Morton Hall (The Spark Notes Werewolf Remix)

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Summary

Werewolf remix. Contains a reversal of most gender roles in The Well of Loneliness. Genderswap, femmeslash, slash, mpreg, fpreg, polyamoury, pack dynamics: however, not nearly so explicit as this would imply. That's a lot of tweaking for the happy ending I've always wanted.

Notes

Many, many thanks to beta doro.

Morton Hall is very definitely a remix rather than fanfiction. There are many direct quotes - particularly speech - and paraphrases from the original text within this work.

This story is part of the Ten Stories zine, and can be downloaded as a .pdf here from 22nd July 2012. Please right click and download.

There is an air of faded grandeur about the Malvern Hills. Rising in a singular, gentle ridge from the flood plains of the Severn, their rounded skirts and worn, short-grassed slopes are reminiscent of an
aged gentlewoman, who in her youth was beautiful and proud, and is now facing twilight with her head held high. So too does the Georgian homestead of Morton Hall, tucked into a south-facing fold of the hills, still face head-on the stares of strangers with elegant frontage and dark windows. The house is old, the red brick weather-worn and the paint faded, but like the hills above it Morton faces the snows of winter and the storms of spring with a quiet pride.

Within the stout walls of this English homestead, sheltered in Morton Hall's encircling, neglected grounds and free to wander wild over the slopes of the Malvern Hills, lived Sir Philip Gordon and his daughter, Stephen. Sir Philip, a man of noble charm, a dreamer, had loved late in life and too well: his husband, a wild, noble boy from across the Irish Sea, had over Sir Philip's protests borne him one child and one only. As Sir Philip had feared, caught between the sudden wild joy of a child that bore his name - a son! - and the fear of losing his beloved, the burden of bearing a child was too great for his fierce, bright boy. As the child grew, the flame of his lover's life sank, and despite every desperate aid Sir Philip could contrive, when the child was born and revealed to be a girl, the flame guttered to nothing. Distraught, Sir Philip neglected both estate and child, leaving the child to be raised by servants and nurses, and winced from the plans he had made for his son with his lover in happier days. Tended and governed by generation upon generation of male Gordons and their partners, Morton Hall would, he thought, now pass from his hands to those of his daughter and her skirted, simpering wife. Sir Philip's daughter would never stand sturdy and gallant at his side, as he had imagined his child: would never tend the aged oak woods, help with the harvest, or ride free over the hills as his lover had been wont to do. The sickly puling babe, narrow-hipped and wide-shouldered, that lay silent and wide-eyed in its cradle would never replace the fierce, encompassing affection of his Irish boy.

In a fit of grieving misanthropy Sir Philip ordered the child christened Stephen, in bitter remembrance of his lover and the son both of them had desired.

For two years the child languished unloved and cared for only by Sir Philip's housekeeper and his elderly nurse, while Sir Philip himself brooded over the loss of his lover. Only at night would Sir Philip approach his daughter, drawn to this last unwelcome memory of his beloved, and by the light of a single candle he would stare at her perfect fingernails and smooth, pale cheeks, looking in vain for his wild Irish boy in the shape of her face and thrust of her chin.

Yet as the child grew Sir Philip was forced to acknowledge that Stephen bore, not his lover's countenance, but his spirit. As an infant she would gambol, unafraid, around the hooves of Sir Philip's hunters and beg to be lifted into the saddle. She would venture into scrapes that left her nurse panting and distraught, climbing onto the roof, swimming in Morton's lakes, and settling before the fire in the library of an evening, unafraid of her father's brooding presence. Slowly, Sir Philip grew to love his child, recognising in her spirit his lost lover, indulging her whims and tantrums as he had done his. Fierce, sensitive, Stephen grew up with as strong a desire to love and be loved as her father, with his timid nature and noble spirit, and hers too was her father's deep love for the land which nurtured both of them.

Thus lived Stephen, for the first thirteen years of her life. Although there remained about her an air of unspoken yearning, born of her early years, on the whole she was as content as a child could be. She did not yet understand that her broad-shouldered frame and capable hands would laughed at by the pretty, painted daughters of her father's friends: that in the marketplace of marriage, her straightforward words and honest, homely face were worth little to the fluttering femmes looking for companionship in their ruffled silk boudoirs. Yet Sir Philip, knowing this, still encouraged Stephen in her country pastimes. As he had done with his Irish boy, Sir Philip taught Stephen to ride astride, like a man: handed her a shotgun and taught her to breathe with the trigger and lean into the shot. And when he found he could no longer keep up with Stephen's wild dashes across the countryside on the beautiful, sleek hunters Sir Philip bought for her alone, he hired a groom to ride with her.
Collins was a soft-spoken Irishman who came to Morton Hall from Sir Philip's cousin's estate. Initially doubtful, looking at the gleam in Collins' eye and the gold rings in his ears, Sir Philip feared that the man would cut a swath through his stable boys and seduce his tenant's sons. But Sir Philip soon grew to trust the man's steady hands and slow smile, and to him he entrusted his daughter.

For Stephen, it was a revelation. Sir Philip knew and loved the land, but Collins lived within it in a way the older man could not emulate. Sir Philip taught Stephen to shoot. Collins would take Stephen up onto the hills, lying with her for long hours concealed under bracken or brambles, showing her the bustling tenderness of the badger dams with their cubs or the stags driven into desperate battle by the force of the rut. Collins knew the secret dells and sparkling streams, the meadows covered with buttercups, the spot where the wildcat nested and the tricks of the wily dog-fox Sir Philip's hounds had never cornered. For Stephen, it was as if every morning was an adventure: she would awake and leap out of her bed, dragging on her breeches and boots with trembling hands, and clatter down the stairs to the kitchen where she would steal bread and cheese from the larder before racing to the stables. There, Collins would already have her beloved hunter saddled and waiting.

Only one grief marred her newfound joy. Unlike Sir Philip's other staff, Collins did not take his half-days once a week. Instead, once a month, he took a three day holiday, and for those three days could not be found. Distraught without her boon companion, Stephen moped from room to room, kicked at the furniture and refused to take solace in the adventure stories that had fired her imagination before Collins had created her own. Neither rage nor angry tears would change Collins' mind: his days were his own, and he would not share them.

So marked was Stephen’s grief and frustration that even Sir Philip took note. As his daughter fretted and itched at the confines of Morton Hall's stately library and broad halls, as she would drag out the croquet hoops and challenge her father to a game, only to throw down her mallet in a temper ten minutes later, as she would curl up by his feet as she had done as a small child only to spring upwards and pace in front of the windows, glaring out at the full moon where it hung over Morton Hall's lakes, Sir Philip began wonder.

In the library at Morton there were one or two books Sir Philip had always locked away. Now, he took them down, and read them late at night in the quiet confines of his study. Sometimes he would take notes, frowning gravely over the text, and at length there came parcels from London he added to his locked desk drawer. Sir Philip watched Stephen ride out and come back flushed and laughing, her hair wild and her eyes bright: he watched her tumble in play with the hound cubs and hunt over the meadows and fields of his estate, focused and sharp, eager as any predator for blood. There were times when Sir Philip would study Stephen gravely, his chin in his hands, as she lolled in front of the fire, and his eyes would be sad. But at the same time there was a sudden gentle tenderness in the way he treated Stephen, a puzzled, fierce love that grew all the stronger for his doubts.

