leave and call upon your father and mother for a visit," he growled softly.

No sooner had the words left his mouth than the wolf sat on his haunches abruptly; Elizabeth slid off and stood. As she backed away, the wolf's great black fur slipped off his back like a cape, and a beautiful man, young and tall, emerged from the skin. His eyes were deep green and his hair was ebon like the great wolf's fur. The man's shoulders were as broad and strong as the wolf's great haunches. He reached out to her with one large, warm hand to escort her up the castle's stairs.

A smile stretched his face like that the great black wolf wore as he welcomed her to the castle.

"I am Prince Fitzwilliam, and this is my kingdom, Pemberley. I welcome you to my home, Princess Elizabeth. Please treat it as you would your own home. You may call me William henceforth."

For the next several months Elizabeth led a very pleasant life, recognized and treated as a visiting princess. She was beloved by peers and nobles as well as commoners; she was gracious and kind, generous with her time with others who needed her assistance. Her lack of airs made her approachable; her appreciation of the kingdom's real beauties in the form of its woods and fields as well as its people assured her future role as queen. Her presence marked the first time of sustained
contentment in the kingdom since William's father had died the previous year. The prince could find no flaw in her behavior or her understanding. Even the grace with which she accepted his magical duel nature was pleasing.

Six months had passed when Prince William came to Elizabeth's rooms. "You must prepare for a journey, my dear. It is not far, but you will be away for a while. Your eldest sister Jane is to be married to the heir apparent in a neighboring principality. Prince Charles, son of King Edmund of Bingley, will soon be your brother-in-law." Elizabeth was happy, both for her sister and to see her parents again. She packed quickly and left in one of William's royal carriages.

William had changed into his great wolf form in order to accompany her; he loped alongside the carriage, his pink tongue flickering from time to time as Elizabeth watched him with amusement. It never failed to make her laugh with pleasure to see him as a Canis.

William left her after she disembarked from the carriage once it pulled in front of her father's palace. "When the wedding festivities are over, I shall return with the carriage to fetch you to my home. I will whistle in the manner of wolves, here at the steps of the castle. Pay no attention to any demand made by your father or mother. If I have to leave without you, you will never be able to navigate your way back through the forest." She threw her arms around the great black wolf and hugged him, kissing his dark nose before running up the palace stairs to join the wedding party. William watched her disappear behind the palace doors before he turned and ran back toward his home.

Three days later he returned, running beside his royal carriage. He howled a wolf's call; Elizabeth heard it and made her farewells rapidly, ignoring all pleas to stay for a while longer. She flew out the doors, down the steps, and into the carriage to return to William's home.

Their lives resumed the pattern adopted before Jane's marriage; Elizabeth remained a treasured guest of the prince, learning much about a consort's responsibilities to William's kingdom. His people continued to expect that some day soon she would become his wife and queen.

Another six months had passed when once again William told Elizabeth her sister Catherine would soon be married to Prince Andrew, the younger son of King James of Matlock; she should prepare for a trip home to celebrate. This time William did not leave her; he accompanied her to the palace in wolf form, occupying her room as her wolf. In the evening before festivities, William shed his wolf skin so as to accompany Elizabeth to the wedding ball in his princely form.

Unbeknownst to Elizabeth and William, Queen Frances had been in the dressing room next to Elizabeth's bedroom and had seen William's change as she rummaged through Elizabeth's finery. Frances raced across to grab the black wolf pelt from the floor and threw it in the fireplace where it burst into flames.

At once a great clap of thunder shook the entire palace; a roaring whirlwind rose and surrounded William, whisking him away.

Elizabeth was heartbroken; she spent the night crying bitterly over the loss of her beloved wolf companion whom she had come to care for deeply both as canine and man. Frances and Thomas both tried to help her see that she was free of a curse, but Elizabeth would have nothing to do with their feeble attempts to justify Frances' hasty action.

Packing little but what she needed to camp on the road and dressed like a commoner, Elizabeth left the next morning before dawn to find her way back to her wolf-prince.

For a fortnight Princess Elizabeth wandered over the roads and fields beyond her home kingdom, finding herself lost in a dark forest. She lived on nuts, berries, and other edible plant materials she
gathered as she tried to find the way back to her wolf-prince's castle. Following the streams from which she drank did not help; they only appeared to lead her deeper into the darkness of the woods.

As twilight fell upon the end of the fourteenth day, when Elizabeth was utterly exhausted and beyond tears, she came upon a small stone cottage in a small clearing. A soft voice asked her to enter when she knocked on the stout door. Within lived an old woman, about whom the air churned as if a living thing.

"I am a wind mage, my dear. How can I help you?"

