

Wolves in the Woods

By Ali Jon Smith

Fate had not been kind to Fräulein Elisabeth. Both her parents had been taken early, leaving her with practically nothing in the world. Now, facing destitution, she had thrown herself at her aunt's mercy, who had agreed to take her in at her ample house in Vienna. Her aunt had even found her a favourable match, which was something at least.

So Elisabeth set out on the long journey to Vienna in a carriage her aunt had hired. Things were going badly. The autumn rains had left the roads in a terribly claggy state, so every leg took twice as long as it should. It meant that on this particular, Elisabeth and her two Hungarian coachmen were still travelling after dusk through thick forests on the road to Pottendorf.

Elisabeth was dozing in the cab when she heard the distant sound of a wolf howl. One of the horses took fright and began to misbehave. With a clunk the wheel of the little carriage slipped on the muddy road and the vehicle slewed diagonally down a bank, straight into a stream. Elisabeth squealed in shock she was thrown sides ways and icy water filled the cab. The horses whinnied in fear and the two coach drivers swore. Luckily when everything was still, no one was hurt.

The coach drivers cut the horses free from the wreck and helped Elisabeth back onto the road. The elder of the two kicked the carriage and muttered in Hungarian.

"Ve'll not get it out. Ve'll have to get help," he said eventually.

Suddenly there was another howl, much closer. It was piercing, chilling. The two drivers went ashen and struggled to keep hold of their beasts.

"Let's go back to the last village!" the younger one said.

"Yes! Good idea," said the elder.

They mounted their horses and started trotting off the way they had come.

"Hey! What about me?" demanded Elisabeth.

They did not halt to answer.

"Ve'll send help as soon as ve can!" said the younger man.

"You'll be safe, don't worry!" said the elder, as he urged his horse to pick up the pace and get him out of the woods all the faster.

Elisabeth looked around her in utter despair. She was alone in the woods, utterly frozen where the stream had soaked her stockings and she had nothing to defend herself with if the wolves came.

She thought she saw something at the edge of the trees. Four plodding paws? Was it real or a trick of the moonlight? Elisabeth did the only thing she knew: She dropped to her knees, took out her little silver crucifix from beneath her scarf and began praying.

"Hail Mary, full of grace,

the Lord is with thee.

Blessed art thou amongst women..."

A third howl!

Louder and closer than even the last.

Elisabeth's resolve broke; she began running in the night, hoping, silently praying, that she would come across some hamlet or village before the wolves caught up with her. Mud sloshed up her legs as tears streamed down her face. Her breath came as a ragged mist.

The road bent and Elisabeth turned with it. Abruptly she was forced to halt; a man was sat astride a horse in the middle of the path.

"I say Madam, are you quite alright?" the man asked. He had a strong, aristocratic voice.

Elisabeth openly wept and said "No Sir, I am cold and lost and my servants have abandoned me. And there are wolves in these woods!"

The man trotted his horse over, "well it seems I am in a position to alleviate all these ills. Let me be your servant. My house is not far from here. You are welcome to stay the night."

He reached down a hand to help her onto the horse. Elisabeth was distraught but she was not a fool. She recoiled from the stranger's outstretched hand. What kind of man saunters through the woods at night? Who stands astride the road at blind corners? It seemed obvious to Elisabeth that this man was in fact a highwayman, ready to waylay travellers caught on the road at night. The two pistols and sabre that hung on his belt seemed to confirm her suspicions.

At that moment the clouds broke and the moon gave her a good view of the man's face. He was young and clean shaven, with long brown hair tied up at the back, a severe straight jaw and lazuli-like blue eyes. His eyes seemed earnest and comforting. As she stared at them, Elisabeth felt her concerns falter. She had never so *wanted* to trust someone. Besides, she had little choice. What was the alternative? Wait for the wolves?

She took his hand.

He pulled her up to sit on the horse as if she were as light as paper. He sat her in front of him, so he held the reins on each side of her. To its credit, the horse did not complain about the extra burden and Elisabeth found it remarkable that he had such control over the beast, when her own pair had been so skittish with the howling.

"Thank you, sir," she said, as they began a plod along the road.

Elisabeth was stiff and anxious in his arms. She fell into a nervous silence. It was a full minute or two before either spoke.

"I'm Leo. Named for the Emperor. My father was a doting subject. What shall I call you?"

"Elisabeth, named for...I'm not sure."

"Well Fräulein Elisabeth, it isn't far now."

"Why *are* you out riding on a night like this?"

"Do you never get the urge to simply wander in the night?"

"Certainly not when there are wolves on the prowl!"

"Oh my dear, there are far worse things than lonely wolves to worry about."

In short order, he turned the horse off the road and they passed through some impressive wrought iron gates. The moon light revealed an extensive formal garden, although one which had become choked with weeds. His 'home' was a villa, bordering on a mansion. Elisabeth felt herself relax; it seemed unlikely a man with such a large estate would be a petty robber.

Leo helped her down from the horse and tied it to a post by the entrance. No servant opened the door for them, but Elisabeth reasoned that was because the hour was late. When she stepped into the house it was barely any warmer. He struck a light to an oil lamp and revealed a grand hall with gilded furniture, plush brocaded upholstery and deep red drapes. Though everything was somewhat marred by dust and cobwebs.

