

## Shifter Origins

The wolf moved closer, as close as he dared, creeping through the undergrowth, drawn by her intoxicating scent. The woman was just as beautiful as he remembered though to his wolf's brain he didn't register such things as physical beauty, all he knew was that this woman was unlike any other human that he had ever met. She was kind where most were cruel and sought to hunt his kind. That was how he had first seen her, she had been bending over a trap that had snared a rabbit. The thing was in a blind panic, twisting this way and that, desperate to get away. He had expected her to do as all other humans had, take the rabbit, give its neck a vicious twist, ending its struggles as well as its life and carry it off as nourishment for their own family. But she didn't. Instead she spoke calmly to the scared creature, her voice sweet and soothing in a way that made his fur stand up on end in pleasure, like a spine long stroke. She then set about the task of gently extracting the wiggling furball from the twine that made up the snare, gave it a small kiss on the top of its little head, just between its long ears, and had released it. She had smiled as she watched it bound away, revelling in its newly acquired freedom. And he had never been the same since.

His family seemed to think that he was obsessed with her, and indeed he may well be, for he couldn't seem to go a day without seeing her, without hearing her voice -she often sang as she went about her chores, washing clothes down by the river bank or gathering wood for her families fire- nothing seemed to diminish the light of her sunny personality.

She didn't know of him, of course, he knew how her people reacted to wolves, he and his kind were seen as a danger, something to be hunted and killed both for safety and for their hides. That was why he was here, crouched in the bushes that lined the river bank, watching her as she bathed. He didn't see anything wrong with this, as his kind were always naked in their skin, though he did wonder how she survived without a fur coat such as his.

Blaez wished, not for the first time, that he had the courage to step forwards, to show himself to her. he wished that he could communicate with her, make his intentions known, reassure her that he had no intentions of hurting her, for she was goodness and kindness the likes of which the wolf had never seen before. Be he couldn't.

His sister, the bold one of his litter had called him a coward, and indeed he probably was, but he didn't want to risk never seeing her again, of her taking fright and being on her guard, maybe feeling forced to take action against him. He could not bear to see her beautifully pale hands stained with blood, to know that he had been the one to force her to take a life.

Even his older brother, the most approachable and placid of his pack had grown tired of his disappearing for hours on end and then, being in a miserable mope when he finally returned. He demanded to know what was going on and eventually he was forced to admit that he desired the female more than anything else.

"Who will help me, brother?" he sighed, head resting upon his paws as he lay on the ground in a depressed heap. "You know as well as I, that our kind and humans do not mix."

His brother yawned wide, clearly bored with both the conversation and the thought of humans. He didn't value the two-leggers, not at all, he thought them clumsy and cruel as Blaез once had. "If we do not mix with them, brother mine, then surely the logical answer would be to become one of them," he laughed to himself, clearly finding himself to be the most humorous wolf of all time.

But the idea, throw away as his brother may had thought, stuck with Blaез, and that too became an obsession of sorts. He was determined that the human female would be his, one way or another, and if she couldn't know of him as a wolf, then it stood to reason that she would have to know of him as a human like herself. The question was, how?

Watching her one last time, he gave her his silent and solemn vow that he would come back for her, that he would become a man that would be worthy of such a treasure.

He took off on his own, leaving his pack and only home behind, travelling far and wide. He questioned every wolf he came across, lurking around villages that contained more two-leggers, hunting for any clue as to how such a feat could be accomplished.

As he roamed, he picked up stories, little bits of information here and there of the beings the humans called the Gods. These beings, so he heard, were all powerful and could be enticed, with the right gifts and promises, to intervene in the doings of the mortal world. They had to be the ones that could help him, they were his only chance.

Blaez knew very little about these Gods, but he had heard one name being mentioned over and over, Loki. This God seemed to be particularly popular, his name often used in conjunction to other things that looked to be very good fun, such as the time in one village, that a farmer began to chase his cart down the road. Blaez loved to chase things and if this Loki person was responsible for that, then all the better.

