

Two Secrets and a Wedding

by Ellid

“Sideboard — keep. Sofa — dustbin. Bed — Oxfam.”

The quill obediently wrote down every word as Severus slowly circled the ground floor. It was much easier to decide what to keep and what not than he'd thought it would be. His parents had not been wealthy, and most of their furniture and possessions had only sentimental value, if that. The estate agent would doubtless be pleased.

“Kitchen furniture — Oxfam. Pantry contents — dustbin. Dishes — Oxfam.”

Remus hadn't so much as raised an eyebrow when Severus informed him that he intended to sell Spinner's End. The house had stood vacant since Severus had been pardoned five years ago, and it wasn't as if they had the extra money to pay taxes on a decaying example of company housing for the deserving and thrifty poor. They lived outside of Hogsmeade now, with a yard and an outbuilding Severus used for his potions by mail business. It was time.

Besides, he needed the money if he was going to take six months off this winter.

“Linens — secondhand shop. Pots and pans — Oxfam.”

The itch below his navel was back, worse than ever. Severus made a face, sucked in his stomach, and reached inside his trousers to scratch.

“Note to self — moisturizer at apothecary's.” He paused. “Tell Remus it's because of winter eczema.”

He sighed, stopped scratching, and rubbed his stomach until the itch had eased. “Winter eczema” was as good an excuse as any, at least until early March. He had no intention of ruining Remus's birthday surprise by showing any physical weakness, at least until he had to.

His trousers seemed tighter as he pulled his hand out, and he was tempted to unzip his flies for a few minutes of blessed relief. Only the knowledge that he'd have to lie down to get them to zip again held him back. “Two more weeks,” he murmured. “Can't you wait that long?”

Of course there was no answer, nor had he expected one. Poppy had told him that babies grew at their own

rate, not at their — *gestational parent's* — convenience. “Tell him now, before you start showing,” she'd said. “You still have a male pelvis, which means you'll carry high. Besides, he needs know.”

“If I tell him now, it won't be a birthday present,” he'd said, with what he'd thought was impeccable logic. Poppy had rolled her eyes, given him a prescription for a vitamin potion, and told him to come back in a month. He'd thought her insistence that he'd show early tedious, and said so as he exited.

Now it looked as though the tedious old besom was right.

He hadn't originally planned to get pregnant. The article in *Advanced Medical Potions* on a male pregnancy potion had been a curiosity, nothing more. Then Potter and Lovegood had shown up at the Bonfire Day celebrations with the news that they were expecting their first, not a month after Granger and Longbottom had announced that *they* anticipated a blessed event. Before Severus could so much as make a cutting remark about disastrous results of Potter's recklessness bred to Lovegood's vagueness, Remus had gone pale and excused himself. Severus had found him at home, staring at a picture of Nymphadora and slamming back drink after drink. She had been the only woman he'd ever been involved with, and it was clear that her death had meant the end of more than a relationship to Remus.

Severus had cleaned Remus up and put him to bed, and then spent most of the night considering his options. Remus loved children and was clearly miserable at the thought of everyone else having a family while he didn't, and a miserable Remus was not acceptable. That meant a family, but how?

Adoption or fostering were out unless the Ministry relaxed its laws on ex-criminals and werewolves being suitable non-genetic parents. Surrogacy was prohibitively expensive, even if they could find a woman willing to be impregnated by one of them. Homunculi didn't live a normal lifespan and were usually deformed, and waiting for a Wizarding child to be rejected by Muggle parents might take decades.

That left one option, and though it would be uncomfortable and frequently painful, it was only nine months out of his life. That Potter might well have an aneurysm at

the thought of Severus carrying a baby for Remus made it all the better.

Severus had checked the recipe, ordered the rarer ingredients, and started brewing.

The potion had been a relatively simple variation on *Hermaphrodite Boreas*, and Remus hadn't suspected a thing when Severus turned into an aggressive bottom in November. He'd conceived early in December, based on the queasiness that started around Boxing Day, and Poppy had confirmed the pregnancy shortly after New Year's. She'd been shocked, and doubtless she wouldn't be the last, but Remus would have the family he longed for by September.

He rubbed his stomach again, smiling slightly at the evidence of his condition. He'd first noticed his waist getting thicker a few weeks earlier when his drawers had felt snug, and he was now getting by with expansion charms that grew as he did. His hair was thicker and less oily, and his face had begun to fill out as he put on weight. By some miracle Remus hadn't noticed the nascent bulge, or how firm his belly was getting now that he was in the second trimester. Unless Remus directly asked, he wasn't going to tell until March 10th, preferably after he'd given Remus the shagging of his life.

"Note to self, warded: speak to Pomfrey re: clothing at next antenatal visit."

This would be the best birthday present Severus could give, and he was determined to stay in his regular clothes until then. It would also take at least that long to find a maternity shop that offered anything suitably tasteful instead of the shapeless, pastel horrors he'd seen in Diagon Alley.

The itch had faded to a dull annoyance when the doorbell rang. Severus frowned. Spinner's End was still warded against intruders, so it was likely a Muggle collecting for charity or asking if he'd seen a missing cat. His old paranoia flared regardless — there were still people who wanted to avenge Albus's death ten years later, not to mention disposing of the few remaining Death Eaters, and he loosened his wand in its sheath before putting his eye to the peephole.

The skinny old man on the stoop seemed harmless enough: shaggy white hair, thick white beard, rounded shoulders. Something about him was vaguely familiar — was he one of the regulars at the Spinning Jenny? A retired plant worker?

Severus shifted his wand to his left hand and opened the door a few inches. "Yes?"

"Good day to you. I'm looking for the family that used to live here, the Snapes." A shadow passed over the hawk-

like face. "I know Mrs. Snape died a while back, but the son —"

An old neighbor, then. Severus relaxed a bit and opened the door. "I'm the son. What do you want?"

"You're — Sevy?" Before Severus could react the man had flung his arms about him in a crushing embrace. "I'm so glad I've found you! I've been asking for months, but no one knew where you'd gone —"

Sevy??? Severus managed to pull back before whoever this was choked him. "Sir! This display —"

"Oh lad. I'm sorry, don't know what come over me." The man stepped inside and shut the door. He frowned at the barren hall. "You really are moving, then? Can't say I'm surprised, the place was never the same after Lenie died. Poor woman, she deserved better."

"Lenie" had been his mother's nickname. Only her family and her Wizarding friends had called her that — what was going on? "Who are you? And what do you want?"

"Sorry, I was forgetting myself." The man grasped him by the shoulders and looked him up and down. "You look well, lad. Healthy for once, and it's good to see you've put some meat on your bones. I know the Princes were always lean, but I used to tell Lenie they weren't feeding you right at that school —"

It was like being doused with a bucket of ice water on a steamy summer day. Severus forced himself not to stare. "Dad? Is that you?"

"Aye, son." The eyes, the stoop, dear God the *nose* — how had he not recognized him? "I'm sorry I didn't write — you still don't use a telephone, do you? I tried writing to your school but the Headmistress said you didn't work there anymore. I came back here because Mrs. Harrison down the street said she'd seen you about lately, and I had to talk to you."

"Your *father*? And you didn't turn him into a potted plant?" Remus poured a steaming cup of tea and added sugar and milk. "That must have been a shock."

"I wanted to. Believe me, it was a near thing." Severus started to lean forward and sat back when the waistband of his trousers cut off his breath. He gulped half the tea at once so Remus wouldn't notice. "Then he started apologizing, and I was so shocked I couldn't."

"Apologizing? Good heavens." Remus reached across the table and began rubbing his hand in that way that always calmed him down. "How many years has it been? Thirty?"

Severus nodded. "Almost. He disappeared right after Mum's funeral. My grandmother told me that it was a guilty conscience since he wasn't there the night she died." He frowned into his mug. "He was drunk all the

time, and when he didn't come back we all assumed he'd died. I never thought he was alive, let alone that he'd sobered up and had spent most of the last few years looking for me."

Remus thumbed through the pamphlets Severus had brought home. "It looks like he's found a sobriety program. That must be why he wants to apologize. It's part of the process sometimes."

"Lovely. Just I need." Severus closed his eyes. His father had been a mean, nasty drunk, especially when he was out of work. Why would he think his son would welcome him back into his life? "That must be why he gave me this."

He drew a stiff white envelope out of his cloak and tossed it across the table. Remus opened it, read, and frowned. "A wedding invitation?"

"He found someone 'in the first year of his sobriety.' Evidently she helped him dry out and he's decided to marry her." There was a sudden wrench in his gut at the thought of someone, anyone, taking his mother's place. "Poor woman, she'll learn."

Remus turned the envelope over and read the address. "I assume I'm 'and friend?'"

Severus sat up and snapped his fingers at the pantry. It was definitely time for chocolate biscuits. "Oh, yes. He apologized for that, too. Said he hadn't known about the civil partnership or he'd have included you on the invitation."

"So he's not a homophobe at least. That's a point in his favor," murmured Remus. "Enid Elliot — where have I heard that name before? It sounds familiar."

"That movie about the ballet dancer?" The biscuit tin opened and positioned itself between them. Severus selected the most heavily coated digestive and took a bite.

"Maybe. It's a common enough name, I suppose." Remus tapped his fingers against the table. "Well. If we're going, we'll need Muggle clothes. I'll have to dust off that tweed blazer, I suppose."

"Muggle — I never said we were going!" Severus coughed as half the biscuit went down the wrong way. He swallowed the rest of his tea before he choked. "Are you mad?"

The teapot poured him a fresh cup. Remus waited for him to stop coughing. "I think we should, actually. It's what, two hours including the reception? If it's unbearable we can apparate home easily enough."

Severus shook his head. "It's the day before your birthday. I thought we were going out of town to celebrate!" He'd made the reservations at a cozy small hotel right after

Poppy had given him the good news. Spending most of Saturday in a grotty little reception hall with his father and his new wife was about as romantic as cleaning the chimney.

"Severus." Remus would not let him look away. "He's trying. You should at least meet him halfway. We'll still have Saturday night and all of Sunday to celebrate."

He never had been able to resist Remus when he was sensible and calm. Severus made a face anyway. "All right. But I reserve the right to say 'I told you so' if it's a complete cock-up."

"That's the spirit!" Remus came around the table and kissed him on the top of the head. "If nothing else, we'll have a good laugh out of it. Did I ever tell you about the wedding I attended where the flower girl leaned over and showed everyone her knickers?"

"I missed that one," murmured Severus. He tilted his head back for another kiss. Remus tasted of tea and biscuits. "How charming."

"It gets worse. The reception was outdoors, and halfway through a swarm of bees attacked the cake. I thought the bride was going to have a fit." Remus chuckled. "And of course no one knew a spell for getting rid of bees so we had to do without."

"I can imagine." Severus reluctantly let Remus stand up and start clearing the tea dishes. They'd have to start dinner soon, and then he'd had to check the "Will attend" box on the reply cards his future stepmother — stepmother! — had included in the invitation and walk it down to the Muggle post box. The exercise would do him good, and he could pick up a copy of the paper while he was at it. The local menswear shop was allegedly having a sale, and the sooner he started looking for a suit, the better.

It wasn't as if he'd been able to squeeze into his old Mod suit for the last twenty years, let alone now.

Severus hadn't been in St. John the Baptist since a Muggle cousin's wedding the year before Potter arrived at Hogwarts. That had been a monstrously expensive affair, with the bride in a two meter train, a boys' choir singing anthems, and a thurifer censing the aisle with smoke before the wedding party appeared. The coughing from the pews hadn't ended until the recessional, and even the priest had looked a bit green.

Toby and his intended had chosen one of the side chapels; it was a second marriage with a middle aged bride, so a full dress ceremony would have been even more tasteless than the usual brawl. The Lady Chapel was a far better choice, even with shockingly modern altar frontal showing an abstract Virgin holding a Child that looked rather like a raisin.

"This is a lovely building. Did your family attend?" Remus had paused by the elaborate baptismal font in the nave. *That* at least hadn't changed.

"Sometimes. I was christened here. I think my father had bet on the winner at the Grand National so he could afford the reception." Severus joined him by the font. They didn't live anywhere near Halifax, but he couldn't help wondering what it would be like to have their child baptized here. "It's original 15th century work, you know."

"It's beautiful," said Remus. He gave Severus a sidelong look. "Makes me wish we could wear robes. It would match the church at least."

One of the guests, a skinny woman who reeked of cigarettes, tottered by on painfully high spiked heels. Severus made a face at the smoky reek. "We'd have to pretend we were in a play. Not worth the trouble."

"I suppose." Remus gave the font a final once-over and let Severus guide him toward the chapel. "At least you found a decent suit."

"I'm glad you think so." The tailor had suggested that a suit in a larger size would be more economical than an elasticized waistband. Severus had tipped him double, muttered something about a glandular condition that would eventually correct itself, and held his ground. It was just as well, too. His waist had thickened abruptly over the past few days, and even with the elastic the trousers were a bit tight. "It was the least objectionable choice."

"Charcoal gray suits you." Remus let a hand linger on his arm as a plump, sweating usher escorted them to the first pew on the groom's side. A woman Severus thought might have been a distant cousin scooted over to make room. "You look good."

Severus nodded. One or two of the guests were clearly relatives, including a great-aunt who had always treated his mother abominably. The rest seemed to be friends, or possibly members of Toby's sobriety group. A large proportion seemed to be smokers, and he swallowed bile as a too-thin woman drenched in perfume plopped down directly behind him.

Mercifully, someone opened a door and he took a gulp of fresh air. Remus frowned. "Are you all right? It's a bit close in here —"

"I'm fine. Too much musk in that perfume." Severus glanced about, then cast a cleansing charm on the air. "What time is it? It should have started by now."

"Not quite half past two — oh. Here's the vicar, and that must be your father?"

"Thank God." Toby, looking more stuffed than Severus felt, took his place beside the mosaic altar. The priest adjusted her glasses and nodded to the side, and the great organ in the nave began the first chords of Clarke's *Trumpet Voluntary*.

The ceremony was surprisingly simple, and surprisingly dignified. Enid, who turned out to be a stately, perfectly coiffed matron, wore a champagne colored suit and a small veiled hat, and was escorted by her adult son. Toby, blushing violently, took her hands and vowed to "continue in my sobriety" in addition to the usual "love honor and cherish" nonsense, and Enid wept a little before promising the same. The vicar smiled, a soloist with a noticeable tremolo sang, and almost before it had sunk in that Enid was his stepmother and her son was his stepbrother (*stepbrother!*), Severus was watching the newlyweds recess to a thundering version of the *Wedding March* from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

The congregation rose as the music faded away with a faint *blat* from a elderly *vox humana* stop. Remus stepped into the aisle and let their pewmate slide past. "Where's the reception?"

"The social hall is this way." Severus felt another twinge of nausea as he got a whiff of his second cousin George's aftershave. "Pray that they used an outside caterer. Some of the WI can cook, but I wouldn't trust anything with dairy in it."

"Noted." Remus paused in the doorway. "This part looks modern. Too bad they couldn't have adapted an old undercroft. Those are much more attractive."

"Only a were — only you could possibly derive pleasure from a wedding reception surrounded by monkish tombs." Severus led him to the rear of the receiving line. He still wondered what he was doing here, and why Remus had insisted on attending.

A few of the guests stared at him, and one or two scowled as they realized that Toby's Boy had turned out a poof the way they'd always predicted. Severus straightened his back and returned each sneer with interest. They hadn't given a damn when Toby drank up his pay packet and screamed at his wife and son, so why should he pay any mind to them now?

"What should I call them?" murmured Remus. They were almost to Toby and Enid, and Enid's children from her first marriage. Completely average Muggles, every one, and Severus had to grit his teeth at the blindingly pink dress the daughter had worn as her mother's bridesmaid.

"I've no idea. I used to call him 'Dad,' but now he wants me to call him 'Toby,' God knows why."