Elisabeth got her first good look at her rescuer and approved of what she saw. He wore shiny leather riding boots with tall heels, long tan stockings that showed off his muscular calves, dark brown breeches of the finest moleskin, a ruffle shirt open at the chest and a brass-buttoned bright blue velvet jacket that matched his eyes. He did not reflect any of the neglect evident in his home. Indeed he was quite fair in complexion and thoroughly aristocratic in bearing.

At the same time he seemed to see her. His expression changed from passive to astonished in a moment and Elisabeth blushed. But then as she followed his eyes down to her feet, she realised he was only astounded by the spray of mud she had brought upon herself with her wild running.

"Dear me! Let me get a fire going for you this instant! You must be freezing!"

He took off his belt with its sabre and pistols and laid it on the mantelpiece, while he bent down and tried to get some kindling going. The fireplace did not look like it had been lit in sometime, and spiders had built a veritable city in the basket of wood to its side. He struggled to get it smouldering and seemed quite shoddy in the art of fire-lighting. But what lord lights their own fires?

In the light of the lamp Elisabeth could see a painting above the fireplace; a man with a long black wig and armoured like an old fashioned knight.

"Who is this? An ancestor?" she asked.

"No, the Emperor Leopold. As I said, my father was quite the devoted servant."

"But this is not our Emperor..."

"Not our current Emperor, silly! The last Leopold!"

"I am confused. I know my history lessons well...the last Leopold ruled over 80 years ago."

He broke off from fire building to shrug, "I don't know, I'd only just been born."

When, eventually, he got the fire going, he laid hands on a chaise lounge and dragged it in front of the blaze.

"Come dear, sit, warm yourself," he beckoned.

Elisabeth perched on the edge of the seat and let her hungry skin soak up the fire's warmth. He poured two glasses of red wine and placed one in her hand. "Here, fortify yourself and rest. You must have had quite the ordeal out there."

"I can't thank you enough," she said, sinking back into the arm of the chaise lounge. Slowly, she found her shivers melt away. "I wish my drivers had half the civility you have shown me."

He took a place on the other end of the seat, a respectful distance from her.

"I cannot imagine what cowards abandoned you. Tomorrow I shall send to the nearest village and make sure they are thrashed."

"I'd settle for them getting my carriage back on the road."

"Well, that too can be arranged." He sighed and looked at her muddy feet again. "We must do something about this, allow me."

Without waiting for a response, he neatly scooped up her ankles and perched them on his lap. Elisabeth gasped with the suddenness of the manoeuvre and was forced to lie down, or else be levered off her seat. He tutted and unbuckled her shoes, placing them closer to the fire to dry. Then he did something very presumptuous indeed. He placed his hand under her petticoat and slid it up her leg to her knee. Elisabeth was so abashed she went perfectly stiff. With deft hands he blindly undid her garter on the first try and slid her drenched stocking off her leg. He did the same for the other leg as well. Elisabeth thought it was telling that he could not light a fire, but apparently knew his way around a woman's undergarments as naturally as she.

He wrung out the stockings, letting them drip onto the carpet, as if the muddy stain it would leave was nothing to him, then lay them to dry in the firelight.

"Unfortunately, I have no maid to wash your clothes. With luck they will be dry by morning. If not, well I think you will still look perfectly fetching in a spare pair of my *bundhosen*."

Elisabeth was caught off-guard and laughed at the image of herself in leather pants. "Somehow I think I would be turning heads for the wrong reason," she chortled.

He absently began rubbing her feet, trying to bring the blood back. Elisabeth had not had her feet rubbed that way since she was a child. She gave a small sigh of satisfaction. She had plain forgotten how good it could feel.

Somehow it did not surprise her that he had no maid. Now she had taken the time to look around the hall she had noticed some odd things. A coat hung carelessly on the antlers of a deer trophy, a cluster of leaves that had blown in the door and not been swept away, a clutch of red-stained glasses that had piled up by the spirit cabinet.

"May I ask, do you have any staff at all?"

His quiet smile dropped. "Alas, no." He drained his glass of wine and sank into the seat. "When I was young this house was full of life. We had three maids just to polish the silverware, a man to keep the dogs and four to tend the roses. We hosted dinner parties every week and never let the fires burn out. Oh it was so beautiful then. I wish you'd seen it like that, not this."

He paused, brooding for a long while. Elisabeth thought she might have touched too raw a nerve and tried to think of some light-hearted topic to switch to, but her mind raced empty.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to agitate you. It *is* still a lovely house and you don't need to satisfy my prying."

He waved her concerns away and gradually built up the will to speak again.

"It was a sickness that took them. One by one, everyone got ill and slowly withered away. All except me. And soon, I was all alone. The rumour went around that this house was cursed and now no one comes to visit and I cannot find anyone willing to work for me. I could move, but I've lived in this old house my whole life. I don't mind it too much. I can look after myself and my horse. I keep myself entertained with night excursions, as you've seen. But I know there is a lot I've lost. A terrible lot."

