



The world-setting (containing Mørkskog and other landmarks within this story's context), and the characters of Manegarm Denedalle, The Sølvdronningen - Sølvkone Visst, Måni - the usurper, Vridd Skog, Gralmunder Trollborne, Alexi and Alexander Sorensen, and Ulaf Sorensen are owned by Sylvan Scott. This story may not be shared or edited without the express written permission of the author.

The Yuletide Wolf

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Alexi and Alexander Sorensen left the warmth of their grandfather's truck. All around them, the air was alive with the deep scent of slumbering pine. Grandfather Ulaf led the way with his antique, kerosene lantern. It sputtered and hissed while lighting their path between avenues of dark evergreens. Each of the two teens carried a small, red box wrapped with a silver bow. All they had been told was to not open it ... not yet. Having departed the warmth and celebratory atmosphere of their family's home for the nighttime woods, however, left the promise of a mysterious present far from their minds.

"Grandpa, where are we going?" Alexander asked, not for the first time. He had not bundled up as warmly as he could have. Now, he regretted his bravado: facing the longest night of the year with only his sneakers and a short, camel hair coat.

"Yeah," Alexi echoed, "It's *really* cold! Can't we go back to the party?" She was dressed more warmly than her brother but still shivered.

"We'll go back, soon enough," the old man assured them. "Come on: if we run, we'll warm ourselves as we go."

With a spry energy belying his age, he took off at a lumbering jog. He led them through deep drifts that rose in hillocks of white between the snow-covered trees. In less than an hour's half, with the grandchildren puffing and panting, the three emerged into a pine-ringed clearing. In its center stood a stand of blue spruce: bedecked with silver ornaments. Overhead, the moon shone bright as day.

Ulaf slowed, moving with reverence. His grandchildren followed, somewhat more hesitantly.

About to ask what this place was, the teens were interrupted by a chorus of ululating howls. The haunting sounds echoed from the forest night around them. They rose and fell—joining, dividing, and remerging in pitch and harmony—together crafting a soulful song. Both Alexes stopped, eyes wide: staring into the night.

"Grandpa?" Alexi asked. Her voice shivered.

"Don't be afraid," Ulaf said. His serene voice wisped from his lips: smoke-like and warm. "It's their night as well as ours; no harm will come to us. Let's go." With that, he strode to the central trees.

Like pillars in an ancient, Pagan cathedral, they stood stalwart in the moonlight: defending their patch of terra firma against encroachment by civilization. Where the silver baubles had been hung, very little snow had been disturbed. Around the base of the trees were footprints and pawprints, intermingled. Alexi peered at them, askance while her sibling looked about into the night.

The howls came again.

"C'mon, grandpa; we've already got a tree," Alexander said. Nervousness shook his voice.

"I didn't bring you to cut down a tree," he said. "And I told you: you have nothing to fear from the wolves. Don't you know that this is their holiest night?"

Both looked to their grandfather. "What do you mean?"

He took a deep, contemplative breath. "Have your parents told you about the Yuletide wolf, Manegarm?" After both shook their heads, he nodded. "Let me tell you, then. It's a tale that reaches back to the Old World. It's a story of faith, hope, trial, and triumph: all in the name of the silver moon..."

All around them, the wolves began to sing.



Manegarm lived in a cold land ... Stabbursdalen: the northernmost, forested valley in all the world. Like most people of the Old World, he worked the land when it was not frozen and hunted its woodlands when it was. There were small farms scattered throughout with a village near the valley mouth. He and his kin, however, were unlike any others in all the world. Similar to the fabled *ber-serkir*, Manegarm's people were shapeshifters. But they did not wear the skins of slain bears to invoke their wolveren forms. Rather, they grew their own wolveren hides beneath their flesh: letting them out only when the sun had set and the moon had risen.

The story of how they acquired this ability has long-since been lost. But some say that it was a gift given unto them by Fenris, himself: the greatest of all wolves. But it was a gift that forced them to live apart from others. Being able to transform into human-shaped wolves, they were feared by outsiders. And those who did not fear them were jealous of their prowess as hunters.

But their abilities did not make Manegarm's people proud. They were family. They were humble, yet confident. They welcomed strangers, provided that they were respectful. They ran beneath the moon in the night-shrouded world and sang their praises to their goddess, high overhead.

