

The One That Got Away

by purpleygirl

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Chapter 1 of 1

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The wolf thinks it smells him: the determination tinged with fear a familiar scent that once haunted its frustrated dreams. The redolent memory carries on the wind, teasing it.

After all these years it smells him again.

The one that got away.

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If there is one thing I take pleasure from, it is playing the long game: moving the pieces into place little by little so that they are barely noticed. Until the king falls and it is too late.

This is why tonight I break into the War Cemetery on the outskirts of Hogsmeade. The first piece is about to be put into place, and I feel myself readying for this first act. It is the most invigorating, for once it is done, I know I must see the rest through.

The night is clear, and I find Remus Lupin's grave easily enough.

I scan the grassy earth around the obscenely large block of granite. On its left side, beneath extravagant carvings of angels and scrolls, there is a glimmer of gold, and the sharp inscription *Nymphadora Lupin, beloved mother, daughter and wife* is thrown briefly into relief.

Then I see it. I step closer. A small sinking depression on the far right. Little wonder it has apparently thus far been missed, if indeed Nymphadora's mother pays regard to this side of the overlarge plot. Perhaps the animal unwittingly tried to cover its own tracks. Soil has been kicked into it, the claw marks just visible, their wild slashes around the opening a bold indicator of life that is out of keeping with their softly bordered surroundings.

Already grass and weeds are starting to reclaim the disturbed earth. But it is not enough to conceal it completely, and as I explore the hole with my wand, I glimpse wood splinters as loose soil trickles down.

Some simple wandwork repairs the damage and accelerates the growth of the grass.

I cover over the last of the animal's tracks with my boot.

Now that the first piece is in place, I feel a calmness as I make my way back through the silent rows. I am more lucid than I have been since before I Disapparated from beneath these very grounds six months ago.

My thoughts fill with the tasks ahead.

The old determination is returning.

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My present course was shown to me three weeks ago.

It began by a stack of dusty potions.

"I swear it was him," I heard the woman whisper behind the counter.

I did not normally pay calls to ramshackle local shops with a so-called apothecary crammed into one corner, but Diagon Alley was becoming far too expensive for my dwindling funds. Peacetime did not always have its pluses, it seemed, and I had to bear the ignominy, which I found was not lessened even under Polyjuice, if I were to acquire my basic necessities. If I did not have potion brewing to occupy my time, I would surely go insane, and I would never be rid of the twinges in my neck that occasionally still troubled me in the night.

"It couldn't have been," a man said, not sounding particularly genuine in his supposed attempt at dissuasion.

I sighed and stared at the bottles on the shelf. Some were in a truly despicable state, stoppers unsealed, ruining the contents within.

"I'm telling you," the woman prattled on, "it was him. I saw him with my own two eyes. Bold as brass."

"But it can't be," the man said again, thoroughly trying my patience. "He's dead."

My hand froze on the bottle of snake fangs.

The glass in front of me still showed a short-cropped, mousy blond peering back through close-set eyes. I glanced across the shop covertly, but the two were deep in their conspiracies, apparently oblivious to me. I pulled my collar higher in any case.

"Believe what you like; I know what I saw in them woods. And I'm telling you it was that werewolf they gave that Order of Merlin to."

"Who?"

The woman clucked in annoyance.

Werewolf. Order of Merlin. It could only be one person.

"Remus Lupin."

"What woods were they, then?"

She pointed vaguely. "Those up by that Muggle village t'other side of t'hill."

I knew which ones she meant. On the other side of the hill that hemmed in this town, whose smattering of wizard folk now enjoyed the novelty of living peacefully side by side with its main residents, Muggles, there was an entirely Muggle village bordered by woods within which I had happened to make my home.

What in Merlin's name was Lupin doing there? It was my destiny to be haunted by at least one of the Marauders or their kin, it seemed, even in the relative peace and tranquillity of my supposed death.

I caught my ridiculous thoughts before they continued further. I was getting as bad as the woman in the shop. Paranoia must breed in small towns like these where there was little else to do.

The fact that I had succeeded in faking my death did not mean that everyone was at it. The damned Marauders had left me in peace, and Remus Lupin, the last of them, had been dead these past few months.

Of course he had, and I thought no more of the gossip's words. I was sure that the brainless woman had seen Lupin's picture in the *Prophet* and could no longer tell the difference between what she had heard, or seen in the paper, and reality.

I took a brisk walk over the hill to avoid unnecessary Disapparation and the risk it brought with it of tracking spells, and to work off the stress she had caused me by briefly leading me to believe my carefully concealed death had been called into doubt.

I very nearly took it out on the pair of campers I sighted as I came to the clearing.

I stayed close and watched them walk by the house, unseeing Muggles, unaware they were being guided along a convoluted path through the clearing to avoid invisible timber and brick.

They disappeared into the trees with their heavy rucksacks and jutting poles. I thanked the gods on their behalf that they had not taken a fancy to the spot.

It was a moment later I had the feeling that I in turn was being watched.

Something was creeping behind me. I heard the telltale silence of insects disturbed from their song. Then the crackle of lightly trodden twigs, the care taken that none would snap and alert me to the thing's presence.

My wand out, I turned swiftly to catch it, but there was nothing. Nothing that I could see.

I put it to the back of my mind. These woods had not seemed as wild as the Forbidden Forest, yet there were bound to be some wild creatures lurking in its depths.

But the possibility of the wizarding world discovering my new life was always present in my thoughts. I was loath to relinquish the solitude, the freedom to be no one and nothing but myself.

With this in mind, the next evening I kept watch from a safe distance, my light dimmed.

I watched for some nights, careful to take Polyjuice each time, but saw nothing. Then one evening a week later, after spending almost an hour in the undergrowth on the edge of the clearing that bordered the eastern side of the house, I saw the leaves shiver unnaturally and a large shape move through.

