

Looking up, the knight sighed in relief on seeing his home again. How long had it been? Six months? A year? He practically didn't recognize the place, yet there was something familiar about the cottage with its thatched roof, the garden in front—well-tended, he saw—and the little puff of smoke from the chimney. Looking over his shoulder, he was reminded why he and his wife had chosen this spot for their homestead: in the distance beyond the dirt path rose the imposing facade of the castle, with rows of thick trees in front. It was a beautiful sight, though after these long months, he didn't care to see the castle again for a while.

Invigorated by the sight of his home, the knight nudged his horse forward with newfound zest and quickly ascended the hill. He saw a motion at the window, and then his wife rushed out to him, her plain dress and long, blonde hair flowing behind her in the breeze.

"Reginald!" she cried.

"Eliza!" he beamed.

He dismounted, and she leapt into his arms.

The two embraced, his powerful arms holding her tightly, little tears of joy forming at the corners of their eyes as they thanked Providence for bringing them together once more.

"Oh, how I've missed you," Eliza said at last, looking up at her rugged knight with admiration.

"And I, you," Reginald replied. "I received your letters. How is your sister?"

Eliza's face clouded. "I'm afraid she didn't make it," she said. "The Plague spares no-one, it seems."

"I'm sorry for your loss," Reginald said, "But I am glad that it has spared you." He kissed her lips. "You're the only thing that makes this everlasting war tolerable."

"Let's go inside," she said, taking his hand. "I'll put on some supper."

Reginald smiled as he led his horse behind him, following his wife up to the cottage. The years had been kind to her, and she was still as winsome as ever, her simple beauty and slim waist untouched by time. While she picked some potatoes and cabbage for their pottage, he untacked his horse and put him in his stall to rest.

The knight and his wife went inside, and Reginald put down his knapsack, took off his sword, shield, and armor, putting each in its place by the door. At last, his feet were finally free to breathe!

It didn't take long for the smell of supper to lend its savory fragrance to the air. The knight walked into the kitchen and found his wife busily chopping potatoes to put into the stew alongside the ham hock. She smiled on seeing him, still somewhat disbelieving that he was actually home. Was it her imagination, or had his beard grown redder and fuller since she'd last seen him? And despite the stress she knew he *must* be under, not a speck of white or gray tainted his thick, brown hair.

"How was the war?" she asked as she worked.

"As brutal as ever," Reginald replied. "I don't know what the French have against us, but I grow tired of the constant petty disputes. Still," he said, stepping up behind her and rubbing her shoulders affectionately, "I am glad to fight for your safety and honor. It is far better to defend my loved ones than to rely on someone else to do it."

She turned to hug him, and he held her close. Sighing in happiness, she looked up at him and smiled with beautiful, pouting lips.

"My knight—my literal knight in shining armor," she said.

"I fight for thee, milady," Reginald replied with a grin, specks of mischief dancing in the dark gray of his irises, "Though the armor isn't quite so shiny right now; I'll buff it out tomorrow."

Though they joked about their roles, each knew that beneath the teasing words was a deep, sincere appreciation for one another. They held the embrace—left to their own devices, they could have held it forever—but supper at last demanded to be tended, and Eliza broke the hug to stir the pottage and get it ready to serve.

A Knight's Tail

© 2018 Jack Doe. Do not distribute without all copyright notices and disclaimers intact.

For the first time in ages, Reginald set up the board that served as their table and took his place at the end of it as Eliza put their bowls down. They offered a prayer of thanks for bringing them safely together again and for the meal they were about to share—together for the first time in a long time—and dug in.

“Oh, Eliza, I have so missed your cooking!” Reginald exulted. “This pottage is so much better than anything I’ve had to eat in many months!”

Eliza laughed. “Reginald, *anything* that isn’t stale, nearly-moldy bread and dried meat is better than anything you’ve had to eat in many months!”

Reginald chuckled. “Maybe so, but I’d rather eat your cooking than anything else!”

“You shameless flatterer,” Eliza smiled, reaching across the table to rub his arm affectionately.

Reginald grinned sheepishly. “Well, whaddya want?” he said, “I haven’t had much chance to flatter anybody!”

He pulled her into a deep kiss and said conspiratorially, “At least I’m not threatening to ravage you right here on the table!”