As the spring of Stephen's fourteenth year waxed into summer, she grew conscious that Collins was changing. Almost unnoticed at first, he became snappish and withdrawn, spending his time on unspecified errands and solitary pastimes. Used to Collins' constant attention, Stephen grew wily in pursuance, rising earlier and sleeping later, yet she could not track her groom across the woods and hills he knew so well. Confounded and miserable, she wooed Collins with small gifts and compliments, while Collins himself grew ever more distant. Stephen herself did not understand the miserable thrill of possessive jealousy that she felt, only that she had thought Collins to be hers alone, and now he was not.

The end came abruptly, in July. It was a summer evening, still warm, and the full moon lit the fountain and the box garden into white light and sharp shadows. Miserable and restless all day, Stephen had let herself out of the house, knowing only that she needed to be outside, and had headed instinctively to the small cottage where Collins resided, for he eschewed the attics where the other
grooms slept. Sure of her welcome and as she had done so many a time before, Stephen slipped the latch and entered.

On the hearth rug, where Stephen herself had sat so often, talking of fairs or hunts or horses, lay two wolves. Curled nose to tail, content as any hound after a day’s chase, they were asleep.

Blind, unthinking, rage seized Stephen. She wanted to cry out, but her voice failed: she caught her hand to her mouth and bit it until the blood came, her knees were shaking, her back rigid against the wood of the door. Then, welling up from her belly, fastening in her throat, clamping around her heart, came a howl of grief so loud the glass in the windows shook, and in the echoing silence after, the stable yard dogs, woken abruptly, gave tongue, and after them the hounds in the kennels. Both wolves shot to their feet, bristling with fear, teeth bared and eyes wide.

So it was that Sir Philip found them, racing from the house with his coat flung haphazardly over his nightclothes and his feet thrust into dirty boots. In an instant he saw what had happened: he wrapped Stephen in his coat and drew her away, and that night he did not leave her side. Like a dumb creature she wept in his arms, over burdened by shame, and Sir Philip held her in his arms, this his beloved child, and stroking her hair he told her that this trouble would pass, that she must be brave, that it would be forgotten, that there would come a time when this would be no more than a memory. Yet as he comforted Stephen he thought of the books he had read, of Stephen's rangy frame and her bright eyes, of her sensitivity and her courage, and his face was grave.

In the morning, he sent Collins away.

Very dreadful indeed were the nights Stephen spent grieving over the loss of her companion. The hours would drag by, the moon shining in the windows would be intolerably bright, the ticking of the clock on the stairs a dreadful intrusion, while Stephen wept silently into her pillow. Without Collins, she felt restless and incomplete, as if some part of her had been wrenched away, and although she loved her father dearly she could not but blame him both for giving her Collins, and for taking him away. She bore her grief in silence, and did not take it, as she had every other childhood grief, to his knee.

Sir Philip was not blind to Stephen's distress. Guilty, feeling he had ignored for too long his daughter's wild ways and unseemly joys, he began to educate her in the ways of the society to which she had been born. He ordered the old brougham cleaned, and began to make neighbourhood calls, taking afternoon tea with old friends he had not spoken to since his lover's death. There Stephen would sit, awkwardly balancing a china teacup and saucer on her knee, fumbling through conversation, while Sir Philip discussed politics and arts with the women of his acquaintance and hunting with the men. Always awkward in feminine company, Sir Philip took to taking Stephen into the nearby town of Great Malvern once a week, where he would call in at the haberdasher's and the drapers and hesitate in the street as they passed the milliner's and the dressmaker's, hoping that Stephen would show an interest in the feminine garments within. But the only place where Stephen was truly comfortable was the lending library, and there she borrowed, not the romances and poetry other girls devoured, but adventure stories and books on farming. Worse, Sir Philip found his daughter fiercely protective in company. The first hint of disagreeable discussion, and she would rouse to her father's defense, her wit sharp, unthinking of the polite conventions that held true argument at bay. In town, she would insist on being by her father's side, walking on the outside of the pavement and holding the door for him: should he betray weariness, she would drag him back to the carriage as sternly as any sheepdog. Only at Morton Hall was Stephen truly comfortable, her father safe and her father's estate spread around them, free from intrusion.

In an attempt to remedy Stephen's education, for Sir Philip felt that in raising her as he had, trusting in Morton's acres and his own wisdom, he had failed his daughter, Sir Philip engaged a French
governess. Mademoiselle Duphot was petite, charming, and pretty enough to send half the county's femmes into swooning disorder when she appeared at the assemblies in her lace cap and flowered dress of Parisian silk. Yet although Stephen took to the language with ease, she did not succumb, as Sir Philip had half-hoped, to the charms of Mademoiselle's softly broken English and the gleam of flirtation in her eyes. When Stephen came to him, lit up and excited as she had not been since Collins' departure, and told him that a Sergeant Smylie was offering both gymnastics and fencing lessons, Sir Philip readily agreed to the engagement and, half fearing and half hopeful, watched Stephen take to both with joy. Stephen grew swift and limber under the Sergeant's tutelage, fierce in each bout and noble both in victory and defeat, but although Sir Philip watched her with sharper eyes than Stephen would ever know, never did she betray any attachment for the handsome sergeant other than admiring friendship.

More often, now, Sir Philip frowned over his books in the quiet of his study, dreading the worst and hoping for the best. There was no one to whom he could confide his fears. At length, his hand hesitating on the pen and shaking when he laid the letters on the tray to post, he made discreet enquiry of the few friends he had made during his university years. Two months later, he bade farewell to Miss Duphot, and in her place, small, grey, so self-contained she could well have been a statuette, came Miss Puddleton.

Miss Puddleton was were. Born to a family in the North of England, she had lived out her childhood mindlessly content and unaware, as so many were born to country families did, and like many other women of impoverished means and intellect, she had supplemented her studies with tutoring and governess work until she had been able to apply to Girton. It was on the cusp of her first term, at the age of twenty one, that Miss Puddleton had turned for the first time. Unfortunately for her, that turning had been witnessed by fourteen dinner guests, her parents and siblings. There was no concealing what she was. Regretfully, Girton had sent their apologies. Few posts remained open to her, if any: no family would openly admit to a bloodline that included the possibility of a were child. Although her family, in the teeth of dismayed protests from her mother's congregation and her father's friends, would not disown her, Miss Puddleton would never be accepted in polite society. Lonely, miserable, she eked out her days alone in her parents' library, studying for a degree that would never be hers. Only the significant remuneration Sir Philip offered had tempted her away, for although Miss Puddleton dreaded and feared exposure, Sir Philip's letter had been both understanding and supportive, and her family was not rich.

From the very first moment of Miss Puddleton's arrival, Stephen suspected that this queer little woman would mean more to her than any other governess or tutor. Something about Miss Puddleton's quiet courage, her dogged intellect and her disciplined study, spoke to Stephen's loneliness. In two months, it seemed to her that Miss Puddleton had always been at Morton. It was to Miss Puddleton that Stephen took her griefs and joys, her pride in her horsemanship, and her impatience with the feminine clothing Sir Philip insisted she don for their ventures into society. Stephen found that her restless frustration was soothed by Puddle's quiet demeanour, that her fits and starts and temper would break on the rock of her governess' patience, and that her questing soul would find peace between the pages of Puddle's beloved books. For the first time, Stephen felt utterly secure in her affections. Under Puddle's quiet governance, she blossomed, becoming confident and assured.