I had been mostly correct in my suspicions, though it was not a something, but a someone.

I stared. So the prattling woman had been right.

Neither of us made a sound.

Then I drew myself up and looked him straight in the face. "Lupin."

He made a strange noise deep in his throat.

He must have seen my surprise in my confusion, I had no time to react before he was on me, pressing me against a tree so that I could not reach my wand.

I was not very perturbed at this point, though he appeared stirred up at something, the shadow of the wolf in his eyes. Whatever game Lupin was up to, I had overcome better wizards than him in the past.

It was then I noticed two things. First, that Lupin had not a shred of clothing on him. His body was a pattern of rashes and welts from nettle stings and thrashings from the woods.

But more worrying was that the shadow of the wolf I saw was no mere shadow. It did not move on. Its presence remained steady and strong as I watched.

And the undiminishing presence of the wolf watched me in turn.

I searched the heated gaze. "Lupin?"

Again there was that inhuman noise. A low growl of possession.

But if this was indeed the wolf, what was it voicing possession of? Lupin? Or me?

I had no inclination to hear that noise again, so I commanded my wand to my hand and cast a Stinging Hex before the thing decided to do worse.

I left Lupin writhing on the forest floor. Evidently the spell had come as something of a surprise. It must have been then that I realised there was no Lupin: this was wholly the wolf in human form. Remus Lupin was dead, but the wolf had somehow returned alone.

Within the safe confines of my house, I began to wonder just why he or rather it was haunting my forest. I had forgotten I was still under Polyjuice but that made it all the worse that the wolf still recognised me.

Did it remember me as the fifteen-year-old boy from all those years ago? The thought of being stalked thus by my past made me consider the possibility of having to move on from here much sooner than I had hoped.

I waited it out. A few days later, I heard the creature howl to the full moon, voicing its happiness at returning to a more familiar form.

The sound chilled my blood, but the idea of the wolf forcing me from the home I had carefully established re-fired it. This wolf had humiliated me once before I would not allow it to do so again. There had to be some way I could be rid of this beast once and for all.

It was then I began to recognise that if the wolf did indeed believe I was that same frightened and helpless schoolboy, then perhaps I had an interesting advantage. If it thought I would be easy prey this time around, it would be gravely mistaken.

But I was not the vicious, attacking beast that the wolf was. Before I took my final revenge, I would first torment it: rob the wolf of its dignity just as it had robbed me of mine years ago. I wanted to tear it apart, piece by piece, just as I had glimpsed it down the tunnel tearing me with its eyes.

And so, when I knew the wolf had no intention of leaving me in peace, my plan began to take shape.

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First, it was important to gain its trust.

It would find it difficult almost impossible to hunt in human form, and so I began to leave various things I had stunned earlier rabbits, the odd chicken. First on the edge of the clearing, then gradually closer to the house.

I lowered the wards. It had not tried to breach them, and this seeming reluctance to force entrance into my home gave me a little confidence, albeit of a wary kind.

I began to leave the front door ajar each evening. Inside, I simultaneously kept vigil and feigned indifference, going about my normal activities or watching from behind a book as though it was already a frequent visitor.

It was some days later when I came upon Lupin in my kitchen.

It troubled me a little that the wolf had gained entrance without my knowledge the kitchen window was letting in a fair breeze but it did not seem concerned by my presence. As I stood in the doorway, it devoured the steak I had been planning to cook for dinner.

The wolf's gaze passed over me as Lupin swallowed the last morsel, tongue darting out to lick greasy lips. My hand reflexively went to my wand. I thought I saw not only the beast in its gaze but a shadow of intelligence. It did not speak, but it was no dumb animal. It was not afraid of eye contact far from it. Its expression seemed almost human as it stood, shoulders slouched, watching me, apparently waiting for me to provide it with more food.

But what was important was that it was entirely happy for me to feed it.

It was that first night, when I knew my plan would bear fruit, when I knew I had the creature's confidence, that I paid a visit to Remus Lupin's grave and cleared away all evidence of the wolf's exit.

And now here I sit, a mere two feet from the wolf in Lupin's body, watching Lupin eating from my table as the creature looks greedily at me, its supposed servant.

And I channel my hate along the path I have begun to carve.

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I have been waiting for it to try to attack me again as it did in the woods. But it doesn't, and I believe it is because it has already discovered that its fellow werewolves are quick to reject it. A werewolf must have a human mind as well as a human body when not a wolf. If the pure wolves will not have it for its human appearance, and if the werewolves reject it for keeping its wolfish mind beyond the full moon, then who else will accept it? Who else will take it in?

It takes me a while to become accustomed to the visits. I sometimes rise for breakfast to find Lupin sniffing around the kitchen or prowling in the garden. Sometimes I forget the wolf's presence entirely before I glimpse Lupin's form slouching across the clearing.

Tonight it returns late at night. The more it keeps coming back to me, the more confident I am that I can maintain its trust. I make it supper before I retire.

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The wolf is happy.

It has found the one that once slipped from its grasp. It is content for now to allow him to pay his homage, the recompense due to it for all the years he eluded it.

But the wolf remains distrustful. It worries that its freshly caught prey will try to evade it again.

The wolf eats the food prepared for it by the one that once dared to escape it. For now, it is recompense enough.

For now.

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Its inhuman behaviour in human guise fills me with disgust. The way it bolts down food then sends out Lupin's tongue to sweep his lips clean. The way filthy hands are licked clean.

The way it parades Lupin's bared skin.

We have settled into a routine of sorts, its gaze following me as it slumps at the table while I prepare its dinner then watch it bolt it down.