For, you see, the shapeshifting people of Stabbursdalen worshipped The Silver Queen, or the Sølvdronningen. The Sølvdronningen's name was Sølvkone Visst and she was sister to the sun. Her duty was to light the night as her brother's was to light the day. She ruled from sunset to dawn, keeping watch over all the world. And all who looked upon her face loved her.

But one day, Máni—a king from a distant and foreign land—did more than love Sølvkone. He vowed to wed her and make himself king of the night. And, so, with cunning and treachery, this man made his way through the world to Stabbursdalen. From there, he climbed the silver bridge, Sølvsbroen, and used it to cross Mørkskog—the Dark Forest of Night—to reach Sølvkone's moon palace. Once there, he professed his love. But she saw the pettiness in his heart and would not have him.

Enraged, Máni ambushed her and cast her in chains. He ordered powerful giants under his command to take her to the dungeons. She was to remain there until she agreed to make Máni her king.

And, thus, the night sky became a black tapestry: pierced only by tiny pinpricks of stars.

Deprived of their night goddess, Manegarm's people were thrown into despair. They howled their prayers and praises to no avail. Their beloved would not appear. Worse, with Sølvkone gone, the silver moon bridge had vanished. Between them and their beloved was the unlit darkness.

Manegarm was first among his people and his farm was the largest. He raised great caribou, tall as trees, and fished the rivers for the mightiest of salmon. He approached his people after a week of lightless nights and told them that he must go forth to find their beloved Sølvdronningen.

They agreed, of course, but had no idea how.

Manegarm said, "There is a creature who regularly passes through the Mørkskog. He is a small but cunning creature: ferret-like and swift. His name is Vridd Skog. I shall go to him and plead our case; ask him to guide me across empty Mørkskog to the moon."

"But without the bridge," his people said, "you will starve in the empty void. Not even gods may sustain themselves on stardust!"

"I only do what I must," Manegarm said. And, with that, he left them.

It took him many days and nights before he located Vridd Skog. And, indeed, as the legends said: he was very small and looked like a weasel. His fur was half-black and half-white. He wore a long hat set with three, giant raven feathers. On his hands and feet were leather wrappings to protect his paws. He had the reputation of a trickster but was the only one who Manegarm knew could get him to the moon.

When Manegarm approached and asked his help, Vridd was skeptical.

"It takes me many days to cross the Mørkskog. And woe betide any who cannot make the journey on their own. They inevitably become lost and maddened by the lack of light. You would set out to follow me but even if we were roped together, you would eventually wander off and become lost: consumed by the void."

Manegarm, however, was not daunted. "You shall carry me, then," he said. "By your nimble feet and strong back shall I traverse Mørkskog."

"But you are far larger than I," Vridr said. "And though I am clever in my movements, I could not bear you all that way. Besides, even if I could, the new King of the Moon would see you in my arms and strike us both down before we got close."

It was at this point that Vridr told Manegarm of the usurper, Máni.

At this, the shapeshifter grew enraged. But knowing that his Sølvdronningen was a prisoner, he also vowed to set her free. He contrived a plan.

"As all my people," he said, "the more we consume as wolves, the larger we become. Likewise, the reverse is also true. In times of famine, we are cursed to collapse in upon ourselves: becoming small and weak. But, if I were to fast long enough, I could shrink to such a size that even you could carry me, noble Vridr Skog. I could remain unseen by the usurper."

And Vridr saw this to be a cunning plan and agreed to help Manegarm.

Immediately, the wolf-man began his fast.

For twenty-nine days and thirty nights, Manegarm consumed nothing but water. Each night, he would transform beneath the stars and run and leap and sing to his missing goddess. And with each night's exertions, his body began to consume itself. He grew smaller and smaller, night after night, until at the final dawn, Vridr's tiny paw was like unto a house in size next to Manegarm.

Now, by this time, Máni had sent out word throughout the celestial realms demanding all come and pay homage to him. Vridr, accordingly, had crafted a beauteous, silver box: spherical and shining like the lost moon. It was to be his gift to the so-called "Moon King". It also possessed a hidden catch. Within its hollow interior, he would hide shrunken Manegarm.

The wolf-man agreed to this deception and took up his hiding place when Vridr departed.

So that he would not shrink unto nothingness, Vridr supplied Manegarm with a cache of acorns and bark to keep the worst of his starvation at bay. But the sustenance would not be enough for the diminished man to return to his former size.

"How will you best Máni and free Sølvkone?" Vridr asked. "You are so small, I daresay a mouse could best you in a fight."

"I am no mouse," Manegarm said, "but a wolf. I will find my way!"