He had heard that the Gods never did anything for free, and that Loki was no exception, he would have to come up with something unique and wonderful with which to tempt the Gods, should he be serious about needing his help.

Not having much in the way of possessions, he was a wolf after all, and being unable to create something from nothing, the wolf searched high and low, scouring the countryside in search of something, anything that would make a suitable gift for such a God.

Yet he could find nothing of worth, though he tried, walking until his pads bled and he became weak with hunger, for he refused to stop and eat or to rest until he had completed his task, or die trying.

Now, in a weird quirk of fate, it seemed that the wolf's efforts had attracted attention of the Gods, who often viewed the human world from afar, finding the trials a tribulations of mortals to be most entertaining. Loki himself was made aware of the wolf's quest and, feeling in a charitable mood, he took pity on the poor creature.

Tracking the wolf down to a snow-covered glen, he found the animal laying half buried in the cold snow, so weakened by his journey that he could barely rouse himself.

Loki waved his hand, giving the creature the power to speak as a human would. The wolf's voice was strange to the ear, a growling, rumbling noise that took some getting used to, but eventually the God managed to understand Blaez and his wishes.

Blaez explained how he had fallen in love with a beautiful, kind human woman and that he desired nothing more than to be with her in the ways of the humans, to mate with her as the wolves mated, to protect her and look after her for all her days. He wished to be human, even if it meant giving up his wolf form forever, along with his family and all that he had once known.

Loki pondered on this for a few minutes, wondering what was in it for him, for again, the Gods never did something for nothing.

"A favour," he said. "You will owe me a favour, a debt if you will, that will be repaid in whatever way I see fit. Whatever I ask, you shall provide. Is this something that you would be willing to promise me for the chance to be with the one you love?"

Blaez nodded eagerly, he would give anything for a chance to be with the woman.

"I agree, my Lord."

"So be it," Loki proclaimed, clapping his hands together. There was a loud booming sound, a flash of light, and the world of the wolf changed forever.

Pain ripped through his body, pain the likes of which he had never felt before, like being bathed in wild fire, hot and stinging on every part of his body, singeing away his fur until it left nothing but pale skin. He felt his bones crack, shift and reform, his muscles stretch and twist, ripping before knitting back together. His nose, his long, powerfully sensitive nose shrunk in on itself, growing short and stubby, his sense of smell dulling by an alarming degree. His ears did the same, shrinking from long, sharp points into the small, delicately shell-like ears of a human. He could hear nothing but the most obvious of sounds, so loud that they previously would have deafened him.

The world around him swirled and twisted, ebbed and flowed as he was lifted from the snow frozen ground and flung as if from a catapult, flying through the air, the wind rushing past his bare skin so fast that it stung. Colours blurred with one another until he didn't know which way was up or where in the world he was.

He landed with a bone jarring crash on the ground as the wind holding him aloft suddenly died down and he dropped from the sky like a stone. He lay there for what felt like forever, completely stunned, his lungs struggling to pull in air. His whole body throbbed and ached, feeling gangly, unwieldy and completely alien. He was cold, so cold, colder than he had ever felt in his life before and he began to shiver violently.

Loki was no where to be seen as the former wolf curled himself into a ball in an effort to conserve some of his body heat, believing that this would be the place in which he would die.

"Are you well? Need you help?" a soft voice asked, concerned. A small hand took hold of his shoulder, giving it a surprisingly hard shake.

Blaez grunted as he moved, the world coming slowly into some kind of focus. He blinked open his eyes, he was alive. Slowly he uncurled, unconcerned by the fact that he was naked, he had never had need for clothes before and didn't think of them now.

The girl leapt back, shocked at his appearance as he lay on his back in front of her, showing his very male body in all its glory. She covered her eyes in hopes of sparing both their modesty. "You cannot lay thus. It is not right."