When its hunger is sated, it takes to the warmth of my fire, and I cannot remove Lupin's dozing, naked form curled on the rug without resorting to spells, which would only incite distrust. But the worst times are when it chooses to settle down near me. I often stay in the kitchen until the fire dies out and the wolf leaves in search of fresh air and small creatures too weary to run fast enough from large shadows in the night.

I am careful not to light the fire until it has gone, but I find it can doze for hours over the plate it has licked clean, and the nights are beginning to draw in.

I have succeeded in persuading it to permit me to feed it. Now it is time to find a way to clothe the body it so openly displays.

At the very least, it would prevent further injuries to Lupin's body from the wolf's roving and allow me to heal the damage it has already caused.

Simply stunning the creature would defeat the object. A more discreet route would not go amiss.

That evening it eats its fill by the fire. The Wolfsbane Potion with which I have spiked its food does its work perfectly. It suppresses the wolf's mind so that it slumps in a heap against the foot of the chair, letting the plate it has licked clean drop to the rug.

The robes I have chosen are laid out on the settee. I take them up and make my way over to Lupin's slumbering form.

Up close, the injuries to his skin are more apparent. Angry scratches and welts criss-cross his arms and shoulders, a clear sign that the wolf has spent much time in undergrowth perhaps lying in wait for prey that finds the lumbering human all too easy to evade.

Little wonder it has sought me out. Perhaps I was the first to slip its grasp, and now it thinks I will be the easiest to capture in its new, human-like form.

But no matter my feelings for the beast, the wounds must first be healed. If the wolf, when it wakes, is not to take a dislike to the strange covering over its skin, I must show it that it is to its benefit.

I mutter a cleaning spell then a healing charm across Lupin's body.

Within moments, Lupin's skin is soft and almost healthy again, apart from a sprinkling of old scars. His chest is supple, his stomach already beginning to fill out with the food I give the wolf. It is almost hard to believe that here is a vicious animal that cares nothing for the body it controls. It looks human as it sleeps, Lupin's chest rising and falling gently.

The spare robes I have selected are somewhat shabby since I daresay they will be snagged and torn and Merlin knows what else within a short space of time. But they are no worse than those I was used to seeing Lupin himself in.

I bring them near. The old scars on Lupin's shoulders are iridescent marks against sun-reddened skin.

I remember how I used to imagine how he must look when he changed satisfying my outrage by imagining these muscles tearing.

And now here they are, scattered with scars and tanned by the wolf. His skin is dappled like his hair, aged ahead of its time.

The stress of the moon's cycle has pulled and tugged at his body the way tides ravage sandy cliffs that must once have gleamed smooth and unbroken. Proud and confident if given the chance.

My own body is not much different, truth be told. Only, where his is reddened and browned with exposure, mine has the pallor of a creature that has spent too long in the dark and is now left ill-equipped for the brightness, the life, of the world without.

Time has sagged us both into the sea.

Lupin appears altogether human, ordinary. Sleeping. But what lies beneath is the beast I have tamed. The beast that I have reduced to a helpless child.

His right shoulder is against the chair, and I must bring him forward carefully without waking the wolf.

I reach around the curve of his back, repressing my feelings of disgust at my closeness to the wolf. How I loathe the creature.

If it had crossed my mind then to risk using a charm instead to dress it, that thought was overshadowed by the sudden contact with soft skin. Something shot through me like a spell charging every cell.

I move back. The fire crackles in the grate. I look at Lupin's naked, silent body, and now I feel a sickness as though I've been hexed.

But no matter what my feelings are against the wolf, I must go through with this if I am not to continue enduring this display of arrogance.

This time I hold my breath as I take hold of Lupin's far shoulder and bring him gently forward. His head falls against me. For a moment, I feel exceptionally vulnerable holding, holding the wolf to me, this strange weight in my arms what if it should wake now?

Lupin's hair smells of conifers freshly rained upon.

The lambent firelight lingers over the mottled skin of his chest as I hold his right arm and draw the sleeve over it carefully, careful not to wake the wolf.

I let him back, the weight of him and the smell of the woods leaving me as his head rests against the chair. Once his other arm is covered, I move round to his front, casting him a little in shadow as I move between him and the fire.

The fabric is soft in my hands as I join it together, covering Lupin's body by degrees. As I work my way downward, I become increasingly aware of his vulnerability. Here Lupin's tender flesh in his lap is as placid as the wolf above. I quickly do up the remaining buttons and move away.

When the wolf wakes, it is wary, suspicious of the new, unnatural layer covering it. It seems about to tear my work apart like it would the stomach of its prey.

But while it slept, I prepared more food for it, and appetite is quick to take over.

From the doorway, I watch it eat. If it were not for the greedy way it gorges as if it has not consumed for days, one could almost believe it were Lupin eating at my table in dull, threadbare robes. How much more each day it comes to resemble him.

A wolf not only in human clothing but in Lupin's as well.

Perhaps I should have chosen different robes.

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On my return from an excursion to Diagon Alley, I find Lupin in my front room. The wolf appears to be dozing on the rug in front of the cold fireplace, and I try not to wake it, aware that the full effects of the Polyjuice may not yet have worn off and wary of what it might do if it thinks me a stranger.

It is when I creep by it that I notice the glint of silver by its side.

My heart skips a beat, and I come to a halt and peer where it lies. I see dark stains on its fingers, and I venture a step forward for a better look. Can it really have...?

But then I smell the sweet scent that surrounds it. Chocolate.

Now I remember I purchased a bar in a moment of weakness only a few weeks after the battle at the school. I had not tasted any of it, and must have thrown it at the back of a cupboard when I found the dilapidated house and occupied myself with making it habitable.