"I should probably let him decide." Remus shook hands with the girl in pink and introduced them both. The girl grinned through shimmering lip gloss and threw her arms about them both, babbling about how Toby had told them about his son, and how happy she was to meet them both at last, and did they know any cute single men because she hadn't found *anyone* in Halifax who had a brain? Severus was tempted to say that Percy Weasley was considered good looking in some quarters and was planning to move north as soon as he finished his parole, but decided against it. Even Percy deserved better than this.

"Severus? I'm so glad you came, son." Tobias Snape, looking like an emaciated Father Christmas, gave him an awkward hug. "And you must be —"

"Remus Lupin. Pleased to meet you, sir." Remus held out his hand. "Thank you for inviting me."

"Nonsense. Of course we wanted you here." Enid handed her bouquet to her son and stretched up on her toes to kiss Remus lightly on the cheek. "You're family now."

She turned to Severus and kissed him as well, a gentle peck that felt surprisingly good. "I've wanted to meet you for years. It wouldn't have felt right if you'd stayed away."

"Madam," said Severus. He hadn't known what to expect — a hardened pub crawler? A religious fanatic with pamphlets railing against the evils of drink and gay marriage? A scrawny young thing who'd married his father out of a daddy fixation? Up close she looked almost familiar, handsome and clear eyed, with the straight back and calm, intelligent expression of a woman who wasn't easily fazed.

To his horror, he felt a slight prick of tears in his eyes. *She wasn't supposed to be kind. Or like Remus. Or welcome me.*

Damn hormones.

"Thank you for inviting us."

"Thank you for coming. Both of you." Enid smiled, then stepped back into line and retrieved her bouquet. Her gaze swept him up and down. "We must talk later — Toby's so proud of you, running your own business."

"Proud?" Severus was vaguely aware of Remus nodding his agreement.

"Aye, son. I was always worried about you after you went to school, and then your mum died —" Toby shook his head. His beard was neatly trimmed, probably for the wedding. "I was too drunk to do right by you then, but I mean to make it up to you now. You and your friend — partner both. It does me good to see you settled and happy."

Severus nodded, unable to think of a coherent reply. Remus let himself be hugged, then drew Severus aside as another well-wisher pumped Toby's arm while congratulating him on staying sober and finding such a fine figure of a woman.

"He's not so bad," said Remus under his breath. Severus shook his head.

"That's because he's sober. Once he gets a taste of champagne —"

"It's sparkling grape juice. Mum insisted because half the guests are former clients." Enid's son snagged a glass of pale yellow liquid from a tray. "Toby's one of her great success stories, actually. He's been sober for three years and counting. She never would have married him otherwise."

"Three years? Do tell." And why couldn't he have sobered up when his wife and son needed him? Severus barely noticed as Remus steered him toward the buffet. His stomach churned at the thought that *she* had managed what his mother never had.

The food was exactly what he had expected: sausage rolls, quiche, iced cakes of all sorts. Most of it seemed harmless, despite an Irish expatriate who had anticipated St. Patrick's Day with a green jelly shaped like a shamrock. There even was a plate of sliced vegetables and several varieties of seasoned hummus and dips that smelled —

That smelled —

Like yogurt that had started to turn.

Perfume. Smoke. Spicy food that had been out too long. Severus clamped his mouth against a sudden flood of bile, ground out something about it being too hot in this wretched place, and bolted for the gents.

The handicapped stall was big enough that he could kneel and vomit into the toilet without having his legs stick out into the rest of the bathroom. He groaned, leaned against the wall, and doubled over as another spasm emptied his stomach completely. So much for Poppy's cheery confidence that the nausea had ended after the second month.

Somehow he managed to flush before the smell made him sick again. He waited for his stomach to settle before pulling himself upright and lurching toward the sink. A spell restored his clothes and cleaned the sweat from his face, and another freshened his breath. He breathed deeply through his mouth until he was sure he wouldn't embarrass himself, splashed water on his face and straightened his tie, and opened the door.

"Here. You don't want to be sick again before the reception ends." Enid, calm as ever, held out a vial of Mother Carey's Best Morning Sickness Remedy. "I used it whenever I was pregnant."

Severus stared down at the vial. Poppy had recommended it to him at his first antenatal visit, and he kept a small, unmarked supply in the pocket of his working robes. How had a Muggle gotten her hands on it?

And how did a Muggle know that a man might need a potion certified as safe for pregnancy?

"You — Madam — I —"

"*Privatus.*" Enid waved her fingers in a familiar pattern. "I work for the Calderdale Royal substance abuse unit these days, but I started out at St. Mungo's."

Severus stared at her. Now that he knew, he could just make out the shadow of a wand sheath in the left sleeve of her jacket. "You're a witch."

"Quite true. Hufflepuff, if you must know." She uncorked the tiny bottle and wrapped his fingers about it. "Here, drink this before you're sick again. You should have taken some before the reception, you know."

Severus scowled but complied. The remaining nausea settled almost immediately, and he rubbed his stomach in relief. "I had no idea someone would bring cumin flavored dip." He paused. "How did you know?"

"That you were a wizard, or that you were pregnant?" Enid conjured a glass of cold water and held it to his lips until he drank. "You need to rehydrate after that — better, yes?"

"Yes. And as to how you knew —"

"I believe you know my sister Poppy?" His shock must have been obvious, based on how quickly she continued. "Yes, my maiden name is Pomfrey. I'm Poppy's youngest sister, the one who left the Wizarding World about the time You-Know-Who rose the second time. My first husband was a Muggle and our children aren't magical, so naturally I wanted to protect them."

"Naturally." The water washed the remaining taste of vomit from his mouth. Severus drained it and transfigured it into a handkerchief. "I assume you kept in touch with your sister?"

"As much as I could without endangering my children," said Enid. "I knew who you were the minute I looked up Toby's medical records and saw that his next of kin was a son named 'S. Snape.'"

"And of course you're back in contact with Poppy, and of course she let slip that her old colleague was up the duff. Perfectly understandable." Severus curled his lip at the thought.

Enid folded her arms across her chest and glared at him. The resemblance to Poppy was suddenly obvious. "Of course not. She doesn't want to lose her license."

"No, I knew the moment I saw you. You've been in the *Prophet* enough that I knew you shouldn't have *that*." She tapped his belly with a sturdy finger. "I doubt anyone else in there has an inkling of your condition, but when you left so suddenly I had a hunch it was morning sickness. How far along are you?"

There was a plain carved bench a few feet down the hallway. Severus gestured toward it and waited for Enid to settle herself and arrange her skirt before sinking onto the hard surface himself. "Almost four months." He hesitated. "Remus doesn't know yet. It's a surprise until his birthday tomorrow."

"Almost four months and you haven't told him? Goodness, you're cutting it a bit close." Enid folded her hands in her lap. "I'll break the news to your father if you like — yes, he knows I'm a witch. We met in the casual ward at St. Monica's when he decided to stop drinking —"

"He went to a Wizarding Hospital?"

"It was the only place where he could talk about your mother, and about you." She laid a hand on his arm. "He loved her very much, you know."

"Forgive me if I can't believe that." Severus did not bother to hide the bitterness. "If it's true, he had a peculiar way of demonstrating it."

Enid took his hands in both of hers. Her palms were surprisingly smooth. "He knows that, Severus. He blamed himself for years for not noticing how sick she was, and for treating her and you so badly. That's why he started drinking — he couldn't provide for his family when you were small, and the pain was too much. Then your mother died, and he couldn't face it, or you."

"He was half-dead when I met him again at Calderdale Royal, and I'm still surprised that he found the strength to pull himself back from the edge. He's been trying to find you for at least a year so he could make amends."

Severus could not face her, not when the prickle was back just under his lashes. "He'll change his mind when he finds out about my condition. I daresay a pregnant man can't be easily explained to his friends."

"You aren't giving him enough credit. All he can talk about is how happy he is that you didn't curse him on sight, and that you've found someone at last even if it's a man. He'll be thrilled to find out he'll be a grandfather." Enid laughed and patted him on the shoulder. "We'll tell my children that you're adopting. Roger's girlfriend is talking marriage and babies, and he'll welcome the chance to see what it's like with a niece or nephew."

"He may flee in horror after he babysits for the first time." Severus still had vivid memories of a newborn Draco Malfoy pissing on the vicar at Malfoy Major during the most expensive christening of the year.

Enid laughed and rose to her feet. "He may at that! He's a bit young for a family to my mind, but we'll see." She raised an eyebrow. "Would you escort me back into the hall, Severus? The dancing should start soon."

Severus tucked her hand through his elbow. "I'd be honored." He paused as she dropped the privacy spell and rearranged her hat. "Thank you."

"It's the least I can do," said Enid.

The rest of the reception was quite ordinary. A cake was cut, photos were taken, and the newlyweds danced their first dance. Severus' appetite had returned enough that he was able to finish a plate of finger foods and a slice of wedding cake, although he'd avoided the cumin dip. He'd talked with his new siblings, exchanged addresses with two cousins who had turned out much better than expected, and enjoyed a discreet dance with Remus once Uncle Algernon and his "great and good friend" Trevor led off a surprisingly vigorous jitterbug. It had been almost nine when Mr. and Mrs. Snape departed for a week in Paris.

Now he and Remus were safely checked into their luxury suite at the Albertus Arms, and Remus was taking his turn in the shower. Severus had gone first, and it had been a foretaste of heaven to strip off his clothes and wash away the last traces of smoke and grime and sweat under a steaming waterfall shower.

The quiet flicker of flames from the fireball was the only sound in the room. Severus glanced over his shoulder to make sure that Remus was still in the shower, unknotted the sash of the hotel's complimentary terry cloth dressing gown, and let the garment fall open.

The itch on his stomach had come back right after the happy couple had left in a shower of confetti and good wishes, and it had been agony to wait this long before moisturizing his lower abdomen. He'd made his own stretch mark salve, of course, with plenty of cocoa butter and healing ointments, and now he summoned it from his luggage and scooped out a generous dollop. He wasn't normally vain, but the pictures in Poppy's maternity magazines had convinced him that being permanently marked was not a desirable souvenir of pregnancy, especially since he'd end up with a caesarian scar regardless.

The cream was smooth, white, and smelled faintly of chocolate from the cocoa butter. Severus could not help sighing in relief as the uncomfortable tightness across

his lower abdomen eased a bit. Soon his condition would be obvious, and then no one, not even Potter or Weasley, could believe that Remus was no more than a passing fancy.

"Here. Let me help." Before he could react Remus had come up behind him, plucked the tub of salve from his hand, and started gently rubbing it onto the itchiest spot. "You're getting nice and round. When are you due?"

"Early September, and — " Severus froze. Remus chuckled, the low, throaty sound that meant he was pleased, and then he was kneeling in front of Severus to cradle his stomach in both hands, a look of such devotion on his face that Severus had to remind himself to breathe. "You knew. You *knew*. How?"

Remus kissed him just below the navel and rested his cheek against the bulge. "Besides you not fitting into your clothes? You started to smell different around Christmas time — all those hormones, you know. Then you stopped drinking, even wine, and you started taking vitamins. I'd seen that potions magazine when it came out and I couldn't help wondering." He caressed the swell. "But I didn't *know* until just now. Lily used the same cream for stretch marks, you know. I'll never forget how it smelled."

"It's a popular recipe." Severus shuddered and grabbed the back of a chair for support as Remus carefully explored every inch of his belly, from underside to shallow navel. "I assume you're pleased?"

"Very much so." Another kiss, this one low on the curve, and another delighted laugh. "We're having a baby. Us. Oh, love — you should have said something."

"I was planning to tell you tomorrow." Severus stroked the graying hair as carefully as Remus had touched his body. Remus sighed with pleasure and nuzzled his stomach a final time before rising to his feet. He wrapped his arms about Severus in a tight hug, close enough that Severus shivered at the pressure on his abdomen. Soon they wouldn't be to do this face to face, not if he got as big as Poppy thought he would, and he took a step toward the bed. "Tonight I wanted to make you scream."

"Oh, did you?" Remus moved past him and stretched out on the pristine sheets. The firelight brought out the gold in his hair, and he was so beautiful that Severus forgot all about his plans for a long, leisurely seduction. "Maybe I should do the same to you."

"Do tell." Two long strides, and Severus had joined him. He straddled the lean hips and leaned forward so that the bump looked even bigger than it was. "You'd best

remember that next year when we'll have a crying, teething, excreting infant. It's your baby, after all."

Remus grinned and pulled him down into a long, fierce kiss, one hand between them to cup the swell. "I won't forget. Promise."

"Good." Severus smiled against his lips. He ground downward until Remus moaned. "I'm doing all the work, it's only fair —"

Later, when the fire had burned low and they had worn each other out, the clock struck midnight. Severus, almost asleep, felt Remus shift beside him and spoon up against his back. "Happy birthday, Remus," he whispered.

Remus stroked his leg, then his chest, then rubbed slow, almost reverent circles on the rounded belly. "Best birthday ever. Best present."

"You say that every year," Severus murmured. Remus was warm and the bed was soft, and without thinking about it he reached down for the hand covering their child and gave it a squeeze. By now Enid would have told his father, and if Toby was sincere about reconciling, the baby would have a real family, not just two middle aged wizards.

"This year it's true. We're having a baby." Remus yawned and wriggled closer. "G'night, love."

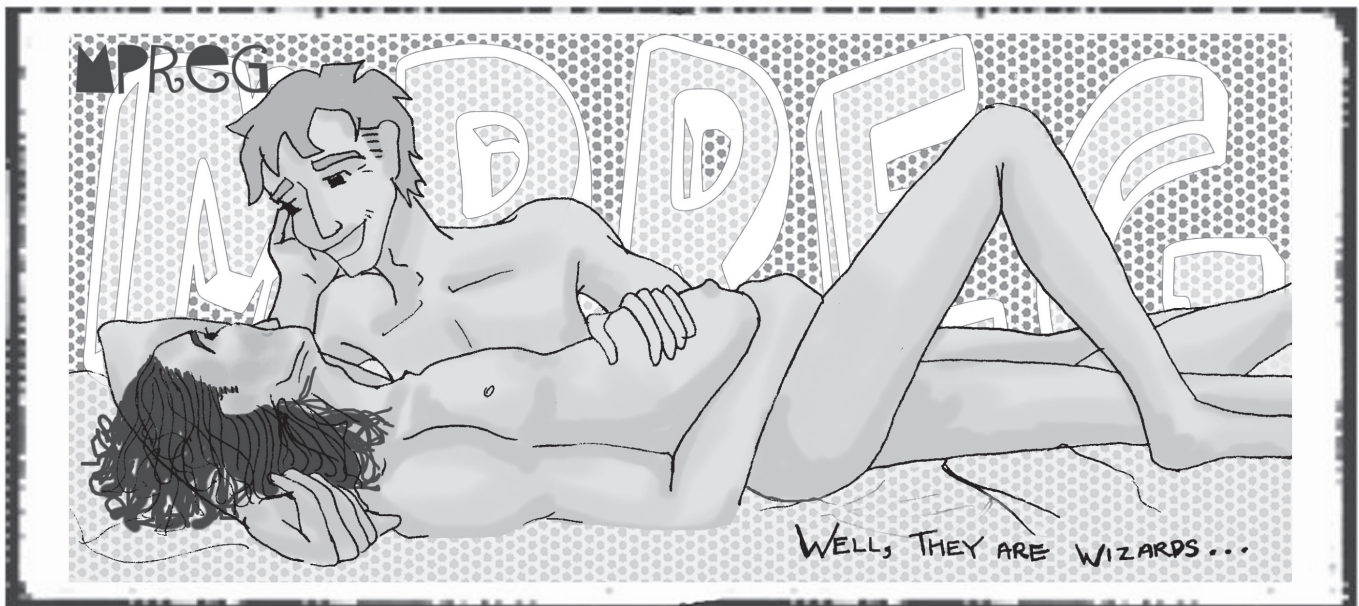
"Good night." Severus settled into a comfortable position on his left side and laced his fingers through Remus's. His partner was happy, and their child would be loved by many, not just a few.