Never once did Puddle bemoan the lack of feminine wiles in her pupil: never once did she seek to instruct Stephen in flirting or politics or dancing, as any other governess would. Instead, Miss Puddleton, gently, inexorably, harnessed Stephen to a journey of intellectual discipline that, at first resented, would become a journey of discovery as compelling to Stephen as any other hunt. Puddle took Stephen exactly as she found her, her agitations and enthusiasms, her fierce love for Morton, her windswept hair and grubby hands, and her turn Stephen grew not just comfortable but content with Puddle's presence. Theirs was not just the relationship of governess to pupil. At night, in front of the
nursery fire, Stephen would lay her head in Puddle's lap and, letting her governess comb out every tangled strand of the resented long hair Sir Philip refused to have bobbed, Stephen would bring to her every small triumph of the day. Nothing seemed truly real to Stephen until, curled up and warm, she had told it to Puddle. Even on the days when Puddle must, perforce, absent herself from the house, Stephen would go out into the garden at night and call to her governess until out of the darkness would come the slight, small mottled wolf Puddle became as a were, and together they would romp and play in the grounds of the house. Never once did Stephen or Sir Philip fear that Puddle would turn on Stephen as so many weres were rumoured to do: never once did Sir Philip, watching from the library, worry that the were's bite would turn his daughter and condemn her forever to the life of an outcast.

Rather, Sir Philip watched his daughter become content and happy, and for two years he put away his books. Only once did he bethink himself of the concerns he had held. Each year, in summer, Miss Puddleton took a fortnight's holiday and, travelling north, rejoined her family. Although Stephen moped in her absence, and prowled the house in restless irritation, there were frequent letters from Yorkshire that smelled of lavender and promised return, and the wait was endurable. But in the March of Stephen's sixteenth year, one of Miss Puddleton's cousins came to stay in a nearby house. The cousin was a radical Whig, a woman who defiantly lived alone and espoused a policy of tolerance towards weres, and Miss Puddleton begged for and received permission to visit on her off days.

Stephen hated every minute Puddle was away. She would walk up and down the hall, biting her nails, tugging at her shirt cuffs until they were ragged, and any attempt to distract her would meet with a muttered refusal and a resentful glare. When Puddle returned, Stephen was not happy until her governess was bathed and settled in front of the fire where she belonged, her comb pulling gently through Stephen's hair and all trace of her absence removed.

It was a great relief to Sir Philip when the cousin removed to Bath.

Thus the time passed until Stephen was almost eighteen, and of age. Her outdoor life, and the athletics and fencing she had kept up, had given her the confidence of an athlete. Her body was spare, graceful and finely muscled: her shoulders were broad and her hips narrow, her legs long and strong. Her hands were carefully kept but capable, her face, reminiscent of both her father's noble features and his lover's sensitivity, was both fine and pleasing, if a little strongly featured for feminine taste. When Stephen moved, she did so with a disconcerting, confident grace that thrilled Sir Philip but sent a shiver of unease through the society femmes, more used to flutter and hesitation. Stephen was strong, powerful, forceful, and among the charms and frills of a feminine boudoir she looked out of place and miserable. It was an incongruity that seldom occurred to Stephen herself, more concerned with the misery of making polite conversation, but both Miss Puddleton and Sir Philip quietly sighed and hoped that somewhere there would be a woman who could take their beloved charge exactly as she was, forthright and confident, yet so tenderhearted she would weep over a fox cub orphaned by the very hunt she had led.

It was then that Stephen met Martina Hallam.

It can safely be said that at seventeen Stephen had not outgrown her childish dread of society. Willing though she was to accompany her father, she disliked small talk and endured social occasions only to please Sir Philip. Nevertheless, when Colonel and Mrs. Antrim sent invitations to a dance much anticipated in the neighbourhood, back the acceptance went from Morton Hall, and on the evening concerned both Stephen and Sir Philip were in attendance.

Stephen, herself gently eased into the confinement of a dress by Puddle's insistent hands, was astonished to discover there a young woman not only as impatient of costuming as she, but also as
widely travelled and free thinking as she wished to be. Martina Hallam, utterly disregarding the sideways glances of disapproving femmes, wore a carefully tailored jacket and dress pants that instantly struck Stephen with such envy she resolved to order both the following day. Martina Hallam did not dance. Martina Hallam owned and managed an estate in British Columbia, having travelled out to the province following the death of her parents and found the country so wide and open she had stayed for love. Martina Hallam spoke of the great forests, the snowcapped mountains, the deep, swift rivers and splendid skies of her home, and as she spoke Stephen thrilled to the adventure of an unknown land and to Martina's deep voice alike. Unlike any other femme Stephen had met, Martina spoke simply and without artifice, and expected Stephen to do the same, and that night Stephen found herself fascinated and charmed by her companion. Equally, Martina too found Stephen compelling, and questioned her about her horses, her fencing, her gymnastics, and her taste in books: both of them drawn to an unexpected friendship which already felt much older than the four hours of the dance.

Before they left, Sir Philip invited Martina to dinner.

Dinner was only the start. Martina fitted so well into their small family that she went often to Morton, talking of husbandry with Sir Philip and hunting and fencing with Stephen, betraying not a moment's unease about Miss Puddleton's presence at the dining room table. She was not a woman who had taken to study, but she was happy to listen to Stephen and Puddle discuss the novels they had read and offer her own thoughts. She rode well, and had the rudiments of a summer's fencing instruction that allowed her to fence with Stephen and occasionally hold her own. Sir Philip lent her a hunter, Stephen smiled, and Miss Puddleton hoped silently that here, here was the woman for her charge.

People gossiped a little, but on the whole kindly, for at last Stephen was behaving as other femmes and although her choice might be odd, so too was Stephen. It was a good match, people thought, and they smiled to see Martina ride past on Sir Philip's rangy bay and Stephen on her own beloved hunter Raferty. Miss Puddleton began to think wistfully of the woodland around Tenley Court, now on the market, and Sir Philip shook his head and tried not to hope, but could not hide the joy in his eyes, for it was possible that he had been quite mistaken.

It was autumn when Martina Hallam looked at Stephen and saw, not a friend, a fellowemme as misplaced as herself, but a were. They were two days from the full moon and Martina was restless and impatient, but for the first time she had dared to risk a friendship and agree to Sir Philip's untimely invitation. By habit and necessity a deeply closeted were, she had feared discovery and dreaded exposure, choosing less from scruple than from a fastidious nature not to join any of the concealed society packs. Yet that night, she had heard Stephen and Miss Puddleton discuss in no uncertain terms where they would hunt on the night of the full moon, and in her astonished gaze Sir Philip sat, wineglass in hand, at the head of the table, nodding agreement. Never had Martina imagined that her monstrous transformation would be so easily accepted: she could barely breathe, trembling in her seat, amazed and disconcerted at the strength of passion with which she wanted to be part of this small pack. To a woman such as she, the conviction that Stephen, Stephen with her sharp mind and the strength of her body and her smile, must be were, came as a revelation.

Of an instant she must say something. She said, knowing that her eyes must be wild and her countenance pale, "Stephen - let's go into the garden, I've got something to tell you."

The tone of her voice must have been odd, for Sir Philip frowned and Miss Puddleton looked sharply at her face, but Stephen was smiling and getting out of her chair. There was not another word Martina could bring herself to say as they went out through the library doors onto the terrace, so suffused with hope did she find herself, and Stephen must have understood from her face that there was something of import to discuss, for she too stayed silent until they were beyond earshot of the dining room.
Then Martina stood still, and she said, "Stephen, my dear -" to Stephen, unbelievable, chilling words, "- utterly desirous of your pack -" "Join with you -"

Stephen was staring at her in dumb horror, staring at the hope in her face and flinching from it, one hand outthrust and clinging onto the terrace rail as if it alone would support her. Staring back, Martina realised, gradually and with a hideous, awful despair, that Stephen had no notion of what she was talking. Slowly, over her friend's face, came an expression of such deepest revulsion that Martina could not believe what she saw: she said, stupidly, stumbling, "But are you not were? I thought -"

At that Stephen spun around and fled wildly back into the house, her face distraught.