I look at the creature now curled up on my floor, fingers and the robes I have given it smeared with chocolate, the half-chewed foil wrapper lying discarded nearby. It has even wiped chocolate across its face in its haste to consume the stuff. My thoughts are filled with disgust, and I am eager to press ahead faster with my plan.

But looking at the brown smudge on its cheek as it dozes, I begin to feel encouraged, even inspired. Chocolate. Lupin's favourite food. Sweet irony.

As I feel the last effects of the potion return me to my usual form, I quickly calculate that I have enough Polyjuice left for one more trip before I will have to find ingredients for more.

I would not normally need to revisit the place so soon, but I decide to make another journey tomorrow perhaps even to Hogsmeade and to Honeydukes itself. I daresay the wolf will be unable to tell if I buy only from the discounted section.

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I'm almost dozing, the fire too hot, when I see Lupin creeping across the floor toward me. I'm ready with my wand and a curse on my lips for letting down my guard.

But the wolf does not make eye contact; instead it settles down to nestle at my feet, brown hair coming to rest beside my leg.

The close proximity to this loathsome creature that has taken Lupin's place makes me want to retch.

The positioning of the wolf at my feet belies the truth: I know the wolf fully believes that I am its servant and it is my owner. It lies here as if guarding its prey.

But the wolf does not understand the full power of human vengeance. Whatever it believes it has over me does not come close to what a man can achieve.

I tentatively bring my hand down. The wolf does not flinch, too lazy to protest as it torpidly absorbs the room's warmth.

Brown hair glints silver in the light from the fire.

I remember how, years ago, I did a similar thing to what I'm now doing. Then as now, Lupin was eager to allow me to serve him. Now it is meat, the occasional cheap chocolate as dessert, a warm fire, perhaps even the silent company that goes with them. Then it was Wolfsbane Potion.

Lupin watched me indifferently as I paced in his room at the school and told him I had been instructed to provide him with the Wolfsbane for the duration of his stay.

He babbled thanks from his chair, and I came to a stop in front of him. "I am not doing this for your benefit."

He looked at me. His eyes seemed hesitant, searching. "Of course."

"The Headmaster knows my views on your employment here."

"I'd imagine he does. I'll certainly try my best not to let anyone down."

"Understand this, werewolf. My promise still stands. You remember?"

He met my eyes. And there it was: his characteristic expression of quiet acceptance. "I remember."

My promise. By the end of that school year, I was forced to honour that promise, and I regretted it not a whit.

And now here I am, and this time I have failed to keep it. Yet to do so to tell everyone again of the werewolf among them would present no difficulty. I would not even need to reveal my identity. Such rumours are all too easy to start, as I know full well from that year.

Yet I have even gone to the trouble of concealing the evidence of the wolf's return. I loathe the creature, and I know I should leave it to others to hunt it down, to discover what Lupin has become, and to destroy it.

But my loathing for the wolf is strong enough for me to want to keep that final privilege for myself.

The hair in my hand, between my fingers, is soft and warm from the heat of the room.

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The wolf is content. The one that got away is finally caught.

It spends more and more time with its prey, the one known to its unfamiliar memories as Death Eater. The wolf likes the term it remembers some distant time when the Death Eater had given it a similar term of endearment, fondly calling it werewolf. He does not call it anything now. He rarely speaks at all.

But it likes this silence, a clear display of submission. The wolf likes to stay by his side past sun fall. It curls by the warmth and sleeps. The Death Eater sometimes brings it more of that special food it craves, the sweetness melting down its throat and spreading warmth through its belly.

The Death Eater treats the wolf well, as he should, and the wolf is happy to leave its old quarry as it is for now. It likes the familiar form that makes it feel less uneasy at its own unfamiliar shape.

It prefers the Death Eater just as he is.

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Still it doesn't try to attack me. Though I think it will try soon so that it can keep my company at the full moon.

At the next full moon, I use a variety of harmless wards to keep the wolf away. It can turn me fully only when it is in wolf form, and I will take no chances in that regard.

The following day it returns and seems wary. But once it has smelt the fat lamb joint, the finest my funds would permit and cooked rare as it prefers, and after I have persuaded it to let me cover Lupin in a fresh set of robes *less Wolfsbane this time so that the dressing must be done quickly before the wolf wakes* it is not long before it is eating its fill as usual. The wolf picks fat from between stained teeth and licks fingers ingrained with dirt.

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I can almost believe it is Lupin at times like these, when the creature is asleep at the foot of the chair, brown hair glowing amber in front of the fire, hints of grey glinting silver.

When it wakes, sometimes for an instant I see Lupin before I catch the wolf's gaze, with its guardedness, the hint of animosity as it focuses on me, possessiveness framing its expression as it thinks of the hold it has over me. I let it believe so; fetch some food if it appears hungry.

But it is its silence, broken occasionally only by low growls in Lupin's voice, that sends me to the kitchen to prepare it supper. Some moments such as when it dozes, I feel an irrational dread begin to creep over me what if it were to speak?

As I prepare its meal, skinning the rabbit with a spell, I remind myself it is impossible. But this does not make the feeling in my stomach leave; if anything it feels heavier, and I have to stop myself and rest my hands on the table. It is not the first time I have found myself detesting the silence the creature lives in. I have learned to interpret what it wants from its looks.

I have never tried to use Legilimency on it, but sometimes when it holds my gaze, I fancy I see its thoughts. I see myself in that cold inhuman gaze and the name it knows me by: Death Eater.

Yet sometimes when the wolf looks at me through human eyes or uses Lupin's voice, long-distant moments, trivial events an unimportant look; meaningless thoughts; words both spoken and unspoken, of no significance come back to me of the dead man through whom it is living.

One such moment was one evening years ago, when Lupin had been about to tell me something. He had cornered me alone somewhere I believe it must have been at Grimmauld Place because it was Black who interrupted.