Happy birthday indeed.

ellid's bio

Ellid is a fan writer and textile historian from Massachusetts. She has three cats, a basement full of fabric, and an unhealthy obsession with early Tudor England and medieval quilts. Her best known Snape/Lupin stories are *New York Minute*, *Motherless Child*, and *Of Mutual Benefit*, all of which are archived at Moonshadow, the Snape/Lupin archive (<http://ssf-moonshadow.com/archive/>).

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Candlelight by Moonycakes

Own My Heart

by Stasia

Severus sat in the darkened room, brooding. The window to his right showed rolling fields, with a hint, far in the distance, of the sea, all under the light of a fitful moon. He sat unmoving, eyes fixed on the figure in the bed before him.

The figure lay still for now, but the disarray of the sheets and the blankets crumpled at the foot of the bed spoke of earlier tossing and turning. Just as Severus leaned forward to place his hand gently on his forehead, the invalid jerked sharply in the bed. His eyes came half open, showing pure gold in the dim light.

"Fenrir, you can't—I won't let you... No!" He tangled in the sheets, recoiling as Severus tried to pull them away from his twisted limbs. "Please, please..." he trailed off, his voice hoarse and desperate.

Severus grasped him by the shoulders. "Lupin, you must listen to me. You are not with the pack any more. You are safe. Greyback is dead." He shook Remus slightly, but the gold eyes staring up at him held no recognition.

"I can't let you... he's mine. I have a claim." This time Remus spoke with total authority, and Severus was so startled by the repetition of the words he'd heard more than five years before that he dropped Remus' limp body back onto the bed. Remus showed no sign of noticing the rough treatment; he was far too lost in the past to see anything in the present.

Severus sank back into his seat. At the time, he'd tried to ask Remus why he'd acted the way he had, why he'd challenged Greyback, but Remus had simply looked at him with terrible cold eyes and told him to get on with it, if he was prepared. Then, the reminder of what the Headmaster had told him shocked him to silence, but now he found himself burning with curiosity.

He kept asking until Remus threatened to stop visiting him in Azkaban, but that hadn't made him less curious. Once he had been released from prison, his curiosity had to take a back seat to survival. He had no idea how Remus had talked Potter into championing his cause with the Wizengamot, but however it was done, it was done completely: he was acquitted, not pardoned.

Once he had settled into a comfortable life, he learned he wasn't as suited to solitude as he'd thought. The

first time Remus visited him, he'd been so pathetically grateful that he'd completely embarrassed himself by nearly begging him to stay for dinner.

Remus continued to visit regularly, only skipping when he was forced to travel for his work. Severus attributed his unease during the times when Remus didn't visit twice a week to residual stress from Azkaban and forced himself to ignore how often he checked the skies for owls and peeked out the door looking for surprise visitors.

Severus spent the rest of the night casting cooling spells over Remus and trying not to think of the strange way Remus had acted the last time he visited.

The next morning, Potter peeked around the door. "You're here, Snape? When did you get here?" He carried a tray filled with a full day's food for at least three hearty eaters and Remus' entire daily prescription of potions for the day. He took one look at Severus' face and set the tray down on a table on the far side of the bed. "What? Did something happen?"

"What do you remember of the time just before you found the last Horcrux, Potter?"

Potter's face tightened in thought. "Not much. Things were pretty crazy then. Ron was here, and Hermione was dividing her time between researching how to destroy the Horcruxes and helping me to find them. Why?"

Severus was silent for a moment, his gaze fixed on Remus. "Because something else happened. Something with the wolf pack Greyback controlled." Severus stood, drifting almost unconsciously to stroke Remus' hair away from his flushed cheeks. "I need to find out what was really happening."

Potter crossed his arms. "Well, you'll have a hell of a time doing it. Greyback is dead, remember?"

Severus controlled his sudden urge to shake the boy. "I know that, you whelp. I was there. I saw the moment when Re-Lupin killed him..." He saw the image of Remus' face, not triumphant as he'd expected it to be when Remus finally killed the werewolf responsible for destroying so many lives, but desolate, as if Remus were aware of something else, some pain Severus hadn't been able to see. "I saw it happen," he finished softly.

Potter approached the bed and tried to straighten the sheets. After a few fruitless tugs, he waved his wand and the sheets twitched straight, returning to shimmering white. "He's almost the last one. There's only one other who's lasted this long, so if you think there's anything you can do, you'll have to hurry." He waved his wand again and Remus was propped up into a semi-seated position. The urgency of his voice contrasted with his smooth movements.

Severus stepped backwards, startled. "The last one? What, all the other werewolves are dead of this? How long has this been going on?"

Potter reached for a bowl from the tray and began to spoon porridge into Remus' mouth, expertly catching the drips. Severus watched, realising that the confident way Potter handled the feeding implied a much longer illness than he'd previously thought.

"How long?" he repeated harshly.

Potter looked away from Remus' face. "A little more than two weeks now. The younger ones all died almost immediately. The older ones died more slowly, but it seemed to hurt them more. We didn't even connect it to Remus at first—he's one of the few who's come out of the pack to live like a hum—to live with people. The rest all stayed with the pack in the Forest. We didn't know anything was wrong until the latest alpha, Badelt, got sick." Potter put the mostly empty bowl back on the table and began the careful process of wiping Remus' face clean.

"Badelt contacted the Werewolf Office, and they came screaming to Remus as soon as they saw the initial death count. Remus brought it to me and..." His hands fell to his lap, "And then he caught it. I was so afraid, but he hung on and hung on. And so did the other man, but the only thing we can find that they have in common is that they've been the longest on Wolfsbane, so we—"

"Called me." Severus' face was buried in his hands. He let his hands slide into his hair, where they clenched into fists. "You should have called sooner, Potter. We could have tried to save the others—if it's been two weeks since Lupin fell ill—"

"No," interrupted Potter. "No, it's been two weeks since the pack started dying. Remus has been here about three days."

Severus went cold. He'd seen Remus just a little less than a month ago. If Potter was correct, Lupin had lost nearly a stone in a bit less than a week. He got to his feet. "Where are the bodies, Potter? The other werewolf who's alive? Where are they?"

Potter turned to face him. "The other man? I think Badelt's on this floor, a few doors down." He paused. "The bodies, though? The Ministry burned them. You might be able to catch the last two corpses before St Mungo's gives them over to the Ministry, but the rest are gone. I'll show you where the last of them should be."

Severus stormed towards the door and then he stopped. "No, I need to see the living one first. But you have to get them to stop burning the corpses. I need to see them, to run tests. And I want all the files on this—what's been tried, what's been done."

Potter looked at him, his expression bleak. "There's nothing, sir. They didn't run any tests."

Severus felt like he'd been struck on the head. "The mediwizards haven't tried to find out what this is? What if it's contagious to non-lycanthropes? What if it's curable?"

Potter's face twisted. "The Minister told Remus that it doesn't matter, a few werewolves here or there. He's burning the bodies because he thinks it *is* contagious..." Potter looked at Remus, who was thrashing again in the bed. "I brought you here because I can't let him die without trying everything, and you're the only one who knows what's really in Remus' Wolfsbane; I know you modified it." He raised his head and stared at Severus. "You have to save him, Snape. You just... save him."

Severus held his gaze. "I will." He knew he might not be able to keep his word, but he was aware of how much he owed Remus, how much of his life would be empty if Remus were dead, how much he—he refused to think about how he felt.

As he stalked down the corridor to find the other werewolf, he suddenly recalled that he'd been feeling ill himself for the past month. He knew he'd felt a connection to Remus ever since the scene in the Forest, but could this be connected to that? Behind him, he heard Potter's quick steps in the other direction.

It was easy to find the room Badelt was in. It was almost as if he could see something in the air in front of the room, some floating dark shape. He blinked, but the shape remained cloudy and inchoate. He strode through it and into the room.

The first thing that struck him was the smell. There was a scent of pine and of pitch, but Severus assumed those came from the clothes tossed into a pile in the corner. The man himself shone with sweat that gave off the rank odour of sulphur and a strange sharp bitterness. Above all was the clear scent of oncoming death.

Severus gave himself a moment to acclimate, then moved to the bed. The patient was emaciated—whatev-

er this disease was, it ate away at the afflicted terribly. Severus saw that Badelt was too far gone to be able to respond to him at all. With a sinking stomach, Severus pulled out his wand, closed his eyes for a long moment, then opened them and whispered, "Legilimens".

Immediately he was drowning in sensation—he felt his body wasting, his heart burning up inside him. Gritting his teeth, Severus pushed through to older memories. He looked for memories of when Badelt had first noticed he was sick. There was a flash of Remus, and Severus stopped. Carefully, he teased that memory out, but it was just Remus visiting the pack. It must have been relatively recent; Severus knew Remus hadn't had any robes as nice as that until after the war's end.

That memory of Remus led to others; Severus followed the chain of memories, watching Remus get younger and shabbier in each. The memories were coloured with some desperate emotion; it wasn't until he saw Badelt put his hand on Remus' shoulder only to have it shaken off that Severus realised he was seeing unrequited love. A flare of hot jealousy burning its way up his throat, he slipped further in, only to come to another halt when he saw himself, desperate and nearly broken.

The snatch of memory triggered his own, and he watched, horrified.

Severus knows he's miscalculated the moment Greyback doesn't acknowledge his status as the Dark Lord's emissary. However, his plan for backing out of the situation gracefully dies with the feral smile that stretches across Greyback's face.

"You know where we are," Greyback says. "You could lead others here." He stands proudly, unconcerned that he's a good ten centimetres shorter than Severus. "You'll pay for that, and then the Dark Lord will know he can't just throw me around like he does the lot of you."

Severus knows he can just Apparate away, so he sneers at the disgusting creature in front of him. "If anyone is going to pay for this travesty, it will be you," he says. Just as he concentrates to Apparate to the Dark Lord, he sees Lupin's face over Greyback's shoulder, and the agony on it distracts him.

"Oh," Greyback purrs, his smile now incandescently malevolent, "I wouldn't try that. We had our resident wizard put up barriers so you can't run away like the coward we know you really are."

Severus' temper begins to burn, but as it's full daylight now and weeks from the full moon, he knows he's in no danger of being turned. He glances at Lupin, but Lupin's face is mirror-calm now. "I'm no coward. I just don't like filth, and the longer I stand here with all of you animals, the more

cleansing I will need." He hears the first few angry growls and tips his chin up slightly, his wand ready to fall into his hand and his two favourite curses in the back of his mind.

Greyback's smile tilts, and he chuckles. "You'll smell a lot more when we're done with you." He steps forward and is just reaching for Severus' shoulder when Lupin's voice cuts across the clearing.

"I can't let you...he's mine. I have a claim." Lupin stands slightly separated from the rest of the pack; only one other werewolf stands near him. That werewolf's eyes are on Lupin and Severus recognises the hopeless look in them.

He snarls, "I'm no one's but my—Lord's." The sound of his voice is drowned in the mocking laughter of Greyback, who turns to face Lupin.

"You'd challenge me, for this?"

Lupin steps forward, face tight and pale. "I do." He begins to pull his shirt off when Greyback turns and lunges at Severus. Severus flinches back, wand out.

"Petrificus Totalus," he screams, but nothing happens. Then Greyback's hands are on him, and they are hot and heavy, the nails like claws in the flesh of his shoulder. He feels them scrabble at his neck, and then they're pulled away. Lupin is there, his shirt half off and his eyes pure gold. Greyback spins and throws himself at Lupin, who falls easily backwards, hitting the ground with a thump.

Greyback snaps forward, trying to bite Lupin's neck, but somehow Lupin slithers out from under him and away, dashing straight to where Severus lies. The other werewolves have left a small space around Severus, many of them looking away from him; he hears others whisper curses at him.

Lupin doesn't reach Severus; Greyback catches his foot and pulls him back. Severus sees the other werewolf, the one who'd looked so hopelessly at Lupin, across the cleared space—his face is tight with horror. Severus looks back at the fight to see if he can see what is so horrifying.

Lupin is on the bottom again, and one of Greyback's claws has pierced his neck. The blood is shockingly red against Lupin's dreadful pallor. Lupin convulses and surges forward; his legs brace on Greyback and push him off.

There is a pause while the two combatants stand panting, facing each other. Lupin is slightly bent over; Greyback's back is bloody. Severus tries to think of when Lupin could have caught his back, but he can't. Greyback shifts to the left and Lupin follows, and Severus wants to scream that it's a feint, that Lupin shouldn't follow, but then it's too late and they've closed again.

The two werewolves are nothing but a tangle of arms and legs on the ground, Greyback's growl punctuated by Lupin's

deeper one. Someone yelps, and they pull apart. Lupin's mouth is bloody, and Severus starts to move forward to help, but there's no time. Greyback is moving again. He dives forward but Lupin is faster. He shifts just a little, and it's clear that he's tired, but Greyback is tiring more. As they turn, Severus can see that Greyback's arm hangs at the wrong angle.

Suddenly Greyback pulls back, his malicious smile returning. He lifts his right hand, which is covered in blood from Lupin's neck, rubs his own bloody shoulder, then places his palm flat against his chest. "Imperium Animus," he whispers.

Lupin cries out, eyes burning in a dead white face. He throws himself forward, arms stretching, fingers looking almost like long claws and he catches Greyback's chin. It's clear that he's aimed himself badly—he's going to move past Greyback, but before Greyback can take advantage of this, Lupin closes his hand around Greyback's chin, and yanks.

The snapping sound of Greyback's neck fills the clearing. Lupin lifts his face to look at Severus, and Severus sees a flicker of some terrible pain; then Lupin's face closes to him.

"Get out of here," he whispers. "Get on with it, if you are prepared."

Severus stumbled back from the bed, gasping deep breaths of the thick air, but his head didn't clear. He hadn't let himself think of that scene in five years. Now, the memory had been impossible to escape.

He'd had time to see that, unfortunately, Badelt had no more understanding of what Greyback's last words meant than Severus did.

Severus turned back to the bed and reached out again to see if he could find more memories. Surely there was something useful here. When he looked into Badelt's face, he realised two things simultaneously: Badelt had been the werewolf standing next to Remus in the clearing, and he was dead.

Severus stood for a few minutes beside the bed and wondered why Remus hadn't returned this man's feelings. He knew Remus preferred men and this man must have been dependable and decent, if he'd been the pack alpha for five years. Giving up, Severus pulled the sheet up over Badelt's face and left the room.

Potter was waiting in front of Remus' room. "There you are," he said. "I had to tell them that I needed to see the bodies myself. They're in the morgue." He trotted down the hall, forcing Severus to walk quickly to keep up.

The morgue was at the very back of the building, several storeys down. On the way down, Severus pondered

what he knew of werewolf pack politics. He didn't know as much as he thought he did. He'd have thought that if Remus were the one who killed the pack alpha, he'd be the new leader. Yet somehow, Badelt had ended up leading the werewolf pack. He hadn't been able to talk them into taking the Wolfsbane, though.

Once at the morgue door, Potter waved him in. "I'm going back up to Remus. You'll be able to find your way back, right?" Potter didn't wait for a response, just turned and started back up the stairs.

The bodies were dreadful. Not because they were particularly offensive—they barely had any odour and were dressed in hospital gowns—but because they looked like they'd been desiccated. Severus stood over them and started on the list of spells he'd need to get information.

An hour later, he staggered away and sat down in a chair against the wall. It looked like both bodies had been eaten from the inside. Their hearts were shrivelled and dark, their lungs dusty smears against the cages of their ribs. There was nothing, nothing he could find that indicated any contagion factor, or, in fact, any infection vector at all. They'd simply burned up from the inside and died.



He tore up the stairs, pushing through the crowd of healers coming out of the cafeteria and galloping along the corridor. In Remus' room, Potter stood bent over the bed, and Severus felt his heart stop. He was too late. Remus was dead.

