

# Keeper of the Faith

by Alley\_B

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Chapter 1 of 1

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A.N.: Written for Zerrah at the r1hg\_exchange. Original Prompt: Angst, possibly dark; the world before the final battle and/with the war ravaged society after it. Who won and how is up to you as is the way the two lives are interconnected. Main focus on the Remus/Hermione relationship aspect, any rating. Many thanks to my beta, Jo (artemis\_ephesus).

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The room is stuffy, the windows sealed shut, the heat from the roaring fire stifling. Remus pushes down the covers and rolls on his side, away from the puddle of sweat that soaks the sheets. He reaches for a dream that floats at the edge of his subconscious, barely there, already fading: Dumbledore's office, lemon drops, a game of Wizards' Chess...relics of better times. Down the hall the young girl sleeps, or can't sleep. They have been holed up at the old mansion for weeks. Maybe it's years...it feels that way. Long enough for the stale and fetid stench of the house to cling to their nostrils, making everything smell putrid and rank.

The dream is gone.

Remus awakens feeling restless. His skin prickles and his thoughts race. He leaves the bed and shuffles across the warped floorboards to the sprawling bathroom that might have at one time been luxurious but is now just a hollow shell filled with leaky pipes, cracked fixtures and yellowed wallpaper. The fractured mirror reflects his features in a jigsaw-puzzle-pattern: hollow-cheeked and empty-eyed. Years of fighting have taken a toll on their resources, their bodies, and Remus suspects, their souls.

The house is their meeting place should they become separated. Hermione arrived first, Remus shortly after, no one else came. He wonders if she knows...that they've waited long enough, that Snape and the others are not coming, that the house is no longer safe, that they've lost the war...and decides that she must know; she is too smart not to.

He retrieves a bottle from the old cabinet and drinks the foul liquid in one gulp...the last bottle of Wolfsbane, brewed by Snape shortly before the attack. One last night of reprieve before the beast again takes over his life once a month. Tonight the girl will be safe in his company, but after that they must part ways. It wouldn't be fair that she should be shackled with the responsibility to watch over him during the full moons. He goes to the main floor of the house to wait for her.

The drawing-room is a skeletal affair, with bare rafters and rickety floorboards dressed in footfall-muting, dusty rugs. The curtains are drawn tight, and lit candles cast shadows that quiver and stretch like claws towards the high-ceiling. Remus picks up a book...an aged tome that Hermione had rescued from a barren cupboard the previous day...and settles into an old chair to wait.

He senses her presence shortly after. His eyes abandon the book and he regards her with a deep sigh. She lingers near the entryway, warily studying the shadows on the walls. Her long, thick braids, slight build and inquisitive eyes give her an almost child-like appearance, but the determined set of her jaw and grim mouth betray her experience and astuteness.

She knows.

"Hermione, we have to talk."

"Perhaps we should send out a *Patronus*," she says dryly.

"I already did, three days ago. We have to consider the possibility that the war is lost, and that we're the only ones left alive."

The battle had been fierce, desperate, and for a moment it had looked as if the tide had turned in their favor, until he had glimpsed the dark shadow zoom across the sky...black, disheveled hair flapping wildly in the wind; green eyes blazing with anger and hatred; clutched wand firing curses that were a far stretch from his trademark *Expelliarmus* of olden days. Snape had given the order to scatter and reconvene at the house.

"If anyone can take *him*, it's Snape, and no one understands better than he the importance of what must be done," Hermione protests.

Remus understands Hermione's omission of the name; she can't bring herself to think of the thing as her old friend. Harry was dead; he had died nine years earlier when Snape had fired the curse that destroyed Voldemort's body but left behind the tiny piece of soul that lived inside Harry to feed on the anger and resentment it found there, to fester and grow. Remus bears no ill will towards Snape in that regard; even with the advantage of hindsight, he can't say he would have done any differently if he'd had to make the choice between killing Voldemort and sacrificing Harry.

"It's not Snape's understanding or skill I question," he tells her. That he has nagging doubts about the wizard's loyalties remains unsaid.

Hermione's soft eyes rest on him, and Remus feels a stirring deep inside him...something he hasn't felt in too long, not since before Tonks' death, not since their victory that was no victory at all. He is not stupid; he has noticed the way she looks at him, although he can't fathom what she sees. It makes what he has to tell her all the harder to say.

"We must assume that the worst has happened and that this location is no longer safe."

"Agreed. Where shall we go, then?"

He hesitates, looking for a way to explain why they can't stay together, why they must each go their own way. It is time to concede defeat in a fight that maybe was never truly their own. She'll be safe in the Muggle world where she came from. He knows places deep in the forests, hideouts that for centuries have concealed his kind.

Remus clears his throat and fidgets with the sleeve of his robes. "It will be better if we split up. You will forsake magic and go into hiding in the Muggle world; you will be safe there so long as you live as one of them."