When Black finally left me alone after some riling, I noticed Lupin still there. I remember the way Lupin looked beyond me with a tight smile when I asked him what he had been about to say and said, "It doesn't matter."

By rights, I should have demanded to know what it was, no matter how trivial, which of course it was sure to have been. It was around the time Dumbledore planned to send Lupin underground with the werewolves, and I wonder now whether it was something that could have helped persuade them. But I too let the moment pass, both of us focused on old friends mine already gone long years, his about to depart within that year.

Lupin and I spoke so rarely after then that I cannot even recall him using my given name again. Now the wolf in Lupin's form knows me as that which Lupin must have believed me from Dumbledore's death until his own. And I have no way of making him tell me what he had wanted to say that day.

It is the fraught silence that makes me spend more and more time in the kitchen waiting on the wolf while it rests alone in my front room.

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Funny how little, insignificant moments come back to me that I had not given a thought to before.

Such as the moment I made my promise to Lupin: it was the first time I had spoken to him since my first encounter with the wolf.

"Pathetic creature" were my first words to him, as Mulciber and his friends disarmed him in a deserted corridor. I hated myself for being wary of him till then, and when Mulciber told me to hand him back his wand, I whispered in his ear how feeble he was without the wolf and watched him pale. I remember how he called me back once they had finished hurling hexes at him and thanked me for not telling them.

He told me he couldn't help what he was and said that I was right "I am a coward without the wolf," he said and I was outraged at his audacity, and that was when I promised him I would tell everyone about the wolf if I ever encountered it again.

I remember how Lupin looked on me as I made my promise. Not with his usual weak smile, but with one that showed his fear clearly. But his fear was not, I remember thinking as I turned to catch up with Mulciber, the same as that I had seen in others it was not that of a first-year who knew he was about to be used to perfect a newly created hex. Lupin had worn the look of someone more afraid of himself than of the boy who knew his secret.

I wish the past would leave me in peace. But it never could. I thought it might do so once I had avenged her death, tied off that thread. But now a new one seems to show itself. Now I see its weave as though it has wound its way insidiously without my knowing it, and the more of it I see, the more afraid I am to pick it out and hold it to the light.

Perhaps these trivial moments that I had long forgotten are merely compensation for the silences. For the wordless Lupin that dozes on the floor in front of the fire.

Sometimes I catch myself feeling an ounce of pity. Then I remind myself that Remus Lupin is long dead.

Perhaps he would even be grateful for what I am doing now.

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Sometimes I'm eager to press on with ridding the world of the wolf. I rise with all the impatience of a new day beckoning, only to decide, once I watch the wolf gorge on the food I prepare, to delay its torture a few days more.

But the longer I put it off, the harder it seems to become, the more restless I am on the days I intend to bring it to an end. And the more I wonder whether it is the wolf's torture or mine I'm prolonging.

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I didn't mean to let it drag on so long. But already the full moon is upon us again.

I hear the creature's anger plainly, resounding through the woods, surrounding the house as though it is trying to break down the wards with its fury alone. Its howls eventually make me cast a sound-proofing spell. But I know it is still there.

I almost dread to take down the wards in the morning. But I must, and straight away the creature is in my house and I find myself pushed back against the wall, Lupin's angry face inches from mine, teeth bared in a snarl.

It knows I have powers enough to hurt it. But my heart's pounding tells me that it has become weary of playing this game perhaps now it has decided that it will turn me for good perhaps it still can at this hour perhaps it will at least try.

I threaten it with my wand. "Who'll feed you? Who'll fetch you your *chocolate*?"

It turns its gaze down to my wandless hand. Nostrils flare, and there is the grotesque sound of it smelling the air.

I have just prepared a chicken for it, and in my haste, I must have neglected to wipe my hands clean.

Hands grab mine. I'm frozen in place as I watch Lupin sniff then tentatively wipe a tongue across the back. Like any animal that knows its feeder, it seems careful in its exploration, and I think it is this that makes me hesitate a hex now might only provoke it to attack. Perhaps it is best to let it satisfy its curiosity and distract it from its anger at the night's wards as long as it does not decide to turn me into an appetiser.

It pays no heed to me as it licks, my hand dampening the tip of a finger dips into the wet warmth of Lupin's mouth, his lips moving over my skin, catching over my knuckles as he licks every last trace.

I let out a breath I didn't realise I was holding.

My hand is soaked from the creature's foul appetite. It is quite enough. I pull back my hand and point my wand at its chest. It seems upset at the loss perhaps remembering the wards again but after all, it will spoil its appetite for the main course I have prepared for it. I pull myself free, unopposed.

I leave the wolf watching me as I enter the kitchen. It is a long while before my hands, reddened with the creature's ministrations, are finally clean. It is then I realise that it is the first time I have spoken directly to the creature since the night it appeared two months ago.

