

Nymphadora At Dusk

by Jenwryn

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Chapter 1 of 1

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Remus Lupin stood hidden in the swaying shadows of a low, densely leafed tree, the hands of falling dusk playing ruthlessly upon the deep lines marked on his face. His eyes were dark and heavily circled and intent upon watching the woman seated on an old wooden bench at the other end of her mother's garden.

Damnation, but she was young.

Days and weeks could go by where he would completely forget the age difference between himself and his wife and then, bam!, suddenly it would rise up and smack him square in the face, making him squint at the impact. Which was what was happening in that moment, standing there with exhaustion suffocating him in moth-eaten blankets and making him feel like an old, old man. And the older he felt, the younger she seemed.

What would James have done?

Huh, James might never have married her in the first place. James Potter, despite what his son might think, hadn't really been the marrying type at heart. It had taken the sheer wilful force of nature that was Lily Evans to capture him without him even realising what had happened but then, they'd all been a little in love with Lily at some stage or other. As for Nymphadora, Remus suspected she'd have come to him even without a ceremony. Yes, she'd wanted to marry him, but deep down she didn't really cling that desperately to tradition or convention. No, in the end, after all the inner struggles, it had been him who had wanted to marry her; wanted to seize this incredible creature as his own despite his better judgement. He knew that everyone had presumed it had been the other way around, but he'd been too dazed by his own good fortune to give a fig about what anyone else thought.

Remus had never dreamt that the day would come when he would marry, when a woman would claim him as hers and hers alone.

But then, he'd never dreamt that he'd become a father either, and look where he found himself now.

Harry's words still echoed through the hidden corners of Remus' mind, despite the fact that it was a good week since he'd been in Grimmauld Place. Remus had left that house in such a blind rage that he hadn't even known where he was going. He'd spent the next couple of days getting systematically and thoroughly drunk in an effort to wipe out the guilt and the anger and the fear and the horrible conviction he'd felt at Harry's words. And the drunkenness had indeed been effective until even the scungiest pub in the darker side-streets of Diagon Alley had refused his patronage. At which point, he'd been forced to spend a day and a half re-entering the world of aching, mind-numbingly painful sobriety and it had all rushed back just as horrible as it had been before.

Since then, he'd just existed.

Existed and travelled. Existed and travelled, and spent long hours uselessly wishing that Sirius were still alive. Sirius, more than James, more than anyone else, would have understood the terror beating its fists against Remus' ribcage. Even now, it slammed against him as he stood in the shadows and watched her. Watched her mousy hair hang so mournfully; watched her body sitting so unusually still; watched her with the knowledge that she carried his growing child in her womb.

Damn it, but he'd been so determined not to come back. Just leave her; that was what he'd told himself. Just vanish, just go, just let her be with her life and her kin, and they'd all be better off without him there. It had been a fatal mistake to marry her in the first place – a beautiful mistake, but a mistake nevertheless. Harry had been right. He wasn't worthy of her and her love; he wasn't even worthy of the ground she walked upon. She was too young – too lovely – too hopeful – too happy – too marvellously alive. To have shackled her to him and his sins, to him and his disease, was an unforgivable sin. And then, to have let it come to this...

No, Remus had been determined to leave, even with Harry's accusations ringing in his ears.

He'd been on a Muggle train, cloak wrapped around him as he sat hunched in a corner seat, head rattling lightly against the cold glass of a window as the machine rushed him effortlessly towards Glasgow, when it had occurred to him that if his worst fear did come to pass – if the child was indeed a carrier of his curse – then that changed matters. He was already a bad husband, a bad father, and a bad man to have put an innocent child at that risk. But if it was born with his affliction, then he'd be an even bigger monster if he wasn't there to help it grow up. The whole world would already be against it, he knew that well enough from his own experience, and who was he to add the little thing's father to that list?

So he'd come back, against his better judgement. Come back, despite the fear throbbing in his heart. Come back and stood in the shadows of the garden and watched her. Nymphadora at dusk was a thing of extraordinary beauty in his eyes. Remus drank in the sight of her and wondered how he could ever have imagined the rest of his life without her at his side, and the thought made his mind spin even more confusingly. He rubbed his fingertips against the rough stubble on his face and could feel his hand shaking slightly. He reached into his worn coat and pulled out a small flask, uncorked it, and tipped the potion down his throat with a sharp grimace. Out on the horizon, beyond the fields that stretched away on the other side of the small garden's hedge, there was a pale moon rising; almost full and almost round.

It would be a long hard night, but he'd survive.

He was placing the flask back into its inside pocket when he realised that the woman had turned her head and was watching him with all the colour drained from her face.

Remus stood there, frozen, hand stopped at his coat, and simply looked at her looking at him.