He was confused, surely he was doing nothing wrong by simply laying there? He was as nature, or should he say the Gods, intended. He looked up at her, his beautiful one, the female of his dreams, and he smiled.

She did not smile back, didn't even look at him, keeping her hands firmly over her eyes, stepping back out of range as if his nakedness could infect her too.

He noticed then that she wore the clothe garments that the humans favoured, using it to cover their skin. Well, he was rather cold without his fur, so he could see the logic behind their choice to clad themselves in.

Taking pity on him, his kindly maiden, she took off the warm fur cloak that she wore and held it out in offering. He staggered to his new feet, falling once or twice before he managed to get his legs to steady underneath him and support his now considerable weight. He had never stood on two legs before and the whole process was alien and uncomfortable to say the least.

He took the cloak from her with a mumble of thanks and wrapped himself in it as best he could with his trembling, frozen fingers.

"Have you a home?" she questioned, her head tipped adorably to one side, her golden hair falling unbound around her shoulders. She wore a simple shirt, cinched in at the waist with a leather belt, and a long brown skirt that looked like it would be quite rough to the touch, not like the soft cloak that now covered him.

Had he a home? He used to, but now he knew that he could never go back there, could never again be part of his pack, and the thought sadden him. He shook his head.

"No, I have no home."

"You cannot stay out here alone," she told him, her tone allowing for no arguments on his part. "You will come with me, you shall work on the farm and earn your keep."

She set off with purpose in what must be the direction of her home and Blaez followed along meekly behind like the loyal canine that he was.

"I raise this horn of mead to the Gods  
So they may bless this union.  
May you feel no rain,  
For you will be shelter for each other.  
May you never hunger,

For you will provide for each other and share all you have.  
May you feel no cold,  
For you will warm each other.  
May your hearts be bound as are your hands,  
From this day until the end.  
Go now to your dwelling place,  
To begin your days of togetherness,  
High and Holy Gods  
Frigga and Odin  
Thorr and Sif  
Freya and Freyr  
Balder and Nanna  
Aesir and Vanir  
Disir and Alfar  
Bless this union/  
Wassail!"

A loud cheer went up from the assembled crowd, all gathered to celebrate the handfasting of Blaez and Astrid. The wolf had captured the heart of his love and now all the world would know it. They returned after much fisting and rejoicing, accompanied by the required witnesses, to the home they now shared, no longer would he sleep in the barn with the animals, no longer would his bed be a pile of straw.

He led her by the hand through the door of their little farm house, made theirs by his own two hands, shutting the door behind them. He was a quick study and had soon made himself useful to her, earning his keep as she had insisted, doing the harder manual labour that she herself, though a very competent young lady, had not the strength to do. He had mended her roof where the boards had sagged, letting in the cold and the rain, he had strengthened the walls when they crumbled. And as he had rebuilt her home, so he had built up their relationship into what he had always dreamed it would be.

He was nervous, for he had never been with another in his current form, not desiring anyone but the woman for whom he had been through so much.

They took their time, disrobing from their wedding clothes, exploring each other's bodies as one would admire a fine piece of art, with a gentle touch and such worshipful reverence as to do it justice. They kissed softly, as they had done many times before, their tongues meeting in a sensual, exotic dance.

He took his time with her hair, running his fingers gently through the gleaming strands, as soft and pure as spun gold, removing all the flowers that decorated the curls, and lastly the bridal-crown, which had replaced her maidens kransen.

When he laid her upon their wedded bed he sent up a prayer of deepest gratitude to Loki for making such a thing possible.

He took her as a wolf would take his female, on her knees with him entering her from behind. It was fast and furious but they both gave themselves over to the pleasure, their howls of completion echoing in the night.

Alone on a hillside that overlooked their little village, Loki stood, his keen ears picking up the sounds of their lovemaking, and he smiled, a wickedly naughty smile of self-satisfaction, for he knew that the time of his reward was fast approaching.