I must not allow it to overwhelm me again.

~~~

The wolf needs to reassert its authority.

Its prey kept it away at the rise of the moon when it should have been its happiest, rarest night. It was a night to celebrate, and instead it found itself excluded, just as it had been from the wolves who sensed it was different. The food and the sweet substance are no longer enough. Now its true appetite has been awakened.

It finds the Death Eater beyond the wall that he departs through each night after he darkens the room.

Here the room is also dark, and the Death Eater lies slumbering. He does not seem to hear it approach. When the wolf moves near, he makes only the slightest movement, a breath and a glitter as his dark eyes reflect the waning moon.

The wolf cannot smell him well through these thick coverings. It tries to draw them away. The Death Eater clings to them with one hand, gripping hard as though dependent on them for his survival. His other hand is tensed beneath a pillow by his head.

The wolf does not show its anger. Instead it moves nearer still until it rests one leg upon the thing on which he lies. Still the Death Eater makes no sound.

The wolf pulls again, and this time the Death Eater slowly lets the coverings loosen. It moves aside to draw back the heavy covers. The wolf is displeased to see that there is still another unnatural barrier, one of grey fabric that covers the Death Eater down to his legs.

It barely hears the whisper from the thin pale lips. "It can't turn me, not fully." One hand is still beneath the pillow while black eyes, shining enticingly, watch in the dark.

But the wolf does not want to turn the Death Eater. It merely wants to show who is in control.

Slowly it raises the thin grey cloth and inhales the salty scent of bared skin.

Now there is the prize that it has long waited for, of which this morning it had its first taster. So dear is it to the wolf that it uses the gentlest of touches as it caresses the flesh that it once came so achingly close to, long ago.

It leans over and tastes that dreamed-of flesh.

The Death Eater's breath changes as the wolf soothes the taut flesh with its tongue. It makes its way across and down, where the heat is centred and the tightness grows, the flesh protruding, enticing the wolf with its pungent, heady scent. It flicks its tongue to the tender head then licks its length before bringing its mouth around, easing lips over veined skin until it has consumed every last inch. It pauses to breathe in the aroma from the dark mass tickling at its nostrils.

Then very slowly it draws back ensuring that, as it does so, its teeth drag against the sinewy tissue, each scrape eliciting from its prey delightful sounds, gasps puncturing the fast breaths as the wolf trails its marks down its length. With the implied threat of the bite, its authority is successfully asserted, heightening its appetite. The wolf moves below and devours the delicate sac of flesh beneath, bathes it in its thirst, feels it tighten as it sucks and savours.

The Death Eater is gasping now and moving beneath, touching his own flesh above, the sound of skin on skin as the wolf sucks.

Hips push, aching for release, the wand beneath the pillow forgotten, the need to come the only thing that matters.

The sudden wetness makes me wake.

I whip out my wand from beneath my pillow and sit up, the covers falling back. *Lumos!*"

But of course there is no one here. No wolf lapping is at me; my nightshirt is in place and soaked through. I always ward this room at night from the wolf.

I mutter a cleaning charm in a hoarse voice and slowly lie back down, leaving the room lit and holding my wand across my chest. I close my eyes, but all I see is brown hair glinting softly in the moonlight.

I open my eyes and stare up at the ceiling.

I decide to bring my plan to its conclusion tomorrow.

~~~

It is a perfect day. There is a fresh breeze from the trees as I pull back the curtains. Today I will be rid of the creature that almost took my life, that shaped my animosities, that perhaps, if I had not already had designs on the dark path I was to take, would have even shaped my very future.

The very last piece is about to be put into place.

The house is silent as I make my way to the kitchen.

I make the dessert first and put it aside to chill and set in the serving glass. Then I prepare the wolf's final meal and wait for its arrival.

~~~

It does not arrive until late in the afternoon.

Before it has finished the brisket, grease covering its hands as teeth scrape bone, I fetch the serving glass. The creature will not use a spoon, of course.

I set the mousse on the table and push it toward the greasy plate. It turns its sated gaze on the chocolate. I have never made it such a thing before, planning to save the best till last, and at first it examines the glass warily. But the strong scent of chocolate is unmistakable, and it is not long before it is licking at, then digging fingers into, the mixture I have carefully prepared.

I watch the chocolate being scooped into Lupin's mouth, dull amber eyes glazed in greediness. The chocolate I used was clearly bitter enough. The metallic taste masks its special ingredient.

I leave it licking the glass clean, chocolate caked beneath Lupin's fingernails. Moments after I have taken my seat, it pads in and settles by the fire I have stoked, resting Lupin's head against the chair opposite. This has been our unspoken routine for the past eight weeks. I cannot say that I will miss its silent company.

I watch the flames dance over Lupin's face, dull eyes staring into the heat.

All too soon I see Lupin's eyes twitch at some unfamiliar feeling. The heat has perhaps hastened the reaction.

Lupin's hands curl, each successive breath coming harder.

The creature does not turn its gaze on me accusingly. It does not have the intelligence to associate what it must now be feeling with the chocolate I fed it earlier.

I close my eyes an instant.

Though each breath is being wrenched from the body, an outward sign of the agonies the creature must now be enduring within, the widened eyes are still fixed on the flames as though mesmerised by their feverish dance.

Over Lupin's skin, there is a soft sheen showing the growing fever of inner battle.

It will not be long now. The Wolfsbane in the meat was much stronger than usual, to paralyse its mind more completely so that it cannot fight back. I rise quietly to the kitchen and fill a glass from the tap and drink it all down.

The setting sun throws a dull red veil across the dark canopy of the woods. A few drops of rain have formed on the window; before long, more join them. Soon there will be a curtain washing down the valley.

I think of the grey war cemetery, two graves lying empty. I daresay that Lupin's son will visit his graveside once he is old enough, forever unaware of his father's absence beneath.

Perhaps one day he will understand how the wolf stole the man.

I turn from the greying day. I have already decided that I will rid myself completely of the creature. It escaped from its grave once, and who can tell that even after tonight it will not try to do so again. Amid my agitation, I feel a renewed vigour. I will finish this tonight, and tomorrow I will wake free of the silent beast.

With this thought, I make my way back to the front room.

There is the creature, at the foot of the chair as I left it, outlined as a man against the fire. It lies still. I take a breath and move closer. I come to a stop as Lupin's face comes into view, eyes staring dully ahead.

I lean down carefully and reach to the wrist across the chest.

I think I hear a sound in its throat. I listen through the crackling of the fire, wondering if my imagination is playing tricks on me. But there it is again, barely discernible and now I feel the faint pulse beneath my finger.

Damn it; for how much longer will it torture me?

Though the noise unnerves me, I stay where I am, my hand around Lupin's wrist. The pulse is weakening, the time between each beat lengthening, but the hissing sound is growing urgent and draws out for what seems like forever before it finally ends and lips close on the last note.

I let the wrist drop and rise to my feet staring. My agitated mind is deceiving me, hearing words not there.

The creature lies still, but then it heaves another last breath, and then the sound is repeated longer now, with rolling syllable framed by hisses. And this time there is no mistaking it.

I stare at Lupin's body dying at my feet. I hear a soft laugh and realise it is coming from me.

"Nice try," I whisper to the wolf below. "But too late, I fear."

The creature gasps my name again. I want to wring its neck for this final abomination. All these weeks it has not uttered a single word, given the impression it was incapable of speech, and now now when it truly needs me, it dares to use my given name.

I bend and grab its jaw. Dull eyes stare blankly back at me. I scarcely know how much time has passed before I glance down and notice fingers caught in my robes.

I try to pull them free, the clenched hand twisted around black cloth. If I had known the creature would make this so difficult, I would have chosen a speedier method.

As I wrench the taut hand away, breath hitches, and I see recognition pass through vacant eyes. The wolf, finally recognising what I have done.

But...

I grip the jaw harder and stare into glassy amber. The fire is hot on my back, and I feel an overwhelming thirst again. I squeeze until my nails leave deep marks in damp skin and stare hard into the empty gaze.

And then I see it, that same instant of recognition. But it is not the creature's recognition of its killer, of the trust destroyed. It is not the wolf. It is a gaze I know from the memories that have returned to me these past weeks.

"Lupin."

There is no reaction.

I hesitate. Could this be reversed now? And even if it could, would I succeed only in bringing back the wolf alone?

Lupin's gaze is retreating further, his hand slackening in mine. I curse myself for hesitating too long.



"Stay with me," I urge before rising, hoping it is Lupin that hears me.

In the kitchen, I sweep aside old bottles in cupboards until I have the vial.

There is a strained breath as I hold Lupin's jaw. There is no sign of the wolf in his eyes. The liquid goes down as I tip his head back. This is the only thing close to an antidote. When there is no more left to give, I try a healing charm for good measure.

The deeper recognition seems to be reawakening in Lupin's eyes as I intone the charm.

I slow only when Lupin's breathing becomes easier. He is still weak, but now his eyes are closing to an easy sleep, the glazed, fixed look disappearing.

The pulse is stronger as I let his wrist go and use a levitation charm to move him to my room.

I watch his stomach rise and fall as he lies asleep on my bed. I hope that when he opens his eyes, it will be Lupin that looks back at me.

