

The Wandering Girl with Owl Skin



By Fargoth

Prelude.

The people of Almira have many names for me.

Azra-Lera-Makai. Which means “woman of bark and bones.” It’s their name for a witch or a sorcerer. But the Almirans are a simple people—anyone who can brew a tincture or disinfect a wound is a witch to them.

Okram-Aman. That’s a slang that only the sailors use. It means “viper cunt,” more or less. I’m not very fond of that one.

Farang-a-Miren. Those words are from a song written by a poet king of the Malgrave dynasty. They mean “the wandering girl with owl skin.” He wrote them after we spent a summer together.

That is my favorite name.

I have lived on the edges of this town or that village for many years. Always, I must be moving—taking my cart and my black trade where I can find a price for it. That is no hard thing, these days. The country of Almira is burning—its seared seams held together by the weak grip of a desperate king. He cannot afford to extend the arm of justice into the edges of his realm.

The dark whims of his people run free.

And there are many who will pay for the nightmares I sell.

I wonder if I will see Almira unravel. I was there when the first Malgrave king rose to power and cut his will into the skin of these backward people.

It is only fitting I should be here when it ends.



“How do I know you’re good for it?” the crofter asks me. His thick, country accent makes him sound like he has a mouthful of mud that he must talk around.

“You don’t,” I respond in Almiran. I do not have an accent. I left that in my first skin, long ago.

He snaps his jowls together, like a dog might. “Then I will not pay.”

I shrug. “Suit yourself.”

He begins to walk away from my wagon, which I have laid up beneath the shade of a willow tree. A stream babbles softly behind me. Dragonflies zip and dart past my face.

“But I would be careful from now on,” I say after he has taken three or four determined steps back towards town.

He looks over his shoulder. “Huh?” he grunts.

“Orin will have heard that you visited me. He will assume that we struck a deal. What would you do, crofter, if you heard the man with whom you feuded had paid a visit to the Woman of Bark and Bones?”

The crofter turns back around. Narrows his big cow eyes into suspicious slits. “Kill him, maybe.”

I nod.

“But you need not return to town, crofter. Let us finish our trade. Then you may continue north along the coast. Stop in the next village, stay a fortnight and enjoy yourself. When you return home, Orin will not trouble you.” I pause, and fix my pale-gray eyes on the dimwitted, brutal man in front of me. “He will not trouble anyone.”

The crofter trudges back to my wagon. “You say this, but you do not swear on it. What if I return and he is still there, but you who are gone? Nothing more than wagon tracks in the road. Orin will kill me.”

“Wait for news of dear Orin, then. It will reach you before long. My work does not go unnoticed, crofter. You have heard the stories.”

He nods slowly. Everyone has heard the stories.

The crofter takes in a deep breath, and then digs out a sack of coins. They’re old, heavy discs of silver and gold that are decorated with an intricate and ancient design. Probably been in his family for five generations. It is amazing to me, the price a man will pay to have an evil thing done. Yet good deeds—like dentistry and potion making—are rewarded with suspicion at best.

Lynching at worst.

If the ways of the world were different, who knows what type of paragon I may have become? But the world is set in her ways.

And I am.....the thing that I am.

“Do it, then,” the crofter says, throwing the coins onto the wood panel next to me. “I want to hear tales of his screams.” He pauses then, mulling over some dim idea within his thick skull. “If what you say is true—that Orin has seen me come to you—he will have men with him. Protectors.”

“Good. They will be the witnesses.”



That night it rains. A violent gale from the east that heaps water down on my wagon and runs sawtooth chains of lightning across the sky.

I watch for a while, thinking of the fish skin I wore for a time the previous spring—I was a thin, violent pike that lorded over a section of the river. The worst of the storm arrives and I retreat to my one-room chamber inside the wagon. The panels and boards are sealed with dragon fat that I condensed down to wax.

Nothing seeps through.

The river beside me could boil over and sweep my wagon up into a flood, and it would not matter. A wagon sealed with dragon wax becomes a boat without trouble.

As the winds and the water pound the world outside, I look through my skins.

They are hanging neatly on a wooden beam that runs across an entire wall of the wagon. My wardrobe of forbidden and deranged magic.

To start, I run my hand tenderly down the sleeve of my owl skin—dark and soft and stealthy. An owl can swoop down upon its prey with silent wings, spear its lungs with razor talons, and be gone again in the night—all within the space of a heartbeat. The owl song is one of elegant destruction.

My favorite song.