Martina stood perfectly still. For the first time in her life she had laid herself bare and confessed to what she was, and the object of her affections - the woman she had thought could be her Alpha, not her wife - had utterly rejected her. All she knew was that she must get away, before the hue and cry was raised: away from Stephen, away from Morton, away from the promise of a pack that had been a deception as great as any she practiced herself.

In less than two hours she was motoring to London.

No one questioned Stephen. That night she fled to the sanctuary of her room, and in the days that followed she wandered the familiar hills and valleys of her home bewildered and deeply distressed. She could not imagine what in herself had drawn Martina to her, and even though she could feel pity for the woman, stronger yet was the utter amazement that Martina could have so desired something which she was unable to give. Stephen shrank from the thought, for even after years of friendship with Miss Puddleton she could not but feel that to be were was to be monstrous, ungovernable, outcast, and yet she missed Martina's friendship with a deep longing unassuaged by Sir Philip's quiet concern and Puddle's tenderness. Now she knew the true meaning of fear. They had been so happy, so content, and yet all the time Martina had been deceiving her, waiting only to force that horrific transformation which would exile her from everything she held dear. Had she been so very different? Had there been something in her, vicious, ravening, which had spoken to the wolf under her friend's skin? At night Stephen could find no answers, tossing and turning in her bed, dreading that the very nature which had brought her Martina's friendship had also attracted the wolf.

One night, when she could bear it no longer, as she had used to when a child she went to her father. Sir Philip was sat as he was wont to do in the quietness of his study, but when he looked up Stephen thought, he has been expecting me. There was a quiet relief in that, and slowly she slipped to her knees, dropped her head on her father's lap, and told him everything Martina had said. She spared nothing, mourning the friend she had lost, laying bare her own shame and confusion, and Sir Philip listened in absolute silence.

To him it was as if the glass had shattered. For years he had feared this moment, dreaded it, and now it was upon him, recognised not by himself but by another. His spirit cowered, and he dared not look at his daughter, so carefully laying bare all that made her different, all that made her the woman she was, strange, unique, beloved.

Merciful God. What could he say? How could he tell her, his daughter, the last, precious legacy of the Irish boy he had loved to distraction, how could he tell her that her hopes and dreams were nothing but ashes, that she was tainted beyond all hope?

He could not. His courage failed him. Smiling, lying, he said to her, "My dear, do not concern yourself. The woman mistook to whom she spoke. Who can blame her, hunted and beset as she must be? Someday, Stephen, there may be a femme who you will come to love and who loves you for what you are, not what they wish you to be, and if there is not, well, what of it? Marriage is not the
only course for a woman, and I have been thinking that you should spread your wings a little, recently."

She was gazing up at him with hope in her eyes. Sir Philip choked a little, and said, "Darling, I'm sorry, it's quite late."

"Thank you," Stephen said quietly. "I felt I had to ask."

After she had gone, Sir Philip sat staring at the great family Bible in which he had recorded his daughter's birth and his lover's death. In had been nearly eighteen years since both, although Sir Philip could not see the dates. His eyes blurred, his throat was choked. He wept.

There was gossip over Martina's departure and none of it kind. The county had welcomed her as one of their own, and smiled to see her with Stephen. Now, disappointed, betrayed in their expectations, the society femmes and country blades felt both foolish and angry. The tolerance with which they had regarded Stephen, for Sir Philip's sake, vanished, and instead Stephen met with frowns and turned backs when she and Raferty rode out.

Such disdain distressed Sir Philip intolerably. He took to riding again as he had not done for years, simply to rack his brain for the poor jokes at which Stephen would pretend to smile, in order that people should see his daughter appear content. It was unthinkable to him that the men and women whose approval he had courted so assiduously should police nature with such vicious tongues and virile antagonism: Sir Philip broke off nearly all acquaintance, ceased to be at home to callers, and from his study began to search for some place where his daughter might be at peace.

For all Stephen's broken friendship was the cause of much speculation, it would not have had such impact were not the commons already on edge. Although for Sir Philip and Stephen, and for a lesser extent Miss Puddleton, Morton Hall was both refuge and home, and whatever happened outside their gates was irrelevant, there were forces afoot in Parliament and in Europe which would drag them out of their isolation. On the continent, the Kaiser was openly defying the arms agreements made with the English Parliament: the Royal Navy was locked into a war of attrition with the Kaiserliche Marine, and the Balkans were ablaze with posture and rumour. With society uncertain, excited, and rife with speculation, gossip over Stephen's broken friendship was both harsher and louder than Sir Philip expected, and while he had been considering sending Stephen on an extended tour of Europe, much as his own father had undertaken, that option was closed to him. Even a trip to Paris seemed an unnecessary risk, with the Germans arming on the border and Austria calling up reserves. Sir Philip wrote to his own old tutor at Magdalen, canvassing on Stephen's behalf, and asked Miss Puddleton if she would consider accompanying Stephen to Cambridge.

Her answer, quietly confident, was yes. But before Sir Philip could put any plan in action that would remove his daughter from the circumstances in which Morton Hall found itself, Sir Philip, caught unaware by a circumstance he had not expected for many years, died.

There was a cypress tree which had stood on the lawn at Morton since before Sir Philip's grandfather's birth. Knarled and twisted as both roots and branches were, neither Sir Philip nor his groundsman expected the tree to long outlive themselves. Yet, struck by lightning in a winter storm, the tree had become dangerously unstable. Unwilling as he was to entrust any aspect of Morton's care to another, Sir Philip had been supervising the felling: the tree was more damaged than expected, the stress on the trunk more telling, and Sir Philip had been standing exactly under the spot where the thing fell.

Stephen got to him just in time to see his eyes close.

Sir Philip's death left his daughter deprived of three things: the companionship of a like mind born of
real understanding, of a stalwart barrier between herself and the world, and above all, of love.

Recovering from the merciful numbness of shock and facing her first deep sorrow, Stephen was utterly confounded. Only now did she realise, laid open to all wounds, how much her father's loving care had protected her. Suddenly responsible for Morton, she began to understand just how much Sir Philip had taken on his shoulders: she was responsible now for the farms, the house, the woodland, the hills: a thousand small decisions which no other could make fell on her and her alone. The support of society was denied to her. Even if Stephen could have borne the contempt in the eyes of her neighbours, she could not and would not tolerate their pity. Only to Puddle would she take her terrible, woebegone grief, and Puddle herself was suffering also. The burdens she and Sir Philip had carried together were now hers alone, and late at night, when Stephen, tearstained and limp, had fallen asleep in her lap, Puddle, helpless, would curse the burden of silence with which Sir Philip had enjoined her. She dared not explain to Stephen how she felt. In her own frustrated grief, Puddle was sharp with Stephen, and the desolated girl would flee to her own rooms, where she would take out her anger on her gymnastic apparatus or on her weighted barbells, or out into the stable to be cried into Raferty's warm coat.

Spring came and went, and summer approached, the summer of Stephen's eighteenth year. It was the cubbing season, and yet she did not order the hunters brought in: the shooting season, and yet she did not put up her gun. Irresolute and feckless, drowned in grief, she wandered the halls of Morton with Puddle behind her, both of them equally unhappy.