His hands had stopped rubbing her feet and now rested listlessly on her ankle. She felt compelled to show him a touch of compassion and took his hand.

"Oh my, you are trying to warm me, but it is you who are frozen!"

Elisabeth wrapped his large hand in her two small ones. He must have lost all his warmth holding the reins. He smiled at her and gave a slight chuckle,

"I don't feel it at all, but thank you. What lies at the end of the carriage ride for you?"

Suddenly she did not want to admit it, though she could think of no reason to keep it concealed. No proper reason.

"I am heading to Vienna. My aunt has arranged a marriage for me."

"*Ab*...then I dare say your husband to be is a lucky man."

So much disappointment in that '*ab*'.

"I hope so, I haven't met him yet."

"It's not so bad, many a happy couple comes from a blind match."

"He is a civil servant."

"Oh dear, how terrible. Then this night may very well have been your final mote of excitement."

Elisabeth found herself laughing again. She interleaved her fingers with his and drew his hand closer to her chest as gesture of affection. He was still like a block of ice to touch. He smiled at her and their eyes locked for a moment.

Such deep blue eyes. She felt so calm and safe when she gazed at them. It was like they had known each other for years already.

His hand gently shifted from her ankle to her calf and suddenly the shivers that had faded away returned. Only it was not cold that made her tremulous now.

"My dear, I must make a demand of you, a small payment for my meagre hospitality."

Elisabeth was a little disappointed in the veil of chivalry tumbling down. Still, she could quite see why he might need the coin. It would be hard keeping a house like this by himself.

"Of course, I will send some money once I reach Vienna. My aunt will be very generous when she hears how you helped me."

“Oh no dear, I have no need of money. I was after something else.”

His hand slid from her calf to her thigh, to a part no one had ever touched before. He softly loomed close to her and Elisabeth at once understood he meant to kiss her. She took a sharp breath and shut her eyes.

Their lips met. And for a moment, she was happy.

Then she felt two sharp pricks on her bottom lip. She opened eyes her with a start.

He was grinning, a trickle of blood dripping down his chin. For the first time she noticed how prominent and keen his eye-teeth were.

Elisabeth vaguely knew the tales. Witch-corpses that haunted the night, draining unwary victims of blood. They could turn into bats, or owls, or rats. And now one was right in front of her.

“You’re a...! A...! A vampire!” She panicked and tried to sidle backwards away from him. “Keep away!”

Her efforts did her no good. Something was paralysing her. It was those eyes! Those damn icy gems were mesmerising her! He’d been doing it from the moment they met!

“Oh my dear, I promise you will barely feel a thing...”

She panted in panic as he leered over her, slowly reaching for her neck. His fangs were bared and he looked down on her as a cat did an injured bird. She gasped as his fist closed on her scarf and tore it away, leaving her neck bare.

Suddenly he recoiled with a grunt of anguish and curled up on the opposite side of the couch, clutching his face.

“Ah! It burns!” he groaned.

Elisabeth was abruptly free of the transfixing glare. Her hand instinctively went to the silver crucifix around her neck and she understood. Of course such a debased creature would flinch in the face of something holy.

Elisabeth sprang to her feet. She could have just run, but she felt safer with a weapon in hand, so she drew one of the pistols that had been hung on the mantelpiece. She levelled the gun at him with one hand and held the crucifix out with the other. She needed a few heartbeats to decide what to do. He peaked one eye out from behind his hand.

“So it comes to this? I suppose I always knew it would, eventually. Far better to die by your hand than some howling mob. Don’t feel guilty about pulling the trigger, my dear. It is far overdue and better men have hung for less. Only aim true for my heart, it is the only way to be sure.”

He opened the lace on the breast of his shirt to give her the mark. Then he shut his eyes and waited for her end it.

Elisabeth felt a tinge of pity for him. How long had he lived like this? How much sorrow had he seen to just calmly accept death? She knew she could not murder any man, let alone one she cared for. One she cared for? It was a bizarre admission to confess you liked someone who just bitten your lip, but there it was.

Elisabeth put the pistol down. Leo opened his eyes, somewhat surprised to still be alive.

“You say it won’t hurt?” she asked.

Elisabeth threw her crucifix into the fire.

Leo was dumbfounded for a moment, then rose with an eager grin. He took her in arms and said, “Only for a moment, I promise.”

And he gave a true kiss.

Elisabeth eventually made it to Vienna, though very much later than planned. Her aunt had cause to remark how pale she was. The marriage went ahead as planned and, fortunately, her civil servant turned out to be a satisfactory match, if a little dull. On their wedding night he praised how, as a maiden, she was so naturally talented at love making.

An odd thing happened shortly after she moved in with him. A very large dog, some feral, half-wolf thing, was frequently seen in their garden at night. It did not seem to bother Elisabeth, so her husband made no attempt to scare it off. But it struck him as odd, that occasionally when she saw it, she would take off her crucifix, bury it under her pillow and ask to sleep alone that night. He didn’t mind indulging her with the odd night in the spare room. Some provincial superstition, he guessed.

END

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