Her grotesquely swollen belly rippled, pulsing with each wave of pain that engulfed her body. It flowed through her in waves, stealing her breath, tensing her muscles. She clenched her teeth, clinging to Blaez's hand as she tried to push, screaming her frustration and pain at him.

" You! You did this to me! I hate you!"

Her husband smothered his smile, concentrating instead on smoothing back her sweat dampened hair and cooing soothing words of encouragement.

"They are nearly here, you're doing so well, my love."

She screwed up her face in pain but managed to pant out, "I shall die, I know it, they shall rip me in two."

" You hush now, all will be well. We're going to have lots of sons to carry on our name and run rings around you "

She choked on a laugh, that ended with a sob and a whimper of pain as another contraction shot through her abdomen, racing up her spine. She ached deep inside, but also felt a hard pressure, like she desperately needed to relieve herself. Embarrassed she tried to cross her legs to shield herself only to have them pushed apart again by the local midwife.

"No, baby has to come out child."

" I know that!" she yelled back " But I don't want anything else to!"

Her spine bowed with pain, almost bending her double as the urge to bear down become too much. Urged by the midwife's sharp command to push, she did as she was bid, gritting her teeth, pushing with all her might.

For what felt like hours she had been battling her body, trying to birth the first child, she had attended many a birth, for the often became a community event and had always thought the women made a fuss over nothing. Now she knew better.

Finally, blessedly, but at the same time, unwanted, she felt the biggest contraction in the universe build up inside her. She pushed, fearing she would turn herself inside out.

She felt something shift, something give way inside her and with another burning, blinding pain, the pressure inside her increased to breaking point then eased as she felt something slither out between her legs. What was that? Had she really lost her insides? Would she die?

She waited anxiously for the first hungry wail that would indicate the child was healthy, but she heard nothing at first. The midwife backed away, her eyes wide with horror, her blood covered hands going to her face, trying to block out whatever it was that Astrid had birthed.

She struggled to sit up, needing to know what was going on.

"What is wrong with my child? What is happening? Tell me now!" she tried to inject a note of command into her voice, but it wavered, betraying her panic and worry.

She looked at her husband, his face as white as the snow which covered the world outside. He had wrapped the baby in cloth and was holding it to his chest, cradled in his arms. It wasn't dead, she could tell that, for the blanket wrapped bundled wiggled and twitched, a high-pitched little yelping, snuffling noise coming from within, though it was muffled by the folds of fabric.

"Show me!" she gasped as the pains began again, her still swollen belly preparing to eject the next baby that waited inside it. She could feel them moving inside her, shifting and rolling as if scrabbling and pushing to get out. She didn't know how it was supposed to feel, having nothing to compare to, but it didn't feel right.

"SHOW ME!" she screamed as a large contraction ripped through her and she bore down, pushing with all her might, her vagina stretching to accommodate the head of the baby, its inner walls flexing and pulsing as it pushed the baby from her womb.

Blaez hesitated again, fearing that if his beloved wife saw their first offspring she would never make it through the rest. He made his decision just as the midwife gave a whimpering moan and bolted for the door. He placed the wiggling bundle in the crib he had built and turned to help his wife.

One by one, he eased their offspring from her body, wrapping each one gently in a blanket and placing it with its siblings until Astrid was finally spent, her stomach withered and deflated like a water bladder, her body streaked with blood and sweat, completely spent.

"Let me see my babies," she whispered, for though she was weak, her mother's instinct was stronger than her fatigue. Her breasts felt full and heavy with milk, her nipples pebbled in anticipation as her body readied to feed her young.

Blaez wished he could spare her from all hurt, all pain and hardship, but he could not. It was the will of the Gods and as he had found out, the Gods were rarely fair in their dealings with others.