So things might have continued for months, were it not that, one afternoon in Great Malvern, Stephen fell in love.

Andrew Crosby was amazingly blond. His hair was not the blond of a movie goddess, but of a Renaissance painting, almost silver in sunlight, cut short and bobbed like any Medieval page. His eyes were large, a striking, remarkable violet blue fringed with long, fair lashes, his smile with its sharp white teeth was so innocently sweet it could be a child's, and his hands lay in Stephen's so trustfully that Stephen felt as protective of this man as every other of Morton's creatures. Like some rare blossom, even down to the slow drawl of his American accent, he had arrived on her land and was hers to cherish.

Yet not only was Andrew Crosby undeniably male, he was married.

They met outside the chemist's in Great Malvern, although Ralph Crosby had rented the Manor House from Sir Philip fully five months before. There had been gossip then, for Ralph Crosby was one of those men who seem ill-fitted to any situation. His boots were too well polished, his tweeds too new, and his smile too tight: the county had not been forthcoming, and the lack of invitations had left the household irritated and fretful. Sir Philip's untimely death had left them even more isolated, for half the reason the couple had rented the Manor was the baronet's presence. Even the Crosbys would not intrude unintroduced on Stephen's grief. Nevertheless, when Andrew Crosby recognised, in the woman who had so efficiently disentangled his beloved West Highland Terrier from the jaws of an irritated Airedale, his late landlord's daughter, he knew that here was an opportunity he could not miss. Recognising that Stephen would value efficiency over vapours, he gritted his teeth, laid claim to the bloodied, triumphant terrier, and opened his big violet eyes at the one woman who could attain for Ralph and himself an entree into county society.

In fairness to Andrew, he had not expected Stephen to fall headlong for that implicit promise. A fraught interlude stitching the terrier's wounds was followed by a lift home: an encounter with Ralph by a dinner invitation, and Stephen was so rattled by the whole situation that, when Puddle enquired after Mr. Crosby - "Mr. Andrew Crosby," Puddle said, "Mrs. Antrim says he was a music hall performer. I suppose you were obliged -"
Stephen flared up. "I'm sick to death of your beastly gossip," she cried, and strode from the room.

"Oh, Lord!" murmured Puddle, frowning.

The interval between that day and the next Sunday, on which date dinner had been arranged, seemed endless to Stephen. She did not stop to analyse her feelings, she only knew that she felt exultant, transported, in a way she had never done before. All of a sudden Morton's summer seemed glorious to her: she had missed the daffodils flowering, but the hawthorns were sharply white; the cubbing season had started without her, but the rich tawny coat of the old dog fox suddenly seemed glorious, while above the hills the song of the lark seemed so beautiful that it left her breathless. Even the memory of Martina, as Stephen wandered through scenes they had shared together, seemed affectionately dim, eclipsed by violet eyes and a shy smile.

The morning of the day of the dinner seemed interminable to Stephen. Breakfast was followed by church, church by lunch, and in the long hours of the afternoon Stephen fussed and fretted about her clothes in such uncharacteristic form that Puddle threw up her hands and left her charge to the morose contemplation of three neckties, all of which, though originally admired, now seemed too loud, too wide, and too old. Nevertheless, the drive to the Manor seemed to fly by.

It was as she was escorted to the door of the drawing room that shyness seized Stephen by the throat. With femmes, she had nothing in common: oddly prim, she was often left awkwardly blushing by their conversation, unable to discuss the minutiae of clothing or fearfully embarrassed by certain subjects. Equally, men found her too clever, a little presumptuous, a little too knowing about masculine pastimes. Yet there were times when Stephen had hated her own isolation and made awkward little advances, her eyes apologetic and her shoulders hunched, attempting to feel at ease amongst her peers. There she would stand with her arms folded and her face strained, trying to be part of a society which she both despised and craved.

Standing on Mr. Andrew Crosby's threshold, Stephen was beset by the memory of every moment she had tried and failed to be something she was not. Her necktie was too tight, her face flushed, her feet stumbling in the boots that seemed now too big and clumsy set against Mr. Crosby's Persian runners: she was close to fleeing when the door opened. The terrier barked, a bullfinch in a cage burst into startled song, and on the lounge, Andrew Crosby was laughing.

"Do come over," he said, patting the silk, and Stephen, clumsy, awkward Stephen, did exactly as asked.

"I am so glad," Andrew said, "That you are here: we have been so short of good company, haven't we, Ralph?"

It was only then that Stephen realised Ralph Crosby had been standing by the window. The other Mr. Crosby's face was unevenly blotched and his hands were clenched: he looked like a man who would rather be anywhere than where he was, and Stephen had just made up her mind to offer her excuses and leave when he came forward with his hand outstretched.

"I am so sorry you find us at odds," he said, through a smile that seemed horribly forced. "The dog has been whining all day, the maid has left us again, and the cook - but I shall not trouble you."

Stephen said, "Yes. Oh, no - yes," and then fell silent.

Ralph Crosby exchanged a glance with his husband.

"We keep American hours here," he said, and his mouth curled a little at the words. "Cocktail?"
"No, thanks," Stephen said, who had not yet come across the custom, and then catching a glimpse of her host's disappointed face said swiftly, "Indeed, no, whatever you desire, I'm sure -"

"Excellent!" said Ralph, rubbing his hands, and very shortly the butler wheeled in a curious mobile contrivance which appeared to contain bottles of colours and types Stephen had never before seen. It seemed to take Ralph Crosby a remarkable amount of effort to create three drinks: ice, lemons and spirits went into the mix, each explained in detail, until by the time Andrew and Stephen had received their chilled glasses nearly a full quarter hour had passed.

"Just the way you like it, dear," Ralph Crosby had said, but Andrew had only smiled at Stephen over the glass and touched the tip of his tongue to his upper lip.

Stephen did not in the least understand why the motion made her feel both hot and cold. She shivered, and twisted on her seat, and suddenly the damp curve of Andrew's mouth seemed more enticing even than the sweep of her own horse chestnut avenue seen from the manor windows. Ralph Crosby smiled, and Andrew Crosby pouted, and Stephen took another sip of her cocktail, which she disliked intensely.

"We hear you hunt," Ralph Crosby said, and his smile was wide and toothy.

"Yes?" Stephen answered him. "Although, not lately, the weather -"

The weather had been glorious, a stretch of late autumn sunshine that had garlanded the rich reds and yellows of the leaves in the park and turned the corn to gold.

"Maybe later," Ralph smiled, and put down his drink. "Darling, would you excuse me?" he asked, and without waiting for a reply left the room.

Andrew sighed. "Ralph is so very busy," he said softly, "And I feel so out of place here. The people don't like me, you know, because I am American. They don't understand."

"Oh, no," Stephen exclaimed, and then blushed bright scarlet, for she was not unaware of the gossip surrounding the Messers Crosby.

"You were so kind," Andrew Crosby said. "I am so glad you'll be my friend. You will, won't you?"

Astonished, elated, Stephen said, "Yes." It seemed to her that nothing could be sweeter than Andrew's smile in reply, nothing more endearing than the chatter with which he entertained them both, and nothing more beautiful than the pale stretch of his narrow neck and his graceful hands. Enthralled, Stephen could not take her eyes from Andrew's fine skin and eyes, and Andrew, recognising all too well the signs of infatuation, set himself to entertain as best he knew. Dinner was late and burnt: Ralph Crosby was taciturn and sharp when called from his study, and there was nothing to drink but white wine and soda or gin, but Stephen left feeling as if she attended the best dinner of her life.