"I am quite lost, madame. I am looking for a great black wolf who is in truth a prince in wolf's skin. Have you seen him before? Can you tell me where I might find him?"

"No, my child, I cannot tell you where he is. I have just returned from the fields where I blow the pollen to make crops yield. I saw him not as I worked."

"Do you know where his castle might be?"

"I cannot say I have seen it. I can give you a special pair of shoes, though, that will allow you to travel like the wind."

The old woman fetched a pair of soft leather bootlets, with stout straps to keep them firmly on the wearer's feet. "You will be able to clear twenty miles with each step you take with these shoes, my dear. They will make your search go faster. Take this cloak, too; it may look old and make you look aged as well, but it will keep you warm and protect you from the elements. Let me feed you before you go, though. You need the sustenance for the road ahead."

Elizabeth thanked the old woman profusely for a lovely, quiet meal of soup with bread and cheese, though with some reluctance about the shoes. "You have been very kind to a stranger, madame. Are you sure taking these will not be an inconvenience to you? You will not need these to do your work?"

"No, these are my old ones. They do not travel as far as my new ones, but they have plenty of life in them for your purpose. Go, seek your wolf with my blessings."

Elizabeth thanked her once again before leaving the cottage; in two steps found herself over the woods by forty miles.

Another small cottage stood before her, this one in the middle of a field of grain beneath the starlit sky. Its thatching glinted as the moon's light shone upon the roof and along the pebbled path to the door. Light also radiated from the cottage's windows, peeking out from between the shutters as if reaching out to Elizabeth.

She knocked at the door, hoping for a friendly reception. A woman of indeterminate age wearing a gown bright like moonbeams opened the door and welcomed Elizabeth into her home, offering her tea and rest.

"And now how many I help you, my dear?"

"Thank you for your hospitality. I am looking for a great black wolf who is in truth a prince in wolf's skin. Have you seen him before? Can you tell me where I might find him?"

"I cannot tell you where to find him. I see you have received help from my sister."

"Your sister?"
"Yes, the wind mage. I am the night mage. What powers belong to the night's skies, I possess and control them. Because I can see and reach farther than my sister, I may have something more powerful to offer as aid."

The night mage produced another pair of shoes, these finer in appearance than those the wind mage had given Elizabeth. They glowed like the night mage's dress, as if lit from inside. The mage took some dried moss from a covered pot and lined the shoes to help them fit more comfortably. Elizabeth slid off the wind mage's shoes to don this pair of luminescent footwear.

"Just as I can see and reach farther than my sister, with these you will be able to travel four times farther, eighty miles with each step. Continue as you were with my best wishes."

Elizabeth stepped out of the brightly illuminated cottage into the night; she took only a few steps before she found herself at the point where morning twilight began. Once again a small cottage drew her attention, this time upon a rise within morning fog rising from a low swale.

She knocked on the door to ask for directions. The fog swirling around the cottage parted as the door opened, and a man dressed in grey woolen shirt and pants welcomed her into his home. He offered her tea and bread with butter as well as a pallet on which to nap by the fire.

"Please, sir, I thank you for your hospitality, but I must continue my journey. I am looking for a great black wolf who is in truth a prince in wolf's skin. Have you seen him before? Can you tell me where I might find him?"

"I cannot tell you where to find him. I see you have received help from my sister, though."

"Your sister? You must have two of them, then. The wind mage and night mage were both kind and generous to me, helping me on my quest."

"Yes, they are both my sisters. I am sure you have been traveling a long way since I know where they live and how far apart they are. Please, rest yourself for a bit. I must set the morning in motion before I can talk any further, and I promise we will talk."

Elizabeth made herself comfortable and dozed off almost immediately on a soft pallet set in the inglenook surrounding the fireplace. She woke when the man returned through the cottage's front door.

"Ah, you're awake. I trust you slept well. Allow me to introduce myself. I am the weather mage. I must tell my youngest sister what her daily chores are each morning, and talk with my other sister the night mage to find out how events unfolded overnight. All is set in motion now, my chores are complete. Come, tell me your story."

Taking a seat at the table as the mage requested, Elizabeth told him the story of how she came to meet the great black wolf, only to discover he was a prince in whose castle she came to live. She told of the horror she felt when his fine pelt was destroyed, and how heartbroken she was to have lost the young man she had come to care for very deeply.

"Ah, lass, I have just the things for you. You will need yet another pair of special shoes, this time to climb a mountain where your wolf-prince's castle is located. You'll also need carding combs, a spindle and some moss, from which you can make silk thread."

"A spindle?"