He helped her to sit up in bed and move to the edge. He slowly pulled back the covers, closing his eyes in pain and sorrow as her scream of denial rent the air as she laid eyes on the wolf cubs that lay curled up in a furry mass within the crib.

"They are monsters," she whispered, horrified at the creatures that she had birthed, having carried them so lovingly for so long a time. "The Gods have cursed us." What had they done to deserve such a cruel punishment? She was the mother of monsters. She was broken, spoiled, her womb was a thing of misery to her, not the joy she had been so looking forward to. She lay back in the bed, where she rolled onto her side, curling in on herself, refusing to again look upon the abominations that lay squeaking on the floor.

She heard her husband bend to pick them up, one at a time, offering them the affection that she could not bring herself to feel let alone give.

Blaez stood alone at his wife's graveside, the mourners having long since left. He hadn't been welcome, but he couldn't stay away. He was an outcast, shunned from their community as they mourned the loss of one of their own, the loss they blamed him for. And rightly so.

He closed his eyes, which turned out to be the worst thing he could have done, for all it did was conjure up the memory of walking into the bedroom to find his wife laying in a pool of her own blood, her wrists slashed to bloody ribbons, her eyes wide open and staring blankly up at him.

He had taken the children and run from the villagers when they came, intent on doing them harm. Much as they were different, they were his children and he loved them as fiercely as any father had ever loved his offspring.

Loki had come to him that night, while he was alone in the woods with the cubs, trying to entice them to drink from a bowl of warmed goats' milk.

"What do you want?" Blaez rudely enquired. "Haven't you done enough harm?"

"I have come to complete the terms of our deal and receive from you, my favour."

"You are too late," the man replied. "I have nothing left to give you, I have lost everything that was ever dear to me or of any value."

"I beg to differ," the God replied, bending to pick up one of the squirming wolf cubs. "These will do very nicely."

Blaez sprang to his feet, making a grab for his son, but the God evaded him easily.

"They were never part of our deal!" he yelled, red faced with anger. "It wasn't meant to be this way."

"On the contrary," the God corrected in a mild tone. "It's all turned out exactly as I planned. Odin was not going to be the only one to have wolves as his creatures, and mine will be so much more than his."

The God waved a languid hand and the cubs vanished as if they had never existed.

Blaez dropped to his knees in the snow, devastated by both the loss of his wife and now their children. "Please, I beg you, don't take my children."

"Too late," Loki replied flippantly, already bored, turning away from the desperate man.

"No!" Blaez yelled, grabbing at the God's leg, pulling him to a stop. "Take me with you, let me stay with them. I'll do anything. I have nothing left for me here, no reason to keep this form. Turn me back and let me be with my children. I will serve you well as my master, I promise you that."

Loki paused, thinking this through, turning all the possibilities over in his head and there were so many of them. At length, he decided to take pity on the man, and smiled.

“I’m in a generous mood, and so, I shall allow you to come with your children, but hear this, I own you all. You, wolf, are mine. You shall keep this form when you so choose, but I shall also return to you your old one, so that you may choose between the two when the need arises. You shall guide your cubs, you shall train them to serve me and only me, and when they in turn grow up and mate, so their offspring will belong to me. Is that clear?”

Blaez, seeing no other option than to agree, sadly nodded his head. Nothing else mattered to him but his children.

Years past and the other Gods for both the Norse and other Pantheons grew jealous of Loki and his wolves, for they had turned into powerful beings, able to shift form at will and perform many a task in the name of their God.

Others wished for the same loyalty, the same powerful creatures as he had, and so they set out to make their own animals, each choosing a creature for different reasons. Panthers for their agility and grace, Foxes for their cunning and resourcefulness, Bears for their strength and loyalty, Leopards for their beauty and speed, the list was endless, each God hand picking their favourites and nurturing them into the beings we know today as Shifters, each born with two forms and able to move seamlessly between the two, holding the best parts of both the human and animal kingdoms. The world would never be the same again.