But Orin does not deserve my owl skin. There are few left who do. I move on. The left side of the rack carries my water skins—trout, pike, char. The devious octopus, with its tentacles hanging down to the floor. The vicious shark. All of them are powerful skins, but they are not right for tonight.

I move on to the woodland animals. A stag, with his great rack of antlers. The shaggy bear, all claws and anger. He is a tempting choice—one swipe alone could pull Orin's bowels apart. Leave him screaming for his mother and reeking of crap. I almost pull the bear free, but think better of it.

The panther catches my eye—the brown and black of her coat is laid out in a tortoiseshell pattern.

I took this skin from the lands of Lord Bershad. These feline, graceful hunters do not live anywhere else. His family reveres them—a black panther with stark yellow eyes slinks across his coat of arms—and it is considered a great crime to murder one of the great cats on Bershad lands.

That is why my panther skin is so powerful—nothing else carries such defiance. It is my most sinful form.

I take it from the rack.

Every skin feels different when I pull it over my shoulders. The trout is cold and wet—like an unexpected splash of water. The goat is sharp and rough, all hooves and energy. The owl is black silk rubbed against soft, wanton skin.

The panther burns.

A heat that curls back my lips and covers my body with a sheen of sweat. I slip my arms through—feel that scorching feeling dig deep into my muscles and bone. Claws that push their way out from behind my fingernails. My backside develops a familiar but queer swagger as the tail does its work.

Pulling the panther skin over my face is never easy. The face is where the sins are.

For a moment there is only the hot anger of a creature in its death throes. The feeling in my gut that the world has been violated, and the last things that made life worthwhile have been burnt to cinders.

But then my eyes become panther eyes. My teeth hunter's teeth. I drink in her feline spirit and feel her vicious rage flowing through my veins.

Vengeance. She whispers to me. *Give me vengeance.*

I push open the door of the wagon and leap into the storm.



Silent paws in the night. The water shimmers and waves under the light of the moon. I can see every leaf, smell each patch of loamy earth. Hear the heartbeat of each terrified squirrel and rabbit that I slink past. Their animal instinct tells them that I am no normal predator.

I am an abomination. Not from their world. Not from anyone's world except my own.

The town is not far away. I follow a deer path down through the woods until it opens up on a muddy road. Most of the houses are dark—but every fifth or sixth hovel is illuminated with by dull, yellow lamplight. Those houses all smell of ale.

Broken souls drinking late into the night, I guess.

Orin lives on the far side of town. I weave between houses and creep along deserted streets until I am beneath the eave of his window. His house is alight, too. Filled with the smell of ale, like the others.

And the laughter of six, maybe seven men.

I have never understood what drunk men find so amusing. Drink always turned me inwards—rolling me up into a quiet and brooding ball of discontent. I'd have liked it the other way. Drunken laughter is not a skin that I have in my wardrobe, but I suspect it would fit nicely around my shoulders.

I circle the house quickly, sniffing each window and listening to their happiness. Definitely seven men. All of them crowded around the dying fire in the main chamber of Orin's rather large, well-built house. It would be better if the men were not so close together. The panther skin is powerful and quick, but she is not invincible.

Oh well. This is not the night that Orin will die. But he will begin to learn the true feel of fear.

I leap up through an open window in the back of his house. Land silently on the wooden floor of the kitchen. Then I creep down a hallway that opens into the main chamber. For a long time I keep myself coiled in the shadows, listening to the men talk.

"I'm telling you, Bessie does it right," a fat, sweating man says. There is a ring of moisture around his collar. "She may not be much to look at, but she's a thing of beauty with a cock in her mouth. Don't think I've ever popped so hard."

"You're just saying that 'cause nobody else'll stand to have your prick near their face," the man next to him says. "I'd rather fuck a sow. At least the pig would smell better."

A stimulating conversation.

“What about you, Orin? You think Bessie’s worth the time?”

A tall, yellow-haired man with a body shaped like an enormous gourd stirs. He is closest to the fire, and he scratches at his wispy beard for a few seconds before answering.

“I dunno,” he says. “I never liked putting it in their mouths. Can’t say I trust a bitch to avoid biting—”

I am sure all of those men would have had a good laugh at whatever end to the sentence Orin had planned. But that end never came, because once I know which man was Orin, it doesn’t take me long to cross the room and get at him.

I don’t take much this time. Just an ear.

