

## **Mantlewolf**

You are set heavy upon my shoulders, your soft fur pressed over my skin. It's warm. Did you keep a part of the sun with you in death? Tell me, *lobo*. A beast like you must have lived in forests free to greet the sun when morning still smelled like dew. Before you died, did you catch the sunbeams in the golden tips of your mane while running through the forests for prey? Today your padded feet cross over my chest; heavy black claws finally at rest.

For shame. Such a vibrant color on your coat must have meant a vibrant life for you, snuffed before gray could find its way to your muzzle. For shame, I say, to be turned into decoration, a lovely donation to the hapless señorita betrothed to your killer. Tell me, *lobo*, if a beast such as yourself, with all the rows of teeth lining your jaws and sickle-shaped claws, could not escape Inocencio, then how could I ever?

I wonder what manner of deception he used to have captured you so. Never for a moment were I to believe it was fair how you were captured and turned to pelt, as long as it was Inocencio. Hardly can he fend off street dogs, and yet he boasts of his exploits with great beasts such as yourself. But look! None such signs of a struggle, no nicks upon your perfect leather, for a fight he boasted to have been treacherous.

Tell me, *lobo*, did you hurt him? Did you leave him scars to remember you by? Don't tell me your teeth and claws were grown in vain. Even the lightest cut, a single droplet of blood; proof he is not untouchable, will serve your legacy well.

What am I saying? Have I amassed such hurt from yearning in my heart that I yearn to hurt? Playing pretend with dead things just so serve my violent fantasies, how

unbecoming! And yet, I cannot stop myself from measuring how much hurt he has brought upon me, and how long I must endure until I obtain justice. Shall I bear the ring and three children before the brunt of justice's gavel strikes him over the head?

Tell me, *lobo*. How much pain will equal justice? Will it equal my freedom as well? Or will it be fleeting like the rain in summer? I imagine it so. It will be sharp and cold like a raindrop descending from the sky, shocking my skin. A storm follows the downpour, and finally my bones will know a petrifying freedom, like a baptism. Oh, to be reborn anew by my own hands, *lobo*!

Suppose a choice was granted to me by the Lord to become a creature of a differing vein. I would choose to become like you. Within the confines of my dream, I shape myself anew. I arm myself with your claws and pearl teeth; armor of thick flesh and bristled fur. Powerful hind legs to take me away with a single leap. Away, away, from Kawit! Where I rot alongside the townspeople shackled by the rules that tout freedom from barbarities. Freedom from the base instincts of man, to achieve a higher existence, differing from that of beasts. But *lobo* don't you see? The allure of the beasts lies in their simplicity! How dare they call you lesser when you can run as you want to, hunt as you need to, and the simple privilege of hurt. Creatures like you refuse to distinguish the arbitrary lines constructing society.

Despite everything I envy about you, here you are, skinned into a hapless mantle. For what manner of use does a corpse need of these claws and teeth, if not for the selfish display of its killer? You are the trophy culminating his excellence, handed a fate unbecoming of yourself, denied your true end for an undignified existence. Gutted like

common fowl and picked clean of bone, save for the skull that holds your beautiful face; your body limp and preserved with all its defenses rendered harmless, for the terror of your bite should only feed the legend of your defeat.

Now he does with you as he pleases; his token of a premeditated battle to be hung around his shoulders like fine drapery. Your purpose to accentuate everything his: from the hew of your pelt, to the theft of your howl; the wild animal stripped of muscle and bone to be as malleable as necessary. It is a gentle class of violence: destroying anything within sully your purpose. Any objections and speculations; sentiments and superstitions. Immaculate ornamentation needs no opinion of its own.

Do tell me, *lobo*: shall I fall prey to death, would I preserve any dignity were it dealt by my own hand? How silly of me to ask the remains of a dead animal. How silly of me to try a comparison between the two of us when we were inevitable all this time.

The carapace of Esperanza had long been shattered, replaced by this fragile facade of coldness, when all I yearn for is to be free in the night. To cross the shores of Kawit in the dark, to howl for the moon as loud as I please without repercussion, and to run barefoot without regard for my cleanliness. Oh, but Esperanza, what of your image? To which I say I have lost regard for such frivolities! There are more important things in this world, like the ocean pulling sand away from my feet, my skirt billowing in the breeze while bathed in moonlight's gentle glow, the one who accepts me as I am; flawed, envious, enraged, and yet somehow deserving of love. I've asked them then, of all the people in the world, why do I deserve it?

The answer was so simple, I was quite taken aback, myself.

“Because you do.”

And isn't that enough? Don't I crave that sort of simplicity? So then, I ask myself if I deserve to live on my own terms, isn't it good enough to say I do? It is! And I no longer want to think of what ifs and what thens. No matter what form of hesitation I may take in the moment, I will grip the blade and make my decision. This ends with me.