At the Manor, Andrew Crosby, idle, discontented and bored, let his thoughts dwell unduly on the young woman. He was not by nature vicious, but Ralph Crosby was not an attentive husband and Andrew had none of the constraints and ties of English Society. He could find nothing wrong in a little flirtation over cocktails, in asking for Stephen's company on shopping trips or excursions - "Oh, darling, do come, I'd be so bored without you," - or arriving at Morton Hall without an invitation. "You don't mind, do you, darling?"

For her part, Stephen, in the grip of an infatuation that was entirely new to her, could not say no to Andrew's appealing smile or wide, violet eyes. Even though she knew that Andrew would
conveniently forget his pocketbook, and it would be Stephen buying the leather driving gloves or the cashmere scarf on which Andrew had set his heart, she still went shopping, standing awkwardly with bags and coats while the assistants fussed and Andrew smiled. After the one occasion when she had tried to introduce a terrified Andrew to Raferty, she did not try to share her own pursuits, but instead willingly held the wool for Andrew's knitting and endured his excursions into chess. Like a tame lapdog, she followed where Andrew led, stood and sat at his command, and smiled at his words.

At Morton, Puddle observed her charge's uncharacteristic, subdued behaviour, and stared worriedly at the calendar still open on Sir Philip's desk. It lacked but two days until Stephen's eighteenth birthday, yet Puddle had seen no sign of the event both she and Sir Philip had dreaded. Hopeful for the future and irritated by the present, she did her best to be polite to Andrew Crosby and remain tolerant of Stephen's enthusiasm.

At the Manor, Ralph Crosby silently fumed. He was not unused to Andrew's flirtatious behaviour, and certainly not averse to allowing certain liberties in his husband's conduct to which other men might have objected. If there was a price to be paid for social acceptance, Ralph Crosby was happy for his husband so to pay. Yet in three weekends of sudden and consuming infatuation, Ralph had yet to see a single invitation or an unbent back, an acknowledging nod or a friendly smile. It seemed to him that Andrew's flirtation was all too encouraging and Stephen's devotion all too obvious, and when he had suggested that enough was enough, Andrew had stared at him blankly. It was not the first nor the last time that they would quarrel, but on this occasion the moon was nearly full and Andrew chose to flee, not to the locked quarters of his own bedroom but to Morton Hall.

There he arrived in the teeth of a summer gale that scattered the leaves from the trees and sent smoke streaming from the chimneys. It was late, and the butler frowned at the intrusion, but Stephen came smiling from the library and ushered him inside. For once, it was Stephen who was assured and Andrew shaken: he found himself settled down with a rug over his knees and a glass of Sir Philip's brandy in his hands, and beside him Stephen was offering biscuits and stoking up the fire. It seemed so homely that Andrew could not but smile back, and at that Stephen came to sit beside him on the lounge.

"You frighten me, you know," she said, and she sounded so disconcerted that Andrew looked up in consternation.

"You make me feel so weak, and so strong at the same time. I don't know how to feel when I'm with you."

"Well," Andrew said, "Perhaps - you're so very unusual, Stephen."

"Really?" Stephen said.

Her smile was so sad Andrew did reach forward and clasp both of her hands. "My dear," he began, and then there came a thunderous knocking on the door.

"Who can that be?" Stephen frowned, irritated, for she knew of no one who would come this far out on so wild a night.

"Stephen -" Andrew said, trying to pull his hands away. "Stephen!"

The door burst open. There was a tremendous growl, the growl of a wild beast, and leaping over the lounge and straight for Stephen's throat came a massive, shaggy monster, all grey fur and huge, yellowed teeth. Stephen threw up her arm to protect herself, Andrew fled for the door, and from the hallway Puddle cried out sharply, "Stephen! No!"
It was too late. Threatened in her own home, on the eve of her eighteenth birthday, a night before the full moon, Stephen Gordon had changed.

Locked in vicious, snarling battle, two wolves struggled and heaved amidst the shattered furniture. Ralph Crosby, pale furred and scarred, was experienced: Stephen Gordon, with a great grey ruff of fur and massive shoulders to bear it, was young and well-muscled. Neither could gain the upper hand, although they snatched and snarled at each other, muzzles bloodied and claws scratched on both floorboards and skin. Crosby managed a ripping tear at Stephen's haunches: Stephen a snap at Crosby's front leg that left him limping. Crouched, Crosby went for Stephen's throat, caught her shoulder, and would not let go, although Stephen swung around so purposely Crosby was smashed against the fireguard, the Chesterfield, the lamp - the side table smashed, the lamp fell, sparking, and Sir Philip's Dresden china clock wobbled on the mantel piece.

It was Puddle who stopped the fight, with a bucket of water brought from the kitchen by the trembling, mute butler. Soaked through, the wolves rolled apart: Ralph Crosby took one look at Puddle's resolute face and the blunderbuss she was holding, and instantly, smoothly, transformed, snatching an antimacassar from the lounge to cover his bare flesh. Utterly bemused, Stephen could not, but instead stood shaking, watching her governess with wary, terrified eyes.

"Enough is enough," Puddle said. "Sir, I'll thank you to get dressed, take your husband, and leave this house. I do not expect to see either one of you here again."

In silence, she watched Ralph Crosby put on his clothes. Dressed, he took the weeping Andrew by the wrist, and left, silenced and exiled by the threat of the blunderbuss Puddle still held.

Only when the front door had slammed behind them did Puddle turn her attention to Stephen. "Oh, my dear," she sighed, and then she sat down on the lounge, suddenly very weary. Everything she and Sir Philip had feared had indeed come to pass, and in the worst way possible. "Oh my dear, dear Stephen," Puddle said. "Come here."

Just as she had when she was a girl, the wolf Stephen padded, hesitating, over to the lounge, laid her bloodied muzzle in Puddle's lap, and closed her eyes. She was still shaking.

It was dawn before Stephen could change back. Human again, from her eyes welled great big piteous tears, and she did not move from where she lay but sat weeping into the refuge of Puddle's comfort. "Oh, Puddle!" she cried. "Puddle!"

Puddle said nothing at all. But in her heart she was mustering the courage to say to Stephen, as she and Sir Philip should have done years ago, "I know. Stephen, take heart. You're neither unnatural, nor abominable, nor mad; you're as much a part of what people call nature as anyone else. Above all, be honourable. Cling to your honour for the sake of those of us who share the same burden, and show the world that people like us can be as selfless and fine as the rest of mankind."

Yet even now Puddle's courage failed her. Few knew better than she the agony of a were, the terrible fear of the outcast who perceives herself to be monstrous. How could she say to Stephen, with conviction, that she was neither abominable nor unnatural, when Puddle felt herself both of these things? How could she counsel Stephen in her distress, when Puddle herself was mired in the depths of her own, despite Sir Philip's compassion and Stephen's own friendship?

Instead Puddle sat, gentle, patient, teasing out the knots in Stephen's hair and wiping the tears from her face.

At length, with a great sigh, Stephen pulled herself upright. Her face was reddened and blotched with tears, but her back was straight and her eyes steady. "Well, Puddle," she began.
It was then that the butler knocked on the door.

"What is it?" Puddle cried, after a glance at Stephen.

"Ma'am, the newspaper is here," Stephen's butler said. "We have declared war on Germany."

"What!" Stephen exclaimed, for the last few weeks had been nothing more nor less to her than Andrew's smiles and Andrew's eyes.