One paw swipe is all I need to wrench the flap of skin free. It comes off along with a modest jet of crimson blood and a rather spectacular scream from Orin himself. I would be lying if I said that I didn’t enjoy the look on his face as he takes in my coal-black body at the same time the pain from his missing ear starts to jolt down deep into his body.

But the next part is my favorite. The other men have just now started to react—recoiling on instinct at the predator that has snuck into their cultured conversation and giving me plenty of space to lock my yellow feline eyes on my target.

“See you tomorrow, Orin,” I whisper.

I’ve yet to meet a man whose face has a prepared reaction for a talking animal. Orin looks a bit like he’d accidentally sat down on a three foot carrot that slipped up his asshole.

Beautiful.

And then I’m gone. Slipped out another open window and bolting through the night. Winding through streets and alleys and then padding along the same deer path I used to get into town.

There is no evidence of my visit to Orin except perhaps for a muddy paw print or two.

And the missing ear, of course.

IV.

The next day, Orin does something I do not expect.

I have played this game many times before. Pulled the pieces from a man one night at a time. I have driven dozens of them mad with fear until every flickering shadow is an enemy. A moth's fluttering wings are an assassin in the night.

More than a handful of times, I did not even need to finish the deed. They did it themselves—with a rope of a knife. One of them slammed his own face into a long, rusty nail rather than receive me again.

Although—I must admit—the cards I dealt him were extremely harsh. Even for me.

So these days, when a man learns that he is pursued by the Woman of Bark and Bones, he generally overreacts with precaution. I have hunted men who barricaded themselves within their homes—nailed every door and window shut with thick planks of wood. Some of the wealthier merchants and landed knights bought their way into the protection of whatever castle or holdfast was available. Searching in vain for safety behind stone walls, battlements, and towers.

But Orin goes fishing.

He just strolls out of his front door in late morning. There is a crudely-applied bandage wrapped around his head and missing ear. A wary look in his eyes. And a trout-pole over one shoulder.

I watch these things from high above, wearing my falcon skin. I had intended to spend the entire day aloft on the off chance that Orin attempted to flee the town, so that I could track him. This comes as quite the surprise.

Of course, I am not surprised for long. Orin makes his way out of town and down to the lazy creek that bends its way south until meeting the Gorgon River—the larger of Almira's two major waterways.

And he just so happens to select a spot that has twenty men watching it from all angles. Crouched and bent in an almost pitiful attempt at camouflage.

It is, of course, strange that Orin is able to muster such a large—if not crudely executed—ambush on short notice. And I begin to suspect for the first time that the Crofter did not tell me the entire reason for his desire to see Orin in the ground. Maybe he isn't a Crofter at all.

It doesn't matter. I am generally the end of men's stories. I do not need to hear the beginning or the middle.

I fly back to my wagon, which I had hidden under a cloak of pine trees seven miles north of town after taking off the panther skin. Then—smiling to myself at the lucky nature of Orin's stupidity—I pull the shark skin from my rack and hike two miles east to the creek.

The creek is narrow, but plenty deep for the shark.

Putting on the sharkskin is like slipping on a film of hate. I took mine off the coast of Papyria—diving deep amongst the reefs and jamming an oyster knife into its peanut-sized brain from above. The creature was simplistic to the point of perfection.

It only lived for one thing: to hunt.

I surge through the water—batting my fins and scaring the living fuck out of all the rainbow trout who thought they were the lords of the river. The insects and algae their vassals.

I wonder what Orin thought would happen. Did he imagine I would slink up in my panther skin again? Make for an easy target for one of his friends, huddled under cover with a longbow half-drawn?

Whatever the case, I am sure that he did not expect a shark to jump out of the water as he was mid-cast and bite his left hand off.

I have eaten men before, and enjoyed the experience. But Orin did not taste good. Probably because his veins were still full of adrenaline and fear from the night before. But the poor flavor did not overshadow the satisfaction I felt pumping my way back upstream.

V.

Orin is not so cavalier the next day.

He paid what I can only imagine was a large sum of coin, and takes quarter in the town's holdfast—a squat tower made from crudely cut slabs of granite.

Almiran architecture is a funny thing. Few countries rival their ability to stack enormous stones on top of each other until they are a fearsome problem to large armies. But there is no accounting for the more subtle methods of incursion.

For example, a neighboring baron or count with a mind for expansion could have spent a summer laying siege to that holdfast. Taken buildings to the torch and slung a catapult's ammunition against its walls from dawn to dusk. Probably gotten nothing for his efforts besides a new enemy.