And, thus, the two departed.

Cramped in his silvery orb, Manegarm stayed still. He forced himself to eat the bitter acorns and assuaged his stomach pains by chewing the bark. For nearly another thirty nights, the two crossed Mørkskog. In the end, they arrived at the moon, passing the edges of the Dark Forest. The silvery landscape spread out before them to the foot of Sølvkone's palace.

Vridr found the procession of celestials making their way to pay homage to the usurper king and joined them. Everyone had a different present: all of them bejewelled or made of precious metals as befitting Máni's presumed status.

Upon entering the moon palace, Vridr was brought before Máni's throne. He went down on one knee and presented the king with his precious bauble. Pleased, Máni decreed that it be hung by the door that he may look on it with pride. And so, it was done: suspended from the bough of a potted evergreen. Then, the assembled celebrants feasted and toasted to Máni's reign.

That night, when all were asleep, either below the feasting tables or in the corners of the great hall, Manegarm opened his hidden door and emerged from the silver orb. He dropped to the floor and quickly scurried between them: no bigger nor louder than a mouse.

He paused, here and there, to sate his gnawing hunger on leftover meat and hard bread. He filled his tiny stomach as he made his way around the hall. He explored each corner and every room. Stealthily, he evaluated his sworn enemy's defenses and stolen home. A final plan came to him.

Manegarm took shelter beneath the pantry: in a hollowed-out cooking stone that his powerful claws—even at their diminished size—could dig through.

He found that, being on the moon, he could transform into his wolverine state at will: day or night. He sniffed the air and smelled the presence of Sølvkone Visst. This was, indeed, her domain. And his nearness to her filled him with joy.

But he remained careful.

Only going out when no one was present, he would steal provisions and feast on the leavings of the giant-sized, normal folk of the moon palace. And as he ate, he also grew. He was forced to find larger lodgings than the cooking stone. He took to following Máni in secret: staying quiet and stalking the man as he went through his stolen castle. Then, one day, Máni led him through a dark corridor and down into the depths. There, in ancient mines where giants toiled to delve valuable stones and metals, were the dungeons where the usurper had imprisoned Sølvkone.

Manegarm took the opportunity to claim temporary residence in an unlocked, neighboring cell. From there, he could still sneak out by night and return to the kitchens to feast in order to regain his size. Once he approached his former height and stature, he felt confident enough to address her.

“Sølvdrönnungen,” he whispered, that night, “Sølvkone Visst: I have come to win your freedom!”

“Who is it who speaks in darkness,” Sølvkone asked.

And the wolf replied, “It is I: Manegarm of Stabbursdalen. It has taken me several months to come to you but, at last, I am here. I am ready to strike and bring down the evil Máni!”

“Alas, but he is strong: even more so than the wolves of Stabbursdalen,” Sølvkone said. “I fear that your strength will not be enough.”

“It will have to be,” Manegarm said. “And after I eat my fill, tonight, I shall be ready to strike.”

And, so, having vowed to free his lady, Manegarm set out from the dungeon to the kitchen, to seek the last meal that would restore him for his fight.

He climbed the stairs as quietly and swiftly as he had in all previous nights. It was easier to scale them, too, now that he was almost his full height. But perhaps in his eagerness, this time he failed to notice that the kitchens were not empty before entering. Instead, Máni’s steward and cook—Gralmunder, the troll-born—was present: cleaning and preparing for the next day’s feast.

Gralmunder smelled Manegarm and snarled: smacking his lips and licking his tusks in eagerness for a meal that was not moon-made.

“Your life shall make a fine snack,” he bellowed, “and, with your mortal remains, I shall provide my lord Máni with a truly kingly meal!”

Gralmunder then drew a mighty cleaver and attacked Manegarm: right then and there in the kitchens.

Manegarm, still small but also a wolf-man in shape and ability, avoided the blows. He sniffed the air and tasted it for Gralmunder’s defenses. He dodged around, skulking just beyond the troll-born’s reach. He darted in and out, worrying at the giant’s heels and nipping him with small bites and cuts.

Gralmunder bellowed in fury and, abandoning his cleaver, picked up the mighty cauldron which was boiling on the hearth. Lifting it above his head, he prepared to smash Manegarm to a pulp and sup on his soul.

But Manegarm was too swift. Quick as a wolf, he darted in and bit through Gralmunder’s tendons. The monster screamed and toppled back, dropping the heavy, iron cauldron upon himself. He was boiled and crushed at the same time. Manegarm had been smart and swift enough to dodge away. When the steam had cleared, his opponent lay dead: cooked in that night’s soup.