"No!" said Puddle, for she had thought of little more than Stephen and the calendar.

But the butler was gone. It was Stephen who retrieved the newspaper from the hall and both of them read it, shocked, by the library fire. Matters were so much worse than either of them had believed. England was mobilising. Reservists had been called up. The Navy was on high alert: nurses, miners, and engineers had been asked to report to bases across the country: train travel was restricted. There was talk of rationing, and troops were already embarking for the continent. France and Austria were at war: Russia poised on the brink, Germany had already declared war, Italy was hesitating....

War. The incredible had come to pass, and throughout Europe and the whole world, the old woke with a sense of disaster and the young, amazed and bewildered, with a stinging pride and a desire to do something, anything. Equally so Stephen felt her own blood stir, and the fierce desire to fight for her own country, for Morton, raced through her veins. Every instinct called her to combat, her new-found predator's blood, her aggression, her competent, strong body and her fierce courage. She was a femme, exempt, rejected, called to service by the bedside and not to the battle, but every instinct in Stephen revolted at serving the bedside of the wounded. She was called to action, not service.

"Puddle," she said urgently, "Puddle -"

Puddle, who was not immune to the same excitement, folded up the newspaper and said gently, "Well, dear. Shall we pack?"

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Quite often now Stephen would see unmistakable figures. For, as though gaining courage from the terror that was war, many a were had crept out of their hole, come into daylight and faced their country. 'Well, here I am, will you take me or leave me?' England had taken. Side by side with humans, weres joined the Army, the Navy, Merchant Marine, the Land Femmes and the Nursing Corps. Ralph Crosby joined the Flying Corps: Martina Hallam was a mechanic with the Canadian First Contingent. Accepted, even welcomed for their courage and strength and perseverance, in these days of struggle many a commanding officer turned a blind eye to three day's leave or strategic illness. For the weres, life was both bitter and sweet, creating a measure of pride that would bring disillusion in its wake, but never again would the brotherhood and sisterhood forged by the whirligig of war be broken. In finding themselves, the weres found each other, and in that solidarity found strength.

Stephen herself very quickly joined The London Ambulance Column, and presently Puddle found employment with one of the Government departments. She and Stephen shared a small service flat in Victoria, and many were the friends and acquaintances, both were and human, who found a welcome therein. So often isolated and mocked at Morton, here Stephen found her strength and competence something to be admired. She blossomed under that regard, and her slow smile and confidence served her well: it was not long before Stephen, as she so desired, was posted to the front.
A week's leave saw her at Morton Hall, sadly denuded, the furniture under covers, the hunters gone to the cavalry regiments and the unmarried men to the Worcester Rifles, the unmarried femmes to the munitions factories or the farms. Then in haste to London, and via the crowded hold of a hastily converted liner to the docks at Bretagne. And thence to the front.

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"Stephen?"

"Yes, Marcus?"

"How far now?"

"I think about twenty kilometres. Why?"

"Oh, nothing."

The road was pitted with shell holes, rutted by the wheels of tanks and waggons and ambulances. Wire netting hung with rags lined the route, camouflage hedges. Behind them, the thud of the great guns could still be heard, the deep irregular thunder that shook every nerve, and occasionally the whine of a shell. The morning was grey, a bitter, starved morning, and the faces of the men that marched to the front were equally pinched. Yet from a single blasted plane tree a blackbird sung, as if the shell that could fall at any moment was as unreal as spring, and in the fields the battered apple trees were still blooming.

"Do you think -?"

"What, Marcus?" Stephen asked gently. She spared a glance for the were at her side, for of all the men and women of her unit, it was Marcus who had both taught her fear and given her courage. A slight man, his hands still shook with the shell shock that had invalided him out of his regiment, but Marcus' grip was as steady as Stephen's, suturing, carrying, soothing, holding the dreadful, patient pain of the wounded at bay with the touch of his hands and his quick smile. Even now, both of them sleepless and exhausted, their eyes red rimmed and watering, Stephen's hands still bloodstained and the ambulance loaded with men who might never see another dawn, Marcus dipped his head and glanced up under his eyelashes as he had taken to doing. It was a submission all the more sweet for the way in which, when Stephen closed her hand at the back of his neck, the smaller were relaxed into her grip.

"Not long now," she said.

At the Field Hospital the orderlies carried away their last patients, and for precious hours the weres could sleep, rolled up in coats and blankets, until it was time to start the terrible journey again. They dared not risk lights in the dark, but for the weres night was almost as day: to them alone fell the awful, cold hours of the midnight watches, when courageous and grim-hearted, the ambulance drivers must negotiate not only the terrible, muddied, rutted roads and the bursts of shell fire but the men who had fallen asleep willy-nilly as they marched, huddling against broken walls and tattered hedges. There were never enough drivers: there was never enough time no matter how fast Stephen or Marcus drove, and the lines of the wounded and dying were unceasing. Every day the risks they took seemed greater, yet under that bombardment Stephen found a curious peace that went hand in hand with a devastating need to protect the were at her side.
Miss Puddleton and Stephen herself were both sports, born to bloodlines which had neither expected nor welcomed them, to a society which rejected everything they were. For neither of them was there the reassurance of a family nor the freedom of a pack, which for other weres, well hidden, long disguised, was their birthright. Marcus was such a were. Born of a Welsh pack, he had grown up roaming freely on the hills of his homeland, slept curled into a heap with his packmates, and understood to the smallest degree the etiquette of pack rule, of which Stephen knew nothing. For Marcus, it was pride that allowed him to submit to Stephen's touch, to make sure his Alpha was fed before himself, to tend Stephen's small wounds and stand by her side. He had none of the constrictions enforced by human society: for him it was enough that Stephen was Alpha, not that she was male or female, and from the moment he had first seen her slow smile Marcus had chosen in any way he could to serve.

For Stephen, understanding came slowly. Raised human, she did not at first understand why it was to her that the new recruits turned for guidance, why it was that she, so clumsy and shy in everyday life, could stand up for her unit and demand the tents, bandages and fuel they needed for the men in their care, why under fire it was to her lead that the other drivers looked. Nor was she accustomed to the fierce protectiveness with which she tended to the men and women of her unit: the urge to defend and cherish that seized her heart and would not let go. It was both like and unlike the love she bore Morton Hall, a vivid, constant current of affection that carried both her and the unit through the horrors of their war. But it was to Marcus in particular that Stephen looked, to the bowed curve of his neck and his quiet, unceasing devotion.

One evening came when they were walking together, beyond the tents and the hospital, down towards the end of the field where one solitary, battered pear tree still stood ragged against the blood gold of the sunset. It was the day when Stephen, still smarting from the half-healed shrapnel wound on her cheek, had received to her utter astonishment the Croix de Guerre. The medal seemed cool and heavy on her breast, and yet to Stephen, set beside the lives of so many men, it seemed nothing. Marcus, though, had brushed away tears at the sight of it and even now his mouth was soft, so that Stephen must reach out a hand and hold his. There was no one to see.

Marcus said, "I have been waiting so long for you. After the war... Stephen, after the war, say you won't send me away. Don't let me live alone again without a pack..."

Stephen stared straight ahead, trembling. Suddenly she understood what it had meant, the companionship and the protectiveness and the care: Marcus' swift smile, the camaraderie of the unit. Even Puddle's faithful care and Martina's question, so long ago now it seemed almost as if she had been talking to another woman. Stephen had not known then what she was.

She said, very slowly, "After the war - no, I won't send you away from me."