"Yes. Take these as my gift." He produced two brush-like objects made of bright brass teeth set in precious wood and a small golden spindle — all that she would need to spin the thread — bundled
in a small leather sack. "You will need to gather some moss on this last leg of your journey if you
do not have any in your satchel. When you arrive at the castle, you will find that your wolf-prince
has been promised a new bride as it was believed you had no desire to marry him. To win him
back you will need to spin the moss into silk."

"This does not sound easy, but I will do whatever is necessary."

"Good. These shoes can traverse over the slickest ice, the hardest and sharpest of stones. You will
need them to walk up the mountain just there." He pointed out the window to a remote, snowy
peak within an hour's distance by crow's flight.

"Once you are there, you will need to use your native wits to earn your place back in the wolf-
prince's care. You do not have long. If your feelings are genuine, trust them to guide you to do the
right thing and quickly."

Elizabeth thanked the mage profusely for the gifts as she donned the last pair of shoes. She also
thanked him for the excellent weather that day which would make her journey easier.

The special shoes, which looked more like low boots with rugged soles, carried her quickly across
granite rubble at the base of the mountain, where she collected moss from beneath large stones to
fill her satchel. She strode away then over boulders as she climbed higher, and finally across slick
and crusty patches of ice and snow as she approached the mountain's peak.

Before her lay the palace, just as when she first arrived, though it appeared that special work was
under way to prepare for a celebration. She wrapped about herself the cloak given to her by the
wind mage in order to mask her appearance. To the people of the kingdom she looked like an old
crone, another one of the many strangers who had traveled from abroad to witness their monarch's
wedding followed by his installment as king.

The kingdom bustled with activity, as the wedding was scheduled for the next day. Shopkeepers
dressed their storefronts with bunting, homeowners decorated their windows with streamers, pots
of flowers lined the thoroughfares. All were busy, save for the lone old woman in a shawl.

The woman made her way to the palace courtyard, where she took a seat near a fountain. She
pulled out some moss from her satchel and more from the lining of the shoes the night mage had
given her. She began to card it between the combs gifted by the weather mage, drafting a pile of
fine, pale green fibrous fluff – finer than the best wool the woman had ever worked.

Small children gathered around her to watch her once she had carded all the moss and produced
the golden spindle. Their small mouths opened and closed like those of fish in a pond, their eyes
following the spindle up and down as a wondrous silken thread began to form on the spindle. The
thread glowed like moonlight, entrancing the children who oohed as it brightened along the
spindle's staff. Elizabeth, disguised as a crone, continued her work even after spinning three
generous skeins of the fluorescent silk.

The prospective bride, Anne, daughter of the Duke de Bourgh, entered the courtyard, returning
from a trousseau fitting at a dressmaker in the town. The small crowd of children caught her eye,
but the glint of the golden spindle and the glow of the moss-silk thread captured her attention and
drew her closer.

After watching for a moment along with the children, the new bride-to-be spoke up. "Madame, I
am in awe of your thread. I would like to try this for myself. Would you gift me with your spindle
and as a wedding present?"

The crone paused to consider the request for a moment. "Yes, I will offer you this golden spindle,
my carding combs, and my worked fiber, but on two conditions."
"Name your price, madame. If it is reasonable, we will have deal."
"Allow me to keep the three skeins I have already produced."
"Certainly. And the next condition?"
"Allow me to sleep in the palace corridor, outside the prince's chamber door."

The bride-to-be felt she had the better end of the deal. "Yes, you may sleep outside the prince's chambers. I will ask a footman to ensure you have a mat on which to lie to keep you warm."

The crone gathered up her satchel, packing the combs, the spindle, and the carded fluff in their leather sack before relinquishing them to the bride-to-be's handmaid. The lady nodded in thanks as her handmaid curtseyed before returning to the palace. The crone collected her skeins, tucking them into her deep cloak pocket before saying goodbye to the children.

That night, shortly after the prince had been escorted to his chamber by his valet and minor attendants, the crone arrived in the palace corridor in the family wing. She wound her cloak tightly around her as she settled herself upon the mat before the prince's door.

Once the entire palace appeared to be in bed for the night, the crone began to tell a story to the empty corridor about the great black wolf who had come into her life, with whom she had fallen in love, and for whom she had traveled so long and far to find.

She recounted all of the events, from her father's arrival with the wild flower wreath, to her departure with the wolf-prince, the return to her parent's kingdom once and twice for her sisters' weddings, the disappearance of her prince due to her mother's imprudent destruction of the great black wolf's pelt.

Her tears came unbidden when she recounted her heartbreak. She spoke of her determination to find her wolf, meeting the three kind and generous mages, and of the challenging path to this mat on which she now sat.

Elizabeth yawned, exhausted from her last and final trip, from the day's work spinning silk, and from the long recitation of her mission to the prince's door.