He collapsed against the doorframe. Potter heard the sound and looked up. His face was lined with worry, but curiosity lit his eyes.

"He wants to talk to you." Potter tilted his head slightly. "He's been asking for you since I got back upstairs."

Severus went slowly up to the bed. He could feel his heart beating, heavy pulses filling his head with noise. Remus lay on his back, one hand covering his eyes and the other clenched tightly in the blankets. When Severus came close, Remus' hand fell away.

"You need to know," he whispered, his voice thready. "You have to see. I don't...it shouldn't harm you, but you need to know."

Severus leaned forward, pressing his hand to Remus' forehead. He was still too hot, but it seemed like his temperature had come down. "Quiet," he said, "you can tell me later."

Remus shook his head. His face was still pale; the dark circles under his eyes made him look as if he'd been punched in both eyes. "No, you have to know now. There isn't time to wait any more."

At the door, Potter's breath caught in a barely suppressed sob; some part of Severus was glad that any noise he might have made was covered by Potter's. Remus shook his head again, his eyes never leaving Severus' face. "Just you," he whispered. "Tell Harry to leave." Severus lifted his head, but Potter was already out the door. As he looked back into the room, his expression was dreadful: a mixture of despair and anger that Severus hadn't seen since the final days of the fighting.

Remus didn't say anything at first and Severus wondered if he was going to change his mind. Then Remus moved slightly and smiled at him. Something shifted in Severus at that smile; it was gentle and made Remus' eyes brighten. He smiled back, helplessly. Remus struggled to sit up, and Severus reached out to help.

Remus wrapped his arms around Severus' neck as Severus rearranged the pillows. Carefully lowering Remus down onto them, Severus wasn't surprised at his own unwillingness to release him. Remus seemed to cling; his too-hot hands slid over Severus' neck and shoulders and Severus swore he could feel the tips of Remus' fingers brush his chest. He flinched, just a little, knowing that it was inappropriate for him to think of Remus in any way besides a friend, in many ways his only friend, and currently, his patient.

Remus leaned back against the pillows, his pallid skin almost as white as the fabric. "I didn't want you to know. I thought... if I just let Badelt have the pack, that it would stop with me. I was wrong." His expression was ravaged. "I killed all those poor people."

"You did nothing of the kind," Severus burst out. "There's some illness—you had nothing to do with it."

Remus laughed, a choked rattle. "They weren't ill. It's a curse. Something you never understood about werewolves, that most people don't understand about them, is that they—we—are magical creatures. Not Dark, necessarily, just magic." He pulled in a wheezing breath and coughed a little. "Like centaurs, or griffins."

He rubbed his chest. "Each creature has some special magic, a specialty, you could say. House-elves are uncontrollable when their family or house is threatened. Or dusty." He smiled, and Severus felt it go right through him. "It's impossible to lie when you're near griffins. Werewolves... since we're more human than most, our magic is of a different sort."

"This is from that spell, then?" Severus interjected, "That was five years ago."

Remus sighed. His face tipped away from Severus. "It was. Greyback didn't know about that curse until I found it when I was doing some research. I know you don't think so, Severus, but this is my fault. I could have refused to search, or withheld the information, or..."

Severus reached out and gently pulled Remus' face around to meet his gaze. "Killing that monster was a good thing. Nothing you say can convince me otherwise." Remus flinched, and Severus pondered how odd it was that he was counselling Remus on accepting the way life was. Usually Remus was the calmer of them, the one more prone to pouring oil on the waters while he himself was the type to light that oil on fire.

"Now," Severus continued, dropping his hand and closing it into a fist to keep from feeling the loss of Remus' cheek in it. "Tell me everything about that curse, and what I need to do to break it and you're as good as beaten in our next chess game."

Remus shivered. "There's nothing you can do to break it. I knew I was dead as soon as I heard him. I didn't think it would kill the others—I hoped that if I passed the leadership to Johan—" he glanced up into Severus' blank face. "Johan Badelt. I hoped that if I passed the leadership off to him, none of the other werewolves to bear the burden of the curse." His face was haunted. "I was wrong."

Severus' frustration increased at Remus' continued delay in telling him what the curse was. Based on what he remembered, it sounded like the words of the curse meant "control life", but that didn't explain why all the werewolves died so painfully, nor why it took them so long to do so. He could see Remus' fever was beginning to return; his colour was becoming hectic, his eyes darkened. Severus leaned forward, brushing Remus' damp hair away from his flushed face. "Remus," Severus said softly, "which books were you using to research? Where can I find them?" If the werewolves were magical creatures, that meant traditional magical theory didn't apply.

Remus blinked up at him. "They're in my flat," he said hoarsely. "Harry knows how to get in." He began to cough, his hands coming up to rub at his chest. Severus felt his own chest clench and his breath tighten. He rubbed at his breastbone and saw Remus' eyes catch on the movement. "You don't—you can't have this. It's not possible."

Severus stood, glad to have something he could do to help. "You are correct, it isn't possible. I would assume my lack of lycanthropic infection would render me immune." He could see that Remus didn't hear him however, as his eyes had now gone completely gold,

and he called out incoherently. Potter appeared at the door and Severus stopped to address him on his way out. "Do not let him die. And tell me how to get into his flat.."

Severus should just go on with things as usual. Severus could see him rubbing his chest again as he Apparated away.

On the way from the closest Apparition point to Remus' flat, Severus thought back to the last time Remus had come to his cottage.

Remus had been irritable, and Severus hadn't been able to figure out why. Usually, when Remus was in a bad mood at the beginning of a visit, Severus was able to bring him out of his funk with a new and interesting book, or a good game of chess. However, every time it seemed that Remus was relaxing, he'd rub his chest and cough.

When Severus was on his way back to the living room with a fresh pot of tea, fresh toast, and some of the dreadful chocolate-nut spread that Severus only bought for him, he tripped slightly over an upturned corner of carpet. Remus was there immediately, catching Severus' weight against his chest and waving his wand quickly to catch the tray before everything spilled. Severus froze, the warmth of Remus' body burning through him, making him suddenly aware of how much he wanted to touch Remus. He nearly turned his face towards Remus, wanting to feel more.

Then he remembered that Remus would never think of him that way. Remus had always been friendly, but never anything more; he'd never given Severus any indication he thought of him as anyone other than just the last one of their age group. Not wanting to expose himself, Severus jerked away from Remus so hard he staggered a bit.

When Severus turned to him, Remus' face was open for one moment, brimming with an emotion Severus couldn't identify. Before Severus could say anything, Remus' expression changed to one so furious that Severus found himself retreating. Remus proceeded to rage about other people getting things they wanted, about not being able to find a job until Lovegood had got the Werewolf Laws overturned, about pack politics, and finally, oddest of all, about research being a dreadful thing and how he thought information should be left alone.

Severus, who during this entire time had slowly been backing up until he knocked against the couch, sat down hard. He tried to interrupt, but Remus just started for the door. Severus started after him, determined to try to find out what was going on, when Remus said that he'd have to be gone for a longer time than usual and

Severus had never been to Remus' flat; all their meetings took place in Severus' small cottage. Remus' flat was in a bustling shopping centre in Brighton, above a small coffee shop and near an extravagantly large bookstore. Severus was not surprised at the location—only at his own wistfulness, and desire to be there himself. The bookshelves were well organised, so it didn't take Severus long to find the books he needed. Feeling like an intruder, he fixed himself a pot of tea and sat down in the small but sunny kitchen to study.

Four hours later, he flipped the last book closed and rubbed his eyes. The oldest of the books, which he treated with great reverence as it was crumbling in his hands, included the most detailed description of magical creatures and their inherent powers that he'd ever seen. Lycanthropic magic was drawn on the strength of the pack and the will of its alpha. What Greyback had done was to tie the lives of his pack to the will of his own heart. During times of war, this spell drew upon the strength of everyone in the pack to ensure that as long as the alpha lived, they all fought with unending ferocity. Greyback's perversion of it to ensure that they only lived if he wished them to was a true horror.

Severus assumed Greyback hadn't done a good job since none of the pack died when he was killed. Remus' notes indicated that he believed the curse transferred itself to whoever was alpha at the time, which explained why he thought relinquishing his leadership status to Badelt would ensure the pack's survival. Something had gone wrong, however; perhaps the strength of the curse was greater than Remus expected due to Greyback's deep hatred for him.

Severus stood, anxious to get back to St Mungo's. In his haste, he knocked against Remus' stacked notes and sent them flying. When he shuffled the notes to put them back onto the table, a page he hadn't looked at before caught his eye. Ancient Bonding Ritual, it said in Remus' neat script. Severus' eyes scanned down the page quickly, his breath stopping in shock. The other half of the curse became perfectly clear.

Severus sat down heavily in the chair, his mind whirling. Remus had claimed him, using the oldest claiming ritual werewolves had. His statement, combined with the blood he'd spilled in the fight with Greyback, had been the trigger for the first half of the ritual. No wonder he was afraid Severus might contract the illness.

Could it be possible that the action of the curse was delayed because Remus' heart, which after his battle with Greyback was the pack leader's heart, was half-given? Would a full bond block the actions of the curse entirely? Remus' notes indicated two parts to the bonding ritual. If the second part of the bond were performed, would it save Remus? Severus re-read the page, heart racing. He could cast the spell right now; he didn't even need to leave Remus' house.

It took him twenty minutes to gather the necessary supplies. Once he did, he stood in the kitchen staring at the small pile and wondered if he really wanted to do this. This would be permanent. There was no going back. He wondered if Remus would forgive him; this would be permanent for Remus as well. Finally he decided it was more important to save his only friend's life than anything else. They would work on how to live with it later.

In a small steel bowl he'd found in Remus' living room, the closest thing he could find to a cauldron, Severus put hair pulled from Remus' hairbrush, some stiff grey hairs found on the blankets near the foot of the bed and a quick clipping of his own hair. Closing his eyes, he took several deep breaths to try to calm himself. He hoped that he was right, and that this would work. Opening his eyes again, he took a silver bladed knife and carefully punctured the vein on the side of his neck. Blood rushed down and he quickly leaned forward so some would pour into the bowl. When the hair in the bowl was completely immersed, he stood up and muttered a quick healing spell. Then, without giving himself any time to think about it, he stuck his wand hand and the end of his wand into the bowl and said, "I accept the claim of Remus Lupin and claim Remus Lupin in return."

His lungs seized and his heart stuttered almost to a halt. It was as if he could see and feel two places at once. He stared around at the dimly lit room in St Mungo's, which was like a double impression over the bright kitchen around him. He heard a faint echo of Potter's voice asking what was wrong when the darkness swirling in the corners of the room caught him up and enveloped him.



He woke up in his bed at the cottage, the morning sun shining directly into his eyes. Groaning, wondering why he felt so sore, he tried to sit up. Immediately, he felt hands pushing back on his chest and he jumped.

"Lie back," came a voice, and Severus immediately relaxed. Then, realising what he had done, and whose voice it was, he jerked upright.

"Remus," he croaked. Remus was healthy again, his face a natural colour and his eyes clear. His expression wasn't, though; it threatened storms. He was glaring so hard at Severus that Severus was surprised he didn't burst into flames. He didn't care, at that point—he'd happily burst into flames if it meant that Remus wasn't ill any longer.

"You are irresponsible, reckless and inconsiderate," Remus snapped. "What were you thinking, to pull that stunt?"

Severus fell back onto his pillows again. He could feel, not only his own relief, but Remus' anger inside himself. "I feel—"

"Yes, you idiot. You feel everything I do." Remus rested his head in his hands, fingers buried in his hair. "You know this is permanent, right? I'll never be—you'll never be free."

Severus barely heard him; he was testing out how much of what he was feeling was his own and what part was Remus'. It was interesting, and a bit distressing, to find that he was no longer entirely alone inside his own skin. With a horrified rush of understanding, he realised that this feeling was most likely what Voldemort had wanted from his connections with his followers.

He felt more than heard Remus' sharp gasp at his side. He was staring at Severus, eyes wide and stunned. "You think I'm...why did you do this?" He stood up and backed away from the bed. Severus struggled with the blankets and sat up slowly.

"Don't leave, Remus, please." He pulled in a breath and then another. "I don't think you're like Voldemort. I just...I can feel you."

Remus stood with his back to Severus. "Yes. That's rather the point of this." He sighed and turned back around. "Let's get you cleaned up and find something to eat. I'm sure you have questions." His voice was calm, but Severus could feel how unsettled he really was.

Severus was surprised at how unsteady he was on his feet, and was grateful for the help Remus gave him on the way to the shower, then down to the kitchen. After a quick meal of omelettes and toast, Remus made them a pot of tea and sat down.

"Why, Severus? Why did you do this?"

Severus watched the steam rising off his tea. "Can you feel anything from me?"

Remus shot him a sharp look. "I can, but it's all very confused. You're just recovering from the after-effects of the curse Greyback used, and you're still a bit sick."

Severus stared at him. "I thought you said I should be immune?"

"That was before you pulled this prank. Now, tell me, damn it. Why did you do this?"

More confident now he knew Remus couldn't feel his emotions, Severus said, "I knew that Potter would be upset if you died, and the notes in your flat suggested that this was a way to save your life. I'd promised him—" His throat closed and he stopped.

"Rubbish." Remus' voice was flat. "You didn't read anything about the bond in the books, did you? You just read my notes and blundered into.... You can't lie to me, Severus, any more than I can lie to you, now." He smiled, and Severus was reminded which one of them was a vicious animal once a month.

"I wanted to," he whispered. "I thought it would be a way to save your life and I wanted to." The steam was making lovely patterns in the air, loops and swirls. He glanced up to see Remus staring at him blankly. Oddly enough, Remus' lack of response gave him courage. He pulled in as deep a breath as he could. "I know you don't want to be bonded with me, but isn't it worth it not to be dead at least?"

The sharp look was back on Remus' face. "You know nothing, but it's clear that there are things I need to learn as well." He leaned back and smiled. "Why do you think I don't want to be bonded with you? After all, I was the one who initiated the bonding spell."

Severus blinked, then raised a brow. "You said yourself that neither of us would ever be free again. I'd think that speaks fairly clearly."

Remus nodded, looking thoughtful. "What made you think completing the bond would block the curse?"

Severus sipped his tea, trying to think of a way to answer the question without giving away his feelings. "I thought about that day in the Forest. I saw your notes on the spell and on the bond, and I thought that, if you'd already done the first half of the ritual, that maybe the curse couldn't fully affect you. From there it was a simple jump to hoping—believing that a completed ritual would protect you, even at this late date."

Remus sent him a tilted smile. "That sounds reasonable. You didn't read anything but my notes? I think I'm flattered. You put a lot of trust in me. What if I'd been wrong? You could easily have died." He paused and sipped his own tea. "You know, if the bond had completed itself and I'd been too close to death, you might not have survived."

Severus tried to look like he'd thought of that, but given Remus' slight smirk, didn't think he'd been successful.

"Anyway," Remus continued, "once I started to recover, and I realised that I could feel the bond's completion, I sent Harry here. He found you on the kitchen floor, nearly dead." Remus' face was bleak. "Don't do that again. I won't survive you."

Severus could feel himself paling. "The reverse applies, I assume."

Remus nodded. "I think I've figured out why Johan and I were the only two who weren't completely affected by the curse. Most of the pack was fairly young by that point. Greyback had killed off most of the older pack members by then." His face was grim. "Johan and I were the only two who were ...who had bonded with anyone else. The curse wasn't originally a curse. It was meant to be a way for the pack's leader to help form the pack into a cohesive and strong fighting unit during a battle. There's a counter-spell, but it's complex and I didn't have time to finish researching it to make sure we had it right."

"It's a way to share out energy?" Severus sat back, thoughtful. "That could be very useful. But with whom had Badelt bonded? He seemed...." He blushed, unable to look at Remus, who looked suddenly startled.