His softly spoken words are met with a defiant stare and an incredulous tilt of her head.

"And you?" she asks.

"I will be safe as well. I know places in the forest where I can hide indefinitely," he hastens to reassure her.

"Alone in the woods? With no Wolfsbane and no human contact for the rest of your life?"

Remus nods. It's not an ideal plan, but a sensible one, and Hermione is nothing if not a sensible woman. Surely she understands.

"No. You will come with me. I can learn to brew the Wolfsbane; I've observed Snape do it at least a dozen times."

"Watching is not the same as doing. The risk is too high for both of us if something should go wrong with the potion."

"Then we'll use locks and wards. I can learn the Animagus charm..."

Remus can hear the undercurrent of desperation hidden under the confidence in her voice, and his heart nearly caves. He would give everything he never had for someone like her...if circumstances were different. That she is willing to take on the responsibility of caring for someone like him is almost more than he can bear.

Before he can argue, she crosses the room. There's a reflexive tensing of the muscles in his shoulder under her touch. Her lips brush softly against his hair. An objection blossoms on his lips and quickly wilts under the coldness of his own dejection...years earlier he would have protested that he is too old, poor, broken, an outcast with nothing to offer but the shame that is his constant companion. But those things don't matter any more...after so many years of fighting they are all poor, broken and old beyond their years.

The book lands on the floor with a muted thud. She sits on his lap, and he notices how light her body is, how pale her cheeks. He fingers one of her braids and brushes her lips with his. Her hand is warm on his skin as it delves under the fabric of his robes to skim the planes of his chest.

Remus has never stolen anything in his life, no matter how hungry he got or how desperate his circumstances...he is proud of that...but what is a couple of hours of stolen pleasure when measured against the years of suffering and loneliness that stretch like a Dark Sea on all sides of him?

Come morning nothing will have changed. Whether or not she agrees, they'll each go their own separate way...he'll make sure of it for her own sake. With that certainty, Remus follows Hermione to her room.

He awakens to a cold and empty space...the windows are cracked, the fire in the hearth forgotten. He shivers from the cold as much as from the images in his dream...werewolves, forests, torn and bloodied flesh. His first conscious memories are those of the wolf, fragmented images in black and white: Hermione's bedroom, the girl sleeping placidly on her bed, her bare legs peeking from beneath the covers. The lingering scents of human skin, sweat and sex are still in the air. Remus sits up with a start and his muscles protest.

The morning sunlight filters through a gap in the curtains, and the girl is nowhere to be seen. Voices and female sobs drift in from somewhere in the house. With a monumental effort Remus reaches for his wand and his robes, cursing his own weakness. They had waited too long...if his suspicions are true, they should have abandoned the house days before.

He silently creeps down the hallways in the direction of the noise. His blood goes cold and his heart skips a beat when he recognizes the male voice...Snape...the female sobbing is clearly Hermione. With no time to formulate a plan and nothing left to lose, Remus dashes down the staircase into the foyer. Maybe it's better this way, to join their fallen comrades in the hereafter than to live out their lives as fugitives, because whatever happens, he has no intention of letting Snape take Hermione alive.

The scene that greets him gives him pause. Snape stands by the door, eyes averted, his wand sheathed. Hermione rests on a chair, face buried in her hands, and behind her stands a somber George Weasley, one hand poised on her trembling shoulder. Realization dawns when Hermione looks up and he sees through her tears a smile.

"It's over," she whispers.

Her simple declaration opens the floodgates for all kinds of explanations.

"The attempt at retreat failed. Many were killed; the rest were taken prisoner," Snape informs him.

"It looks like only you and Hermione managed to get away," George adds.

"But it wasn't a total loss. I was able to take credit for their perceived victory and get close enough to Harry to earn his trust, even though your ill-timed *Patronus* nearly foiled my plan."

"He is dead, Lupin. Harry is dead."

Remus finds no satisfaction in George's words...they sound like both self-congratulation and condolence.

He only half listens to the details, his attention on the woman crossing the room to stand next to him. Only when she grasps his wrist and gently lowers his arm does he realize that his wand was still aimed at Snape.

"I can still learn to brew the Wolfsbane," she whispers close to his ear.

He smiles down at her, touched by her pointless offer. "There's no need," he reminds her, "Snape is here now."

Her answering smile is mysterious, almost mischievous. "But he will not be where we are going," she says.

For a moment it doesn't make any sense, until he remembers the night before: the short hours before the full moon spent in her bed, their shared need and despair, her unconditional surrender to his passion and insistence afterwards to remain with him during and after the transformation, her conviction that they would survive and be together...somehow.

Remus knows he should object to such a preposterous liaison, but he also knows that any argument he can present would be in vain, because her faith is stronger than his words.

"Where are we going?" he asks instead.

Her smile widens, and he sees in her face something she probably hasn't felt in years...relief.

"Away," she says.

~ The End~