Having the hearing of a wolf even without his pelt, the prince had heard all of Elizabeth's story. He knew the crone about which he had heard from his prospective bride over dinner was his first betrothed and his only love.

But he resisted taking action that evening, asking only for a footman to offer a soft pallet, a pillow and blankets to the old woman in the corridor. William drifted off into an unsettled sleep that matched Elizabeth's slumber just outside his door.

The next day the last of the wedding guests arrived – some of them kings, princes, and other dignitaries from countries far and wide. They gathered in the great hall at midday, where the wedding ceremony and banquet were to take place.

Elizabeth's heart sank, her stomach roiled with turmoil over the impending loss of her love to another forever. She could think of nothing else to be done to restore her relationship with her wolf-prince. Hoping for a miracle, she waited in the foyer of the great hall, still looking much like the old crone who had spun silk in the courtyard.

William emerged from the family wing of the palace, garbed in finest royal attire trimmed with
black wolf fur, entering the great hall to fanfare. He greeted his guests warmly and thanked them for coming, before speaking to them.

"My lords and ladies, friends and family, before the wedding proceeds, I must confess have a problem with which I need your guidance."

The assembled guests and courtiers nodded their consent.

"I have had a great treasure, enclosed in a chest for which I have lost the key. I asked for a new key to be made. While the request was being fulfilled, I recovered the original key."

Many of the guests looked puzzled. How could their advice be of any use in this case?

"I ask you which of these keys is better, the first and original key, or the second key made as a replacement?"

The guests one and all exclaimed that the first key, made for the chest, was the better of the two.

"Then it is also right that my first betrothed is better than her replacement."

Prince William waved to lady's maids and footmen at the back of the great room, asking them to retrieve the crone from the foyer.

Decloaking the old woman he revealed his beloved Elizabeth, declaring, "This is my bride, my first and only love, who had been lost to me. She is now restored and will become my wife today."

The second betrothed was shocked, but not unhappy as she had been forced to agree to a marriage of convenience with Prince Fitzwilliam by her father, who had many trade debts with the wolf-prince's kingdom.

"I release my second betrothed from her marriage contract. I will settle the debts of her father the Duke de Bourgh, and ask that she take my neighbor, the Duke of Salus, as her spouse."

Richard, Duke of Salus, was a childhood friend of Prince Fitzwilliam and had long been in love with Anne de Bourgh. She had tender feelings for him which might well become love over time within the duchy's borders as the duke's bride. Her father felt he had no choice but to accept.

"Further, I ask the duke and his bride join me and my first betrothed today at the altar here, to share our joy in a mutual wedding day. Most of you are counted among his friends as well. I would happily provide the feast for my neighbor and his friends if they but join with us today."

The duke and his new bride-to-be agreed eagerly. A cheer went up as Prince William escorted Elizabeth to the family wing, where a dressmaker had been dispatched to fit her with a lovely gown suitable for a wedding.

Elizabeth could not attend to preparations without first throwing herself joyfully at William, wrapping her arms around his neck as she did her former furry wolfen friend. He returned her affection, whispering words of endearment as he nuzzled her ear and kissed her cheek.

"I would have walked many leagues more to find you, William. I am so sorry we were parted."

"I am so very glad you did not have to walk any further, my love, and that you arrived just in time to become the bride you were meant to be. Mine, my beloved, never to be parted from me again."

The two couples were joined; now married, the new prince was installed as king the next day as
stipulated by the succession laws of his kingdom. His new princess-bride became his queen-consort, and the people of the kingdom were as happy as the newlyweds.

Soon after the celebrations ended, three packages arrived at three different remote cottages, each containing a small bag of gold coins, a skein of moonlit moss-silk, and a thank you note written on the letterhead of the kingdom of Pemberley. The weather was beautiful, the winds gentle, the nights glorious for the remainder of that year.

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People still talk of the feasting and festivities many years later, and of the happiness of the couples joined that day. They had many children and grandchildren who intermarried between the duchy of Salus and the kingdom of Pemberley, caring well for their subjects.

From time to time, under a bright full moon, one might still see an old crone walking with a great grey-muzzled wolf at her side, sometimes along the mountain's peak outside the town's borders, and sometimes in a moonlit glade in a forest not far from the palace.

They say if you listen closely, you can hear the old woman telling a story to the wolf; he grins broadly as he sits beside her while she weaves flowers into a wreath for him to wear about his neck.

*The End*

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**End Notes**

A/N: With many thanks to my betas Andrew and Nathan, who continue to slog through all my JAFF fiction like good sports.

[Image: remix of sketches by Jean-Auguste Dominique Ingres (cropped and modded; underlying original image is in public domain)]

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