~~~

His recovery is long, as I feared it would be. But at least he is recovering.

The first time he speaks, his voice is hoarse from lack of use. "I remember," he says quietly.

I am not sure whether he is speaking to me or still in a delirium.

"Chocolate," he whispers.

"Do you want some chocolate?" I ask.

He moves his head and looks at me then as though for the first time. The moment stretches as he gazes absently towards me, and I ask him again.

His face is pale, his lips cracked as he opens them with some effort. "Metal," he breathes.

Now I know he must be delirious. He cannot be remembering eating the chocolate and the silver in it. Perhaps it is the aftertaste he remembers.

But then he takes another breath and speaks again. "Meat ... bitter," he says. Though his words are too quiet to know whether I am meant to reply, he turns his eyes on me questioning. "Wolfsbane."

I look into his gaze and nod.

He breathes heavily then closes his eyes and turns his head to the wall.

~~~

He is dressed and sitting on the edge of the bed when I bring him the morning's potion.

"What are you doing? You are still not well enough to be out of bed."

He does not look up. His voice is still weak when he speaks. "I have to see my family." It is the most I have heard him say yet.

He is holding onto the bed, and I can see that he is gathering his strength. I set the potion on the table and address him. "In a few days, we shall be sure that all the silver is gone from your system. You are still weak." I approach to take his wrist as I have so often done the past week to check his pulse.

The responding movement is slight, but it makes me stop my hand on seeing him move his arm away from me.

I almost forgot that he must still think me a Death Eater.

When I return in the afternoon, he is gone.

~~~

It would be wrong of me to imagine that I knew, even on some unconscious level, that all that I had planned and put into action would end the way it did. I truly believed Remus Lupin to be long gone.

And even if I had wanted to, what hope had I of raising the dead?

Perhaps the wolf is now truly gone forever and Lupin has taken its place finally and permanently.

I do not know, and it matters little now. The wolf is no longer here, and I cling to this fact, though doing so makes me feel the absence more strongly.

~~~

The forest is encroaching into my garden again.

I glare at the bracken pushing up, threatening to unfold its ferns among the leaves of my struggling vegetables. Perhaps it is not worth trying to win a losing battle.

I bend to grasp one of the intruders. I need to find something more constructive to occupy my mind. Perhaps I should leave this place. I have been here several months after all. I think it may be more than time to move on to somewhere new. Yes, perhaps even abroad.

The fern comes up rootless, leaving me cursing, and it's then that I notice the movement in the trees beyond.

He is hurrying towards the house, and his haste makes me pause and reach for my wand just as I should have done without delay that first night.

But as he comes closer and notices me, he stops. For a long moment, he says nothing, and I still wonder whether it is him or the wolf again.

Then he takes a breath.

"I thought you might be gone."

He seems much recovered since last I saw him. I relax my wand arm. "As you can see."

He sees me glance behind him. "I'm alone."

Lupin stands there unspeaking again, just watching me, like the wolf did while it ate at my table, and I wonder what in Merlin's name he wants.

"May I come in?"

~~~

I almost forget to make enough tea for two. Although I brought him sufficient water while he was recovering, I am not used to letting him handle delicate crockery.