“Later, dear,” Eliza said, rolling her bright, blue eyes and grinning.

They finished their bowls, and Reginald went back for seconds before his appetite was sated. They cleaned up the dishes together, and then Eliza drew and heated water for a bath.

For the first time in a long time, they sat together, bathing each other in the warm water. His rough hands caressed her soft skin, and her soft hands ran over his burly, hairy chest. They both enjoyed the closeness very much and had missed it dearly. Once more, they could have let the moment last forever, but the water eventually cooled, and they stepped out, drying off and sighing in contentment.

As Eliza took up some socks to begin mending them, Reginald went to the window to watch the sunset. They *did* have some of the most beautiful sunsets in the county. But as the shadows grew longer and the sky began to blaze with the evening rays, a dull ache began in Reginald’s head, just behind his eyebrow.

“Oh, no,” he whispered.

“Hmm?” Eliza asked from her chair.

Reginald slumped. “It’s...” He couldn’t bring himself to say it.

Eliza put down her darning and rushed to him.

“Oh, Reginald,” she sighed, “It’s that time again, isn’t it?”

Reginald nodded sorrowfully. “You would think it could have given us just *one* night together in peace before it started,” he said woefully.

“We’ll make it through,” Eliza said comfortingly, though her voice faltered. “We always have, and we always will.”

Reginald smiled, but the glint of the evening rays told him they had to be quick.

“We must make haste,” he said.

Eliza grabbed her shawl, Reginald grabbed his boots, and they quickly left the cottage and set out down the path, following it for about a quarter mile before turning off and hurrying down an ill-used trail. When they came to an old well, they knew they were close. The knight scuffed through the underbrush with his boots until his feet landed on something solid and woody. The two pulled up the overgrown weeds to expose a heavy, wooden trapdoor. They stared at the sinister portal, neither wanting to do what came next, but both knowing that it must be done.

With a heavy heart, the knight opened the door to reveal a gloomy, subterranean stone prison. The knight’s stomach turned as he saw the claw marks on the walls and on the backside of the door. His breathing labored, he turned slowly to his wife.

A Knight's Tail

© 2018 Jack Doe. Do not distribute without all copyright notices and disclaimers intact.

Gripping her by the shoulders, he said urgently, "Make haste, my love. When I am inside, lock the door tightly—make sure it is fast—and then go straight home and stay in the house, no matter what you hear."

Eliza began to protest, but Reginald put his finger to her lips and shook his head. "Please, don't argue, my love. We both know this is the only way, and this is hard for me as it is."

Fighting back tears and swallowing the lump in her throat, Eliza hugged Reginald tightly. He hugged her as comfortingly as he could but then broke the embrace and climbed down into the cell.

"Hurry, my love," he said anxiously. "Twilight is upon us!" He hesitated, and then added as optimistically as he could, "I'll see you on the morrow, and this will all have been just a bad dream."

Driven by fear, Eliza closed the trapdoor, plunging her husband—the love of her life—into pitch darkness. Fishing around in the weeds, she found the wooden boards that she was to place over the entrance, barring his exit. She locked her husband in that gloomy tomb and then deserted him there, fleeing as if the very beasts of Hell were after her, tears of woe streaming down her face. She met nobody on the road and hurriedly made her way to the cottage, closing and blocking the door, and drawing the curtains closed.

And then she waited, breathlessly watching through a crack in the curtains for the sun to set.

Reginald paced his cell, his eyes still not accustomed to the darkness. His headache was growing worse and had spread across his forehead, pounding furiously. He went to the trapdoor and peered through a tiny crack. Darkness was coming fast; it wouldn't be long now.

How had he managed to be such a lucky man and yet so cursed at the same time? He thought of Eliza and the pleasant time they'd had since he'd gotten back. He detested that this foul curse had chosen *now*—on their homecoming day—to besmirch their time together! He slammed his fists against the stone wall in anger. He should be with his wife, watching her darn socks, not trapped in this infernal tomb, awaiting Hell to possess him!