The woman stood up very, very slowly, brushed a leaf from her clothes, and took a few faulty steps towards him, her hair changing through a rush of colours that he couldn't even begin to interpret. "Remus..." she said in a voice so low that he could barely hear it across the distance between them, but he could read his name on her lips and in her eyes. Something broke inside him, and he let his hands drop to his sides, helpless beneath her gaze, and walked hopelessly, painfully towards her.

She took a few steps of her own in his direction and then came to a halt just out of his reach. "Remus..." she said again, and he could see that she had been crying, and he hated himself for the hurt and tears etched on her face. What kind of man was he to make a woman as strong as her weep at his absence?

She rubbed her eyes roughly and attempted to pull an angry expression onto her face. "What were you thinking, going off like that? Where have you been?"

He gazed out across the fields towards the moon, because as much as the moon disturbed him, the sight of her was worse. Her presence, the sound of her voice, filled him with such an aching love that, under the circumstances, made his soul sting.

Somewhere, an owl hooted, heralding the end of twilight and the coming of nightfall.

"I went to see Harry," Remus answered in a quiet voice. Nymphadora didn't speak, and at her silence, he couldn't help himself; he had to turn back to her, he had to see the emotions in her eyes.

She was looking at him with that way she had about her, reading his face in a manner that told him all too clearly that she knew exactly what he'd gone to do. Then she breathed in deeply, tilted her head a little to one side, and asked, so that he knew she'd put all the pieces of the puzzle together without so much as a word of explanation on his behalf, "But you've come back now?"

Remus rubbed his hand across his face again. The garden around him made whispery noises as grass brushed against grass, and out in the fields, night insects started to murmur sweet nothings that only they understood.

His wife seemed to gather strength from the sight of his vulnerability, and she stepped across the space between them, the moon's light sending her face silver. "Remus," she said a third time and put her hand out flat against his coat. "You have to talk to me. You have to – communicate. You can't bottle it up all inside you. I can't make us work if you won't let me."

He could feel her hand against him as if there weren't layers of clothes between her and his skin, and he let her eyes sink into his. There were days when she seemed so young, but then there were also moments when he suspected that somewhere deep inside, inside where it really mattered, she was already eons older than he would ever be. As though she bore in her bones some kind of woman's ancestral memory that made her understand the world in a way he never would.

"Nymphadora..."

Her name, the name she had always hated so much, was like a lament on his lips, and she flinched a little as it cut through her – but then she pressed her hand harder against him, looked up at him with those clear, relentless eyes of hers and said firmly, "I know what's bothering you, Remus. I know you think you should never have gotten me pregnant. I know you're..." She bit her lip, then shook her hair gently in the evening light and continued, "I know you're scared our baby will be a werewolf. But... but you don't seriously think I hadn't considered that possibility, even before I married you? You don't think I'm not aware of what it would mean? I'm your wife, Remus. I have a fair idea." Her voice had risen as she spoke, brooking no argument, but then she paused, her other hand reaching up against him, her fingers picking absently at the buttons on his coat. Her tone, when she continued, was as soft as the breeze on his skin. "I want your baby, Remus. I'm not a child myself, you know. If I hadn't wanted to fall pregnant, I would have made sure I didn't. And – and maybe people will say that this is no time to be bringing a child into the world, that it isn't safe, but I don't reckon the world will ever be safe enough, Dark Lord or no Dark Lord, and they can call me irresponsible, and I won't care. I want this child with every inch of me. But I want it with you, Remus. Not on my own."

He sighed. Then reached out his hand and touched her hair gently. "You make it damn hard for a man to leave you, woman."

Her fingers clenched against the buttons with a kind of reflex panic, but then she managed a half-hearted roll of her eyes and whispered, "You couldn't leave me even if you wanted to, Remus. You'd come back in the end, and you know it."

A small laugh slipped from him. His fingers tangled themselves into her hair, stroked through it, and then moved down onto the soft curve of her warm neck. "You're a stubborn witch, you know that, don't you?"

"I have to be when you're involved, don't I?"

He smiled down at her, the terror still there banging loudly in his heart, but overridden by the knowledge that he was impossibly and irreversibly in love with this woman and her courage.

His wife moved closer, wrapped her arms around him, rested her head on his chest and then said, her voice half muffled by the heavy material of his old coat, "I love you, Remus Lupin, and I don't ever want to have to face the world without you at my side."

He put his arms around her and pulled her even closer, his face against her bright hair, and breathing in the familiar scent of her. "I love you too. And you won't have to face it alone. I'm not going anywhere. Not anymore. It'll be the two of us together, forever, I promise."

The night closed in around them, and the grass whispered secrets of a future they couldn't see.

And he held her.