It is strange to see him sitting in the chair where only a month before he had lain curled at its foot.

Stranger still is listening to him talk over a civilised cup and saucer of how he had escaped from his grave on the full moon. Suffice to say, it does not sound very pleasant.

He looks up. "How did you ...?"

"Timed Draught of Living Death."

"And ... a Portkey? No, too much open to chance. Disapparition? Tricky."

"I practised beforehand. I knew that year was the Dark Lord's last."

"Still. Risky."

"If that had not worked, I would have simply blasted my way out. Messy, but it would have worked."

He studies me. "Was it really worth it?"

"To escape Potter's world? What do you think?"

I barely listen as he tells me how it is not like that. "Harry is a good man," he says, "but he'll never be more than an Auror."

Yet in the silence that follows, it is apparent we both know what I really mean. I saw the stories bandied around in *the Prophet* almost straight away. Of course, I had not expected for a second that Potter would have understood the value of all that I had entrusted to him.

Lupin shifts forward and places his cup on the coffee table. "You know what Dora's mother said to me?" he says, unskilfully changing the subject. "She said she'd spent so much on getting the best plots and headstones and organising the best service that all she could afford for me was the cheapest coffin she could find. She said she didn't think it mattered six feet under the ground." He laughs softly into his lap. "Lucky for me, that, wasn't it?"

I gaze down at my untouched tea.

"Poor woman - she lost so much to the war. But it made me think," he says, looking up. "Outward appearances and all. So I've decided I'm not going to let Teddy grow up thinking his father's a second-class citizen just because he's a werewolf. Now that the war's over, maybe now's the right time for us to start standing up for who we are. Merlin knows it's not just the werewolves."

He has a determined look that is so strangely out of place on him that I can't force myself to look away.

"Come back with me."

His words take me by surprise. I quickly set my tea on the table. "I've already told you. I have no desire to return to Potter's world."

"Well, I don't care any more about what people think of me. It's their problem. It always was."

He pauses, seems to think of something. "You know, I think there's an Order of Merlin First Class waiting there for you."

About bloody time too, though not even that could entice me back. I must have missed its announcement when I'd decided I'd read enough stories about me, that first month. "Better late than never, I suppose." I try to keep my expression neutral, but I catch Lupin's small smile.

I glance toward him, his earlier comment bothering me. "So ... you're still ...?"

He looks at me for a moment. "A werewolf?" He nods. "Yes." He smiles briefly. "It came back the last full moon. It's what I am, Severus."

I look away quickly. It's the first time I've heard him use my name since that night.

"Do you ...? You said you remembered."

I hear him take a breath. "I remember flashes as if ..."

I glance back at him and see that his eyes are closed tight as though against the thought. "But if the wolf could taste it ..."

Lupin looks down into his lap, and the fleeting thought passes through my mind - was it possible that he knew all along what I was doing?

"Since the battle," he says, his voice distant, "everything's so vague and unreachable. Just like a dream."

A moment passes, then he raises his head, and he's searching my face with a look of urgency. "Did I hurt you?"

I think he is looking for signs of the wolf, though his gaze comes to a stop on mine.

I eventually find my voice. "No."

He holds my gaze a moment longer, and then he gives me an answering smile.

I don't believe he is the same person I once knew. Perhaps death has changed him.

He takes a deep breath. "I should go. Andromeda will be wondering where I am." He stands to leave.

As I rise, he pauses. "If I come back, will you still be here?"

He is watching me again with that intense, searching look that still reminds me of the wolf. "I've been thinking of moving abroad for a long while now," I tell him.

"That's what I thought." He makes no move to the door. "Severus - do you trust me?"

"With what?"

"Trust me. Just for a moment. Or just for a second if you prefer."

I look into his gaze, but I see no shadow of the wolf. "What are you babbling about?"

"Close your eyes."

With a frown, I let my eyelids fall.

Why it surprises me, when I think I must have known what he was going to do, I'm not sure, but still it sends a jolt through *methat same jolt I felt the first time I touched him by the fire* when his mouth touches my thinned lips. When, after a moment, he pulls away, I'm sure I can taste him still.

I open my eyes and see him looking at me. There is no trace of the wolf in his bold smile. Lupin seems more alive than I have ever seen him before. "I'm glad I found you," he says quietly. Though I know he's talking of the wolf, all the rediscovered moments I remember of him seem to converge on this instant, as though this is where the thread was leading to all along.

"Please think about what I said. I hope you'll be here. If not I promise no one will know."

I search his gaze. Does he remember the promise I once made to him and kept and failed to keep this time?

"I should go," he says, beginning to turn.

"It's barely past noon." The words are out before I can check them, and I know there is little use leaving it there. "Stay ... for lunch."

His strange smile is back. "Miss feeding me?"

"No, I..." Now I do manage to stop myself, though what I was going to say I do not know. I can feel my face burning. How has he reduced me to this?

But his gaze is thoughtful. "Are you sure?" he asks me quietly.

I say nothing, mesmerised by the intensity of his look, the life behind it. I contemplate asking him what he had been going to say to me at Grimmauld Place. It was probably nothing. Something trivial about the werewolves. And then I think: does it even matter now?

I think I have forgotten his question.

He draws toward me slowly, and this time I'm ready. I taste more of him now, a delicate sweetness that I'm sure must be chocolate, though there is something else, indefinable, that makes me wonder whether it is concealing something more, something that is already seeping into my system. Perhaps a poison. Or its opposite?

Somehow my hand has become caught in his robes. He does not pull it away, but presses closer.

Perhaps it is possible after all to return from the dead. Could it be that learning how to live among the living is the long game I truly crave?

When he releases me and I close my mouth, I know the answer to his question.

And I tell him.