But a woman dressed as a serving wench can simply walk in the sally port with a basket on her head.

Orin's quarters, at least, are well guarded. But the privy shaft's basin was not. I entered the shit-filled cistern and put on my adder skin.

To be clear, shape shifting is not magic. There is no such thing as magic, no matter what the wizards tell you. If you showed a barbarian a suit of steel armor and told him you made it from rocks, he would call that magic, no? My craft is the same.

But when it comes to second skins, everyone is a barbarian.

Except for me.

My point is this: when I put on a snake's skin, I do not become the snake. It is a shroud—a clever disguise. That means the weight of a human is still crammed in underneath the slithering scales.

And that makes for a big fucking adder.

I slip all fourteen strides of my snake-body into a notch of the privy-shafts cobbled wall, and being to climb. The adder is an unsettling skin to wear. It feels like guilt. But it's a kind of guilt that can see in the dark and feel heat from four rooms away.

For castles, I almost always choose the adder.

I slither into Orin's fortified quarters using the same road all of the shits use to get out. Lift up the wooden plank covering the privy with my snub-nosed snout. Slide out the door that does a poor job of keeping the shit-smell contained, and onto a plush carpet. Could be red, or blue maybe.

The adder doesn't care about color. Only heat.

And there is a very hot lump laying on a sofa, taking sips from a rather large jug of wine with the hand that I didn't eat yesterday. Orin's heart beats in the lazy way of a drunk person, as if pumping blood to all the organs is almost not worth the effort.

I make my silent approach. Come around from the far side and coil up behind his head. His next sip is careless, he spills more than he drinks.

An adder is a very poisonous snake. Unlike some serpents that paralyze their prey, the adder lays waste to the blood within their veins. Victims die from a terrible kind of hemorrhaging. Hurts like a motherfucker, or so I'm told. I've never been bitten.

With a human the size of Orin, it's unlikely that a regular adder bite would kill him. It'd leave a scar, sure, and maybe some bruises that'd take a few weeks to heal. But nothing fatal. If Orin hadn't decided to conceal himself in a castle, I might have been restricted to such a limited form of punishment for this day.

But castles come with surgeons. And every surgeon in Almira knows that for a bad snake bite, the only thing to do is amputate the limb.

I burst from my coil and sink my fangs into Orin's right leg—just below the knee. He drops the jug of wine. Screams. My poison sinks into his flesh.

"Fucking Cunt! Cunt! Cunt!" he yells. It's a strange way of reacting to a snakebite. I wonder if he recognizes me.

I release him and whip away to the far side of the room, closest to the privy.

"Sorry about the hand yesterday, Orin." I rasp in my lizard voice. "Hope you can jerk off with your left, too," I don't mention the leg I just took from him. I figure that can be a surprise.

And then I'm gone the way I came in.

I spend the rest of the day disguised as a serving made, listening to Orin's cries of agony as the castle surgeon saws his leg off.

VI.

The next day I rest. Laying on a bed of animal skins in the back of my wagon. Naked and sweating from the mid-summer heat, staring up at the wooden roof. Drawing swirling design with the perspiration on my skin.

It feels good to do nothing. Humans are cursed with the need to fill their hours with tasks and jobs and obligations. The panther skin taught me how to relax. The most work I do from dawn to dusk is put my hand between my legs and rub out a primal kind of pleasure.

Arch my back and moan.

The night comes, and the screaming insects with it. Almira is so alive. There are sandy places in this world where it will not rain for years. Mountain ranges that have nothing for you except rocks and stunted pines that look like they were built by a stupid god with a poor eye for creation.

Compared to those tomblike places, Almira is unfathomable. Like diving off a ship in the middle of the ocean and trying to swim to the bottom.

An ear. An arm. And a leg. Sometimes that is not enough torment, but it is enough for Orin. The Realm of Terra whispers to me on nights like this, tells me the way things will be.

And She says that this is the end.

Dawn comes. I rise, and take my wolverine skin from the rack.

VII.

I reserve the wolverine for a very specific kind of murder.

The beast is truly unmatched when it comes to strength. There are larger animals. A lot of them. Predators that know no fear, and have no rivals. But there is nothing like the brutal power of the wolverine. I once donned the mud-matted skin and killed a grizzly bear that was seven times my size just because I could. Crushed its windpipe with my jaws and laughed an animal laugh while it happened.

I need the wolverine tonight because Orin has finally gotten smart and barricaded himself in the house. Sealed the doors and windows. He even caulked the seams with dragon fat so I can't take my spider skin—a truly horrific thing—and squeeze between the cracks of his cedar home.