When the guns stopped, she went, not home to Morton Hall, but to Paris. Armistice seemed, not a celebration, but a slowly closing door. Even before demobilisation, the weres who had been so precious in war were looked at askance in peace: asking for her customary three day break for herself and her drivers, Stephen had first been refused and then had to plead her case. Soldiers who had once welcomed their help now looked aside and spat as they went by. Letters from England told of weres suddenly unemployed, discarded now that their usefulness had passed, and the faint hopes of legal recognition were already fading into the bitter memories of the past.

Yet still remained the sense of community, embattled, threatened, but so very welcome. In Paris, Stephen knew she had friends: in London too, should she need. Even from Morton Hall came letters from Miss Puddleton that suggested the county was not so averse to weres as they had been. Colonel Antrim's daughter Violet was openly were, careering across the countryside on her father's hunters with her wife at her side: Ralph Crosby had distinguished himself in the Corps and was now a
respected, if awkward, dinner companion. Even Puddle herself had given up concealment. "I am too old and set in my ways," she wrote to Stephen from Morton Hall. Yet she wrote too of the autumn leaves and the turning gold of the bracken, the bright yellow of the gorse, the reclamation of the Hall itself, so very battered after the Army Corps had departed, and for Stephen Morton, was an ache in her heart that could not be assuaged.

Yet it was to Paris that she went first, and by her side went Marcus. To Puddle she wrote, "He's got no one except some distant cousins, and I can give him a home: he has offered to help with my writing, and of course the Unit takes up much of my time." For Stephen had vowed to assist her drivers and staff in any way she could. Puddle, reading, could only sigh, for Stephen did not write as she had wished for so long and say simply, "I have found my pack."

The strange sympathy which exists between weres held both of them in thrall. For Marcus, it was everything to stand by Stephen's side and sit at her feet, type her letters and plan with her Morton's gardens: for Stephen, Marcus' tender care was a joy and a refuge. Yet the fact remained: she was female, he was male, they were both were. With the terrible bond of her nature, she could bind Marcus to her, and although the world might condemn both of them they would rejoice, unashamed and triumphant. Yet how could she? If she laid claim to Marcus, the world would name him unfit, outcast, abhorred: were. Irresolute, she hesitated and could not reach out. Yet she could not bear to send Marcus away.

In spring, she took them both to Italy. There was a villa there, under the Tuscan sky, which belonged to a friend from the war. It stood empty and welcoming, and at night the gardens seemed to welcome the two wolves who played there, rich with the scents of eucalyptus and heliotrope and jasmine. The tangled woodland seemed made for a were to explore, the lush gardens and winding trails perfect for gamboling play, and there at last Stephen found herself freed from the shackles of the war. There was no one to watch if she and Marcus rolled together on the great lawns or ran shoulder to shoulder under the moonlight: no one to see if they curled up together in front of the massive stove in the library. The days slipped by, days of sunshine and laughter.

Yet, slowly, discontent eased between them. Marcus, who had hoped for so much, began to believe that Stephen would never offer him the bond he so craved. Stephen's soul longed for completion that her honour would not allow. Slowly, they began to avoid each other, running alone in the night and resting apart. The tension became unendurable.

One night, Marcus came to Stephen as she sat alone in the library. He had never been a coward, and he had the pride of his birth: he was afraid to lose the woman he loved, but more afraid of the lies that lay between them.

He said, as Martina had said before him, "I want to speak to you, Stephen."

Stephen put down her newspaper. For a second she looked at Marcus' wide eyes and trembling hands, and then her courage failed her, and she said, "No, Marcus -"

"Now," Marcus said, and went down on his knees. "Stephen," he said. "I can't stay. I thought - I thought you would come to accept me as pack. But I have come to realise that you accepted me out of pity and nothing more, that I will never be what you need. Every time you look at me you shrink away. I'm going home, Stephen, I can't bear -" His voice broke.

Stephen stared at him, aghast. Then in a moment the restraint of years was shattered. She fell to her knees, and reached out to hold Marcus in her arms: she had nothing to say but his name. "Marcus... Marcus..."

When she looked down Marcus' mouth was trembling, but his eyes were bright with hope.
"Don't you understand?" Stephen said helplessly. "Don't you know what it would mean to be together?"

But Marcus was smiling when he said, "What do I care? I love you."

That night they were not divided.

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In April Stephen returned to Morton Hall. She did so quietly, slipping home under cover of darkness, and by her side came Marcus.

For Puddle, it was as if joy had returned to the house. All of a sudden the tasks that had seemed so very hard were nothing to Stephen's competent hands and Marcus' loving care. The house seemed no longer an empty shell but was filled with voices and laughter, the walls repaired and the carpets patched, the furniture brought out of storage and the pictures rehung. Cook returned to the kitchens and the gardeners to the grounds: the great lawn was reseeded, the box gardens replanted, and in the stables three new hunters looked over the stable doors. Spring covered the hills in buttercups and the woodlands with the tiny white starred anemones, set the tulips ablaze in the gardens and charmed the honeysuckle on the walls into glorious scented bloom, and for Stephen and Marcus, newly bonded, Morton Hall was nothing but joy.

Late one night Stephen came smiling to Puddle as she sat reading in the library. "Do you remember," she asked, "When I used to come to you here?"

"Yes," Puddle said, laying aside her newspaper and taking off her reading glasses, for Stephen sat now as she had done then, with her head in Puddle's lap. Her hair was still shorn, as it had been for the war, but the shortness suited her and made of her strong face something distinctive and handsome.

"I should have asked you this years ago," Stephen said, "Except that I didn't understand. Now Marcus -" and she smiled, soft and gentle, for Marcus' love and care underscored every waking hour. "Marcus has made it clear to me what pack is," she said. "Puddle, would you..."

"Yes," Puddle said. "Oh, Stephen. Yes."

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In July, Martina Hallam came back to Morton Hall.

The war had not been kind to Martina. Shipped over from Canada with the First Contingent, she had been plunged into the morass of the Somme with a company of human drivers: her compatriots, unused to weres, had misunderstood both her need for society and her awkward, masculine attributes. She had been badly wounded at Pusey, bad enough to be invalided back to England, and in a hospital in Dorchester doctors had fought to save her eyesight. Scarred, she had retreated after the war to her estates in British Columbia, yet even there the consolations of the great lakes and mountains of her adopted land were no substitute for the companionship of other weres. Lonely, she reached out to the companions of her youth, and from Morton Hall, secure and happy with her own pack about her, Stephen wrote back.
"It seems queer now," Stephen wrote, "that we argued so deeply. I was just an ignorant cub in those days. What splendid companions we were, and how badly I failed you then. Martina, I was so young: I beg you to forgive the mistake that I made then. I thought of you often during the war, and now I am returned to Morton I remember your companionship with such sweet joy. Can we take up our friendship again? If only we can..."

From Canada, amazed and delighted, Martina wrote back. At length she heard about Marcus, and Puddle: about the new woodland and the improvements Stephen had made to the home farms and the conservatory: about Marcus' white doves and Puddle's research, and in her awoke the desire to see once again the lost friend of her youth. From Canada she set sail to Liverpool, and at length she came again to the great door of Morton Hall, all set open now for her coming and ablaze with light, and behind Stephen's smiling face stood the familiar Miss Puddleton and Marcus, so very well known to her now from Stephen's letters.

It seemed to her that she had been away but an instant. She hesitated on the threshold, yet Morton seemed to her now as it had ever been, a refuge unlike any other she had known.

"Welcome back," Stephen said, and drew her into the warmth.

The End.

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