"Oh. Ah, me. He bonded with me."

"What? Then why—how can you say that—"

Remus hurried into speech. "NO! I meant that he performed the first part. He didn't tell me until after... after you went back to Voldemort, he told me."

Severus covered his eyes with a shaking hand. He'd been so focussed on saving Remus' life that he hadn't even thought of anyone else having bonded with him. Just the thought of someone else being that close to his... bond mate...made sick jealousy fill his stomach. Remus seemed to understand, because he reached across the table and rested his fingers on Severus' hand. Severus could feel his muscles relaxing at the contact, and heat flooded his body. He breathed in deeply; it felt as if he were breathing clearly for the first time in his life.

When he opened his eyes, Remus was smiling at him. "I have a question for you, Severus." He waited until Severus made an impatient movement, then laughed slightly before continuing. "Do you believe that actions speak louder than words?"

Severus glared at him. "That's self-evident."

"Then why did it take you this long to figure things out?" Remus' words sounded accusing, but his tone was ...if Severus had to pick a word, it would be loving. Remus tilted his head. "What did I do, in that fight with Greyback?"

"You killed him, like the monster he was." Severus felt himself begin to get frustrated. What did killing Greyback have to do with their situation?

"No, before that?" At Severus' glare, he chuckled. "I knew what the bonding ritual required. I knew what it would do, to me and to you. I chose to act—to claim you—didn't I?"

"You did." Severus gritted his teeth.

"I thought you were loyal to Voldemort at the time." Remus held Severus' gaze, his own challenging. "I chose to protect you, to claim you, knowing you'd never return it, knowing you were working for and with someone with whom I could never agree.... What would you say my actions implied?"

"That you wanted to challenge Greyback? That you were looking for a way to gain control over the pack?" Severus could barely keep his voice below a shout. He hated being confused and out of control, and being able to feel Remus' amusement wasn't helping at all.

"Why would you choose to bind yourself to someone, knowing both that the bond is permanent and that you've spent years telling everyone that you will never allow someone else to control any of your life, especially after being trapped between two such difficult men?" Remus propped his chin in his hand, leaving his other

hand on Severus'.

"I told you I wanted—oh." Severus stared across the table at Remus. "Oh." His voice was very small. He felt even smaller when Remus laughed.

"Let me show you," Remus whispered huskily, and suddenly Severus was filled with emotions; he felt Remus' joy, his fading worry about Severus' health, his concern and—yes, love for Severus. Shaking, Severus tried to return the feelings, to show Remus what he felt, but somehow he was blocked. He closed his eyes and concentrated; if he could perform Legilimency, he could do this.

Across the table, Remus gasped, and then everything felt doubled; his own feelings for Remus were swept up into and combined with Remus' for him, leaving him shaking and gasping.

"This is only the beginning of how it can be," Remus said in a low, hot voice. "I can show you the rest, if you like." Remus filled his mind with images of the two of them tangled in sheets, heat and moisture and throbbing need surrounding them. Severus stood, pulling Remus with him as their combined joy spiraled up inside him.

"I would like that very much," he returned, knowing that he finally had everything he'd been looking for all his life.

stasia's bio

I'm a knitter, a writer, a mother, a wife, a humorist, a woman, a student, a worker, a caffeine addict and finally, myself.

Age Statement: I'm well over 18. In fact, I'm twice 18.

Soon to be twice 18, plus 1.

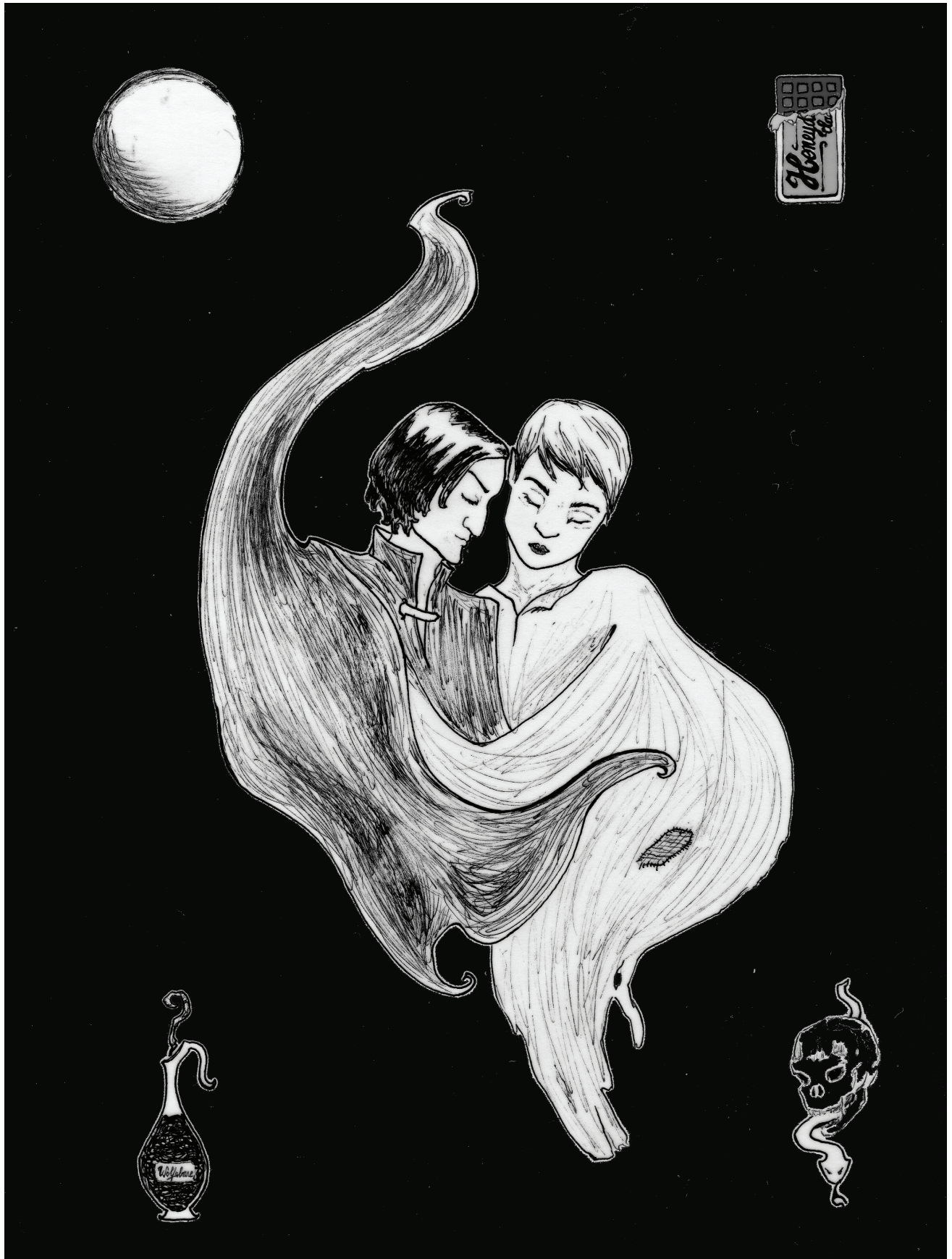
Author's Notes: I had many betas for this story: RexLuscus, McKay, Mechaieh, SchemingReader. Each of them contributed amazing amounts. The story wouldn't be half as good as it is without any of them.

Any remaining errors are all my own.

Disclaimer: I don't own these characters. JK-Rowling does.

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Tarot by Neodandiesrule



On the Same Damn Side



by Mechaieh

*I can imagine the moment
Breaking out through the silence
All the things that we both might say
And the heart it will not be denied
'til we're both on the same damn side
All the barriers blown away*

- Peter Gabriel, "Come Talk to Me"

Nymphadora Tonks had known she might die during the War, but she hadn't anticipated how annoyed she would be about it. She was vexed, of course, that her demise had taken place in a clothing boutique, although it had also amused her to be proved right: she had told her mother for *years* that nothing good would come out of Andromeda's persistent campaigns to interest her in feminine frills.

To be fair, however, it was not her mum's fault that the shop had been ambushed by a gaggle of silk-robed Death Eaters during their visit. Thankfully, her mother had promptly obeyed Tonks's orders to Apparate the stunned proprietor away from the scene. With the older ladies safely out of the way, Tonks had actually enjoyed a good deal of the fighting. Outnumbered ten to one, she had literally thrown the contents of the store at the women she'd come to think of as "Voldemort's hens." As she ducked their hexes and dodged their missiles, she'd Transfigured little strappy shoes into grenades powerful enough to demolish walls. She'd converted jewel-embedded hair-sticks and gold-embroidered barrettes into self-propelling knives. She'd charmed soft scarves to melt flesh upon contact, flinging them across the room still half-tangled around their hangers. She'd blinded the women with jangling flurries of necklaces and whipped them with beaded belts.

She hadn't survived the battle, but neither had most of the hens. The instant before the end, recognising she would not be able to twist or lunge away from the final *Avada Kedavra*, Tonks hurled all of the wandless power at her command toward the roof of the boutique, ripping it free of its moorings. The rafters and plaster and shingles had already begun to avalanche down upon the remaining women as the green light struck her chest and she slumped across the floor-length mirror she'd knocked over earlier.

All told, it had been a good afternoon's work. Some hours later, however, once she returned to consciousness as a spirit, Tonks lingered in a corner of the building's ruins, disconsolately watching Kingsley Shacklebolt and his partner sift through the mess. Not only was she massively irritated that she hadn't managed to stay alive, she felt *cheated*. It had taken her so very long to persuade Remus Lupin that she was old enough, thrifty enough, and tough enough to cope with both his lycanthropic impairment and his work on behalf of the Order. He'd relocated himself and his few belongings to her flat in Camden Town right after Dumbledore's funeral, and the nights they'd spent in her bed, the kisses they'd stolen in between missions, the jokes they'd traded while sifting through reports and rumours -- there had been so much to share and not nearly enough time. It was grossly unfair that a single short summer was all the gods had seen fit to grant to them.

Not that there's ever enough time, she amended, catching sight of Bill Weasley. His family was still grappling with the death of his brother Charlie, who had perished in an ambush outside of Târgu-Mures the week before Bill and Fleur's original wedding date.

As Bill crouched down next to Kingsley, Tonks crept over to listen in.

"...took the news well," Bill said, his voice low. "Kept asking how *we* were, even."

"That's Remus," Kingsley said, collecting the remnants of a shattered wand. "I've never once seen him lose control."

I have, Tonks thought. *Both when he wanted to and when he didn't.*

"Mum sent two pies," Bill continued. "And, on our way out, Hestia intercepted Isabelle Vautour on the stairs."

"Her, already? Merlin."

Tonks felt as though her intestines had been hit with a Shrivelling Hex. Isabelle Vautour was infamous for her eagerness to offer teacakes and sympathy to recently bereaved men.

"Claimed her Sight showed her what happened," Bill said. "I think she happened to be shopping."

"Oh?" Kingsley paused. "An eyewitness, even?"

"That's exactly what Hestia thought," Bill said. "She's detained Miss Vautour for questioning."

"Good," Kingsley said. "Women like her give vultures a bad name."

"If Tonks were here, she'd be hexed, stuffed, and mounted on a hat already."

Tonks could keep quiet no longer. "I *am* here," she gritted out. Both men jumped as she stepped into their line of sight. "I'd be at the flat already, but every time I touch a property line I rematerialise on the spot where I died."

Kingsley swore under his breath. "Merlin, Morgana, and Maeve--"

Bill looked at her sympathetically. "You, too? Charlie had the same problem. Took him *weeks* before he figured out how to show up at the Burrow."

"Strewth. I'd forgotten about that. *Fuck*. Why didn't Binns ever teach *useful* stuff, like how to deal with crap like this? A fat lot of good his history does me now."

"Steady there," Bill said. "How about I go find Charlie? He'll be happy to be useful."

"Remus, too?"

Bill hesitated, uncomfortable. "I doubt he'll be back just yet. He all but ordered us to leave because he had 'work to do'."

Tonks stared at him, nonplussed. "Work. You told him I'm dead and he's all about *work*?"

Kingsley stood up and Vanished the heap of fabric and rubble he had been examining. "Best way to avenge you, isn't it?" he said, the savage swish of his wand belying his cool, reasonable tone. "Keep doing his job, get this sodding war over with. It's not like moping over your body would bring you back."

You're right, of course. God, I hate that you're right. Instead of answering, Tonks kicked a crumpled hosiery rack. She stared at her foot as it glided straight through the tangle of metal and nylon, her consternation mirrored in the expressions on her friends' faces.

Finally, Kingsley muttered, "You'd think we'd be used to this."

"It's bloody fucking different when it's someone you know," Bill said.

"Will you fetch Charlie already?" Tonks pleaded. Nodding, Bill stepped through a gap in the wall and Disapparated.

Kingsley walked over to another clump of debris. Tonks floated to the other side of it.

He studied her for a minute, and then shook his head as if to clear it. He said, "Would you forgive me if I questioned you about it? You did a fine job taking out half of the flock, but more ammunition--"

"To bag a few more? Kingsley, you're brilliant. No wonder you get the worst assignments." Tonks took a deep breath and then walked straight through the mound between them.

Kingsley grimaced at the demonstration but sat down on the ground, patted a spot next to him, and pulled out a quill and scroll. "Why don't you start by listing everyone you recognised."

"Marlene Neelow," Tonks began, with alacrity. "Christine Gardini. Helene Zograf. Simone Laurens. Elspe -- *noooooooooo!*"

A mistle thrush had swooped in, seemingly from nowhere. With a loud rattling call, it had brushed a wing against Tonks' forearm, sucking her whole into the shaft of one of its feathers.

Bitch, Tonks mentally hissed. *You wouldn't have taken me alive.* She could feel the bird jerk and plummet as a spell singed its tail -- *come on, Kingsley, you can do better than that!* -- but, to her dismay, the next shock of magic never came.

What kind of Auror are you, Kingsley, that you can't even take down a bird? Tonks knew she wasn't being fair -- *a moving target, after nightfall, out of range* -- but, sweet Iris, *this* had not been part of any of her fantasies of the afterlife, and she couldn't think of anything she'd done that she considered heinous enough to merit such a fate.

As autumn deepened into winter, and winter sighed on and on, Tonks endured her imprisonment within the shell-like walls of the shaft as a dull, extended muddle of cold, damp waves. She could dimly perceive the lift and fall of the feather's barbs and filaments as they tugged the shaft to and fro during the thrush's travels from forest to feeder to field.

You pampered hen, Tonks silently groaned, *shouldn't you be back in your human form by now?* Even as she thought the question, however, Tonks already realised the answer: whatever Dark spell Elspeth Craig had called upon in order to trap a ghost within her flesh had almost certainly condemned her to retain the form in which she had performed the capture. Tonks took a measure of satisfaction in knowing that Elspeth likely hadn't been aware of this side-effect; Tonks herself had learned about it only near the end of a breakfast conversation with Remus that had turned unexpectedly creepy. She had never wanted to learn *quite* that much about physi-

cal transformations gone awry, and there had been a chilly detachment in his gruesome descriptions of torn and slashed hearts literally on sleeves -- still beating -- that had given her a screaming nightmare two nights later.

Fortunately, Remus had been away that night. Remus had been away many nights, and she had been away on so many others. As dark blurred into light and grey against white, it nagged at her, how he had not seemed inclined to spare any time for her memory the night of her death, but she told herself again and again, *it doesn't mean he isn't mourning you.*

No, but it doesn't mean he is, an inner demon retorted.

You will get nowhere, Tonks admonished herself, *maundering over whether he ever loved you as much as you loved him.*

It's not as if you're going anywhere as it is, the demon replied.