I wonder who told him to do that. That oaf certainly didn't think of it himself.

But you cannot caulk a floor. Nor can you barricade it with iron or oak. The badger is the greatest burrower of the large weasels, but not nearly as gifted a killer as the wolverine.

I have been a badger, though. And afterwards I taught my wolverine skin all the tricks. I start my tunnel at sunset fifty feet away from Orin's house. Two hours after midnight I am scraping floorboards.

Now, the horrifically mutilated Orin is not much competition for me. But the four bodyguards wearing plate armor and standing outside his door are a different story.

Like I said, I only used the wolverine for a specific kind of murder: armored men.

They are so surprised to see a wolf-sized weasel charging down the hallway that not one of those assholes gets his sword drawn before I snatch the first one by the neck. Turn the gorget around his neck into a metal noose with my teeth. He falls to his knees and begins suffocating while I grab the next-closest guard by the thigh and yank.

There is a popping noise as his leg leaves the socket on his pelvis.

The two morons who aren't dead or maimed finally have their blades drawn. One has a bastard sword that looks to be well made, and his stance is both comfortable and confident. Him, I'm wary of. The other has a big, two-handed monstrosity, and I figure anyone stupid enough to carry that in a hallway deserves exactly what he's about to get.

I jump back fast, out of reach from both attacks—one executed perfectly, the other as clumsy as a sword-fighting baboon. Then I use a strategy that's allowed me to walk away from a score of these difficult situations.

I speak.

“Say your prayers, cunts.”

A talking wolverine surprises both of them enough to delay the next series of attacks. I use that time to paw the talented swordsmen in the face. One of my claws tears through his jaw and throat, pretty much ending the threat.

The idiot has just enough time to raise his massive mistake of a weapon over his head before I spring up and clamp my jaws around his head.

It's like cracking a walnut. Just messier.

VIII.

I break down the door with a half-dozen paw strokes. Inside, the heat is menacing. Like a blacksmith's furnace. The fire on the east side of the room is packed to the brim with wood.

Unsafe, really.

Orin is in a bed on the far side of the room—his stumps are bandaged, but need changing. I can smell the rankness over the roiling heat. His eyes are open. The vitality of this man impresses me. Most people can't withstand such a close series of amputations.

"You better fucking kill me this time," he say, voice wavering.

"And if I don't?" I pad across the room and stop three strides from the bed.

"I'm not waiting around for another visit."

Emotions are not easy to convey from a weasel's body. But I did my best to give him a knowing nod.

"I don't perform mercies," I say. "You'll have to trade something for it."

His eyes flick around to each of his missing limbs.

"Not like that," I continue. "Information."

Orin takes a few labored breaths. "Fine."

"The man who has paid me for this...who is he?"

"Not a crofter."

"Obviously."

Orin swallows. Licks his lips.

"His name is Moss. He is...like you. A sorcerer."

"There is no such thing as sorcery."

"Says the woman wearing a bear skin."

I don't bother correcting him regarding the proper classification of the wolverine. Orin swallows again with a great deal of effort, then shakes his head.

"I wouldn't have betrayed him," he says. "Moss didn't have to do this."

"And yet it is done." I raise a claw. "Answers, or the pain continues."

Orin's eyes turn into white circles of fear. "Please," he whispers.

"Tell me, and I'll release you."

He takes one more deep breath and then speaks fast. "He fucked Lord Bershad's wife last spring when she visited the Baron, and I found out. The child's been born, and it's...raising questions. I supposed he wanted me silenced."

"That simpleton slipped between Lady Bershad's legs? I don't believe that."

"He was clever enough to get you to do his dirty work."

Orin has a point there.

"Why bother paying me to do this to you? If he's a sorcerer," I try to hide my disdain as I say that ridiculous word, "he could have done it himself."

Orin shrugs as best he can beneath all those bandages and blankets.

"Don't know."

I sigh. It might be that I could pump a little more information from the maimed piece of meat in front of me, but I am tired. And I have little patience for complicated plots, elaborate deceptions, and high-born intrigue.

I like my killing to be simple.

So I raise my paw and slam it down on Orin's chest. Turn his ribcage into a box of splintered bone. He gurgles some blood out of his mouth and then dies. Rolls off the bed with a thumping noise. Shits himself.

An hour later I am driving my wagon north, smoking a pipe and trying to decide what I am going to do about this man named Moss.