He didn't have to look at the trapdoor to know when darkness fell. A sudden, blinding pain shot through his head, and he screamed in pain, clutching his temples as they throbbed in furious agony. He felt the bones in his body beginning to grind, shift, and grow. The bones in his legs grew longer, ripping his skin and muscle and sinew until they stretched to catch up and thickened. Coarse, black hair sprouted from him all over, itching like mad. He began to furiously scratch himself, desperate to stop the miserable feeling. But his clothes prevented him from reaching his skin, and he desperately tore at them, trying to get at the source of the infernal itching. His back wrenched as a tail sprouted from the top of his buttocks, and he fell on his side, no longer able to take the pain standing up. He cried out in miserable suffering as his body continued to change and morph, his arms growing longer and stronger, his chest packing on layer upon layer of muscle and growing thick with the black, coarse fur. His clothes ripped as his growing body could no longer fit into them, and his shoes split in two and fell to the ground around his rapidly growing paws.

The last thing to go was his voice, and as his mouth pushed away from his face to form a muzzle, his screams of physical pain became the mournful cry of a werewolf mourning the last ounce of his humanity.

And then it was gone, and all that remained was primal instinct.

Trapped! Stuck in cage! Must get out!

He slammed into and scratched at the walls, testing their strength.

Argh! No! I will not be stuck here! I'm...hungry. I need to feed.

No food in here! Must get out!

He slammed harder and harder against the walls, growing more frustrated with each failed attempt.

Trapped! No!

He howled in frustration.

Walls are stuck! Must be a way out! Must find it!

He began clawing at the floor, but it, too, was made of stone, and his claws scratched futilely against the surface.

Argh! Damn this floor! I will get out! I will feed! Curse the one who trapped me in here! There must be a way out!

His sensitive eyes suddenly spied a hint of moonlight from the trapdoor. He bared his teeth and hurried to it. He gasped.

Light! Light means out! Must get out!

He climbed the wooden ladder and threw his shoulder against the trapdoor. It held fast.

No! Infernal prison! Must get out!

He slammed against the door again.

Out! Out! Out!

Over and over, he threw his shoulder against the stubborn door, but still the door held fast. Yet after years of neglect and having held him captive and suffering abuse just like this many times before, the door was beginning to fatigue; it could only take so much mistreatment, and as the werewolf went for broke, leapt from the ladder, and threw his entire body against it, the door finally let out a loud *crack* and gave a little. The werewolf's eyes narrowed, and a wicked grin crept across his lupine face.

Out! he thought resolutely.

He climbed the ladder once again and hit the door over and over with his shoulder. It gave a little more with each strike, until suddenly it broke open, showering him in moonlight.

Ha! Out!

He howled in exultation, leaping out of his prison and quickly sniffing around.

He gasped. *Humans were here!* He sniffed some more. *One is gone, but the other...* He moved his nose closer to the ground and picked up on a trail.

Food.

He took off at a brisk lope, having no trouble chasing the powerful scent of fear as he crashed through the woods and abruptly came to a road.

Roads aren't safe, he thought, taking a cautious step back into the shadows.

His stomach growled.

Hunger. Must eat! Roads be damned!

With a snarl, he charged into the road and quickly picked up on the fearful human's scent again. In no time, he was at the cottage. He saw a light inside, and a face peeking out from the window. The human's eyes went wide as she covered her mouth to contain a shriek of terror.

Food! he thought triumphantly.

Eliza gasped as she saw the werewolf charge into the road.

"Oh, no!" she cried, covering her mouth with her hands for fear of giving herself away.

But it was too late. The hideous beast's eyes locked on her, and he began moving aggressively towards the house.

"No, oh, no, no, no, please, Reginald, no!" she whimpered, watching in helpless terror as the werewolf moved closer and closer.

Her heart pounded as he neared the cabin. She could smell his rancid breath and hear his raspy breathing.

Reginald, she thought desperately, *please, don't do this...*

And now came the fun part: stalking his prey. He slunk slowly toward the door.

His head twitched.

What? He blinked in confusion.

He shook his head and slunk forward, the door mere feet from him. He could smell the human's fear, could hear her breathing and even the sound of her palpitating heart.

Hearts full of blood. Meat. Bones.

His mouth watered in anticipation, and he stole another few steps forward.

His head jerked violently to the left. He gasped.

Wha—?! Stop it! Want food!

Leave her alone, a tiny voice in the back of his head said.

What? The human? No. Human is food!

LEAVE HER ALONE! the voice demanded.

The werewolf snarled and bared his teeth.