A frantic fluttering. A Stunning spell. Then an extended period of stillness before another jumble of dark and light and mustiness. Confined within the feather, Tonks couldn't tell if Elspeth had been freeze-dried or merely indefinitely Petrified, but it wasn't as if the change had altered the framework of her own existence. *Her death should have released me -- but does that work on Dark spells? Damn, damn, damn, damn, damn...*



When she was finally, suddenly, freed from the feather, toppling over the edge of a table, Tonks heard the clatter of a knife and then a string of guttural oaths and violent cursing. As her senses adjusted to human-scale sensations once more, she realised most of the shouting was coming from a very angry Severus Snape, all of it directed at a slender, sallow-faced man she recognised as Clive Hiverfond, a man she had thought to be an ally of the Order.

Gesturing furiously at the bleeding bird, Snape shouted at the other man, "You. Coward. With fastidious nincompoops like you, no wonder this war will never --"

"It's not like that at all," the other man insisted. "At least you can use --"

"Utility be damned!" Snape spat. "That's all any of you think of. *Oh, we need a murderer -- Snape is just the man!*"

He slashed his wand through the air. As the body of the thrush careened into Hiverfond's chest, Snape continued, "Take her with you and do your own dirty work."

"Don't you think you should Legilimise her? Find out what--"

"I'm not going to waste any more of time on *that* bird-brain. Seeing that even *you* managed to catch her--"

"Right, right, fine," the man muttered. Cradling the bird against his chest, he looked around the room with an air of hastily collecting his belongings -- and then, only then, did he seem truly to register that Tonks was staring at him. Hiverfond swallowed, tightened his hold on the bird, and said, "Right. I'm going to Lupin."

"You -- what? No!" Tonks shrieked. *Must keep Remus sa--*

Snape bellowed "*Enfermatôme!*" the instant before she crashed into the spot from which the man had Disapparated. *Out of Dark frying pans into Dark fires,* she thought to herself.

Aloud, she said to Snape, "Over my dead body."

Snape sneered at that. "Is there a live one that's escaped our notice?"

"You utter bastard. Though I should thank you, I suppose, for your hen-carving skills."

"I assure you, your rescue was hardly on my mind." Snape scowled. "I hope Lupin tans Hiverfond's hide."

"You-- *what?* What does Remus have to do with any of this?" Tonks bounced up from the floor and hurled herself at her captor. "Snape, so help me --"

"Oh, for the love of Emrys," Snape snapped, "cool your heels, you daft bint." As she careened straight through him, he snatched up the knife he had dropped, inspecting the blade for damage. "Seeing that Hiverfond managed not to splinch himself, I imagine Lupin will find his way here soon enough. And then -- ah, see, what did I tell you?"

Remus, breathing as if he'd been running, had Apparated into the middle of the room. He took two steps toward Snape and demanded, "Are you all right?"

Snape narrowed his eyes. "Why are you asking that when *she's* here?"

"*Is she...?*" Remus frowned and stepped back, the better to sweep his eyes around the room. "Hiverfond claimed she was, but where...?"

Tonks had seen a number of expressions on Severus Snape's face over the years, ranging from condescension and contempt to fury and foaming-at-the-mouth.

"Dumbfounded," however, was a new one. *And not a half-bad look on him, actually.*

Aloud, she said, "Goddammit, Remus Lupin. Am I going to have to forgive you for being right?"

Snape's head swivelled around to her. "Right about what?"

Remus said, in a too-calm voice, "Severus, if this is *your* idea of a prank, I believe I'll take you up on that duel after all."

Snape whirled back around to face Remus. "You can't seriously think I would -- *Hiverfond*, Lupin. Who in their right mind would conspire with *him*?"

"Well, no," Remus admitted. "I thought that unlikely. And since *I* know how to turn animals back into people, Madame Elspeth Craig is now in the custody of Mr. Shackbolt. So she survived your little bloodletting, for all the good that'll do her."

Tonks noticed the infinitesimal release of tension in the set of Snape's shoulders at the word "survived." *Fuck me blind*, she thought. *He doesn't actually enjoy the killing?* "You still haven't answered my question, Remus."

Snape turned around once again. "And you haven't answered mine. What do you mean, he was right?"

Remus stepped up to Snape, gently pried the handle of the knife out of the other man's fist, and peered at the blood still crusted on the blade. As Snape turned back to him, he bestowed a wry grimace on the other man. "Even if I had any inclination to consider this a joke, I know you well enough to know you wouldn't treat your tools this carelessly." Cocking his head, he added, "How did *Hiverfond* manage to trick you into slicing into *Madame Craig*?"

"Dosed the bird with Draught of Living Death," Snape said. "And mistle thrush broth makes a superlative glue when mixed with silvertoe vine-powder--"

"Which, as a binder of books, *Hiverfond* would be keen on keeping on hand," Remus concluded.

"Exactly. So when he said he had a commission for me to execute, it didn't occur to me the son of a bitch meant for me to be *literal* about it." Snape retrieved the knife from Remus and hissed a charm to clean the blade.

Remus leaned against the table. "Tonks wasn't the first murder she'd joined in on, you know. *Hiverfond* had a sister."

"Ah," Snape and Tonks said, both at same time. Then they reflexively glared at each other.

Remus stared at the spot where Snape had aimed his glare. Tonks could practically sense him *willing* himself

to see her where she stood, but the spark of recognition remained absent from his face.

After a taut, tense silence, Remus knelt in front of Snape, locking his eyes with the other man's. "I hoped I wouldn't have to ask," he softly said, "but I see no other way I can join your conversation with her. Please, let me in."

"No," Snape automatically replied. "You ask too much."

"Do I?" Remus murmured, "I've asked you for very little, up to now. I didn't *ask* you for the Wolfsbane, though I'm grateful beyond words. I didn't *ask* you to set your wards to allow me in at any time, though I'm well aware that we're safer here than anywhere else in Britain, thanks to Draco and Peter doing each other in."

"As if I could have truly kept you out," Snape retorted. "I'm not fooled by you, Lupin." He added, grudgingly, "All your faults notwithstanding, you are as well-versed in barrier spells as any other salamander-brain hired by Albus."

Remus observed, without rancour, "There were many years without Wolfsbane. Keeping myself *in* as well as keeping other people out was a top priority once a month."

"So that's how you recognised the *Certesbielde* the night Dumbledore died," Tonks murmured.

Snape jerked back, eyes wide. "You..."

Remus leaned forward. "What did she just say?"

Snape said, his voice husky, "*Certesbielde*..."

Remus captured Snape's hands in his. "That night -- that stair-blocking curse you cast? Something about it kept nagging at me, and not because I ended up with a sprained elbow when it threw me back. Everyone else assumed you'd cast something Dark, but I taught DADA too, and I *know* a Dark spell when I run into it."

"Miss Tonks," Snape said, "what did Professor Lupin have to say about *Certesbielde* spells?"

"That they aren't Dark," she recited. "And that they're not even all that complicated," she added, earning a glower from Snape. She continued, "That they're traditionally used as sheltering spells. They keep animals from following their masters into danger and thwart children too intent on going where their parents went. There are legends about them being used to forestall the recently bereaved from throwing themselves into the graves of loved ones."

"Salazar be praised, Lupin didn't make a scene over yours," Snape muttered.

"You were there?" Tonks said, startled.

"Are you talking about graves?" Remus asked. "There were crocuses on hers last week."

"Who did you think Lupin had to meet the night you died?" Snape said to Tonks.

"His rendezvous was with *you*?" Tonks's voice rose. "He chose *you over me*?"

Snape rolled his eyes. "He didn't have a choice that night, you stupid woman. It was meet with me or get me killed."

"For Christ's sake," Remus interrupted. "If you're going to argue about me, *let me in*."

"There's nothing to argue about," Snape said. "We're talking about people merely doing what they must."

Tonks had floated in front of him so that *she* could look him in the eyes. "Only what they must? You're one to talk."

Remus simultaneously exclaimed, "'Merely'? Do you think I've been meeting you all this time 'merely' because I must?"

As their words overlapped, Snape glared at them both and then dropped his head into his hands. Remus turned to the empty space Snape had scowled at and tentatively said, "Tonks...?"

At that, Snape jerked his head up and said, "*Fine*. I will not have you say I kept her from you."

Remus glared back, exasperation writ large across his features. "Severus, it's *not* about -- oh, sod it. *Legilimens!*"

Tonks could tell the instant she became visible to him: his face lit up with the same pleasure he had shown the nights she'd arrived home safe. It was a subtle change in his expression -- a casual observer would have mistaken it for the same mask of reserve Remus wore for most of his interactions with other people -- but she had watched him so closely for so long that she could tell the difference.

And, apparently, so could Snape, if the man's flinch at the same instant was anything to go by. Which suggested that Snape had likely been studying Remus just as closely for just as long.

Which... the taunts and jibes Snape had needlessly directed at her all the last year suddenly took on a different colour. She had assumed he despised Remus as much as he'd hated her cousin -- and, until now, that's why she hadn't truly believed Remus's conclusions about the *Certesbielde* --

Gazing at both of the men, she quietly said to Snape, "Remus is convinced there were *two* barrier spells cast

on the stairs the night Dumbledore died."

Snape said, "That *would* have been doing more what was necessary. A simple 'Keep Out!' incantation would have sufficed."

Remus said, "Would have, yes. It would have kept out both friend and foe -- and also you yourself. That's why Minerva and Harry thought the first barrier had been Dark -- something able to let through only Death Eaters, since you ran right through it as though it hadn't been there."

Snape snorted. "As if anyone there that night had the wits required --"

Remus said, a little too casually, "They could have perused a book someone left for them to find."

Tonks had no idea what Remus was on about. Snape flushed but said only, "That was something that had to be done."

"So it was," Remus agreed, "but how you helped Harry isn't the issue at hand."

"No?" Snape said. "My vaunted ability to run through a barrier --"

"A barrier *that wasn't there* by the time you reached it," Remus said. "As you say, it doesn't take brains to cast a 'Keep Out' curse. It doesn't take much in the way of brains to dispel it. Which is why I was gobsmacked when I couldn't follow you up those stairs."

Snape manufactured a sneer. "You were shocked I wanted to keep you out?"

Remus said, "I was stunned that your *Certesbielde* could keep me out. Since it works only on people for whom the caster is willing to die."

Snape retorted, "And also on devoted animals."

Remus conceded, "There is that. But in spite of your penchant for calling me a beast, I somehow doubt you've ever seen me as your pet."

Which leaves the category of "*willing to die for Remus*," Tonks thought.

Snape said to Remus, "You are confident of your conclusions."

"I'm quite familiar with *Certesbielde*," Remus said. His voice steady, he added, "I almost cast it on Harry the night Sirius fell through the veil."

"*Willing to die for* does not mean *in love with*, Lupin."

Tonks spoke up. "He never claimed you were. But *I* say you are."

Snape whipped his head toward her, but then remembered Remus would not be able to see or hear her without the Legilimetic connection. As he re-established the contact, Tonks slid behind Remus, wrapping her arms around his shoulders. He was unnaturally still, although his right hand stole up to her left wrist, hovering where he would have once felt a pulse.

She couldn't resist. "*Why so wan and pale, fond lover? Prithee, why so pale?*"

Remus choked out a laugh. "You're terrible. Nice to know some things haven't changed."

She nuzzled his ear. "It *is* nice," she echoed, "but it won't do."

"No," Remus nodded. "Severus doesn't owe me this."

"Better here with me," Snape reluctantly stated, "than elsewhere without."

Tonks couldn't feel Remus's flesh, but she could see how the drape of his robes shifted as his shoulders tensed. She couldn't see his face, but she was familiar with how his throat would be working -- how new creases would have appeared at the corners of his mouth as he scrambled for an appropriate response. She'd seen that expression often enough during their own pre-relationship arguments.

And had she looked like Snape did now -- not nearly as greasy or curdled or worn, thank Godric, but with that same terrible yearning (*I want all of you, body and soul, but I'll take what I can get*)? She said, slowly, "You're the one who's alive, Snape. And you're the one who cast the *Enfermatôme*. A *Finite Incantatem* and a manoeuvre against a wall -- that's all it would take to banish me right back to the boutique."

"There's still a war on," Snape informed her. "I won't do that to Lupin."

Tonks took a deep breath. "I can't help existing. I can't help having existed. But you're willing to die for Remus, and I'm not in your way."

Snape bestowed on her a sour smile. "You won't stop me from dying, is what you mean?"

Remus said, teeth clenched, "Don't even joke about that."

Snape froze, arrested by the expression on Remus's face. Tonks drifted around his shoulder to see for herself.

Oh. Oh, it hurt, that that look was for someone other than her. But then he tried to look at her, forgetting he could see her only within Snape's mind, and the flash of anguish across his face -- *oh, love, I never should have doubted you.*

"You see," Snape said to her, as if the matter were settled.

"You don't do him justice," she snapped at him.

Remus stood up and grabbed Snape's shoulders, looking dangerously close to shaking the other man. "Severus, I loved her and I always will," he said. He pressed a hand against Snape's chin, forcing the other man to look him in the eyes once more. "But if I cast a *Certesbielde* right this moment, it would most certainly keep you out."

"A willingness to die is not a proof of love," Snape intoned.

"Neither are kisses," Tonks said, "but they're far more fun than the dying. What the hell are you waiting for?"

"It's not all up to me," Snape retorted.

"No," Remus agreed, his voice thick. "But..." He looked at Tonks, who gazed back at him sadly.

"Snape's alive," she said. "I'm not. And better him than Isabelle Vautour."

"I'm not putting on a show for you," Snape hissed, wrenching himself free from Remus's grip. "*Finite Incantatem.*"

She heard Remus's intake of breath as he saw her outside of Snape's mind, but she didn't feel any different from the moment before, other than the new frisson of danger: one false step and *she* would be the one outside of the three, even though Snape seemed utterly convinced Remus would choose her.

She pinned both men with a stare and said, "You don't get to use me as an excuse. If you're scared of what comes next --"

She smirked as they both reacted.

"I am *not* a coward!" Snape snarled.

"Tonks, I'm not a saint," Remus groaned.

"I know," she said, "but you need to prove it to *him*." She glided behind him, drew her hand back and gestured as if she were shoving against his shoulderblades. While Remus couldn't feel or see her pushing him, Snape instantly rushed forward to catch him.

She smirked again as Snape swore at her upon realizing he'd been tricked into the contact. He had ripped only a single oath at her, however, when Remus crushed his mouth against his, silencing whatever Snape had intended to shout next. Tonks savoured Remus's muffled groan as Snape clutched his arms, and, oh *God*, Remus's hands lifting up to stroke Snape's hair and sliding down to grope Snape's arse and Snape hungrily kissing Remus's cheek and lips and jaw and lips again and throat and lips yet again and *more more more*.

Tonks's own mouth tingled with the memory of such kisses -- how they had felt like being drenched in a cascade of fire, flowing and searing and so much *everywhereness* in each glide and nip and press of lips against skin and tongue. Tonks could feel herself starting to melt into a blessed nothingness as she watched the two men devour each other -- not enough to disappear completely, but enough to crave more of it.

I was meant to see this, she realised. If this is what it takes...

Snape broke away from Remus, gasping, his hands possessively sliding over Remus's limbs and chest and hips even as he locked eyes once more with Remus. "Too soon?" he challenged. "Too much?"

"Not enough," Remus panted. "Don't you *dare* think it's enough, now we've started."

Snape eased them to the ground and splayed his palms across Remus's chest. "What are you willing to give me?"

Remus stared back at him, every bit his match in aggression. "As much as you're willing to take. You think I won't be enough?"

Tonks said to Snape, "At least he's not giving you the 'too old, too poor' song and dance."

His shoulders shaking, Snape lowered his mouth to Remus's. As the kiss deepened between them, Tonks again felt the force of their passion surge through her own ghostly fibres. *Whatever forced me to linger -- this is part of its answer.* She watched avidly as Snape's hands roamed all over Remus's body, deftly undoing buttons and fastenings, and her heart soared at the sight of Remus writhing in pleasure as Snape's mouth travelled from lips to throat to nipple to navel.