Manegarm, seized by a wolfish hunger, could hold back no longer. He dove upon Gralmunder’s body and, piece by piece, picked his bones clean. He ate the monstrous cook, downing each bite with relish. And when his final meal in the kitchens was done, Manegarm found himself towering at the size of any giant. He had found his answer for how to defeat Máni.

Indeed, drawn by the noise of combat, the usurper came to kitchens to see what had caused the commotion. There, seeing Gralmunder’s bones and the giant, looming form of Manegarm, Máni fell to his knees and began to weep: begging for mercy.

"Did you show mercy when you cast the night into blackness solely for your own vanity?" Manegarm asked.

"No," Máni said.

"Did you show mercy when you consigned the wolves to a sky without a moon to hear their songs?" Manegarm asked.

"No," Máni admitted.

"Worst of all, did you show mercy to our eternal Silver Lady, Sölvkone Visst, when she declined your offers of betrothal?"

"No," cried Máni, "but I shall not be judged by a mere wolf!"

And he leaped at Manegarm, snarling like a rabid animal. But Manegarm was too big and too fast to be taken by such an attack. He snarled and dove snout-forward, opening his maw, and snapped up Máni between the pillars of his white fangs. And with a growl and a chomp, he ripped the would-be Moon King into pieces and devoured him, that very night.

The servants of the palace came forward, in ones and twos, to witness their salvation. Cheering him, they led Manegarm to Máni's bedchambers, first, where the wolf was able to retrieve the dungeon cell key. Then, in a procession worthy of any monarch, they followed Manegarm to the prisoner cells. There, as he released Sölvkone Visst, the assemblage raised great cheers. They bore both she and Manegarm upon their shoulders back up to the great hall. There, they roused the sleeping celestial host and made them bear witness to the liberation of their Sölvdrönnungen.

Manegarm's bravery had won the day and all the beings present saw the truth.

In payment, Sölvkone blessed him, saying, "You, great Manegarm, have suffered and endured much to set me free. But as such, I would be a fool to release you from my service. You and yours and all your descendants shall be my champions: immortal and unable to be released from life without my leave. You shall be champions of the moon until set free by the touch of silver."

And Manegarm bowed, humbled by his queen's generosity.

That night, in the skies above the world, the moon reappeared. The bridge, Sölvbroen, reappeared connecting Sölvkone Visst's palace to the Stabbursdalen valley.

"From this night, forth, you shall be called Manegarm Denedalle: Manegarm the Noble! Your descendants shall rule the night and, even when the clouds shield you from my gaze, be the most favored of all my subjects!"

She then retired to her throne room.

Bowing to his queen, Manegarm Denedalle left the moon.

It had been the longest of nights: both ending and returning with the full moon. Thereafter, Manegarm and Manegarm's people lived to remind all the world that the periods of darkness in the sky would always be temporary. They were her champions, ever more: passing their mantle from parent to child, from generation to generation, remembering their goddess and Manegarm's ordeals with silver baubles on each and every solstice.

They remain, to this day, champions of the moon-bright sky.



Alexander and Alexi finished listening to their grandfather's tale. The night was still cold with gusts of icicle-like wind, but it had lost much of its teeth. They began to feel warm inside as a few clouds parted revealing the full moon, high overhead. The howling of the wolves inundated them: body, mind, and soul. They felt connected to a part of themselves they had always sensed but never known, before.

They understood the change even as they felt it for the first time.

Their grandfather, before them, changed, too.

They shed their clothes as their inner skins came forth. Muscle and bone stretched and grew; mouths became muzzles. All the secret sounds of the night, too high or low in pitch to be heard by human ears, became crisp and clear. And as the power of the moonlight flooded their veins, they joined their grandfather in their first song to the moon.

All around them, the wolves changed their song to echo the new generation of the moon's celebrants in their Yuletide howl. From even further, Alexi's, Alexander's, and Ulaf's relatives gathered for the Solstice in their lakefront home, transforming to sing with their distant kin.

At the end of midnight's hour, after racing through the dark eaves of the forest, the brother and sister returned to the trees and unwrapped their presents.

Each was a silver orb: etched with the symbol of a howling wolf.

Alexi and Alexander hung their ornaments next to those already hung by their family and, enraptured by the new vistas opened to them, followed their grandfather back home.

Their feast was waiting.

The End