No. Stupid voice. Human is food. Must eat human.

His head jerked to the left so violently that he fell over. He scrambled to his feet, snarling.

Hungry! Must eat food! Human is food! Must eat human!

NO! the voice cried. *Eat animals! Animals are food! Humans are not food!*

But... the werewolf pleaded, *human is right here. Can almost taste...*

Leave. Her. Alone!

Fine! The werewolf huffed.

Snarling, he charged back into the woods.

Eliza gasped, seeing the wolf's head twitch, seeing him move forward again, and then seeing him fall over and get up snarling and gnashing his long, vicious teeth.

Her breath caught as she anxiously watched him seeming to wrestle with himself, and she let it out in a breathless sigh of relief as he charged off into the woods. She was safe—for now.

But her thoughts quickly turned to her husband: there might be dangerous animals that could hurt him, or worse, hunters! Yet she dared not go out after him. She sobbed softly, praying desperately for him to make it safely through the night.

But as the hours wore on, her worry grew and grew. She couldn't let him face this trouble alone; she was his *wife*! She shook her head, resolved to find him, and stole over to the stable. It would be madness to follow the werewolf on foot. At least with a horse, she could outrun him if he should turn on her.

"Shh, easy boy," she quietly urged her husband's steed.

The smell of the werewolf made him nervous, and the whites of his eyes flashed in the moonlight. She soothed him and then quickly got his reins put on, forgoing the saddle to save time, and leapt up atop the tall horse.

A Knight's Tail

© 2018 Jack Doe. Do not distribute without all copyright notices and disclaimers intact.

"Okay, come on, boy," she whispered, nudging him forward out of his stall.

The werewolf wasn't hard to find. The creature cared little for his personal safety, and he crashed through the brush, leaving thick trails of destruction as he broke branches, matted grass, and left huge paw-prints in the mud. Eliza snuck carefully forward on her husband's horse, following the trail. The wind was on her side, carrying the werewolf's musty scent downwind to her and spurring her forward, despite the horse's fidgetiness.

She gasped as she suddenly came upon the werewolf just as sunrise was beginning to break. He lay fast asleep on the ground, blood all over his face, an immense bear next to him, partially eaten.

"Oh, Reginald!" Eliza cried softly, slipping off the horse silently and gingerly tiptoeing up to the creature to cover him with a blanket, "Thank heavens you're safe!"

She quickly got back on the horse and watched, waiting for her husband to awaken.

The morning sunlight snuck through the canopy and crept over Reginald's eyelids. He stirred and blinked. He was in his bed, the blanket drawn up close to him. To his left lay a half-eaten bear.

Wait.

Reginald's eyes shot open. *This is not my bed! Where did this blanket come from?! Why is there a bear here?! Eliza! I have to go check on Eliza!*

He leapt to his feet and reached for his sword, only to realize that he was completely naked. He gasped and covered himself with the blanket, looking around wildly. *How did this blanket get here?!*

And then he saw her lying draped over his horse, dozing lightly.

"Eliza," he said, breathlessly approaching her and running his hand over her forehead.

She stirred, saw him, and dismounted to throw herself into his arms, the blanket falling in the process.

"Oh, Reginald! We made it through the night!" she cried, sobbing and burying her face in his shoulder.

"Yes, my love," he said, stroking her back soothingly, "We made it through the night. But I am very upset, love," he said, holding her by the shoulders. "Why did you come out here? You could have been killed! I couldn't live with myself if you died at my own hand! You must never do that again! Promise me!"

Eliza shook her head hesitantly and then firmly. "Reginald, I am your wife, and I love you. I could not live with *myself* if you were hurt out here and I didn't you." She held his hand. "I rode your horse to be able to outrun you if I had to. Don't worry, my love; I won't die at your hand! We're in this together, for better or for worse."

Reginald started to protest, but Eliza reached up and kissed his lips instead. He sighed, beaten, and kissed her tenderly, both grateful that the other was alive and safe.

"It's a good thing we don't have any servants," he said wryly as they began walking back to the cottage, him carrying the blanket in one arm and locking arms with her with the other while she led his horse back in her other hand. "It'd be hard to explain why I'm out here as naked as the day I was born."

"They'd be in for quite the show!" Eliza chuckled in agreement as they turned up the road to the cottage.