As Snape pulled the last folds of cloth away from Remus's hips and legs, Tonks couldn't resist drifting closer. Her eyes still focused on her beloved's face, she began to speak into Snape's ear.

...You see that birthmark just inside his thigh? He can't get enough of being licked right there, especially if you're stroking the backs of his knees at the same time. No, that's too light -- it should be almost a pinch, but not so hard that it stings. Yeah, oh yeah, just like that -- you see how much he likes it? And when you've had enough of that, there's also this spot, just to the right of his cock. Just scrape your teeth there -- oh, doesn't he sound so good? I don't know why it doesn't work on the left. His body's just weird that way. Stay away from his ankles -- something's not right

down there. No ropes, no chains, no leather -- he does like clothes pegs, though. Metal, not wood. Up and down the ribs and thighs --

Tonks watched Remus's right fist beat against the ground as Snape's fingers lightly pinched their way down and up where the clothes pegs would have gone, his breathing increasingly ragged as Snape revisited his birthmark, tonguing its outline over and over. When Snape's hand closed over Remus's erection, Tonks eased herself away from his side, gliding to a spot where she could view Remus's entire body as it responded to the attention Snape was now lavishing on his member. She savoured the raw, desperate note in Remus's moans as Snape alternated stroking and sucking him, and the way Remus's fists continued to pound the floor as he struggled not to come, not so soon, not just yet...

There. Oh, yes. Yes, yes, yes... Tonks basked in the bliss streaming through her phantom veins, feeling lighter and lighter as Remus lost all control, his hands uncurling as pleasure consumed him. Even with his lips and fingers still wrapped around Remus's cock, Snape radiated satisfaction. *He's almost handsome when he looks like that,* Tonks hazily mused. *And he actually listened to me...*

Snape stretched back up toward Remus, and Remus lifted his head just enough for their lips to meet in a long, seeking kiss. Cupping his hand against Snape's hardness, Remus murmured, "Shall we continue in your bedroom?"

Snape's expression was a curious mix of tenderness and trepidation. He moistened his lips several times before he managed to say "Yes."

Remus turned his head to look at Tonks, his gaze suffused with both wonder and sorrow. "You..."

She drifted up to them. Snape whispered, "You've become almost invisible."

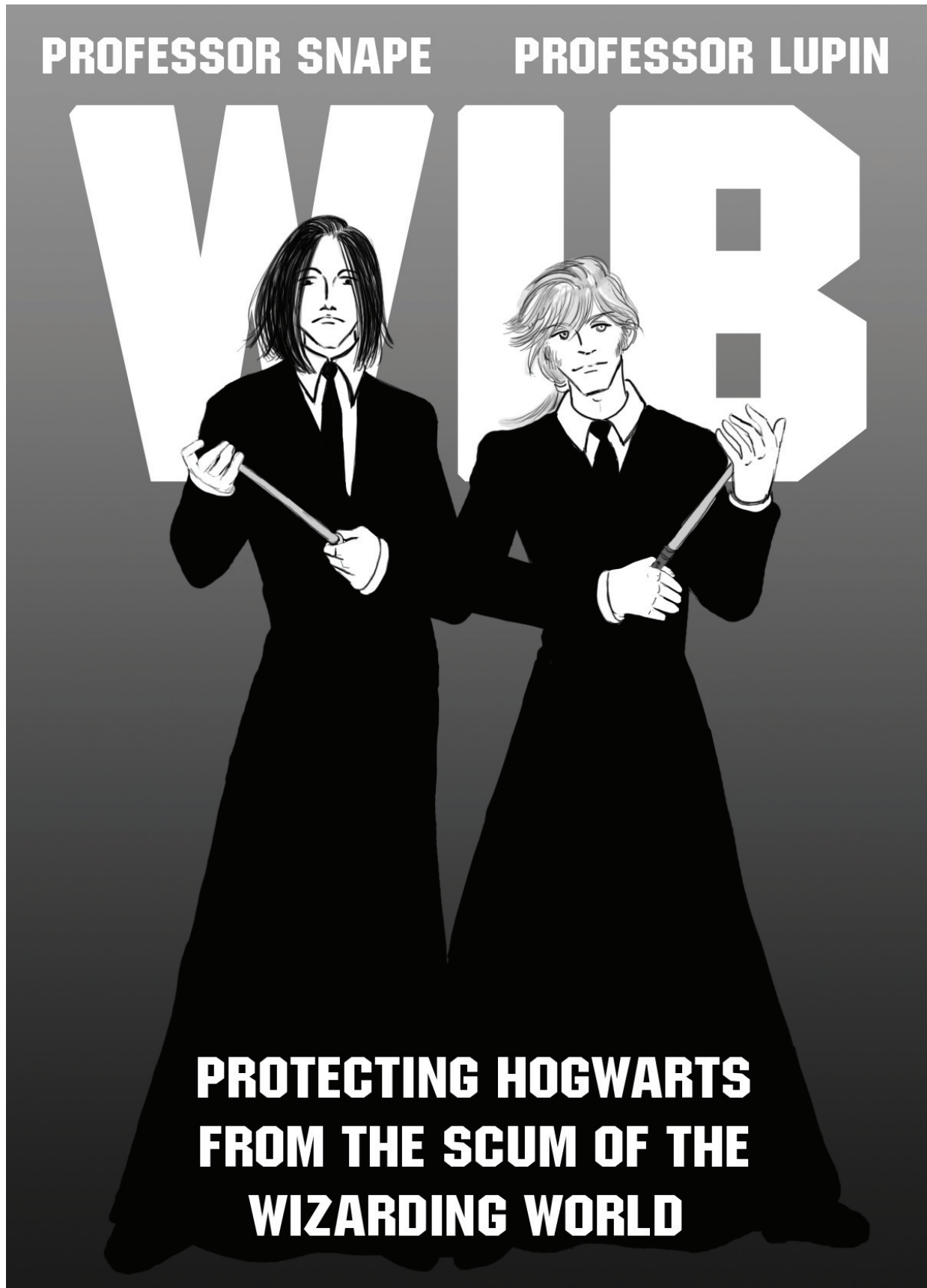
She simply replied, "I trust you'll take care...?"

She saw his arm tighten around Remus as he answered, "To my dying breath."

"Good," she said, and focused one last time on Remus. Acting on pure instinct, she leaned in and pressed her lips to his brow.

There. This is a better farewell.

The thought resonated through her entire being as she finally, fully melted into the peace of nothingness.



WIB by Karasu Hime

❧ *The Gates of Hell* ❧

by Mnemosyne_1

On the days of the full moon, Remus Lupin wears the Gates of Hell under his patched clothes. It's one last measure of control that he is able to grant himself before the inevitability of the change.

Each month before taking the Gates out of their locked drawer, Remus wanks in the shower and carefully dries himself off. Gently, he runs a thumb along the black leather strap, the steel snaps on each leather ring glinting at him as he reaches for his now-flaccid cock. First is the largest strap, wrapping snugly around the base of his cock to snap behind his balls. Next comes a leather ring fastened just above the base of his cock, then one around the middle and one just below the head.

As the last steel snap goes into place, Remus gives a sigh of relief, the weight of the Gates a steady reminder that he is a man. He is not bound by base urges and desires, but binds them. It is one last measure of control he grants himself before being taken over by the wolf.

By lunch Remus is half hard, and by tea his cock strains against the leather straps. He will not touch himself until just before moonrise, when he stimulates himself to as intense an orgasm as he can manage in an attempt to relax himself, controlling the pain of the change.

He has never let anyone see this. No one knows, aside from himself. Lovers, even Tonks, were never allowed to touch him on the day of the full moon. He relishes the secret, as he savors the pleasure-pain of the Gates that bind him.

It is natural, Remus thinks, that Severus should discover this secret about him. After all, Severus has discovered everything else.

The potions master is now working for the Ministry — pardoned and free, as long as he uses his skills to aid their objectives. He brings Remus the Wolfsbane once a month, along with familiar words of derision.

They are an unexpected comfort in Remus' quiet and now solitary life.

Harry visits, on rare occasions, and a few others even less frequently, but Severus, bound by the schedule of the Wolfsbane, is the one consistency in his life. Severus and the moon and the Gates of Hell.

So when Severus does not show up on the day of the next full moon, does not supply Remus either the Wolfsbane or the thrill of having one last dirty secret to keep, Remus is irritated, then worried.

It has never been like Severus to be anything less than dependable, however much he hates such a Hufflepuffian word.

So when the clock reaches 30 minutes to moonrise, Remus resigns himself to the fact that Severus will not make it in time and sets about his pre-change routine. Silencing charms up, floo blocked, wards to keep the wolf in. He used to set wards to keep others out, until Remus decided that since everyone knows, it is on their own heads if they're foolish enough to enter his flat during a full moon.

Remus undresses himself and lies back on the bed, running a finger along the straps of the Gates of Hell. His cock has been leaking pre-come in anticipation since he set the wards.

He works hard at giving himself a shattering orgasm right before moonrise — a relaxed body handles the change better. The best transformations are ones after he's come hard enough to pass out, not that it's easily achieved with just masturbation. Remus has discovered the Gates of Hell are an essential tool in this endeavour.

Bringing a finger to his lips, Remus gently licks the pre-come off, then runs his wet finger over a nipple. He feels it bud beneath his fingertip and pinches it, shivering as his cock responds to the stimulus.

His other hand is on his thigh, gently tracing patterns on the sensitive inner skin. Remus makes a point of touching as much of his body as he can on this night, drawing the pleasure out. He usually rides his fingers hard, imagining the feeling of someone inside him.

He is so involved in the sensations his hands bring that he fails to feel the wards shiver or hear the soft crack of Apparition.

"Lupin, you must take this... bloody fucking hell!"

Remus closes his eyes and wills this to be a bad dream, a boggart, anything but Severus Snape discovering his final secret. He can only imagine the picture he makes, sprawled on soft cotton sheets, knees wide, hands touching himself, cock high and bound with now-glistening leather, matching leather band squeezed around his balls.

"Lupin, you should drink this directly." Since Remus' eyes are closed, he hears Severus' voice more acutely, and he notices a subtle shakiness which he otherwise would have overlooked. So Remus opens his eyes, grasps the goblet and drains it while meeting Severus' eyes.

He sets the empty goblet on the table next to him and says, voice rough from the painful burn of the potion, "The change is easier when I am as relaxed as possible."

"I see." Severus' voice has gone very deep, and his dark eyes take in Remus' splayed and wanton body. "Do you require... assistance?"

Shocked, Remus replies, "Not usually." Hardly believing his own daring, he continues, "but I wouldn't object if it were offered."

To have another pair of hands on his body is intoxicating on this of all days, and Remus finds himself responding as he never has to his own touch. Long, slender fingers pluck at a nipple, press his perineum, trace his collarbone and Remus arches up into the contact.

Bending, Severus presses a kiss to his jaw, then slowly works his way down Remus' neck, licking and sucking and nipping. Remus will have marks to hide tomorrow and he delights in the fact that Severus is giving him another secret to replace the one he's taken away.

Severus swipes his agile tongue across a nipple before biting down, and Remus hisses in pleasure, twining his fingers in thick, greasy locks. With a final tug, Severus releases the dark, tight nipple, moving to give the other the same attention.

As Severus traces patterns down Remus' stomach with his tongue, his hands slowly move up Remus' thighs. They come close to meeting and Remus groans, spreading his legs wide.

"Fuck me," he begs, but he feels Severus' head shake under his hands.

"No time left," Severus says, and Remus' incipient protest is cut off as a rough tongue laves the head of his cock. Severus' hands have disappeared for a moment, but their absence is explained when they return, now covered in lube.

"Yes," Remus moans as Severus takes him in hand, squeezing his cock between the leather rings. "Yes!"

A questing finger has found its way to Remus' hole and slides in slowly, searching. Two fingers, and Remus arches up into Severus' mouth as his prostate is stroked.

"God, yes," he pants, "hurry. The moon..."

Sucking the head of Remus' cock and inserting a third finger, Severus manages to unsnap the Gates of Hell with his free hand. Remus gasps in pleasure-pain as his cock and balls are released, and screams as Severus swallows him down to the root while pressing hard against his prostate.

Remus comes long and hard, feeling the beginnings of the change prickle under his skin, and as he falls into a welcome blackness, he hears a barely audible crack of Apparition next to him.



Remus has thought about the last full moon every day since, and worries that it was a never-to-be-repeated aberration. Neither of them has contacted the other. Now he paces anxiously in loose trousers and vest, feeling the welcome weight of the Gates of Hell pushing against his trouser front as he waits for Severus, wondering when he will arrive and what he might be willing to do.

An hour before moonrise, there is a knock and Remus opens the door almost before the third rap of knuckles. Draining the potion quickly, Remus follows it with a glass of water as Severus watches, seeming half-bemused, half-aroused.

There is now nothing that needs saying, so Remus pulls Severus into a fierce kiss, their first, and one of firm lips and tangling tongues. Arms wrap tightly around Remus' waist, and he moans into Severus' mouth as his bound cock presses tightly against the other man's hip. Remus slides his hands up and around Severus' shoulders, feeling the brush of long hair along his arms.

When Remus pulls away to catch his breath, Severus moves to his jaw, his neck, his ear and Remus can't help but melt under the attack of kisses.

"Do you still want me to fuck you?" Severus whispers in his ear, and in response, Remus grabs him by the front of his robes and drags him into the bedroom.

He treasures the stifled chuckle that is drawn from Severus.

As Remus unfastens Severus' robes, he discovers that the man has worn nothing underneath, and delights in the pale, smooth skin revealed as he pushes the robes completely off. It is a second's work for Severus to toe off his shoes, and Severus is standing naked and wanting before him.

It is a heady sight and Remus can't resist wrapping himself around Severus, running his hands down Severus' back to his arse, cupping and massaging the surprisingly abundant flesh as he kisses Severus fiercely.

Slim hands slide under Remus' vest, accidentally hitting a ticklish spot, and Remus laughs, twisting away. Severus' smirk tells him that spot has been noted.

Severus tugs on the vest as Remus raises his arms and it joins Severus' robe on the floor. The bite scar is on Remus' back, and he can feel Severus tracing it.

For a moment he wonders if this reminder of the truths of lycanthropy will send Severus away, but Remus shakes himself out of that thought. Severus brings him the Wolfsbane every month and has known about Remus for almost 30 years. He has not forgotten.

A nip just below his ear brings Remus back to the here and now, and Severus murmurs, "Are you ever going to let go of my arse?"

"I like your arse," Remus says, and squeezes for emphasis. "I didn't realize you had such a nice arse or I would have made an effort to touch it much sooner."

He moves on, though, just to make Severus happy, and as his tongue explores Severus' mouth once again, Remus' hands discover that Severus is thin and strong, with muscles defined from years of stirring and lifting cauldrons and running up and down dungeon stairs. This, his libido decides, is an excellent thing.

Severus pulls back to unfasten Remus' trousers, and Re-

mus can't repress a relieved sigh when his constrained cock pulls free... and rises only as far as the Gates of Hell will let it. He moans in protest and arousal, fighting the urge to remove the Gates himself, but Severus catches Remus' hand before it can move any closer to his tightly-bound cock.

"Tonight," Severus breathes in his ear, "this belongs to me."

"Yes," Remus agrees instantly, twisting his hips to make the trousers fall. He steps out of them and tugs on Severus' hands, leading him to the bed.

They strip the bed of blankets, leaving nothing to get in their way. Severus summons his own jar of lube from a pocket in his robe, and Remus laughs, suddenly realizing that he is more than aroused.

He is happy.

It is a strange and exhilarating feeling, and one that he has not felt in far too long.

Sliding onto the bed, Remus pulls himself back towards the headboard, and Severus follows him, kneeling between Remus' bent legs. Severus sets the now-uncapped jar on the bedside table and leans in to kiss Remus again, one hand braced on the bed while the other trails up Remus' calf.

"God, I want you," Remus says as Severus attacks his collarbone with kisses and nips, and the other man freezes for a moment before continuing. This may be convenient for both of them, but that doesn't lessen Remus' desire for Severus' pale skin, slender hands and long, thick cock.

Remus feels like time is growing short, and he squirms under Severus' ministrations, wanting him to speed up. Raising an eyebrow, Severus grabs a hip and flips him over easily. Remus rocks on his hands and knees and keens as Severus spreads his arse cheeks and shoves his tongue into Remus' hole.

God, it has been years since anyone has done this to him, and no one quite as desperately as this. Remus shoves back into Severus' face, begging incoherently. Severus pulls away, only to suck at his balls, tongue tracing the lines of the leather straps. Slender fingers dig into Remus' hips as Severus moves back to the tender hole, driving his tongue inside between licks and nips of the puckered entrance.

Remus suddenly finds himself on his back again, with Severus' tongue seeking entrance in his mouth. Gladly he opens, sharing the musky taste of himself and arching up as he feels two lubed fingers press into him.

Fumbling for the jar, Remus manages to grasp enough lubricant to smooth all over Severus' erection, and he takes his time making sure it is covered completely as he rocks back and forth on Severus' fingers. The fingers disappear, and Remus has no time to mourn the loss as his legs are hooked over Severus' shoulders and, with one hard thrust, Severus enters him completely.

Remus gasps, clenching, and Severus stills, dark eyes meeting Remus' as he waits for Remus to adjust.

"Move," Remus growls, and Severus does, pulling nearly all the way out before slamming back in. Remus is bent in two, is being fucked into the mattress, and he cries out in pleasure, scoring his nails along Severus' back. Each thrust in and each pull out hits Remus' prostate, and he begs for release, unable to take anymore.

His cock is straining against the leather bands, and Remus feels Severus grasp it, trying to release the bands with one hand while still pumping in and out of Remus' arse. Finally, after Remus is incoherent with pleasure, struggling to come, the final band is released, and he can feel Severus' hand wrap fully around his cock, tugging him to completion.

Screaming as he comes, Remus can barely feel his own desperate arch as he clenches tight around Severus' cock, drawing the other man's orgasm from him. Spent, they collapse onto the bed, Remus carefully sliding his legs from Severus' shoulders, stretching them out in the hope that they won't cramp. Severus is a welcome weight across his body, but he can feel the moon about to rise.

"A few minutes," Remus says, voice rough. His throat will be sore tomorrow, from all the screaming. Severus slowly rolls off of him and reaches for his wand to perform a quick cleaning spell on them both. Sleepy now, Remus watches the other man slide quickly into his robes, picking up his shoes in one hand as he reaches for his wand with the other.

"Thank you," Remus whispers, and Severus pauses before leaning down for one last kiss.

"I will see you next month," Severus promises, and Disapparates.

For the first time in his life, Remus looks forward to the next full moon.



The full moon evenings are variations on a theme for the next eight months, replete with Severus and sex and toys in addition to Remus' usual Gates of Hell. Remus is still a bit embarrassed about the previous month and his eager reactions to the giant dildo. He doesn't want Severus to believe that Remus thinks he isn't big enough, because he is. Dildos are very nice, but another person is infinitely better.

When Remus is being very honest with himself, he will admit that it is Severus that is infinitely better, not simply the presence of another body. He is not quite sure how to broach the subject of perhaps wanting Severus to come around more than once a month. The most time they have spent together is an hour and a half of sex every 28 days, and really, that isn't much to base a relationship on.

Though, technically, he thinks, we have known each other for years.

He's not sure if Severus will see it the same way, and Remus is a bit worried that he'll discover that Severus just sees these nights as the opportunity for some good sex, and nothing more.

It is three hours too early for Severus yet, so Remus is sprawled on his couch flipping idly through a book, cock a significant bulge in his thin pajama pants due to the Gates of Hell, when someone knocks at the door. Hoping it isn't Harry and preparing to summon an outer robe just in case, Remus peeks through the peephole in his flat door.

It is Severus, and Remus panics, wondering why he is here already. Perhaps Severus means to put an end to their routine, and is simply dropping off the Wolfsbane as he used to do. He doesn't realize how long he has stood motionless until Severus knocks again, impatiently.

Jarred into motion, Remus swings the door wide, then feels a grand sense of relief when Severus eyes the bulge in Remus' pajama bottoms and licks his lips. Apparently Severus has something planned that requires more time than usual, though this means that Remus is a bit unprepared. He chugs the potion and heads for the kitchen to get a glass of water.

Remus nearly drops the glass when he feels hands on his waist and a kiss on his neck, but manages to finish off the water without spilling any. He turns around and braces himself on the sink.

"Any particular reason you're here early?" Remus asks, smiling to show he doesn't mind at all.

"I had a thought," Severus says, kissing him. Remus teases Severus' lips with his tongue, and Severus responds immediately, sucking Remus' tongue into his mouth and twining it with his own. They are lost in moments of heady kisses, snogging like teenagers in the kitchen.

"A thought?" Remus prompts breathlessly when they finally pull apart.

"My thought is that if one orgasm before the change helps you relax," Severus says, tracing the shell of Remus' ear with his tongue, "then two will help you even more."

Remus shivers at that. "Oh, yes."

He pushes Severus toward the bedroom, because if Remus is only getting sex one evening a month, he really prefers to be comfortable. Along the way, Severus loses his shoes, one by one in the kitchen, then Remus drops his pajama bottoms by the couch, and Severus leaves his robe at the bedroom door. Naked, Remus guides Severus to the bed, pushing the covers aside.

Usually Severus focuses their attention on Remus, but tonight Remus wants to return the favour. Leaning in for a kiss, he gently pushes Severus onto the bed. He explores Severus' body slowly, memorizing the curve of his ribs, the jut of his hips, the arch of his feet. Finally, as Severus clutches the bedclothes in impatience, Remus drags his tongue along the underside of Severus' cock and looks up to meet a pair of smouldering eyes.

Remus gently sucks Severus' head into his mouth, sliding his tongue into the slit as he grasps the base of the cock. He lets go quickly as Severus reaches down and drags Remus up his body, calling him a bloody tease.

"Now you know how I feel most months," Remus says, laughing, and kisses Severus.

He sprawls across Severus happily, leather-bound cock rubbing against Severus' stomach as the other man massages his arse. Fingers brush Remus' entrance and he hums low in his throat and reaches for the jar of lubricant.

"Oh, now you want to hurry up?" Severus asks, smirking as Remus slicks Severus' erection thoroughly.

Remus arches back and slowly lowers himself down on Severus' cock.

"Careful," Severus whispers when Remus pauses to let himself adjust.

Bracing his hands against Severus' chest, Remus lowers himself the final few inches and sighs as he seats himself firmly. He rests a moment, then lifts up, Severus' hands gripping his hips tightly. They come together awkwardly at first, then with a growing rhythm.

Severus' eyes catch his own and Remus cannot look away as he draws closer and closer to orgasm. It is there, at that moment when Severus reaches to release the Gates of Hell, that Remus realizes how much he cares for this man.

Then the Gates are opened and Remus cries out as Severus surges up, slamming into his prostate one last time before coming. Wrapping one hand around Remus' cock and an arm around Remus' waist, Severus leans up for a kiss while pumping Remus' cock furiously. An interminable moment later, Remus' completion finally follows.

They slump to the bed, arms wrapped around each other, trying to catch their breath. Severus gropes for his wand and casts a quick cleaning charm before pulling the blankets up over them both, and Remus can feel himself smiling idiotically as they curl into each other and doze off.

When Remus wakes some time later, he is on his side with Severus spooning him, one arm around his waist and the other under Remus' head, face pressed into Remus' neck. He has the thought that *this* is how they would wake in the morning, if Severus came on nights other than the full moon, and Remus knows he will ask Severus if this is possible, or simply wishful thinking on Remus' part.

Remus rolls over in the circle of Severus' arms and kisses him, causing Severus to stir, nose wrinkling in a way Remus will never tell him is absolutely adorable. Remus has many wishes, but none of them is a death wish.

"Don't worry," Remus says when Severus opens his eyes. "It's still a while until moonrise."

"Not worried," Severus mutters. "I have an excellent sense of timing."

"And an excellent sense of self-preservation?" Remus teases, daring to place a kiss on Severus' nose.

"Hmm." Severus frowns, but doesn't pull away.

It's now or never.

"I had a thought too, you know," Remus says, heart beating fast. "You can come other nights besides this one, and stay."

Severus blinks, then focuses hard on Remus' eyes. "Stay?"

"If you want," Remus says quickly. "You don't have to, it's just a thought."

"You..." Severus hesitates. "I wouldn't be... intruding?"

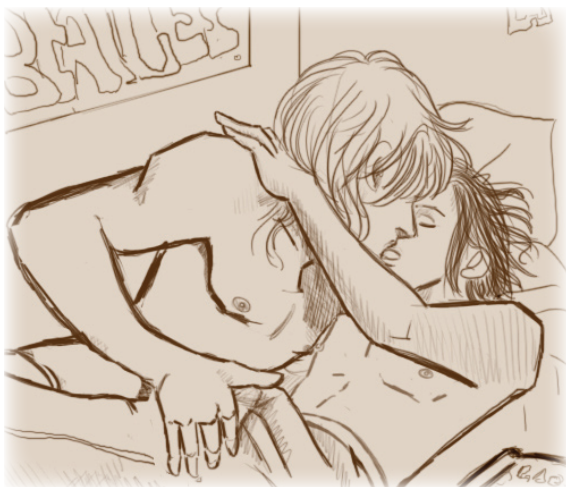
Remus is surprised at how unsure Severus seems. "No, not at all," he replies, trying to be reassuring. "Most months you're the only person I see, and I wouldn't mind seeing you more. If you want to come by."

"I'd like that," Severus says, quiet and intense. "I did not know..." He takes a deep breath. "I assumed that I was needed, not wanted."

"No." Remus gives a shaky laugh, hopeful now that Severus will be more to him than one night of pleasure and relief. "I've never needed anyone on full moon nights. I would never let anyone touch me those days. Most of my lovers either didn't know about the lycanthropy or were only too glad to avoid me if I wanted them to. Until you walked in on me."

"That was hardly my fault," Severus says, glaring mildly at him. "I was simply bringing you the potion."

Remus laughs. "I know. I'm glad it was you — you seem to discover all my secrets. Why not this one?"



"You aren't concerned that I'll tell?" Severus isn't looking at him anymore, seemingly afraid of Remus' answer.

"I trust you," Remus says. It seems to be what the other man needs to hear, because Severus kisses him fiercely, pushing him over onto his back, running his hands all over Remus' body, their now-hard cocks pressing against each other.

"You trust me," Severus breathes between kisses.

"Yes. Yes, I do." Remus reaches for the Gates, but Severus catches his hand.

"Just us this time," Severus says, kissing Remus' fingers. "No toys, no binding, nothing between us."

How Severus has been before is nothing compared to the way Severus worships Remus' body now. He is overwhelmed by touch, skin and lips and hands all contriving to consume him in a haze of arousal and need. Severus takes him, turns him inside out, and steals Remus' heart as he holds sway over Remus' body.

As he gasps and moans under the onslaught of sensation, Remus realizes that Severus has a secret too, and his hands now speak what his lips cannot. Writhing in ecstasy, Remus cries out and knows that he is loved.



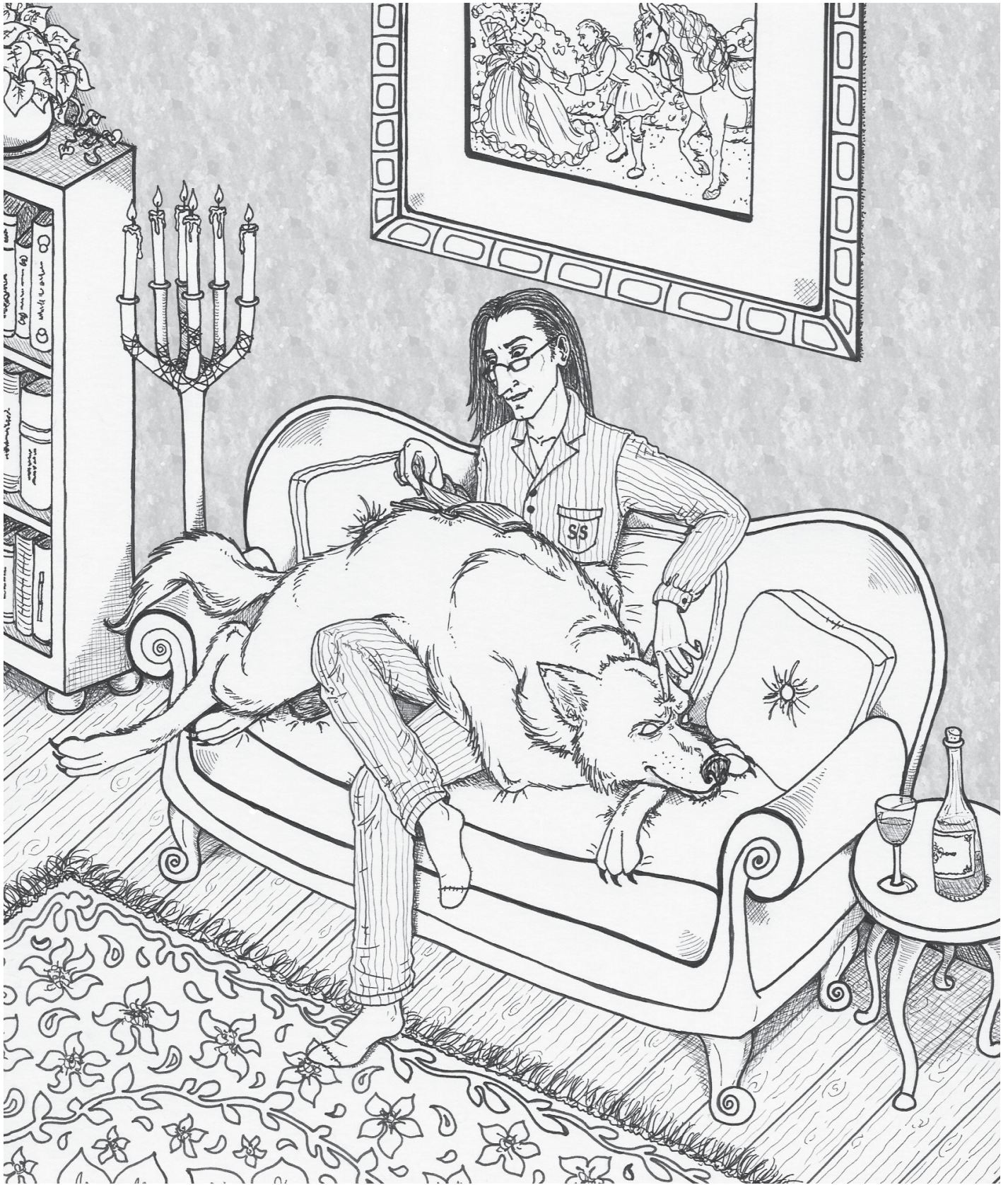
Once a month, Remus Lupin wears the Gates of Hell under his clothes. One person knows this, one person who looks at him with heated glances, knowing what binds him. For one night a month, Remus belongs to the moon.

For the rest, he belongs to Severus, and every morning when Remus wakes, Severus is there.

Mnemosyne_1's Bio

Syne, after much internal debate, emerged from lurkdom on July 7, 2006. Since then she's written about 75,000 words' worth of fanfiction, and the plot bunnies haven't stopped coming yet. Aside from fandom, Syne loves to read, crochet and go to the opera. Her living room is decorated in as much of the Moroccan style as she can afford, and she dreams of one day actually being able to visit that country.

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Lap Wolf
by Ebonyserpent